

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS  
An Oral History Interview with Martin Becker  
7<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery, Headquarter Company, 1942  
Interviewed by Elaine Harmon, NPS,  
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Transcribed by Jo Anne Carlson, NPS Volunteer, 2007



Mining Casemate at Fort Hancock where Mr. Becker worked.



7<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery in World War II laying underwater mines.  
Photos courtesy of NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ( )

Elaine Harmon: We've had the good fortune to have a gentleman come in by the name of Martin Becker of 16 River Lawn Drive, Fair Haven, New Jersey, who had enlisted here in January 1942 and stayed until October 1942 with Headquarters 7<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery and from here he went to Point Pleasant, West Virginia. Just a few moments ago he was telling us of his initial introduction to Uncle Sam at Fort Monmouth. Would you be kind enough to review that for the recording here?

Martin Becker: The Draft Board suggested that either I enlist or they would draft me. If they would draft me I would go to Camp Dix and then from Camp Dix I would probably might go out of the country. I was a newly married man at the time and I didn't want to go out of the country at the moment, so I tried to enlist. I went to Fort Monmouth and inquired about enlisting and the only opening they had for me was in the Medical Department and I said, "What were the duties? What would my duties be?" They informed me, "Well at the beginning you would mostly be carrying bed pans." I literally would start at the bottom. I said, "Let me go home and think about that for awhile." So I went home and I thought I'd try to enlist at Fort Hancock. Went down to Fort Hancock and went to the Sergeant Major of the Coast Artillery and I said to him that I would like to enlist and I told him of my background and he said, "Can you type?" I said, "I can type a little bit." And he said, "All right, I think we could use you in Headquarters Battery here." So, he swore me in and after he swore me in he said, "You go down and get your uniform from the Supply Depot." I said, "Let me go home and tell my Wife that I have joined the Army". He said, "You're in the Army now." At any rate, I said, "Look, I've got to go home and tell my Wife. I didn't come down here to join the Army." But he said, "All right" and he gave me a pass to get out.

EH: For that day.

MB: For that day, and come back the next morning. This was without a uniform. I went home and told my Wife and the next morning she drove me down to the Gate. The MP's (military police) at the Gate saw me and saw my pass and asked, "Well, where's the uniform?" In those days, if you were in the Army, you had to wear a uniform all the time. No such thing as wearing "civvies." So, I said, "I didn't get my uniform yet." Well, there was a lot of explaining to do and phone calling. Finally they straightened the matter out and I was finally able to get to the Headquarters Battery of the 7<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery.

EH: Which was where?

MB: Oh, some place over here. I forget exactly where it is. Right around here someplace. At any rate I went and got my uniform.

EH: From the Quartermasters?

MB: There was a Supply Department around here someplace. Yeah, Quartermasters. Got a uniform and they gave me a job. My job mainly consisted of working in the Mining Casemate right near the Coast Guard Station. Mining Casemate was a building, sort of bombproof, which they had the switches to the mines of New York Harbor. I did a lot of typing and a lot of checking up on the switches. This was mainly my job. Sometimes I worked from midnight to eight in the morning and sometimes I worked other shifts. This is what I did and beside that I took a clerk's course. I was not very happy here because most of the men in my company were Regular Army men and they didn't like that I was a draftee. They all had ten or fifteen years in the Army and they didn't like the new draftee, so they gave me the dirty jobs; like polishing fire extinguishers, cleaning latrines, doing KP (kitchen police). I didn't like any of that. So, I made application for Officer's Candidate School. Before my application was accepted, they knew that I didn't like it here, they transferred me. I became a cadre to a Mine Planter which was going down to Trinidad. In October 1942, they shipped me out to Point Pleasant, West Virginia. While I was here, beside working at the Mining Casemate, I worked on some boats which towed targets. We would tow target for some of these shore batteries like (Battery) Urmston and (Battery) Morris down here and this was my job. Oh, we used to walk the Parade Ground. We had to appear on the Parade Grounds every Saturday morning we had a parade. As I look back on it, it was rather enjoyable.

EH: Where were you living? You didn't live here.

MB: On Fort Hancock? In one of these temporary buildings that has since been knocked down, one of these wooden structures. I didn't live in one of these brick structures but I lived in one of the wooden structures.

EH: Down near the South end?

MB: Yeah, not far from the Coast Guard Station. And I worked in that Mining Casemate which is not far from the Coast Guard Station.

EH: Right. Do you remember what it looked like? What the interior....

MB: Of the building that I lived in? Oh yeah. It was a long two story structure it had a center hall. Typical Army barracks building painted ivory, I guess it was, and it had a stove at one end. It was either too cold or too hot. And we ate in a dining hall. It was rather enjoyable while we were here.

EH: Where was the dining hall at the time here?

MB: One of these brick buildings had the dining hall in it. Or else in the back here. One of these places had the dining hall in it. The worst part of my whole tour of duty here was when I worked the midnight to eight shift. I enlisted in January and it was very cold and windy at that time. When I had the midnight to eight shift, I had to walk about a

quarter of a mile from the barracks to where I worked in the Mining Casemate and it was very, very cold and windy. But we managed. That's about all I can tell you.

EH: What was the Mining Casemate building like? What was that in appearance?

MB: Well, it had a lot of switches that we constantly tested. It had a typewriter and a desk. The unusual feature was that it was covered by about fifteen feet of earth. It was supposed to be bombproof. And to get in there, it was like this ultra-secret place, because it had all these switches to the mines in New York Harbor. They were constantly testing those switches. At that time they had hundreds of mines in New York Harbor. None of them were ever set off.

EH: Was the earth work structure like a mound or was it set into a hill?

MB: Yes. It's still here. From the ocean side it looks like just a hill. From the river side it had like a garage door to get on the inside of it. It's around here someplace. It was called the Mining Casemate. I don't know what they call it now.

EH: Yeah, it's still the same name.

MB: Mining Casemate, yeah?

EH: The interior, the overall appearance was switches.

MB: Mainly switches.

EH: That was divided up into rooms?

MB: One big, big room maybe three or four times the size of this room. That's about it.

EH: How many people worked in here?

MB: Oh, maybe about five to seven people.

EH: And was there one officer in charge of it?

MB: Oh, there was a lot of officers in charge.

EH: Do you remember their names?

MB: No. But the man in charge of the Post was General Gage at that time. I remember that.

EH: Phillip S. Gage. Yes, we know of him pretty well.

MB: He was the Commander of the Post. I don't remember any of my superior officers. I don't remember them.

EH: Did you have any connection with this Mine Cable Testing building, this building that has these huge open pits that look like swimming pools?

MB: No.

EH: Had you ever been in there? It's a very interesting building. I've was recently been in there.

MB: No.

EH: What was your typical day? Do you recall what a sort of standard day was like?

MB: Working in this Casemate. Just sitting at the typewriter and constantly typing and checking the switches. Switch Number 1 has been checked and it's ready to fire. And Switch Number 2 reported that something was wrong with it and somebody had to do the tracing or we'd pass the information on to somebody else. I think they had what they called dummy loads where they could check the switches without firing any of them. And we were constantly checking them. That's about all I can tell you. In the meantime, they had me polishing fire extinguishers and cleaning the latrine. I was low man on the totem pole there. That's why I didn't like it there because I was getting \$21 dollars a month for four months.

EH: Wow. In those days was Fort Hancock considered a great place to go to? What was the impression?

MB: It was a very strategic location. It was one of four locations controlling, protecting New York Harbor. There was Fort Wadsworth, Governors Island, I think. There was Fort Tilden and Fort Hamilton. All these Forts, their main purpose was protecting New York Harbor. This was a very strategic location. And in as much that it was a Fort the enlisted men could only get out one of eight days. You had to stay on the Post all the time. I could only get a twenty-four hour pass once every eight days. It was a very important Post in those days. And you were always fearful of the enemy approaching the shores. There were alerts, but I don't ever remember anybody approaching the shore.

EH: Did you have a separate insignia for the Mining Casemate Division?

MB: Just the 7<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery had an insignia.

EH: Cross cannons?

MB: Yeah.

EH: With a number 7 maybe below it?

MB: That's right. There was another Company that I remember on this Fort, the 245<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery. That was a really big company. Ours was really a small one, the 7<sup>th</sup> Coast. The 245<sup>th</sup> was quite large. Those are the only two that I can remember.

EH: Were there any men who enlisted with you or that were your comrades that you can remember off hand? Names of people....

MB: I remember his last name was Solomon. He was older than I. The only thing that I remember about him is that he was about forty years old and he wasn't married and his eyesight was very bad and he often wondered why they took him in the Army because of his eyesight. But apparently they needed somebody and he didn't have a good excuse for staying out of the Army. So he was drafted.

EH: Any social life that went on here like the theater?

MB: The social life consisted mainly of the Service Club where I used to go every night where they had 5 cent beers.

EH: Where was that located at the time?

MB: Right around the Hospital. Is the Hospital right around where the road divides?

EH: Right.

MB: And the theater was in existence and the church was existence at that time, but I used to go to the movie house almost about every night. That's about all the social activities they had out here was the movies and the Service Club. They had dances at the Service Club on weekends. But mostly I went to the movies. Right around here was the movie house.

EH: Right, Post Theater. Was it a different movie every night?

MB: Yeah I think so. A different movie every night.

EH: That's what I was told. Do you remember what you paid?

MB: Oh, I don't know, no more than about a quarter. Beer was about a nickel in those days. I had a bicycle at the time and I used to go from here to meet my Wife. She couldn't get on the Post there for awhile. So I used to go to the Gate and they would let her come about ten or fifteen feet inside the Gate at Fort Hancock. Way down there by the Highlands Bridge over there. So I'd take this bike, this by the way is seven miles long, and go down and meet my Wife down at that point.

EH: Yes. When did she finally join you? Oh, she never did join me very much. I was transferred to Point Pleasant, West Virginia when I became a clerk on a Mine Planter

because the 7<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery was developing Mine Planting. I was supposed to go on this Mine Planter. Point Pleasant is on the Ohio River and we were going to outfit this new boat. I was part of the cadre of this new boat and I was supposed to be the company clerk of the boat. We were going to go down the Ohio to the Mississippi and go on down to Trinidad to mine the Trinidad Harbor. But I had made Officers Candidate School and I never did get to get on that boat. I was at Point Pleasant and we were getting outfitted and my papers came through for Officers Candidates, so I went to the Quartermaster Officers Candidates instead. So, I never did go any further than that. I spent the rest of my career in the Quartermaster Corps which at the time I was in the transportation part of it. I was involved in convoy duty, truck convoy duty. I went to Quartermaster and that was what I was really trained to do, operate convoys.

EH: Where were you stationed at that time?

MB: Camp Lee, Virginia. I went to Quartermaster school there, Camp Pickett, then I went to Fort Meade. Then I went to Ordnance Depot and studied engines, Normoyle Ordnance Depot in Texas. That's about as far from New Jersey that I ever got. I did a lot of convoy duty around Maryland, Virginia. That's about the extent of it. Then, I had a physical examination prior to going overseas. The examination turned up that I had arthritis and 3<sup>rd</sup> degree flat feet. So, I was sent to Walter Reed Hospital. This was after I became second lieutenant. I was sent to Walter Reed Hospital to be put on limited service because of my flat feet and arthritis. And at that time they had a surplus of second lieutenants, so they put me on inactive status, which means that they sent me home with the idea in mind that they might call me back. After about nine months they gave me a discharge. So that was the end. That's it. That's my Army career.

MB: While I was on convoy duty at Camp Meade in Maryland, I made arrangements with my Wife that I would pick her up at the Baltimore B&O Railroad Station one Saturday morning.

EH: Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Station in Baltimore?

MB: In Baltimore, there's a B&O Railroad Station. I was at Camp Meade that was about twenty or twenty-five miles away from Baltimore. And I made arrangements to pick her up at a certain time in the morning. At any rate, the Company Commander insisted that I take a convoy on this particular Saturday morning. I told him I had to pick up my Wife. He said, "No excuse." I had to take this convoy out for practice. I said, "Okay, I'll do that". I had fifty-eight Army 6x6 trucks, six Jeeps, four weapons carriers and maybe about four command cars. I had to take them out to practice convoy duty. I also had to pick up my Wife. So I took this entire convoy to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Station.

EH: (Laughter)

MB: I had advance jeeps stopping all traffic. About seventy-five trucks were involved in this thing. I picked up my Wife, put her in the command car and went back to Fort

Meade. She was in the command car. In order to get her on the Post, she was not supposed to be in one of those command cars, once we got near the Post of Fort Meade she lied down in the back of the command car and we covered her up with a tarpaulin in order to get through the gate. So we got through the gate and that's it.

EH: What rank were you then?

MB: Second lieutenant.

EH: My goodness, that's a riot. That's a great way to end an interview. Thank you very much.

EH: Martin Becker has just remembered a brief story about searchlights. We can't possibly let him leave without telling us about this little episode.

MB: At that time there were many searchlights on the beach. They were on towers maybe twenty, twenty-five feet above the ground.

EH: At Sandy Hook.

MB: At Sandy Hook. Many of these searchlights, they were about 6 ft. in diameter and they could shine for about twenty, twenty-five miles out. The people that manned these searchlights were supposed to be looking out for the enemy. I got friendly with these guys in the searchlight batteries and I happened to make the mistake of telling them that I was expecting my Wife to come out and visit me one evening. Also, they knew what kind of a car I had. She came out to visit me and this was a blue and gray Pontiac they knew that I had. So, when my Wife came to visit me we parked along the beach one spot there and we were talking. And one of these guys with these great big searchlights shined it right on my car with this great big... and not only embarrassed me, but made me move my car.

END OF INTERVIEW