



Source: 54th Coast Artillery cannoneers show how to fire the Regiment's 155mm GPF guns.

The Famous 54th Artillery Regiment in Estero Bay

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In the year before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the lives of the 30,000 residents of San Luis Obispo County were dramatically transformed as the entire nation mobilized in anticipation of potential war.

By the fall of 1941 soldiers began to arrive in large numbers. Contractors had built new soldier cities north of San Miguel at Camp Roberts and on the sandy hills west of Lompoc at Camp Cooke. The occasional buzz of civilian aircraft had been replaced by flights of B 25 bombers stationed in Santa Maria.

Camp San Luis Obispo had been the National Guard's summer training venue until 1940 when the army built a military city for 20,000 soldiers there. By November 1941 the soldiers and sailors had almost doubled the civilian population of the Central Coast.

The Navy established the Morro Bay Section Base Headquarters, filling the gap between Monterey Bay and Point Conception to guard the two strategic marine oil terminals at Avila and Estero Bay that provided critical fuel supplies to the worldwide mobilization efforts.

Within two weeks of December 7, 1941 Japanese submarines prowling the west coast. attacked 9 ships along the California from Eureka to Long Beach, One of them, the Union Oil tanker SS Montebello, was sunk off San Simeon.

Following a second wave of Japanese attacks in February 1942 the Army ordered the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment, a “Colored” unit born in February 1941 with a hundred white officers and sixteen hundred black soldiers, to protect harbors and critical infrastructure. The 1st Battalion was assigned the marine terminals in San Luis Obispo County and 3rd Battalion covered Monterey Bay. They fired the mobile 155-millimeter M1918 gun known as the GPF from the French “Grande Puissance Filloux” as it was called in the Great War.

In early April 1942, a special train delivered eight rail cars onto the Camp San Luis Obispo spur off the Southern Pacific main line loaded with a new green painted caterpillar D7 bulldozer paired with a 30,000-pound wheeled 155-mm GPF. For the previous year military vehicles had been running the roads of the county, but these were different!.

The bulldozer-gun pairs were divided into two groups of four, one group grinding down the highway like lumbering oxen to Avila and Shell Beach and the other west on Highway One toward Morro Bay. Two pulled off the highway at the old Cloisters Hotel to set up one pair of artillery cannons and the other two continued to the Estero Bay oil facility at Toro Creek.

For the next two years, these big guns defended the oil and harbor operations on the Central Coast, where they trained with live ammunition and stood on alert to get the first 95 pound shell fired within 5 minutes of contact. Luckily the Japanese did not return.

The Regiment’s 2nd Battalion was deployed overseas in October 1942 on the SS President Coolidge to Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu, to defend key airfields. Renumbered as the 49th Coast Artillery Battalion, they became the first black unit to fire on the enemy in the Pacific War.