

Willis Spitzer's Recollections of Battery Townsley

From interviews by Brian Chinn and John Martini

Willis Spitzer served in Battery E, 6th Coast Artillery Regiment, at Battery Townsley, Fort Cronkhite, California, from 1940 until 1944. He was twice interviewed, in 1992 by Brian Chinn and in 1993 by John Martini. The following is a summary of those interviews, courtesy of John Martini. Direct quotes are indicated; statements not in quotes are summaries by John Martini; brackets indicate editorial commentary.

For a different perspective on the same subject, readers are referred to the recollections of Col. John S. Schonher, who commanded Battery E during the war.(1)



Willis E. Spitzer. Harbor Defenses of San Francisco: 1941, *The Army and Navy Pub. Co.*

Background

Willis E. Spitzer was born in Bismarck, ND, in 1917 and enlisted in the National Guard as a young man. He moved to California in 1939, and when the National Guard was mobilized early in 1940, rather than return to his unit in North Dakota, he chose to enlist. He first went to the navy and then the army, where the recruiter offered him duty with the 16-inch guns at Fort Cronkhite, outside San Francisco. Spitzer began to think that if war came, it might be better to be on land than on a potential target floating in the ocean, so he enlisted in the army.

Initially, his assignments were switched around “like a yoyo.” At Fort Scott and Fort Baker, he spent a lot of time marching. He then moved to Fort Barry. At that time, neither Battery Townsley nor Fort Cronkhite’s barracks were finished, but he figured, “Well, we’re getting closer all the time.” Closer, that is, to Fort Cronkhite. Spitzer was assigned to Battery E late in 1940. By then, Battery Townsley was newly completed and manned by only a small maintenance crew. In mid-1941, Battery E moved to Fort Cronkhite, the first crew to man Battery Townsley. That is when he got his first look at the 16-inch guns.

Battery Townsley

When Battery E arrived at Fort Cronkhite, “They [the army] didn’t really know what to do with these big guns. They were navy guns, by the way – they were not army. Instead of putting them on a battleship, they put them up here with coast artillery. They were a new thing for the army.(2) We had 235 men to man two 16-inch guns, some 3-inch antiaircraft guns [on Wolf Ridge], some 3-inch guns between the two 16-inch guns (3), and we had at that time, I thought, four base end stations. . . We were truly understaffed. . . . Every month we had target practice. They’d fire seven rounds out of each gun.” Spitzer started out in the plotting room (PSR), working on the plotting board. He also “. . . worked as gun pointer – and the gun pointer’s the one that pulls the trigger. I worked on the ammunition crew. I worked in the plotting room. I worked up at the base end stations spotting the targets and so forth, and all that. . . . They kept shifting men around all the time. If you were handy at something you’d go do this job. Next you know, ‘you go over here, we need you over here. Go learn.’. . . And after almost a year like, why, they made me a ‘key man’ because I can work every position in that place.” By this time, he had been promoted to sergeant.

The crew spent several months on dry-run target practice, just going through the motions, before actual live firing. Again, they were cross training between various positions at the battery. He remembers there was no ammunition at Townsley at first, but it arrived later. Battery Townsley was top secret, and he believes people in San Francisco did not know there was a battery of 16-inch guns in Marin. He speculated they might also not have known there was another in SF [Battery Davis]. “The army did not reveal them there.”(4)



Battery Townsley, ca. 1940. NPS, GGNRA Park Archives

The company took pride in being assigned to a project like Battery Townsley. Infantry soldiers and artillerymen assigned to 155 mm guns were envious.

Training at Townsley was carried out at different times of day, sometimes under normal conditions and sometimes under emergency conditions like turning the lights off or “putting obstacles in the way to see what a man would do.”

Life at the Battery

“When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, everybody scrambled. Scrambled out of the barracks and moved up to the gun emplacements and this and that. The guns had a tunnel between the two guns, and everybody was sleeping in the tunnels. We didn’t know, you know, if the Japs were going to bomb us next or what. We had no idea. They gonna land? They could have landed on the beach down there [Rodeo Beach]. It was wide open. We couldn’t protect the beach too. We didn’t have enough men to do that. We had a guard down the road but what’s he gonna do if a crew landed on the beach? I mean, no one would . . . suicide.”

When the war started, “There wasn’t any facilities up there. They had to bring the men down to the barracks down here to get a shower. . . . No facilities for anything. All you had was two large guns and a lot of ammunition.”



Credit: Golden Gate NRA Park
Archives & Records Center

Battery Townsley, September 15, 1939. NPS, GGNRA Park Archives

The guns and casemates were camouflaged with nets and strips of burlap, dyed different colors to match the ground. “They had planted some of the brush that grows in the hills up there” as additional camouflage.

Q: Did they plant any trees?

A. “Not to my knowledge, no. If they did, I didn’t see ‘em.” [Trees would have been out of place and attracted attention from the air or sea.]

“We’d always have a guy [sentry] out in front of the gun because no one was walking out into the front.” [The area in front of the casemates was a restricted zone for the battery personnel.] A Sperry gun computer [M1 gun data computer] was installed in the plotting room (PSR) partway through the war.

Firing the 16-inch guns

They never fired both guns at the same time because the observers couldn’t differentiate fall of shot to make corrections. The process before firing had to go like clockwork. Every person had to do his job right, and at the right time. This meant lots of training. And you had to have a lot of respect for ammunition. “It took a long time to train men on those guns up there. It wasn’t an easy job at all, it just took a lot of training. You had to be precise all the time; you couldn’t make mistakes. It took a crew of 35 to operate the gun, because you had to have a man for every move.”

Q: Did many injuries or deaths result from mistakes during your time?

A: “No.”

The noise and concussion surprised the soldiers. “Recoil of the gun was about three feet to start with, and the flame coming out of the barrel was about 110 feet in the air, and of course the rocks and things that were flying around from the concussion of the gun. And the concussion of the gun itself on the human body, well it felt like the flesh was coming off your bones. That concussion would go down through that tunnel and come out the other side. It was about a 100 mile per hour wind [sic] coming down through there when that happened. . . . The sound of the guns wasn’t sharp, it was more like an earthquake, like thunder, the ground shaking. A huge rumble. It would shake the whole mountain up there, believe me!”

As for hearing protection, “They didn’t give us anything for our ears. They probably should have, but they didn’t.” The 3-inch guns they used for training were worse on the ears than the 16-inch guns.

It took about a minute and a half for the shell to go up and come down. Many variables had to be adjusted for: projectiles went up 30,000-40,000 feet before they started down again, and the plotting room had to account for the rotation of the earth, the height of the tide, the size of the waves, and the wind. In those days they sent up a weather balloon just prior to firing to see what direction the wind was blowing at 5,000 feet and 10,000 feet and so on.

Each 16-inch gun fired every 1½ to 3 minutes. “A minute and a half between firings. Number one, number two, number one, number two, number one, number two.”

Q: Three minutes between each gun firing?

A. “Uh huh.” [Other accounts state 1 minute to reload, for an experienced crew.]

“Before the war started we used to fire the guns at Townsley once a month, both guns once a month, and used four base end stations. What we didn’t know at the time was that there were four more.” The guns were fired less frequently after Pearl Harbor.

Once he was assigned as an observer on a chartered tugboat towing the target, “bouncing around like a cork.” He was supposed to lie on the deck, watch the splash, and report back how much they missed the target. He could see a puff of smoke at the battery and knew a shell was on its way. When the shell hit, a column of water went about 200 feet into the air. One time the shell hit the towline,

severed the target, and almost pulled the tug stern-first into the water. The tug ran for its life.

The Farallon Islands were theoretically within the guns' maximum range, "but things don't always go as far as you want them to go, you know?"

Q: What was the maximum accurate range for a 16-inch gun?

A: "18-19 miles." If the target was a little closer, they were REALLY accurate.



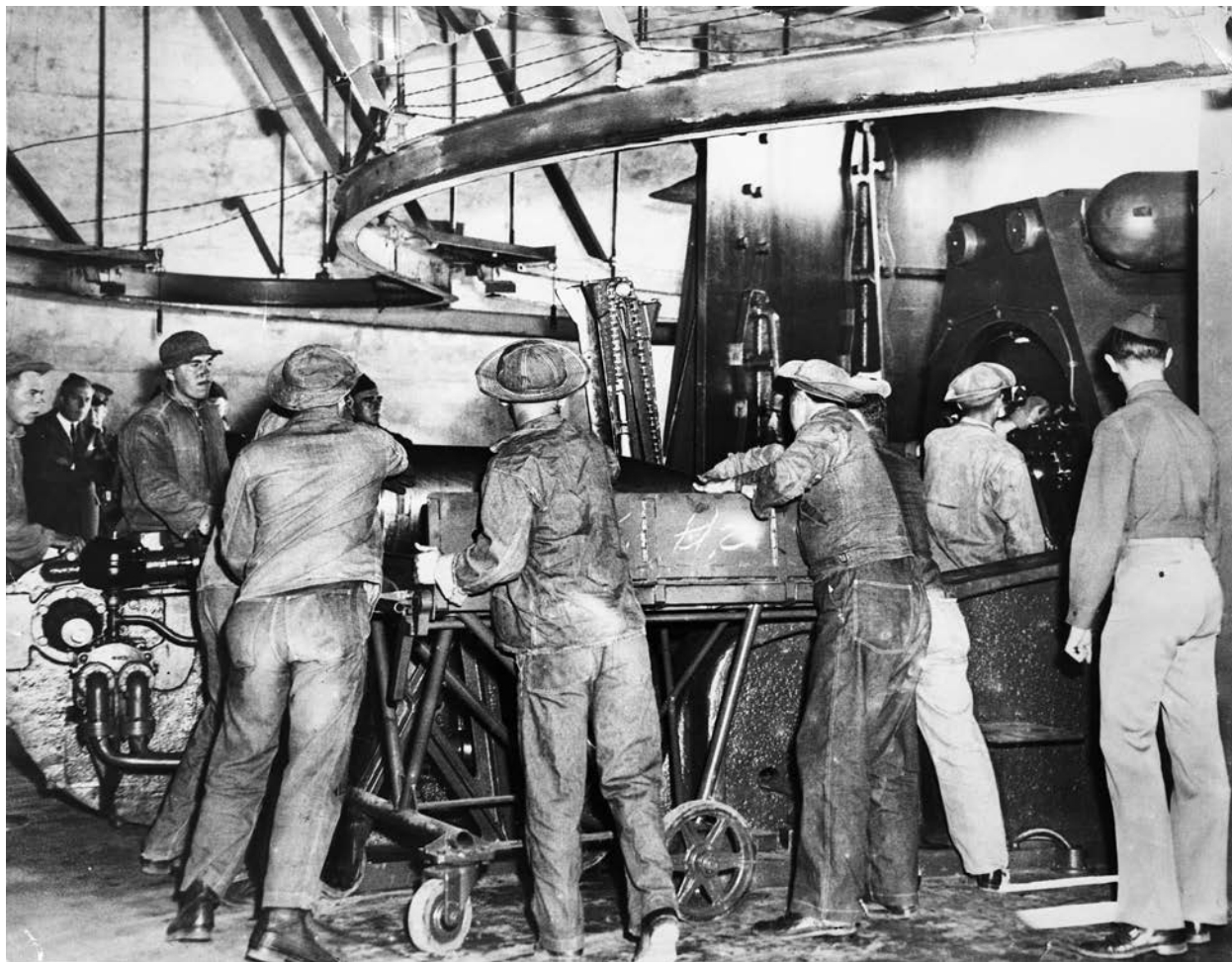
Test firing Gun No. 2, Battery Townsley, July 1, 1940. NPS, GGNRA Park Archives

Powder Magazines

"At first," powder magazine-room doors were kept closed during firing, because they didn't know what the effect would be. Only later did they start to keep them open, and stencils were placed on the doors ordering them kept open.

Two or three men worked in each powder magazine unloading powder "cans"(5) and placing silk powder bags onto shot trucks that took them to the loading tray at the gun. Two bags per can, 110 lbs each, six bags per shot. Powder was treated very carefully. Spitzer operated the hydraulic rammer staff only a few times. "If you pushed it [the hydraulic ram] too hard then that powder would explode and you'd have a blown up gun." He remembers paper tags sticking out of powder tanks. If they changed color, it indicated the powder was going bad and they had to get rid of it. The powder bags were made out of silk, the only material that would burn without leaving a residue.

“We didn’t wear our shoes in the powder room. We walked around in bare feet. Well, we used stockings, anyway. Because any kind of a spark in there would have been disastrous, so therefore they had to be careful and you didn’t wear any metal buckles or any of that. . . . If you had a metal buckle you had to take it off.”



Loading one of Battery Townsley’s 16-inch guns, October 1941. *NPS, GGNRA Park Archives*

The One-Shot Incident

Fire control radars were introduced late in 1943. “By tracking by radar, it eliminated a lot of work in that plotting room. Because it became automatic.” All gunners had to do was adjust two dials on the gun to match each other and that would give them the range.(6)

The radars helped Townsley sink a target with one shot. “We sunk the target with the first shot. We were tracking a target; they built the target over in Fort Baker over here, and we were gonna have target practice, and so they were towing the target out there, it was a nine-mile shoot setting. We’re tracking the target and getting it all lined up and the other stations were on it too at the same time and they’re all coordinated. And they fired the first round and it went right in the middle of the target and sunk the target.”

He remembers the commanders were a little upset because they had just paid \$3000 for the target. “You guys weren’t supposed to sink it; you were supposed to set your sights off a little bit so it only

hits beside it.' One round, that's it. Usually we fired several rounds out of each gun for target practice. This day we only fired one round. That was it."

"I was on the radar screen and I was tracking the target. And I got a call, 'What's the matter with you guys? You're not supposed to sink that target for crying out loud! You know, we're target practice! You're supposed to miss the target by ten feet at least! What are you guys doing?' Well, I was right on. Nobody told me that."

Fire Control & Base End Stations

Before the war, Battery Townsley only manned four of its base end stations during test firings: "Sharp Park [Milagra], San Francisco out at 44th Avenue there out where the hospital is [Fort Miley], and here at Townsley [Wolf Ridge], and Stinson Beach [Hill 640]." On December 7, the army opened up additional stations at Wildcat and Bolinas that had been built, but not manned.

Rounding up and delivering men to the fire control stations became Spitzer's job - three men to a station, 24 hours a day, with no relief. Initially, there were not even latrines at the stations; each man just had a small shovel with which to dig a pit. Spitzer was given a truck and a checkbook. He spent the next few months driving up and down the coast, buying and hauling food, water, and cook stoves. Driving at night was without headlights; the coast was blacked out. When he could, he tried to give the glassy-eyed observers a few hours of relief.

Crews at the base end stations consisted of three men, on duty 24/7, indefinitely. They were supposed to be on the scope for four hours, then off for four hours. In reality, they guys set their own schedules of about two hours looking through the eyepiece. Bunks were already in the stations when they got there. No mattresses though. Men slept in the bedrolls they brought with them. There were two scopes in base end stations: a 15-power scope for general observation and watching for fall of shot (spotting) and calling back corrections [M1910A1 azimuth instrument], and a 30-power primary instrument [depression position finder, probably an M1]. "If it was a nice clear day I could watch a man walk up that tower out on the Farallon Islands. And you could see the birds and everything else just like they were right next to you."

"Later on they put in bunkers under the ground for them to sleep in and they had bunk beds in there and they had a stove in there that would keep the men warm and they had facilities for cooking so they could cook their meals and this sort of thing, which was much better, and they also made a latrine for them so they could go to the bathroom and that sort of thing. It all came later. Much later, much too late."

Eventually more men were assigned to Battery E and crews averaged 4-5 men. They were on their own out there, with no protection. Everything had to be brought out: food, water, mail, heaters. When enough men were available, crews were rotated back to Fort Cronkhite for a few days before returning to the stations.

For security, crews could lock themselves inside stations with a padlock on the inside of the hatch.

Once they could not raise the base station at Bolinas by phone, so Spitzer had to respond with a truckload of men to see if the station had been attacked or whatever. When they arrived they found the station deserted; the crew had gone AWOL. He later picked up the guys in Petaluma.

War

When the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor, the men were completely surprised. Coastal defense became a sudden priority. Bldg. 944 [Battery E's barracks at Ft. Barry] was immediately evacuated and the company moved into Battery Townsley.

Later, as the war expanded, new men were moved in. Experienced men who were physically fit for field duty were shipped out, replaced by draftees, “Doing what they didn’t want to do in a place where they didn’t want to do it.” Spitzer’s job was to train them to replace those sent overseas. Eventually, Spitzer himself was shipped out, and he finished the war serving in the Pacific. He was discharged in December 1945.



Fort Cronkhite, April 26, 1944. Cantonment area is next to Rodeo Lagoon, at right.
One emplacement of Battery Townsley stands out at lower center. *NARA*

Footnotes

1. Col. John Schonher, “A Personal Account of the Coast Artillery in the Harbor Defenses of San Francisco during World War Two,” *Coast Defense Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Nov. 2010), pp. 18-35.
2. Battery Harris, the army’s first 16-inch barbette battery, was completed in 1923, with army M1919MII guns on M1919 carriages. When the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty left the navy with surplus 16-inch Mk II gun tubes, some were transferred to the army, and in 1929 the first two army batteries for these navy guns were completed in Panama. However, the first casemated batteries for the navy guns, Batteries Richmond P. Davis at Fort Funston, and Battery Townsley at Fort Cronkhite, were completed at in mid-1940. Bolling W. Smith, “The 16-inch Batteries at San Francisco and the Evolution of the Casemated 16-inch Battery,” *Coast Defense Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Feb. 2001).
3. These 3-inch M1902 guns from Battery Yates were technically not “sub-caliber” (or “ex-caliber”) guns, as they were mounted on their M1902 carriages.

4. The batteries were actually less secret than Spitzer thought. The movement of the large guns was reported in the press, with photographs, and the location of Battery Townsley should have been evident to observers in the city or aboard ships, at least until wartime camouflage was implemented. "Death Rides a Truck – 150-Ton 16-in. Barrel Hauled to Ft. Cronkhite," *Marin Independent Journal*, Aug. 29, 1939.
5. They called the metal canisters in which the powder bags were stored "cans," although the army officially called them "cartridge storage cases." However, some of the powder came from the navy, in what the navy called "tanks." The army apparently used both terms, depending on the source of the canisters. Ordnance Department, Standard Nomenclature List P-4, *Charges, Propelling, Separate Loading, 10" to 16", inclusive, for Harbor Defense, Heavy Field, and Railway Artillery*, Part II, 1 July 1943.
6. This may have been more directly related to the M1 gun data computer.