

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, National Park Service  
An Oral History Interview with Albin Zwiazek  
52<sup>nd</sup> Coast Artillery (Railway), Battery C, 1937-39  
Interviewed by Elaine Harmon and Tom Hoffman, NPS  
May 18, 1986  
Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2012



Al Zwiazek in front of Barracks 74 in two uniforms. The uniform on the right replaced the uniform on the left in 1938.



Mr. and Mrs. Zwiazek in 2003.

Photos courtesy of NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ( )

(This interview is part of a public tour at Fort Hancock. The tour originated at the Fort Hancock Museum which was the former Army Guardhouse Building 28. Some audio recorded outside was difficult to understand.)

EH: Today is May 18, 1986 and we are tape recording Al Zwiazek in "A Walk in Time."

AL: We had gone to Delaware right near where the ferry lands now, the Cape May Ferry, Lewes, Delaware. The place called Cape Henlopen. We went down there both batteries, 52<sup>nd</sup> Coast Artillery Regiment and we went down there with our guns. We'd fire them there at Lewes, Delaware, Cape Henlopen. We were there about two weeks. We lived in tents. We built the railroad. We built the spur off the main line. It was hard work. I had a title of railway sergeant and expert gunner but I was getting the pay of private first class. In other words, they didn't give out the money in those days. They were very cheap. I have to get that in (laughter). Especially when I have to give my mother half of my pay every month.



Mr. Zwiazek's battery at Lewes, Delaware in 1938.

TH: One time, Al mentioned to me you literally had to wear out, you wore something out and you had to show it worn out to get a replacement for it.

AZ: I didn't wear my stuff out. I used to take care of my stuff. There was a pair of boots here and a pair of breeches that I wore here like new, but you do wear things out. I'm not saying that you don't. We had a clothing allowance, so many pennies a day. During the War there was no clothing allowance. I was in the War, not here though. So, they would just, you bring a thing in and they issue a new one. No trouble. I fell down once. I hurt my knee. I just walked in a supply room and asked for a pair of slacks and my friend gave them to me. But here you didn't want to use up the money from the clothing

allowance. You wanted to save that for when you were discharged. I got \$52, 52<sup>nd</sup> Coast Artillery, \$52 when I was discharged for three years that I saved in my allowance. Tom is bringing out the boots and breeches that I wore here until April of 1938 when we switched to slacks. This was heavy stuff. We wore this summer and winter.

TH: The latest thing back in the 1930s. You might want to mention this is the style of the World War I U.S. Army soldier of 1917-1918 and this is what they were still issuing here in the late 1930s.

AZ: They didn't wear boots during World War I. They wore leggings, wrapped leggings. The early '30s they came out with these boots. Everyone wore them except the Infantry. The Infantry still wore wrapped leggings. But it was an interesting experience here for a young 18 year old kid. You know, I never saw a canon in real life before and when I went home to New Jersey, northern Jersey, I met a fella in Passaic. He told me go to the *Montauk*. "They are showing newsreels of you guys firing the guns at Fort Hancock." So, I went to the *Montauk* and I sat through about three shows to see myself and the rest of the other guys, you know, firing the 12-inch (railway) mortars. There were about four companies here during that. We fired just about all the guns. We had West Point Cadets come here, ROTC, CMTC, (and) National Guard. They came here to watch us and once in a while they would supplement us in these different positions on the guns. Like the 12-inch mortar, there were 28 men on that crew, on the gun and on the ground. Every time that gun fired, a man ran around to tighten up all the outriggers. Large steel beams like that come out and going into a thing that looks like a raft and its buried in the ground because the guns shook from the 130 some odd inch recoil. We were capable of firing a round a minute. So, there were two guns, maybe a half minute a round per gun, 1,046 pounds. Load the shell and load the powder like anywhere from 35 to 55 pounds of powder in the silk bag. The reason they used silk is because it burns rapidly. Fastest burning material they had. So, they used silk. And if we had powder left over we stretched it out along the beach and burned it. You didn't save it. The state troopers used to come here for all their ammunition. We had ammunition here that could blow up this whole state. This was in the '30s. You know shells, live shells. All kinds of things, you know, you had to be ready. They were fighting overseas already some of these countries in '39. And they had another battery up here for the 7<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery. They used to go out in the water and plant mines. If the ship hit the mine then it would blow up the ship. They used to do that out in the harbor here quite frequently. That was the 7<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery Headquarters Battery. They also had the red insignia but they had an animal. I forget what animal it was. And they wore the insignia here like we did. But there's was one animal was facing one way and the other animal was facing the other way. They faced each other. They wore them here. The commanding officer was always a colonel from the 7<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery. That's the regiment he was from. He only had one battery here but he was the commanding officer of the whole Post and whereas the 52<sup>nd</sup> Coast Artillery we had three batteries. One (was) C Battery, E Battery and Headquarters Battery and they had a band. Headquarters Battery had a band. So, we used to go out there on parade once in a while and do things. People used to come here like June 1939 the King and Queen of England were here and we were members of the guard. Some of us were members of the Guard of Honor for them. They landed in, they came by train

from Washington and they got off at Red Bank, E Battery, the battery next door went out to Red Bank. They formed a Guard of Honor at the railroad station. C Battery, the battery I was in formed a Guard of Honor on the pier over here. It was a destroyer waiting to take them up to the battery. And that same day they went to the World's Fair. They came from Red Bank. They came through here. They gave them a 21 gun salute here. Two canons fired by that flagpole over there. Those two canons were fired, you know, one after the other, back and forth. 21 gun salute which a head of state gets or King and Queen and then a Coast Guard Cutter *Campbell* which was anchored out in the (Sandy Hook) Bay there also gave a 21 gun salute. They were there and talked to the Guard of Honor and the King and Queen got out of their cars there and spoke a few minutes to the big shots. At one moment there, the King said, "What do I do now?" (laughter) Then they told him, you know, and they got on this destroyer. This destroyer took them up to the Battery and from there they went to the World's Fair. The next day, they ate those hot dogs at Hyde Park at Roosevelt's place. People remember reading about. None of you were alive yet so you read this in some history somewhere. But the first taste they had of hot dogs. That's what happened. So, that was an interesting thing. The guys that didn't look too great they put in the kitchen or somewhere. (They) hid them in the background. I know a couple of those. The nice looking guys like me get out there. (laughter)



Guard of Honor at Red Bank Train Station for King and Queen's visit June 10, 1939

TH: Al as you can see is also very modest former soldier but in that vein when it came to guard duty you had to look sharp. And since we are standing in front of the Guardhouse I would like you to come front and center and explain what happened here. It's just not soldiers sitting around guarding maybe some prisoners in there or taking some prisoners out. But there was quite a mini spectacle here when there was a changing of the guard. It was very formal and you also had to look sharp to, when you reported for guard duty. So

I would like Al right now to maybe tell us a little bit about guard duty here back in the late 1930s.



Image of Fort Hancock Guardhouse, Building 28 from the late 1930s.

AZ: If you didn't look sharp you would be on KP so long you'd think you'd taken a mess sergeant's course or something like that, you know. So, what it was everyone polished up for guard mount. They sent two extra men. Two men more than they needed mount all the posts here. Those two out those group became orderlies. One was the commanding officer's orderly and one was the adjutant's orderly. And if you became an orderly you wore a red brassard over here. Like the MPs wear the blue and white, this would be a red brassard. So, if you walked around on here everyone looked up to you because you were an orderly. You went over there to Headquarters. You relieved the other orderly from the day before. Guard mount ended at 12 noon. I am going to go into the guard mount. I just want to finish this about the orderlies. You went in there and the orderly that you were gonna relieve, let's say the commanding officer's orderly he would put his arm out. The new orderly would peel off the brassard and hand it to the old orderly and you put your arm up and he puts it on your arm. Now he is relieved and you are now orderly. And you stay there until the end of the day. Go back to your barracks. Ate, slept in your bunk instead of here and the next day you reported back in here at 8:00. 12 noon you were relieved by the new orderly. The commanding officer's orderly never did anything. He was just there. (The) adjutant's orderly which was a lower rank of the two used to have to go around with orders to different officers and what not. I liked that lower rank because I could go out there and show off and show that I am an orderly. If I am sitting in there no one sees that. No one know it. I am kidding. It was a really formal thing. Now we used to get sentries from all the batteries, several from each battery. Four posts, you needed three men for each post. You needed three corporals. One for each relief. This was like a shift and then the sergeant of the guard. He's the overall commander of the guard and a bugler of the guard. The bugler came on duty he sounded all the bugle calls including extras like fire call or (inaudible) call or whatever right from where that flagpole is. There was a megaphone there. Sounded the call twice this way.

He turned around and sounded it twice the other way. The other battery was up here, Headquarters Battery. Fire call he ran out there and called Fire Call. All the buglers on the Post picked up that call. All the buglers they would sound fire call. That happened a few times. We had a fire at the Officers' Club just before we were going to New York for a parade. Just before that. So, all the people would form out beyond this building here. They would march out to just about where this building is now. Right past that tree there and they would form there for guard (inaudible). In the meantime, the old guard would come out of here. Everyone except the man walking post 1. The only person at 11:30- 12 noon that did not move off his post. All the other fellas who walked these other posts, we walked them at night because they were free. You had to be here. You couldn't wander off in case (inaudible). The officer of the day was inspecting the new guards there. The old guard would form out here. They would be several men where this gentleman is standing here. Several men at the other end and you would have the prisoners in between. All these GI prisoners would be there with sentries on either side of them. The old guard. The new guard was being inspected. Then the new guard was told to march to the Guardhouse. The officer of the day would do the inspections. He wore a saber. You knew he was the officer of the day because he was the only officer wearing a saber. During the War, they did away with sabers. It was before the War. You saw a man with a saber you knew he was the officer of the day unless there was a parade and audience. They would finish there. March the guard to the Guardhouse. Give the proper command and they would march this way out of the grass there. When this guard, there was a sergeant out front, when this guard saw the new guard coming the sergeant who was the commander of this group would give the command, "Present arms." In other words, these troops would be doing this. These guys, that's a salute. All kinds of salutes. This is a salute. This is a salute. But when you are standing like this you don't present arms. Okay. So, now the troops are coming here, the new guard. He gives the command, the sergeant, "Present arms." These guys are given the command, "Eyes right," which is also a signal. "Eyes right." The new guard which is returning a salute of the old guard. The new guard watches the cross here. Forms over here on this brick walk just like these people but there are no prisoners, just guards. Everything is picked out already. The orderlies are picked out. Each man is assigned his post. You come here, now two sergeants facing that way, the old guard, the new guard, the old officer of the day, the new officer of the day. This sergeant salutes the old officer of the day. This sergeant salutes the new officer of the day. Then these two sergeants face each other and they salute. Those two officers face each other and salute and then the officer of the day give the command, "Dismissed." These guys go back to their, they march the prisoners in go back to their barracks and these take over. Now the fellas that are gonna walk the night shift post from six o'clock at night. They have nothing to do in the afternoon unless there is some emergency. So they are assigned to take out prisoners to work all over this area. The one who walks, the three men who walk post 1 do not guard prisoners because they are busy there two (hours) on and four (hours) off for 24 hours. You wind up walking that post for eight hours and its tiring because you have duties to perform. But see this is called the informal guard mount that I described to you. Another guard mount we used to have out in the Parade Ground once in a blue moon and that was called formal guard mount. The band was there. The pipe and drum corps was out there. The sergeant major was out there. All the top people were out there, the adjutant. It was

a very involved ceremony. Then when it was over the band marched away and the pipe and drum corps escorted the new guard here to its position. Very, very interesting, so post 1, (you) walked that post. He had certain duties to perform. He just didn't walk around. If he saw the commanding officer walk out of his house I told one fella, "I saw Colonel Magruder step out of his door and I said, Turn out the guard, commanding officer." He said, "I'm better than you," he said, "I saw the doorknob turn and I said turn out the guard, commanding officer." Now where's that house? The largest house there.

TH: Where the cars are parked (House #12)

AZ: You can't see the doorknob turn. He used to lie a lot and tell stories. So you turn out the guard for the commanding officer. If you saw the officer of the day, you knew he was the officer of the day because he had a saber and you knew him from guard mount so you said, "Turn out the guard, officer of the day." If you saw armed parties of soldiers marching with rifles. "Turn out the guard, armed party." "Turn out the guard, National Colors." You had these things to do. You always had to be alert, look all the time. Now if the commanding officer did not want to inspect the guard he heard you say, "Turn out the guard, commanding officer," he would salute and you would return the salute. He saluted first, the colonel saluted a private out on post. A lot of people don't know this. If he salutes, that means I don't want the guard. So you turn around and say, "Never mind the guard." Okay. And they all relax. If no one says anything they all get out here and form here with rifles and pistols and whatever and they are ready for inspection that they have and then the officer of the day also. You watch him. Turn out the guard during the day. If he doesn't return the salute, you better get the guard out. You know, you could be (inaudible) on duty out here. If he salutes, then never mind the guard. (Inaudible) anytime the National Colors like, the 7<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery for parades each battery took turns being the Color Battery. (Inaudible) Those colors were marched in front of your battery. So we rotated. When it was 7<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery's turn, they marched out here from their barracks quite a way up the road here. They marched right, well, "Turn out the guard, National Colors." "Company present arms," when they came by and marched to the Parade Ground. The people who guarded prisoners, like I said they worked nights from 6:00 to 6:00 in the morning. They would have to dump and there was a dump down the street, various jobs. Shoveling coal to officers' houses and things like that. So you kept busy. If you wanted to go to eat, certain people went to eat. The rest of the people stayed here. You know, you just didn't walk away from, you had to get permission of the corporal who was on duty. Not just walk off. He had to know where every one was. Some of these prisoners were rough guys. The ones who were rough were (inaudible) prisoners. That's a prisoner awaiting court martial or garrison prisoners. Garrison prisoners were prisoners who had been court martial and he is serving anywhere from 30 days to 6 months. A general prisoner serving anywhere from 6 months, he does not stay here long. They take him up to Governors Island, Castle Williams. I wound up guarding prisoners there, long term 20 to 30 to 50 years, 100 years, life. So, they would not be here long. So they had a thing on them on that type over there that fence there. They had a little garrison prisoners and general and they used to have little pegs like how many of each. Post #1 sentry would be there walking his post. He would see a sentry coming up here with prisoners so he would get ready for them. And that sentry could

say, "Post #1 more prisoners." I would turn around and say, "Corporal of the guard, more prisoners." (inaudible) "Turn them in." Now they know the prisoners are coming in and get ready. They had to escort them in to the area in the back. Everything had to be done exactly. No fooling around. I was in the Army for eight and a half years, most of it in the War. They weren't GI like. (inaudible) Before the War everything was strict. You had to know your rifle number, your pistol number, who the secretary of war. Who was chief of staff, all of this stuff. I liked that stuff so, I used to remember it. I used to loan my rifle a lot because I really polished it with linseed oil. (inaudible) "Loan me your rifle because I am going on the line." Okay, and he would need the serial number which I memorized 374378. I still remember it. It was 49 years ago. This one 256457, so they get up there. Of course, the officer of the day, (inaudible). "What's the serial number of this rifle?" Knowing that you could be using another guy's rifle so, he said 374378. That was my rifle. I am the guy who (inaudible) all kinds of stuff. One guy had a pair of custom made boots made. Custom made, you know. They didn't match up with those boots. They weren't like this. Those I bought, so we would be dinged. You wouldn't make orderly. One fella had his boots shined. See, over here they crinkle a little bit. He had two guys tie him down the steps like this from the barracks. I couldn't believe it. (laughter). He wanted to make orderly. When he came here he marched like this. He wanted to be an orderly.

TH: Al, I would like you to tell everyone the story about the time that you were trying to call out the guard and you couldn't. You were doing guard right out front there.

AZ: You know I am telling them about....

TH: Yes. About the little accident they had here.

AZ: I was walking this post once I want to tell you something and I am not bragging or anything like that. They used to pick the neatest soldier after the orderlies were picked. They used to pick the neatest soldiers to walk this post. It was just like at Army if I saw you, you had to be sharp. So they picked...so some day I saw the officers at the second building down here. Bachelor Officers' Quarters and this second lieutenant was a bachelor who lived there. He was the officer of the day. He was coming down this way and right down the street here they had compressor and jackhammer ripping up the street. All this noise, so I saw him coming down. So, you know, what you do when you are on guard with your rifle if you see him you do this (making loud noise with gun). You come to quarter arms, "Turn out the Guard, officer of the day." And now you are waiting if he salutes. And if salutes you turn and salute and that's it. Goodbye. He's not saluting. He is coming. No one could hear me because the jackhammer. I am getting nervous. He is coming closer and closer and I look back. Nobody is coming out the Guardhouse. They are supposed to be out here so can inspect the guard. That's what he wanted to do. He came up to me and he blew his stack. I said, "Sir, they don't hear me." He was blowing his stack. He figured someone should watch it like they were looking around or something. They were probably reading a magazine or something. So then another time they had a guard mount here and (inaudible) the Army pistols. When I came here we were walking post with pistols. Then a new colonel came in and he decided he wanted



the guard to carry rifles. We were trained in rifles. That's the first thing you get. Okay. Now we carried rifles. Besides the rifles you had the pistols and one day there was guard mount and this captain (inaudible) he was the officer of the day. He was wearing a campaign hat like Tom Hoffman is wearing here. He is wearing this hat and he takes this pistol and he looks at it. He hands it back to me. A pistol has a clip. It has, you have five rounds of ammunition. What you do is you take you pistol out of its holster. You take the clip out. You click the little button and boop. It slides out and you hold it like that. He is inspecting your clip and you ammunition. He inspected your pistol and he puts it back. What he was supposed to do because its (inaudible) He puts the clip in. Lets the slide go forward and pulls the trigger right through the guys campaign hat. (laughter) It missed him maybe an inch or something. The captain turned white.

TH: This happened right out here. Right?

AZ: Right over there. Right where they inspect the guard. Right past that tree. Right here. Pow, you know.

TH: What did the captain do?

AZ: I don't want to tell you what he did. I am glad I am not in the laundry business. (laughter) I don't know but he turned white. He was right there loud. We fired pistols. You knew it could go off and it was loud and we didn't have ear plugs like right now you see. We didn't have them. When we went out on the range with cannons we had cotton. After the first round went off the cotton went out of your ears. (laughter) You had no time to put new cotton in. You know that was it the end of the line. Then you get Coast Artillery, hey (can't here) who is in charge of quarters? Let me tell you about this one guy who had artillery ears. He was an old sergeant. He was a gun commander. The battery commander was up in the tower. He shouts down, "Suspend firing." Because there was a boat in the bay out there. There was a target out in the ocean being towed and a boat had gotten into the field of fire. He sees this, you know, and, "Suspend firing." Okay, so this sergeant has got the lanyard around here and he's ready to pull the lanyard. He's on the ground, see. The gun is ready to and they had what they call a TI bell, Time interval bell. And it went beep, beep, beep. On the third beep you get, "Fire." And all hell broke loose. So he's there with this lanyard and the battery commander says, "Suspend firing." The sergeant says, "Corporal Bruner," he's in charge of quarters, "Fire." (gasp from audience) It didn't do any harm. The battery commander was going crazy up there. You know, things like that happened. One guy ran to the hospital. He said he had appendicitis. He (inaudible) He was just scared for gun to go off. It's so loud and you are right there. You know the mortar is loud, very loud and everything goes flying. You hold you mouth and you will be standing (inaudible). And you are supposed to have it open and be on your toes. At the time you are not on your toes you are doing something. Getting ready for the next round.

TH: (Tour information about taking a walk. Not transcribed.)

AZ: Here on this post right here at night here all the posts, after 11:00 at night you see anyone walking you challenge them. By that you say, "Halt. Who's there? Who goes there? Who is there? Halt, who is there? Who is there?" Some guy will tell you, "Joe Blow." We don't take any bull. You are at full arms now you are ready. Before you open your mouth you're ready. When you have a pistol you have a pistol out. You have it out. You don't challenge and then take your pistol out. Here's your rifle. The guy is walking over there, right. The sentry is here. It's at night. He is walking here. He sees the officer of the day. He sees the thing glistening, the saber, the scabbard glistening, you know, the scabbard could be some phony. "Who's there?" "Cleopatra," he says this guy. (Sound of rifle clicking.) Boy is that loud at night.

TH: At night.

AZ: You know, what that officer knew. He knew that this fella just put a shell in the chamber. (laughter) Lieutenant Prescock, you know, we don't take baloney. You could say it was peacetime. You know, we were getting ready for War in the late '30s. We went to war and thousands of guys were killed. We were getting ready for this. The *Hindenburg* flew right over here. And it crashed that night and burned, that night. There had a hundred guys from my outfit that went there. I wound up in the hospital with poison ivy. I was loaded with it from the guns. You fire them and you know there is a lot of poison ivy around. A hundred of our men went down there to guard the wreckage. They brought back some souvenirs. I have a piece of the fabric that didn't burn. A little piece of the metal, very light metal. So different things happened here a lot of interesting things. Alright. Tom.

TH: Let's take a short walk right up the sidewalk here up to the Rodman gun. (Tape stops and restarts) You know, there is always something stolen or there is always some wise guy. And it was always the discipline of the Army at that time for the minorous offense. Correct? Even not coming back on time from your pass.

AZ: Well, that's what I am gonna tell you. You work some where. You earn a living. If you don't show up nothing happens to you or if you are late. Not here, not here, pal. If you are late you are in trouble. If you decide to take a day off. Oh, I will take an extra day. I won't come in on Monday. I will come in on Tuesday. You go in here. 30 day sentence, minimum. If you are a good boy you will get out in 25. If you are wise guy and can't stand it you will escape. Then you will have more time to serve. Things like that. But there are some guys here for serious crimes. You know, every once in a while. I said they will have general court martial which is a court martial that could sentence you to death or put you onto other punishment as the court martial may direct as in the articles of war. If you were going to have a lot of time to serve they sent you up to the United States Disciplinary Barracks on Governors Island, Castle Williams to serve your time there. I was sent there late in '39 to help the Infantry guard prisoners and I was discharged from up there and re-enlisted.

TH: So, in short, you have some real characters even in your own military forces and that's any Army, not only the American Army, any Army throughout history will have

some bad characters and also at the time even for the minorous offenses you know, just coming back late from a pass...

(Visitor comment not transcribed.)

AZ: I decided to do that when I came here I had no idea. I knew little about that Army. I was 18 in 1937. Now, you know, a lot of guys who were in the service. I thought whatever it is I signed up for three years. I am going to tow the mark if it kills me. I don't want to get into any trouble.

Visitor: I was just wondering if they are so strict today.

AZ: I don't think they are as strict. I don't think they are as strict.

Visitor: They are trying to get an all volunteer Army.

TH: Don't go into the Marine Corps. Don't go into the Marine Corps. They are still...

AZ: My brother was in the Marine Corps. He said, "If you did something wrong they put you in a corner with a bucket over your head." No wonder he is wacky. (laughter) They think they are invincible.

TH: I would like Al, let's start walking. I would like Al to mention how much money did you start with back in 1937? What was the pay?

AZ: The pay was \$21 a month. But you never got the \$21 because they took a quarter out for the Old Soldiers' Home. That's in Washington. See, if you stayed here for 30 or anywhere in the Army for 30 years and you are old and decrepit and had no where to go they let you stay at the Old Soldier's Home. They owe me because I didn't go there. Right here at this house Tom lives now, (Building 64) right here there was a master sergeant by the name of Matchett. My name starts with a Z. The batteries rotated on payday who gets paid first. This one day my battery was last. I was the last guy in my battery. So, I was the last guy on the whole Post to be paid that day but Headquarters Battery was ahead of us that day. And I hear this Master Sergeant Matchett. This guy stands up, salutes to get money, you know. You didn't walk in like that. You earned it. So he saluted. I hear the paying officer say \$157.75. Holy smokes. I step up and its \$20.75. \$20.75. I should be on welfare. I thought the guy was a millionaire. He lived here. He had a house. \$157.75. Grey headed older gentlemen. He was a master sergeant. He earned it. He had a lot of service and everything. Oh, I was jealous of that guy.

TH: But you were just a private brand new and he was a sergeant major and it probably took him about 30 years to...

AZ: To get it.

TH: To get to sergeant major. But it still shocked you to hear. In 1937, the Great Depression was on. Millions of people did not have a job.

Visitor: \$20 a month wasn't even probably.

AZ: Yeah I was, you know, my mother was very poor with two other kids at home. I used to give her \$5 to \$10 every month. Whatever I could scrape up. I never had any money. It cost you money to soldier. You had to get three haircuts a month, positively no way out. (You had) a ticket. The barber punched that ticket. You'd pay a dollar. He punched that ticket that's like almost 35 cents, 33 and 1/3 cents a haircut, right. When he punched that ticket you had better have that thing punched three times in one month. One fella had his hair like cut a little too long. The battery commander made him pull it down. He said, "Go back and get a haircut." (He said) "I just got a haircut." "Go back there and get a haircut." And this officer used to wear a crew cut, you know. So this guy goes back to get a haircut but he had got upset with the battery commander. He got a bald haircut. He came back and the captain went crazy. That guy was on KP for about a month because he cut his hair bald. They would punish you if you cut your hair down to nothing.

Visitor: How much was a beer?

AZ: A beer? I never bought one because I was too young to drink beer. You had to be 21. But I think they were 10 cents in town. I think they were 10 cents.

TH: In town, in town. They, did they allow it out here?

AZ: The only place you could have anything like that here that I know of is that the Officers' Club which enlisted men couldn't go into and the Non-commissioned Officers' Club which you had to be at least a corporal and you had to be an old guy by that time, you know. You had to have a lot of service to be a corporal. The bus cost ten cents. Because the bus goes to town but most of the time it wasn't running. We walked to town or we hitchhiked. Once in while someone would stop and pick us up. If not, you walked like close to six miles into Highlands, you know.

TH: Walk from here to the bridge.

AZ: Yeah. Now you came from here by car, you know what, it is over five miles.

TH: From here it's a little over five miles a little over.

AZ: Coming down like I used to go up once in a while to see my mother. I would get on train in Newark and get off at a place called Water Witch over here. It was right next to Highlands. And then we walked from the train. It was on a Sunday night if I had the money and then we would get on a bus and pay 10 cents to come in here. One time I was a PFC and they gave me the job of being in charge of quarters of the main building where you were supposed to be at least a corporal to do this, but they, maybe they liked me but

they didn't pay me. There was no vacancy. Somebody had to die to get a promotion. So one morning I was hitchhiking to be up here because I was due to be in charge of quarters at 12 noon. It was snowing and I am out there on Route 36 and no one is stopping. You know, I hitchhiked a few and I am waiting for a ride and I am getting cold and getting soaked of the snow and I know that I am due here and if I don't get in here I am in trouble. You don't get to your job so what. This I was worried. Some guy gave me a ride to the Gate. Someone else gave me a ride. I got in about 11:50. The first sergeant said, "I am so glad you are here. I was gonna send the MPs out after you." Oh great. So, right on duty. (I) couldn't go to eat because it was too late. See, if you are charge of quarters you go to eat at 11:30. It was almost 12 noon. I couldn't go to eat. I had to relieve the other fella. That is what you worried about. Okay.

TH: Let's just take our walk. We will just be going up the street. The world was quite different back then. I know we get a lot of question as you walk around or drive around Fort Hancock. People have asked me the question do buildings like the ones that we are going to see up the street here have bars on them? Was that the jail? And or the gun batteries, they have bar, gate like doors on them. One of the reasons was keeping soldiers or somebody out of them because not all buildings were occupied like warehouses up ahead of us up the street here were not occupied. You don't know who is going to try and break in so you see a number of barred structures but they are not the jail.

AZ: Well, one of them here was the finance department.

TH: The finance department.

AZ: They had money there. They had places where they stored firearms and whatnot.

TH: We are walking up this part of the street and off to your right here you have what is known as was this called Sergeants' Row when you were here?

AZ: Sergeants' Row. All the high ranking sergeants lived here. The master sergeant, first sergeant, some tech sergeants.

Visitor: Did they have their families here too?

AZ: Some of them. I was single. I didn't have anyone here, but the married guys...

TH: Yeah, these senior sergeants had families. The wives and the kids would live like all you see here are duplexes. The master sergeants or sergeant major's home is the only one that is a single family dwelling but all these like right here this is a two family house, two family house and this was for the married sergeants, of course senior sergeants. There is also a number of other buildings no longer standing that used to be right back here in those trees. They used to be small wooden housing that were built back in the early 1900s and other sergeants used to live in smaller buildings.

AZ: They lived (inaudible) some of them lived in town. They were the brown baggers. They used to get on the bus and go in town. (inaudible) Their wives and children were in town. They didn't have enough quarters here. You had to, first of all you had to get permission to get married. You had to get permission. You could not just go and get married. They had a good reason for it. They didn't want you to be in debt. You know you couldn't afford it. You know, I knew one private who had a house. Maybe he was something higher before that. Right, there is a house on the left hand side going into where the waterworks is down here.

TH: Right. That house in there.

AZ: A private something, maybe I rate house. Well, let me tell you later on I got a promotion. Private first class. \$9 more. I became an expert gunner. Another \$5. I went out and bought a car for 50 bucks. Crazy, no insurance, no nothing. It was insane. I thought I was rich like Sergeant Matchett. I was making \$35.

(Part is inaudible and other information about where officers lived)

AZ: Well, anyplace where officers resided was officers' county, but actually it was Officers' Row.

TH: Officers' Row.

AZ: More official name.

TH: (more about Officers' Row.) In fact, Al remembers some of the commanders here. Who was commanding when you were here?



Brigadier General Gardner and staff on May 2, 1938.

AZ: There were three here, three guys, one after the other, not all at once. The first one was Colonel Lloyd B. Magruder. His father was a doctor who founded the medical school at Georgetown University and he was a physician for McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt. Lloyd B. Magruder, a colonel 7<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery. He left, we got a man by the name of Plimpton Q. C. Gardner, Colonel. He became a brigadier general. As soon as he became a brigadier general we had a parade here to put his stars on and he left. He was transferred out. His rank was too high for here. Then we had another officer by the name of Forest E. Williker. He was also, when I left here he was commander. We had three in a row. He is the one who asked me to get up and sharpen a pencil for him when I was orderly. He just wanted to see how this guy carries himself. I don't know why.

TH: But that's all he asked you to do?

AZ: That's the only thing I ever did for him. (laughter.) I used sharpen his pencil and give it back to him. But you know okay. I don't care. I am orderly. I will clean his toilet if he wants it. I don't care.

TH: Here is the Commissary. Was this in operation when you were here? And what is a Commissary?

AZ: A Commissary is a place where I didn't go. You know who used to go there? The married non-coms and officers to buy the food cheap, you know. I didn't go there. I wasn't married. I didn't have any dependents. I lived in the barracks here with the rest of the peons I would say. We ate there. I said to this nice Jewish mess sergeant get that dam thing and clean this area. They used to call him Sergeant Murphy. That wasn't his name, an Irish sergeant.

TH: Who got to use the Commissary?

AZ: Officers and non commissioned officers that have families.

TH: And its one of the warehouse type buildings that you notice has the bars on them.

AZ: Yeah. They had food and everything so they wouldn't be stolen. There wasn't much stealing here. Very little.

TH: But they still guarded against it with security measures.

AZ: Yeah. It was a precaution.

TH: Okay. Let's continue up. By the way, guard post #2 was around the main parade field here which you see back there behind all the trees. That large field was the main Parade Ground and guard post #2 was around that and then you also had 3 and 4 and did they set up...

AZ: We are on three right now.

TH: We are on # 3 right now.

AZ: We would check all the doors here and we would look for windows broken or damaged, fires. (Talking about information not important to interviews.)

AZ: Okay, this is a good place to talk about this. A lot of people think that before the War soldiers just hung around. They really worked for their keep. The government was poor. They had a lot of WPA going on. We had WPA. We used to paint the insides of the barracks. We used to come down here to chop wood. This was our coal yard. We hauled coal in addition to our prisoners. There weren't many prisoners five or six maybe 10 or 12 prisoners there. We used to go out and take coal to all these houses, to the barracks, chop wood, cut grass with a scythe out there. All kinds of chores. In the winter, very, very early spring or late in the fall because the rest of the summer we were busy with the guns firing the guns. No fooling around. If you had every other weekend off we were lucky but don't figure on it. Furlough, leave, not in the coast artillery it didn't happen. Maybe in the infantry you know year round maybe you were off in the summer. In the summertime no one got a furlough. It was a lot of work, hard work. You had to be in shape. The Coast Artillery is tough, heavy stuff. Ammunition is heavy guns are hard to work on and this was the coal yard. This was like Siberia. Someone had to do it. You weren't here for punishment. You were sent on a detail quartermaster detail. A little old fella had one stripe on him but he had about six under here. I never saw anything like that. He was making more money than a sergeant. He was what they call a first and first. They don't have that anymore. Private first class, first class specialist. But he was in command here. He was the boss. When you came to work here you worked for him. He was in charge. Maybe I had a stripe. He had a stripe but he was the boss here and that was it. He told you what to do so it was very hard work. You had to come back you had to change clothes. You couldn't eat in your fatigues, never. You had to have a class A uniform to eat. You had to change clothes. You washed up to eat. After lunch you changed again to your fatigues. Go out and work and then if you had a parade that night go back quick and everybody is rushing for the showers. You take a shower you cleaned up. Class A uniform, white gloves, leather equipment, parade. Get out there after you worked all day, you know. Parade the fellas in the CCC said, "Oh you guys had a racket parading all the time." He didn't see how we used to work here before the parades. When he was done with his day's work he was done. He didn't have to put on a show for some big shots you know. But it was nice. We were healthy, young and I didn't...all I had going for me was my youth. I am glad of that. I had that. I'd die here right now if I had to work. So, they had down below there I think along that side they had all these poles. Like they had a different pole of buckwheat or something like that. There were buildings here that were knocked down just recently, right Tom?

TH: Right. Originally this was coal bins right here, a wooden structure to hold coal and the tracks, railroad came right back through here this gravel roadbed is actually a railroad bed going right to the back of the commissary building but this was the original coal bins which later on when you were here back in the late 1930s which was converted to a 16 car garage that I often wondered for who. The officers?



AZ: Well, most of them had cars. You know, you needed a car to out get anywhere. Some of the non commissioned officers had cars. I knew a tech sergeant had a beautiful Pierce Arrow, beautiful. He may have had a rich family. I don't know. Some of them had cars. Some fellas in my outfit, not many, not many, maybe two hundred men, maybe three or four cars, the higher ranking ones.

TH: They also had there is a building right here you can kind of see the depression in the ground right here in this corner was a yellow brick building which was at one point in its life was the post office here. Where was the Post Office when you were here?

AZ: It was here.

TH: They moved it around but there used to be a wooden Post Office building for many, many years up the street and that building was eventually torn down and I guess they put it in here and then even into the 1970s I understand it was in this building right here where they literally raised the roof on the building. (Building 32) You see the two colors. The building was built around 1905 and it was the main storehouse for everything out here for the soldiers. You name it. Furniture, clothing, eating utensils, dishware and they said hey we should have made another story to this building. We have a large post here. So they literally raised the roof on the building. You can see the two different color schemes of brick there. The Post Office ended up being in that building. I like to mention that because I was over at the Red Bank Antique Center just about a year or so ago and I am looking around and my wife goes, "Tom, Tom come over here. Come look at this." And I come running over like maybe I will see something from Fort Hancock and guess what I did. Wooden set of shelves. Just wood, just pieces of wood making shelves and drawers and the sign said, "Post Office, Fort Hancock Post Office," for sale for \$75. It always interests me because when the Army is here that is Army property.

AZ: Somebody stole it.

TH: That means right. When somebody left here they cleaned house they cleaned it pretty well. There was nothing on it to say officially it was from the Fort Hancock Post Office building. But here somebody was selling it for \$75.

AZ: Maybe he made it up.

TH: Maybe he made it up or maybe when they were cleaning house here I did see when the Army was closing down its activities here things being thrown out that you wouldn't believe and the army still had the policy you know of when you were in the service I guess, right they would rather throw out surplus equipment than go I guess go through mountains of red tape to make it surplus like they did right after World War II there was a lot of surplus.

AZ: I would like to have a dollar for every truck deep sixed off a pier.

TH: Trucks.

AZ: Overseas in Europe so they wouldn't have to bring them back here and compete with General Motors and them to sell it. They got rid of it.

TH: Somebody got a prized possession because I mean this place is like a town. Of course it's regimented. You got to go by the rules and the regulations and people wear uniforms but there was a town atmosphere in a way. There was a social life.

AZ: That was for the families here.

TH: The higher ups. But not for the common soldiers.

AZ: We couldn't wait to get out of here. If you asked me forty some odd years ago would I have ever come back here I would have said, "No. What for?" Here I am. You didn't have to drag me here either.

Visitor: Do you know when the railroad was taken in?

TH: 1950. 1950 in fact it was our privilege to meet Jim Pike who was about 90 years old back in 1975. (about railroad Jim Pike and the last engine leaving in December 1949 and track removed in 1950.)

AZ: You know maybe you people would like to know what they called this railroad that we had here. The troops here had a name for it. "The BNF." The back and forth (laughter) it used to go down to the gate and back and points in between. It didn't say it on the car. You know what the definition of a railroad is. I learned that when I was studying to be a railroad sergeant. A locomotive with cars (inaudible from wind) that's a train. It could be just that one locomotive and it's a train.  
(Visitor question and more information about trains not transcribed.)

**END OF INTERVIEW**