

**Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Interview with Gary Peal
Nike Missiles
by Billy Yirce, NPS intern
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Transcribed by Billy Yirce 2003**

Where and when were you born?

I was born January 16th, 1936 in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

How did you end up joining the Army?

I dropped out of high school in my junior year and when I was seventeen I joined the Army in Corpus Christi, Texas, which is where I lived then.

Where did they send you off to?

They sent me to basic training at Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas, then they sent me to Fort Tilden, New York.

How did you end up stationed at Fort Hancock?

I was at Fort Tilden about a week and I was with three or four other guys that just got out of basic training. We didn't have a permanent assignment yet, so they sent us out here on detail with a couple of NCO's. We cleaned up some of the barracks and tried to make them habitable for the NIKE battalion that was coming out here.

Did you know anything about Fort Hancock before you were stationed here?

Nope.

What was your job and title while working at Fort Hancock?

PFC, Launcher crewman for NIKE AJAX missiles for awhile and then I worked in the motor pool.

On the average day what would you be doing?

When I was a crewman we would practice bringing the missiles out of the silo and putting them on the launchers. When I was in the motor pool I was driving a two and a half ton truck, hauling trailers around with missiles on them.

Did this help you in your future; did you go into a related field?

It helped me because I went on to work for the postal service and I received a military title toward my retirement.

Where there ever any alerts of enemy attacks while you served here?

No.

What did you know about the missiles before you started working, did you know anything about the NIKE's?

I didn't know a thing about them. I was seventeen years old, what do I know?

Did you work with both the AJAX and the Hercules?

Just the Ajax.

What building did you live in?

Building 57, Charlie Battery.

How was the food?

The food was good. The food was very good usually. I remember a lot of different holidays they had special meals and stuff for everybody. It was better than being in jail I guess.

Did you work with both civilian and military?

We had some civilians that helped set up the batteries; they were probably corps engineer people. Then after the batteries were set up we didn't work with civilians anymore.

What did you do for fun here, social activities?

We would get into Highlands and Highlands was a unique town then as it is now. There were thirty-three taverns in Highlands at this time. So that's what we did.

Did you ever go to the city?

Yup, a couple of times.

Did you ever go to the beach?

We went to the beach, of course we had our own beach.

Do you remember what beach you guys used when you went to the beach?

They didn't have formal beaches, we just went down to the water.

Do you have any humorous stories from your time of service?

It wasn't humorous at the time, but I had old 1936 Pontiac Coupe and had it parked in the parking lot. Some drunk came in and totaled it. So that was heartbreaking, but looking back it was kind of weird. It took a lot of fixing.

When you walk around here today, do you see anything yet that jogs your memory the most, any of the buildings?

Officers Row, between headquarters and Officers Row was the parade ground. We did some drilling, we didn't do a whole lot of drilling, but we did some. We did them on different military holidays. The biggest thing I remember is the lighthouse and Officer's Row. Officer's Row was impressive then because it was in really good shape.

Is this the first time you've been back since you left?

I was back a few years ago and don't even remember when it was. It must have been the late 1980's, they had an anniversary celebration for the lighthouse and they issued a lighthouse stamp. I have a couple of them, I'm assuming I still do.

Do you still keep in contact with any of the guys you served with?

The only one is one of my barracks mates was my best man when I got married. I got married about five months before I got out of the army. Him and his wife came to see us two years ago. He is from Minnesota it was the first time I've seen him since I got married.

When you were here did you go to any religious services at all?

They had non-dominational service

Do you remember who the General was in charge here?

No.

Did you ever get to go into Officer's Row while you served?

I never went into any of the houses.

Overall, did you enjoy your service here?

Yes, for two and a half years of being in the military it wasn't bad. It's a nice place. Yea, I did enjoy it.

