Corps Book Read In High School Inspires Lifetime Of Volunteering...

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Fort MacArthur Museum Assn.

Corps Book Read In High School Inspires Lifetime Of Volunteering At Venerable Museum

Over the years the two most frequent questions people ask of me are: “What got you started in this?” and “What keeps you going in one of the most unfriendly places in the country for a military historian?”

I have to say that more than anything else, the blame for my almost obsession-like admiration for Fort MacArthur rests solely with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In 1976 the Los Angeles District published a simple paperback book titled “The Cultural and Historic Resources Survey for the Harbor of Los Angeles.” I remember that it came in two versions, one with a yellow cover, the other in blue. The blue one contained the appendices mentioned in the book, the copies of the nominating documents for those structures to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

I don’t really know where my love of history comes from, but I do know that at a very early age all I was interested in what I call “lost technology.” I remember hearing about and studying elegant Ocean Liners like the “RMS Queen Mary,” the “Titanic’s” sister-ship “RMS Olympic” and later battleships like the “USS Missouri,” but instead of marveling at the elegant public spaces of the grand ocean liners, I was interested in the propulsion and navigational elements. As a young man I would wonder how this 88,000-ton piece of steel, glass, tin and copper could possibly float on water, let alone travel at speeds in excess of 30 miles an hour for thousands of mile. If you really think about it, it’s pretty fascinating.

In 1985 I was in my junior year of high school and my interest these big mechanical beasts that no longer roamed the high seas had evolved into a love of mechanical and construction engineering--not the latest and greatest innovations and processes but rather all the stuff we can’t make anymore that paved the way for all the great inventions my friends and I were experiencing.

This led to my spending a lot of time at the library.

For most people born after 1980 it’s hard to imagine that there was a time when the Internet didn’t exist, and research took place in large, sometimes cavernous, often dusty, usually stately buildings we called libraries. On one of my trips to my local branch, I was digging through a filing cabinet in a back room looking for a pamphlet that was said to be on file about a particular building I was researching. In the bottom drawer stuck in the back I chanced to find a seemingly unopened copy of the Corps of Engineers “Historic and Cultural Resources Survey” (the blue one). In its pages I found an incredible wealth of information about history in my own backyard, including the history of the SS Catalina “The Great White Steamer” that had been languishing at anchor for years just inside the Long Beach breakwater.

From learning about the ship, I learned about the LA Harbor Federal Breakwater constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and about the Corps’ other historic construction projects around the harbor, including those massive one-of-a-kind concrete fortified gun positions at a place called Fort MacArthur.

I checked out the book… and promptly “lost it”; I paid the fine and put the book away among my prized positions… (I know that sounds bad, but hey, I was 16 at the time and didn’t know any better.) It was not long after this that I got my drivers license and started planning all the places I could go with my newfound freedom. I could only borrow my mother’s car for short periods of time, but on my first extended opportunity I decided to go check out this fort-now-turned-city park, and the rest is quite literally… history.

Answering the question of what keeps me going is much harder to put into words. I never served a day in uniform, never joined the armed forces, but have forever stood in awe of those who have had the courage to do so. You would have thought that a person who cared as much about a ship’s engineering would have joined the Navy and become an engineer. Well, that’s partially what happened; I became a recording engineer and worked in the studios, motion picture and theatre. Today I sit in front of a computer writing software and, in an avocation that demands as much time as a full-time career, teaching history at a little-known museum.

In studying the long-lost technology of continental defense, I have had the great honor of meeting many of the people who worked that technology, and over time I have learned that the people who served in this long-forgotten branch of the Army are the real story here. The men and women who have passed through these gates in wartime and peace have

contributed immeasurably to the history of our nation for over a century. The stories they tell are the stories of this country. This fort has had its roots planted in three centuries and the changes it has witnessed are both exciting and staggering.

A lot of people come to visit the museum on a regular basis, but it’s really hard to get the full experience in an hour-long tour of the battery. To truly understand how special this place is, you have to get involved and become a part of it.

What’s so hard for me to understand is why it’s so hard to sell people on the need to get involved and to protect this place. The museum is a “special facility” of the city of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks. We have the funding for one full-time professional curator (who, by the way, does a fantastic job) and we receive an annual budget of $1,000 (yes, that’s really only one thousand dollars) that can be spent only on office supplies.

We have to raise the rest of the money ourselves and it’s sometimes like pulling teeth—from a great white shark. The cost of upkeep on a facility of this size is enormous; we’re blessed that Battery Osgood-Farley is not only made of concrete, but that the Corps of Engineers really put in some overtime on the design and construction of this place.

When the US Military first started using the property back in 1888, the U.S. Navy was just learning to build its first modern warships, ships like the-then experimental USS Maine. Battleships constructed by the U.S. and other navies would fuel the planet’s first “arms race,” making places like Fort MacArthur vital for the national defense.

By the time construction of Fort Mac started in 1915, the first airplanes were being used over the battlefields of Europe, but no one had even thought of putting one on a ship. By the 1930s aircraft were commonplace and could be launched from the deck of a warship, and America now had to defend the skies as well as the seas. When the Pacific Fleet left Los Angeles in October 1940 for its “Date with Infamy,” the coastal defenses of the United States were nearing their peak. Like those same battleships they were designed to protect us against, most of the coast artillery guns were scrapped by 1950.

Over the next 25 years, jet airplanes became commonplace, we saw a man land on the moon and the U.S. was not the only kid on the block with “the bomb.” Coastal guns were replaced by missiles (NIKE Ajax & Hercules) designed to destroy any foreign aircraft that might try to cross the oceans.

Today all of the coastal defenses are gone and the borders are watched from hundreds of miles up in outer space. Today, the lower reservation of Fort MacArthur is now used by the United States Air Force as housing for those people in uniform who work at the Los Angeles Air Force Base.

And, on the upper reservation, the Fort MacArthur Military Museum continues to claim my time and duty.