

THE GUNS OF FORT WORDEN

World War I Memories of a Young Guardsman in Washington's Coast Artillery

By Floyd Oles

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Floyd Hall Oles was born in Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan, on May 27, 1896. His father, Ulysses Oles, was retired from the Fifth United States Cavalry after being partly blinded by alkali dust during the Indian wars. The family, including Floyd's brother and two sisters, moved to the southern part of Puget Sound, at Glencove on the Key Peninsula, when Floyd was about nine years old. There, another sister was born. The years in Glencove, before the family moved to Tacoma, are recorded in nostalgic detail in Floyd's book, Glencove, published in 1986.

In Tacoma Floyd attended what was then Tacoma (now Stadium) High School. For two summers he went to Alaska as a crew member of the Coast and Geodetic Survey vessel Equator.

When World War I began in 1914, Floyd enlisted in the Coast Artillery and, after Officer Candidate School, was commissioned a second lieutenant. In that capacity he served in France in 1918-19.

Following World War I, during the 1920s and 1930s, he became manager of several trade associations, married, moved to Seattle and had two sons.

Floyd served, at one time or another, as manager of the Northwest Feed Dealers Association, the Northwest Produce Shippers Association, and the Washington State Taxpayers Association. In the latter capacity he was instrumental in the enactment of the property tax limitations amendment. He also headed a number of cultural and political groups.

When the United States entered World War II, Floyd went on active duty with the army and attained the rank of lieutenant colonel. His principal activity was as the chief American officer in postwar Denmark, dealing with the disposition of German assets. For his wartime service in England, where he was wounded in a bombing attack, he received the rare honor of MBE—Member of the British Empire. The King of Denmark awarded him the Order of the Danebrog.

After the war he returned to the Pacific Northwest and made his home in Tacoma. For several years he divided his time between an import business, politics (he headed the 1952 Eisenhower campaign in Washington), lobbying Congress for the Retired Reserve Officers Association, and his special joy—rock hunting. He wrote two books about gem trails in the United States. He also organized many reunions of his old World War I artillery outfit and was indefatigable in calling on and helping his old comrades and their widows.

Floyd served as city manager of Tacoma in a time of municipal turmoil and was later honored as Tacoma's "First Citizen." He received innumerable other honors arising out of his civic and veterans activities, and he was a distinguished speaker at many clubs and associations. He corresponded extensively with friends who included many major figures in public life.

Floyd Oles died in Tacoma at the age of 99. Among his numerous writings, besides the books on Glencove and rock hunting, he published a book of poetry, and left some memoirs of Alaska and France and other writings and memorabilia of a long and active life. What follows is his reminiscence.

It was toward the end of October 1917 that I finally reported to the headquarters building of the Coast Defenses of Puget Sound at Fort Worden, not far outside Port Townsend. Those defenses also included Fort Flagler on Marrowstone Island and Fort Casey, some five or six miles across Admiralty Inlet on Whidbey Island. That broad inlet, a southwest continuation of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, separates Whidbey and Fidalgo Islands from the Olympic Peninsula at the northwestern tip of the Olympic Peninsula.

I reported in "civvies," having sold my ROTC uniform when I joined the Coast Artillery. Aside from some close-order drill on the University of Washington campus and a few sessions of marching around at the Seattle Armory, my military knowledge was limited to what I had read in newspapers and magazines.

I presented myself to the adjutant, who was a first lieutenant. I thought he welcomed me with remarkable friendliness, considering what seemed the vast difference in our ranks.

It developed that the Third Company was in Montana, assigned to guard copper mines at Butte and the smelter at Anaconda. The adjutant asked if I would like to join them there.

"Do I have a choice?" I asked.

"Yes, you do," responded the lieutenant. "I'll name off the companies in the Coast Defenses, and you may have your choice."

This was indeed a remarkable opportunity for a common recruit, so I took advantage of it.

"May I go out and take a look at them?" I asked.

"Go ahead," said the adjutant. "Come back and let me know where you would like to be assigned."

On my way down the outside stairs I very nearly collided with Sergeant Ralph Winsor, an old friend from Tacoma. He hailed me like a long-lost brother.

"What the heck are you up to now?" asked Ralph. When I explained my opportunity to choose a unit, Ralph responded immediately: "Your problem is solved right now. I want you in the Fourth Company, where I'm top sergeant. How about going back inside and fixing it up?"

Nothing could have suited me better than joining a Tacoma company with old friends and schoolmates, so we marched back into the adjutant's office and confirmed my assignment. I then procured a uniform, shipped my "civvies" back to Tacoma, and reported for duty to Captain Schmale at a tent on the Fort Worden hill. There the Fourth Company was quartered in squad tents just behind Battery Ash, a 12-inch barbette gun emplacement to which we were assigned. First Sergeant Winsor led me up to the company's camp, and I reported to the headquarters tent where First Lieutenant Frederic J. Shaw of Tacoma was on duty. He welcomed me warmly and assigned me to the Eighth Squad, whose corporal was Archie Ohiser. Practically all of the Fourth Company came from Tacoma or its environs, and I knew some of them from Tacoma High School (or as friends of my brother Bob at Lincoln High). My squad tent included Corporal Ohiser, Gabe Nordi (whose family were tailors in Tacoma), "Shorty" Ben Johnson, Charlie Protheroe, Dick Smith, Wilfred (Bill) LePenottiere and Ronsos Scordell.

Ronsos was a Greek boy whose last name appeared on the company roster as something like Papadorockis. It seems he inserted this word on an entry form in the space for "occupation"—having no job, he had filled in the Greek word for "son of a priest." The army interpreted it as his family name. Despite all his efforts to correct this error, it became his military name throughout the war. I can still recall the vain efforts of our commanding officer, Colonel C. B. Blethen, to read that name off a roster at general inspection. After several failures, he said, "Well, I give up—are you here?" Poor Ronsos, dying of embarrassment, answered weakly, "Here, sir," and tried to remain inconspicuous.

The eight inhabitants of my square squad tent slept on army cots with our few possessions stowed in boxes or bags nearby. Our rifles reposed neatly on our cots when not being carried, and a few agreed oddments were hung from the tent pole. Except in storms, the tent flaps were rolled up to permit free air circulation during the day. At the inner end of the tent stood a Sibley stove, an army standby that required very little wood but gave off very little heat. Meanwhile, we were rather exposed on that Fort Worden hill where soldiers commented that winds from the Strait of Juan de Fuca were cold enough to freeze certain appurtenances off a brass monkey. Still, we managed quite well, especially after we improved on the Sibley stove.

The Fourth Company occupied roughly a dozen squad tents. Adding the officers and Top Sergeant Winsor, who occupied separate tents, we must have numbered around a hundred. Between the company street and the guns stood a latrine and a wash house with water taps. There were also benches where one could scrub clothes and shoes or just wait for a turn at the water. The tents stood in orderly rows running inland from the gun emplacement. Farthest inland was the cook tent, presided over by Robert P. Kelly. His considerable array of pots and pans hung around the tent sides and on shelves constructed by our mechanics, Hans Henderson and George Hicks. On one side of the cook tent, a broad curtain could be rolled up to expose the interior. Along this opening was a kind of shelf from which the cook's helpers (known as Kitchen Police or "KPs") would dish food into the waiting mess kits of queued-up men shuffling by. In bad weather, which was not infrequent at Fort Worden, the line moved faster as we hastened to get our portions and regain the shelter of our tents. The food was generally very good—at least

it was welcomed by hungry men after a day of drill or hiking—and Bob Kelly was a competent cook.

Battery Ash consisted of two huge 12-inch barbette guns, trained on the narrow entrance to Puget Sound. Immediately behind them was a concrete corridor through which powder and shells were laboriously carried from elevators, which brought them up from storage areas under the gun platforms. In that corridor we were sometimes assigned to sit and "blend powder." This boring process assured that all sacks of powder would have a uniform propulsive quality. The powder came in small yellow cylindrical pieces. Looking like sticks of lemon candy, they were perforated by longitudinal holes to permit instant ignition. We picked up small handfuls from one batch and mixed them with similar handfuls from other batches. We were warned to treat them with extreme care, though it was said they would only explode in the confines of a gun chamber. While unconfined gunpowder was supposed to be flammable but not explosive, we made no effort to confirm that theory. In the powder room we always worked in stocking feet to avoid scuffing up a spark.

As stated earlier, the Sibley stove in our tent did not give off much heat, so we of the Eighth Squad decided to do something about it. We delegated a party to go down over the hill and along the strait to reconnoiter some abandoned farmhouses thereabouts. In one of them we found a small round stove and brought it back to our tent. There, we removed the Sibley and "ditched" it in some nearby brush. Our substitute worked beautifully. It consumed a lot of wood but gave out excellent heat. When cold winds blew off the strait, we were very cozy in that squad tent, deciding on such occasions that army life was a pretty good life after all.

On a Saturday morning came the first general inspection since our procurement of the new stove. We were all a bit nervous because it was clearly not "government issue" and might require some explaining. Colonel Blethen, the inspecting officer, was followed closely by Lieutenant Fred Shaw, who commanded the company that day. We stood at attention with our tent flaps up and our cots in good order, and all went smoothly until the colonel spotted that non-regulation stove.

"Where did these men get that odd stove?" he asked Lieutenant Shaw.

The lieutenant had never seen the stove before, but he replied without a moment's hesitation. "They wanted a little more heat, sir, so with my permission they bought this stove at a secondhand store in Port Townsend."

This satisfied the colonel, and the matter seemed ended until Lieutenant Shaw returned after inspection. He entered our tent with lowering brow and annoyed mien. "Now you guys," he said, "where in hell did you get that stove?" We told him and got a scolding for it, not so much for stealing the stove as for failing to warn the lieutenant before inspection.

We led a busy life up on that Fort Worden hill. I have visited it many times since to recall those cold, windy and sometimes rain-soaked days of training. Those outdated Puget Sound forts were long ago declared surplus and converted into state parks. The site of our tent at Fort Worden is grown over with thick, brush, locatable only by reference to the hollow concrete bunkers of Battery Ash. Back in 1917, however, we kept the guns in "apple pie" order: oiled, greased with

Cosmoline, and ready for action. We first used them for subcaliber practice and later for "full service firing" at targets towed behind tugboats out in the strait.

Before taking part in full service firing, I acquired a good deal of theoretical knowledge about the big gun to which I was assigned. I began as "time-range operator," a lowly position on the gun crew. After a few months of book study and repeated "dry run" practice, I became a "second class gunner," proudly wearing the insignia of two crossed cannons. By applying myself diligently, I also became a private first class, which entitled me to wear one chevron on each sleeve (with the crossed cannons). Those early achievements were the result of hard study and application to the business of becoming a soldier, and I had much more sense of deserving them than I felt for many other honors received in later years.

My first full service firing was aimed at a huge white target, towed some third of a mile behind a tugboat offshore. Our officers were in the command post, and our "spotters" occupied observation posts at measured distances from the gun on either side. Their angular observations of the target enabled officers to determine its range by geometrical triangulation, range determined the gun's elevation (in degrees) and the angle of fire (hence the azimuth) needed to land a projectile on the target. Refinements in aim (to account for wind and other variables) could be accomplished by so-called "ranging shots," which required careful observation of the place where each shot fell. In time we formed an effective working team, calculating hits or near misses that would have sunk an enemy ship (if one had appeared). All we had to do was follow the oft-practiced procedure with care and exactitude.

Standing within a few feet of a 12-inch gun or mortar when it fired was at first an astonishing experience. There was no sound at all—only an impact. When we pulled the firing lanyard, we were told to stand on tiptoes, open our mouths, and place hands lightly over the ears. In that position, the shock of firing was equalized, and one merely felt a dull blow, as if being struck heavily all over at the same time. After a few such experiences, they were no longer frightening, but the impacts could have serious consequences for those not warned or prepared for them. This occurred because the blast from a gun's muzzle created a huge vacuum behind the gun, followed instantly by an inrush of air to fill the vacuum. This fluctuating pressure could have strange effects.

To Bob Kelly, our cook, it was a disaster. Either he was not warned of our firing or had not yet learned the appropriate precautions. Specifically, his cook tent was tightly closed when one of our firing practices began. At the first round, the cook tent exploded. The side curtains blew away, and cooking utensils flew out in every direction. Bob and the KP crew were some time in repairing the damage.

Still worse happened to the house of a veteran sergeant who had apparently been a fixture at Fort Worden for many years. He lived just behind our tent camp with a teenage daughter who was charming but not always obedient. As the old sergeant explained later, he had instructed his daughter to open all windows and doors to equalize the air pressure during firing practice. He himself was an old regular artilleryman and well understood the danger. The girl, it seemed, opened doors and windows but did not fasten them open. At the first blast, they all slammed shut. The second round split the house neatly open from bottom to top, like cracking open a watermelon, leaving a two-foot gap in the roof.

Not all our time at Fort Worden was spent on the big guns. We did close-order infantry drills down on the big parade ground between the headquarters building and a row of wooden barracks and officers' quarters. There was great competition between our National Guard companies and the regulars who normally manned the Coast Defenses. During close-order drill we took immense pride in our appearance and the precision with which we performed the manual of arms and the drill manual. In some of the more intricate maneuvers, like "on right into line," it was difficult to avoid the irregular appearance of individual men out of line, straggling or stumbling. When most of us finally got it down pat, we became our own greatest critics, roundly cursing any man who spoiled our performance. A man could become extremely unpopular by causing us to incur the displeasure of the commanding officer or our other officers, who were inclined to berate us regarding flaws in our drills.

One popular amusement was called "monkey drill." Flatly prohibited (to avoid damage to rifles), it was all the more attractive to us. I suppose that American soldiers in every generation have attempted the monkey drill, and today trained units perform it for exhibitions. It consists of going through the manual of arms with extra flourishes between commands. Such flourishes include tossing one's rifle into the air and catching it neatly after at least one complete revolution. Since inexpert hands would drop the rifle into dirt or mud, we usually practiced the monkey drill when our officers were out of sight. I dropped my own rifle many times, failing to catch it as it fell, or fumbling when I struck the butt to start a spin in the upward stroke of a toss. Nonetheless, I eventually earned a reputation as one of the best performers in the company.

We were often taken on long hikes—exhausting on a warm day—into the countryside around Port Townsend. A frequent destination was Discovery Bay, lying five miles west of Port Townsend and named by Captain George Vancouver in the 1790s. After resting for a while at that picturesque spot, we would slog back to Fort Worden, often singing to pass the time. Some of our marching songs had verses that did not sit well with the more straitlaced officers. One of the least offensive among our favorites was sung to the tune of "The Old Grey Bonnet" and went something like this (slightly expurgated):

*Put on your old blue denims,
Your dirty old blue denims,
And we'll all march out to Discovery Bay;
When the hike's all over
We'll be sweat all over,
It's the same thing every day,*

When we swung into the ribald text of "She's My Lulu," however, the officers would invariably call us to attention and require us to march in silent martial step (rather than the usual "route step"). This soon put a stop to "Lulu."

During service gun practice we were permitted to observe the firing practices of other companies. Some manned barbette guns (like ours), some had rifles on fixed mounts, and others were assigned to the two mortar pits behind our camp. Each mortar pit contained four 12-inch pieces, and their loading and firing procedures were similar to ours on the big barbettes. Mortars, unlike guns or howitzers, fired at very high angles, and their armor-piercing shells were supposed to drop more or less vertically onto the decks of a target vessel. They were remarkably accurate weapons, throwing huge shells at a relatively leisurely speed. One could stand behind a

mortar, keep an eye above the muzzle at time of firing, and follow the round black projectile as it soared aloft. It remained visible until the top of its trajectory, where it diminished to a mere speck in the air.

Fort Worden also had two batteries of "disappearing guns" (10-inch and 12-inch pieces), so called because they disappeared behind the walls of their emplacements during reloading. The large 12-inch guns stood in Battery Kinzie, some hundreds of feet below Battery Ash where a road led out to Point Wilson Lighthouse. After loading with a shell and bags of powder, a lever was tripped and a counterweight caused the great gun to rise above the rim of its emplacement "into battery." Upon firing, a portion of the recoil energy forced the gun back down into its cradle, where it locked in place to await swabbing out and reloading. In its day, the disappearing gun was a formidable weapon, becoming obsolete only because of longer-range guns on battleships and the advent of bomber aircraft. Today, the empty emplacement at Battery Kinzie, an impressive complex of concrete, is a popular attraction for visitors to Fort Worden State Park.

I also remember that Battery Kinzie was exposed to raw cold winds off the strait. There were nights when I nearly froze while walking guard post just behind those disappearing guns. In particular, the man on guard had to cross a small wooden bridge (without railings) over a gully behind the battery. It was exposed to gales through a gap between Battery Kinzie and the Fort Worden bluff. Despite heavy gloves, my hands practically froze to the butt of my rifle, and I had to run like mad to cross the bridge without being blown sideways into the gully.

Another undesirable assignment for guard duty was Post No. 1, which required one to walk in a square around the guardhouse where the "officer of the day" and the noncommissioned guards sat at night. Several times a night those officers had to bundle into their overcoats and visit the various outposts to see that all guards were in position and alert.

The trouble with Post No. 1 was its unbearable monotony. For four long hours there was no relief from the boredom of that confined circuit. One wintry night I actually fell asleep on my feet while walking that post. With my right hand firmly holding my rifle's butt, I must have marched right off the post in a straight line. I awoke by stumbling on a small grass hummock. Coming to my senses, I found myself in the middle of the parade ground, some two hundred yards away from my post. I can still recall the fearful revelation that I could be guilty of a court-martial offense. Running back to the guardhouse, I found that nobody had observed my departure, and I breathlessly resumed my monotonous pacing around that deadly dull post.

Aside from the danger of falling asleep, there was little memorable about guard duty at Fort Worden. I do, however, recall an amusing incident from my first guard assignment. It was a cold night and shifts were four hours on and four hours off. While off duty we could lie down on any free bunk in the guardhouse. As it happened, however, I was an odd number that night, and there were more men than bunks. Therefore, with affected nonchalance, I rolled myself in a blanket and lay down on a hard wooden tabletop. As a matter of pride, I was careful to show none of my discomfort. Just before I dropped off to sleep I heard one guardsman say to another: "That Oles is just down from Alaska—they come tough up there." Such a reputation was well worth a sacrifice of comfort.

Most practice with our barbette-mounted gun involved the firing of subcaliber shells. Thus we improved our skills at observation and calculation of azimuth and elevation. We practiced these

skills on targets towed several miles away by a tugboat or the mine planter *Ringgold*. This latter ship was equipped to lay out and service the minefield, which had been installed to prevent hostile vessels from entering Port Townsend Bay and thereby outflanking the coastal forts. Fort Worden also had batteries of 6-inch and 3-inch guns that could fire over the minefield and defend it against sabotage.

Subcaliber firing was much cheaper in shot and powder than full service firing, and it served many of the same training objectives. Typically, our exercise would begin by tracking the towboat. Before any actual firing, there would be a command to "shift target" and fix coordinates on the towed object. On one celebrated occasion a nonexplosive subcaliber mortar shell was accidentally fired while the observers were still tracking the *Ringgold*. Someone had presumably failed to give an order to "shift target." As a result, a well-aimed shot (eight or ten pounds) went straight down the ship's funnel and right through her hull into the sea beneath. Hasty action was required to keep her from sinking. Fortunately, no great harm was done, but somebody doubtless got a stern rebuke for carelessness. At the same time, however, they should have had a commendation for some very accurate shooting.

In the close quarters of an eight-man squad tent, it was important that each soldier maintain his kit in good order while keeping himself clean and healthy. We of the Eighth Squad had good luck throughout that early training period. In another squad, however, there was a boy who refused to take a bath. In truth he stank, and his companions eventually decided to take drastic action. They escorted him forcibly to the bathhouse, stripped him, and washed him as they were accustomed to wash clothing—with laundry soap and a rough scrubbing brush. Such skin as remained was clean but uncomfortable for some days, after which the boy undertook to perform his own ablutions.

While training in the coastal forts, our federalized companies of National Guard were known among regular artillerymen as the "Damned Militia." As the fall of 1917 turned to winter, however, we were nearing readiness to take part in the war against Germany.

Floyd Oles, a longtime Tacoma resident, died in 1996, very nearly a centenarian. Among his various writings is a memoir, Adventures in a Second Decade, which details events in his life around the time of World War I. The unpublished manuscript, from which this article is excerpted, is housed in the Special Collections of the Washington State Historical Society.