

Finding Help to Restore a Landmark

Although they were never fired at the enemy, the four six-inch naval guns defending the entrance to Pago Pago Bay on the island of Tutuila remain as mute reminders of a time almost 60 years ago when American Samoa briefly stood on the front lines in America's war with Japan.

In 1941, in anticipation of the coming war, gun emplacements were built on the jungled ridges on both sides of the harbor entrance. The ridge locations were not accessible by roads. About 1,000 Samoan laborers (basically the entire male workforce of the island) were hired to haul the cement, aggregate, and reinforcement bars to the ridge tops; and somehow the massive guns, carriages, and ammunition were lofted into place.

In the grim months following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese advance in the Pacific appeared to be unstoppable. Samoa was a vital link in the route from the United States to Australia and New Zealand, and Japan's 1938 Basic War Plan called for its seizure. There was considerable evidence in early 1942 that Japan was preparing to seize Samoa, especially after its advance into the Gilbert Islands to the north and New Britain to the west. The United States rushed the 2nd Marine Brigade to strengthen American Samoa's defenses and the 3rd Brigade to defend Western Samoa and Wallis Island. American Samoa became the largest Marine Corps installation in the Pacific Ocean. However,

the subsequent battles of the Coral Sea and Midway halted the Japanese Navy's push to conquer the South Pacific, and Samoa was spared the scars of modern war. The guns guarding Pago Pago Bay were left to rust and be claimed by the jungle.

In 1987, the Naval gun site atop Matautu Ridge at Tulutulu Point, commonly called Blunts Point Battery, at the western entrance to the Bay was designated a national historic landmark. The landmark includes one of the two original guns of the Battery. Since its designation, however, the landmark had been largely ignored by the American Samoa government on whose land it sits and by the local Department of Parks and Recreation, which was nominally responsible for its maintenance. Access was difficult, dangerous, and unmarked. The gun emplacement and accompanying bunkers were flooded and overgrown by jungle.

In April 2000, the islands of American Samoa were to celebrate the centennial of their cession to the United States. More than two years before the centennial, the American Samoa Historic Preservation Office (ASHPO) initiated efforts to repair and restore historic sites associated with the Territory's Naval period (1900-1951). The Blunts Point Battery National Historic Landmark was high on its list.

The main problem was a lack of funds. ASHPO is the sole U.S. state and territorial historic preservation program that operates entirely without any local funding. The American Samoa government was, as always, experiencing a severe economic crisis. There was no budget for repairs, no hope for an ad hoc appropriation.

Through the efforts of the governor's office, a contingent of 10 U.S. Navy Seabees was assigned to American Samoa for the express purpose of helping with the repairs to historic structures and sites. In March 1999, a crew of five Seabees began work on Blunts Point Battery.

Following plans drawn up by ASHPO and the American Samoa Department of Public Works, the Seabees constructed cement stairways and paths to the Battery. They drained the emplacements and bunkers, cleared the long-

The lower Blunts Point Gun as it looked prior to restoration. March 1998. Photo by David J. Herdrich.





Boy Scouts clean the concrete gun enclosure and remove rust from the lower Blunts Point Gun using sandpaper and wire brushes. December 1999. Photo by Analosa Vele.

clogged drains, and cut trees and vegetation away from the sites and approaches. The necessary pumps, welders, and construction materials were scrounged and borrowed. The Seabees (from NMCB5) did a great job.

When the Seabees were finished, however, much was still left to be done. ASHPO decided to turn the several acres of ridge top grounds surrounding the Blunts Point guns into an arboretum of Samoan heritage trees and plants and invited the American Samoa Community College's Land Grant Program foresters to take on the new park as a model project. An incremental replanting plan was devised and implemented. Maintenance of the new park was adopted by the local Americorps Volunteers as a community project. This was done at no cost to ASHPO or the American Samoa government.

But the landmark's single gun still needed to be cleaned of rust, treated, and painted. ASHPO was fortunate to find an Eagle Scout, Eti Vele, looking for a challenging project to take on for his Eagle Scout Merit Badge. Under ASHPO's direction, Eti and his buddies undertook the considerable task of wire-brushing, sealing, priming, and painting the big gun and its base. Through donations from the community, Eti paid for all the materials and supplies needed to complete the job. And he got his Eagle Scout badge. All was completed in time for the centennial celebration.

Today, ASHPO staff can safely take tours of school children to the landmark site and tell them about their grandparents' efforts to defend their island and what life was like in those times of nightly blackouts and anticipation, the island swarming with thousands of Marines.

It would have been easier to write a work order against appropriated funds and just have it done, but that was not possible. By the end of this process, more people had become involved, and in a traditional community such as American Samoa that is what really matters. The Eagle Scouts, Americorps, and the Land Grant folks have all committed themselves to the long-term maintenance of the landmark and its park.

A lesson that life in the islands keeps teaching is that the process is what contains the meaning, and its products are always properly transitory.

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Aerial view of the Rock Islands of Palau. See related article, p. 41. Photo by Tom McDonald.