An Oral History Interview with Alfred Bricca
9th New York Coast Defense Command
1917
Interviewed by Elaine Harmon, NPS
March 11, 1981
Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2011

Editor's notes in parenthesis ( )

EH: …of the Sandy Hook Museum and I would like to introduce our special guest for today, Mr. Alfred Bricca, who would like to record for us his recollections of Fort Hancock in 1917. This is March 11, 1981 and my name is Elaine Harmon. I work at the Sandy Hook Museum as Park Technician and we would like to introduce a special guest for today Mr. Alfred Bricca. Mr. Bricca just began to tell me that in around June or July of 1917 he enlisted at the 14th Street Armory between 6th and 7th Avenue in New York City. From the Armory he was sent to Hoboken, New Jersey where he worked as a censor for a few months and then he went to Fort Hancock and stayed for about a year.

AB: Yeah. Yeah.

EH: From Fort Hancock he went to Fort Eustis, Virginia. So, tell us a little more about what you remember?

AB: Well, from Fort Hancock we went to, we stayed there quite a while.

EH: Right.

AB: And they shipped us to Camp Eustis and from Camp Eustis, I just don't know how long we stayed there we went oversees from there.

EH: Right. You showed me a letter that is from France from November 1918. So we can reconstruct the time that you were trying to go back to that you spent about a year at Fort Hancock, then went to Fort Eustis for about five months you say.

AB: Something like that yeah.

EH: And this letter sort of…

AB: Yeah.

EH: This letter sort of verifies that by November of 1918 you were in France and you were being promoted to a colonel.

AB: Corporal.

EH: Corporal, excuse me. (laughter) Boy that would be great. I meant corporal.

AB: Yeah. Yeah.

EH: So you were a private first class at Fort Hancock?

AB: A corporal.

EH: At Fort Hancock?

AB: Yeah. Yeah. Private first class.

EH: Right. And what was it like to be there? What was it like in 1917.

AB: Well, it was alright.

Mrs. Bricca: She's taking all that down.

AB: Oh yeah. It was alright. It was nice. I mean we had, they used to take us on hikes. You know what I mean. They used to give us lectures and stuff like that.

EH: You were actually training you said.

AB: Oh yeah. We were training. We were digging trenches and stuff like that. Sure.

EH: Then you talk about guard duty. You were assigned to guard duty.

AB: Yeah. Oh yeah. Well, we had to do guard duty, I mean…

EH: And you were walking Post?

AB: Oh yeah, walking Post one night and this covered wagon didn't stop and I fired a shot and he stopped.

EH: And what did you say were in the covered wagon? You said officers?

AB: They were all officers. So, when I got to him he was all bundled up. It was funny. He had a team of horses. I said, "When you get a challenge," I said, "don't you stop." He said, "I didn't hear ya." He had all officers in there and they all had their hands up. They were afraid. (laughter)

EH: You must have frightened them.

AB: Yeah. Yeah.

EH: How many horses drove the wagons?

AB: Two, two horses.

EH: And was it a big wooden wagon?

AB: It was wooden and they had like seats.

EH: Right.

AB: It must have had fifteen, maybe ten or fifteen officers in there.

EH: And when you were walking Post was it, you said you were along the bayside most of the time. Is that right?

AB: They put you all over. I mean they put you all over. They put you anyplace doing guard duty. I was at the Parade Ground there one night when this wagon come by, see, and I was walking Post. It must have been maybe, eleven, twelve o'clock at night. And that's when I, you know, gave him a challenge. You know and they didn't stop. So, when I fired a shot he stopped.

EH: You described for me you uniform. Can you tell us a little bit about you uniform? It was issued at the Quartermasters' Building?

AB: Yeah, I don't, I guess so. Yeah. They had a quartermaster there. They had everything there. They were giving uniforms out and things like that.

EH: Do you remember that it was next door to the bakery? The quartermasters.

AB: Ah, that I don't remember. No.

EH: Where a lot of people tell us you could buy a loaf of bread for three cents.

AB: That I don't remember.

EH: That it was a terrific bakery if fact by what we were told by veterans. Yeah.

AB: Yeah.

EH: And you had you said olive drab tunic?

AB: Yeah. Yeah.

EH: With the stand up collar? And the insignia you had you had the 9th Regiment.

AB: 9th Regiment.

EH: Insignia on it. Which I guess was brass? Was it brass?

AB: Brass I think it was.

EH: Circular.

AB: I had one or two. I don't know what I had done with them.

EH: Right. And you had a campaign hat?

AB: Yeah I had a campaign hat here, but when you were in France they gave you a hat like this.

EH: A steel helmet was it you mean?

AB: No.

EH: Right. It's an overseas cap.

AB: Yeah.

EH: That's what that is called.

AB: And I had a helmet. Yeah. A gas mask. Something like that.

EH: You campaign hat had a red cord on it? Was there a red cord around it?

AB: Yeah. I think there was a red cord. Yeah, you are right.

EH: It was Coast Artillery red.

AB: Yeah. Artillery, that's right.

EH: And the pants were they like balloon pants? Britches, were they…?

AB: No. We had the leggings.

EH: No, but the pants, you can see it here, they were like balloon pants?

AB: Right. Yeah. Yeah. Like balloon pants, I see. Yeah. Yeah.

EH: Like britches and wrapped leggings.

AB: Wrapped leggings, that's right.

EH: And you were issued any kind of a weapon?

AB: We had a rifle.

EH: Do you know what kind it was?

AB: I think it was and Enfield, I think.

EH: Enfield rifle.

AB: I think so. Yeah, if I remember right.

EH: Was that part of your training also to learn, target practice?

AB: Oh yeah. Sure. We used to go on hikes and stuff like that on the range and firing and stuff. They kept you pretty busy.

EH: Did you load guns?

AB: Oh yeah. Yeah. Them big guns.

EH: But you don't remember the names of the gun batteries.

AB: No. I really don't.

EH: But you remember being in the pit?

AB: Oh yeah.

EH: With the disappearing guns?

AB: Yeah. Yeah.

EH: And loading it on a cart.

AB: They still got those pits there?

EH: Yes. The pits are still there.

AB: Next time I go with Pauline I am going to look for them.

EH: But they are very overgrown.

AB: Oh yeah.

EH: You won't recognize it

AB: No kidding. You mean to tell me they covered it or something.

EH: What happens is that nature takes over and it just grows immediately back, you know reverts to nature.

AB: Yeah.

EH: And there is sumac and poison ivy and…

AB: Yeah. I see, yeah. Yeah.

EH: Because we don't have the thousands of soldiers there just to clear out the pits.

AB: That's right. Yeah.

EH: …and constantly polish the guns and do what the Army did. They had plenty of people in the Army to do that. And we are reduced to a small staff. And it began to deteriorate over a period of years when the Army knew they were not going to use it anymore. You remember the barber shop?

AB: See we were doing guard duty in Jersey too. We were there with the 15th (New York National Guard) Infantry Regiment from Harlem.

EH: In Bayonne?

AB: In Hoboken.

EH: Oh, Hoboken, I'm sorry. You were with the…

AB: Yeah. We were doing guard duty there and this colored regiment from Harlem, they were there.

EH: So you remember a black group that were…?

AB: Black regiment, yeah. They were the 15th Regiment from Harlem.

EH: And you also said you were a censor. You inspected packages?

AB: Well, no that was in Hoboken where we inspected packages.

EH: Right. Right.

AB: We stayed there quite a while.

EH: And where was the 15th, the Harlem…

AB: Well, they were with us there. Yeah. I think it was Long Branch. Do I remember Long Branch?

EH: Long Branch, that's nearby.

AB: Kee…

EH: Keansburg? That's in New Jersey.

AB: No. I forget now where.

EH: Do you remember much about the 15th Regiment?

AB: No. But they used to do guard duty. I seen them there. They were guards.

EH: Not many people have mentioned black soldiers.

Mrs. Bricca: Do you get a lot of people there?

EH: Yeah. Not many people mention black soldiers in our...

Mrs. Bricca: Oh they had black soldiers there?

EH: He's talking about the Harlem…

AB: They had regulars from Harlem up there.

EH: What about, you said you could point out the Barber Shop which I think is Building 77?

AB: Well, that building I saw it with…

EH: Right you said it has two steps.

AB: Yeah. The Barber Shop. It had a few steps. It was still there. It was near the prison, near the Museum.

EH: Right. That's building 77, I know. It was also a laundry at one time.

AB: Oh yeah.

EH: Right and a tailor shop.

AB: Oh yeah.

EH: But you remember it having two barber chairs in there?

AB: I don't know. Maybe they had two, three, it was a barber shop.

EH: What did they charge you? Do you remember?

AB: I don't remember that.

EH: Was it a quarter or…

Mrs. Bricca: Must have been very little.

AB: A quarter, thirty cents, thirty-five cents while I was there.

EH: What were you making in those days in the Army? What salary were you making?

AB: They were getting, first we were getting fifteen (dollars), then they gave us twenty. When we went overseas we got thirty.

Mrs. Bricca: A month.

AB: Yeah. Then we got thirty.

EH: Did you have a little payroll book? Someone showed me one in the museum one day. It was a little salary book.

AB: Oh yeah. That I don't…

Mrs. Bricca: That's interesting, isn't it?

EH: It's very nice.

AB: That I don't remember. Yeah. I don't remember that

EH: Were you given ration tickets and coupons and stuff like that? Do you remember coupons for cigarettes or…

AB: Well, there was like the Red Cross, Salvation Army, those things that would give you cigarettes, you know.

EH: Right. That's right.

AB: Yeah. They used to give me cigarettes. And then the government used to give me, they used to give you Bull Durham.

EH: What is that?

AB: Tobacco. You roll your own cigarettes. You roll your own cigarettes. They used to give you the paper. That was government issue like. Yeah. You used to roll your own cigarettes.

EH: What was it like on payday? You gave me a good question. What was payday like? Did you go up to the Paymaster's window?

AB: Oh yeah. They give you all new money. And everybody start gambling there.

EH: That's what everybody tells me. (laughter) They would immediately go out drinking or go gambling.

AB: Yeah.

Mrs. Bricca: Well, better gambling at least they wouldn't get hurt. Sometimes drinking they would get into a fight. Right?

EH: Right. Someone told me that is why they gave them canteen checks. So that you had a little coupon book so that after you sent all you mad money…

AB: Oh, yeah you are right. They did have that.

EH:…at least you would have your canteen checks.

AB: Yeah you are right. Yeah.

EH: We have them in the museum. We have them out on display from time to time. I keep changing it.

AB: Oh yeah.

EH: But just to show people who have never seen them before, the fact that they gave you a little coupon book so that after everybody went crazy gambling and drinking their money off they still had a little something if they wanted to buy shaving cream or cigarettes or whatever. It's kind of interesting.

AB: Yeah. Yeah. (inaudible)

EH: What was in the PX? Do you remember? What was the PX like? Do you remember much?

AB: Well, it was a building. It was a building something like a small building.

EH: The Post Exchange.

AB: (looking at a photograph) Something maybe like this, the Post Exchange. Yeah. Yeah. That's it. They had everything in there. You know they had cigarettes. You could buy anything you…

EH: Right. In fact, in the Museum we have a big towel that says Fort Hancock.

AB: Yeah. Sure. That I never…

EH: Which someone bought in the PX during World War II time and they bought it for a quarter I think it was. And that's a great item to have. I have had that out. And it says Fort Hancock on a big stripe.

AB: Yeah. I never saw it.

EH: Just like a hotel towel, you know.

Mrs. Bricca: They got a museum up in Fort Hancock?

EH: Yeah. He was there. And he remembers it as a jail. It was a jail and a guardhouse.

AB: yeah. Johnny was (inaudible) Those chains and locks…holy…What a horrible place that was.

EH: What was the, in the photographs that you showed me, what was the storm like? Can you tell me? What can you remember about that big storm?

AB: Well, it was during the night. We woke up. There was a gush of wind and rain. We run into these barracks…

EH: The brick barracks, right.

AB: Yeah. Right in here.

EH: At the time you were living in a canvas tent.

AB: Yeah in the tents we were in the canvas. And we went in there. See these were regular barracks.

EH: Right

AB: And we washed up in there. We stayed in there for the rest of the night. That was one day they put us in barracks.

EH: In the morning, did you find all you tents were…

AB: Oh, they were all down. See like this. (looking at photographs)

EH: Destroyed. According to what they are wearing it must have been a fairly, it must have been like spring time or summer time? Because they are not wearing.

AB: Oh yeah it was a summer time

EH: It was a summer storm.

AB: Oh, yeah. It was summer time.

EH: Was there flooding? Did the water come over the Bay?

AB: No. No. It was just a gush or wind and rain, you know. They tore up all the tents down and that was it.

EH: What was the submarine rumor that you were telling me about? What do you remember?

AB: Well, I heard from New York, you know the way they talk. I heard that in New York, they say they saw a submarine at Fort Hancock, you know.

EH: But you never heard anymore about that?

AB: No. Never heard more about that.

Mrs. Bricca: Did you hear this from others too?

EH: Oh yeah. We've heard it from several veterans. You mentioned a whole bunch of names to me. Colonel Burns, you said was the 9th….

AB: Colonel Burns was the head of the Regiment.

EH: The 9th?

AB: I don't know if he died and they put another guy there.

EH: And then there was Captain Cole.

AB: He was a Captain on my company, the 9th.

EH: Right and Claude Ranzetti whom you think may still be alive? Isn't that right?

AB: Claude Ranzetti. He's in Brooklyn. I don't know if he's living.

EH: Fred Valentino, he's

AB: He died.

EH: And Harry Romano. And Anthony Antonelli.

AB: He died.

EH: And Tom Costa you were..

AB: He died.

EH: And Arthur Varone

AB: He died.

EH: So maybe some day we can find Mr. Ranzetti and tape record him too.

AB: He's in Brooklyn, I don't know.

Mrs. Bricca: You know he's in Brooklyn?

AB: I guess so. I don't know. I never, I don't know anybody that knows him.

Mrs. Bricca: Yeah. We never heard of him after he moved, in fact, after he got married. He got married a short time after he come home from the Army.

AB: Yeah. Yeah.

EH: And from the 9th Regiment you went to the 47th, Battery C.

AB: Yeah. I got discharged out of the 47th.

EH: Right. And what year was that? How old were you?

AB: 1919, I think it was 1919. Yeah. It was February 1919. The war ended in 1918.

EH: Yeah. Right. How did it feel to be back. I mean did you feel like a hero? Did you feel very proud?

AB: Well, then at least they respected you. You know.

EH: They were proud of you.

AB: These poor kids from Vietnam.

EH: It's a shame.

Mrs. Bricca: It's true everybody says the same thing.

AB: The poor kids from Vietnam, they don't even consider them, now they do, now they consider them veterans I think.

EH: Yeah, but still

Mrs. Bricca: A lot of them, them poor boys they got mixed up in drugs like I hear. A lot of good boys.

AB: They lost a lot. They didn't lose many men in the First World War.

Mrs. Bricca: Not compared to what they lost in this war.

AB: No. What they lost in this war…

Mrs. Bricca: Some of them got involved in the drugs and that was terrible.

EH: It's a shame.

AB: (inaudible) gives you all these figures. We lost very few men because we went in late. You know what I mean. The Germans were fighting in 1914. This country went in, in 1917 and in August, no April 6th. I think April 6th we went in there. They declared war. Geez, I remember that night. I brought a paper. I was a kid. I was young. I looked. No, they declared war on Germany, what was it when they sank the *Lusitania*, no.

EH: But you remember it was April 6th. You remember the date.

Mrs. Bricca: April 6th was it?

AB: April 6th. (1917)

Mrs. Bricca: Are you sure?

AB: "Congress Declares War on Germany". I think it was, was it April the 6th? Yeah.

EH: You have a very good memory. It is astounding. What is the date of your birth again? I forgot to write it down.

AB: March 14, 1899.

EH: Wow. That is pretty astounding. And you had not been to Fort Hancock until this summer, August 1980.

AB: Yeah. The first time.

Mrs. Bricca: He had mentioned it quite a few times.

AB: Pauline is a schoolteacher.

Mrs. Bricca: My daughter.

AB: She did all the work. She got everything. Even if I had an I.D. card. (inaudible)

Mrs. Bricca: How to get in there, you know.

EH: Sure. So you hadn't been back in 63, 64 years.

AB: That was the first time.

EH: That's amazing.

AB: And if I live long enough I'm going in December again.

EH: That would be great. I'll come and see you that time I'll make sure if I know you are there. I'll be sure to be there.

AB: Sure. I hope I see you there. Yeah. Yeah

EH: I'll introduce you to Tom, the authority. That concludes our interview which was conducted on March 11, 1981 with Alfred Bricca who gave us his recollections of Fort Hancock in 1917. This tape recording was taken at his residence. 299 Pearl Street in Lower Manhattan after we decided to follow him up after he had been to the Museum in August of 1980 and was greeted by John Krisco.

END OF INTERVIEW