

COORDINATOR'S REPORT—COAST DEFENSE STUDY GROUP'S ANNUAL CONFERENCE
ST BABS XI: BEAUFORT INLET/CAPE FEAR RIVER(15-17 October 1993)

Alex M. Holder Jr.

The Coast Defense Study Group(CDSG) held 1993's conference(St Babs XI) along North Carolina's coast. The conference was conducted in two phases. Phase one focused on the defenses of Beaufort Inlet, and phase two examined the Cape Fear River's defenses. Phase one was attended by 32 members plus three guests. Two additional members joined during phase two making a total of 37 attendees.

Before St Babs officially began, 17 members traveled to Cape Lookout on Thursday(14 October) to visit the World War II battery(two 5-inch Navy guns) located there. The weather and seas cooperated, but the battery's concrete ruins are offshore some 30+ yards and hardly visible, even with a calm ocean and low tide. Three members(Matthew Adams, Lee Guidry, and Gary Paliwoda) waded to gunblock number one and determined its bolt pattern(square with eight bolts/side). Foundation ruins of the battery commander's station and associated radar(SCR 296) are nearby. The trip, each way, took some 30 minutes by boat from Harkers Island followed by about the same time by surplus Army 2½-ton truck(built 1950). At best the effort to visit the battery can be considered a credibility trip or a check on one's master list of sites. Those who made the trip, however, are not difficult to entertain and seemed pleased.

The conference began unofficially Thursday evening at Morehead City in the Comfort Inn's hospitality suite. At that time introductions and administrative announcements were made followed by a couple of presentations by members. The conference officially began the following morning(Friday, 15 October) at Fort Macon's entrance. Paul Branch, manager of Fort Macon State Park, gave a short orientation which was followed by a complete examination of the fort. North Carolina has done itself proud by the manner in which the magnificent Third System fort has been maintained. Paul has done great work by establishing displays representing various periods of the fort's history and, especially, by gathering oral histories and private photographs regarding the fort's role during World War II. After touring Macon, the group moved to the nearby seashore and the site of a World War II battery(two 6-inch Navy guns). Only concrete ruins of the battery commander's station remain. The gunblocks were covered with sand, but the number two gunblock was partially uncovered for a short period during the spring of 1993.

Phase two began about noon on Friday as members traveled south some 130 miles to Fort Caswell on Oak Island at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. Many stopped en route to visit the battleship North Carolina(BB.55) at Wilmington. By evening most had arrived at Caswell's former post headquarters which was used as quarters—with disparate conditions from Victorian bedrooms to a crowded room filled with bunks. Presentations continued that evening in a nearby classroom.

Early Saturday morning(16 October) the group drove to nearby Southport. At Southport the column stopped at the site of Fort Johnston(a colonial work, rebuilt during both the First and Second System periods). The fort belongs to the Army, and one original building, much modified, remains. Nothing is left of the fortifications.

After crossing the Cape Fear River by ferry from Southport, the column arrived at Fort Fisher. Fort Fisher is a Confederate work which kept the port of Wilmington open to blockade runners throughout most of the Civil War. It controlled the New Inlet entrance(closed during 1870's-80's) to the Cape Fear River. North Carolina maintains the fort as a State Historical Site. After visiting the site's museum, the group toured the remaining portion of the fortification. Little is left because of beach erosion and World War II activities(antiaircraft artillery training site). If the fort is represented by the letter L, the

vertical side and much of the base are gone. The state has funded a sacrificial dune to protect what remains.

After visiting Fort Fisher, most of the group returned to Fort Caswell and began individual tours of Caswell's installations. The original Fort Caswell, a pentagonal Third System work, has been ravaged by Civil War activities, land-fill operations, and construction of a 12-inch early modern battery. Portions of four of its scarp walls remain. The fort's moat is filled, citadel destroyed, covered way removed, and, at least, four of the six caponnières are missing. One caponnière(perhaps two) remains, covered, at the fort's southeast entrance. At present, when at the site, the fort's original appearance is difficult to visualize. In addition to the Third System work, Fort Caswell has seven early modern batteries, all in good condition. They are Batteries Shipp(2X5BP), Bagley(originally 8X12M), Swift(4X8DC & 1X5BP), Madison(2X6DC), Caswell(2X12BC & 1X4.72P), McDonough(2X3P), and McKavett(2X3BP). The remains of two fire control stations, other than those located at the batteries, can be identified. They are the concrete instrument pillars of the double primary station at Bagley's left rear and the steel tower of the station on the parade field, presently mounting a water tank. The mine cable tank, a brick structure, also remains. All other installations peculiar to the coast artillery and not located with the batteries are gone. Most of the fort's Victorian era buildings are wooden, still exist, and are in great condition. Fort Caswell is pleasing to the eye!

The annual "dinner," cafeteria style, was held Saturday evening followed by the business meeting and continued presentations—AND the rains came!

The Weather was clear on Sunday morning(17 October), and individual tours of Fort Caswell continued. Some members left early to visit other sites in the Carolinas or Virginia. The conference officially ended at noon.

The North Carolina Baptist Assembly allowed us to visit and use Fort Caswell's facilities. They provided quarters, food, and a meeting room. They also maintain the fort in an absolutely fantastic manner. Many thanks to Caswell's people for their efforts, especially to Pat Blackmon and Marilyn Hill who handled the coordination.

Thanks also to those members who prepared presentations/papers/handouts for the benefit of the group: Bob Burt—a video on some former Soviet Union fortifications made during his travels; Dale Floyd—short pitch on Civil War fortifications in North Carolina; Lance Furburt/Terry McGovern—update on activities regarding Bermuda's fortifications; Dave Larsen—report of visit to 6-inch battery and associated structures on Outer Brewster Island, Boston Harbor; Danny Malone—report of visit to Battery Wilridge(two twin 8-inch Navy turrets), Hawaii; Ed Olmstead—couple of short talks coupled to question/answer periods regarding early ordnance(artillery); Norman Scarpulla/Tom Vaughan—comprehensive report of CDSG's 1993 tour of Panama; B. W. Smith—short slide show of aerial shots of Fort Caswell; Glen Williford—detailed report showing construction of two 16-inch batteries in San Francisco; Lee Guidry—tome handout of his sketches of coast artillery sites in California; and Mark Henkiel—handout on Battery Caswell. Elliot Deutsch, Terry McGovern, and B. W. Smith held reserve presentations in the event they were needed—thanks! Several people provided information to the conference coordinator to be used in the master handout, etc.—coordinators depend on those who are willing to do this. They are(and thanks!): Paul Branch(of Fort Macon), Dale Floyd, Bill Gaines, B. W. Smith, Leland Smith(of Fort Fisher), Glen Williford, and Bob Zink—hopefully none were missed.

The only significant administrative problem was the bunk sleeping arrangements at Fort Caswell. Eyeball, rather than phone, coordination would have prevented the problem. Most, however, enjoyed the easy pace of St Babs XI, and, on the whole, the conference can be considered successful.

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DISPATCHES FROM THE TRENCHES

by Bolling Smith

In early July, I visited a dozen forts in the Northeast. A few notes on what I found may assist other visitors. Those desiring more information can contact me directly.

FORT TOTTEN: Entry was not difficult, but I was eventually stopped from photographing buildings by MPs, who said I need permission from Fort Hamilton. Jack Fein, who runs the museum on Fort Totten, is the key to access to the fortifications. He should be contacted well in advance, and as he is getting on in years and not always in the best of health, it would be a good idea to reconfirm by telephone before arrival.

CAMP HERO: Unauthorized visitors were being evicted from the camp, so permission was obtained from George Larsen, at Montauk Downs State Park. He was very helpful, but it would be wise to write in advance, explaining the nature of the visit. All batteries and PSR buildings were dry and reasonably intact.

FORT H.G. WRIGHT: Phil Knauff, manager of the ferry district, is definitely the key man on Fisher's Island, and was extremely helpful. A car is not necessary unless one wishes to also see the WW-2 fortifications, which are surrounded by a strong new fence erected by the USN. For that area, advance contact, apparently through Fort Trumbell, CT, is necessary. The 12" and 10" DC batteries have been considerably cleaned up, but the mortar battery was virtually unrecognizable due to trash and overgrowth. One 6" battery was lost in the vegetation, which included a great deal of Poison Ivy, and another one was partially demolished. The remaining batteries were in reasonably good shape and accessible, and the dynamite gun site was readily located, using Alex Holder's directions.

FORT MANSFIELD: A 45 minute walk from Watch Hill, RI, the approach march was not difficult, except for the heat and soft sand. A route along the North side of the spit will avoid the stiff fee for the "use" of the beach, and is not appreciably more difficult. The two remaining batteries were in good condition, but there was Poison Ivy in their immediate vicinity.

FORT BALDWIN: All batteries were open and in good condition, but it continues to house swarms of mosquitoes. The tower was not revisited in an attempt to retain some few drops of blood.

FORT POPHAM: The entire inside of the fort is now fenced off, but a simple request to a friendly park employee got us into virtually everything, including the barbette tier.

FORT PREBLE: The entrance to the protected switchboard room appeared to be sealed, as was the magazine of the 6" battery.

PEAK'S ISLAND M.R.: Easy access by frequent ferry service. A map is essential, and ones are available from the ferry company and from the real estate office near the ferry dock on the island. All sites were accessible, and both Battery Craven (6" WW-2) and the 3" AMTB battery site are listed for sale.

FORT BANKS: One mortar pit is open and easily accessible, but the magazines are locked. Advance arrangements should be made with member George Iorio, who has access to the keys.

REPORT FROM BERMUDA**Terrance McGovern**

I recently returned to Bermuda over the 4th of July weekend as compensation to my wife for past and future fort trips. As the beach is not an attraction for me, I escaped to some of the sites visited during 1989 CDSG Tour. The following summarizes the status of Bermuda's fortification going from east to west.

Fort St. Catherine - CDSG member Lance Furbert is still in charge. Lance has been gathering artillery from his side of the island to add to the fort's collection. Lance is working on a project to transfer the single 6 inch BL from Fort St. Catherine to the Alexandra Battery since the gun was only moved to the fort in the 1950's for display purposes and therefore has no historical tie to the fort.

Fort Victoria and Fort Albert - The Club Med Hotel is still closed, so the area around Fort Victoria and Fort Albert has not changed since 1989. The remaining 9.2 inch gun is in need of painting. Lance showed me a fixed beam searchlight station built into the cliff below Fort Albert. The position used a mirror to project a beam out over the shipping channel.

Alexandra Battery - The emplacement has been cleaned and brickwork restored. As mentioned above, a plan is underway to bring the 6 inch BL from Fort St. Catherine to the battery. Dr. Edward Harris from the Dockyard has provided a RML and carriage for the uncovered armored casemate.

Gates Fort - Several small cannon have been emplaced within the fort in their proper position.

Fort Cunningham - Lance Furbert and I were able to hitchhike a boat ride out to Paget Island. Dr. Harris and Earthwatch have conducted a series of digs to uncover the fort's original armament. He was able to remove the fill in the fort's ditch and clear the front of the armored casemates. It was quite a change since the 1989 CDSG Tour. Five 10 inch RML and two 12 inch RML are completely exposed in ditch. Even more impressive is the ability to view the exterior of armored casemates by walking around the ditch. The interior of the fort is much the same. There are currently no plans to restore the fort.

St. David's Battery - An important change here is the start of a project to paint the 9.2 inch and 6 inch guns. One 9.2 inch gun has been sandblasted and painted. Hopefully the Parks Department will continue the project and paint all four guns.

Warwick Battery - Warwick Camp remains much the same as it was during our 1989 CDSG Tour. No efforts to preserve the two 6 inch guns have occurred. Both guns are in need of sandblasting and painting. The hillside to the left flank of the battery has been excavated.

Tudor Hill - The U.S. Naval Underwater Systems Center has been closed. The main building is still fenced in, but the fence around the warehouse building next to Battery #283 has been breached in several places. I was able to drive my moped right up to the gunblock's.

Dockyard Keep - Dr. Harris has steadily improved the Dockyard Keep. The Commissioner's House is still being restored. Walking around the ramparts, I noticed workmen restoring the handrails for the 6 inch BL guns. The two 6 inch guns are not yet mounted but the barrels have been painted and placed on the loading platforms. One of the 6 inch emplacements has been removed and restored to a RML position. The RML gun is on site awaiting a carriage. The other 6 inch emplacement has been filled in and two older 6 inch barrels have been placed on cradles. The 4.7 inch emplacements have been cleaned up and the remaining carriages removed. The rain catchment area on Bastion C has been covered over with earth. Dr. Harris has continued to collect ordnance from various points around the island.

Bermuda remains an excellent destination for members in search of a compact collection of fortifications. Lance Furbert continues to work toward a joint Coast Defense Study Group - Fortress Study Group tour to Bermuda. Lance has also offered to work with a CDSG member to organize a special tour to Halifax, Nova Scotia.