BATTERY POINT LOMA

by

Howard Overton
Cabrillo National Monument

This is the story of a little known part of San Diego and America's history. It happened on Point Loma, on property now part of Cabrillo National Monument. The tale will involve events that led up to the construction of Battery Point Loma, how the guns were fired, and what life was like in those early months of World War II. It is also an assessment of what time and the elements have done to it since its construction.

What is a battery? A battery can be two things. A battery, if named, such as Battery Point Loma, consists of one to four guns mounted to direct fire at a point. (1) If it is an alphabetic designation, such as Battery E, it was a group of men adequate to fire the number of guns assigned to it. So a battery can be a group of men and/or a number of guns.

December 7, 1941 was a dark day in the history of the United States. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had thrown the nation into turmoil. An attack, or possibly an invasion, of the west coast by the Japanese was expected. (2)

Much planning was done in the middle 1930s to improve the harbor defenses that would defend the port of San Diego, but, on December 7, 1941, only one gun battery was in position to effectively repel the expected attack. That was Battery Point Loma. All other gun batteries were either pointed in the wrong direction, not yet ready to be manned, or were outmoded and useless. Battery Point Loma was the lead defensive position in the San Diego Harbor Defenses from December 7, 1941 until April 1942 when other gun positions came into service.

In the 1930s, Fort Rosecrans, though technically still a U.S. Army base, had been virtually closed down. A reporter visiting the base in 1935 found a commissioned officer, eighteen enlisted men, and a dog named Bozo. (3) The United States, however, began to respond to trouble in Europe and the western Pacific. An article in the October 12, 1940 issue of the San Diego Union reported 18,525 officers and men stationed at Fort Rosecrans. (4) Not all of those men belonged to coastal artillery, which was the normal type of unit stationed on Point Loma. Fort Rosecrans served as a basic training center for the U.S. Army. About 15,000 of the men were draftees with regular Army instructors. This build-up was the largest force of men to have been stationed at Fort Rosecrans up to that time. (5)

Army planners were assigned to improve coastal defenses on the west coast as a precautionary measure against increased tension, stimulated by Japanese agression in the Far East. The War Department received a detailed plan to improve the harbor defenses of San Diego as early as 1936. At that time, the main batteries of Fort Rosecrans were Gillespie, Calef, Wilkeson, McGrath, Fetterman, White, and Whistler. (6) The latter two were mortar batteries of limited range and slow firing. All of these guns were on the east facing slope of Point Loma and were aimed to the south toward Mexico.

Prior to Pearl Harbor, Battery McGrath served as the "examination battery" for all the batteries on the east side. At the time, it mounted two three inch guns on barbette mounts and was slightly elevated above Ballast Point. Battery McGrath had the best troops assigned to man its guns. When an alien ship entered the harbor with unknown intentions, the Harbor Defense Command Post

required it to stop and anchor within firing range of the examination battery, for examination, until officials cleared it for entry or ordered it to leave. (7)

A Harbor Entrance Control Post was established at the Old Point Loma Light House in July of 1941. It operated with an Army officer, Navy officer, and enlisted assistants on duty twenty-four hours a day. Battery McGrath was also manned around the clock. (8)

155 Millimeter G.P.F. Artillery

Included in the 1936 plans were two batteries of 155 millimeter "G.P.F." guns, one at Imperial Beach and one on Point Loma. The latter was located 300 yards north of the New Point Loma Light on the west side. Another gun position, Battery Strong was to be completed in April, 1942. Strong consisted of two 8 inch guns that were mounted on the west side of the peninsula with a field of fire directed to the west. (9)

The term 155 mm G.P.F means one hundred fifty-five milimeter Grand Puissance, Filloux. It was a U.S. Army mobile artillery designed by Captain Filloux of the French Army and sold to America in 1917. The shells fired by the gun measured 155 mm or 6.1 inches in diameter. After World War I, this piece was the standard heavy support weapon of the field artillery and could also be used by coastal artillery as mobile armament. They were a readily available piece of artillery prior to World War II. Hauled by vehicle, the 155 mm G.P.F. was quickly emplaced on a concrete pad with a steel track called the "Panama Mount." (10) This type of mount was first developed in Panama and the name stuck.

During service of the gun, no talking was permitted except for orders, reports, and instructions. The guns were loaded, elevated or depressed, swiveled left or right and halted, troops ordered to stand fast, take cover, ready, fire, and cease fire. (11)

Target practice was taken against towed objects at sea. Targets were towed from right to left. Each gun was manned by a "gun squad" of eleven enlisted men. Each man had a specific place to stand and specific duties related to that position. Odd numbered positions stood on the right of the gun and even numbered on the left. (12)

The gun was aimed through the use of an observation post. This post for Battery Point Loma was located above the battery on a hill to the east. There was a 45,000 yard field of view from that location. (13) Observations were taken of targets and then communicated to a plotting room. Every fifteen seconds a time interval, or T.I., bell would ring. At the bell, a reading of the location of the target was given to the plotting room, and they would compute the settings for the gun. After two T.I readings, a third point could then be theoretically advanced to where the ship would be located. The proper settings would then be

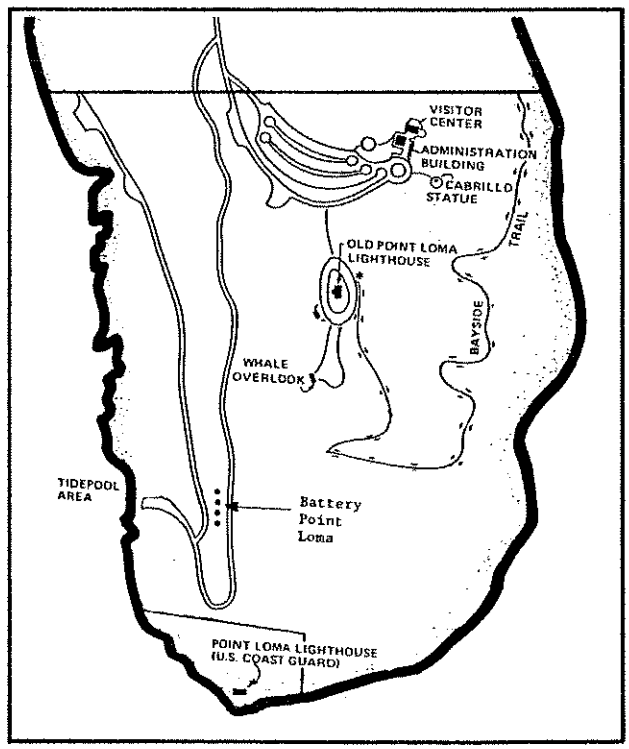


Figure 1. Cabrillo National Monument, showing position of Battery Point Loma.

communicated by telephone to the gun. At the third T.I. bell, the gun would be fired. (14)

A great many variables needed to be figured into the computation. Coastal artillery fired at moving targets. Factors that affected the flight of the projectile included air density, wind speed and direction, rotation of the earth, weight of the projectile, and amount of propelling charge. Hitting the target, of course, depended on the target approaching in a straight line. In time of a heated battle, few ships sailed in a direct line. (15)

Panama gun mount construction began on Point Loma in March of 1941. Each consisted of a massive cylindrical block of reinforced concrete, ten feet in diameter. The wheels of the 155 mm G.P.F rested and turned around this center cylinder. Outside was a circular ring of reinforced concrete with an outside diameter of thirty-eight and one half feet. On top of this ring was a circular steel rail embedded in the concrete. The gun trails rode on this outer rail. The gun was maneuvered from the trails. (16) The Panama mount went through several modifications over the years. Those at Battery Point Loma had a continuous outer ring that allowed the gun to rest on it and be fired in any direction.

All the gun positions were covered with a camouflage netting. This consisted of chicken wire with cloth interwoven to give the impression of dense brush. It was supported by wooden poles and spread out over a wide area to appear from sea as merely a gentle rise. Sometimes the muzzle blast would blow the netting away, but generally it remained in place. Work could continue in sandbagged trenches and beneath the covered gun positions on a routine basis with no activity exposed outside the camouflage. (17)

Battery Point Loma was manned by Battery E of the 19th Coast Artillery. The basic unit of men in the coastal artillery was the battery, whereas the basic infantry unit was the platoon. The strategy was to organize all the individuals under one commander. Harbor defense units such as the 19th Coast Artillery were organized into batteries, battalions, and regiments. Battery E in December of 1941 consisted of 150 men. Battery E was to be a tactical fire delivery unit manning the four 155 mm G.P.F. guns of Battery Point Loma. They were commanded by one officer. (18) This installation was to defend the west side of Point Loma. From May 20, 1941 until April of 1942, it was the only battery pointing to the west.

A Model 1918, 155 mm G.P.F. was used in Battery Point Loma. These guns were made in America. Each gun weighed 25,905 pounds and fired a 100 pound projectile propelled by twenty-five pounds of propellent powder. Intended to hit shipping, the maximum range was 24,075 yards or 14.2 miles. (19) This was the largest piece of field artillery available before World War II. Similar batteries were mounted with these guns in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and throughout the Pacific. Modifications were made during World War II, but the gun remained essentially the same as it had been originally conceived in World War I. (20)

The harbor defense plan prepared on August 21, 1936 called for the construction of Battery Point Loma. Four gun platforms, one magazine for propelling charges, one magazine for projectiles, and a storeroom were designed to be cast in concrete. The estimated cost for completion of the battery position and accessories was $44,720. (21)

On August 17, 1940, Colonel Peter H. Ottosen, Commanding Officer of Fort Rosecrans, recommended construction of Battery Point Loma as soon as possible. He noted that the defenses of Fort Rosecrans were entirely without means of effective fire against the types of ships normally used in maritime raids. Ten days later, the Commanding General of

the Fourth Army requested $44,700 from Washington for the Point Loma 155 mm G.P.F battery. (22)

The War Department in Washington disagreed with Col. Ottosen's request. The 1936 plans were for six inch fixed sea coast batteries. Col. Ottosen replied that he needed both six inch and 155 mm G.P.F. guns on platforms. Failing his initial request, Ottosen recommended that at least the platforms be constructed at a cost of $6000. This was accomplished on December 7, 1940. (23)

In March of 1941, Col. Ottosen reported that the plans for the gun mounts he had received called for only 180 degree traverse. He urged a full 360 degree traverse to defend the area. This modification was approved on March 8, 1941 and the contract for $7935 was awarded thirteen days later. The actual cost with hired labor was $7166. Col. Ottosen then moved guns and sights from storage areas elsewhere at Fort Rosecrans and installed them on the mounts. (24)

The slow process of design and approval for construction was delayed by technical review, comment, redesign, and competitive bidding. As the war in Europe and the Pacific dominated the news media in 1941, this red tape probably appeared unreasonably slow.

Battery Point Loma consisted of four mounts stretching in an approximate North-South line. The northernmost was Number 1 and the mounts were numbered up to Number 4 at the south. They were spaced ninety feet apart from center to center. (25) Battery Point Loma assumed the role of Examination Battery on December 7, 1941, relieving Battery McGrath. (26)

Emplaced then at Battery Point Loma was a heavy field artillery piece mounted on a concrete base firing a 100 pound projectile 14.2 miles. This was thought to be an effective defensive position in 1941. The guns could direct their fire to the west where the enemy would be presumed to attack. This strategy was devised for World War I, over twenty years before the assault on Pearl Harbor. The United States was many years behind technological developments in warfare.

The Japanese had improved their offensive strategies and artillery in China. The attack, if it ever came, would have been by air and not sea. Ships carrying aircraft would position much further than 14.2 miles west. The planes could fire directly down on those uncovered positions, taking them out quickly. The U.S. Army had anti-aircraft positions also, but those too were outdated. These were water-cooled .30 caliber machine guns and would have been inadequate against the Japanese Zero fighter. But the attack against San Diego never came.

George H. McGlothlin
Battery E, 19th Coast Artillery

George H. McGlothlin enlisted in the U.S. Army on August 3, 1939 at the Baltimore, Maryland Recruiting Station. He then transfered to Fort Slocum, New York which was a processing center for U.S. Army personnel going overseas. Following six months training, he was put on the U.S. Army Transport Grant and shipped south through the Panama Canal, then north to San Francisco. The ship off-loaded men and supplies in California, Midway, and Guam. McGlothlin arrived in the Philippines on October 27, 1939 and was assigned to a Coastal Artillery unit. Following six weeks of training in Correigador, he was assigned to Battery G, 59th Coast Artillery on the island of Caballo at Fort Hughes. He was assigned to work at various times on 14", 12", and 75 mm gun crews. Two years later, McGlothlin completed his overseas duty and was transferred to Fort Rosecrans in San Diego, California. He joined the men of Battery E, was promoted to the rank of Corporal, and assigned as an observer for Battery Point Loma. (27)

December 7, 1941

Corporal McGlothlin was lying in his bunk on Sunday, December 7, 1941, and it was almost time to go to lunch. About 11:00 or 11:30 AM, Battery E received a message that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. Ammunition was immediately hauled to the battery positions and made ready for firing. Guards were increased at all posts. By 2:00 PM that afternoon, the four 155 mm G.P.F. guns at Battery Point Loma were being manned on a twenty-four hour basis. Activity at Battery Point Loma was particularly hectic the first week of World War II. Corporal McGlothlin would later recall in a 1986 oral history that many doubts ran through his mind in the first six months of World War II. Was the United States really that weak, and what would happen next? (28)

The temporary impairment of the Pacific Fleet made enemy attack on the Pacific Coast not only possible but, to all appearances, also probable. The entire west coast defense forces anticipated an attack and were put on alert.

The guns at Battery Point Loma were more heavily sandbagged. Holes were dug in the ground and covered with a half piece of culvert pipe and then recovered with soil. Canvas cots were placed in these bunkers and the men slept next to their guns.

The garrison at Fort Rosecrans perfected gun and close order drill. Every man learned the duties of each gun position through classes and practical instruction. Officers gave the men updates on the progress of

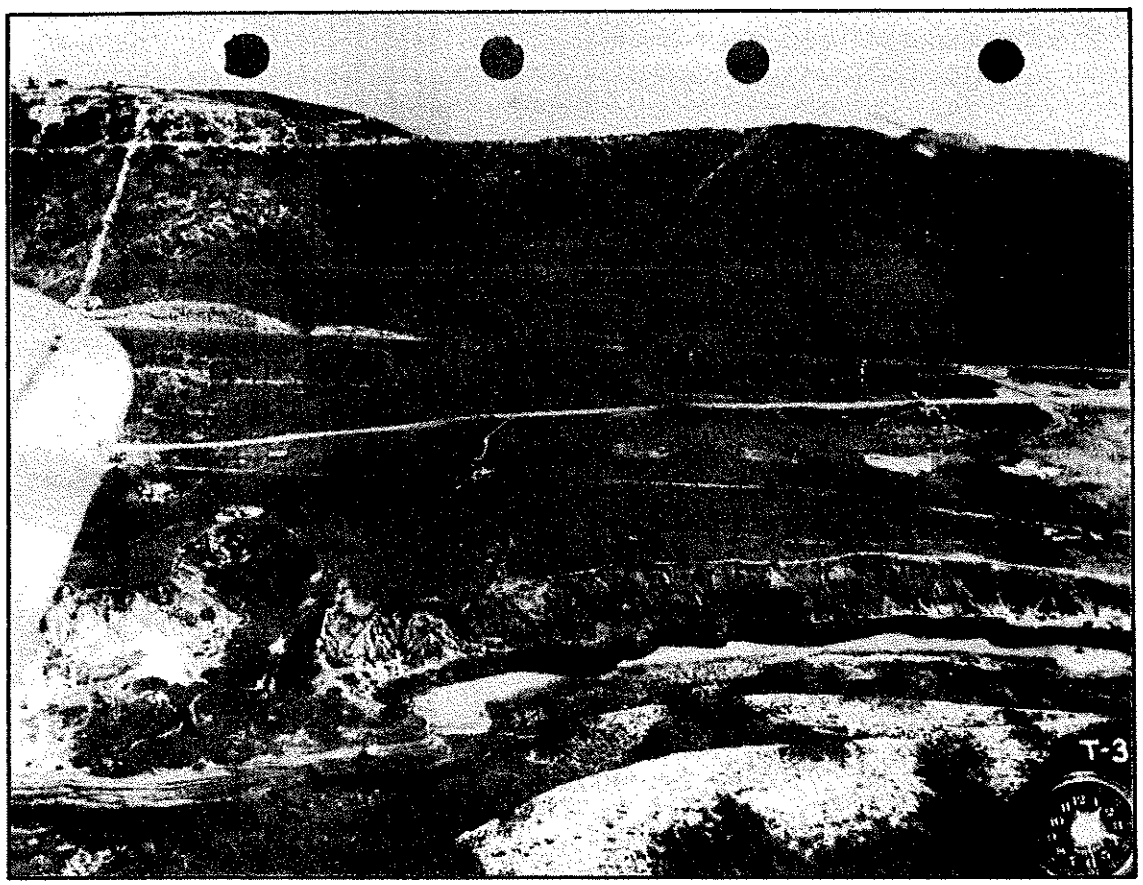
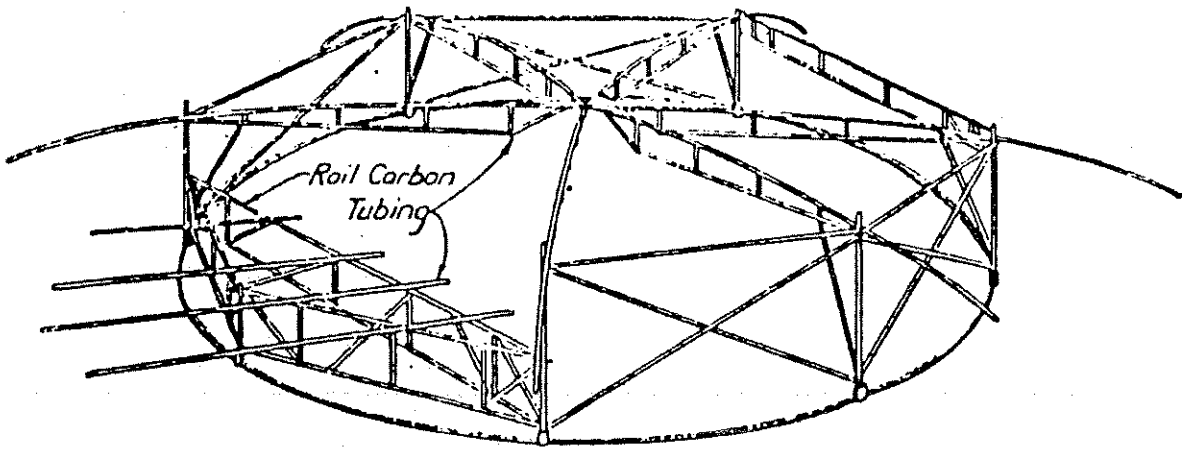
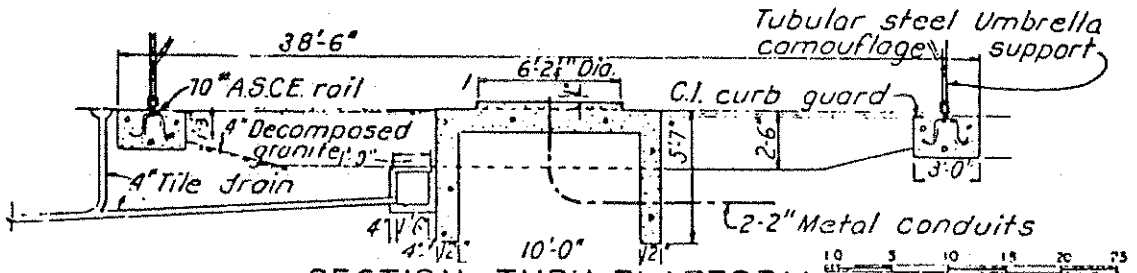


Figure 2. Battery Point Loma is shown here heavily camouflaged. You can see it if you look carefully between the two roadways. The obvious circles below are not the Battery. In the upper right of the photograph, construction on Battery Humphrey is just being started. This dates the picture to January or February 1942. Photo courtesy of the Naval Ocean Systems Center.

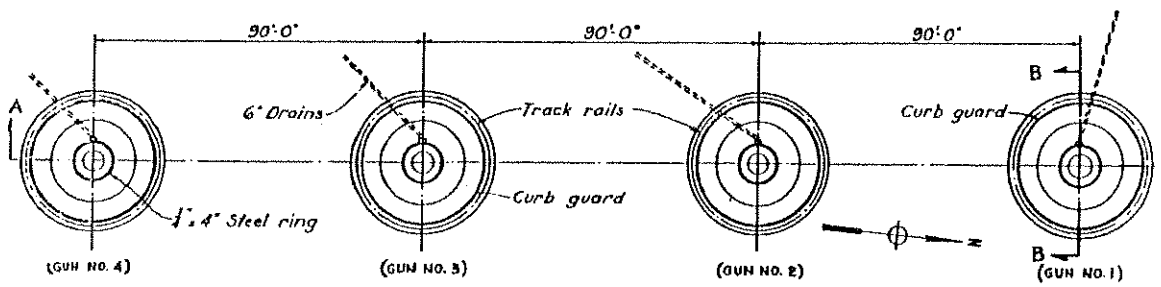


TUBULAR STEEL "UMBRELLA"

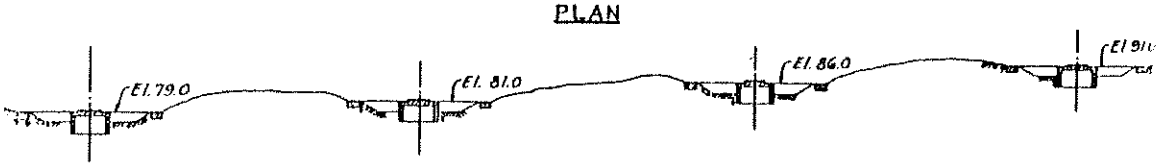
CAMOUFLAGE SUPPORT



SECTION THRU PLATFORM



PLAN



SECTION A-A

Figure 3. Overall plan and details of 155 mm gun emplacements.

the war. The Fort Rosecrans Cannon Report, a newspaper issued by the U.S. Army, gave local information that was not classified. The men played volleyball and baseball, but were not allowed to go into other areas of the fort. This insured security against foreign intelligence gathering.

The day at Battery Point Loma was divided into two twelve hour shifts. Each would alternate one week on days and then one week on nights. There were also four men in each of two twelve hour shifts at the observation stations. During the day shift, twelve men were posted at each of the 155 mm G.P.F. guns. They would sleep in the barracks with clean sheets and have access to warm showers. The night shift manned the guns continuously, but on a reduced staff. Five men would stand watch at each gun, while the others slept in the bunkers. Night shifts changed every two hours. Those awake could quickly arouse the sleepers if San Diego were under attack. Meals were trucked to the emplacements, which were otherwise isolated from Fort Rosecrans.

Battery E remained at constant alert for six months. The vigil relaxed as the war situation became better understood, and off duty soldiers were given four hours each week to drive into San Diego for recreation. They were required to eat before departure, due to food shortages in restaurants at that time. San Diego swarmed with tens of thousands of Army, Navy, and Marine personnel in the war years. However, Corporal McGlothlin reported that San Diego did not run out of beer. (29)

From December 7, 1941 until April of 1942, when Battery Strong was emplaced, Battery Point Loma was the primary effective gun position available to fire to the west to protect the entrance to San Diego Harbor. Battery Humphrey, immediately above and to the east of Battery Point Loma, was completed in July of 1942. Although it was to have been armed with six inch guns, they were not available, and two 155 mm G.P.F. guns from Camp Callan, south of Torrey Pines, were borrowed and installed. Battery Humphrey then was given the honor of Examination Battery for Fort Rosecrans. The six inch guns were finally installed in Battery Humphrey in July of 1943 and Battery Point Loma was dismantled. (30)

The men of Battery E were scattered throughout the various campaigns of World War II after the guns were removed. Corporal McGlothlin volunteered for paratrooper duty and departed for Fort Benning, Georgia in February of 1943. He then was shipped to Casablanca, and he fought in North Africa, Europe, and under the command of General Gavin of the 82nd Airborne Division and met the Russian Army at the Elbe River.

No battle ever came to Battery Point Loma or the shores of San Diego. During the period of World War II, there were sixty-one reports of enemy submarines, unidentified surface vessels, and underwater contacts off San Diego recorded by the harbor defenses. No friendly shipping was sunk, and no enemy craft were ever identified within range of the Coast Artillery of Fort Rosecrans. There were several instances where whales received machine gun fire from troops who had never seen whales before. (31)

Historian Jason Marmor has said that Battery Point Loma "is a reminder of a time when the West Coast of the United States prepared to repel an enemy attack or invasion on its shores. This obsolete defensive installation remains in stark contrast to the specter of remote controlled global warfare in the atomic age." (25) Although the guns are gone, the site has been visited by thousands of Americans since World War II and the 1950s, when Cabrillo National Monument received the west side of Point Loma to the sea. The sandbagged trenches and steel bunkers were, unfortunately, detonated by the

government and bladed over in the early 1960s in fear of visitors injuring themselves. In the mid 1980s, Cabrillo National Monument uncovered and stabilized the Number 4 position for interpretation. (33)

ENDNOTES

1. The R.O.T.C. Manual-Coast Artillery-Basic, 9th Edition (Harrisburg, Pa.: Military Service Publishing Company).

2. U.S. Army, Coast Artillery, "History of the Southern California Sector Western Defenses, Harbor Defenses of San Diego," September 15, 1945, File 407, Record Group 165, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Herein refered to as "History of Western Defenses."

3. Paul Michael Callaghan, "Fort Rosecrans, California" (M.A. Thesis, University of San Diego, 1980).

4. San Diego Union, October 12, 1940.

5. Ibid.

6. "Harbor Defenses 1929-1948, Annexes to Harbor Defense Project, Harbor Defenses of San Diego, 1936-1984," Box 114, Record Group 407, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

7. Dale E. Floyd, Washington, D.C., to Howard Overton, San Diego, September 22, 1987.

8. "History of Western Defenses."

9. "History of Western Defenses."

10. The R.O.T.C. Manual.

11. The R.O.T.C. Manual.

12. The R.O.T.C. Manual.

13. George McGlothlin, San Diego, to Howard Overton, San Diego, January 1988.

14. Arthur Blee, San Diego, to Brett Jones, San Diego, June 28, 1979.

15. Blee to Jones.

16. The R.O.T.C. Manual.

17. Pamela Morton, 1986, "Cabrillo National Monument Oral Histories," transcript, Cabrillo Historical Association, San Diego, California.

18. Morton, "Oral Histories."

19. The R.O.T.C. Manual.

20. Emmanuel Raymond Lewis, Seacoast Fortifications of the United States (Annapolis, Maryland: Leeward Publications, 1979) 103.

21. "Harbor Defenses 1929-1948."

22. "Harbor Defenses 1929-1948."

23. "Harbor Defenses 1929-1948."

24. "Harbor Defenses 1929-1948."

25. Jason Marmor, Redondo Beach, to Howard Overton, San Diego, September 30, 1985; October 19, 1985; February 19, 1988; November 8, 1987; May 15, 1988.

26. "History of Western Defenses."

27. McGlothlin to Overton.

28. Morton, "Oral Histories."

29. Morton, "Oral Histories."

30. "History of Western Defenses"; "Harbor Defenses 1929-1948."

31. Hollis T. Gillespie, San Diego, to Brett Jones, San Diego, July 4, 1979.

32. Marmor to Overton.

33. The R.O.T.C. Manual.