



WOMPATUCK NEWS

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Friends of Wompatuck State Park

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Annex History Day Slated

By Jim Rose, FOW News Editor and Historian

Wompatuck State Park is planning a history tour of the old Annex this spring. The excursion will be led by this writer, park director Steve Gammon and former Annex workers.

We'll meet at the parking lot opposite the Visitor's Center. I'll show some souvenir ordnance my late father gave me. He was a Leadingman at the ammunition depot for 20 years.

Our first destination will be the classification yard. This is the spot where the trains stopped to have their munitions classified and inspected before distribution. It was later used as a helicopter pad by the U.S. Army.

From there, our next stop will be the Guided Missile Service Unit 215 area. The U.S. Navy tested its first surface-to-air missiles, *Terrier* and *Tartar*, here. Propellants for ICBM, Nike and Polaris missiles were tested here as well. We will also look at the XM-47 Gravel Mine bunkers where anti-personnel mines were made for the Vietnam War.

Next, the group will proceed to the rocket motor plant and the inhibiting building. The Navy's first air-to-ship rocket *Tiny Tim* was assembled here. Inhibitors were devices attached to the rocket propellant to regulate the burn and prevent explosion.

Our final destination will be an area that encompassed the locomotive shed, boiler house, Navy and Marine barracks, sick bay and fire house.

It should be an interesting tour. Maybe we'll hear about the "lead room" that contained the nuclear warhead for the ASROC RUR-5 depthcharge missile. Or perhaps Steve Gammon can tell us about the day Annex employee Leo Parenti tipped over the light utility train called the "hurdy-gurdy." I'm sure the former Annex workers have a few bullets and blarney tales to share with us. ■



Ammunition ship USS YF-415.

The USS YF-415 Tragedy and Racial Discrimination in the Military

By Jim Rose, FOW News Editor and Historian

The U.S. Navy ammunition ship USS YF-415 rests upright on the silty bottom of the ocean 14 miles off Boston, its bow firmly mired in sediment, its stern exposed and encrusted with barnacles and other sea life. The shell-pocked, burnt-out remains of the 132-foot long freighter lists undisturbed since the fusillade of explosions and fire consumed it on May 11, 1944, killing 17 of the 31 crewmembers.

The USS YF-415 was disposing a routine dump of obsolete ammunition in a deep trench ENE off Boston Light when signal rockets caught fire and set off three-inch and five-inch shells and other pyrotechnics.

The relatively inexperienced Afro-American sailors from the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot were detailed to dispose the rockets. They were preparing the pyrotechnics when a terrific "whoosh" was heard that ignited the ammunition hold.

At no time did "abandon ship" or the emergency signal sound. Men began to jump overboard on their own accord. There was little time to don life preservers or rafts. Many of the men couldn't swim. The survivors clung to debris in 50 degree water as the ship slipped under.

Numerous ships and vessels operating in the area saw the fire and explosions

and quickly conducted search and rescue operations.

The weather ship USS Zircon rescued 14 survivors: four crewmembers of whom one succumbed to burns and ten members of the Hingham work detail. The missing 16 men were never found. Eleven of these men were Afro-Americans of the Hingham contingent.

Aftermath

The wreck of the USS YF-415 was first discovered in 2003 by diver Bob Foster of Foxborough. Today the ship



Photo by Deoma Chaston

Blast holes on USS YF-415 as it looks today. rests at a depth of 240 feet with the bridge and other structures on the weather deck torn off by fishing nets over the years.

As the United States experiences the leadership of its first Afro-American president, many Americans are unaware of the servile, demeaning and, as witnessed

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USS YF-415 (continued from page one)

with the USS YF-415 tragedy, dangerous jobs Afro-Americans were subjected to in the military before integration.

Port Chicago Disaster

Besides the USS YF-415 sinking, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine disaster in California was the biggest tragedy black servicemen ever suffered. On July 17, 1944, munitions being loaded aboard a cargo vessel bound for Pacific action detonated, killing 320 sailors and civilians and injuring 390 other personnel. Most of the dead and injured were enlisted African-American sailors.

A month later, unsafe conditions persisted and hundreds of servicemen refused to load munitions, an act known as the Port Chicago Mutiny. Fifty men were convicted and sentenced to long prison terms. By 1946, all the convicted men were released.

Widespread publicity encompassing the case was a prime motivator for the Navy to begin desegregating its forces in February 1946.

Hingham Race Restrictions

In Hingham, the U. S. Marine Corps was also guilty of discrimination. Morris J. MacGregor, Jr. of the U.S. Army Center of Military History writes in "Integration of the Armed Forces:"

"The commandant of the First Naval District (Boston area) voted against the assignment of Negroes (to Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot in 1947) on the grounds that the Hingham area lacked a substantial black population, was largely composed of restricted residential neighborhoods, and was a major summer resort on which the presence of black units would have an adverse effect."

MacGregor further writes that the restrictions were eliminated in 1950 because they were "overtaken by the manpower demands of the Korean War."

Former Worker's Opinion

When apprised of the military's black segregation and the USS YF-415's fate,



Bill Handrahan

former Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot ordnance inspector Bill Handrahan of Hull said, "I recall when I was a G.I. during World War II, black soldiers were usually relegated to low-ranking service jobs like food prep, stewards, transportation and ammunition handling. They were the ones who lugged up the ammo and food to us on the front lines during the Battle of the Bulge.

"After the war when I worked at the depot in the 50s, we did have black sailors, Marine guards and civilian workers. We all got along fine.

"I also helped dump ammo off Boston Harbor. We dumped all kinds of stuff: bombs, rockets, shells, powder... you name it. There were no blacks involved that I know of. We never had any mishaps. There was always an officer on-board who closely supervised the operation. Plus, we were well trained in safety procedures."

Today's Military

Now, the U.S. military has made great strides against discrimination and is well represented by Afro-Americans up the ranks, in all the services, from generals and admirals to the Commander-in-Chief, President Obama.



Sen. Kennedy Honors Men of the USS YF-415

In 2004, Senator Ted Kennedy paid tribute to the victims of the

USS YF-415 on the 60th anniversary of the sinking at the dedication of the World

War II Memorial:

"Mr. President, as the official dedication of the World War II Memorial approaches, I welcome this opportunity to honor the sacrifice of the courageous men who lost their lives close to home in a tragic accident in 1944, fourteen miles off the coast of Massachusetts during the war.

"Sixty years ago today, the 9-member crew of the Navy ship USS YF-415 and 21 men from the Hingham Ammunition Depot were disposing of condemned ammunition and explosives off the coast. Tragically, while performing their mission, the ordnance on the ship caught fire, setting off the ammunition for nearly 40 minutes. The ship and 17 lives were lost.

"The vessel lay on the ocean floor until the summer of 2003, when amateur divers discovered its remnants. They informed the Navy of the location, but too many years has passed, and the Navy salvage team was unable to find any trace of the missing men.

"Now as the Nation prepares to honor all who served our country so bravely during World War II, it is fitting on this day to remember the men who lost their lives in that tragedy 60 years ago. I express my deepest condolences to the family members who have suffered so long because of that tragedy so close to home and to all of us in Massachusetts.

"I would like to add the names of these men to the Congressional Record so that all may recognize their sacrifice: William J. Bradley, Adell Braxton, Joseph F. Burke, Raymond N. Carr, Truman S. Chittick, George M. Cook, James Cox, Jr., Freddie Edwards, Jr., F. E. Federle, James S. Griffin, Charles R. Harris, Raymond L. Henry, Julian Jackson, Yee M. Jin, Mike Peschunka, Vernon Smith, and James B. Turner."

Below are Navy photos of the USS YF-415 funeral dated May 14, 1944. ■



Chaplain conducts services.



Benediction at Back River dock.



Flower dedication.



Marine firing squad pays tribute.