

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS  
An Oral History Interview with Charles Spinella  
1225<sup>th</sup> Army Service Unit, 1942-43,  
Interviewed by Thomas Greene, NPS Intern  
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Transcribed by Thomas Minton, NPS 2008  
Edited by Mary Rasa, 2011



Mr. Charles Spinella's 1225<sup>th</sup> Army Service Unit in 1943. Photo was split in 2 sections.  
Image courtesy of NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ( )

TG: Good Morning, Mr. Charles Spinella. Thanks for taking the time out to do this interview with me. I'd like to start off with some general background questions. When and where were you born?

CS: I was born in Waterford, New Jersey, June the 20<sup>th</sup>, 1921.

TG: Okay. And where did you attend your schooling?

CS: I attended it in a small school in Bakers Mill. We had a one room school, we had 48 kids, 8 grades, and one little teacher. And she never had any problems.

TG: Were any of your relatives, such as your father or grandfather in the military?

CS: My father was in the military. My father was Swiss. He was born in Switzerland. And when he was 15, he left home and he joined the Italian Army, 1894 Italian-African Campaign.

TG: Okay.

CS: He was there until he was 21. He was a captain. He was a young fella.

TG: How did you become involved here at Fort Hancock?

CS: I joined the military. And I went to Sandy Hook, and I was there for two days, if I remember right. They shipped me here, and I don't know why I got picked for here, I thought "Huh." But I remember it was cold here, in the wintertime. Very, very cold out in the Parade Ground here.

TG: And you were here during what years? You said '42 and '43, right?

CS: Into part of '43, yes.

TG: Okay. And you had no idea what this place was going to be like before you came?

CS: No, I didn't even know where it was. Never heard of Sandy Hook. 'Course, I'm a farm kid, ya know, born and raised on a farm. So, it was horses and farms, yeah.

TG: Did you know about the type of job you would be performing?

CS: No. I didn't know the, what the MOS meant or anything at that time. An MOS (military occupational specialty), that was just letters to me, ya know? Like Polish kids, ya know. We were just kids. They shipped me here, and they had me... and I was

mechanical inclined. And, first couple of weeks, they had me working on trucks, on the big six bys. And then I met Major Johnston out on this road, that's another story.

TG: Wanna tell about that story?

CS: Oh sure, I'd like to. Well, it was one Sunday afternoon, and I was just out for a walk for myself. And, this car came down, and it was sputtering and coughing and spitting, ya know. And he pulled over to the side, and he got out and slammed the door, and he lifted up the hood, ya know. And it was Major Johnston. And I walked past and said, "Having problems, sir?" and he said, "Yeah, this damn thing...", ya know. Anyhow, I looked under the, he let me lift up the hood. Well, anyhow, I found his problem, right? And he was back on the road again. He asked me my name, and where was attached to. That was on a Sunday. Like, Tuesday, my captain calls me up to his office. He says, "From now on, you're gonna work for Major Johnston." And he showed me, the building is still here as a matter of fact, I was in. That building about three months ago, took pictures of it. And he sent me to work for Major Johnston. Anyhow, that's how I got attached to the Ordnance Engineering.

TG: Alright. What was your rank, or your title, while you were here?

CS: My what, my rank?

TG: Your rank.

CS: My highest rank was a tech sergeant. But back in them days, you had to take an examination for rank. And I was a permanent buck. You know what a buck is?

TG: No.

CS: Buck sergeant, three chevrons. Okay, nobody liked the buck sergeants. Nobody liked to be a thief and corporals. The corporals were the worst. They were company clerks. They decided what you were gonna do.

TG: I see. You said you worked for the ordnance unit?

CS: Well, when I first came here, I worked on trucks for a couple weeks until I got transferred over to Major Johnston with the guns. We put the guns up on the hill. (in Highlands)

TG: Was here where you got your training, or did you get any education on it before you came here?

CS: No. I was always...I dunno. I was born and raised on a farm. I was handling dynamite when I was four years old. It sounds crazy, but it's true. We had a big farm. We had a lot of woods and my father used to dig the stumps out. And we used to blow them with dynamite.

TG: Do you feel that the job you did here aided you in your future work?

CS: No. I don't think so. No. I went to school and became an engineer. I went to Drexel. Became an engineer after I come out of the service. Of course, no help from the service because I didn't go through the service or anything. I bought a couple (inaudible) I went to school and I paid my own tuition. I went to school.

TG: While you were here, were there ever any alerts of possible enemy attacks?

CS: Ah, yes. We used to have alerts all the time. We used to have Germans coming up in submarines, and we had Germans coming to the PX (Post Exchange) dressed in American uniforms. Didn't know it, but it was happening. (The story was probably a rumor.) We used to have a lot of alerts, lot of alerts. And I remember one morning, it was 6 o'clock. And we heard these big explosions. A German submarine had blown up an American Navy ship, right in here in the harbor. And we had like, I believe, it was 52 sailors that were hurt, in our hospital. (The U.S.S. *Turner* explosion occurred on January 3, 1944. Sailors were brought to the Fort Hancock Post Hospital. The explosion was not from a German sub but an internal explosion. It was a typical rumor of the time.) They brought 'em here. We had a nice little hospital here. It's gone now I imagine. Isn't it? It's torn down? (The Post Hospital was destroyed by fire in 1985.)

TG: I think, yeah.

CS: Yeah, destroyed, it's a shame. But, ... I am disappointed in what I see what they have done to this property. It is not for me to say, but I am disappointed in what I see. How things have been destroyed, you know? These beautiful buildings, gorgeous buildings. I've been through some of the officers' quarters, and the NCOs' quarters, they're tearing them down, I believe, some of them, it's really a shame that they are doing that to these properties. This is America. This is my America. And I love my country. (None of the yellow brick buildings have been torn down.)

TG: What buildings did you work in when you were here?

CS: I beg your pardon?

TG: What buildings did you work in?

CS: There's an engineering building, I forget the number. (Building 65) But, I have taken pictures of it, and I'm going to go see it again today. The building is over here, right behind the Theater, I think. Either that, or behind the brig, whatever it is. It has a big platform on it. That's the building where we used to work out of.

And there's a smaller building down below, where we used to keep guns and ammunition in it. Like Thompson submachine guns, and the M-1's, and the old 1915 or 1920 rifles, we had all that stuff we stored in there because, we handled the rifles. That was our job, I believe, at that time, make sure the Fort, the men who were coming in, would get their rifles. And that's what we did. And we worked on some guns. We used to have, right behind our building, we had 20 mm anti-aircraft guns. We fired them. We had .50 caliber machine guns. We fired them. We fired a lot of guns. And we had a lot of ammunition dumps. On alerts, we had to be there, at the dumps, to make sure nobody did anything rude to them, blow us up or anything like that. I remember having, I saw, somebody, one time, I think they were probably off a submarine. We had a night alert, one night, ya know and we had to approach people. And I approached this one person, and he disappeared on me. It was interesting here. It was a very interesting place.

TG: Do you remember where you ate, and what the meals consisted of?

CS: Oh, yeah. They, they... they had good meals. They really did have good food here. I mean, ya know, the average. Think for some of the men who were here, the boys that were here... they were probably eating better here than they were at home, really. But the meals were pretty good. I was never really disappointed in their food. You got what you wanted in the morning. You know, you got your ham and eggs and whatever. You got a lot of stuff like that. And it was very good meals, very good food. You wouldn't get thick on it, anyhow.

TG: What social activities or recreation did you take part in while you were at Fort Hancock?

CS: I, I, really, I never took part in anything like that, but I used to go to the Theater here. That was nice. I think it used to cost us ten cents to go to a show. They used to have real good shows. And they used to have a USO in Long Branch that I used to go to. So, I had my own car here by the way and I used to go there once in awhile. I used to love skating, and we went to Asbury Park to skate, but there was never really, that I remember, any activity, that I ever, ya know, participated in. It was a good Fort. It was a good place. They had a very good general. General Gage was a terrific man. I had another good job. I used to tow radar targets, so the guns would shoot at 'em out here, around the Hook. As a matter of fact, I helped build these targets. Out on the Highlands, there was a boat shop there, a boat factory. You wouldn't call it a factory. Anyhow, they built boats out there, and they used to used to build these big radar targets. And, I used to tow them. We had a speed boat to tow them with. But it was cold in the winter time, very cold.

TG: Yeah. I would imagine.

CS: And the guns had to shoot at them, 12-inch guns. They had 12-inch guns and they used to shoot at them. Luckily, never hit us.

TG: Would you like to talk about the 16-inch guns (Battery Lewis in the Highlands) that you said you...

CS: Yeah, there wasn't too much to talk about them... We put 'em up on the hill. We worked quite awhile on those up there. I know I was up there, very much, sometimes up there almost every day. We put the big generators up there, enormous generators, they were beautiful. Ah, that's about it. I mean, the barrels, I think, I remember, they were about 50 feet long. And like I say they were built, they were designed, I think, I don't remember where they were designed them. But anyhow, they were built, I think, in Camden, New Jersey, Camden Ironworks, or Camden Steel, or Camden Foundry. I know where it is. The "W" is still there, I think. They were machined there. Everything was made there. The barrels were made there. Let's put it that way. The barrels were made there, I know that.

TG: Did you attend religious services while you were here?

CS: Yes, I went to church occasionally. I wasn't exactly a heathen (chuckling). I did go to church occasionally, I was born and raised in church, really, and I did go to church, yes.

TG: Did you ever go to the beach while you were here?

CS: Yes. I, we used to go fishing. Stripers this time of year, beautiful fishing. You go down there for an hour, you'd have a hundred pounds of fish. Yes, beautiful fishing here, yes.

TG: Did you ever take any trips to New York City?

CS: Yes. (shows picture) Let me tell you a little something about him. See that accordion? Well, Walt and I were good friends, and we made, our pay was pretty high. He made \$21.00 dollars a day, once a month, you know what I'm saying? (chuckling)

TG: Right, yes.

CS: Before, around the 18<sup>th</sup> of the month, we were probably out of cash. We'd go to the PX and buy a cup of coffee or something, like that. Anyhow, when we ran out of money, Walt Winters and his accordion, we used to go to New York. And they used to have a program on called "Major Bowes' Amateur Hour." And we'd go there, with Walt and his accordion, and he'd win 50 bucks every time he went. So, he had enough money for the month. That's the truth. That's the honest to god truth. Many times he went there, and he always won. He was a terrific player. It's a shame he didn't get into something here. But this picture here was taken on the stage here, at this movie theater. This picture is at the Museum, in one of the books. I told John about this, and I was here. First time I came here was about 7, 8 months ago. First time in 60 years. I ran across this picture. I didn't see it first. John saw it. And I had told him about this, and I was doing something else, and he says "What's that fella's name that you said he played the accordion?" I said,

“Walt Winters.” He opened the book and he says, “Is this the guy?” This is not the picture that’s in the book. This is my picture. I have it home in my scrap book. But that’s him. Walt Winters. He was from Brooklyn, New York. I’ve lost track of him, lately... I can’t find him. I dunno, maybe he passed away. I dunno. I’ve tried to find him. He lived in Long Island, the last time I knew.



Walt Winters on the Major Bowes Show.  
Photo courtesy NPS/Gateway NRA

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

CS: A what?

TG: Was this a fun place to be at?

(The following incident did not occur at Fort Hancock.)

CS: No, this was a military place. Very, very military. And that’s what it was for. We were Harbor Defense, and you were definitely on your toes all the time. Always on your toes, really. But although you were on your toes, we did have the enemy come in. They come in, they’d be out, and then you never saw them, but you knew they were here. Somebody had saw them, or you saw a submarine out there or something like that, and they do know that Germans used to come into the PX and buy candy and stuff like that. They spoke good American. They had the uniforms, they’d come in on a raft, hide ‘em in the bushes, it was all they did was come to the PX was because they wanted something. They didn’t come to do any damage at that time. Well, it was just, ya know, things that happened.

TG: What stands out in your mind the most when you think back about your time at Fort Hancock?

CS: I came back here 60 years, 60 years ago, I was here. What came to my mind?

TG: What sticks out in your mind when you think about the time you spent here?

CS: Oh. I, I have very, very good memories. My daughter was married in the military. I had no problems with the military. I liked the military, and the military liked me. We got along just fine, 'cuz my father was a disciplinarian, and I was used to it. I had no problems with the military. Really no problems.

TG: And for a final question, do you think that schools should institute a class on what went on at Fort Hancock to the students, so they can learn the history?

CS: I think it would be good for the children today to learn what went on in history. Your children today, they don't even know what happened in Iraq yesterday. It's a shame. We were taught American history, all about our wars and everything. But today, I think the children don't know anything. All they know is what's on TV, somebody on a stage jumping' up and down, with hardly any clothes on. This is not my America. What I see. And if I were, if I had any authority, I know I'm on tape, I would stop it immediately. It would not happen tomorrow. I think it's a disgrace what they're doing to my country. This is my country. I fought for my country. And I just, I get infuriated when I see what goes on. And they let it happen. I know it's making money, but for the wrong people. So, that's my problem. I have a very, very big problem with that. And, I think about it, and I talk to my children about it, and everything, and they agree with me that it's not right. Of course, they were brought up, I talked to them, you know, they're my children. And, it's a shame what happens to the children today, the way, I dunno, I can go on forever, so I better stop.

TG: Well, I'd like to thank you for taking the time out for doing this interview with me.

CS: You're welcome, I'm sure.

TG: It was very interesting.

CS: You're a nice boy.

TG: Thank you.

CS: I hope that, whatever your endeavors are, I hope you make it.

TG: Thank you very much.

**END OF INTERVIEW.**