



CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# MONOGRAPH

SUMMER 2019

## THE ELIZABETH ISLANDS DURING WORLD WAR II

*This Monograph complements a 1993 Monograph about Cuttyhunk during WWII, borrows from a recent paper by CHS Board Member George Shaw, and adds newly compiled material.*

**DUE TO THEIR STRATEGIC LOCATION**, the Elizabeth Islands played a role in the World War II defense of New Bedford's harbor, Narragansett Bay's naval facilities, the Cape Cod Canal, and shipping channels in Vineyard Sound and Buzzards Bay. George Shaw's research paper outlines a defense plan that relied on concealed anti-motor torpedo boat (AMTB) batteries, dispersed lookout bunkers, and a radar tower.

The islands' concrete bunkers (technically "fire control stations;" also called pill boxes), were recessed into the ground, covered with sod, and accessed via a hatch in a concrete roof. Each cost approximately \$3,400 to construct.

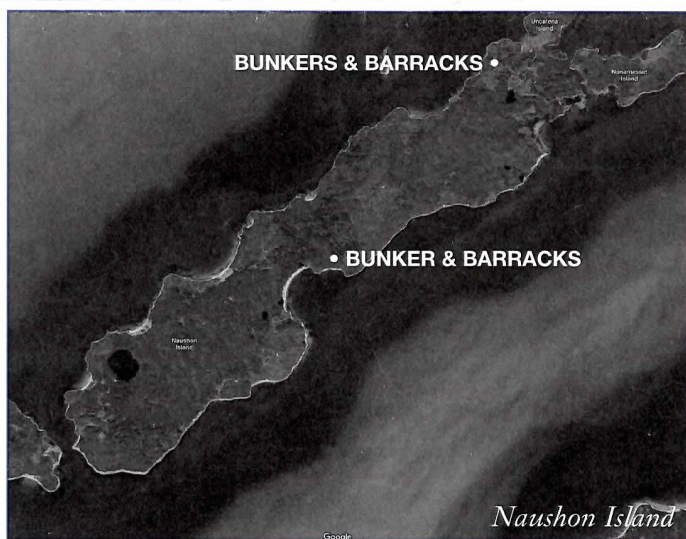
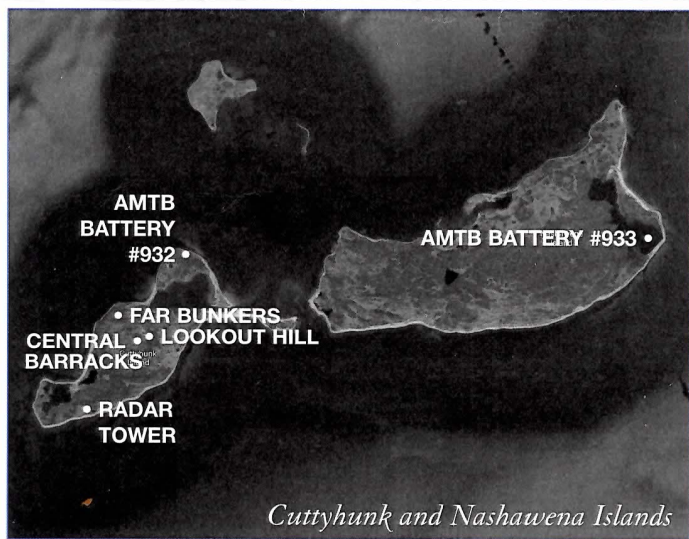
Typically each bunker, with hinged panels covering viewing slots, had a pedestal-mounted telescope and a depression position finder (DPF) with greater (30x) magnification for tracking enemy ships. Sophisticated calculations of any projectile's position could be transmitted to mainland batteries by a dedicated cable and telephone lines.

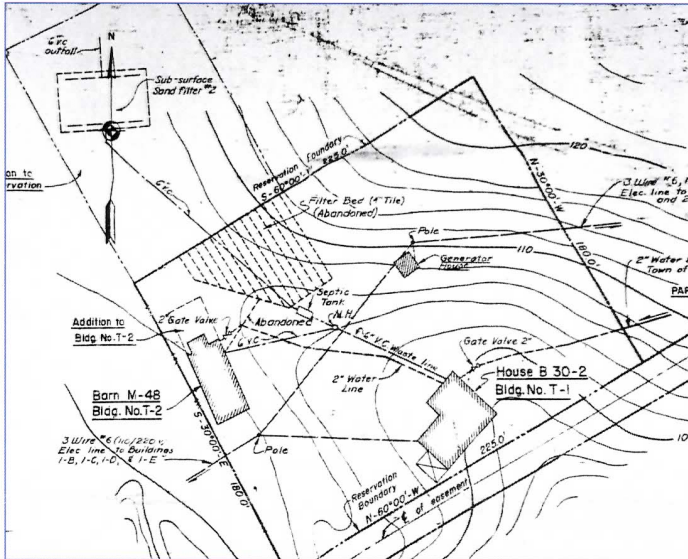
Installations on Cuttyhunk, Nashawena, and Naushon comprised the US Army's Elizabeth Islands Military Reservation. Approximately 250 servicemen of the 23rd Coastal Artillery Corps were stationed here from 1943–1945. The central battery and communications center was at Fort Rodman in New Bedford.

After three years with nary a shot fired, islanders repurposed Army buildings and kept tales of the war years alive. While few have seen remains of Naushon's and Nashawena's less public installations, many have explored accessible sites on Cuttyhunk.



Cuttyhunk Island, with a safe harbor and small village, was the site of three installations. Lookout Hill's elevation of 154' allowed unobstructed views of local waters. In January 1942 the Army leased 16.3 acres from the Wood family (in the hollow below Lookout Hill, and on the West End and Copicut Neck) and took another 7.1 acres by eminent domain (Lookout





*Army site map of Central Barracks.*

*Credit: George Shaw*



*The Central Barracks on Cuttyhunk, showing (from left to right) barracks, mess hall, and annex, circa 1943.*

*Credit: George Shaw*

Hill and the “Far Bunkers” site). By early 1943, construction of three complexes, built to mimic clustered island housing, was complete.

The central installation on Cuttyhunk was nestled in the hollow below Lookout Hill. It was composed of a clapboard barracks for 15 men, a mess hall with storage and an annex. Communications from a trio of bunkers—the “Far Bunkers”—facing north, on a nearby rise, and a single bunker up the hill were channeled to a nearby underground central switchboard station.

At a second site on a high southwest bluff, a 100' wooden water tower camouflaged a directional radar antenna (SCR-296A type) connected to Fort Rodman. Powered by two gasoline generators, the unit had a 22-mile range—useful for detection of ships using range/azimuth calcula-



*A typical Army bunker found on the Elizabeth Island Military Reservation.*

tions in all weather and in darkness. The 1993 Monograph mentions Randy Unwin, who manned this station and remembered the barracks for the 12–15 person crew at this outpost overlooking Vineyard Sound.

The northern tip of Copicut Neck was the site of ATMB Battery #932 which, strategically paired with a battery across Buzzards Bay at Barney’s Joy, covered a large swath of air and water. The six-gun artillery array consisted of two mobile and two fixed 90 mm guns (capable of firing a 23½-pound projectile about 11 miles, at a rate of 30 rounds per minute) plus two mobile 37 mm guns. These guns could hit enemy small craft and defend both mine fields and aircraft. Supporting tactical structures, including two 60' searchlights to assist in nighttime illumination, stood on this fortified point:

In the absence of any photos or site maps, long-time Cuttyhunker Alan Wilder’s memories of the Neck base are especially helpful. He remembers barracks housing up to 150 officers and enlisted men of the U.S. Army Coastal Defense, Battalion E of the 2nd Battalion, a large mess hall, gym, and generator and pump houses. Water, piped across Church’s Beach in a 4" steel pipe from the Allen House well, was stored in a 25,000 gallon wooden water tank (located near what is now a private garage).

The Army used both the town dock and one built on the Neck’s harbor shore (now owned by

the Zimbones) for supplies transported to the Neck installation on Jeep-pulled trailers and horses, recalls Wilder. Easements on telephone wires and poles allowed for the Army's island communications which could be sent via an under-the-bay telephone cable to Mishaum Point.

The Coast Guard maintained its life saving station near Canapitsit and its boat house next to the town dock. Island volunteers stood watch and supplemented the patrols of the island's perimeter, looking for subs or other enemy activity.

In nearby waters the Navy's First Naval District managed anti-submarine nets and submarine-detection from a station on Gooseberry Neck in Westport. Mine sweepers patrolled Buzzards Bay and planes practiced small-scale bombing on Gull Island and the Weepeckets (off Naushon).



Remains of three bunkers (on two sites) are visible on Naushon. Paul Elias shared *Naushon Data* records stating that, in November of 1942, trustees of the island trust granted the Army permission to build a wharf in Tarpaulin Cove and granted an easement for an underground cable (from Fort Rodman) from the island's north shore to the observation stations.

On lands leased for \$180/year on Mount Surat (just south of the Weepeckets), two bunkers with searchlights were built; and on Billiard Station Road, (just northeast of Tarpaulin Cove) a third bunker provided views of the Bay, the Sound, and Wood's Hole. By early 1943 two 15-men garrison houses and a stable were built, and wells were dug.

*Naushon Data* reported that the Army's presence had "a minimal effect on island life.... We are glad to be able to report no unpleasantness." As on Cuttyhunk, the men at times partook of island life, hiring themselves out for 85¢ per hour. They were instrumental in clearing roads of timber felled by the 1944 hurricane.

Personnel departed in February 1945, and the bunkers were covered with vegetation. The houses, transferred to the trust for \$175, were moved to the east end of the island in 1946. Named White Cap Cottage and Lichen Cottage, they are still occupied.

Nashawena Island, too, supported the war effort with AMTB Battery #933 which was linked to

Gay Head. Installed in 1943 on Fox Point (private property) on the southeast corner, the site overlooked Vineyard Sound and Quicks' Hole. The base, with at least one bunker, had a small barracks and mess hall, according to Alan Wilder who, with his wife Ann, was Nashawena's caretaker in the 1970s.

The Army constructed a dock close to the north side of Canapitsit, and a cross-island road from there to Fox Point. The gun bases are all that remain, as the dock—not otherwise useful—disappeared in the early 1960s.

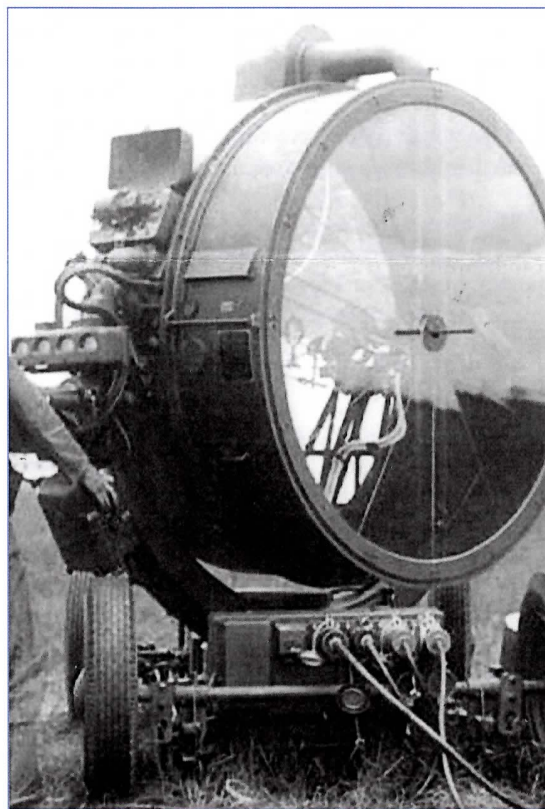


The 1993 Monograph described Cuttyhunk Island life during the war. Nighttime protocol included blackout curtains and a ban on bonfires, fireworks or flashlights. Islanders adjusted to sporadic ferry service because of the *Alert's* commission as a Navy tugboat to carry men from Newport to torpedo stations in Narragansett Bay.

Louise Haskell, in her 1953 *Story of Cuttyhunk*, mentioned that island women took Red Cross classes while many residents took part in air raid drills.



*Radar Tower on Cuttyhunk's southwest bluff.*



*A 60" Sperry seacoast searchlight, the type used on island bases.*



*Unidentified man reporting to duty on Lookout Hill, c. 1944.*

*Credit: Ellen Moreau*

The school remained open, as did the store and guest houses. Everyone coped with food rationing. Eleanor Snow Prell, whose family ran the Bosworth House, remembers men being treated to an occasional delivery of lobsters or a boarding house pie. Summer guests were few, and fishermen and lobstermen saved gasoline ration coupons for only the “finest days,” recalls Wilder.

Summer resident Eleanor Moore reminisced in 1983 about island children watching nighttime drills from the roof of her home, the former Cuttyhunk Club. Planes dropped parachutes with flares near Pease Ledge, and practice bombers aimed for the lit-up areas. The next morning the excitement was beach combing for the white nylon parachutes. Some island wedding dresses were made of the parachutes rescued from the sea!

Various accommodations were made for Army personnel. Wilder recalls that Catholic servicemen attended mass in Town Hall while others went across Tower Hill Road to church services led by lay minister Louise Haskell.

There are shared memories of the Army’s contribution to island fun. Tales of children’s visits to the Army PX in the hollow to buy candy are island legend. Wilder, a boy at the time, remembers that soldiers sanded the floors of the Woods’ two-lane bowling alley and then joined islanders for games.

Seamond Ponsart Roberts, a youngster living in the West End lighthouse, had a ball riding with her mother in the radar station crew’s Jeep for movie nights at the Neck mess hall. The special nights included a “propaganda film” (with a



*Bette Ponsart with two Army “radar guys,” c. 1945.*

*Credit: Seamond P. Roberts*

jeering crowd), the National Anthem, and a cartoon, plus treats of ice cream sodas and popcorn.

Seamond still remembers “The ‘Army’ guys who became our good, good friends; in rationing time we would provide eggs from our hens, they would bring bacon and we had some good breakfasts that way. They had a huge searchlight and could see the bathers and couples over at Gay Head. They drove me to school and made the ruts that are still there from their trucks.”

One final story, recently made public on a Facebook post of scrapbook clippings, gives a glimpse of wartime social life. The New Bedford *Standard Times* reported in February of 1944 that about 30 Junior Army Hostesses from Fort Rodman, along with the Fort’s orchestra, had gone to Cuttyhunk for a servicemen’s dance. When the rough seas prevented their late night return, the servicemen found other beds, and the young women spent the night in the barracks. The paper reported that they were “issued G.I. towels and soap...and had a good lesson in how the army lived.” Steadied at the leeward rail by the musicians, and suffering torn stockings, the young women, upon their return to the mainland the next day, said they would do it again!

Shaw uncovered no record of shots fired from or incoming shots spotted from the Cuttyhunk bunkers. At war’s end on VJ Day, August 14, 1945, the bell of the island church rang loud and long. Louise Haskell, lay preacher during the war years, delivered a stirring service of thanksgiving in the overflowing church.



*Junior hostesses from Fort Rodman—all smiles upon their safe return to the mainland after an unplanned overnight in Army barracks on Cuttyhunk, February 1944.*

*Credit: Kevin Mach*



The three-year Army presence on Cuttyhunk is neither forgotten nor erased. Visitors to the island continue to be curious about the war years—whether they are occupying a former barracks or gym, perching on a pill box to watch a sunset, or playing a round of pickleball on the concrete slab of a former Army building.

Bill Archer received permission from the town to shore up (and he dreams of restoring) the abandoned bunker on Lookout Hill. Now covered by a viewing platform it offers distant views and the chance to sing the “Star Spangled Banner” on Independence Day after the annual parade.

Some Army buildings had a marvelous second life in a diaspora by land and sea. In late 1945, all 28 structures went to auction in Boston. For \$50 Leila Hall purchased and had severed the 20' x 32' annex of the hollow mess hall and had it moved to the hillside above the Cuttyhunk Yacht Club dock. Over the course of its several expansions, it has been enjoyed by five generations of the Lovell family.

Shaw tells his family story that prompted his research. Stephen Baldwin, acting for Shaw's grandmother Nancy Taft, managed to buy the central barracks (measuring 34' x 40') for \$100, and both the gym for \$100, and a portable garage for \$25 from the Neck site. Nicknamed “Government House,” the building was moved by truck and rollers to its current site on Bayberry Hill where it has been enjoyed by five generations of family. The garage (long gone) crossed Church's Beach on the back of Baldwin's 1929 Model A roadster “Thumper.”

In Cuttyhunk style, Baldwin traded the reddish Cellotex-clad gym to island fisherman and carpenter AP Tilton in exchange for renovation of the barracks. AP floated the building across the harbor to the edge of a cow pasture near Three Corners where it was for years the popular “Sea Breeze” eatery by day, and juke box and dancing spot at night. Since remodeled, it is now owned by the Conway family.

The Wood family moved the main section of the central mess hall and positioned it next to the town dock. It served as a boat house until claimed by Hurricane Carol in 1954. Finally, islanders took any useful lumber from the unclaimed structures on Copicut Neck. The



*Leila Hall sitting in front of the relocated mess hall annex, core of the Lovell family's “Nucleus.”*

*On Loan: Hall/Lovell/Middleton Family.*

water tower, present in many photographs and paintings, eventually toppled. Visible under heavy brush are its crumbled base and two gun mounts. One foundation—possibly of the mess hall where movies were shown—was cleared and is now a private pickle ball court.

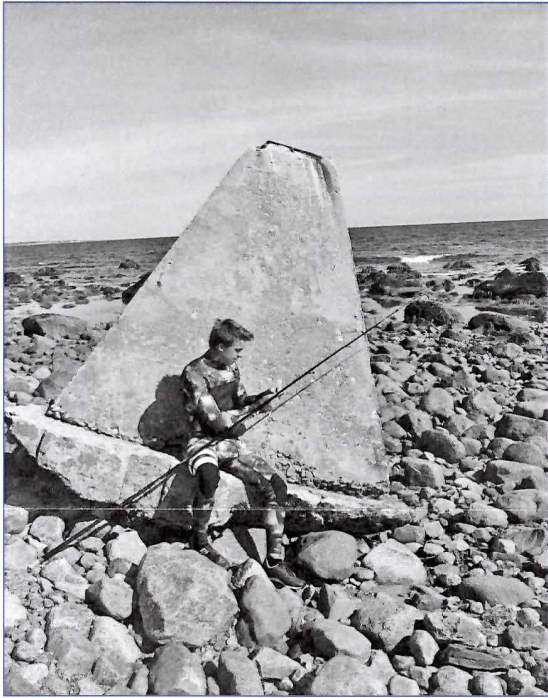
The Army salvaged and removed all Radar Site structures after the war, leaving only traces of foundations. The tower's concrete support pylons eventually tumbled over the eroding cliff, where they rest mysteriously on the rocky shore. Dubbed “Little Egypt,” these remnants provide a secluded spot for fishing or watching the sea and sky.

Leased properties were returned to their original owners or transferred to government entities, detailed by Shaw. The Central Barrack site, the majority of Copicut Neck parcels, and the

*Nancy Taft and Louise “Gan” Wyatt Garfield at the foot of Bayberry Hill Drive with the “Government House” on site, July 1947.*

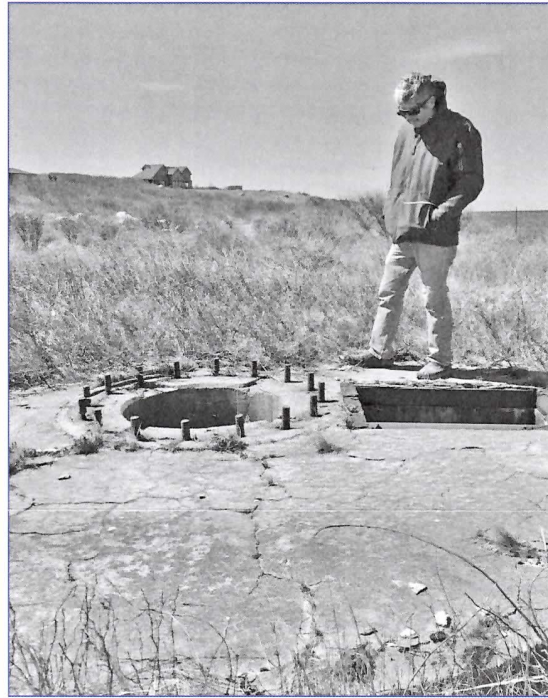
*Credit: George Shaw*





*Sitting on one of four triangular support pylons, Coby Goodrich checks his line before casting off "Little Egypt," 2017.*

*Credit: Allie Goodrich*



*Wyatt Garfield, Jr., atop the circular concrete base of a fixed mount 90 mm gun at ATMB Battery #932 on Copicut Neck, 2018.*

*Credit: George Shaw*



Monographs are periodically published by the **Cuttyhunk Historical Society, Inc.**, which serves the Elizabeth Islands

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non-tower section of the radar site were restored to the Wood Trust. Oriel Ponzecchi eventually took possession of other pieces, some of which she sold or donated to Mass Audubon.

In the 1990s the Army Corps of Engineers completed a final step in the Army's closure of the Elizabeth Island Military Reservation. The COE's Defense Environmental Restoration Plan reviewed sites used during WWII for environmentally harmful materials such as fuel, piping, and ordnance remains. COE investigators worked with island landowners to remediate their findings.

CHS has always appreciated the sharing of additional bits of history of the Elizabeth Islands—whether artifact or memory, photograph or research. Without a doubt, there are more stories afloat about the brief but extraordinary Army presence on these islands a mere 75 years ago.

LOUISE GARFIELD

#### Sources:

*All photos and texts are in the CHS collection and credited when the photographer is known.*

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