

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Interview with
Vincenzo J. Alfano
7th Coast Artillery
1941
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS
July 19, 2005
Transcribed by Mary Rasa 2011



Tent City at Fort Hancock where Mr. Alfano lived.



Temporary Barracks at Fort Hancock to house the influx of soldiers during World War II.
Photos courtesy of NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

MR: Today is Monday July 19th 2004. My name is Mary Rasa, Sandy Hook Museum Curator. I am here with Vincenzo Alfano and we are going to do an oral history interview. First question, I would like you to state your full name and date of birth.

VA: Full name is Vincenzo J. Alfano. Date of birth 8-28-18.

MR: And where were you born?

VA: I was born in Sicily.

MR: What town?

VA: In a town near Palermo, it's the province of Agrigento; (inaudible) is the town.

MR: Okay.

VA: And I came to this country when I was three years old.

MR: Where did you go?

VA: Where did we go? We went to my father's sister in Bolero, Ohio. And we were there for a short time and we moved to Trenton, New Jersey. And there I was raised, (in) Trenton.

MR: Do you remember the name of the boat that you came over on or did they tell you?

VA: (laughter) Well, that was a long time ago. I was three years old. I don't remember the name of the boat.

MR: Did you go through Ellis Island or...?

VA: Yes. I went through Ellis Island. My mother and I came together and my father came about a year before.

MR: Were you at Ellis Island for long or was it very brief.

VA: Well, I don't remember that.

MR: (laughter) Okay.

VA: Probably brief because of my father.

MR: He was already here. How did you get involved with the Army?

VA: June 7, 1940 I became an American citizen because I, my mother became an American citizen. And I just believed that I wanted to protect myself and it was the right thing and get it, the papers. So, you had to wait. First papers took, I had the first papers and the second papers took six years to get. So, in June 7, 1940, I got the papers and when I got home to my mother I got a letter saying that I had been selected for a draftee. So, somewhere around November or so I got a call to go into service and to prepare to go into service. And I went in sometime in December and from there I went to Fort Dix.

MR: For Basic Training?

VA: For Basic Training. After Fort Dix we went to Fort Hancock. It's like we got here in January.

MR: Did you come with a number of soldiers?

VA: There was 185 (men) and they split the line to 85.

MR: Where did the other guys go?

VA: They sent them home.

MR: Oh.

VA: I was the one that went home and I was called back two weeks later and I went to Fort Dix (means Hancock) and we got here and we had no barracks. We had tents for about six months. We were here, maybe a little, seven, eight months in barracks and we had your latrine was outside because the barracks were being built and then the latrines and showers and everything were installed later. So, I stayed here I don't think it was a year and I was, I learned everything here into Basic Training and they finally sent me to school at Fort Wadsworth to be a radio operator. I finished that course and I was ready to be, figured I was going to be shipped someplace else because they were, they were breaking the outfit that sent me to Fort Hancock, I mean Fort Monmouth. And then I finished the course there and sent me to Fort Jackson (South Carolina). They told I'm not supposed to be there and sent me back to Fort Monmouth again to take high speed (a class). Finished that course. I'm on my way. I don't know whether it was South or North Carolina. I don't know where I was supposed to go. I was on my way. I can't remember where that was and got called back. They said, "You are not supposed to be here either." (I) had to go back to school. Got back to Fort Monmouth and passed the high test. Sent me to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri and I was only there about seven months and we were shipped to England.

MR: And what year was it by the time you went to England? It must have been '42 or '43?

VA: About '43. And we landed in Shrewsbury, England. We spent Christmas, first Christmas out to sea. It was very, very cold in England. From England we went to all

throughout Germany, France, Belgium. We were stuck there. Being a radio operator they transferred me from one outfit to another. I was attached to the 20th. What did they call it? I don't know. I can't remember that, but I was attached to the 101st Airborne Infantry, which was parachute jumpers. And I was with 3rd Army. I was out of, not out of 3rd Army, but different branches of the Army because of my skills as an operator, both voice and Morse code.

MR: So, when you were a radio operator there were you in the field with the troops?

VA: I was in with the field with the troops in battle with the troops or stuck in battle with the snow, Belgium. Patton was the leader at that time which helped one of the other major officers that was stuck and I was with Patton's group all of that time.

MR: What other major campaigns were you in?

VA: Major campaigns in Germany. Throughout Germany, through the Black Forest.

MR: Were you at the Battle of the Bulge?

VA: Yes. We got stuck there and I think then when it was over, that's when the War was over. I think the War ended after we got out of there and it's so hard to remember, but I am trying to remember how long it was. I can't remember.

MR: Did you make it to Berlin?

VA: I didn't go to Berlin. I went to, I was going to Berlin but, I was in so many towns they were too numerous to mention. But I found that the German people were so glad to see us. And they were good people. A lot, a lot of good people there. And then I went to France. I was one of the first to go home on a ship. And that happened to be close to Christmas time because I was out. I was out sometime in December.

MR: That was 1945?

VA: 1945.

MR: Okay. I want to ask you a few more questions about your time at Fort Hancock. So, your starting and ending date here, basically you were here from the summer of 1941?

VA: Yes, we got in Fort Hancock somewhere in January and I stayed here, I think I stayed here close to eight months.

MR: Okay. So you probably came in January and left in August, September 1941. While you were here you were attached with the 7th Coast Artillery?

VA: Battery C of the 7th Coast Artillery.

MR: Okay and what was your job while you were in the area?

VA: Well, being an A alphabetically, I was in the kitchen, in guard duty in the honey hole, in guard duty, in the kitchen. I think I was more in the kitchen than I was, that's where I loved to learn to cook.

MR: Well, that's good. (laughter) And they, so you were in tent city.

VA: But it wasn't, about six month, seven months tops, they made the barracks.

MR: It must have been pretty cold in January.

VA: Oh please, it was so cold out there. (laughter)

MR: How many soldiers were in a tent?

VA: I have no idea, but I will say about 25.

MR: In one tent?

VA: One tent.

MR: Wow. Were other units in...?

VA: Yes. There were others.

MR: In the tent city.

VA: Let's see, we had Battery A, Battery B, Battery C, Battery D. I don't remember any E.

MR: Did you ever get to go out on the minelayer?

VA: No. I was, I was, I went out on a boat and they were going to shoot the targets, okay. We were for some reason, to remember what I did was nothing but be on the boat and they would pull in, I guess, they were pulling targets. What we were doing on the boat, like a rowboat, I have no idea. Only thing is I got a severe burn from the mirror of the ocean on me.

MR: Oh.

VA: Burn, a severe burn. They were pulling targets and they were shooting the Coast Artillery.

MR: The guns.

VA: For practice, shooting you know the targets.

MR: Did you ever get to go visit the guns or work on the guns or...?

VA: No. I never worked on the guns because they needed somebody to work in the clerk's office. To be a clerk, I was in the Adjutant General's office working as a clerk.

MR: So, do you know which did you work in one of the brick buildings or did you...?

VA: The brick buildings.

MR: Okay. Probably the Post Headquarters building?

VA: I have no idea to try and remember that.

MR: Okay.

VA: But the officers lived in the brick buildings. When I first went in I had to become an orderly for a short time. Clean the house.

MR: For an officer?

VA: Yeah. For an officer.

MR: Did you get paid to do that?

VA: I was getting nothing from that but I was getting thirty dollars a month of which twenty one dollars went to my mother. Two dollars for insurance and seven dollars lasted me a month.

MR: That was pretty good.

VA: That was my pay.

MR: Was payday the first of the month or the end of the month?

VA: First of the month.

MR: Did your experience in the military aid you in future work?

VA: Age me?

MR: Aid you, help you out.

VA: Yeah. I made me to understand how to work with people and how to take care of yourself. Be independent.

MR: Where did you, what did you do after you got out of the service?

VA: Well, when I got out of the service, I loved music and wanted to go back to it, but I had a little girl then and that was my daughter here and it was hard. I took a test. I didn't want to be a mailman. I didn't want to do it. I messed it up. My brother in law told me, "Try again." I passed it and I never got the job.

MR: Really.

VA: He said, "I'm on the list to wait." I said to the mailman after, the postmaster I said, "Mr. Murray its 25 (inaudible) is that job still open?" Yes. I did tell him that. "Yeah. You are still on the list."

MR: Where did you live after the service?

VA: I lived first when I came out of the Army I lived on 28 Second Avenue in Long Branch and I did everything to keep the family together and learned to work hard and got what I got.

MR: While you were here did they ever have any enemy threats or anything happen?

VA: No.

MR: Did you ever work with any civilians while you were here?

VA: No. I didn't work with them but they worked here. Civilians were road workers, barracks builders, electricians, plumbers were all. I had nothing to do with them.

MR: Okay. Was your mess hall close by to your tents?

VA: Who?

MR: Mess hall where you ate?

VA: Yes.

MR: Did you attend social activities? Go to the theater, dances?

VA: We used to go to dances. They used to take us on a covered truck to the Elks in Long Branch and then maybe another time the girls would come down to the PX when it was built. Not the PX the...

MR: Gym?

VA: No.

MR: Service Club?

VA: Somewhere social club.

MR: Service Club.

VA: Service Club, yeah.

MR: Okay.

VA: The girls would come here from all over, Highlands, Atlantic Highlands, Long Branch, Red Bank.

MR: Did you see any sporting events while you were here?

VA: Sporting events?

MR: Yes.

VA: No.

MR: Did you attend religious services here?

VA: No.

MR: Did you take trips to New York at all?

VA: After I met my wife we did go to New York.

MR: Did you meet here while you were here?

VA: I met her while I was at Fort Hancock, yes.

MR: Did you meet her at a dance?

VA: I met her at the USO in Long Branch.

MR: Oh.

VA: Which was not the USO, but it was the Elks, the Long Branch Elks.

MR: Okay. So did you find your experience here fun or boring or...?

VA: Well, because I was with the National Guard men which didn't like the draftees it was boring to be with them. But once the War broke out it was a different story.

MR: Okay.

VA: When the Adjutant General needed a, my first sergeant said they needed one and said, "Can you type?" And then to get out of the kitchen and get out of guard duty, "Yes, I can type." (laughter) So, I became a Sergeant Bilco. Whenever guys wanted anything I remember the guys that gave me the dirty guard duty and did the work and went all over them.

MR: What stands out in your mind about Fort Hancock?

VA: That's nothing that I can think of.

MR: Okay. Did anything especially humorous occur while you were here?

VA: No humorous, but there was a fishery where you cross over to Highlands and on a hot, hot day the smell would come over and the mosquitoes were terrible. The smell and the mosquitoes.

MR: Anything else that you would like to say about your time here?

VA: Well, it was a good experience to be here. It was. I learned that I met a lot of good fellas here and a lot of nice fellas that became officers. And everybody after I went to Missouri I never saw hide nor hare of any of these fellas except one or two in Trenton, New Jersey and then after they passed away.

MR: Okay. Well, thank you very much for your time.

VA: Okay

END OF INTERVIEW