

**Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Interview with Captain Phillip Oswald,
Commanding officer of Fort Hancock's Launcher and IFC sites in 1959-1962.
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS, on May 7, 2003.
Transcribed By: Melissa Shinbein, NPS 2009.**



Captain Philip Oswald (center) accepting trophy for football team on Fort Hancock Parade Ground



Captain Oswald, 1962

MR: Today is May 7th, 2003. This is Mary Rasa, Sandy Hook Museum Curator. And I am here today with Lt. Col. Philip Oswald. And he was stationed here from 1959 to 1962. And we are going to ask him some questions. Could you tell me when and where were you born?

PO: I was born in New York City in 1929 in a quaint area known as Hell's Kitchen on the West Side. And I was educated in the New York school system. And I went on active duty in the Army in 1951 and retired in '72.

MR: Did you go to college before then or after?

PO: No, I went into the military right after high school. I got a college degree after I retired from the military using the GI Bill like a lot of my peers.

MR: Did you have your father or grandfather in the military?

PO: I had uncles in the military in World War I for the Canadian army. My mother was Canadian. And I had a great-Grandfather who was First Sergeant in the Civil War. On the winning side.

MR: Okay and you already answered when you were here. So how did you become involved at Fort Hancock?

PO: In 1959, I received an assignment when I returned from Alaska to command a C-battery in the 4th Missile Battalion in the 71st Artillery which was a double battery that was based here in Fort Hancock. I was at the Officers' Advanced School which was in Fort Bliss, Texas and Colonel John Ray, who was the 80th Group Commander, came out for a visit to the officers in our class. And at that time I was scheduled for an assignment as a Battalion Escort Fly Officer. But most of my experience in the military had been command and I asked him if he could possibly find a command for me. He said he had just the site for me. The post had just flunked the Technical Efficiency Inspection and an Operational Readiness Inspection and we are relieving the command officer. Would you like it? I said it sounds made to order. And that's how I got here.

MR: How did you go from enlisted to officer?

PO: I went to OCS in 1951 during the Korean War.

MR: Other than knowing that this person flunked those tests, did you know anything else about the site before you came here?

PO: No, except that it was the largest air defense site in the New York Air Defense and one of only four double-Herc (Nike Hercules) sites in the US.

MR: And you knew the type of job you would be performing?

PO: Yeah I had quite a bit of command and artillery experience but this was my first time

commanding with missiles.

MR: And what was your rank while you were here?

PO: Captain.

MR: And your unit again?

PO: C Battery, 4th Missile Battalion 71st Artillery. Our next major headquarters was 80th AAA Anti-Aircraft Artillery Group that was stationed at Fort Wadsworth and the next higher command Headquarters was the 52nd Artillery Brigade which was in the Atlantic Highlands. But, they were all part of an Army Air Defense Command known as ARADCOM that was stationed out of maybe the same place as SAC.

MR: I think it was Colorado Springs.

PO: Colorado Springs, right.

MR: So after your military experience, you retired?

PO: Yeah I retired in 1972.

MR: Were there ever any alerts of possibly enemy attacks while you were here?

PO: Yeah, quite a few. One time we went to the point where we raised missiles. It was an unidentified track that was later identified as a commercial airliner. We never got to the Nth degree, which was "Guns Free", when we would have been allowed to fire but we did track the aircraft and then later, when it was identified, we were told to stand down. That happened around 1961, I believe.

MR: And when that happened, what did you end up doing?

PO: Well, I breathed a lot easier after it was all over. But, we went prepared to fire as if it had been a hostile aircraft and it was a good test for the troops.

MR: So, would you have been in the ready room at that point?

PO: I was at the firing console. I would have been the guy that hit the "Fire" button because it would not have been fair to ask someone else to do it.

MR: And what building did you work in?

PO: Well the headquarters building was the horseshoe building across the way

MR: Barrack 74.

PO: 74. That was the battery headquarters but I had four operational sites. I had C1 and C2 radars and C1 and C2 launching areas and I spent most of my time visiting the sites.

MR: Can you also explain what was in the “U -Shaped” Barrack while you were there?

PO: On the second floor there was troop billeting. On the first floor was the Battery Headquarters where the 1st Sergeant was located and the executive officer, and then I had a small office. And also, the mess hall. We had a large mess hall located on the first floor. We had a weapons room in the basement. And a few other things. It was a large building with lots of room.

MR: Where there also troops billeted in the barracks next to them?

PO: We had troops that were on alert status in both the IFC area and the launching area for specific periods, like be on a week or so. And those guys we would be located down in those small barracks where they would be staying. After they were off alert, they would come back to the main headquarters to do their normal billets.

MR: Were there any soldiers in the barracks next to the HQ.

PO: I don't remember. I think most of my people were in the one barracks with the exception of those in the launcher or IFC.

MR: How many people were stationed here at the time you were here?

PO: I think the TOE, that's the Table of Organization and Equipment, the TOE called for around 140 for a battery or 160 officers and men. The officers of course all lived off post. Most of them lived off post. I lived on post, and some of my key people like my missile control warrants and my fire control warrant and my Execute officer lived on post. The rest of the officers lived off post. So, the only people in the billets were mainly Corporals on down.

MR: Mostly single men.

PO: Yes.

MR: Were you working with both civilians and military or mostly military?

PO: Well we got our support from civil service people who worked for units like Ordnance and Signal Corps support unit and they would come out and do 2nd or 3rd degree echelon maintenance.

MR: And you think you lived in building 15?

PO: Yeah, if I could get out out and walk the terrain though. Or bring my daughters 'round. They were teenagers while we were living out here and remember more than I do about where we live.

MR: So, how many people were living with you at that time?

PO: It was my wife and our four children.

MR: And did you enjoy the spaciousness of the house?

PO: Oh yeah, it was a pretty house. The only problem was I was a Captain and couldn't afford to buy a lot of furniture. We were a big family. But I did get some stuff from Quartermaster. And since my wife and I were from New York, we always had people visiting. I always had about ten or twelve cots set up for visitors for the weekends.

MR: Did you use the third floor in the building?

PO: Yeah, we used it when we had visitors. But that was mostly storage. We kept the cots were up there and some emergency rations up there.

MR: So did you generally eat at home or the Officers' Club as well?

PO: We only used the Officers' Club for social functions. They were few and far between.

MR: Did they have Hails and Farewells?

PO: Yeah, we called them "Meet and Greet" and Friday nights it was sort of automatic that the officers would meet and have a couple drinks and leave before they got to DUI status and went home to their angry wives.

MR: Did you ever go to the theater or the sporting events out here?

PO: Oh! We used the gym a lot. We had a lot of Battery athletics. We had softball teams we had football teams, and we had basketball teams. My unit was so large, that I set up intramural teams. We would have at least five teams competing. We would have a Headquarters team, C1 Radar, C1 Launching Area, C2 Radar, and C2 Launching Area teams. We would have prizes and trophies and such. But it was good for morale.

MR: Did you participate?

PO: Oh yeah, I was a basketball player in those days. But you'd never know it today.

MR: Did you ever go to movies at the theater?

PO: I can't remember but I think my kids did. I'll have to ask them and bring them out someday.

MR: Was the bakery in operation or was it shut down?

PO: That was all shut down. There was a small PX.

MR: Was the commissary open?

PO: No, instead of the commissary we had a commissary run with milk and bread from Fort Monmouth a couple times a week. They would set up right by the PX and you could go over and get milk and bread.

MR: Was the gas station open?

PO: No.

MR: Did you attend religious services out here?

PO: No, we went off post to go to the Catholic Church in Atlantic Highlands.

MR: Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Right on the highway. Did you go to the beach while you were here?

PO: Yeah, the beach was run by Fort Monmouth. Fort Monmouth Officers' Club. Fort Hancock didn't have a beach but they allowed us to use it if you were a member of the Officers Club.

MR: And was that the north beach one right off the fort?

PO: It was the one with a small snack bar.

MR: I think that was North Beach. Right to the east of us here.
You said that you had family visiting from New York. How did you get there? Car, bus or boat?

PO: We took our car. The quickest we could get to the Bronx was about 2 hours. It would be quicker now. And it's funny that you mention the boat because the commander of the Coast Guard detachment at that time was named Alexander Hamilton. Of all things, which was coincidence since *the* Alexander Hamilton started the Coast Guard, so he took a lot of ribbing in the club for that. But, we were good friends and whenever I had a meeting over in a place like Fort Wadsworth in Staten Island, or Fort Tilden or Fort Totten, he'd send me over in one of his Coast Guard boats so I didn't have that long drive.

MR: Were the train tracks gone? The train tracks were gone by the time you were here.

PO: Yeah, I understood that they had supplied ammo back in the Coast Artillery days, but, by the time I got there, they were gone.

MR: So, was there a good relationship between the Coast Guard and the Army?

PO: Oh yeah, excellent. There was no inter-service rivalry in those days. We helped one another out.

MR: Did you know of any servants, minorities, or women who worked at the fort? Either

civilian or military.

PO: There were quite a few. I can't remember any specifically.

MR: Were there any WACs at that time? Or only civilians?

PO: No, I think this was when the women's army corps went out. Well, there were some WACs at the Missile master. We didn't have any women in our unit. There were some radar operators up at the Highlands. I don't think there weren't even women at the Headquarters, though some were civilian women working in post headquarters. There were black people, too.

MR: So, you were completely integrated at that time?

PO: Oh yeah. We were completely integrated. I'd say my unit at that time was about, maybe, 11-12% black and maybe another 4-5% Hispanic.

MR: Did the commanding officer have any servants?

PO: Oh no, we didn't have servants. You're talking about the British Army on that one.

MR: Was it a fun or boring place to be working?

PO: Well it was not boring by any means. There was always a lot going on. And since we were on a 24/7 schedule we always had at least hot unit. So, that meant there were always people manning missiles and people manning radar and there were always problems. Security problems. Some boats would get too close to the launching and we were always really touchy about that to the point of paranoia since we had nuclear warheads stored there, which is common knowledge today but at the time was not.

MR: Would you be called out at night often to check on a situation?

PO: Oh yeah, that went with the territory. If something like that went down you *wanted* to be informed.

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

PO: Let's see, I'm sure there were incidents. One time we had MP (Military Police) detachments at this integral to the unit, including dogs and dog handlers, and they called security on the launching area which was the most secure area. So, one evening at about 6 o'clock the guard reported that he heard a banging in one of the missile pits. So, I went down to investigate and listen to it. We had listening devices that worked in different pitches to monitor it. And I could hear it, that steady banging, and the only thing I could think of was that some nut got down there and was hitting on a warhead. Finally, I went own and discovered it was a ventilator that had a chain or lid that had gotten loose and was the wind was blowing it back and forth. It was a big relief.

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

PO: Well, during that period of time the Army Air Defense Command was trying to raise the combat readiness status of units. So, they set up a new system known as SNAP which was Short Notice Annual Practice Criteria which meant they came down to the unit and instead of giving you two or three months advanced of knowing you're going to fire, they come down with 48 hours to pick your crews and get ready to fly out in 48 hours to Fort Bliss, assemble missiles, and fire them. They set up a criteria for Honor Battery, I forget what the numbers were. And the year, year and a half, after this SNAP Criteria had been in existence, no unit had ever achieved the status of Honor Battery. Finally, around 1961, I was leaving in '62, one of my units was selected, C1, and we did fire Honor Battery and we were the first unit in the United States Defense to do so. So, that's probably the one thing that stands out most in my mind.

MR: So, you enjoyed your time here?

PO: Oh yeah, it was the most challenging assignment I had in the US Army.

MR: Did your kids enjoy their time here?

PO: The kids loved it here, it was a great place.

MR: And they went to school in Middletown?

PO: My daughters went to a Catholic school.

MR: Was it grammar school or high school.

PO: Grammar School.

MR: The same place where we attending Church, Our lady of Perpetual Help.

PO: Oh yeah. The mayor's daughter was in my daughter's class and she used to come to down to the Fort every now and then.

MR: So, pretty much there weren't many people at the Fort when you were there?

PO: The Officer's Row was full. The occupants of Officers Row were officers and warrant officers in my battery, the battalion headquarters officers and warrant officers, brigade headquarters officers and warrant officers, and the Missile Master. The highest ranking officer was the General in command of the Missile Master, or rather the 52nd Brigade and his name was John Daly, BG Daly. His headquarters was in Highlands.

MR: Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

PO: No, except I'm happy to see some effort is being made to recreate the historic era during the Cold War when the Nike Hercules Missile was considered a viable deterrent to the Soviet

Bombers and I think you're on the right track in establishing and collecting information and trying to get as much equipment as you can. I'm certainly going to get back down here and I'd be happy to assist in anyway I can by providing recollections like this.

MR: We've come back from a a tour of the park and I have a couple more questions. What happened during Hurricane Donna out here?

PO: During Hurricane Donna we had quite a bit of advanced warnings to button up and to get people who were not necessary for operations off the post and the Sergeant Major at that time was named Melvin Bonsel. He was an old soldier who had served on the Corregidor and the Philippines during WWII, a great old soldier, just the kind of guy you wanted as a Battalion Sergeant Major as an enlisted man in the unit. He and I got quite friendly, we used to talk daily, and I knew he was hanging around 'til the last minute to leave the post because he had things he wanted to look after. At that time Melvin was the only man on post who had a Cadillac, he had a brand new Cadillac every year as befitting a man of his prestigious position. And I knew he was going to leave but the water was rising fast, so I called the Battalion Headquarters and I said, "Is Sergeant Bonsel there?" They told me he had left about 30 minutes ago. So, then I called the gate guard and I asked if Sergeant Bonsel had left yet, he told me nobody had left in the last hour. So, I figured he must be trapped somewhere between Battalion Headquarters and the main gate. I got a hold of a wrecker and I think Carl Cochran had been driving it. He drove down the road and the wrecker about three feet off the ground, there was a good three-four feet of water on the roadway. We went about halfway down the road when we found Sergeant Bonsel sitting on the top of his Cadillac. He was flooded out. So, we picked him up and took him down to my quarters and got him wrung out. I'll never forget the look of him there on top of his Cadillac.

MR: So it was destroyed?

PO: Oh yeah.

MR: How was the fishing out here?

PO: My wife and I used to go fishing down at an area near the what was then Monmouth Beach. We would bring two poles, my oldest daughter take care of the kids so we could get away from them for a couple of hours, and we used sand worms as bait. I would fix up my wife's pole and by the time I would begin to set up mine, she would have a striper. So, I would help her land it, take the fish off, bait it up against, cast it out, and again before I could set up my own pole she'd have another one. Some nights she'd catch five- six fish and I'd catch nothing.

MR: And is there anything else you would like to tell me about the incident with the missiles?

PO: Oh yeah, we had a Missile Warrant, a very fine officer, Omro Reinhart and he knew more about the Hercules Missile than any man in the service I'm sure. And we had a problem with one of the launchers during a wind storm, it locked in the up position, and although it's supposedly safe in that position, we wanted to get it down as soon as possible because if it did break loose, it could cause all kinds of problems. I asked him if there was anyway we could take it off and he said, "Yeah with a halter and a cherry picker. But I'll need some help." So the two of us went

down there, we evacuated the area so we wouldn't have any undue casualties in the event it broke loose. And Omro put the sling on it and I got in the cherry picker and we got it down. Sometime after that, somebody asked if I didn't think it was a little odd that the Battalion Commander was down there helping take a missile down, and I said, "No not at all. And when he asked me why not I said, "Because if that thing went off I didn't want to do the paperwork!"

MR: So, you really had a good time here.

PO: Yeah, we had some bright moments.

MR: Okay great, thanks so much.

END OF INTERVIEW