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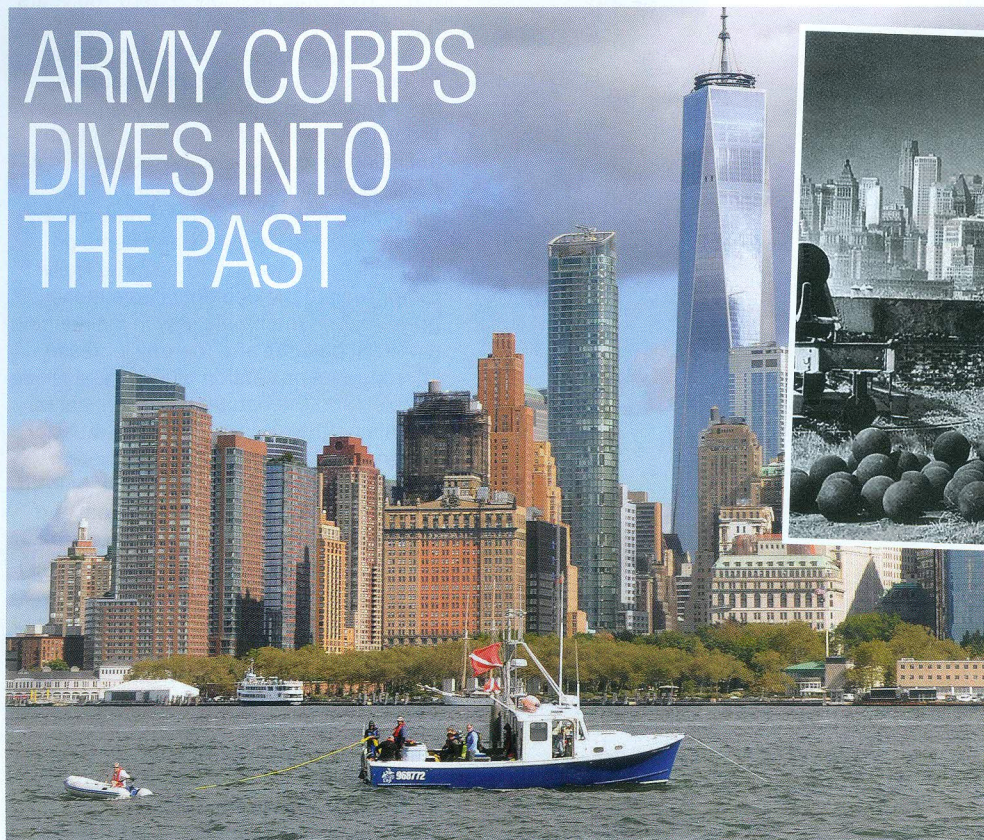
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DIVER Brief

ARMY CORPS DIVES INTO THE PAST



BY JOANNE CASTAGNA, ED.D.

This fall, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had teams of divers investigating the waters off of Governors Island, in the heart of the New York Harbor. The operation involved the investigation of piers used from the 19th century until the mid-20th century for the loading of military ships. In WWI, Governors Island was one of the primary points of embarkation for Europe.

There used to be an active U.S. Army post on the island, with military families residing on base. There are stories of children getting into mischief and rolling cannonballs down a hill, some making it all the way to the water's edge and splashing into the harbour.

"Our historical research indicates that besides the playing children, the cannonballs may have wound up in the water from past military operations or been dumped or accidentally fell into the water off of vessels that were loading and unloading munitions at the piers," said Erik Jarger, project manager, New York District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New York District.

"This work is to ensure that the waters are safer for the public, boaters,

and for potential future development around the island," said Jarger.

Governors Island was used as a U.S. Army post for almost 200 years. Fort Jay and Castle Williams were built centuries ago on the island to prevent enemies from seizing control of New York Harbor.

The army post once served as a recruitment center, supply depot, prison, and supply base; where munitions, such as cannonballs, were stored, tested, transported, and used for training and coastal defense.

It was during this time that munitions are believed to have ended up in the harbour. The Army Corps' dive teams investigated the locations of old, historically significant piers and other areas around the perimeter of the island.

"The divers are looking for what we refer to as 'metallic anomalies', or essentially any metallic items of interest that have the potential to be considered munitions or explosives of concern," said Jarger. "The munitions most likely to be found are cannonballs of various sizes, based on the historical knowledge of past island operations and munitions stored and used on the island."

Main: Divers investigating the waters off of Governors Island, New York. Insert: Historic image of armory use on Governors Island, cannon balls clearly visible

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The dive teams inspected almost three acres (1.2ha) of the harbour floor and going down as deep as 30 feet (9m) in some areas.

According to Douglas Schicho, project manager, Aptim, the Army Corps subcontractor performing the diving operation, "The dive team laid down approximately 12,000 linear feet [3650m] of rope across the surveyed area. The divers were tied off to the rope and used it to navigate. They used hand-held magnetometers and surveyed a five-foot [1.5m] swath on each side of the rope."

"Any metal found with the metal detector was inspected visually and by touch to determine whether or not it was a suspected munition," said Schicho.

None of the piers from the WWI timeframe remain. In most cases, however, some remnants of the piers are still present on the harbour bottom. Teams encountered construction debris, evidence of remaining pilings, concrete rubble, and rebar.

The munitions are being retrieved to make the waters off Governors Island safer for boaters, vessel traffic, and potential future development on the island, such as the construction of new piers, bulkheads, or seawalls.

Governors Island is located in New York City, a half mile (0.8km) from the southern tip of Manhattan at the confluence of the Hudson River and the East River.

Visitors can take a ten-minute ferry ride from Manhattan or Brooklyn to the 172-acre (70ha) island, which has become a popular recreational, educational, and cultural destination. []

Photo courtesy: Aptim, U.S. National Park Service