

W09 – Feature writing portfolio

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Revolutionary War fighting ended in 1781. The last shots exploded 2 months ago.

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RICHMOND

In an uh-oh episode of historic proportions, hand grenades from the last major battle of the Revolutionary War recently and repeatedly scrambled bomb squads in Virginia's capital city.

Wait — they had hand grenades in the Revolutionary War? Indeed. Hollow iron balls, filled with black powder, outfitted with a fuse, then lit and thrown.

And more than two dozen have been sitting in cardboard boxes at the Department of Historic Resources, undetected for 30 years.

Encrusted and corroded, no one realized what the grenades were when they were excavated in the 1980s along with 5,000 other relics from The Betsy, a British ship sunk in the York River in 1781. Analysis that would normally have been conducted after such a find was shut down by state budget cuts.

So the grenades went on the shelves — labeled with the best guess of "shot" — alongside 6 million other artifacts housed in the state's repository.

The first grenade was noticed around Thanksgiving, thanks to a conservation grant that had staff sifting through boxes to see how relics were holding up. The last was rounded up just before New Years.

And yes, they were still live.

More volatile than ever.

The repository at the Department of Historic Resources is full of ghosts. Sheltered in rented space alongside the Virginia Museum of History and Culture, it's a library of rolling shelves and 9,000 boxes holding countless artifact-filled plastic bags preserving the remnants from centuries of lives. Arrowheads and pottery. Pipes and pieces of planks. Bottles, buttons and buckles. Anything old that's been unearthed by archaeologists or found and donated.

Live ordnance has shown up at the door before, brought by folks who didn't recognize what they'd dug up in their garden.

"But it's usually Civil War stuff," said Kate Ridgway, a conservator with the department. "You still get quite a bit of that around here."

Standard protocol: Call the police for disposal.

"We hate to see anything historic destroyed," Ridgway said, "but it's just too dangerous to keep."

Staff had no idea what they were holding onto themselves.

The first thorough inspection of Betsy artifacts began in the fall after the department landed a Maritime Heritage grant from the National Park Service. It covered the cost of examining and re-treating, if necessary, the "organics" in the collection — pieces of wood, rope, leather and the like that are most vulnerable to decay.

When originally preserved, they were soaked in chemicals and "bulking agents" that tend to degrade over time. Better techniques have been developed.

"So there I was," said Chelsea Blake, a conservator hired to handle the project, "going through old records and boxes, trying to match things up. As I came across metal items — since that's not an organic — I'd set them aside in a box I'd marked 'Things for Kate' so she could take a look later."

On Nov. 28, Ridgway was working her way through that box in the lab when she pulled out a plastic bag labeled "shot." Inside: a gray-ish round clump not much bigger than a golf ball.

"I knew right away something wasn't right," Ridgway said. "It wasn't heavy enough to be lead shot. And it had these weird cracks in it. And what looked like crystals inside."

When she opened the bag, she caught the scent of something ominous.

A whiff of gunpowder crossed 237 years and drifted up.

In September 1781 — six years into the Revolutionary War — the siege at Yorktown was under way. Roughly 8,000 British troops were dug in, trapped against the river by twice as many troops from George Washington's Continental Army and its French allies.

Most of the town lay in smoking ruins. Food was running low. But Lord Charles Cornwallis, the British commander, was holding out. He had a good supply of ammunition and a decent-sized fleet still afloat in the river. And he was expecting reinforcements. A British armada was on its way from New York.

But French warships fended off his rescuers, blocking their path at the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay. Fearing the French ships would then sail for Yorktown, Cornwallis made the desperate decision to sacrifice much of his own fleet, scuttling dozens of vessels to form a barrier of barely sunken wreckage in the river.

The Betsy was one of them. A 75-foot collier built of heart of oak in Whitehaven, England, the ship had been drafted into military service. Before dropping anchor in the York River, The Betsy carried British troops from Portsmouth to Yorktown. Then, on Sept. 16, 1781, a hole was chiseled in the ship's hull, and The Betsy sank to the bottom.

The scuttling strategy didn't change the outcome at Yorktown, of course. Cornwallis surrendered on Oct. 19, 1781 — sapping the will of the British empire to fight on. The French salvaged what they could from the crippled ships and locals picked through the remains.

In time, the ships settled deeper and the elements ate at their carcasses. What was left was eventually covered in a protective blanket of silt. And the lost fleet of Yorktown slept, largely forgotten.

John Broadwater started probing the river bed in the 1970s. Hired as the state's first underwater archaeologist, he led a team that found nine of the shipwrecks before efforts were focused on The Betsy. Located just 500 yards offshore in about 20 feet of water, the hull was intriguingly intact under five feet of silt.

Full-on excavation, which didn't start until the 1980s, was a big deal. It required a specially designed enclosure called a "cofferdam" to overcome the York River's strong currents, near-zero visibility and stinging jellyfish. National Geographic magazine published a spread on the Yorktown Shipwreck Archaeological Project in June 1988, dedicating 20 pages to the history, excavation and relics recovered — everything from a barrel still holding 10,000 musket balls to a window from the captain's quarters with glass still intact.

There was no mention of grenades. When they'd been found — waterlogged and heavy with a type of corrosion archaeologists call "concretion" — it was assumed they were shot for a small cannon.

"We took some rough measurements and they seemed like they'd fit," Broadwater said. "We put them aside, along with all kinds of other stuff, for later study. We were planning to get them X-rayed to see what was inside."

Instead, a budget ax fell hard in 1989, slashing funding for the department and pulling the plug on the shipwreck project.

"Right in the middle of everything," Broadwater said, "we were all laid off. And the artifacts ended up getting stored wherever they could find room."

Thirty years later, Broadwater's brown beard has turned silver and he's accumulated quite a list of accomplishments. He's worked with James Cameron on deep-water studies of The Titanic. Led expeditions to The Monitor, a storied Civil War ironclad. Helped Jeff Bezos recover Apollo Saturn V booster engines.

But The Betsy got to his soul. Diving in such a murky river, you feel alone with a shipwreck's spirits. The small discoveries — a whistle shaped like a monkey, a scrap of yellow ribbon, a scuttlehole cut with astonishing precision — gave a pulse to the long-dead.

"Those are moments an archaeologist cherishes," Broadwater said. "I felt like I was touching somebody from the past."

He was stunned when he heard that the past has now reached out to rattle the present in Richmond:

"To think that we've been sitting on bombs all these years ... and that the powder could still be viable after two centuries underwater."

Ridgway figured it could be, especially after three decades of drying time. She carried that first strange ball to a microscope. Those were definitely crystals inside.

"I am not happy," she told Blake, before turning to her computer to search for information about weapons of The Betsy's era. It dawned on her that this ball could be the core of a grenade, what was left after the iron shell had long dissolved.

Ridgway crossed the lab to another instrument that identifies chemical elements. Sulfur. And potassium. The ingredients of gunpowder.

"I am really not happy," Ridgway said. "We're done here. Call the police."

Soon, a parade of emergency vehicles jammed Kensington Avenue out front.

"I didn't even know they had hand grenades during the Revolutionary War," said Mark Castillo, the Richmond bomb squad commander.

A bomb tech put on safety gear — the heavy, head-to-toe Kevlar suit of their trade. Employees were cleared out. No one knew what to expect.

Grenades typically need a hard outer shell to produce the kind of explosion that sends shrapnel flying. But this one's shell had broken down, leaving "bits of metal and rust inside the powder which makes it even more sensitive," Castillo said, "more unstable as time goes by."

The core was nestled inside a bomb truck, driven to a range, wired with explosives and detonated. When the whole thing blew, the core sent up its own plume of white smoke — the signature of burning black powder. "There was no doubt the material was still hazardous," Castillo said.

Two days later, the staff found three more.

Repeat bomb squad scene.

Three days later, another one turned up.

Repeat bomb squad scene.

"At that point," Blake said, "we realized we needed to check all 140 boxes of Betsy artifacts at one time so we didn't have to keep calling the bomb squad every day. I mean, what if we had a fire in the building? These things had to go."

Most of December was spent crafting plans and preparing the lab. Guided by the bomb squad and following munitions factory rules, they removed anything that could produce a static spark — plastic, scraping chairs, squeaky carts. Tables were covered with cotton fabric. Extra humidifiers were brought in. Flammable chemicals were carried away.

On Saturday, Dec. 29, they came in just after dawn — Ridgway, Blake, collections assistant Andrew Foster and archaeologist Mike Clem.

All other employees had been told to stay away. Neighbors across the street had been notified with a letter. Experts from an alphabet soup of agencies — FBI, ATF, bomb techs from the city, county and state police — met the four at the lab, parking in a side lot to avoid causing a scene. The fire department and medics stood by.

"We didn't want to endanger anyone else, but we didn't want to panic them either," Ridgway said. "We did whatever law enforcement advised us to do."

The bomb squads provided helmets, vests and thick aprons for the staffers, who had come to work dressed only in cotton clothing and rubber-soled shoes. Each staffer was assigned a personal bomb tech handler.

"We had 18 people in here," Ridgway said. "We couldn't have asked for better help."

Eight hours later, they'd combed through every single box. And found 20 more grenades. One was still wearing its iron jacket.

All were carefully carried away and detonated — the final shots of a war fought more than two centuries ago.

"Those were the oldest explosives we've ever dealt with, for sure," Castillo said.

Staff went home exhausted.

"That was a really long day," Clem said. "Going through everything, piece by piece, wearing all that heavy gear. That whole thing was a first for me. I definitely have a new respect for those bomb squad guys."

Blake slept through New Years. Foster hit the couch with a glass of whiskey.

"My mind had turned to mush," he said. "My desk is like 20 feet from where most of those boxes were on the shelves."

Ridgway was just mostly relieved: "This is a story where it all went right. It could have been one of those other stories."

Determined to glean something useful from all this, the staff has created a guide that might help other institutions and the bomb squads they'll need to call.

"There are legacy collections in small museums all over the world," Bake said. "Not so much Revolutionary War but Civil War, and something similar could happen with them."

As for the lost fleet of Yorktown, archaeologists fear it vanishes more by the day. Storms and currents sweep tirelessly, drawing skeletons toward the river's 80-foot channel, where they slide into oblivion, beyond reach.

Broadwater has helped form a company called JRS Explorations that's trying to raise money to return to a place he considers hallowed ground. He's still haunted by the wrecks under the York River.

"We learned so much from The Betsy," he said. "This isn't about treasure hunting. It's our story."

And if he ever finds any more grenades:

"This time we'd be able to identify them before they sit for 30 years."

Norfolk State may have the best marching band in America. But the Spartan Legion is about so much more.

<https://www.pilotonline.com/entertainment/arts/vp-db-nsu-band-20190906-gk3izgkjkbhpnngzynjwlv3vq-story.html>

The door is open to William Beathea's office. Usually is.

He's juggling paperwork, phone calls and multiple conversations. Usually is.

Students poke their heads in, waved across the threshold with a "come on" flutter of his fingers. This one is searching for a set of keys. That one has a question about the new uniforms. Another is worried about a gap in his financial aid.

"Don't worry," Beathea tells him. "When I met your mother, I told her I was going to take care of you and I meant it. I'll take care of it this afternoon."

Marching band is about much more than music.

Beathea is director of Norfolk State University's 225-member Spartan Legion — a high-stepping band with a rep for putting on a show, drawing fans to the stadium no matter how the football team is faring.

But every song and dizzying drill takes a back seat to what's really going on here.

"Character-building skills, leadership, communication, discipline, work ethic, problem solving — we start there," says Mr. B, as the students call him. "Once we get that going, and teach these kids to care about each other, the band part becomes rather easy."

Norfolk State University, Spartan Legion, Marching Band gets ready for their first game of the 2019 season.

It's an ambitious playbook, begun anew every fall, unfolding at a university that's had plenty of challenges of its own.

NSU has yet to fully recover after administrative problems led to a temporary accrediting probation in 2014, which dropped enrollment from about 7,000 students to around 5,000, resulting in some serious budget cuts.

Google "top HBCU bands" though – Historically Black Colleges and Universities – and find NSU steadily on the list, right there with legends like the Sunshine State's Florida A&M and Bethune-Cookman, Louisiana's Grambling State and Mississippi's Jackson State.

The Spartan Legion "can hold its own in any part of the country," says Don Roberts, an executive consultant for an ESPN committee that ranks HBCU bands.

Last season, NSU hit No. 1 in the committee's Division 1 rankings before ultimately winding up the season at No. 6 in the nation. To top it off, the band was featured in a video produced by Justice, a Grammy award-winning, internationally known dance music duo.

Such laurels "might surprise people who don't follow HBCU bands," Roberts says, "but people who do are not surprised. Norfolk has an extremely well-rounded program and they play really well."

They're fun to hear and watch, blending funky dance moves with sharp choreography and a "very unique marching style," Roberts says.

"It's like part military and part Troy – like long ago, a back-in-the-day feel. I can always pick them out from other bands."

Band camp is grueling

It's called "90s" – and it's learned at band camp, a grueling affair that consumes the two weeks before fall classes begin.

Drum major Caleb Latham demonstrates: "You gotta lift your knees high like this, so it makes a 90-degree angle, with your toes pointed toward the ground."

Nineties require a lot of stamina. Days start early at band camp, with physical training at 6 a.m., followed by marching and drilling, music rehearsal and individual practice, more PT, drilling and rehearsing that goes on as late as 11 pm.

Beahea and Assistant Band Director Stephanie Sanders leave students in charge as much as possible.

"This is their band and they can't learn to lead if we're not willing to let them try," Beahea says. "And to tell you the truth — trying to keep up with a bunch of 18- and 19- year-olds, especially in this heat — forget it!"

Students choose the songs, herd practices and lead performances. Veteran members coach rookies — no hazing allowed. Eighty freshmen joined this season. Hardly anyone with basic skills and enough heart is turned away.

Beathea recruits to fill holes but scholarship money is always tight. The band's annual budget was among the slashed — from nearly \$1 million to \$400,000 — and its headcount plummeted to 110.

Now, rebounded to traditional size, “we’re still working with that same amount of money,” Beathea says. “I get it, though. The administration has been very supportive — they love this band. Bands are just expensive.”

Helping the bottom line: Extra money raised or donated by alumni, churches or community, or funneled toward the band from various school pockets.

Enough has recently come in to replace almost all old instruments with shiny new ones and buy crisp new uniforms — the first in nearly 20 years — at \$800 a pop.

Another thing different this season: three drum majors instead of the typical two.

Two of them — Caleb and Joshua Latham — are 25-year-old twins who grew up in Norfolk. At the head of the trio: John Hill — aka Mr. Spartan — a 22-year-old from Detroit.

All three are seniors and accomplished musicians, but instead of playing in the band they man its helm.

At field shows, they’re the ones out front, furiously conducting in towering plumed helmets, helping everyone stay in sync while pulling off their own routines.

In the classroom, they’re expected to maintain good grades.

In the bandroom, they instill standards while setting the emotional tone.

Caleb gets teary eyed when he witnesses a rookie limping through a strained knee to keep going. Joshua counsels a new cymbals player who hasn’t mastered the music but refuses to ask for help.

“No one can force you to practice, bro,” he says quietly, “but nobody can do it alone. I need help all the time. You gotta put aside the attitude and learn to ask for help.”

Both twins say marching band was a life raft.

“Our mom is a super-hero and she did the best she could for us,” Caleb says, “but there were times when the lights were turned off and food was thin. We’ve been in and out of school. And we haven’t always been on the right path.”

Joshua says he once got into so much trouble he was kicked off the NSU campus for two years:

“I wasn’t making good decisions. But the Legion believes in third and fourth chances. They taught me how to own up to my mistakes. And get my head right.”

And then the magic

In the bandroom, all musicians are now assembled, filed in quietly, standing at attention, eyes straight ahead, instruments ready.

John Hill steps onto the podium. It's his third year as Mr. Spartan.

"Good morning, band," he says pleasantly.

"Good morning, sir," they reply in unison.

John says band was a "safe haven" for him while growing up in downtown Detroit:

"I could escape the tense environment and surround myself with positive people. When I'm in band all I think about is the music."

He conducts with a tranquil voice and fluid arms — at odds with the over-exaggerated arm pumping and rigid strutting the drum majors bring to field shows.

To warm up, he asks each instrument section to play and hold the same note, listening carefully, tracking any sour sounds down to specific players.

"You're slightly flat," he says gently. "Try again? That's better."

And then, the magic that is music swells. Drums, horns, woodwinds, cymbals — separate yet one, entwined in melody.

Jevon Baldwin, a 19-year-old snare drummer from Orlando, Fla., says he first heard about the Legion from a friend in high school, who dreamed of marching at NSU and showed him a video of the band in action:

"He was like my brother, but he got into drugs and drifted away. Now, I'm living his dream."

Beathea, who's been working with the Legion since 2000, says Baldwin is talented enough to be sought after by any university band.

Baldwin says he turned down two full scholarships to other schools, patching together financial aid to come here.

Maybe that wasn't practical.

"My mother has health problems and we don't have much money."

He pauses to steady his voice.

"But I just had to be part of this."

Fort Story's prime seems past, swallowed by time and sea. Until gunfire crackles in the woods.

<https://www.pilotonline.com/military/vp-nw-fz-fort-story-then-now-20191130-si57g5kdrfh5jfew5mnusw5qpu-story.html>

The heavy door creaks open. Rusty hinges groan.

Tucked into the base of a sand hill, cloaked by kudzu and weeds, the entrance to the bunker goes unseen by tourists on the other side of the mound, shuttled onto Fort Story to see the old lighthouses of Cape Henry.

Beyond the door, cobwebs drape a narrow passage. Cave crickets jump and scatter, startled at the sudden intrusion into their dark, dank world. Flashlights lead the way to a small room, empty except for a table.

It's shaped like a half-moon — a plotting table where men wearing World War II uniforms once leaned in, the helm of operations for an underwater minefield guarding the Chesapeake Bay from enemy vessels.

Like much of the history of Fort Story, the bunker feels forgotten, ghostly with the images of what once was. Combat never came to Fort Story, making it easier for the past to fade away.

Fields that teemed with barracks, mess halls, chapels, a hospital and the bustle of thousands of boots are now bare grass, marked only by leftover street signs, eerily pointing the way to nothing.

Artillery emplacements — platforms for the anti-aircraft and long-range guns that bristled along the shore — have almost all tumbled into the surf, the casualties of erosion. Platforms that stood farther inland grow steadily fainter, concrete circles sinking, commemorative plaques crumbling away in the salty air.

A hush seems to blanket the 1,450-acre post. Except at night, when chopper blades whup overhead, and the dense woods peppering the base rattle with booms and crackle with gunfire.

That racket — loud enough to raise the eyebrows of campers at nearby First Landing State Park — is the sound of today's kind of war and Fort Story's latest life.

This windswept elbow, jutting into the sea, has always been strategic real estate.

Conflict has long blown across its dunes.

Under the fence

Few people alive today know Fort Story better than Fielding Lewis Tyler.

He's 86, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who grew up just outside the fort's perimeter and still lives nearby.

"Not many people lived up here back then," he says of the North End neighborhood of Virginia Beach, where he returned to spend his retirement years. "There wasn't much for kids to do, and I was curious about what was on the other side of that fence."

He and his pals found spots where they could slip under and explore. WWII was over and most of the troops were gone, but some of the artillery pieces remained.

"All these big guns and giant shells — all just lying there — I found it fascinating," he says. "Got caught a time or two, though. They came and told my mother to keep little Fielding at home."

At Virginia Military Institute, he majored in history, then went into the service. Vietnam was his war.

During his first one-year tour, he embedded with the South Vietnamese army in the Mekong Delta, calling in air strikes. He spent his second tour with a U.S. infantry unit. His third, as a briefing officer, was cut short when America pulled out and the North Vietnamese were closing in.

"I was giving a final press briefing," he says, "and we could hear the rockets."

In his 30 years of service, Tyler found himself stationed around the world but never at Fort Story. When he finally moved home for good, the old fort intrigued him as much as ever.

Military history has long been Tyler's interest. Memorabilia fills his study. Books about various wars cram his shelves. But Fort Story has always been special.

"Because it was close, I guess," he says, "and because I could sneak under that fence."

He joined a legion of local boards and history associations, some devoted to the bygone days of Fort Story and Cape Henry. He wrote a book about the place for the Images of America Series, filling it with vintage photographs, many from his own collection, some taken with his Kodak Brownie during those forays under the fence.

A flip through the book follows his blue eyes into the past.

As one of the gateposts defining the mouth of the bay — Cape Charles on the Eastern Shore is the other — the knob of sand and maritime forest has witnessed plenty, like the first landfall of the Jamestown colonists, who stepped foot on the cape in 1607. And their first skirmish, when native warriors promptly attacked.

Over the centuries, the cape has known wreckers, rescuers and pirates. Battles that changed the course of history have raged just offshore. The Battle of the Chesapeake during the Revolutionary War. The Battle of the Ironclads during the Civil War.

By the early 1900s, the cape had settled into a community — houses, hotels, railroad service, even a casino.

Fort Story came along during World War I, when the U.S. beefed up coastal defenses in case of attack. The federal government snapped up 340 acres of the cape, planted a couple of gun batteries in the dune line and named the post for Maj. Gen. John Story, a top Army artilleryman of the day.

It was largely an open installation, coexisting with its seaside neighbors who trekked right through it to reach their properties. When that war ended in 1918, the fort was placed on caretaker status until WWII renewed fears of invasion.

The entrance to the Chesapeake Bay was considered crucial to protect. Hostile vessels with access could reach all the way to the nation's capital — not to mention the naval bases and shipyards that lay just inside.

But its mouth isn't easy to secure: 15 miles wide, humming with military and commercial traffic that must be allowed to flow.

An early plan to build an artificial island in the middle for staging artillery was scrapped. Too difficult and costly.

Instead, old forts along the edges were muscled up. Manpower flooded into Fort Story, which quadrupled in size, gobbling up surrounding acreage that quickly sprouted a plywood city of support structures above ground, and a concrete warren of bunkers and tunnels below.

Fort Story was already the only post in the U.S. armed with M1920 16-inch howitzers — four of them, with 30-foot-long barrels, powerful enough to lob one-ton shells nearly 14 miles.

More heavy guns were brought in, with additional batteries burrowing into the other side at Cape Charles and Fisherman's Island. Fort Monroe and Fort Wool were the fallback, the inner line of harbor defense. More firepower was amassed at the local forts than anywhere else in the country.

Fire control towers were erected along the shorelines — dozens of high platforms for the spotters who helped gun crews adjust aim. A network of searchlights cast arcs over dark water.

Stout nets were stretched under the surface between the capes, with guarded openings for friendly ships. Hundreds of mines were laid beneath the waves — the largest mining operation on the East Coast.

The threat was real. German submarines, known as U-boats, were hunting nearby. During the first half of 1942, dozens of ships were downed off the mid-Atlantic coast.

In June of that year, a U-boat came calling on Hampton Roads. Creeping in at night, so close that the crew could see residents through lighted windows ashore, the U-boat dropped mines of its own just outside the bay entrance. Over the next few days, five ships collided with those enemy mines and were sunk or damaged — blasts that stunned locals from the Boardwalk to Buckroe.

Overall, however, the blockade of the bay itself was effective. In 1945, when the war ended, the nets were hauled out and mines were removed or detonated in place. Guns were carted away — most of them anyway. And little Fielding Tyler began crawling under that fence.

“What a great place to play army,” he says with a chuckle.

By then, troop numbers had dwindled, largely leaving the post to a few Army transportation groups. The Cold War brought some Nike missile batteries in the 1950s to counter the Soviet bomber threat. But mostly, time washed over Fort Story as it dozed.

Spiders and mold took over the bunkers. On the surface, weather worked on the wooden buildings until almost all had to be razed.

For years, Tyler led tours for WWII reunion groups until those folks “were all gone, too.”

At the peak of its commotion all those decades ago, Tyler figures, a few thousand people were stationed at Fort Story.

There’s almost that many stationed there now.

So why does the place feel like a ghost town?

Because, Tyler says, since the Navy SEALs came, “that’s what they want.”

Today

SEALs moved into this time capsule when the Navy took over Fort Story from the Army and merged it with Little Creek Amphibious Base in 2009, creating a joint expeditionary base.

SEALs aren’t the only ones at Fort Story — it’s also a hub for bomb disposal experts, among others — but the stage is ideal for the Navy’s premier commando force. Vacant land for out-of-the-way practice ranges. Broad, lonely beaches for honing water-borne tactics. Dark woods to train for night operations, and tuck replicas of the far-away villages they’ll need to know how to navigate under dangerous conditions.

Training, in fact, has become Fort Story’s thing. More than 10,000 personnel from every branch of service come through each year to be coached in nearly 50 different disciplines, carried out on more than 120 ranges.

Yet, somehow, the place still seems empty. Isolated. Muffled by the sea on one side and the forests of First Landing State Park on the other.

Bruce Widener, the park’s manager, said it’s not unusual for campers to be concerned about noises heard in the adjoining woods. “We try to educate them ahead of time — we tell them we’ve got some unusual neighbors,” Widener says.

Not everyone gets the word. Campers turn up in the mornings, wide-eyed over the gunshots, explosions and low-flying helicopters of the night before.

“Once we explain what it is and tell them it’s safe, they’re usually OK with it,” Widener said. “And a lot of them are like me. I love the military and I find it all really interesting.”

Only a few have packed up and left.

“And I get that,” Widener said. “I mean, sometimes they don’t even get started over there until after midnight. A helo buzzing at tree-top level when you’re tent-camping? That can be more than enough all by itself.”

At today’s Fort Story, a little Fielding wouldn’t roam far inside the fence.

Like other military installations, it’s now firmly closed to the public. Visitors can come to the cape’s lighthouses and a memorial to the first colonists, but they’re taken on base by a shuttle and not allowed to wander.

Even if they were, so much of the fort’s past has been erased.

“Fifty-five thousand visitors come to see the lighthouses every year and they don’t see anything else because it’s not there anymore,” says Spencer Layne, a public affairs officer for Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story.

Layne served 23 years in the service, most of it as a Navy photographer trotting the globe. For the past nine years, he’s been in his civilian job at the base, where he’s come to treasure Fort Story’s history and its remnants.

“The bunkers, the gun mounts — you can walk around and visualize so many things that happened here,” he says. “I guess it just brings out the little boy in me.”

It brings out perspective, too. There are hopes of opening at least one bunker to visitors — a place where people can stand face-to-face with the peeling paint of perils that defined a generation before them, and remember that 9/11 wasn’t the first time an enemy came to America’s shores.

Fielding Tyler is another gem Layne has found at Fort Story.

“He’s been a wonderful resource for me,” Layne says. “I mean, he wrote the book — literally.”

But Tyler’s shock of silver hair hasn’t been seen at Fort Story in quite a while. Time is taking its toll on him, too, and Layne finds himself increasingly thrust into the role of memory keeper.

He does what he can to collect and preserve old records and photos.

“But there’s no way I can ever fill someone like Fielding’s shoes,” Layne says. “No one could.”