Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Interview with Phil Duffy
NJ National Guard, 254th AA, 1959-63
by Melissa Kozlowski, Monmouth University, NPS intern
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Transcribed by Melissa Kozlowski 2003

This oral history interview of Phil Duffy is taking place on Monday, April 21, 2003 at Sandy Hook, NJ. Mr. Duffy served with the National Guard from 1957-1962, and was discharged with the rank of private.

Question: When and where were you born?

Answer: NYC, 1937.

Q: Where did you graduate from?

A: Red Bank Catholic High School

Q: Was your father or your grandfather in the military?

A: No.

Q: How did you become involved at Fort Hancock?

A: I joined the National Guard, and came over here to Fort Hancock for a few weeks and then they sent me to Fort Bliss, Texas for 6 months training as a radar operator.

Q: What influenced your decision to join the National Guard?

A: A lot of my friends were in different units, a lot of my friends were in the Red Bank Unit which was a tank unit, and that didn't appeal to me, to sit in a tank all the time, so I found out about the missiles and actually we were stationed here at Fort Hancock, the missiles were here, but I was in a trailer up in Middletown, off of East Road. That's where, if you had to fire the missiles, you'd actually fire them from. So these trailers, like the one you have here for a sample, that trailer was 6 miles away up on top of a hill.

Q: What was your start and ending date at Fort Hancock?

A: I'm not really sure of the exact dates, but it's approximately 1957-62.

Q: Did you know anything about this place before you came here?

A: Yes, as you grew up you could never come out here. It was always blocked off all during high school. You could get as far as Sandlass Beach Club, which was the first thing when you came in but the rest was all blocked off, it was strictly for the government

Q: What did you know about the type of job you'd be performing when you came here?

A: I wasn't really sure. In fact, I spent the first couple of days, the first couple of meetings, in the silos down where the missiles were. And then it looked more interesting to be a radar operator. So, I went over and asked the sergeant if I could become a radar operator and he said fine.

Q: What was your rank or title?

A: Private.

Q: What unit or department did you work for?

A: I was in the NIKE- my patch said NIKE on it.

Q: What was your job or jobs here?

A: I was a radar operator.

Q: What background or education did you get to be a radar operator?

A: I used to work at Electronic Associates, which was a computer company out on Rt. 36 in West Long Branch. So, that's the reason I could get into the radar because I told the guy I was a radar expert, which I wasn't, but I told him I worked on computers and stuff and I guess I impressed him. The whole outfit was out of Newark, and its funny, our first Sergeant, he drove a Ballantine Beer truck, and I would say 80% of all the guys' here drove garbage trucks full time in Newark.

Q: Did this job aid you at all in your future work?

A: Yeah, well or one thing, it was the first time…I never went to college or anything so when I went to Fort Bliss it was my first time away from home, so to spend 6 months by yourself in the Army and go through weeks of basic training at Fort Dix, add then be out on your own it was a fabulous experience for me. I guess the same experience you're getting while at college.

Q: Were there any ever alerts of potential enemy attacks while you were here?

A: Yes. One night, we were here, we used to have to come every Thursday night and one weekend a month, and we were all asleep up in Middletown and they got a report at that time , I forget how high the plane was, but there was a plane flying over Long Island. I want to say, at that time, back in the fifties, I guess the airlines flew at about 30,000 feet, I think that's what they fly today, and they had reports of a plane at 50-75,000 feet flying over Long Island. So they called a red alert, and they got us all out of bed, and they said "This one's for real." So they called, there used to be a lot of aircraft companies on Long Island, big companies that built airplanes. So they called all them, they called all the…I'm getting chills

thinking about it, because we though we were going to have to fire it…they called all the aircraft companies to see if they had any experimental airplanes in the air at the time. And they all denied that they did. So, we thought it was enemy aircraft or something coming in. We all got on alert, and we had a countdown and everything else. And then, a couple minutes before we were going to fire it actually they cancelled it. That's about as close as we came.

Q: What did it turn out to be?

A: I have no idea. I was only a private; they don't let you know a heck of a lot. I remember, I mean, we were all ready, they kept saying "This is NOT a drill." So, it was interesting because there was nothing at that time that they knew that could fly that high.

Q: What building did you work in?

A: I actually slept in these buildings over here right on Officers Row. I'm not really sure of the number, for some reason the number 9 or 10 comes to mind, something like that. All the buildings were filled with guys, we used to sleep like 40 in a building, just put cots out and sleep.

Q: Were you working with military, or civilians, or both?

A: Well, the officers were full time Army, so they were out here all the time, or up at the NIKE base up in Middletown, and then when we came out we were like the…in fact we used to have to walk guard duty with ax handles. They didn't trust us with ammunition. I remember one night one of the guys said "halt" to one of the regulars, one of the Coast Guard guys or something, and he didn't stop and he beat him with the ax handle. They threw him in the brig. They didn't think we were capable of carrying ammunition.

Q: Where did you eat at the Fort?

A: Well, that's a good question; I don't know…I don't know where we ate. Probably out in the field.

Q: Were there any social activities for you to take part in at the Fort?

A: No.

Q: Did you attend any religious services while at the Fort?

A: Yes, on Sundays we had Mass.

Q: Did you go to the beach while here?

A: No, didn't even know the beach was there. You just never, you known you were here to work and stuff, but it wasn't really work. I remember we used to come to summer camp for two weeks out here, and the first thing the Ballantine guy did was have about 5 kegs of beer in the back of his truck. So, the first thing we did was unload all the beer and stuff.

Q: Did you know of any servants, minorities, or women who worked at the Fort?

A: No.

Q: Would you say this was a fun or a boring place to be working?

A: Oh, it was them most fun I ever had in my life. It was great. I looked forward to it, I mean all the other guys, all my friends, were getting in the backs of what they called deuce and a half's, big old ugly army trucks, and they used to drive from Red Bank up to Camp Drum, which used to take them about ten or twelve hours. They'd go up to Camp Drum and freeze, and a couple of them would always get run over by a tank during summer camp. And I lived in Rumson so it took me less than 10 minutes to get over here, and we played a lot of softball. We have softball, we had 5 kegs of beer, I would have been a career guy.

Q: Did anything especially humorous occur while you were here?

A: Nah, the whole thing was just one big ball. You'd really look forward to the Thursday nights and the weekends, to come out and see everybody and a lot of camaraderie and like I said we used to play a lot of softball.

Q: You were here on Thursdays and the weekends. What did you do with the rest of your week?

A: I worked full time at the computer place. What the deal was, you signed up and they sent you to Fort Dix for eight weeks for basic training, and then they took you right from Fort Dix down to Fort Bliss Texas in El Paso. So you spent 4 months down there training in how to operate. Then while you're down there, they would take you out to White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico to show you how to work and stuff. It was great.

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

A: I just loved it, the buildings, the whole ambience, the location. That's what prompted me to come out here and work for Sandy Hook Partners, because I came out when I knew I was retiring, and wanted to be a Park Ranger. I came out at the time and Chuck Baerlin was the Superintendent, and I had been a Police Officer in Rumson for 7 years. So, I told Chuck that I didn't have to go through the, I had been through the State Police Academy so I didn't have to go through the security training, and I love Sandy Hook. So, I said I'd love to come out here

and be a Ranger on weekends. He asked me what I did and I told him I worked for a land developer, and that's how I got involved with rehabbing all these buildings.

Q: What year did you return?

A: 1998.

Q: What are your responsibilities here now?

A: I'm a partner in the group that's trying to rehab these buildings and restore them to 1897 conditions.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to talk about that we haven't covered in the interview?

A: No, just that it's a labor of love, because it's coming back to where I was 50 years ago. In fact I think I was the last one to live in these buildings, they shut these buildings down in '59 or '60, in that era. So I think I was the last one that slept in these buildings, and now to come back and be able to restore them, to me you can't beat that.

End of Interview