



Coast Guardsman James N. Keyser, Jr. visiting former detachment buddies (unidentified) after boot camp. Tent in background houses sentries of expanded detachment.

took the midnight-8 a.m. shift on a very dark, rainy night. At about 5 a.m., he began to hear a steady ticking sound, which he could not locate. Just as he was about to report a bomb, a cheerful voice announced: "This is our tick-tock station, coming on the air!" The previous sentry had left a radio set turned on and neglected to tell Keyser!

Private Keyser was discharged from the SMP on May 16, 1942, after a four-month stint at the bridge. He remembers being influenced by association with the patrol boat crews to join the Coast Guard, and naively thinking he would be assigned back to the bridge after he enlisted in June. Instead, he was posted to various troopships and served in the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Pacific until discharged in February 1946.

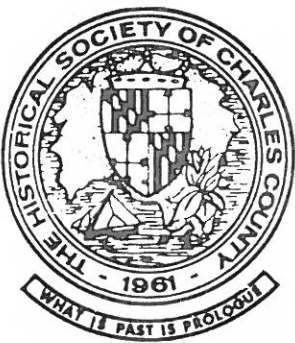
The Maryland State Guard was disbanded in February 1947, but returned to Charles County in April 1984 when Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 5th Security Battalion was activated at the La Plata Armory. The

battalion has companies at the La Plata, Prince Frederick, Greenbelt, Glen Burnie and Annapolis armories, and is subordinate to the 2nd (Chesapeake) Brigade.

The reactivated State Guard is a military police organization, and thus may be considered a lineal descendant of the World War II SMP Battalion. Training emphasizes skills in disaster relief, civil disturbance control, emergency communications, traffic control, facility security and anit-terrorist operations support.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Articles of historic interest on Southern Maryland are requested for possible publication in future issues of **The Record**. Please send your typewritten manuscripts and other communications to: Editor, **The Record**, P.O. Box 261, Port Tobacco, Maryland 20677.



# The RECORD

Publication of the Historical Society of Charles County, Inc.

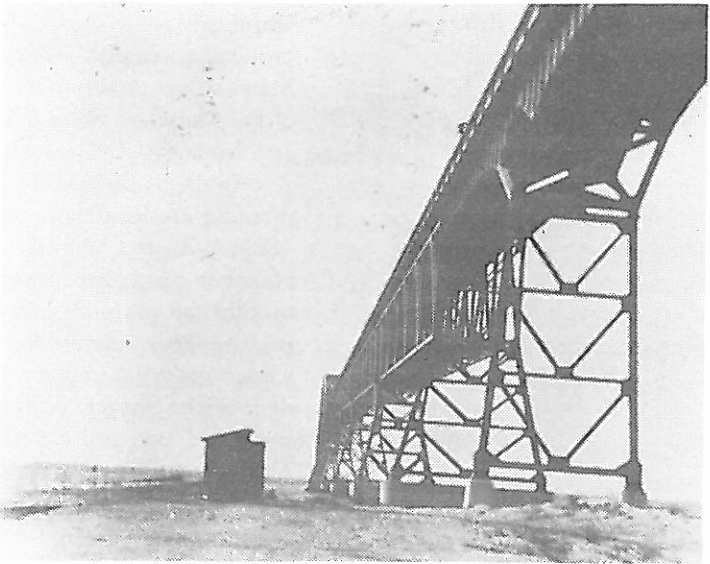
No. 36 February 1986

Mr. Richard E. Heise, Acting President

Elwood M. Leviner, Editor

## Guarding the Morgantown Bridge, 1942-1943

by 2nd Lt. Merle T. Cole, MDSG



Looking south across the Potomac River under the bridge. Guard shack in left foreground. U.S.C.G. boat pier is just over crest behind shack.

During the first half of World War II, the Governor Harry W. Nice Memorial Bridge was protected from possible sabotage by troops of the Special Military Police (SMP) Battalion of the Maryland State Guard (MDSG). The U.S. Route 301 bridge was a vital link in the region's transportation network, providing the most direct route between Richmond, Baltimore and major cities to the north. Maryland's central geographic position, defense industries, key military installations, Baltimore harbor, and proximity of the national capitol, combined to focus attention on the state's attractiveness as a military target.

Threats were perceived from Axis espionage and sabotage teams, potential "fifth columnists", and even amphibious or airborne raiders. The fears were not completely fantasy, as demonstrated by landings or attempted landings of German agents from U-boats in 1942 and 1944.

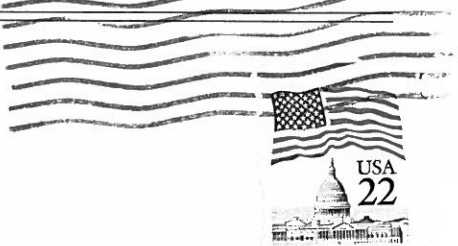
Security of war-essential facilities was beyond the capability of the small State Police force, and Maryland's National Guard was scheduled for induction into federal service. The General Assembly passed an emergency measure which Governor Herbert R. O'Connor signed into law on February 14, 1941, authorizing the governor to activate a Maryland State Guard to serve in the absence of the National Guard.

The National Guard was ordered up between February 3 and March 10, 1941. State Guard activation started slowly, but by July 6, 1942 it comprised a brigade headquarters, nine infantry battalions, one engineer battalion, one medical battalion, and an SMP unit, with authorized strength of 2,799 officers and men.

O'Connor ordered the State Guard to active duty in increments between December 9-12, 1941. Monotonous patrolling of public utilities and bridges soon prompted many disgruntled guardsmen to apply for discharge. As the Sunpapers reported, "Among charges made by the men . . . were that they were 'taken into the Guard under false

This article is extracted from Lt. Cole's unpublished manuscript, "The Maryland State Guard as an Internal Security Force," and interview with 2nd Lt. James N. Keyser, Jr., November 3, 1985.

The Historical Society of Charles County  
Post Office Box 261  
Port Tobacco, Maryland 20677

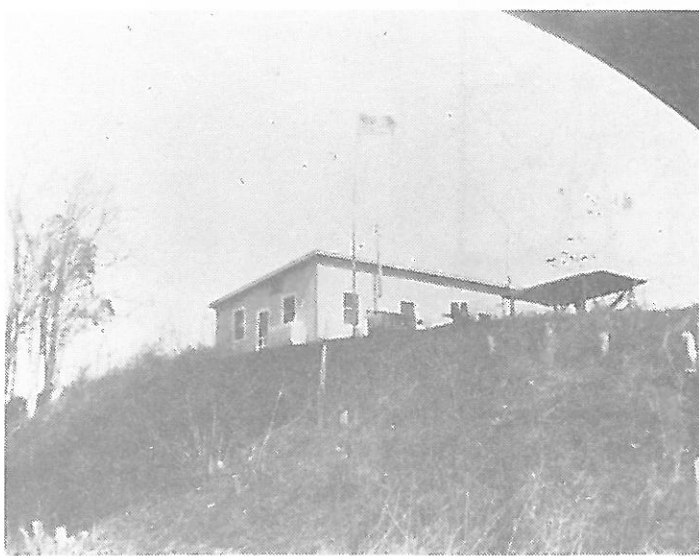


Mr M. J. Mazzeo, Jr.  
Rt 1, Box 65  
Indian Head, Md 20640

pretenses,' protesting that they understood they would be put on active duty only to 'quell uprisings' and not 'to walk around reservoirs.' "

O'Connor responded by appointing several guardsmen to the "Military Section of the State Police" on January 9, 1942. Most were recruited from the State Roads Commission (SRC), and paid from the gasoline tax fund, with privates earning \$5 a day. The SMP assumed all active security duties, while the remainder of the State Guard reverted to reserve status. As summarized in July 1942:

The Special Military Police Unit is under the direct supervision of the Commanding General of the Maryland State Guard and is composed of men carefully selected from the personnel of the Maryland State Guard, completely uniformed and equipped. This unit is on full-time duty guarding highway bridges and vital water installations. In an emergency, the men of this unit will remain on their present assignment, redoubling their vigilance, and all [State Guard] reserves will be strategically placed.



Guard detachment barracks, looking north from river bank. Arch of bridge is visible in upper right hand corner.

By early 1943 the SMP was organized as a provisional battalion with authorized strength of 13 officers and 306 enlisted men, responsible for securing Montebello filtration plant (Baltimore); Loch Raven, Pretty Boy, and Conowingo dams; and the Havre de Grace, Morgantown, Halethorpe, Hancock, Frederick, Elkton (Pennsylvania Railroad), Kent Narrows, Vienna, Severn River and Middle River bridges. Actual strength was 8 officers and 255 enlisted men, for a total of 263.

Despite this broad security mission the SMP proved controversial. Many legislators challenged the legality of sentry appointments, and the fact that SMP were not paid

from a Military Department Appropriation. O'Connor upset Baltimore politicians by withdrawing SMP from most utilities in the city, forcing creation of a costly special police force to protect the many smaller facilities. The sentries were involved in two highly publicized shooting incidents, in one of which a Kent Narrows SMP killed a man. (The sentry was exonerated by a board of inquiry.) In late February 1943, officers of one detachment left their post to protest an alleged political maneuver to replace the SMP commander. Such "bad press" kept the SMP in the spotlight for several months.

The funding conflict was finally resolved when O'Connor signed an emergency bill on March 4, 1943, providing for continued use of SRC funds until the start of Fiscal Year 1944, when a specific appropriation would be made. On April 7, O'Connor issued an executive order calling "into active service of the State a Provisional Battalion of the Maryland State Guard for special duty in guarding and protecting strategic points, sites and installations within the State, said battalion to be known as 'Military Police Battalion of the Maryland State Guard.' "

Ironically, O'Connor reduced the SMP as early as March 2, ordering a 60-man reduction and a one-third cut in the pending appropriation request, closing out or halving the Middle River, Vienna, Kent Narrows, Severn River, Hancock and Frederick Detachments. In the ensuing months, all bridge detachments were phased out. First came the Frederick, eliminated August 15. The surplus soliders were transferred to patrol Brighton dam and a filtration plant near Silver Spring, under agreement with the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission, which paid their salaries. The Morgantown, Havre de Grace and Halethorpe detachments were terminated effective September 28. A reorganization effective December 11, 1943 left a battalion



Sentries returning to barracks after a game of pitch in the parking lot. Note access road behind soldier on the right.

headquarters and detachments at Montebello, Loch Raven, Pretty Boy, Burnt Mills and Brighton dam, totaling 8 officers and 89 enlisted men. This structure remained in place until the SMP were disbanded March 31, 1945.

Second Lt. James N. Keyser, Jr. currently commands Company B, 5th Security Battalion, MDSG, assigned to the Prince Frederick Armory. On September 9, 1941, while a student in Hyattsville, Keyser enlisted in Company D, 9th Battalion which was commanded by Lt. Col. Caesar L. Aeillo and had companies in Prince George's and Anne Arundel Counties. When his company was called up after Pearl Harbor, Private Keyser was assigned to patrol a sewage treatment plant and a PEPCO transformer station. Then he was reassigned to Lt. Maurice P. McGrath's detachment, sent to secure the Morgantown bridge, with a sergeant, a cook and 12 privates. This detachment was transferred to the SMP by executive order effective February 15, 1942.

Three fixed posts were selected and guard shacks installed: on the bridge approach ramp, past the toll-taker's booth; beneath the bridge, at the head of a dirt road leading to a Coast Guard patrol boat base; and at the Virginia end. The bridge has unusual construction, forming a "hump" not far from the Maryland shore, so that guard shacks were not in line of sight. A "foot patrol" was placed atop the "hump", the sentry required to pace back and forth so he could be seen from the ends.

Soldiers manned the posts on a rotating scheduled, in three shifts: 8 a.m.-4 p.m., 4 p.m.-midnight and midnight-8 a.m. The major task was to stop vehicles and search for weapons, explosives and suspicious items. Upon a vehicle's approach, the sentry stepped into the roadway and flagged the driver to halt, using a flashlight at night. The trunk, hood, inside and underside of the vehicle were checked. Keyser recalls that despite the obvious inconvenience, no one ever complained about being stopped or searched. In fact, travellers returning from Florida often gave the young soliders oranges and grapefruit.

Sentries wore Army khaki uniforms, leggings, garrison caps and black "M.P." brassard. They carried Enfield or Springfield .30-calibre bolt-action rifles, with bayonet and scabbard. They lived in a barracks beneath the bridge - actually a construction shed renovated for the purpose. Soldiers usually spent their off-duty time in policing the barracks and maintaining equipment. They were trained in search techniques and standard procedures, and had occasional target practice at a rifle range in the woods behind the barracks.

Keyser recalls the detachment being very much "on its own." They never saw any other Maryland forces except for State Police posted at Waldorf. There was likewise no contact with federal military forces, other than the Coast Guardsmen.

The sentry work was "scary for a bunch of young kids, especially when we got rumors of German spies in the area," according to Keyser. He now believes the "spy" report may have been concocted to keep his detachment more alert. Private Keyser did get one major scare, when he

