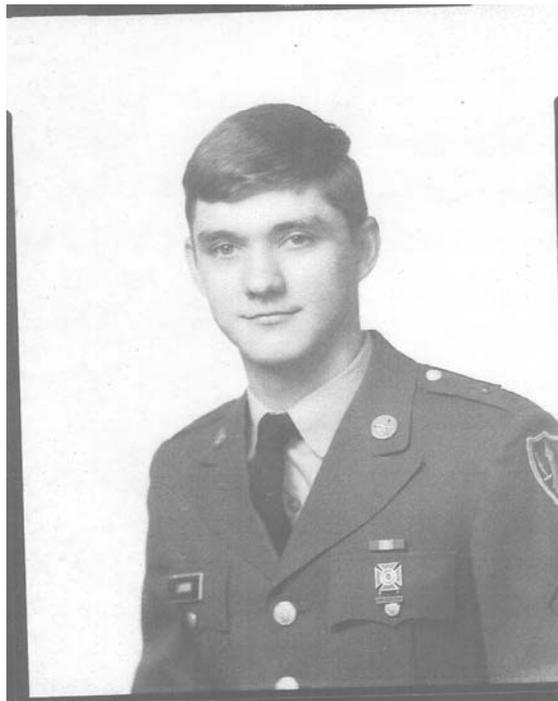


Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Telephone Interview with Richard Larsen and Betty Larsen
51st Air Defense Artillery (ADA)
1968-71
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS
June 26, 2004
Transcribed by Mary Rasa 2010



U.S. Army photo of Fort Hancock's Nike Radar site, called the Integrated Fire Control Area. c. 1970.
Photo courtesy of Gateway NRA/NPS



Richard Larsen's unit photo from 1968.



Richard and Betty Larsen at their home, 2010.
Bottom two photos courtesy of the Larsen Family.

Editor's notes on parenthesis ()

MR: Today is June 26, 2004. My name is Mary Rasa, Sandy Hook Museum Curator and I am on the telephone with Richard Larsen, who served at Fort Hancock and I am going to start out right now by asking what is your full name?

RL: Richard Larsen.

MR: When and where were you born?

RL: Weehawken, New Jersey.

MR: What schools did you attend?

RL: High school was Westwood High School.

MR: And what year did you graduate?

RL: 1966.

MR: Was your Father or Grandfather in the military?

RL: My Father was.

MR: Did he serve in World War II?

RL: Yes, he did in Germany.

MR: So until the end of the War probably?

RL: I really don't know that.

MR: Okay. Were you drafted?

RL: No. I would have been.

MR: Okay. So how did you become involved at Fort Hancock?

RL: I enlisted knowing that I was draft material.

MR: Were you then allowed to choose what branch you wanted to be in?

RL: I was guaranteed thirteen months in New Jersey.

MR: Oh, okay.

RL: That was part of the... but I had to join for four years to do that.

MR: What was your start and end date at Fort Hancock approximately?

RL: Ah, Fort Hancock, well, see originally I went to a battery in Hazlet.

MR: Okay.

RL: So that was the... I joined in February, four months after that.

MR: This is 1969?

RL: No. 1968.

MR: Okay.

RL: I was six months in Hazlet and then went down to Fort Hancock.

MR: And were you here for about two years, three years.

RL: Yeah. I finished up there. I was there until December of '71.

MR: Okay.

RL: And they were in the process of closing down.

MR: And you were actually just processed out at that point in time?

RL: Yes.

MR: Did you know anything about this place before you came here?

RL: No. No idea.

MR: Did you go to Missile School?

RL: I went to Basic Training in Fort Dix and then went to Fort Bliss in Texas for Missile School.

MR: And were you in the Launcher Area?

RL: No. I was in the Battery Control.

MR: So, you were with the radar?

RL: Right.

MR: What was your actual job?

RL: I was Missile Tracking Radar.

MR: Okay. And your rank was?

RL: E-5.

MR: And you were in Battery C?

RL: Battery C, yes. There were two batteries there. I was in the one in the front, right nearest the road.

MR: Which is to the west side?

RL: Yes.

MR: That's C-2. Yeah, okay. What was your training like in Fort Bliss?

RL: They gave us, I guess, an all around view of how the system worked. And then when you got to let's say, Fort Hancock, you really didn't know where they were going to put you, but whatever they needed at the time, that's what you were.

MR: So, while you were watching the scopes, did you ever have any alerts that something was coming closely and...?

RL: No.

MR: No.

RL: No. Never. We were called down there because we were on 24 (hours) on and 24 off and we were called down a few times, but never saw anything. No.

MR: Now did you actually see the commercial airline on your radar?

RL: No.

MR: Okay. So I guess, what were there two people on the 24 hour shifts while you were there or just yourself would be on duty?

RL: Oh, no. There would be a whole crew.

MR: Oh. Okay.

RL: And if you were on, you had to stay on base. And if there was anything going on like I guess in the news or something like that then you would have to stay right at the site.

MR: In the barracks there.

RL: They had a little room where we stayed at right on site inside the gate.

MR: So you were with the missile tracking, you were inside one of the trailers?

RL: Yes.

MR: And what was in the inter-connecting corridor building? Did they have it set up like a break room?

RL: No. They had a separate break room in a different building. But there was, you know, there was like desks and phone. I would say almost like a garage type thing and a trailer attached on each side.

MR: Did this job aid you in future work?

RL: No. Not a bit.

MR: (laughter) What do you do now?

RL: Now I am a tool and die maker.

MR: Okay. Let's see, I'm just looking down the list. And you lived in Barracks 74, the U shaped barracks when you were off.

RL: Yeah.

MR: I guess when you were off duty. When you were off your 24 hour shifts?

RL: Yeah. Until I got married.

MR: Okay.

RL: Then I moved off base.

MR: Where did you live then?

RL: Long Branch, a block away from the ocean. It was really nice.

MR: Which street was that?

RL: Right on Ocean Boulevard.

MR: Okay. When you were living in the barracks, there was also a mess in that same barracks?

RL: Yes.

MR: Tell me a little bit about the social activities that you took part in while you were stationed here?

RL: Well, we used to go to the beach sometimes depending on the time of the year.

MR: Did you go to the theater to watch any movies?

RL: I don't remember doing the theater. We had basketball and we had a team. There was Headquarters Battery up in Highlands. They had dances at the.. where we used to get our mail.

MR: The Service Club?

RL: Yeah it was like a Service Club. They had dances there and that is where I met my wife.

MR: Okay. We will go back to that in a minute. I just want to go over a couple of more questions. Did you attend any religious services here?

RL: No I didn't.

MR: Did you go to the PX? Did they still have kind of like a lunch bar or...?

RL: Yes, they did. They had excellent chili.

MR: Oh, that's good.

RL: It was really good.

MR: Did you take trips to I guess see your family? Go to New York, things like that?

RL: We never went to New York. I would go home. If I was off on a weekend I would go home. It was close enough that I could go home.

MR: Did you have your own car?

RL: Yes.

MR: Okay. Did you ever deal with any women while you were here? Were there ever any civilian women working where you were or anything like that?

RL: Maybe in the PX. Other than that, I don't think so.

MR: Were there civilian men working on the equipment, the radar equipment?

RL: No. They had...they were like officers, but they weren't...

MR: The warrant officers?

RL: Warrant officers, yeah. They used to do most of the, you know, if something was broken they would fix it, not us.

MR: Was this a fun or boring place to be working?

RL: It was fine. It was good times.

MR: Was it better than being in Hazlet?

RL: Actually there was more to do than in Hazlet. That's for sure.

MR: 'Cause you were actually on a real base, I guess.

RL: Well, yeah. Hazlet was just us. It was like two small groups and two shifts. Down there, there was a lot of other people there. You know, things going on. It was a much better setup.

MR: Did anything especially humorous occur while you were here?
(laughter)

RL: This was a long time ago.

MR: I just thought I'd ask.

RL: No. Well, the one time we were there, I don't know if you were aware of it, it was towards the end. We used to get a lot of different people coming in all the time as batteries were closing. I think these fellows came in from Buffalo. They were a little bit flamboyant; I guess you would call it. And it was going to be Halloween and we had the big white covers on the radar domes.

MR: Yeah.

RL: So, they put, they made it like a big pumpkin.

MR: Oh. (laughter)

RL: They put orange lamps in it. It really came out neat. I know the picture was in the paper, but it was a cool thing. That was the kind of thing that they did. But of course we didn't have a whole lot to do.

MR: Were the ..the radomes were actually inflated by air?

RL: Yes.

MR: That's how they kept up?

RL: They had blowers in there. We used to hate it when we got a big storm because they used to come down and that was a real job.

MR: I guess it took a lot of people to get them back up?

RL: Oh yeah.

MR: Do you keep in touch with anyone?

RL: No. We keep in touch with one fellow's wife and that's about it. We kind of all separated.

MR: Okay, well let's go back and talk a little bit about how you met your wife.

RL: Okay. It was out, they had these, once a month, did they have a dance there? (asking his wife off tape.) I'm checking with her.

MR: Okay.

RL: And there was a group, I think they were from Ridgewood, New Jersey and there would just be girls. They'd come down on a bus and there'd just be a dance at the club there.

MR: Okay.

RL: And that's how we met.

MR: And how soon thereafter did you get married?

RL: A year. The strange part was she only lived, you know, from my hometown maybe five miles away.

MR: Oh. (laughter)

RL: So, that was kind of odd.

MR: So, anything else you would like to talk about?

RL: No. It was good duty. That's for sure. No problems with anything

MR: Okay. Can I talk to your wife now?

RL: Sure.

MR: I'd like to ask her about that.

RL: Okay.

BL: Hello.

MR: Hi. Could you state your name for the recording?

BL: My name is Betty Larsen.

MR: Tell me a little about the organization that went to the dance.

BL: I think it was called Junior Hostess and it had to do with the Ridgewood Y(MCA). And my sister had gone there because her husband was in Vietnam and she was looking for something to do while he was overseas and she found out about this. So, my other

sister and I did the going to the dances. We would go to Fort Hancock, Stewart Air Force Base, and West Point on a weeknight.

MR: Oh, okay.

BL: And we would just go dance and that's it.

MR: Where was Stewart Air Force Base?

BL: In Newburgh, New York.

MR: Oh, okay. So when you went down for the Fort Hancock dance, tell me a little bit about it. It was in the Service Club?

BL: It was in the Service Club and I know there was one dance where they made, you know, all the guys get up to dance. But they just wanted to sit and do nothing. And I know my girlfriend came back and said, "I met a guy from my hometown." She was from Westwood. And then later that night I met him. And we danced all night and he asked me my phone number and he asked me my name because he forgot it already.
(laughter)

MR: There began the whirlwind romance.

BL: Yeah right. How about that huh? Well, stranger things have been known to happen, right. We dated, and we got married, like a year later. We got married on his birthday so he never forgets our anniversary. (laughter) Oh, he's got some information here.

MR: Okay. Well thank you very much.

BL: And he's got something for you. Here he is.

MR: Okay great.

RL: Yeah. It was the 51st artillery.

MR: Okay.

RL: Okay. And one thing we used to do is every year each unit had to go back to Fort Bliss to run a practice run.

MR: Yes.

RL: And so we used to go down. We had two batteries and each battery used to go down separately. But I got a letter here from the Army saying that, oh, this is from the commander at the time. That we scored a perfect score a 100%.

MR: Who was the commander?

RL: Charles H. Mayhew. M-A-Y-H-E-W. And it says here, "You and the other members of fire control should be especially proud of being the only regular army unit to attain this since 1961." So that was 10 years.

MR: Wow.

RL: So, you might want to mention that.

MR: Okay.

RL: Okay.

MR: Alright, I am going to end the tape right now.

RL: Okay.

MR: Thank you very much.

End of Interview