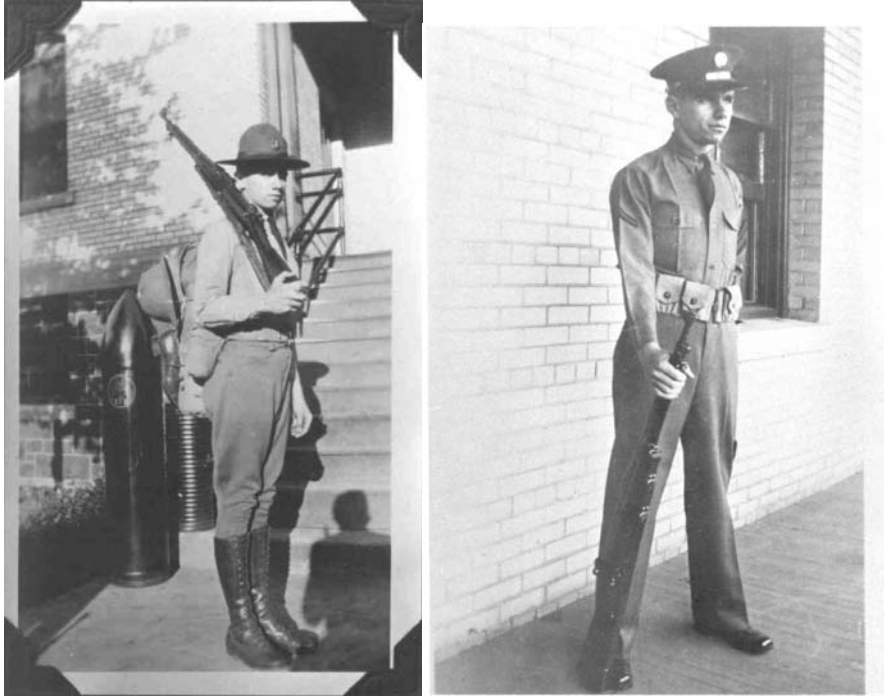


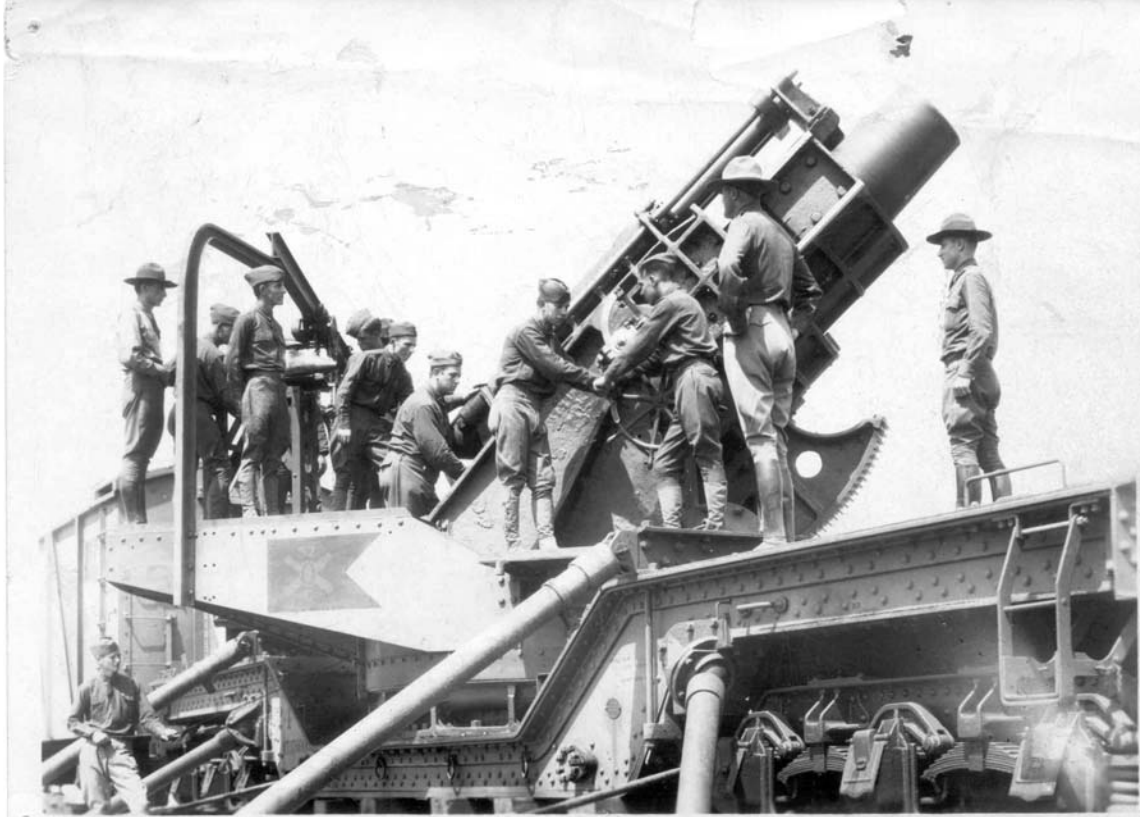
Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, National Park Service
An Oral History Interview with Al Zwiazek
52nd Coast Artillery, Battery C, (Railway) 1937-39
Interviewed by Tom Hoffman, NPS
May 31, 1987
Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2012



Al Zwiazek outside Barracks 74 in two styles of uniform. The uniform on the right replaced the one on the left in 1938.



Mr. and Mrs. Al Zwiazek in 2003.



12-inch railway mortar in action with Battery C, 52nd Coast Artillery.

Photos courtesy NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

(This interview is part of a tour at Fort Hancock. Parts of the interview that were not relevant to the interviewee, Al Zwiazek, were not transcribed.)

AZ: (Description of walking guard duty near Battery Potter.) This was a dirt road. (inaudible) That's the way that was over there. I was walking this post. An 18 year old recruit to me for 11:00 at night to early in the morning, like 6:00 in the morning, was the time for challenge. If you hear anyone or see anyone you are supposed to challenge them. Halt, who is there? And then they are supposed to identify themselves and then you would tell them advance to be recognized. So I was walking. I went over there. There was a little building over there. I turned the crank.

TH: The famous crank.

AZ: To let the corporal know that I am here. Now, I had to go over there to that gate and check the lock where those black doors were (Battery Potter). They were not there. They were open. I don't know if they were there or not but they were open like a tunnel in there right. I was walking down that way and I hear this echo in that tunnel. Pretty fast.

TH: Footsteps.

AZ: It's getting closer and closer to me. So, they say get in a dark area. Don't be out in the light. Take your pistol out before you challenge take your pistol out. I take my pistol. I look. "Halt," I hear. Scared, some guy comes to a dead halt right. "Who's there?" "Sergeant of the Guard." Sergeant of the guard? What the heck is he doing running, you know. Then I recognized the voice. "Advance to be recognized." He comes closer. He said, "You scared the," you know what, "out of me." I said, "What do you think you did to me?" The first thing he did, the first thing he thought was (a) recruit's on this post here. He is liable to shoot. As soon as he heard halt he came to a dead halt. He was on duty, the sergeant of the guard but he had a girlfriend come to visit him. They took a ride on the beach over there and the car got bogged down in the sand so he was running back to the Guardhouse to get some of the guys to help him to get that girl out of there, right. He's on duty right. He forgets about me because he is interested in getting to the Guardhouse fast. She's there by herself, you know. He is running and all of sudden this clown stops him. Zoom. But of course, I didn't leave my post. That's not my post. I didn't go over there. I stayed here doing my job. I guess he got help and got her out of there. Incidentally, his name was Sergeant Potter and this is Battery Potter.

TH: No relation. No relation.

AZ: Red headed.

TH: It reminds me too. I believe it happened in the early '30s before you came here the lighthouse keeper was shot by one of the sentries. His name was Mr. Hand and Mr. Hand was very hard of hearing. So, they always used to tell the soldier sentries that make sure you yell out your challenge out loud because Mr. Hand is hard of hearing. And evidently one of the new recruits didn't get the word and challenged the phantom in the dark and shot and killed the lighthouse keeper, Mr. Hand. (This story about Keeper Hand was told by veterans. It has not been verified.)

AZ: He had to kill him after I was here because he carried a red lantern.

TH: So, it happened after you were here?

AZ: I think he was alive. He was an older guy but he was alive.

TH: So, you left here when in 1940?

AZ: Late in '39.

TH: '39. Okay so it happened after.

AZ: It happened, you know, but it didn't happen when I was here. They said there is a guy walking around, the lighthouse keeper. He can't hear too good. The guy has a red lantern. Don't challenge this guy because he won't hear you. That's what we got but Tom says he was killed. Maybe he was killed later. Later on, you were getting guys in

the Army from all over. I hate to say this but, you know, some of these guys didn't measure up. They lowered the standards, you know, when War came or just before the War. They were federalizing troops. (inaudible)

(Not transcribed tour of Battery Potter.)

AZ: Just to follow up on what Tom said. These guns were disappearing guns. Down further they have more modern version of disappearing guns (Battery Granger). I sailed overseas two times during World War II from New York. We went by here. I knew it was here. I bet no one else on that ship knew what was behind those hills. All these guns were here. You could not see them from out there. It was all grass, like slopes of grass. I just wanted to bring that up.

(Tour discussion not transcribed.)

TH: (At Battery Granger) Did you fire here, Al?

AZ: We fired this Battery more than anywhere else. This (inaudible). 198th Regiment of National Guard from Delaware would come up here. ROTC, Reserve Officers' Training Corps, Reserve Officers, West Point Cadets. They would come here and we would fire these guns. We fired these a lot. Battery Granger we fired maybe more than we fired our 12-inch mortars (railway guns). We had our 12-inch mortars, C Battery and then we had certain batteries here that we could... Sister battery (Battery E) next door had their 8-inch rifles and then they had batteries... what do you call it?

TH: Kingman and Mills.

AZ: Kingman and Mills on the way out on the Sandy Hook side, the bayside.

(Not transcribed about harbor forts, Sandy Hook Lighthouse, and Mortar Battery.)

TH: Coast Artillery, strictly Coast Artillery, mines, anti-aircraft, mobile artillery on the railway flatcars and the big stuff, you know permanent emplacements was all Coast Artillery. Is it still the same a little bit? Was it more quieter? I mean you didn't have that many boats out there making a racket. You didn't have these jets.

AZ: No. It was quiet here. You know like on stormy nights, like fog nights you hear all these bells.

TH: From the buoys.

AZ: Yeah foghorns, buoys and foghorns. Aside from that it was dead here. Buglers, I used to like to hear the bugles, "the last call." I used to walk this post, #2 Post. I knew it was like near 11:00 I would stop somewhere behind these barracks and wait because I wanted to hear the bugler sound, "Taps".

TH: Really?

AZ: Especially one guy, Malinowski. He was good. He would make the notes quiver like now, you know. I would wait for that. Everybody would say, "Malinowski's Bugler of the Guard. Malinowski is Bugler of the Guard," like he was Jesus Christ himself but he was good. You know, the guy was good. So, it was interesting. You knew all the calls and what time and what they meant. They eliminated all that stuff.

Visitor: What rank was the senior officer?

AZ: Colonel. I understand later they had a brigadier general here during the War but when I was here it didn't rate a general. The highest rank was a colonel.

Visitor: A bird colonel?

AZ: Yeah. Three in a row. Three of the guys commanding officers in a row while I was here were colonels. The next was the guy in head of the hospital. He was a lieutenant colonel and the regimental commander was a Lieutenant Colonel Hawkins, Samuel Hawkins. And you know battalion commanders were majors. They didn't throw too much rank in those days.

TH: Usually like when they got a promotion to general, was it General Gardner.

AZ: Yeah Gardner.

TH: Yeah. They had a colonel, a full colonel here who got his promotion and he was only here for a short time after.

Visitor: Transferred yeah.

TH: Then transferred out. But in World War II Philip Gage was colonel commanding the 7th Coast Artillery batteries here. They had Headquarters Battery and Batteries A and B in 1941 here. And he was colonel commanding the batteries here at Fort Hancock but then they gave him a brigadier general star and said, "You are commanding the Harbor Defenses of New York."

Visitor: So, he was in charge of the whole...

TH: Of the whole smear and then I found out that doesn't just take in the forts in lower New York Harbor. The defense sector was Montauk Point, Long Island to Atlantic City. That was New York Harbor Defense sector and he commanded it from here as a brigadier general.

(Not transcribed.)

AZ: The three commanding officers that were here when I was here was (inaudible) they commanded the Post. They were full colonels and I checked them out in that register of graduates of...

TH: West Point.

AZ: One graduated in 1904, one in 1905 and one in 1906. And one became a brigadier general. That was Gardner.

TH: Gardner.

AZ: Gardner. See, this guy came a little bit later in 1909. He became a general.

(Not transcribed about Fort Wadsworth history.)

AZ: You know, in the late '30s they had Infantry outfits at Fort Wadsworth and Fort Hamilton. 18th Infantry.

TH: Really?

AZ: First division.

Visitor: When was that?

AZ: In the late 1930s.

(Not transcribed)

AZ: I was at Fort Slocum on Easter Sunday 1943 coming down from Fort Custer, Michigan. I got on a tender there with a bunch of other guys and went up to Staten Island. Got on a ship and went to North Africa from Slocum.

Visitor: So you deployed then overseas.

AZ: I was overseas twice. I was in North Africa and I came back and went to Texas and from there went to Europe.

Visitor: With the Coast Artillery?

TH: No. Army. Infantry.

AZ: I was in last was the Infantry.

END OF INTERVIEW.