

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS  
Oral History Telephone Interview with Alfred W. Kucinski  
41<sup>st</sup> AAA (Anti-Aircraft Artillery)  
1950-51  
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS  
August 19, 2004  
Transcribed by Mary Rasa



Alfred Kucinski in North Africa in 1948.  
Photo courtesy of Alfred Kucinski.



Image of 41<sup>st</sup> AAA at one of the sites ringing New York City, 1953.  
Mr. Kucinski's job was to set up the communication radios at these 90 mm gun sites before they were  
manned in 1951.

Photo courtesy of Gateway NRA/NPS

Editor's notes on parenthesis ( )

MR: Hello. Today is Thursday, August 19, 2004. My name is Mary Rasa, Sandy Hook Museum Curator. I am on the phone with a veteran of Fort Hancock and we are going to conduct a telephone oral history interview. Please state your name for our record.

AK: My name is Alfred W. Kucinski. K-U-C-I-N-S-K-I.

MR: Please tell me when and where were you born?

AK: I was born in Passaic, New Jersey. September 24, 1929.

MR: What schools did you attend?

AK: I attended Clifton public school system in Clifton, New Jersey.

MR: And did you graduate high school there?

AK: Yes, I did.

MR: Did your Father or Grandfather serve in the military before you?

AK: Yes. My Father did. He served in the Army in the First World War. He was an immigrant from Poland. He joined up.

MR: Did he go overseas?

AK: No. As a matter of fact, he was at the troop transport in Hoboken when the War ended. He never went over. He lucked out.

MR: Tell me how you become involved in the Army?

AK: Well, after I got out of high school, as a matter of fact, before I even graduated I started inquiring about going into the Army. I was bugging my parents that I wanted to go in. At that time, I wasn't quite ready to go to college, so I finally got them to consent for me because I was only 17 years old and they consented for me to go into the Army. And two days after I graduated from high school, I was on my way to Fort Dix for Basic Training.

MR: What year was that?

AK: 1947.

MR: And then, how did you end up at Fort Hancock?

AK: Well, I spent three years in the Army with the Army Security Agency. 21 months spent overseas in Africa in Asmara Eritrea, which is East Africa. And when I got out of the Army, I decided to join the inactive reserves, which I did. I got out on June 19, 1950. The Korean War started on June 25, 1950. (laughter) In September, I was back in the Army for another tour of duty as an enlisted reservist at that time. The first time I was in the Regular Army.

MR: Did they put you back at Fort Dix?

AK: Yeah. As a matter of fact, I was in a replacement depot there. And I got orders to report to the 41<sup>st</sup> AAA gun battalion to battalion headquarters for an interview because they needed a high speed radio operator. And that was my training in the Army Security Agency. I went there and they interviewed me and they said, "Okay. When can you report?" I mean, "We are going to cut the orders for you and so you can report the next day" and I was there. And we stayed there at Fort Dix for, oh, I guess until April 1951. And then we moved over to Fort Hancock. They were reopening Fort Hancock and I was with the original party that went in because I went in with radio equipment to set up communications because we had the electricity. The phone lines were down. I don't think they had enough phone lines to handle all the traffic they were expecting.

MR: So how many people were in the unit that had just been created?

AK: Well, you mean us sent over to Fort Hancock?

MR: Yeah.

AK: Well, a whole battalion went over eventually, but we were an advance party. The advance party consisted of, oh, I don't know I guess maybe fifty men or something like that.

MR: Okay.

AK: They had (to) bring over the mess hall. The sergeant, the mess sergeant and all that stuff. There weren't very many of us. I would say, approximately 50. You know, my mind is fuzzy on that fact.

MR: When everybody was there how many do you think were there then?

AK: Oh, we had the whole battalion. The whole battalion strength, whatever that is. We had a, we had four batteries plus headquarters and headquarters battery. So, we had five batteries of men there. And each battery consisted of approximately two hundred men. So, I would say there were about a thousand people there at that time.

MR: Oh, okay. Now were you housed in the wooden buildings or the brick buildings?

AK: Oh, I was housed in the wooden buildings. I wouldn't know how to live in a brick building. (laughter) I stayed in the wooden barracks. As a matter of fact I was in Fort Hancock, maybe about eight years ago and I took a ride through there and I think most of the wooden barracks were down if I'm not mistaken.

MR: Yes. Did you know anything about Fort Hancock before you came here?

AK: Well, I knew Fort Hancock and the history of Fort Hancock, that it established in the First World War they had the coastal artillery there to protect New York Harbor. And I think prior to that they also had the artillery there to protect the harbor from you know invading forces coming into New York Harbor. That was the gateway to New York Harbor.

MR: And you knew this before you actually got here?

AK: Oh yeah.

MR: Okay.

AK: Well, I was a Jersey boy so I knew everything about New Jersey.

MR: So you knew the exact job you'd be performing before you got here?

AK: Oh yes. Yes. Yes.

MR: What was your rank at the time?

AK: At the time I got there I was corporal. By the time I left I was a staff sergeant.

MR: When you were working, since you were doing radio communications, were you near the guns or were you in a building?

AK: I was in a building. We were sorta like a fixed station. And being, I was chief radio operator for the battalion and we constantly had contact with all the batteries. Establishing communication plus with brigade. And then what happens when they were going out to establish other sites for their weaponry we went out, the communications section and the headquarters battery we ended up in an armory over in Staten Island. And from there we conducted our base of operations. What we would do, we would contact all these various sites. They were locating to check out how the communications would be. That would be in Newark. I think it was near the airport in Newark and possibly in Nutley and East Hanover and a few other places.

MR: So they all started out of Fort Hancock, I assume because it was already their property and then they went to these little sites.

AK: Well, Fort Hancock was the base of operations for our battalion. That was it. So they just went out in little groups to set up these things.

MR: What type of work did you do after you left the service?

AK: When I got out of the service, I went to school to become a tool and dye designer. And I went full time for two years under the G. I. Bill and got my certificate. Then, I went to work in the aerospace industry. I ended up retiring. I was a configuration analyst and what we do, we worked on the B-2 bomber, B-1 bomber and space shuttle and programs like that. We had developed the ring laser gyro, gyroscopes that kept all these space craft level in the air.

MR: So, do you think your work in the Army helped you in your future work?

AK: Oh, absolutely. And as a matter of fact, what I did with my radio work, I got out, I got married and my wife and I have eight children. And naturally I needed money to support them.

MR: Did you say eight?

AK: Eight.

MR: Oh, okay.

AK: Okay. And what happened, then I worked part-time through my Army experience, I got a part-time job on weekends working at a radio station. Plus, I had my own cable television program for, I think it was for three year.

MR: Oh, okay.

AK: So, all of that Army training really helped me.

MR: It was good skills.

AK: Yeah right. It certainly did, because I wasn't bashful.

MR: What year did you actually leave Fort Hancock?

AK: 1951.

MR: And did you end up going to Korea?

AK: No. No. No. Stayed stateside. In the first hitch, I was in Asmara Eritrea which is in East Africa. Its right north of Ethiopia. And I was in the Army Security Agency and we had a radio intercept station up there. That was the forerunner of the NSA, the National Security Agency.

MR: Was the building you worked in near, in Fort Hancock or was it further out by the guns?

AK: In Fort Hancock itself. It was a wooden building. Yeah. Yeah. As I say, I never had a brick building in my life.

MR: Were you working with any civilians or were they all military?

AK: No. Strictly military.

MR: Was a mess hall nearby your barracks?

AK: Oh yes. Yes. The mess hall was close by the battery area.

MR: How was the food?

AK: The food was good. I mean, I'm still alive. I'm 75 years old, so I mean it didn't kill me. Well, you know a lot had to do with the type of Mess Sergeant we had, if you had a good mess sergeant. For instance, if you were eating on a battalion level, you are not feeding as many troops as when you're on a division level. So, naturally they can cater to you a little bit more.

MR: What social activities did they, now the Fort had just been reopened so did they reopen the theater and the Service Club?

AK: No, we didn't have that but the beach was open. So, you know, you could go fishing or you could go swimming and then of course, you could go up to Atlantic Highlands. They had ample watering holes up there and restaurants also.

MR: So, what was it like coming to a Fort that had just been closed down and was re-opening? Was there, was everything basically just closed?

AK: Yeah. Everything was closed, but what happened was we opened some of these buildings and the rest of the outfit started coming around. Like with our commo officer, that's communications and commo sergeant. We would go around in weapons carriers and jeeps and visit these abandoned buildings. And get in there and there's a lot of stuff you could scrounge like fluorescent lights and lamps that you might need and gooseneck lamps and things that the Army doesn't usually supply that are (in) short demand. So, we were able to gather that stuff up and make our life more livable. And also some equipment and tools that we used in our radio work.

MR: Since it was pretty closed, were they starting to get families back into the officers' quarters?

AK: At that time, no. Not really, not that I can recall. I don't think there were any, you know. And they did have a Coast Guard Station up at the edge of the hook. And they were there when we got there, but they were a separate entity.

MR: So, it was pretty desolate then?

AK: Yes it was. As a matter of fact, being young G.I.'s we had (been) going through all those caves where all those coastal guns were or would be. And you know, really, it was kind of eerie and very interesting part of history that we gathered.

MR: Did you ever go to New York while you were out here?

AK: No. I did not. No, no.

MR: Was this was a fun or boring place to be stationed?

AK: It was a good place. It was acceptable. We used to take a ride over to Keansburg. You know, to the beach over there to the amusements that they had. And it was good duty as far as that was concerned.

MR: Anything especially humorous occur while you were here?

AK: Humorous. Not really. I'm trying to think. I can't think of anything humorous.

MR: Anything stand out in your mind?

AK: No. It was pretty basic. You know, do your job and hoping that you get out of the Army as quickly as possible. That was the thing. And you know, after over three years, going into the Army four years, you know, you say, "I've had enough of this. Let me go home and grow up and get married and settle down."

MR: Do you keep in touch with anyone?

AK: No. Not, no, I haven't. You know part of the problem was when they first came up from, I think they were at Fort Bliss, our outfit came up to Fort Dix. I was inserted into the outfit. Most of those boys were from Oklahoma, Texas, Georgia and Mississippi and I was the only Yankee there at the time. They looked at me with a weary eye because I spoke funny. (laughter) And after a while they got some more guys in from the east coast and Philadelphia and things like that. But I had some friendships, but after we, after I got out and I went to school I didn't have time for that because school was full time and I was finishing studying and it was time for me to get down and get serious with life.

MR: Did you expect that you could potentially go to Korea or was that kind of?

AK: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. That was in my mind. As a matter of fact, I expected I would be going there. Why I didn't, you know, surprised me. There was a lot of rumors that the outfit was going overseas, but it never happened. And I don't know where they are now. I tried. I got on the website and looked up, tried to find out the history and where they went but I have been drawing blanks so far. I guess I haven't got into the right button anyway.

MR: Anything else you want to say?

AK: No, well that's about it. I mean, the Army was a good experience for me. It let me grow up. I went in as a kid, 17. I came out, I was 22. And you know, I put a lot of time in. I made a lot of friends the first time I was in. And the second time, I had acquaintances too. There were a couple of buddies we used to go out together, but after I got out we sort of lost track of each other. And that was it. But I tell you I wouldn't exchange my Army experience for anything in the world. It really, you know, it really opened my eyes and made me grow up. Taught me some discipline and taught me how to shoot a rifle, which I never knew how to do before. But I never would shoot a 90 mm gun. That's one thing, I don't think I was strong enough to pull the lanyard to make the gun go off.

MR: Okay, well thank you for your time. I am going to turn the tape off.

End of Interview