If These Walls Could

Part 3: Victory Over Spain to Today

Story by Maj. Scott Bell, S.C. National Guard Historian
Archival photographs courtesy of the National Park Service at Ft. Moultrie

Editor's Note: *As our state commemorates the bicentennial completion of Ft. Moultrie on Dec. 19, 1809, the "Swamp Fox History" pages of this magazine are proud to showcase South Carolina's epic service at the fort in this final installment of a personified three-part series called "If These Walls Could Talk."*

Hey ya'll! Welcome back to Ft. Moultrie. Thanks for coming by to celebrate the 200th anniversary of my completion on Dec. 19, 1809. What a great year 2009 has been. I've had so many friends from the S.C. National Guard down here visiting, I thought ya'll were bringing me out of retirement. Just kidding! But, you have to admit, the Guard and I did spend a lot of time together between the American Revolution and World War II.

Speaking of those great times here on beautiful Sullivan's Island, let me pick up where I left off during your last visit. Soon after the Spanish-American War, our President William McKinley was assassinated. Sadly, he was the last of us Civil War veterans to serve as president. Vice President Teddy Roosevelt – the old "Rough Rider" himself – then became our nation's youngest president at age 42. Well, Teddy, who had received a Medal of Honor during the Spanish-American War, believed in speaking softly and carrying a big stick!

Needless to say, it wasn't long before I went through another growth spurt. The Army purchased all the land south of the Sullivan's Island light house, as well as smaller pieces of land up to Breach Inlet, to build artillery batteries and other structures. Breach Inlet, you recall, is where 200 of our brave Guardsmen helped Col. Thompson repel 2,500 redcoats on June 28, 1776.

Anyway, I was so big folks started calling me the Ft. Moultrie Military Reservation. To help my Soldiers, their families and all the folks who were building summer cottages on the island to get around easier, the S.C. General Assembly allowed a company to build a street car system here on Sullivan's Island in 1903. Want to know another secret? Those "Station" markers you saw all along the road as you drove down here are all that's left of the old street car system.

Before the Grace Memorial Bridge was constructed connecting Charleston to Mt. Pleasant, Soldiers and their families went to Charleston and back via small sailing vessels such as this.

Besides the sounds of progress from all the new construction here and that funky new street car's bell, things were relatively peaceful here until April 1917. That's when Congress was forced to declare war on Germany. Five companies of the S.C. National Guard quickly mobilized to man my positions and an antisubmarine net was placed across Charleston Harbor to keep out German U-boats. Life was about to get real scary.

While we worried about German U-boats and what they might do to our shipping here in Charleston, we also had to worry about a new threat from the air. Ever since Orville and Wilbur Wright flew their first *Flyer* – now called an "airplane" -- a few hundred miles north of here in 1903, German engineers had been working hard to develop their own. They must have done a good job of it 'cause when we went to war, my Soldiers spent a lot of time installing anti-aircraft guns. You wouldn't

know it today but by the end of the "Great War," there were 3,000 Soldiers serving with me here on the island.

Things quieted down a lot after the Allies and Germany signed the armistice on Nov. 11, 1918. I can't begin to tell you how proud all of us here in Charleston were when the *U.S.S. Pocahontas* sailed by me on March 28, 1919, into the harbor carrying our S.C. National Guard's 118th Infantry Regiment. Charlestonians turned out by the thousands to meet the ship at the dock to welcome our S.C. heroes home. Despite the joy we all felt, we couldn't help but feel sadness for the families of the 329 enlisted men and 14 officers from the unit who didn't make the trip home. They, like so many S.C. Guardsmen before them, had paid the ultimate price for our freedom.

In 1920, Congress did something we all applauded. They passed the National Defense Act. From then on, my Guard buddies in the Coastal Artillery had the money they needed to come visit more often. They'd practice firing my big guns from Batteries Jasper, Logan, Capron and Butler at targets thousands of yards out to sea. What was really cool is when they'd fire my mortars at Capron and Butler. It would literally shake the island like an earthquake. To keep the ladies of the island happy, we wisely learned to warn them before each practice. It gave them time to open all their windows and take the china off the shelves. After all, we didn't want any windows and fine china getting shattered!

Left to right: Hon. Olin D. Johnson, Governor of S.C., Gen. (Ret.) Charles P. Summerall, Brig. Gen. James C. Dozier, The Adjutant General of S.C., Col. Charles A. Dravo, Ft. Moultrie Post Commander and Lt. Col. Claud C. Smith, 263rd Coast Artillery Commander review a parade of S.C. National Guard Soldiers on July 30, 1936.

Over the next 20 years, I became a big training base. Not only were S.C. National Guard Soldiers training with me but young men from the Senior Reserve Officer Training Corps, Citizens Military Training Camps and Civilian Conservation Corps were training here as well.

By the way, did you know America once had five-star generals and admirals? There's only been nine of 'em and the first one was my boss in 1933. George Marshall was a Colonel when he came here in June of that year. By the time he moved on to his next job in October, I'd had another facelift and all of us here knew he was going places. Where, we weren't sure, but after the Japanese killed over 2,000 Americans at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, Marshall became a household name.

Four days later, Germany declared war on the United States. As Chief of Staff of the Army, my old boss, would direct our war effort to defeat both Japan's imperial forces and Nazi Germany. Fortunately, Marshall had planned ahead. The S.C. National Guard's 500-strong, 263rd Coast Artillery

"Probably the most important mission of the Regular Army is to provide the knowledge, the expert personnel and the installations for training the Citizen-Soldier upon whom, in my view, the future peace of the world largely depends."

Gen. George C. Marshall
Chief of Staff of the Army

(Biennial Report to the Secretary of War, 1944-1945)

S.C. National Guard Coastal Artillery Soldiers practice firing one of four 10-inch rifles mounted on disappearing carriages. When fired, the rifles recoiled behind Battery Jasper's walls at Ft. Moultrie.

The 263rd Coastal Artillery (Harbor Defense) headquarters at Ft. Moultrie during World War II.

Our Reverie

In the hush of the night
I feel your strong arms
Holding me tight;
The bugle blows in the distance
With your lips on mine we listen
As the beautiful notes of "lights out"
Fade - and all is quiet;
You whisper so tenderly
As the moon light enfolds thee
In your eyes
I can see
All the love you have for me;
With the lost notes of the bugle
You're no longer a Soldier
But my man - honey;
As from salute
Your hand falls
And caresses me;
Yes, darling - the hush of the evening
Is our reverie.

An anonymous World War II poem found in a Soldier's scrapbook at Ft. Moultrie.

(Harbor Defense) had been stationed here since January 1941, mounting searchlights and manning my harbor defenses. A month after Germany declared war on us, the Nazis torpedoed several ships off the coast of North Carolina and every seacoast fortification remained on high alert for the remainder of the war.

Now's a good time to tell you another secret. Looking back, it's really kind of a funny tale to tell. As your grandparents will tell you, at the outbreak of the war, there was a nationwide effort to collect scrap metal to send to our steel industry. Places like the "Steel City" in Pennsylvania would melt down scrap and send new steel to the "Arsenal of Democracy" in Michigan to make airplanes and tanks. It just so happened my 263rd brothers from Beaufort had two ancient, four-pounder Napoleon brass cannons sitting out in front of their office here. In fact, those boys loved those cannons so much, they had small copies of them put on their coat of arms.

A 263rd Soldier wearing the Coat of Arms on his World War II dress uniform with Ft. Sumter in the background.

Well, one day some folks decided the 263rd needed to send those shiny cannons off to get melted down. What those folks didn't know is that some Beaufort boys lost those cannons the night before the Civil War battle of Bay Point. It took until 1881, for the Beaufort unit to get their most prized possessions home again. Well, guess what? They decided they weren't gonna lose 'em again!

The night before the cannons were to be sent off, I watched some of my Beaufort buddies sneak out of the barracks, hop into a flatbed truck, drive over to their headquarters, pick up those two cannons and drive off. Before reveille was sounded the next morning, those boys had taken an unauthorized pass, driven to Beaufort, hidden the cannons in someone's barn and gotten back here to their barracks before sunrise! Affter the war, I heard both cannons just reappeared outside the old Beaufort Armory one morning.

Another interesting thing happened here during the war. You may not believe it but the first time women were officially recognized for serving in the U.S. military wasn't until after the start of World War II. Can you guess where some of those first Women's Army Corps (WACs) members served? Yep, right here with me. Gosh, those WACs sure were pretty and they smelled a whole lot better than my 263rd buddies!

As the war progressed, I got two 12-inch rifles, 90-mm antiaircraft guns and some of our country's most state-of-the-art communications and harbor defense equipment. It was installed in that camouflaged building over there on my

During World War II, 263rd Coast Artillery (Harbor Defense) Soldiers such as Cpl. Arthur L. Quick of Battery B, were required to carry "Pass Cards" if they were leaving Ft. Moultrie Military Reservation. Typically, Soldiers were granted pass on Wednesday's from 1 p.m. until 11:59 p.m. On weekends, they normally had pass from noon on Saturday until 11:59 p.m. on Sunday.

A Woman's Army Corps unit parades at Ft. Moultrie during World War II.

The 263rd's G-Company in formation preparing for guard mount during World War II.

northwest bastion. The Navy called their portion the Harbor Entrance Control Post. The 263rd called their part of the building a Harbor Defense Command Post.

Even with all this new equipment, by the time we'd won World War II, my friends were asking me what my plans would be after the war. As you may recall from your two previous visits, my job has always been to protect Charleston and its harbor from an attack by sea. I really thought about sticking around but I knew with the support of our Navy, American troopers could land on any beachhead, take it and keep it. I also knew our air forces could destroy enemy targets above or below the ocean. Knowing my city would be safe from here-on-out made my decision to retire an easy one. To be honest, I needed the rest!

After 171 years of service, a lot of people ask me if I miss it. In some ways I do but the great thing about being retired is more people get to visit me now. Fact is, while I was serving, I had a lot of dangerous, explosive stuff here. Folks couldn't enjoy me the way they do today. What's really neat is how many families moved into my old post housing, buildings and bunkers all up and down the beach. The Fort Moultrie Military Reservation is gone but thanks to my National Park Service (NPS) rangers, S.C. National Guard and the folks living on Sullivan's Island, the memories of those who served here with me will live on.

Well my friends, thanks again for visiting. You made this 200th anniversary of my completion a very special year for me. Thanks for letting me share some awesome memories of the great Citizen-Soldiers who served with me. As you have heard – from the old fort's mouth – so to speak, the S.C. National Guard has been like family to me since the American Revolution. And oh, by the way, don't let my Ranger Rick Hatcher know, but if you ever need me, I'm "Always Ready—Always There" to fight beside you!

1st Sgt. Herold Brown, Headquarters, 2nd Battalion, 263rd Coast Artillery (Harbor Defense) mans our nation's state-of-the-art Harbor Defense Command Post during World War II.

A 263rd Soldier photographs his wife at Ft. Moultrie during World War II.

The Army lowered Ft. Moultrie's flag flag for the last time in 1947. In 1960, S.C. transferred custody of the historic fort to the National Park Service. To schedule a staff ride for your unit to Ft. Moultrie, please contact Maj Scott Bell, S.C. National Guard Historian at (803) 667-1013.