Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Telephone Interview with Robert Fullerton
245th Coast Artillery
1939-1945
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS
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Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2011

Nine-Gun Battery firing during World War II. Mr. Fullerton's radar equipment was located on one of the parapets of this battery.

Anti-Aircraft guns emplaced at Fort Hancock. Mr. Fullerton worked with radar equipment that was used in conjunction with AA guns like these.
Photos courtesy of NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ( )

MR: Hello. Today is January 12, 2006. My name is Mary Rasa. I am the Museum Curator for Sandy Hook, part of Gateway National Recreation Area. Today, I am on the phone with someone who was at Fort Hancock and please state your full name for our record.

RF: Robert D. Fullerton.

MR: And also I just want to confirm that you are giving us permission to use this interview for historic purposes.

RF: You have my permission.

MR: Thank you. Okay. Can you tell me a little about when and where you were born?

RF: I was born in Brooklyn in 1920.

MR: Where did you attend school?

RF: I went to P.S. 138 and then I graduated from there and went to Jamaica High School and I graduated from Jamaica High School in February 1938.

MR: And did any of your family members before you serve in the military?

RF: No. I don't…well, I had an uncle who I think served in the Navy in World War I.

MR: How did you get involved in the military?

RF: I joined the National Guard in Brooklyn in 1939.

MR: And tell me a little bit about the unit there.

RF: It was Coast Artillery and our station whenever we were called was Fort Hancock, New Jersey and it was a coastal defense regiment and I believe the number was 245.

MR: Okay. Good. And tell me a little bit, while you were in the National Guard, I assume you were just getting called up, what was it once a month?

RF: No. We just called up for two weeks in the summer.

MR: Oh, okay. And did you attend classes like once a month at the armory or…?

RF: Yeah.

MR: Okay.

RF: Yeah. We had meetings once a month.

MR: And they had a good athletic program I have heard.

RF: Yeah. I think they did. I really didn't get involved in that.

MR: Tell me a little bit about what you would do when you would come to Fort Hancock.

RF: Well, we practiced, at that time they had disappearing 12-inch guns and we practiced on those. Then when we were called into service in 1939…

MR: When you were federalized?

RF: Yes. Again we were assigned one of the 12-inch guns.

MR: Disappearing or the barbette ones?

RF: Disappearing.

MR: Oh, still the disappearing, okay.

RF: And believe me when we fired those things it was scary. (laughter)

MR: Did you have any ear protection?

RF: No. I don't remember any. (laughter)

MR: How far were you able to shoot?

RF: We shot out into the ocean, of course, and I don't know how far they went. They had a target out there. Sometimes we came close and sometimes we missed. (laughter)

MR: What was your job on the gun crew?

RF: Well, my, I really didn't have anything to do with the gun. I was, we had a radar assembly on top of the parapet and I was assigned to that as a technician.

MR: Now where was that in relation to the gun battery?

RF: Well, it was on the parapet of the gun.

MR: Okay, the same, were you on the really long gun battery which today we call Nine-Gun Battery or were you on a smaller one? I guess you would have had to be on Nine-

Gun, the really long battery with many, many guns? (Nine-gun Battery is made up of four gun batteries and had the only 12-inch disappearing guns at Sandy Hook)

RF: Yeah, no we weren't on that.

MR: Oh, one other question I wanted to ask you when you came down for your training did you take a boat or did you take the train?

RF: No. We came across from Manhattan on the *Chauncey De Pew*.

MR: Oh, okay, which is a little steamer?

RF: Yeah. Yep.

MR: Did that take a long time?

RF: I forget how long. It seemed like quite a trip to me, but I don't think actually it was that long.

MR: So, you had to go from Brooklyn into Manhattan and then I guess from Governors Island? Was that..?

RF: We went from Battery Park.

MR: Oh, okay.

RF: From the Battery.

MR: So, tell me a little bit more about working on the radar.

RF: Well, after we got there they sent me to radio school in Kansas City, Missouri. And I finished that. And while I was in Kansas City I met this lady and we got married that November before I came back to Hancock. And then..

MR: How long were you there?

RF: Let's see. I think I got there in August and we got married the 14th of November and the week after we came back to Fort Hancock.

MR: And did she get to live on the base or did she have to live like in Highlands or someplace?

RF: No. She, my parents lived in Queens Village, New York and she stayed there with them.

MR: Oh, okay.

RF: And let's see I'm trying to keep this straight chronologically. It's many years ago.

MR: Oh sure. Was that after the War started that you went to radio school?

RF: I believe it was.

MR: Okay.

RF: Yes. It was. And then I was back for a while and assigned to the radar unit. I operated one of the, of cathode radio tubes. And then I was sent to Stuart, Florida to take a course on radar.

MR: Which was pretty primitive at that point in time?

RF: Oh, yeah. It looked like an old hay rake. Yeah. It was a very cumbersome arrangement. But after I got to Florida, my wife came down and we stayed at a rooming house in Stuart, Florida then we came back to Fort Hancock and I managed to get quarters on the Post.

MR: Okay. Do you remember where they were?

RF: They were towards, from where the guns were it was away from the Fort itself. Towards the gate.

MR: Were they temporary type buildings? They weren't brick?

RF: Yeah they were, they were permanent buildings.

MR: Oh, they were, okay.

RF: Yeah and they were duplexes and we had one side of a duplex.

MR: Oh, okay and what was your rank? You must have been a sergeant? Right?

RF: Yeah.

MR: Okay, so you were basically in Sergeants' Row then?

RF: Yeah. That's it.

MR: Was it a two bedroom or a one bedroom?

RF: You know I don't remember, but I think it was two.

MR: Was it an up and down because the one bedrooms are on one story?

RF: No. It was one floor.

MR: Oh, okay. What did she think of the place?

RF: Well, it wasn't like home but it was better than nothing. It was fairly good. Then I was, I think I got mixed up it was after we got the quarters that I was sent to Florida.

MR: Okay.

RF: Radar School and while I was in Florida we were sent into Miami to help them shore up because there was a hurricane aimed right at Florida.

MR: Really?

RF: And it missed Florida and hit New Jersey and hit Fort Hancock.

MR: Which year was that?

RF: And it flooded to, and they had to rescue, and I had a child by this time and they rescued my wife and child by boat, (laughter) temporarily.

MR: So, you were at Fort Hancock for quite a long time then?

RF: Yeah. I was at Fort Hancock until I think it was early '45. They were, of course, closing down things and I was sent to Fort Sill, Oklahoma and assigned as part of a cadre for the .155 mm field guns. And it was there until September of '45 and I was discharged in September '45 from Fort Sill.

MR: So, you have a very good, you spent a long time at Fort Hancock. Tell me a little about working the radars. Would were you looking at the sea or the sky?

RF: The sky.

MR: Oh, okay.

RF: Yeah. It was strictly for the sky and while I was there and I don't remember exactly what year but I was up on, standing outside the radar early one morning around seven o'clock and I heard this boom. I looked across the harbor and the destroyer *Turner* broke in two and went down quickly there. The boiler had exploded.

MR: Did you have to help out when they brought the sailors back to Fort Hancock?

RF: Well, what we sad task that we had, bodies kept washing up and we had to take care

of them and some were, most of them were dead. Some were alive and they laid a field hospital out on the Parade Ground. We had a hospital, but of course it was small…

MR: Right.

RF: And that's about all I remember about that.

MR: Did it explode in the Bay or was it more in the Harbor?

RF: Well, it was anchored and supposed to be unloading its ammunition. It was off Fort Tilden.

MR: Oh, okay. And do you, now what I have heard about this explosion of the *Turner* that it was the first time that a helicopter was used as a medivac. Do you remember seeing a helicopter come in?

RF: No. I sure don't.

MR: Because I would think that that would be kind of unique at that point in time.

RF: No. I don't remember any helicopters. That's not to say that they weren't there.

MR: Oh sure. Okay. When the disappearing guns were no longer being used did you get, did you move around in your location of working?

RF: No. It, as I said, the radar was on the top of the parapet. It stayed there and I forgot to mention that we were hooked up to four anti-aircraft guns.

MR: Oh okay.

RF: For gun laying.

MR: Oh, so you were working more with the anti-aircraft guns then?

RF: Yeah.

MR: Okay. What, do you remember how big the guns were? Were they like 90 mms or..?

RF: 90 millimeter, yeah.

MR: And were they nearby?

RF: Yeah and they were fairly close to the radar unit. I couldn't tell you exactly how close but fairly close.

MR: Did they do a lot of practicing with them?

RF: No. I only remember actually that we fired them one time in practice.

MR: Now with the radar did they also have searchlights nearby?

RF: They probably did but I don't remember them.

MR: Was your typical duty time would you be working at night or during the day?

RF: It varied. We worked different shifts.

MR: So, while you were at Fort Hancock your wife and you had one child there?

RF: Yes.

MR: And how was life on the Post? Did you get to go to the movies at all? You got to shop there? Things like that.

RF: Yeah. We had a PX and we had a movie theater.

MR: Did you ever go to dances or things like that?

RF: Yeah. When I first got there I did. Then, after my wife moved up we didn't go. And oh, one thing I don't remember exactly what year it was.

MR: Okay.

RF: But Bob Hope and his troop, do you have a record of what year that was?

MR: No. I remember Judy Garland was there in '43 but I am not sure when Bob Hope was there.

RF: Well, Bob Hope and Jerry Colonna and Les Brown's band the (Band of) Renown.

MR: Did you go see them all?

RF: Well, this was when I was there. I think this is before I was even married.

MR: Oh okay.

RF: It was early when I was there and I was assigned to a staff car to go to New York and pick up the Troupe.

MR: Oh okay.

RF: We had quite a few staff cars. Bob Hope rode in my car.

MR: Oh really.

RF: And I got to visit with him a little which was awfully nice.

MR: Sure.

RF: And he was very nice, accommodating and the show was put on the Parade Ground. And he gave quite a show and, of course, all the fellas enjoyed it.

MR: So any other, did you attend church out there? Go to chapel or anything?

RF: Yeah. Occasionally. Bob Hope's Troupe was there in my car when we took him back to New York after the show a dancer by the name of Betty Smith rode with me and I made a date with her. Went into New York on a weekend pass and we went out and had dinner, danced. It was very nice.

MR: Oh good. I actually have a question when you were on duty, I guess, would there be alerts say when you were off duty would you be called back to your station?

RF: Yeah. If it was necessary I would be called back, yeah.

MR: And what would, would there be reports of incoming planes possibly? Is that what would happen and then they would get everybody back to work?

RF: Yeah. One time, I had forgotten about this, but one time we had an alert. An aircraft unidentified and we fired our guns and hit the plane.

MR: Really?

RF: It came down on the beach and all we could hear was somebody cussing a blue streak and it was a U.S. Navy plane. (laughter)

MR: Oh.

RF: The pilot had forgotten to turn on his identification unit.

MR: Really?

RF: Yeah.

MR: Do you remember what year that was in?

RF: No. I don't.

MR: Was it at night or during the day?

RF: It was at night.

MR: Oh, okay so couldn't really see too well.

RF: No.

MR: What did you, what other experiences, did you socialize with the other families that you were living near?

RF: The people next door, it was a Sergeant Rice and his wife, Elvira and we visited back and forth. She came over quite often during the day to help with the little girl we had. She made things very nice for my wife.

MR: So, you lived pretty near, did you go to the Commissary to buy your food?

RF: Yes.

MR: Which was near where you lived, right?

RF: Well, we had to get a ride. And I could usually requisition a jeep and we would take that up to the Commissary and get our food.

MR: Anything else that you remember? Did you ever go to the beach?

RF: Occasionally, of course, we were right on the beach. And after the War started they had a battalion of infantry that was manning the beach. They strung barbed wire and all that stuff.

MR: Was there a place where the families could go sunbathing?

RF: If there was I don't remember it.

MR: Oh, okay. Would you go into New York often to see your family?

RF: Whenever we could get a two day pass we would go in and somebody would meet us at the boat and drive out to my folk's house.

MR: Do you ever remember meeting any servants or women working?

RF: What do you mean?

MR: On the Fort were there ever any servants that you met or did you ever meet any of the WACs that were stationed there?

RF: Yeah. I met one WAC. I forget her name. I met a couple before I was married. This WAC and I went to a couple of dances and that was all.

MR: But during you typical work, the WACs wouldn't be working where you were? They would be working in other fields right?

RF: Yeah. They were mostly working in the Commissary and in the hospital.

MR: Did you enjoy your time at Fort Hancock?

RF: Yeah. It was pleasant. I enjoyed being in the Army but I was very fortunate. I never had to go overseas.

MR: Did anything especially humorous occur while you were there?

RF: Humorous?

MR: Yeah.

RF: Nah. My wife was pregnant and this was in '44. And they had shut down the hospital so prenatal care she had to go to Fort Monmouth.

MR: And how would she get there?

RF: By Red Cross Ambulance.

MR: Oh, okay.

RF: On night my wife woke me up and she said she thinks she better go to the hospital. It was time.

MR: Did she go to Fort Monmouth for that as well?

RF: Yeah. So, I called for the ambulance and it was off the Post and they didn't know when it would get back.

MR: Oh god.

RF: My wife was having fits so I had to call a taxi from Highlands and he came and got us and we got to the Gate and the MP (Military Police) didn't want to let us out without a pass. And I said, "Okay, do you want to deliver this baby?" He looked in the back and said, "No. Go." (laughter) So, we got to the hospital and they took my wife up and I was checking her in and by the time that I had got upstairs, my son was born.

MR: Oh, that was pretty quick then.

RF: Yeah. It was.

MR: And the hospital at Fort Hancock was already kind of shut down? They probably didn't take care of any births at that point in time, right?

RF: No. They had the hospital there but it had been shut down. It was out of commission.

MR: Oh, okay.

RF: They were closing things down at that time.

MR: So, that was in '44?

RF: Yes.

MR: Anything really stand out in your mind about Fort Hancock?

RF: Well, it was pleasant in that place.

MR: Okay.

RF: I remember a lot of sand. (laughter)

MR: A lot of poison ivy?

RF: Yeah. When we first got there we were, they didn't have any barracks or anything and we were in eight man tents. That was quite an experience.

MR: Because you were there over the winter still in tents, weren't you?

RF: Yeah. Yeah

MR: It was pretty cold. (laughter)

RF: We had stoves in there, but keeping those buggers going… Somebody had to go get wood all the time. My best buddy and I were in the same tent and he got pneumonia and at that time the hospital was still operating and they took him there and he got okay and came back.

MR: What did you do after you got out of the service?

RF: I went to work for Western Electric.

MR: Okay. So you did use your experience from the military then?

RF: Yeah. Yep.

MR: What type of work did you do?

RF: Pardon me?

MR: What type of work did you do? Did you work on a lot of military contracts?

RF: We worked on sub-station installation. Western Electric was the company that did all the installing at that time of switching equipment for the sub-stations.

MR: Okay.

RF: And we did that kind of work.

MR: Is that when you moved to Texas or did you move right after? Where did you go after you left the military to live?

RF: My wife, as I told you was from Kansas City. We went back to Kansas City, Missouri.

MR: Oh, okay.

RF: Because her folks lived there. We left Kansas City in ’59 and went to my brother’s house in Pompton Plains, New Jersey. We arrived there on Thanksgiving Day of ’59 and then my mother lived in Pompton Plains also. And then we finally got our own place in Washington, New Jersey and we were there a short time and then we bought a place in Lake Lackawanna which is near Netcong.

MR: Were you working for Western Electric this whole time?

RF: No. I left Western Electric and when I was in Netcong I went to work for a Chevrolet dealer in Hackettstown. Then I left New Jersey and came to Texas in ’67. And I have been here ever since.

MR: Okay. You have been here quite a while.

RF: Yes.

MR: Is there anything else that you would like to say about your time at Fort Hancock? Any other stories that you might remember? Anything?

RF: No. I think that pretty much covers it.

MR: Okay. What is your wife's name?

RF: Winifred.

MR: Okay and what is your daughter's name?

RF: Frances. Frances died in '63.

MR: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

RF: She had cancer.

MR: Okay, well, thank you very much for the interview. I am going to stop the tape now.

END OF INTERVIEW