



THE ALCATRAZ SENTINEL
The Newsletter of Historic Civil War Alcatraz Island
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Editor: Donald Van Auker

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Living History Days

Each and every living history day on Alcatraz gets better and better. The two living history days held in 2011 were no exception. Visitors to Alcatraz are always surprised to see Union soldiers manning their posts and guarding Confederate prisoners on Alcatraz. As you know the effort it takes to put on such an event is tremendous. If you want to help, contact Co-chairpersons Fred or Brad. Besides having a great time, the photo opportunities are endless. We hope to see you at the 2012 living history days in April and October. To view photos of past LHD'S visit the FOCWA web site.

Annual Elections

Annual elections for the Board of Directors and 2012 Officers were held on December 11, 2011, as required in our by-laws. The Friends of Civil War Alcatraz are in good hands under the Elected leadership for 2012.

September Officers Meeting

The 2011 officers held a general meeting at the War Memorial Building on September 11, 2011. A key motion and vote was to purchase a 1861 United States Flag for hanging in the Sally Port Gun Room during special events. On your next visit to the Island look for it.

White Tarps Shroud Alcatraz Water Tower During Repair Work

As the tallest structure on Alcatraz Island, the 57-year old water tower is also the most visible and contributing feature of the island's National historic Landmark Designation. Built in 1939 the 250,000 gallon tank is now covered with white tarps, giving the false appearance of a new structure while the tower undergoes \$1.1 million in repairs. A lack of use, inadequate maintenance, and the harsh marine environment have slowly eaten away at the water tower's structural integrity, according to the National Park Service.

The water tower is culturally important, according to the park service, because it is covered with Native American graffiti—scrawled during an 18-month occupation of the island in the late 1960's and early '70s that helped spark the country's Native American civil rights movement. Repair work is expected to last through April 2012, not including the time it will take to restore the graffiti.

The water tank sits on six cross-braced steel legs anchored to concrete foundations, and "corrosion and deterioration of the steel fabric is clearly evident and several steel members are missing or in a state of disrepair".

"The Civil War - Northern California's Unrecognized Valor" by John G. Edmonds

A Review by Steve Johnson

Anyone interested in the role of California during the Civil War has found little in popular history books that tells the importance of this state during the years 1860 to 1865. One exception is the scholarly "The Army of the Pacific" by Aurora Hunt, written in the 1950's to describe in detail the operations of that army on the West Coast and in the Southwest. John Edmonds' book follows that same path in part of his book. His chapters about the California Battalion and the California 100, and the battles in the Southwest involving California Volunteers, reiterate the crucial role that men from California played in some battles back east and especially in checking the Confederates in Arizona as well as protecting settlers from Indian raids in the West.

The value of Edmonds book is the greater picture he paints of California and San Francisco on the eve of the Civil War. California reflected the nation as a whole, with great political differences between city and country, between men from the South and those from the North, between new immigrants and settlers, all with their own feelings about slavery and free labor. In San Francisco there was also great unrest because of a lack of law and order, resulting in the formation of the Vigilance Committee to bring some kind of justice to what was still a frontier town. The author spends quite a few pages describing this seething, emotional time and how it played out once the war began. He explains how the state came close to joining the South (both houses of state government voted for secession at one point), and what events and personages helped turn the tide towards the Union.

Being from Redwood City, Edmonds also wanted to tell the story of the men from San Mateo County and their involvement in the war. He describes the formation of the Jefferson Cavalry in Redwood City (in case the Confederates ever made it up from Southern California) and the California Volunteer units that were formed from several peninsula cities and where they served. He also dedicates a chapter to 16 Union heroes who were from San Mateo County, some of whom are buried at the Union cemetery in Redwood City.

Edmonds devotes a chapter to California's maritime participation in the Civil War, and he explains how some spectacular shipwrecks (*S.S. Central America* and *S.S. Golden Gate*) brought to the attention of the entire country the great amounts of gold that were coming from California. This was the driving force of the Southern sympathizers to arm the schooner *J.M Chapman* and to plan an attack on one of the gold-laden ships sailing down the coast of Mexico to bring the gold to the South. The story is told in much the same detail as in Hunt's book, and the story of

Captain Waddell of the *C.S. Shenandoah* is given even less detail even though it is a much more interesting story, in my opinion.

There are two chapters in Edmonds' book that are somewhat interesting but I have no idea why he included them. One is on the use of chloroform and alcohol as anesthesia during the war, and the other is the building of the railroad between San Francisco and San Jose during the 1860's. Frankly, I wish he would have used the space instead to continue on his theme, such as writing about how the Civil War affected the economy of California (and San Francisco in particular), or a description of army life in San Francisco (he does a good job of describing life in the army forts in the Northwest), or what the people of Northern California did to support the army.

Also, it was a bit frustrating that he has no bibliography as such but simply cites some general sources of information. Thus it is hard to make sense of such statements as this one on page 54: "men volunteered to fight in the east rather than to join the California volunteers so as to avoid fighting the Indians." How does he know this? No sources were cited. And did he mean that fighting Indians was worse than fighting Confederates? Or does he mean that the men preferred to not fight Indians at all? Part of this may also be the author's style, which at times tends to make sweeping statements without some details to back them up.

Nevertheless I would recommend Edmonds' book because it provides more information about Californians who served the Union cause and the specific ways and places they did so. It also gives a greater context to the politics and passions of the time, and the many ways California influenced the war even from so great a distance. It gives a special space to the men of San Mateo County who served the Union cause.

The book is very readable, is illustrated with many period photographs, has an index, and is available in paperback. The book can be found at the Fort Point Bookstore (profits go to the Parks Conservancy) and on Amazon.com. It is published by Star Publishing Company, Belmont, California ©2010.

Editors Corner

Most of us in the Civil War community are older and have made many friends over the years. In our travels to groups such as Round Tables, Conferences, Re-enactments, Battle Field Parks, Tours, etc. we have enjoyed the time together. It matters not if one is Pro Union or Pro Confederacy, as now we are all Americans striving to learn more about the War Between the States. It is very sad when one of our large circle of friends leave us. Over the years this has happened to me a number of times and each time I lose a friend from my circle it saddens me to realize that there was so much more to say and share. So let me say to all of you, that having you as a friend is a solemn honor and I hope that we again can share our Civil War interests together for a long time to come.

To all of you, God Bless you, and may he give us Good Health and Peace throughout the world.

Donald Van Auker
Editor

If you have anything that you want to be included in the Alcatraz Sentinel, The newsletter of the "Friends Of Civil War Alcatraz". Please submit it for publication. All articles, photos, or things of interest to our group are always welcome and encouraged.

Two Distinguished Guests Tour Alcatraz Island

On December 10, 2011, Fred Bohmfalk was a tour guide to several distinguished guests. One was Brigadier General Parker Hills who is the founding chairman of the Friends of Raymond Battlefield, located near Vicksburg Battlefield in Mississippi. Parker is an award winning co-author (with Ed Bearss) of *Receding the Tide: Vicksburg and Gettysburg – The Campaigns that Changed the Civil War*. Parker's organization is devoted to acquiring, preserving and, hopefully one day, adding the historically significant 3,000-acre Raymond Battlefield to the National Park Service. The other guest was Mike Green from the San Joaquin Valley Round Table, located in Fresno. During his tour, Mike took many pictures that will become part of our Alcatraz photo archives. The tour included the sally port, up through the tunnel, out the industrial building, walking through the garden area and then up to the prison.



Fred Bohmfalk (left); General Hills (right)

At the prison we were met by nineteen Boy Scouts and Scout Troop Leaders, including Scout Master, Charlie Mabie. His troop then joined our tour of the citadel. After the tour of the citadel, we took a closer look at the prison, including the hospital. After a pause at the prison bookstore, we took the ferry back to San Francisco.

The following is from the California State Military Museum web site:

History of the Post at Alcatraz Island By Colonel Herbert M. Hart, USMC (retired)
Executive Director, Council on America's Military Past

“Frowning Alcatraz, Key of San Francisco,” was the 1860's description of the fortress. “It commands the entrance to the Golden Gate, and forms an effectual defense for the harbor of San Francisco.” It is 450 feet wide, 1,650 feet long, irregular in shape, and encircled by powerful batteries, in which are said to be mounted some of the heaviest guns ever cast in America. Alcatraz Island's heavy guns may not have fired in anger in her 81 years as a military post, but they came mighty close to it on October 1, 1863. That was when a suspicious ship was noticed approaching Raccoon Straights and the ensuing confusion included firing between the ship and the island with Fort Point chiming in. Routinely during the Civil War a Revenue Service cutter greeted every arriving ship at the Golden Gate, but on October 1 she left her station to help a wrecked Russian ship. Captain William A. Winder, commanding at Alcatraz, was asked to challenge all ships before permitting them to enter the port.

“The officer of the day reported an armed ship towed by small boats in the direction of Raccoon Straits” reported Winder. After he was unable to recognize her colors (there was no wind and the flag fell in folds) Winder decided her course was so unusual, “I deemed it my duty to bring her to and ascertain her character and the reason. “I therefore fired a blank charge, which apparently not attracting her attention, I directed a gun to be loaded with an empty shell and to be fired 200 or 300 yards ahead of her,” he said, his two boats were busy inspecting other ships, but while waiting for one to return so that the newcomer could be inspected. “The ship commenced firing.” He thought it might be a salute, but could not be sure because she was firing broadside and was “entirely enveloped in the smoke.” As soon as he decided it was a salute, he started to return a 21-gun answer. Before he was finished, “Fort Point commenced firing.”

Finally everyone stopped firing. The letter exchange that followed was even more pointed when

the ship was identified as Her Majesty's Ship SUTLEF, the flagship of Rear Admiral John Kingcome. The admiral did not take kindly to the unusual welcome, Captain Winder did not appreciate the Sutlej's "unusual course" and in the final outcome, the departmental commander suggested a mild reproof to Alcatraz. "It is expected that the delicate duty devolving on military commanders will be exercised with prudence." he announced in a letter dated five months later.

The embarrassing international situation was all part of the game to Alcatraz, however. With her position recognized as the key to San Francisco Bay, she was in a sensitive situation throughout the war. In 1864, in fact, an even greater reaction set in when commercial photographers were permitted to make 30 photographs that showed ever road and battery.

The War Department heard about the photos, ordered them suppressed and demanded to know who had authorized them. As department head, General McDowell reported to Washington that the photos had been approved by the area engineer and authorized by Winder, whose "motive was one of pride and interest in his important command and a desire to have himself and the command have pictures of the place. McDowell denied any disloyal motive on Winder's part, including rumors that he was influenced by the fact his father was in the Confederate Army. If he wanted to be disloyal, McDowell suggested, as an officer of intelligence he would not "have acted so openly and undisguisedly as he did."

The real losers in the proposition seem to have been the San Francisco firm that claimed it took the views on a \$400 contract from the Army, and had spent \$1,500 in the process. They hoped to recoup the difference by selling their photos for a rumored \$100 to interested soldiers. Instead, the pictures and negatives wound up at the War Department. Had Confederate agents obtained and interpreted the photographs, they would have found that Alcatraz had not changed materially from 1861 when she had 85 cannon and 130 men. In one of his last acts before resigning to join the Confederacy, General Albert S. Johnston had rushed 10,000 muskets and 150,000 cartridges to Alcatraz. His successor, General Sumner, had proposed posing 400 men on the island. And in 1864, an official estimate was that 600 artillerymen were needed to man the works.

This was not to be. In fact, details from Alcatraz were siphoned off frequently. Thirty men spent months guarding Mare Island Navy Yard until they could be relieved by Marines from the USS Lancaster. Another detail was dispatched to man a battery on the south end of Angel Island, later the location of the vegetable garden tended by Alcatraz troopers. Rumors of election riots placed the entire garrison on alert frequently. The bulk of the force was shifted to San Francisco to keep order in 1865 in the unsettled days following Lincoln's assassination.
