

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

October 2021

Steve Johnson, Editor

Board Meeting on October 30, 2021

The September meeting of the Board of Directors was cancelled due to a lack of a quorum. This month the board plans to meet via Zoom on Saturday, October 30th at 10 a.m. The board will discuss plans for Veteran's Day and the upcoming elections for board members. If you wish to be on the board please email Constance Smith to place your name on the ballot.

Dates to Remember

Tue.-Sun. Oct. 5- 10

Fleet Week

Saturday, Oct. 30, 10 am

Board Meeting via Zoom

Fleet week returns to San Francisco

Fleet week has been a major event in San Francisco every year since 1981, with the notable exception of last year when it was cancelled due to the pandemic. This year the Blue Angels are returning to perform their amazing flying skills as they pass over San Francisco Bay. In addition, there are several Navy ships in port which are giving tours, and on the Marina green there are exhibits about the humanitarian work the military does in the time of disasters. The events are listed on the Fleet Week webpage, found here: <https://fleetweeksf.org/> One of the best places to see the air show is on Alcatraz where several FOCWA volunteers will be on



duty to assist the rangers with crowd control as well as giving the usual Civil War programs in the morning.

Gunpowder on Alcatraz

Alcatraz at one point in the early 1860's had over 100 cannons to defend San Francisco Bay. These cannons of course required a lot of gunpowder, which had to be brought all the way from the East Coast as there were no gunpowder manufacturers in the state until the California Powder Works began operating in Santa Cruz in 1864.¹ Gunpowder was then, and is generally now, composed of 3 substances: charcoal, saltpeter (potassium nitrate), and sulphur. The charcoal was made by burning wood (willows were preferred) in special furnaces at high heat. Saltpeter appears as a white salt and is found primarily in Tennessee and Kentucky. This was refined by boiling it in water to remove impurities and left to evaporate and recrystallize. The moist crystals were combined with the charcoal and sulfur in a

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California_Powder_Works

paste, which was then compacted in a press. The dried gunpowder was placed in barrels to be transported in special wagons with wooden wheels, pulled by unshod horses, to avoid sparks.

The main gunpowder factory in the North was the Du Pont factory in Delaware; in the South it was the Confederate Powder Works in Augusta, Georgia.² Gunpowder was unloaded at the Mare Island Naval Station and delivered to the Benicia Armory; from there it was distributed to the various forts in the state and elsewhere. The Ordinance Sergeant at each fort was responsible for the care, protection, and distribution of the gunpowder to the individual cannons. The barrels of powder, for example, had to be rolled periodically to keep the heavier saltpeter from settling out of the mixture. Barrels of powder can be seen in the powder room at Fort Point; soldiers assigned to rolling the barrels in the room had to take off their shoes and coats with buttons to avoid creating a spark.

How much powder was required to fire the cannons? Here is a chart to indicate the amounts required³

| Cannon diameter | Shot (cannon ball) | Powder Amount |
|-----------------|--------------------|---------------|
| 8 inch | 65 pounds | 10 pounds |
| 10 inch | 128 pounds | 15 pounds |
| 13 inch | 283 pounds | 30 pounds |
| 15 inch | 400 pounds | 40 pounds |
| 20 inch | 1,080 pounds | 200 pounds |



The huge 20 inch Rodman cannons were only fired a few times for practice. In reality, most coastal defense fortifications eventually used the 10-inch or 15-inch Rodman cannons. Alcatraz originally had 10-inch Columbiad cannons but in 1864 the island received the better constructed Rodman 15-inch cannons.

At Fort Point and Fort Alcatraz, the cannons were fired only occasionally for target practice, to salute visiting foreign warships, or on special events such as the 4th of July. Since shipments of powder were costly and time consuming, most powder was reserved for times when needed for battle. On Alcatraz powder was stored in the north and south caponiers; the South Battery, for example, held 1,000 barrels of powder under the gun room.⁴

Today the “powder room” on Alcatraz has a different connotation, which is just as well; visitors don’t have to worry about walking around hundreds of barrels of gunpowder as they tour the island.

Resources

“Artillery through the Ages”, NPS Interpretive Series

<http://npshistory.com/series/interpretive/3/is3b.htm>

John Martini, *Fortress Alcatraz, Guardian of the Golden Gate*, 2004, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, C

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gunpowder>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodman_gun

⁴ Erwin Thompson, “The Rock: A History of Alcatraz Island, 1847-1972”, p. 57