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Roll Call event ends at the 1918 Fort Caswell Rifle Range

By Norma Lee Eckard

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Eight of the Roll Callers at this year's event include, from left, Yvonne Brown, Mary Sands. Martha Koletar, Phyllis Wilson, Fred Stanley, Leroy Hill, Thomas Luken and Patrick Gowan.

Photo contributed

The Friends of the 1918 Fort Caswell Rifle Range and the Brunswick Town Chapter of NSDAR conducted their final roll call for the Great War. They commemorated the men and women who served from Brunswick County in the Great War on Tuesday, April 4, 2023, at 11 a.m. The 14 nurses who served at the Fort Caswell Army Post Hospital during the war were also roll called at the event.

It was an exciting day because both groups were happy that they could finally complete a mission that started in 2018, the centennial year, the hundredth year since the Great War and the date the US entered the war. There were 718 men and women, 14 women nurses and we wanted to complete the roll call.

Norma Eckard, president of the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range, a nonprofit started in 2015, announced, "The pandemic did not allow us to continue with the roll call of the soldiers from Brunswick County or the nurses who served at Fort Caswell during the war. Back when the pandemic hit in late 2019, we were fearful that maybe we would not be able to accomplish the mission of reading all the names of the soldiers and nurses. It is a happy day now that we called all their names."

Another mission which the Friends are hoping to accomplish is awarding a Purple Heart for Robert Bollie Stanley's family who was in the Great War and was the only POW. His grandchildren attend most of the events and have served as roll callers. Seven members of his family are pictured in the book. Vice President Ronald Eckard of the nonprofit is attending to communication with the Army about the Purple Heart.

Caron Myers was back again portraying Susan Adkins Williams from Southport. She encouraged folks to read the book, "Brunswick County in the Great War," about the life she spent in Brest, France as a nurse. Then she recapped the story of researching the Williams' family siblings. She eventually found a great niece, 77-year-old Jacqueline Moody Ziskind, who lives in Pikesville, Md. Jacqueline sent a pin awarded to Susan Williams by the Army Nurse Corps. A picture of the pin was placed on the back of the program for the event so all could enjoy it.

Her father, mother, stepmother, and three siblings are buried in the Old Smithville Cemetery in Southport. Susie and her four remaining siblings eventually moved to New York and New Jersey. Only two sisters out of eight married and had children.

Caron sang a musical piece popular in 1917-1918, penned by George M. Cohan during the earliest days of the US involvement in the Great War.

The biggest hit of the day was the cannon, Thor. It was not a 21-gun salute, like is done for dignitaries around the world who perished serving their country. But for the 718 military men who served in WW1 from Brunswick County and the 14 nurses who served at the Fort

Caswell Army Post Hospital, it was touching and refreshing to observe the firing crew men in preparation. Eight crew members of the Southport Historical Society placed the cannon a distance from the monument, aiming it toward the trees across the street. They were a busy group, polishing the brass on the barrel before the event. The audience was curious. When it came time after the roll callers read half their list of soldiers' names who served in the war, they went into action.

Two of the men took charge of traffic, stopping all cars, golf carts and pedestrians from driving or walking around until the cannon was fired by the crew. The preparation of the crew was a sight to see and the professionalism was admirable. Anyone could tell that they knew what they were doing.

There was another firing of the cannon when roll callers continued to name more local soldiers and the nurses who served at Fort Caswell. Fascinating what a cannon can do for a presentation. This is the 3rd time the Southport Historical Society has brought the cannon to the event. They honored our men who served in the Great War in 2018, 2019 and 2023.

They would have been here in 2022 but a tropical storm interrupted and a rain date was selected when the crew was not available. We thank the Firing Crew members of the Southport Historical Society for all they do to encourage giving thanks to the men in uniform. This group helps people celebrate birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, funerals and other special occasions.

The Friends intend for a surveyor to identify the firing line used by the soldiers to enhance their skills before going to France and locating the pig pen that the Army was able to use for food.

Do not forget the rifle range is 105 years old on May 20th. Do not forget to visit the cemetery on Memorial Day. That is the day to give thanks for those who perished or served their country.

Also, there are two books of Brunswick County in the Great War in our five public libraries in Brunswick County. In the section where the soldiers are listed in alphabetical order, we listed the final resting place where they were buried, if we were able.

Remaining events are having a surveyor identify the firing line used by the soldiers to

enhance their skills before going to France and locating the pig pen that provided food for the troops at Fort Caswell.

If you did not receive a FFCRR Newsletter, send us a message at ftcaswellriflerange@gmail.com. Remember to visit our website at caswellriflerange.com. You can purchase a book by calling Norma Eckard at (910) 278-7584.



Caron Myers shown at the podium portraying Susan Adkins Williams.
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The cannon, Thor, is being prepared for firing by eight crew members of the Southport Historical Society.
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