

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Interview with Carl Erickson,
US Coast Guard Sandy Hook Station, 1943
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS
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Transcribed by Maren Morsch, NPS 2008



Carl Erickson in Coast Guard Band at Fort Hancock Service Club, 1943



Coast Guard Signal Tower, 1943



Carl Erickson in 2003

Rasa: Hello, my name is Mary Rasa, the Sandy Hook museum curator, and today is October 25th, 2003, and I am here with Carl Erickson to do an oral history interview, and I would like to start off by asking when and where you were born?

Erickson: I was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, in September of 1924.

Rasa: Where did you graduate high school from?

Erickson: From Academy High in Erie.

Rasa: Did your father or grandfather or anyone in your family serve in the military before you?

Erickson: No, but they came over on ships from Sweden. That's as close as they got to it.

Rasa: And what years did you serve in the military?

Erickson: I went in in December of '42, and got out in March of '46.

Rasa: Were you drafted, or did you sign up?

Erickson: No, I signed up.

Rasa: Okay. And how did you become involved at Fort Hancock?

Erickson: When I...It's a kind of interesting story. When I was at over in Brooklyn at training, training, they asked if there's anybody that knows anything about Morse code?" in our barracks. And I know you're never supposed to, to volunteer for anything, but nobody put their hand up, so I put my hand up. And then "Where did you learn about, where'd you learn Morse code?" And I said, "In the Boy Scouts." And they said, "You're not in the Boy Scouts now, kid!" (Laughter) But, as a result of that, they sent me to Sandy Hook, because they needed a signalman out here. And that's how I got to Sandy Hook.

Rasa: Oh, Okay. And when was that?

Erickson: That was in February right after, right after basic boot camp, that was in February of '43.

Rasa: And where was your boot camp held?

Erickson: I was at Manhattan Beach.

Rasa: Did you know anything about this place before you came here?

Erickson: Not a thing.

Rasa: So basically, were you taught the type of job you were doing, since you already knew some basics, or did they send you to more schooling, or did they just send you immediately here?

Erickson: The...I was working with another person who was more advanced in signaling than I was. His name was Correra, C-O-R-R-E-R-A I think it was, was because he used to spell it out for me in dots and dashes, and I never forgot his name.

Rasa: So were you assigned on any of the ships, or were just in the main base?

Erickson: No, the first assignment I had was with Correra and a couple others who knew signaling, at an old Western Union tower, here out over by the Coast Guard station. It was very interesting situation because there was an old man by the name of Poole, who was a telegrapher, and his job over many years was to get out his big brass telescope, and

watch ships coming in Ambrose Channel. And then he would sit down and telegraph New York, da-da-duhduhduh-da, so that they would know that this ship was coming in, and probably make preparations for where its going to dock, and are the facilities ready that, for the ship to come in. And that was Mr. Poole's job.

Rasa: Was he still here when you were here?

Erickson: He was still here, yeah.

Rasa: And Western Union was still functioning?

Erickson: In the Western Union tower.

Rasa: Were they functioning the whole time you were here?

Erickson: Well I wasn't in the Western Union tower too long, because they built a tower, and I just happen to have a picture of it...this is the tower that was built.

Rasa: Where you did work on?

Erickson: This tower was built after I joined, after I came to Sandy Hook.

Rasa: Oh, Okay.

Erickson: Before that we just had the, we had the Western Union tower.

Rasa: So you had to climb to the top of this tower to work?

Erickson: Pardon me?

Rasa: You would climb to the top of the tower--

Erickson: Yeah.

Rasa: To work?

Erickson: And an interesting little thing about that is, we had our signal...our signal lamps up on top in that tower, here's...and that's me and here's Bruce DeCamp, who was from Hammond, Indiana. And uh...

Rasa: So it wasn't enclosed.

Erickson: Well, it was...the bottom was enclosed. But if you wanted to signal, you had to climb a little ladder and get on top. And this is a drawing made by Bullwinkle in 1943. This is for Thanksgiving menu, in 1943. And to give you an idea of the types of vessels that we had here, this is an 83-footer. And here is the, the new tower, and here is the old, old tower, for all the old telegram tower. And I don't know how accurate this drawing is,

but I see this looks like something that was...hanging out the tower.

Rasa: So this was Sandy Hook Coast Guard Station 97, is that was they referred to it as back then?

Erickson: Yeah.

Rasa: Okay.

Erickson: And its signed by the Commander, Marlin...

Rasa: Were there other Coast Guard stations in the area that you communicated with? Was the one in Monmouth Beach functioning?

Erickson: We didn't communicate with any other Coast Guard station. There was one out to kinda the...north, east point here, and that was George zero 5, but that was a Navy, a Navy signal tower.

Rasa: Now, at the same time, was the Coast Guard maintaining the lighthouses that are in the, in the water, like Romer Shoals and West Bank?

Erickson: I don't know anything about the lighthouses, but if they, if they were maintaining that, as with Sandy Hook, the light was darkened during World War II. But it was the responsibility of the Coast Guard, as were most, most lights.

Rasa: So who would you be signaling to, these ships just from station Sandy Hook?

Erickson: We were challenging vessels coming out of Raritan Bay. Sometime fishing vessels, other vessels that came right across our view here, into Sandy Hook Channel. And we would, we would blink to them, and get the--

Rasa: They had to identify themselves?

Erickson: Yeah.

Rasa: Well you're the first person with the Coast Guard that I've interviewed, this is very interesting.

Erickson: Pardon me?

Rasa: You're the first person with the Coast Guard that I've interviewed.

Erickson: Oh really?

Rasa: Yes.

Erickson: Can I skip to something else here?

Rasa: Sure.

Erickson: We...we had enough Coast Guard musicians to form a band. And this is the group.

Rasa: Now is this in Fort Hancock Service Club?

Erickson: This is Fort Hancock. This all Coast, all Coast Guard. And we would play at the PX, which was where the Nike Missile is right now, there's a park?

Rasa: That was the Fort Hancock Service Club, back then.

Erickson: Yeah. And they'd serve three-point-two beer--

Rasa: Near beer.

Erickson: Yeah. And the girls came from Rumson and Red Bank and Highlands to dance... and the, I don't know if you ever heard of Major Bowes?

Rasa: Yes.

Erickson: Well, Major Bowes came once to visit us, and he was particularly interested in our drummer. We had a very good drummer. Once, one time I had a picture of Major Bowes talking to our drummer, and the drummer was performing for him.

Rasa: Now were you allowed, as service members, to go to the, up to the Service Club any time, or were there certain nights that Coast Guard was allowed there, or was it basically—

Erickson: Well, there were certain nights that the Coast Guard would play. We did the...we did, that's me, back over here. I play the trumpet. We did play the Officers' Club a couple times.

Rasa: But you were allowed to go to the Service Club any time you wanted, just to relax, right?

Erickson: Most of the...It was open evenin's. And if you had time off, we could, we could go over there. The band played, on occasion, and it was a lot of fun. I think, as I recall, we played in Newark once or twice. But it was a good group, and enjoyable.

Rasa: What was your rank or title?

Erickson: I started out as a Signalmen Striper. That means your hopin' to get to be a petty officer. And then I became a Signalmen, Third Class. That's signalmen with one stripe. And I eventually became a Signalmen with two stripes, Second Class Signalmen. And I used my signaling experience around here aboard a troop transport.

Rasa: Was it part of a specific unit? Were you part of smaller group than just the Coast

Guard Station at Sandy Hook?

Erickson: All I know is Coast Guard Station at Sandy Hook.

Rasa: Oh Okay. I was just referring to what the Army has, the 7th Coast Artillery and the 245th were both here in World War II, I was wondering if there was something like that...

Rasa: Did this job aid you in future work?

Erickson: Did it...did what?

Rasa: Did it assist you in your future career, after you left the military?

Erickson: I... I kinda think that it did. Because it was communications, and after I got out of the service, I decided that I wanted to go to college. Couldn't afford it before the service, but with the GI bill I could afford it. I could even afford to get married two years after joining during college. I took courses in communication, and advertising, marketing and I was in some form of marketing or sales promotion for forty years.

Rasa: Oh, Okay.

Erickson: Mostly in the pharmaceutical business. But it was the communication part, I think, that somehow ties into it. With the, with the light hoists, in convoy, we had constant communication because we had 66 ships in convoy. And many times, we were in prime position with radar, a lot of our ships didn't have radar, early on, and we would communicate to other ships help 'em out.

Rasa: So you stayed in New Jersey after your service time was up?

Erickson: Yeah, after I got out of the service, I went to college in New Jersey...

Rasa: Where'd you go?

Erickson: I went to Upsala College in East Orange...and I've been in New Jersey basically ever since.

Rasa: Okay. So you worked in the tower, did you also work in any other buildings on the facility there, or was that basically the location where you'd be?

Erickson: No, the tower was my assignment. And I wonder if any of the Army guys ever talked about the boat that went to New York, the Chauncey Depew?

Rasa: Yes.

Erickson: We would, like, if we had time off, would take the Chauncey Depew to New York.

Rasa: And was that a Coast Guard vessel, or an Army vessel?

Erickson: No, that was a civilian vessel.

Rasa: Oh Okay.

Erickson: Maybe the Army had taken over during the war, but it was a steam boat, had plenty of space on it, and it got us into New York, and we could take it at liberty, and enjoy it.

Rasa: Did they bring you to the Battery?

Erickson: Yes.

Rasa: You can get all around from there.

Erickson: (laughter)

Rasa: Were you just working with military, or did you ever work with civilians?

Erickson: While I was in the Coast Guard?

Rasa: Yes.

Erickson: It was always, always military.

Rasa: What building did you live in? Is it still there?

Erickson: When I first came to Sandy Hook, they had a barracks, which has since been removed, as other barracks have been removed from this area. But it was just a plain barracks. And then, later on, the white house, that'd be, Commander Morin's house, I lived there for, for some time.

Rasa: Building One, the big building?

Erickson: It was a big white building.

Rasa: Yes, Okay.

Erickson: And I have a feeling that that building was moved. It doesn't seem to be the same position that it was before.

Rasa: Really?

Erickson: Yeah, I think this drawing would show this building right here as being Morin's. Cause it was pretty close to the water. Now, they've got those big buildings here, and I was over there not so long ago and looked around, and there are big, the stone buildings, and I couldn't even see the white house. But from the distance here I can see, is kinda way back. I think they might've moved it.

Rasa: Hmmm...And there was a mess hall there, for you to eat?

Erickson: In the, in the white building there.

Rasa: What social activities, other than going to the Service Club, did you ever go to the beach while you were here?

Erickson: I don't recall doing that.

Rasa: Fishing?

Erickson: No...

Rasa: You just went to New York and the Service Club? Did you go to the theater?

Erickson: No. I don't remember that...Oh, we had a little box, like a dumbwaiter, on the tower? And we had a little dog called Flags. And we'd give Flags a ride up, up to the tower. (Laughter)

Rasa: That must've been a sight.

Erickson: (Laughter) Ridin' in the dumbwaiter.

Rasa: Were there ever alerts of attack, potential enemy attacks, when you were working?

Erickson: We heard of some problems out in the Ambrose Channel. But they didn't directly affect where we were located.

Rasa: So you didn't have to do anything special, in response.

Erickson: No.

Rasa: Did you attend religious services at the Fort?

Erickson: Yes, I went to the little church, the chapel up here.

Rasa: The...St. Mary's Catholic Chapel?

Erickson: No, the little white one.

Rasa: Oh, the regular chapel.

Erickson: Yeah, the one that's been changed, by the boat landing.

Rasa: Yes.

Erickson: Yeah, nice little chapel.

Rasa: Was this a fun or boring place to be working?

Erickson: Well, I'll tell ya...I found, I found signaling interesting, as I did when I was on the ship. You're always up on the bridge, we kinda knew what was going on. Even before the Captain knew what was going on, you knew what was going on, if you were a signalman. And I can't think of any assignment that I would've wanted that was different than signalman. I really liked that. I never felt bored. But there were times where Mr. Poole would say, "Hey, go down and get some coal, for the coal bucket." And I'd say, "You shouldn't be spittin' in the coal bucket," I says, "It's rusting out the bottom."

Rasa: Ooh...Interesting.

Erickson: And he's say, "Who do you think you are, tellin' me what to do, I been up here for years!" (Laughter)

Rasa: Like thirty years or something, yeah...did anything especially humorous occur while you were here?

Erickson: Well, since its sixty years ago...no, forty years ago, right? How old was I?

Rasa: No, it was...sixty years ago.

Erickson: Right, sixty years ago...I don't think of anything particularly humorous.

Rasa: Okay. Did you ever take the train that...though Sandy Hook? Back on the line, back to New York City? Did you ever go by train?

Erickson: I never went by train to New York...the Chauncey Depew was my way to go.

Rasa: It's much quicker. Did you ever go to Highlands or Sea Bright to socialize, to go to the bars, to do anything like that?

Erickson: Yeah, I did.

Rasa: Did you go to Sea Bright, or just Highlands, was it?

Erickson: I remember going to Sea Girt. I remember going down to Asbury Park, and one thing I remember about Asbury Park was one hotel had a lot of British sailors in it. We thought that was interesting, a lot of British sailors were in this one hotel in Asbury Park when we went there. Same thing, and somehow went to Red Bank one time too. I didn't let the grass grow on my feet. (Laughter)

Rasa: Gotta explore where you are. What stands out in your mind about your time here?

Erickson: About my time? I would say...I would say my job, and as I recall, walking along the bay to, to the PX. I can just see me walking in my sleep, walking along the bay there, after a few weeks.

Rasa: I walk out here now, and I know it's cold... I can imagine!

Erickson: Yeah...

Rasa: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Erickson: Only that I'm thankful that I learned about the opportunities to come here, after all these years, to open up the, to be in the lighthouse...but it's really enjoyable, coming back here ...and I find it interesting to be in the lighthouse. And every time I get up there, I look down at the Coast Guard station, now there are a lot of houses with families living there, we didn't have any families living there when I was there, but being nearby, I had a picture of a Coast Guard vessel, and I went over there, and said, "I'd like to come in and show you something I have here, I can give it to you," and they let me in, and it was enjoyable, to come back after a good number of years, and somehow recollect things a bit, like we're doing.

Rasa: Sounds great. When did you leave here?

Erickson: I left in...this was November of '43? I left very shortly after that, in December. '43.

Rasa: And how many people were assigned to that Coast Guard station? Do you have any number? Were there several hundred, or...

Erickson: You know, I've been thinking about that, and I really have, I couldn't even guess how many were here at that time.

Rasa: You don't think there were more than a thousand people.

Erickson: I think if there were 200 people, I think that would probably be about it.

Rasa: Because there was basically one barracks, or...

Erickson: Pardon me?

Rasa: How many barracks were there?

Erickson: I think there were about three barracks.

Rasa: Oh Okay. So that was probably about 200, somewhere around there.

Erickson: Yeah. And then once in awhile, we'd meet to have the, to lower the flag and so forth, and being a trumpet player, I also played the bugle.

Rasa: Oh, great.

Erickson: But when we were all gathered out there, in what you'd call, might say it was a

parade ground, there weren't that many of us. If there were a hundred out there, I think that would be about it, at that time.

Rasa: Was the flag lowering by the main building, is that where they would have it?

Erickson: That was behind the white Morin house, there was a, like a parade ground, not a big parade ground, but it was this field, and that was where the flag was. And then over to the side, were a couple of the barracks. And there was a shop over on this side, and then the tower was over here. So you had the Morin house, barracks, field, shop, and then the signal tower. And the Western Union tower was over here.

Rasa: Okay. Well thank you very much; this has been a very good interview.

End of interview.