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Metro News

BUNKER MENTALITY

WWII munitions domes may anchor linear park

Monday November 10, 2003

By **Sandra Barbier**

West Bank bureau

They are earth-covered domes, odd 20-foot-high mounds with stained concrete facades and metal doors sometimes sealed shut by the thick trunk of a nearby tree.

"Architecturally, they may not be aesthetically pleasing," said Southeast Louisiana regional archeologist Bob Mann, "but in terms of historical significance, they played a large role in a major historical event."

They are World War II bunkers, scattered in the forest at the end of Lower Coast Algiers and the northern edge of Belle Chasse, that once stored ammunition loaded on ships bound, most likely, for the Pacific Theater.

Mann and Lower Coast resident Katie Brasted are collecting firsthand accounts and documentary information about the bunkers, which could become part of the proposed Woodlands Trail and Park.

Brasted wants to build 19 miles of trails across Lower Coast Algiers and northern Belle Chasse for running, biking, walking, horseback riding, birding and in-line skating.

The project recently received a \$33,000 recreational trails grant from Congress through Plaquemines Parish for an environmental impact assessment, Brasted said.

The Regional Planning Commission is coordinating the study.

The project also received a \$30,000 grant from the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program for a birding trail, and \$70,000 from the state recreational trails program. The money will be awarded if the project meets environmental impact guidelines, she said.

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"I feel like we are creating a legacy for future generations, planning for smart growth and preserving some of those things people moved to the area for, preserving those things for future generations," Brasted said.

Her preservation goals include historic sites of plantations, a sugar mill and the bunkers, once part of a military installation beside the river.

The bunkers are on part of 5,000 acres in Orleans and Plaquemines parishes that once belonged to the Navy, Brasted said. Sections are now owned by the Plaquemines Parish government and school board, Tulane University, the state, the U.S. Coast Guard and others.

The bunkers stored ammunition manufactured in ordnance plants across the country, Mann said. A bullet casing found on the ground was inscribed New Haven, 1943.

"We believe the arms were transported by rail to the river, and from the river, by ship," he said.

The base name is listed in a military encyclopedia as the U.S. Naval Munitions Magazine, Brasted said.

Some of the old railroad tracks are still there in the woods. Mann and Brasted hope veterans and their relatives can tell them more about the place.

"How did you load these things? How did you unload them?" Mann said. "This is a dangerous job. What were the daily activities that went on at the site?"

While the bunkers may seem mundane, they are significant in their connection to the war.

"Fewer and fewer of these types of places are going to remain," Mann said.

Part of Mann's job as one of four state regional archeologists is to promote the preservation of such sites, which private landowners are not required to save.

Once they're shown the historical value of a site, "often people are proud to have it on their property," he said. "The ultimate goal for most regional projects is to determine if a site meets the criteria for the National Register of Historic Places."

Mann said he and Brasted believe the bunkers could qualify for the list.

Brasted has received a call from a woman who said her husband was a Marine stationed there during World War II. He worked as a sentry on horseback. "When they got off work, they would check the horses out and go riding," she said.

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Anyone with information about the bunkers and the base is asked to call Mann at (225) 587-6739 or Brasted at (504) 393-2666; send e-mail to Mann at rmann1@lsu.edu; or visit the trail Web site at www.woodlandstrail.com.

Sandra Barbier can be reached at sbarbier@timespicayune.com or (504) 826-3784.

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