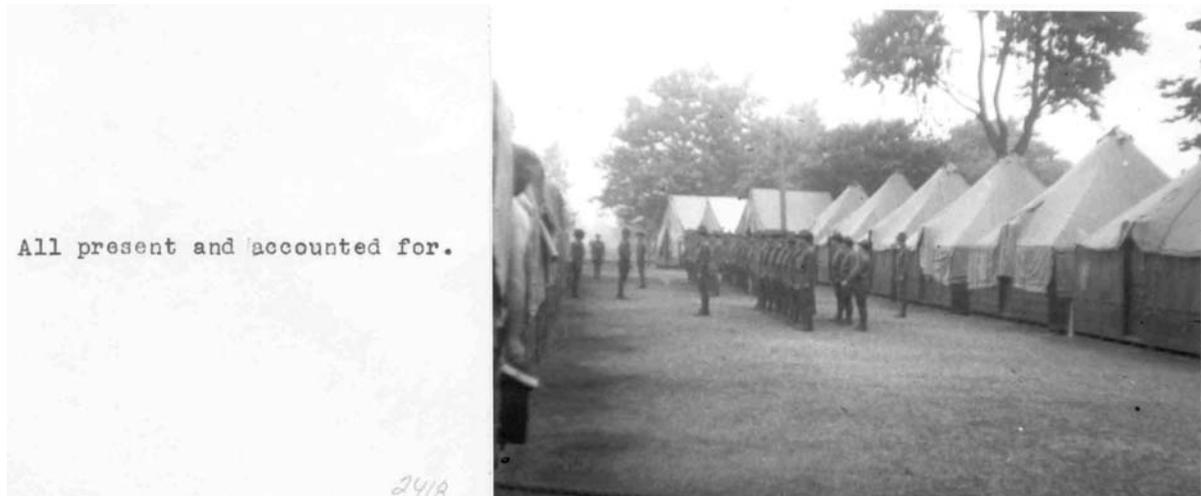


Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
A Self Recorded Oral History Interview with
Lt. Colonel Henry J. Willis
CMTC, 620th, 245th, and 7th Coast Artillery
1934, 1939-1943
Fort Hancock, NJ and Fort Tilden, NY
July 1, 1980
Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2011



The Citizens' Military Training Camp site was located just north of Officers' Row. This photograph taken in 1930s is from a member's album.



The CMTC drilled on the 8-inch railway guns when Lt. Col. Willis was at Fort Hancock in 1934.



Gun crew at Nine-Gun Battery in World War II era.
Lt. Col. Willis worked with these guns while at Fort Hancock.



Btry Harris, Ft. Tilden, N.Y. 245 C.A. 1941

Battery Harris at Fort Tilden, 1941.

Photos courtesy NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

(The Citizens' Military Training Camps existed from 1921 to 1940. Select Army Posts including Fort Hancock hosted young men for one summer month. It was done with the intention that men such as Lt. Col. Willis become Reserve Officers.)

Lt. Colonel Henry J. Willis: My name is Henry J. Willis a retired Lt. Colonel of the United States Army now residing in Leesburg, Florida. I was born in New York City on January 5, 1918. Went to school there and spent my early life there until I went on active duty in 1940 at Fort Hancock, New Jersey, assigned to the 245th Coast Artillery Regiment- Harbor Defense. My military career started at the age of fourteen when I attended the Basic Course at a Citizens Military Training Camp CMTC at the then Camp Dix, New Jersey in 1932. Seventeen years was the minimum age then for attending the Basic Course at CMTC. However I was big for my age and fibbed a little about my age as no doubt many youngsters did then. At the time I started attending CMTC camps each summer I selected Infantry as my branch of choice. However a number of my neighborhood friends had selected Coast Artillery CMTC and attended the annual encampment at Fort Dix, correction at Fort Hancock, New Jersey. Between summer encampments they bragged about how wonderful Coast Artillery was compared to the foot slogging Infantry. In the summer of 1934, a friend of mine Michael J. O'Brien who had been attending the Coast Artillery CMTC Camp at Fort Hancock, New Jersey could not attend camp that summer. He suggested that I attend the CMTC encampment at Fort Hancock under his name to see if I like Coast Artillery. I did attend and was hooked by Coast Artillery from then on. That year, 1934, the CMTC students from the New York City area assembled at a scheduled time and day at the Battery which was the tip of Manhattan. As I remember the U.S. Army Mine Planter (a ship) from Fort Hancock was there to transport us across New York Harbor to Fort Hancock. I believe a Captain McFadden, 7th Coast Artillery regiment was in charge. When we arrived at Fort Hancock we were taken in hand by reserve officers of the 910th Coast Artillery Reserve Regiment AA (anti-aircraft) who were on a two week tour of active duty. I believe the 910th Regiment AA at that time was commanded by a colonel Doll D-O-L-L. We were billeted in pyramidal tents. The battery I was assigned to was commanded by Captain John Dwynell (spelling?) of the 910th. Captain Dwynell has previously been a member of the 245th Coast Artillery, New York National Guard. Subsequently Captain Dwynell became a member of the 245th Coast Artillery. Incidentally, at the end of World War II Colonel Dwynell gained wide publicity as either the prosecutor or the defense council for a case in Germany that involved jewels allegedly stolen from a German castle by a Captain in the U.S. Women's Army Corps and several accomplices. One memorable event of this 1934 summer camp was a one day trip for we CMTC students to West Point via the US Army Mine Planter. Returning to Fort Hancock that evening the Mine Planter ran into a heavy storm crossing New York Harbor. We weren't quite sure we were going to make it. I believe this experience disabused us about ever joining the United States Navy. At that 1934 CMTC Camp, we student were assigned to 8-inch railway guns of the 52nd Coast Artillery Regiment for training. Our trainers were officers of the 910th Coast Artillery Regiment AA and enlisted men of the 52nd Coast Artillery railway.

Towards the end of our one month training we did fire several rounds from the 8-inch railway guns, plus numerous sub-caliber rounds. I definitely like Coast Artillery, but decided to finish my remaining two summer camps in the Infantry at Plattsburgh Barracks, New York in 1935 and 1936. In 1936, I enlisted as a private in the 620th Coast Artillery Reserve Regiment-Harbor Defense. If I remember correctly the regiment met one night a month in a building in downtown Manhattan. The meetings were about two hours long. We discussed various military subjects. Of course, in those days we did not receive any pay for attending these meetings. I believe our regimental commanding officer was a Colonel Johns. Following my enlistment in the Reserve Corps and my assignment to the 620th Coast Artillery Regiment I took extension courses, the 10 series with a view to securing a commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army Reserve Coast Artillery. Although a majority of my CMTC training had been in Infantry I took the extension courses in Coast Artillery subjects with a view of securing a commission in the Coast Artillery Reserve. In 1939, I appeared before a Coast Artillery Examining Board. Passed the board and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Coast Artillery Reserves. I was assigned to my own regiment, the 620th Coast Artillery-Harbor Defense. In the summer of 1939, I went on a two week active duty tour as a second lieutenant with the 620th Coast Artillery Regiment at Fort Hancock. I believe the 619th Coast Artillery Regiment-Harbor Defense was also on duty at Fort Hancock at the same time. That summer, 1939, the 620th Regiment was assigned training to a 10-inch disappearing gun battery. I don't remember the name of the battery. In the summer of 1940, I again went on a two week active duty tour at Fort Hancock with the 620th Coast Artillery. Once again, I believe we were assigned to train on a disappearing gun battery. It was either a 10-inch or a 12-inch battery. About mid-September or early 1940, the Coast Artillery Reserve Headquarters in the New York area informed we second lieutenants, and first lieutenants in the Coast Artillery Reserve Regiments that we might be needed for a one year tour of active duty to fill vacant slots in the ranks of the Regular Army Coast Artillery Regiments and the 245th Coast Artillery New York National Guard Regiment who were responsible for manning the Harbor Defense Forts for defending New York Harbor. In October 1940, the 245th Coast Artillery had been ordered to active duty for one year at Fort Hancock, New Jersey. Many of us second lieutenants favored the idea of a one year tour of active duty. So, many of us volunteered. I volunteered and received orders to report to the 245th Coast Artillery at Fort Hancock, New Jersey on October 30, 1940. Upon reporting to Headquarters 245th Coast Artillery on October 30, 1940 I was assigned to Battery H of that Regiment. Battery H was commanded by Captain Franklin M. Coleman and was assigned to man a disappearing gun battery. I don't recall if it was Battery Richardson or Battery Granger. I also don't recall whether it was a 10-inch or a 12-inch disappearing battery. Captain Coleman was a very experienced Coast Artilleryman. Battery H, 245th Coast Artillery was part of a 3rd Battalion of that Regiment. The key officers of the 3rd Battalion were Battalion Commander, Major Tom Donalson; G Battery Commander, Captain Charles Munskey; H Battery Commander, Capt. Frank Coleman; I Battery Commander, Capt. Henry Derby, 3rd Battalion Headquarter Commander, 1st Lt. Clarence Johnson. As I remember all personnel of the regiment were billeted in tents while barracks were under construction at Fort Hancock. Mess hall buildings were available for enlisted battery personnel. The officers of the regiment had their own mess hall. Most official announcements in the

officers' mess were made at the noon meal by the Regimental Adjutant, Captain Bob Gool (spelling?). It was rather cold living in tents during that winter period. As I recall the officers were in two man tents. These tents were heated by a small coal burning stove. I was assigned to the gun sections of Battery H. It was always friendly rivalry between the gun sections and the range or plotting sections of the battery. During November-December of 1940 and January of 1941 all batteries of the regiment did a lot of gun drills, plotting room drill and maintenance on the guns and emplacements we were manning at Fort Hancock. The 245th Coast Artillery Regiment at that time was a large harbor defense regiment with four battalions. The first battalion consisted of 1st Battalion Headquarters, Headquarters Battery, Battery A, B, and C. The 2nd Battalion consisted of 2nd Battalion Headquarters Battery, Batteries D, E, and F Batteries. The 3rd Battalion was 3rd Battalion Headquarters, Battery G, H, and I Batteries and the 4th Battalion consisted of 4th Battalion Headquarters, Battery K, L, and M Batteries also a Regimental Headquarters Battery and a Searchlight Battery. There may have been other elements of the regiment that I don't recall at this time. The Regimental Commander was Colonel Charles Glime and the Regimental Executive Officer was Lt. Colonel Eric Barron. The battery commanders and the senior officers of the 245th Coast Artillery Regiment were all experienced Coast Artillery men. Almost all of them had come up through the ranks. Also most of them had quite a bit of target practice experience as a result of attending the annual two week summer camps at Fort H.G. Wright-Harbor Defenses of Long Island Sound during previous years. During the day and into the evening at Fort Hancock, the 245th officers talked mainly of Coast Artillery firing techniques. They lived and breathed Coast Artillery. Elements of the 7th Coast Artillery and 52nd Coast Artillery Regiments were also present at Fort Hancock at that time. The senior Coast Artillery officer on Post at that time was Brigadier General Philip Gage. The elements of the 7th Coast Artillery and 52nd Coast Artillery Regiments at that time were rather small in number of batteries present. During late 1940 and 1941 and later all units at Fort Hancock and Fort Tilden were levied for officers to be sent overseas as replacements or to activate new units overseas. I recall some of the places they were sent. For example Panama, Newfoundland, Iceland, Philippine Islands, Hawaii, Trinidad, British West Indies. In November 1941, our 3rd Battalion 245th Coast Artillery Regiment received orders to be transported in February 1941 to Fort Tilden, Rockaway, New York to prepare the 16-inch gun battery, Battery Harris for firing and annual service practice later that spring or summer. Batteries G and H, 245th Coast Artillery were to jointly prepare and fire battery Harris. Battery I, 245th Coast Artillery was to prepare and fire a 6-inch barbette gun battery. I don't recall the name of this 6-inch barbette battery. I believe our entire 3rd battalion was transported via ship from Fort Hancock to Fort Tilden and across New York Harbor in early February 1941. In those days, batteries of a Coast Artillery Harbor Defense Regiment were not authorized vehicles of any type by their TO and E. All we had were hand pulled carts to draw rations and supplies from regimental supply. Not even a jeep for the battery commander was available. When our battalion arrived at Fort Tilden in early 1941 the two senior Regular Army officers living on the Post were Major Hennessey who was the Post Commander and Capt. Paul Jacquard, Post Executive Officer. When we arrived there were already, I believe, two batteries of the 7th Coast Artillery Harbor Defense stationed at Fort Tilden. After we arrived, one of these batteries was assigned to man the second 6-inch barbette gun battery. The other battery was

assigned to man the three fixed anti-aircraft guns, 3-inch, I believe. Soon after our battalion's arrival, the Fort Tilden Officers' Club was organized by most compliment officer of 7th Coast Artillery, Harbor Defense officers and 3rd Battalion, 245th Coast Artillery officers. About this time, Lt. Col. T.E. Jeffords, 7th Coast Artillery replaced Major Hennessey as Post Commander. Capt Jacquard was promoted to Major about the same time. When our battalion arrived at Fort Tilden the construction of wooden barracks and wooden buildings had already been completed. It was a welcome relief to work and be billeted in heated buildings. Battery G, 245th Coast Artillery was assigned to man gun #1 Battery Harris. Battery H was assigned to man Gun #2 of the 16-inch Battery. Both G and H Batteries made up the joint range or plotting section. There were a number of base end stations along the Long Island shoreline that were utilized for the artillery drill and firing of Battery Harris. I remember the following, Fort Tilden base end station, a base end station in one of the towers of the nearby bridge that connected Rockaway with the mainland of Brooklyn, a base end station at Long Beach Long Island. I believe there was another base end station at Jones Beach, Long Island. In the spring or summer of 1941, we were ready to fire a target practice with Battery Harris. About this time we were inspected by Lt. Colonel, correction, by Lt. General Hugh Drum, Commanding General of Headquarters First Army based on Governors Island, New York. General Drum had been a key member of General Pershing's staff during World War I. At that time, the projectiles and powder for the 16-inch guns were stored in brick buildings located near each gun emplacement. The approximately 2,000 pound projectiles and 860 pounds of powder for each 16-inch round were transported to the gun emplacements on small metal cars that ran on railroad tracks from the storage building to the gun emplacements. These cars were pushed by battery personnel. The firing of the Battery Harris service practice in mid-1941 was considered to be successful. I believe we fired at a range of approximately 30,000 yards. Prior to the actual 16-inch gun firing we fired sub-caliber practices with 75mm guns mounted ex-caliber on top of the 16-inch gun barrels. In May 1941 or early 1942, the War Department decided to casemate all 16-inch barbette batteries. Casemating consisted of concrete doming the 16-inch guns themselves plus adding the plotting room and ammunition storage facilities as an integral part of the casemented emplacement. If I remember correctly, the casemating of Battery Harris took approximately six months to complete. Well, Battery Harris was out of action. Battery H of the 245th Coast Artillery was issued four .155 mm guns GFPs which were of World War I vintage which were emplaced in the Fort Tilden Beach near the water's edge. The four .155mm guns were a headache to drill on. Almost every time the breech blocks were opened, the wind would blow sand on the blocks. Then, it would be difficult to close the blocks. It would then be necessary to call the Post Ordnance to come work on the breech blocks so they would close. We never did fire these .155 mm guns. When Battery Harris casemating was completed the .155 mm guns were returned to Ordnance. We then went back to manning the casemated Battery Harris. Sometime in early 1942, it was decided that possible attacks by large enemy ships in the New York Harbor area was unlikely. However, attacks but German submarines were very prevalent along the Atlantic seaboard also attacks by German PT boats sneaking into New York Harbor area was a definite possibility. To combat the possible enemy submarine and PT Boat menace it was decided by the New York Harbor Defense Commander to emplace two 3-inch rapid fire surface guns along side the stone jetty at Breezy Point. I believe a similar plan

was implemented for other areas throughout the Harbor Defenses of New York. I was assigned to command this 3-inch rapid fire detachment at Breezy Point. Later these two 3-inch guns were augmented by two fixed 90mm anti-aircraft guns and two mobile 90mm anti-aircraft guns. Also a small tower was constructed nearby to house a 60 inch seacoast searchlight. We manned the two 3-inch rapid fire guns on a continuous basis 24 hours a day. A concrete combination command post and plotting room was constructed at the 3-inch gun site. We were required to have a sufficient crew on hand to be able to open fire in two or three minutes. During this time temporary barracks and mess halls were constructed about a third of a mile away to house the entire battery. In addition to manning the 3-inch and 90mm guns battery personnel were required to walk beach defense in pairs if I remember. We fired one service practice with the 3-inch rapid fire guns. I don't recall us firing the 90mm guns. We were a little bit apprehensive about firing the 3-inch guns because the lot of 3-inch ammunition we were assigned to fire was dated 1910. The first few rounds we fired we hooked a long lanyard and backed off about a hundred yards behind a sand dune when we fired the guns. Fortunately, the ammunition functioned okay. I believe it was sometime in late 1942 that there was a large scale reorganization and re-designation of the various units manning the armament comprising the Harbor Defenses of New York. Our battery was re-designated as a unit of the 7th Coast Artillery. I don't remember at this time what lettered battery of the 7th Coast Artillery we became. Sometime in 1942, I was promoted to Captain and became Commanding Officer of the Rockaway or Breezy Point Battery as the 3-inch and 90mm gun battery. In 1942, and there after the Harbor Defense of New York started to lose officers in great numbers to the Anti-Aircraft Artillery Branch of the Coast Artillery. Most were sent directly to Camp Davis, North Carolina to an Anti-Aircraft Artillery Officer School. In August of 1943, I received orders to report to a preliminary Anti-Aircraft Officers' School at Fort Eustis, Virginia. Following that school, I was sent to the regular Anti-Aircraft Officers' Course at Camp Davis, North Carolina thus ended my association with the Harbor Defense of New York. Later, I was sent overseas to Hollandia, New Guinea and then to Manila in the Philippines. During my assignment to Manila, I had occasion to visit Corregidor on several occasions. It was awesome to see the devastation that Corregidor had received during the Japanese and later the American attacks to capture and recapture it. I stayed in the Army at the end of World War II. In the spring of 1947 I was reassigned to the United States. I was assigned as an instructor to the Coast Artillery Reserve Section of the New York Military District with headquarters at 90 Church Street New York. In this assignment, I was again among many Coast Artillery officers whom I had known while serving in the Harbor Defense of New York in the 1940s. At the outbreak of the Korean War, I was sent to the Far East. Instead of Korea, I wound up in Japan as an advisor and instructor to the Japanese National Police Reserve which in reality is the new Japanese Army. In 1953, I was reassigned back to the United States to Fort Stewart, Georgia. From there I was sent to be a student at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. After the staff college I wound up with the Nike Surface to Air Missiles Defenses of Chicago. Then in 1957, I was assigned to U.S. Army Headquarters Europe in Heidelberg, Germany with the NATO Air Defense Division. Our mission was to supply Nike Ajax and Hercules Missiles and later Hawk Missiles to the NATO countries. My country of primary responsibility was Italy. I spent much time in the northern part of Italy advising

the Italian Air Force on the selection and activation of the Nike Missile sites in October of 1960. I retired in Germany after 20 years of active plus five years of reserve service. I stayed on in Germany at U.S. Army Headquarters in Europe as a federal civil service employee for another 16 months. I resigned my civil service job in Germany in the Spring of 1962 and settled in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. In 1984, I moved to Leesburg, Florida where I now reside with my wife. Of my entire Army career my fondest memories are of the days when I spent at Fort Hancock and Fort Tilden. End of resume.

END OF INTERVIEW