

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Interview with Albin Zwiazek
52nd Coast Artillery, Battery C, 1937-1939
Interviewed by Elaine Harmon and Tom Hoffman, NPS, 10/16/81
Transcribed by: Jo Anne Carlson 2009
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Topic: Railway Guns



52nd Coast Artillery Battery C, 12 inch mortar gun #1



12 inch mortar being loaded



Battery Commander station



Soldiers getting to guns by railway flatcar.

EH: Today is October 16, 1981 and I'm Elaine Harmon, Museum Technician at the Sandy Hook Museum. We have invited Al Zwiazek who is a Veteran of Fort Hancock, to record his reminiscence of the Railway Artillery of the 52nd Coast Artillery Battery C.

And he was beginning a short while ago in reviewing some of his memories that he arrived February 20, 1937 as a Recruit at the young age of 18 years. And arrived with a partner by the name of

AZ: Victor Bruzek we met at the recruiting office. We're still friends.

EH: Really, where is he now?

AZ: Old Bridge, New Jersey.

EH: Tell me about the decision you made to determine that you were going to join the C Battery.

AZ: Well, the Sergeant Major, his name was De Lyle, mentioned that both Batteries needed people. He said that E Battery had eight inch guns and C Battery had 12 inch. Vic and I decided to go to the Battery with the big guns. I think it was a pretty good decision. Nothing against E Battery, but, you know, C Battery was exciting.

EH: And then, you were telling me before that, you didn't immediately get started on the guns. You started out with, really, what you would call mediocre tasks. Tell us about that. First you said you were issued a .45 caliber Colt and Remington pistol.

AZ: It might have been a Colt. The first thing you do is what they call this Basic Training. It was called Recruit Drill then. ...Close order drill, military regulations, military courtesy, and everything pertaining to becoming a soldier. We studied about the guns in inclement weather you could become a second class gunner. As spring came along we got outside to see the guns. Well, we got to see them before that. Little by little, we started practicing on them and actually firing took place these things and gained experience. (inaudible sentence.) It was gradual and you learned little by little and you learned more important jobs as you went along. By the time the summer season was over, you were a pretty good gunner.

EH: What were the classes of gunmanship that you mentioned before?

AZ: Second Class, First Class, and Expert, you start out in Second Class. It sort of went like one grade a year. Second Class you started out with and the following year you became a First Class gunner. Some people didn't go all the way up. I think at the beginning of the third year I became an Expert gunner. I was a Private First Class making \$30 a month. They gave me five dollars more for being an Expert gunner. I went out and bought a car. I thought I was rich. (LOL) They rewarded you for being an Expert gunner. There was only one grade higher than that and that was very selective. Maybe one or two out of the whole Regiment went to Fort Monroe Virginia and made it to Master gunner. I think I knew one person. The guns were exciting and you really had to be on the ball.

EH: Describe to me the targets, which I'd like to record.

AZ: The target looked like a floating pyramid. It was shaped like a pyramid. A structure made with 2 x 6's and it was floated on a raft that was 20 feet square. And maybe the height of the raft was about 15 or 20 feet covered with what looked like, red sail cloth or canvas. It was seen from far away. And they would fire at this target. You (were) not (to) hit this target because if you hit the target, you destructed it and you'd have to start all over again and bring out another target. We came close several times and damaged the target a few times.

EH: What were you firing at the target?

AZ: Well, when you first start with the guns, every year, every spring, you zero them in you used what they call sub-caliber ammunition. Thirty seven millimeter shells. It's placed in a device and goes deep in the barrel and they zero in the gun. And then when its time for firing for the record, you use 1,046 pound projectile. Instead of having high explosive inside the projectile, we put sand in there. You had to know exactly what the shell weighed, how much powder to put in. You had to know the wind velocity and density of the air. Many things were involved there. All these things combined (inaudible).

EH: You mentioned the other mediocre tasks involved.

AZ: They looked like these things that people have in basements. They're called lolly columns in basements to support your house. These things that I mentioned were outriggers. They were placed in the sand, large big planks were there I think 6 feet by 6 feet square. They had like a socket for the outrigger to go into. Each person that worked on these outriggers had a tool. You had to place this tool into a hole and turn it. Each time the gun was fired to tighten this outrigger into it and buried into the ground two thirds the way in the sand. Every time the gun would go off the outrigger man would have to go out and turn, a half a turn, a quarter of a turn or a full turn. They were in position to handle this outrigger. Four at each end of the gun and this had to be done each time. Everyone had a job to do. Twenty eight men. Five were up on the breech. Corporal was Chief of the breech and had four helpers. They loaded the gun, opened the breech, cleaned the gun, get the flames out. You could fire a round a minute, that's what we used to do. It sounds like not much but we had a lot of work to do and the data kept coming in. The Battery Commander gave the command to fire at a certain time. We had what they called a time interval bell. It went beep, beep, beep, beep. It kept doing this. The Battery Commander chose the time to fire. And he would fire at the third beep of that sequence. He would give the command "Fire," then the gun would be fired. He was in control. He was in the BC tower – Battery Commander tower and he had the two guns down there. Each Battery had four guns but we always fired two. We fired them a minute apart because E Battery also fired their guns in the same way.

EH: What were the remaining members of the crew, you said there were 28?

AZ: There were twenty eight. So many jobs. You had the gun mechanic, you had the people that pushed the ammunition from the ammunition car. The ammunition car was directly behind the gun carriage and these people, I forget how many there were on that detail, they pushed the shell like, on a block and tackle out over the gun position and it was lowered by the people on the breech onto this tray. Then they had another extension tray that went from that permanent tray to the breech. And the gun was at minus 5 degrees elevation because you loaded by gravity. You had to push that shell 1,046 pounds, into that gun. So they had this extension from the device where the shell was kept to the breech. The Commander of the breech would give the command "home ram" and five people would shove that thing in. Then you had the powder monkeys. The powder was in silk bags because silk burns rapidly. I think we used between 40 and 55 pounds of powder. It all depends on the range. You had the elevation data board operator. You had the elevation- the man who actually did the elevating of the gun. You had the azimuth data board operator. You had the man who controlled the azimuth on the gun. It was 28. I can't give you all the jobs, because I don't remember all of them, but each person had an assignment. You had the Gun Commander, was part of that crew. You had Chief of Breech was a Corporal. Gun Commander was a Sergeant. You had the man who pulled the lanyard -fired the gun, the Gunner, that's the man who fired the gun. When these guns were tested the first round to be fired back here, everyone clears the gun. The Battery Commander gives the command "Clear Gun". Everybody leaves. One person stays behind, that's the Gun Commander, the Sergeant. He puts that lanyard around his waist and he's the only one near that gun. When the Battery Commander gives the command to "Fire" he pulls that thing not knowing what's going to happen after that. He's the only one there. Everything's loaded and everybody leaves, they depart by the order of the Battery Commander.

TH: How far away is the crew?

AZ: Oh, I'd say, thirty or forty feet.

TH: Was there any protection like sand dunes?

AZ: No.

TH: (Just) stand off to the side.

AZ: Away from the gun. We'd all wanna see what's happening, you know. We had an experience later on in Delaware where two very, very serious things could have happened. Very, very serious but we didn't do it down there.

EH: Was that situation parallel to what could have happened here at Sandy Hook? What was it like?

AZ: Well, the gun itself, weighed about 85 tons and it was on this gun carriage which was on a railroad car. It was all steel. The car was steel, the railway car was steel. Four large bolts held down the gun to the gun carriage. Now when this gun goes off, it recoils,

it kicks back. There's a lot of pressure there. I think it had a recoil of about 32 inches, which is a lot. They had all kinds of hydraulic devices there to keep it from not kicking back too fast, you know. It's about 32 inches of recoil. Well, down in Delaware, the gun went off. I was on the ground. I forget what my job was, but I was on the ground and I saw something go up into the air other than caps and debris, you know, heavy things. But it's not my job to say anything up there. The gun went off and the Gun Commander shouted out to the Battery Commander "Sir, number one gun out of order, number one gun cease firing". The other gun – this is fast – you're firing every minute but its every thirty seconds because of those two guns, see. So, the other gun goes off and I hear the other Gun Commander of the other gun say, "Number two gun out of order." I was on number one gun. And what happened, this is unusual, the bolts, the four bolts, two in the front and two in the back of this gun – the two front bolts sheared off. So the gun went like this (describing how this happened). It reared back. Not a lot because if it went back more, it would have toppled over and killed everyone behind it. It's heavy. If that thing falls on you, you're finished. See, people look for this. Certain people up there look for these things to happen. Everybody looks for certain things every time the gun goes off. Whose ever job that was spotted that and told the Gun Commander. The Gun Commander called the Battery Commander to cease firing. The other gun, the same thing. People thought it was sabotage. There was a radio announcer by the name of Oak Carter years ago, he thought it was sabotage. He said that. The Army didn't like that. We had to stop and we had to go to Aberdeen to get parts. This was down in Delaware. See, if that wasn't noticed, the next round would have been the end. You had to look for these things.

EH: Did any major mistakes ever happen that you witnessed here at Fort Hancock.

AZ: I don't want to be critical of a certain gentleman who was here a few weeks back at the Reunion. He was right at what he said but it did not happen at Cape Henlopen in Delaware it happened here (Fort Hancock). It was an error on his part. It's a memory thing, you know, its many years ago. What happened, we had this Battery Commander, first one that I had and I don't know if I should use his name or not. I thought he was a terrific soldier an older gentleman. To me everyone was older 'cause I was eighteen. He was strict, stern, sharp and I thought that's the way it's supposed to be. Captain, he was the Battery Commander of C Battery. We went out to the gun position out here, maybe some day we can find that spot. I'd like to show you where these guns were. There was a large, I think stone or concrete thing there near the water. Someone was working with a bulldozer there. A civilian employee, doing something there with this HOLT bulldozer and the Battery Commander wanted to fire the gun sub-caliber ammunition, small ammunition. I mentioned before thirty seven millimeter in diameter into the gun. E Battery had x -caliber ammunition. Outside the gun. You people wouldn't understand that but I thought I'd mention it in case someone does. Well, the Battery Commander was very annoyed because that man would not go away and we wanted to fire this gun and we didn't want anyone around. Coast Guard is keeping boats and other vessels away. Fishing boats and whatever was there. They're keeping them away and your field is ready to fire, and this man is here. So, this Battery Commander was not drunk, like this guy said. He wasn't drunk and he got very annoyed. And the civilian, who the heck

is this guy, Army officer, I don't have to take his baloney. The gun was at zero elevation and he gives some orders to the crew and he says "Fire." I was there, this is no baloney. I remember this unusual thing. Boom! This thing went off and it bounced off that concrete thing whatever it was, and this guy took off with that bulldozer. He left. Sub-caliber ammunition. But this other fella, I don't want to criticize him, he said this happened Cape Henlopen and this Captain was no longer in the Army at Cape Henlopen 'cause that was a year later.

TH: The area that you're talking about was one of the questions I wanted to ask you. Where did you fire the guns on Sandy Hook? Where you used to go?

AZ: I'd like to find that spot. We used to have to go to where the guns were kept up here.

TH: North Beach.

AZ: Right. We'd get on the train. First we'd go down to the guns and put them in position. Like today we'd put them in position and tomorrow we'd fire those guns. So we'd walk over from the barracks down to the railroad and the train would take us down. We had these flat cars and we used to ride on those flat cars. They'd take us down there. There was a little roadway there and we'd get off the train and walk down the roadway and go to the left. Our guns were positioned there. E Battery's guns were positioned to the right of this little dirt road. And we were within a hundred yards of the water. We used to build a spur over there to fire these guns. I was Railway Sergeant, no rank, just a title. You know what that meant, pal, pick up those rails and those ties. (LOL) Everybody had to work. It was hard work. We had to put this in position and then put our guns on it.

TH: That spur line that you built was off the main line down there.

AZ: Right

TH: In the sand dune area...

AZ: Let me make a correction, Tom, rather than have anything wrong, that one there, was there already, that spur. We didn't have to rebuild that one. Down in Delaware where we had to lay down fifteen hundred feet of track, we had to take it all up. I want to correct that all the time.

TH: I'm still saying that that's the spur you could go down to and you could get off the main line using that spur.

AZ: Right. We never fired off the main line.

TH: All right, so you get on that spur, that's where you do your practice.

AZ: Right. And we also, took those guns, maybe you've seen pictures of them, near the Main Gate. Those same guns, we took them down there.

TH: Also behind the seawall.

AZ: Right, right it's narrow there. There's the road and the tracks. We fired our .155's from down there too, the hundred fifty five millimeters.

TH: Would that be tractor drawn, the .155's?

AZ: Tractor drawn and they had those cleats. They didn't have the rubber wheels.

TH: Special ...

AZ: The old days, yeah, those were French guns from WWI.

TH: Any reason for going down there?

AZ: I don't know. I guess they just wanted to change the location to let the range section practice. We never got into the range section. We're talking about the gun itself.

TH: Do you think that being behind the sea wall gave you some degree of protection?

AZ: I don't know. Those guns were quite high up. They were tall. They may not look it in a photograph but they were a big gun. Watervliet Arsenal, on the muzzle, Watervliet Arsenal, it said.

TH: I don't know if Elaine asked you earlier but there were several questions I wanted to ask you so we could have this interview. When you painted, what were the colors on the guns and also the flatcars?

AZ: This was a ritual every fall. I learned to be some painter. We used to paint Olive Drab, OD, (inaudible) we used to paint the guns, guns, carriage, the ammunition car, the tool car, the whole bit, everything is painted. (inaudible) You get up on these guns and the paint was on these cars and the Sergeants would push you like crazy. You can't let your hands stop for a minute. Pour that stuff out just slop it on, got it done real fast. But that guidon job, some Sergeants, "Didn't you paint that bottom?" So I just traced the other side with the yellow and the red. This is after you're done firing the guns after they're all cleaned up.

TH: Would the flatcars also be painted?

AZ: Yes, everything was OD, Olive drab. There was one part of the gun, the breech, that was polished metal. The muzzle and then the area where the gun recoiled I forget what they called it, like the frame of the gun, recoiled and came out, that was brass. I polished that and lubricated that. We had a Mess Sergeant that became a Gun

Commander once. (He) Told us to put cosmoline on it. You don't put cosmoline on brass. Cosmoline is like a grease. We just cleaned the brass. Everything else was painted OD, and no camouflage. They can easily do that overnight.

TH: With the paint, you had regular cans, would that be regular US Government paint?

AZ: The cans were OD with black numbers on them. No brands. We don't know who made that paint.

TH: Over all it was Olive Drab and in peace time you get that Army ... So the only other color would be the red and yellow.

AZ: Red for artillery and the yellow for the projectile.

TH: So, when the soldiers went down there to set up the guns up and fire, would you leave any debris behind that would be buried.

AZ: I don't think any of that was thrown away. You're finding ammo and all. When I was here there was very little chance of that happening. Everything was accounted for. At the end of the firing season... (inaudible)
We stopped moving those guns around in maybe, April. For our guns, May is for firing. Then we had other guns. May would be for our batteries. We had other guns to fire too. All through the summer we used to have West Point Cadets come here. National Guard and we used to fire them for them, mostly at Battery Granger. After our guns were fired. Then we'd go behind where the Visitors Center is now and fire those anti aircraft guns and the .155's. I gave them the .155's but they hurt your ears. Very sharp crack because long barrel guns give you a sharp crack when they go off and they hurt.

TH: Several years ago they fired .03 Springfield's out here and that had a sharp crack to it.

AZ: 'Cause it's a rifle.

TH: The .155 was probably magnified a hundred times.

AZ: The Springfield, I fired them a lot, I must have fired thousands of rounds. That was like a cap gun compared to ...

TH: One of the questions I wanted to ask you was how would you describe the .155 millimeter? Although the Army probably still has them, right?

AZ: I think they modernized them. They have rubber wheels on them now.

TH: What did an eight inch rifle sound like when that went off? What did an twelve inch mortar sound when that went off?

AZ: I'd be happy to try. I don't know if I can handle it, you know, vocabulary, but I'll try. Our guns, the short barrel guns, make a very loud roar but it's not a sharp crack. It's less damaging to your ear drums. Its loud vvrrruummmm. A roar. But the longer the barrel the worse it was. Maybe it wasn't as loud.

EH: This is side two of the tape of Al Zwiazek 1981 and if you can follow the continuation from side one, he was describing the sounds of the guns and their sizes and you were saying the longer the barrel the sharper the crack.

AZ: It seemed like everything ... A very, very sharp crack. The shorter barrels, it seemed like the sound lasted a longer period of time. It was loud but it came at you gradually instead of suddenly. I would like to mention one more thing. We would see the gun go off before we heard anything. We would see the shot a few seconds before you heard the gun because the sound seems to travel slower than. You'd see the gun go off then vvrrrrrmmmm.

TH: Then you'd see the smoke?

AZ: You'd see the smoke too and the flames – red and orange flames.

TH: Actual flames would shoot out?

AZ: You couldn't see them they'd be out there maybe seventy miles away and they would pin point it.

TH: How about the color of the smoke, what color would that be?

AZ: Very dark gray or black. Really dark smoke, not white.

EH: Did it smell?

AZ: You'd smell that firing all together you know because you have intense heat. Sometimes you'd even smell hair burning on twelve inch mortars because you'd get like a hair burn the flames would come shooting back. The guys with the longer guns didn't have that problem because the flames were way up there.

EH: Did you hair get singed?

AZ: Yeah. Let's say you're on the elevation gear or the azimuth gear you're very close to the muzzle of that gun, like in the middle of the gun and when that comes back, you know. You say you're wearing those fatigue hats, yeah, but those fatigue hats fly around. You put those lousy hats that they used to wear the compression would blow them off.

TH: The shock wave when the shell meets the gun barrel.

AZ: Sure its displacing all that air, pushing all that air, it's really like a vacuum. I don't know the technical aspects of it but its just pushing that air away.

EH: It's a tremendous force.

TH: Asks a question (muffled)

AZ: I'll tell you about this guy I should tell you his name. This guy was the biggest man in the Army, he was a bully. This hasn't got anything to do with the guns, I'm not going to dwell on that. He was a big guy, always lifted weights. He lifted long pieces of rail to show off, but not too much up here. The scale that we used to weigh the shells, remember I mentioned earlier, was heavy. It used to take three or four men to carry that scale. They used to bring it down by truck instead of hauling it down to the train and bringing it down by train. Then we would have to take it off and walk through the sand with this heavy weight, to the gun position, to where the shells were weighed. So we used to tell this guy that he wasn't so strong and all that. We'd talk him into carrying the scale. It worked every time. (LOL) He'd show us how strong he was. He'd lug that scale all by himself walking to the thing. And I think we saw more than footprints out there because when he walked he was lugging, sweating blood. He was up on the elevation. You need a big strong guy up on that elevation, everything was manual. He was up there. And then all of a sudden he jumped up off the gun and he ran through the woods, he ran away. Some people said that maybe he had to hurry up to the bathroom or something. He didn't come back. He went to the hospital and told them he thinks he has appendicitis and he's sick and all of that and they examined him. The Battery Commander was upset over this. He was a Private First Class, which was hard to get. He got this because he used to shine his shoes all the time, he looked good. He looked impressive, big soldier, very shallow upstairs. So this guy got sent back and the next day he was a Private. And boy did we kid him about running away from the guns. It could scare you if you think about it. It makes all this noise and everything goes up into the air. You know they tell you to stand on your toes with your mouth open and all of this. Everything goes out the window when that gun goes off. It's only a momentary thing but its going to happen and again and again (LOL), he couldn't handle this thing. They say, peace time, well this is a dangerous sport.

TH: A lot of our visitors to the gun batteries showing what these guns were like and how they sounded it's was hard to believe soldiers would be standing near these huge guns when they were fired and also no protection.

AZ: Falls out. They issued us cotton, it falls out. First round the cotton fell out. A lot of guys had what they called Artillery (inaudible) We had one Gun Commander talking about these mistakes he was a little hard of hearing, nice guy, this guy Farrell that I was with complained about it.

EH: I think you mentioned him before, Gary Farrell.

AZ: Yeah, but the Gun Commander was hard of hearing because he was on these guns for years. Coast Artillery. So the Battery Commander saw something out on the horizon that was coming into our field of fire so he said, "suspend firing." This guy turns around and says "Corporal Gruner, he's in charge of quarters and he heard the word "fire" and heard the TI bell he was standing right by it, and gives the command "Fire" and the guy said "suspend firing" but he thought he said something about Corporal Gruner. Corporal Gruner was in charge of quarters, in other words he was not there that day. That was a mistake. You don't change any routine. The old man said, "suspend firing". He didn't hear him so he just continued on with his job. (LOL)

EH: What did everyone else do?

AZ: The gun was fired, the gun went off. Nothing happened but the gun should not have been fired. Once the Battery Commander said cease firing that's it. But he was hard of hearing. I knew one fella who was on the .155, he had a little bit of blood trickling out of his ears. I worked on them too but I was lucky.

EH: Before you mentioned to me that the mortars being the only twelve inch rifle bores. Could you talk a little bit more about that and what did it mean? Your mention of it was very brief but makes a very important point.

AZ: Okay, it's a very important function. The projectile has two parts that cuts the bore inside the gun. One is called the (?) that's smooth. That's the widest part on the shell. And the other part on the back of the shell is the rotating band. That's made of copper and that's attached to the steel shell. Now this (?) lays right up against the lines and grooves in this rifle inside. The back part with the rotating band is snug against these lines and grooves. When that gun is fired, that copper is soft and grooves are made in it by the lines of the gun, the rifling and that makes that shell spin. It was made to spin to avoid tumbling in flight and be more accurate. It would hit the target more accurately because if it tumbled around who knows where it would wind up. That's the reason for these guns having this rifling found in guns and pistols. The mortars, as most people know, have a smooth bore because they fire a short round of ammunition close up in short range and didn't have to be that accurate. This gun was a long range gun with a high trajectory so it had to have accuracy. The mortars that they have now like in the infantry, they don't fire short distances not miles.

EH: What are the range that you're talking about?

AZ: Our guns? The maximum range was eight and a half miles. You have to remember this was shooting up into the air.

TH: The twelve inch mortars?

AZ: The twelve inch mortars. You had to fire maybe about 65 degrees, forty five, fifty, sixty, sixty five. The other battery next to us had a fifteen mile range but they fired flat trajectory. But this had to climb. Eight and a half miles was quite a range.

EH: Were these called the “cement mixers”, commonly, that’s what I heard.

AZ: I wouldn’t be surprised if some people didn’t call them that.

TH: We talked to several veterans from the 52nd Coast Artillery.

EH: And the common name, I was told, was the “cement mixer”, like a short barrel.

AZ: Like a cement mixer would be. The appearance is that way but I don’t ever remember calling it that. But I’m sure that if a gun was called that, that would be the gun. Because that’s the one that resembles a cement mixer than any other gun.

EH: You said that the projectile had a blunt nose, is that correct?

AZ: Yes. The ones we fired had a blunt nose about two or three inches in diameter. They were coming to a point but flat on the end. If you fire a pointed projectile to the back of a ship, it could bounce off the deck. It could ricochet right off. (inaudible) within two or three inches of the end it was flattened out...They didn’t want that shell to glance off. If it didn’t hit directly it went straight down. There’s a chance that it might hit at an angle and explode below decks.

TH: Would there be a fuse in the base of the shell?

AZ: We didn’t set any fuses but there was a concussion. I don’t know what did that. I don’t know how that explosion would occur. We didn’t have fuses on those. We had fuses on the anti-aircraft.

TH: It’s just amazing how a shell would go through the whole armor of a battleship. I was always under the impression that the fuse at the base of the shell, would somehow, through concussion, ah....

AZ: I was thinking that way too but I don’t know how it works. But you have the information. I gave you a couple of

TH: Manuals.

AZ: That’s in there.

TH: Okay, about the fuses.

AZ: You know it’s about 44 years ago. But unfortunately, I do remember, things that interest me I do remember. Something I don’t know, I’m just going to tell you outright.

EH: It’s amazing what you remember.

TH: I'd like to know the tactics you used. You were part of a gun crew and you mentioned all these soldiers operating the gun. And what would happen, in the event that there would be an invasion and you're working the big gun, what about protecting your gun crew? It was never thought of in the Coast Artillery?

AZ: I don't know. No, it wasn't in my outfit, the lowly enlisted man. Somebody up front maybe they had it figured out. I never gave it a thought during peace time. War time I thought about it a lot because I was in some hot places but not while I was here. All I worried about is this gun blowing up. As far as protection is concerned, I don't know. Whether we were protected by our airplanes, I don't know.

TH: You started to mention that the season when they started firing guns could be as early as April?

AZ: I would fire maybe in May. But we'd start getting guns ready earlier than that.

TH: You mentioned in fall you'd do the maintenance on the guns – winterize them. Would that be about this time of year or would that be in November?

AZ: That would maybe be in about October because in September we were still firing guns. The ROTC, CMTC would be coming here all summer long and we're firing these guns like crazy. They weren't firing these guns.

TH: They were observing.

AZ: Fortunately we kept these guns in good shape. There wasn't that much rust or anything. We didn't allow things to get out of hand like that. Our stuff stayed in shape. We covered those guns, like the muzzle and covered the breech.

EH: With canvas?

AZ: Yeah. Anything that was not brass or painted metal had Cosmoline on it. Like all over the breech was covered with Cosmoline.

TH: This is leading to my next question: you had those blue denim fatigues on. How'd you ever get them clean? You had to wash them at some point, right?

AZ: We had a laundry that came here from Staten Island.

TH: You had all this paint and grease and grime...

AZ: I don't know how, I'm speaking for myself, I managed to keep this stuff looking so good because when I paint at home I put on a pair of slacks and forget about it. In no time its all polka dotted but here, I think most of the guy were careful, you got Cosmoline on you and dirt and all that but this laundry from Staten Island used to do our wash. We'd send them out (inaudible) They look kind of thread bear but not dirty. That must

have been a good laundry. They must have been paying off the Colonel. Like if you got paint on it they wouldn't get that off.

TH: The reason I asked you, this is going back to your other question if you left any trash behind after firing the gun would you just bury it because at Battery Potter we found a long cartridge perforated with long holes going up and down the cartridge and we don't know where it came from. We were wondering after you fired it one of the soldiers might throw it away but being brass it could be used again.

AZ: I doubt if these were (inaudible) I'm not positive the primer used to come in a box. Like when I was a kid they used to have chalk that came in wooden boxes with insulation in there like sawdust. (inaudible)

Let me tell you a short story about the primer. The chief of the breech needed a primer so he shouts to the guy in the ammunition car, "Hey I need a primer." He threw it out, you don't throw primer, you hand it to the guy. He was one of those hobos I told you about. He was discharged later on.

TH: What was the general feeling, I mean, military service was, you know, you have to do it. That was an awful lot of work, setting up those huge weapons, firing, and then reloading. What was the feeling among the crew? Did some guys love it and some guys dread it or it was just a job?

AZ: Most of the guys took it very seriously and were proud. When we did good we wore an E on our sleeve.

TH: Excellence?

AZ: Excellence in firing. So many rounds you got out of direct hits. A certain percentage had to be direct hits. In 1939, a visiting Colonel was here. We lost our E in '38 because we had trouble down in Delaware. In '37 we had an E and they had E's before that too. Thirty nine we got our E back and you had to take it off your sleeve. In thirty nine we put it back on. The olive drab and the red E and we were proud of that. I think most of the fellas were proud of it. We were young and we didn't know what these things were.

TH: Between Battery C and Battery E were they rivals against each other.

AZ: Rivals, yeah, sure. You lose an E and you come on guard with somebody from E Battery hey, you guys lost E, boy they give you a hard time. The gun crews were quiet. If they went out and fired well, they were happy with that. (inaudible) I didn't go boozing it up or anything because I was too young anyway (inaudible)

TH: It was probably pretty hot going when you were out firing during the summer months.

AZ: It was a beautiful little gun out behind that Visitors Center. Eight inch barrel. We were loading that gun every two seconds. I don't know how many rounds a minute we were firing. And if the gun is like this and a shell fell out and somebody had to pick that shell up its boiling hot, hot and you had to get it out of the way. Some guy had that job. And the fuses had to be cut. They had different commands like "fuse cut, this, that, load, boom, bang" you had no time to look up to see where the first one went you know.

TH: You were too busy operating the

AZ: Yeah, everybody is working. I saw a lady who was the widow of a fella who became a Major, Provost Marshal in Munich, Germany. Nice guy. He lived here in Staten Island. I'll tell you one more thing about that gun. A target, you know these sleeves they have?

TH: From an airplane, yeah.

AZ: The plane came from Mitchel Field on Long Island. One day the Range Section made a mistake just like they, I forgot to tell you about this, we were out there on the ocean and they tracked us instead of the target. They forgot to make the correction. The target is like a thousand yards behind. Let me tell you about the boat first. We were out on the L-40, it's a small boat 40 feet long. A Corporal was the Captain of it. Now they put a Colonel on it to Captain. So we're out there and they're firing sub-caliber, a shell about that long. All of a sudden, on both sides of us, splashes in the water, you know. These are not porpoises coming up. (LOL) So this Corporal tells this telegraph operator, a tall dark haired guy. He told him "they're firing at us".

EH: They're getting nervous.

AZ: See they don't know. They're not paying attention, they're working. They're working like crazy. It's the Range section in a boxcar somewhere away from everything and they send in the data. So that same darn Range section did it with our anti aircraft guns. We're out there firing behind the Visitors Center where the Coast Guard center, for anybody who doesn't know. We're firing away, firing away and finally the plane takes off, he leaves. So, cease firing. So what happened was we were shooting at the plane instead of the target. They burst all around us and the guy figured the heck with this noise. He radioed somebody and says he's leaving. So he swung around and dumped the target on the Parade Ground at Mitchel Field (LOL). You know, mistakes are made.

EH: That's what I was asking before, you know, humorous mistakes, those weren't dolphins around you, huh?

AZ: It happens. You don't think about these things. This was true. That's no baloney, these are true stories. We were up here on the land. We were here with those anti-aircraft guns. It's that poor pilot up there that was....Over there was the crew of the boat, two or three of us and the target people, about 6 people. Tiny little boat out there and if

those things hit, they could make some hole in that boat. Its not going to explode, theres no explosive ammunition in it, but it would have sunk the boat.

EH: Could we end this tape with the expression you told me before about pancakes and sausages? The common phrase?

AZ: Well, we had nicknames for the different food we used to have here, the rations. In these big guns you had a breech and a breech block. A breech block was an assembly of parts and one of those parts was some kind of a fiber pad.

TH: Yeah.

AZ: And it was called a gas check pad. So we named pancakes gas-check pads. And since the primers looked a little bit like sausages we had for breakfast, we called them gas-check pads and primers when we had pancakes and sausages. And on Sunday we used to have "sea gull". We never figured the Mess Sergeant went out and bought chickens. We figured he went out and slaughtered a few sea gulls. And SOS everybody knows that. I'll tell you that off the tape. SOS, it was chipped beef on toast.

TH: (LOL) You took the words right out of my mouth.

AZ: I liked it.

EH: Gas check pads and primers, that's a good one. I found that pretty witty.

AZ: I think that was only used in the Coast Artillery but not infantry.

TH: They would never understand.

AZ: Gas check pads and primers, a little girl said spell it for me. I said its pancakes and sausages, it's just a nickname. (LOL)

END OF INTERVIEW