



Oral History Interview

With

Wendy McNiel

February 10, 2003
Waco, Texas

Interviewed by Erin Pogany

National Park Service
Minuteman Missile National Historic Site
21280 SD Hwy 240
Philip, SD 57567-7102

Accession Number: MIMI-016
Catalog Number: MIMI 2472
Oral History Number: 2003-4

ABSTRACT

Wendy McNiel grew up in Wyoming and attended the University of Wyoming where she joined the ROTC program. After completing college, she joined the Air Force. She was assigned to the 44th Strategic Missile Wing at Ellsworth Air Force Base from February 1991 to December 1992. She worked in the 67th Strategic Missile Squadron as a missileer. She eventually became an instructor training missileers. In late 1992 she was reassigned to F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming. At the time of this interview Ms. McNiel lived in Waco, Texas.

EDITORIAL NOTICE

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview conducted for Minuteman Missile National Historic Site. The interviewer, or in some cases another qualified staff-member, reviewed the draft and compared it to the tape recordings. The corrections and other changes suggested by the interviewer have been incorporated into this final transcript. Stylistic matters, such as punctuation and capitalization, follow the Chicago Manual of Style, 14th edition. The transcript includes bracketed notices at the end of one tape and the beginning of the next so that, if desired, the reader can find a section of tape more easily by using this transcript.

RESTRICTION

Researchers may read, quote from, cite, and photocopy this transcript without permission for purposes of research only. Publication is prohibited, however, without permission from the Superintendent, Minuteman Missile National Historic Site.

INFORMANT: WENDY MCNIEL
INTERVIEWER: ERIN POGANY
DATE: 10 February 2003

[Beginning of side one, tape one]
[Interview begins]

ERIN POGANY: This is an interview by Erin Pogany of Mead and Hunt in Madison, Wisconsin with Wendy McNiel at her home in Waco, Texas via the telephone on February 10, 2003. Could you state your name and your age?

WENDY MCNIEL: Wendy Susan McNiel, age forty.

POGANY: And what is your current military rank?

MCNIEL: I currently do not have rank.

POGANY: Okay.

MCNIEL: I'm not in the military.

POGANY: And could you explain your military background?

MCNIEL: Would you like the jobs or . . .

POGANY: Sure, you know, how you got into the military, was this directly following high school and what ranks did you hold and where were you along the way.

MCNIEL: Well I came into the military later after college. I had thought about joining the military, but it was a decision and I finally decided to go through. I was in my mid-to-late twenties when I actually did. I went to the University of Wyoming ROTC program. I was commissioned in May of 1990. Went on active duty on February of 1991 to my first duty station at Ellsworth Air Force Base in February of 1991.

POGANY: And after your time at Ellsworth were you stationed anywhere else?

MCNIEL: Yes, I was stationed in F. E. Warren [Francis E. Warren] Air Force Base, Cheyenne, Wyoming.

POGANY: And where are you from originally?

MCNIEL: I'm originally from Wyoming.

POGANY: I just want to be clear here. So when exactly did you serve as a missileer at Ellsworth Air Force Base?

MCNIEL: It was February '91 until December 1992.

POGANY: And do you recall what launch control facility you were assigned to?

MCNIEL: I believe I was assigned to Golf.

POGANY: Okay.

MCNIEL: In the 67th Squadron.

POGANY: Now, I was in one of the launch control centers underground and I'm assuming that's where you were assigned to. Could you describe your first time entering one of these launch control centers?

MCNIEL: I was able to tour a launch control center while I was in ROTC, but the first time I went in after I had gone through my training and I actually showed up for my first day on the job I was excited and nervous at the same time. I was excited because I was doing something that I knew I wanted to do. Having a career in missiles was my first choice. There was some anxiety because of the nature of the work. You would see the light on the panel knowing those were missiles and there was a great responsibility but it was a responsibility I very much wanted to have.

POGANY: So as a missileer did you have the sense that you were making a contribution to national security?

MCNIEL: Oh very much so. That was part of the reason I wanted to enter the military. It was a sense of being part of something that big of national security and being a missile launch officer that was my way of contributing to a field that I enjoyed very much while I was in.

POGANY: Do you ever or have you while you were there did you ever think about how you would've reacted if you were called upon to activate a missile?

MCNIEL: Most of those thoughts have been while I was in training and before I entered the field of missiles. While we were in training we did have discussions with our instructors and with the commanders at school as to what our thoughts were about actually having to launch and these were the questions that we wrestled with and we thought about and it was something I thought about for a very long time. So by the time I actually went on to serving my first tour I had the question already settled. Now it was always in the back of my mind because of the nature of the job, but it was something that I was confident I could do well and I could do correctly if the time ever came to do that.

POGANY: So during the training process is when you kind of second guessed this, but then by the time you were called upon to work in the facility you had basically accepted that that was your job then?

MCNIEL: No, I didn't second guess it, but it was something that I knew I had to be comfortable with.

POGANY: Okay.

MCNIEL: And the concept of having to launch a missile if ever called upon and knowing what that meant.

POGANY: And what did that mean to you?

MCNIEL: To me it meant that whatever national policies were being worked at the time failed miserably and if I was ever called upon to do that I knew that my nation was very much in danger.

POGANY: Sure.

MCNIEL: And my attitude was I would protect my country doing the job that I was told to do which was . . . which would be at the time to launch the missiles.

POGANY: Now since we're talking about training, I'll ask some of those questions. Could you explain or describe the type of training that you had to go through?

MCNIEL: I'll describe to the best of my recollection it was over ten years ago.

POGANY: Sure.

MCNIEL: The training constituted of a lot of classroom work. Learning about the general information about the weapons themselves and also classroom work on the war fighting side of the weapons system. So we had the classroom work with the worst side of the weapons and also with just the day-to-day maintenance of keeping weapons running, you know, because they're always on and just the general maintenance with that. We also had simulation time; a lot of time in the simulator in which we entered the missile procedures trainer and there we had both war time and peace time simulation of different events that could happen out in the field. So, by the time I was done, I was very well trained to go out in the field.

POGANY: And that was my exact next question, if you thought the training was adequate.

MCNIEL: I thought it was.

POGANY: Could you talk a little bit more to the simulating tests for war time in this training facility, did you activate an actual missile then, not an actual missile, obviously, but as if you were in training?

MCNIEL: In training we did simulate actually launching missiles. We actually simulated going to war and different conditions of war fighting. Now we didn't actually launch anything because it was a simulation.

POGANY: Oh, certainly. How serious do you think other people you worked with took what they were doing during the training and then actually working?

MCNIEL: I think they took both of them very seriously. The people I was with seemed to enjoy their job and the training and staying up with the steps and the procedures that we had to know it took time. It was always being in the books, always studying, always reviewing the procedures so that the material was always fresh in your mind. Something like that takes people who enjoy doing what they're doing.

POGANY: Sure. Could you tell me was there screening to become a missileer like psychological screening?

MCNIEL: I think there was but I can't recall right now because I was also trying to get into the Air Force at the same time. So I don't know how much of that was overlapping with Air Force and how much was actually for that particular career field. I remember we were asked if we had problems with closed-in spaces, you know, because the capsules were small. I think to the best of my recollection, if we would have a problem with launching missiles if we had to, but right now that's all I can think of.

POGANY: Okay.

MCNIEL: There was a questionnaire we had to fill out, but again I don't recall the exact items on the questionnaire.

POGANY: Were there other trainees that were not, after going through the training and evaluations and what not, were there some that weren't then permitted to become a missileer?

MCNIEL: Not in my class. I can't answer for other classes.

POGANY: Sure. So how many hours exactly was your shift and how often were your shifts?

MCNIEL: The shifts were 24 hours long once you actually arrived at the capsule and changed over with the old crew then your 24 hour shift would begin. We normally went out about eight times a month.

POGANY: Could you describe a typical day at the launch control center?

MCNIEL: To the best of my recollection it would be, after changing over with the old crew we'd view the current maintenance that was going on if there was any, if we had any maintenance people out at any of the launch facilities and we would have communication with them. If there was anything going on with the security we would have communication with that. There were days it would be very busy with whatever maintenance that was going on and there would be days it would just be very slow. So sometimes it's hard to tell what a typical day was. The weekends tended to be a little slow, during the week it tended to be busier.

POGANY: And what kind of maintenance things would you be working on, for example?

MCNIEL: It would be the periodic maintenance things to make sure that the missile was always ... they would go out and check and make sure everything was working the way it was supposed to.

POGANY: Okay.

MCNIEL: And then if there were any faults or any possible problems with the mechanics of the missile or the launch facility the missile was in we would get those indications and then we would have to go out do unscheduled maintenance out there to fix whatever was the problem.

POGANY: Now you explained your shift was 24 hours that included your whole time at the facility, how many hours would you be in the capsule?

MCNIEL: Well, the capsule, we would be 24 hours in the capsule approximately.

POGANY: Okay.

MCNIEL: And that would not include the briefings in the morning, getting whatever supplies that we needed for that day, picking up whatever people also went out there, taking the drive out there, having changeover, briefing, then getting downstairs into the capsule and then changing over with the crew and that's when your time started, after that changeover. Then you would have to have everything in reverse on the way home. You would have the drive back, bring back whoever you needed, etc. So it would be well into the next day before you were home.

POGANY: Could you describe a little bit the procedure for changing staff?

MCNIEL: The changeover, I guess to the best of my recollection, everything was done with a checklist.

POGANY: Okay.

MCNIEL: With the manuals and it was step by step by step. It was basically reviewing whatever was going on at the site either in the capsule or in any of the L.F.s [Launch Facilities], getting an update status of the flight, hello?

POGANY: I'm here.

MCNIEL: Having an inventory of all the materials, reviewing the inventory after every shift, and assigning flight responsibility over to the new crew and releasing the old crew.

POGANY: So when you're releasing the old crew they're actually in there and you go down the elevator and so there's no one time when no one's in the capsule?

MCNIEL: That's correct.

POGANY: Could you tell me a little bit about . . . when I was there I saw these code burners, how often or how and when they were used?

MCNIEL: You say code?

POGANY: Code burners? This barrel-like thing that was out in the yard, I was told it was like a code burner.

MCNIEL: I'm not sure what that is.

POGANY: Okay.

MCNIEL: It doesn't sound very familiar.

POGANY: No that's okay. Could you explain, now you said that some days were slower than others when you were down there, do you know or do you recall any non-duty activities that you did to pass the time away while you were down there?

MCNIEL: One of the major things that we do is our studies. We have training several times a month and each one requires its own studying. We had a weather system training, codes training, emergency war orders training and the missile simulation. A lot of the time was spent reviewing the books, reviewing the materials and making sure you were up to whatever new procedures had been implemented, make sure you were up on those and once you reviewed the materials you needed to stay current in your job a lot of people would some times do there school out there. A lot like missileers were working on their masters degrees so they were taking homework out and work on that as well.

POGANY: What other duties did you have outside of the launch control center?

MCNIEL: Like in the squadron or?

POGANY: Sure.

MCNIEL: When I was working in the squadron my main duty was going on shifts and my training. A few months afterwards I became an instructor so I had less shifts, but I also came into the office on a daily basis so a lot of my duties changed. I was into helping with the training of the missileers and helping develop training products for them.

POGANY: And how many classes did you train while you were there? Or how many students?

MCNIEL: Let me think, it really varied because we had training throughout the entire month. We put people in based on what their schedules were. So we would have maybe three or four classes in a month and each class would vary in size.

POGANY: Okay.

MCNIEL: Approximately twenty maybe or more.

POGANY: Now when you were actually on duty were you often evaluated on the job performance or?

MCNIEL: We did have regular evaluations, but most of the time we were not being evaluated or watched . . .

POGANY: Okay.

MCNIEL: . . . out in the field. There were times in which we were . . . evaluators would come out to the field and observe everything we did, from the time we arrived until the time we changed over.

POGANY: And what were the consequences of failing an evaluation?

MCNIEL: Well, at the time when I was there it was, now I don't know what the policy was, I can tell you what happened to people around me, but the consequences could be if you were an instructor and evaluator you would no longer hold that job. You would be put back to the squadron. If you were a flight commander you would not have that job anymore and would be put back to the flight. And you would become crew again and doing your eight shifts a month and working on the proficiency that you need to have to do the job correctly and once you showed that you had that proficiency you still had the chance to return to those jobs. It was several months, but it wasn't permanent. But if you showed that

you were able to recover and get the proficiency up where it needed to be then you were able to reapply for those kinds of positions.

POGANY: Were you . . . every time you went down to do your 24 hour shift, were you with . . . now it is my understanding that there were two people that were down there at anyone time?

MCNIEL: Yes, always two people.

POGANY: Okay. Was it always the same person that you were with?

MCNIEL: It usually was, but not always.

POGANY: Okay. Do you remember who you were with?

MCNIEL: Yes, but I don't remember his name.

POGANY: That's okay. Did you get along okay?

MCNIEL: Yeah, we seemed to get along fine, yeah.

POGANY: Okay.

MCNIEL: I just had a lot of partners.

POGANY: I'm sure, and it was quite some time ago, so that's fine. As a female missileer do you feel that you were ever treated differently than the male crew members?

MCNIEL: No I never did. I felt that my training was the same, the standards were the same. I didn't notice any differences based on my gender. Again, I was a Second Lieutenant, but I didn't notice anything obvious.

POGANY: Now at . . . I'm not sure when they first started having female missileers at Ellsworth, at the moment I can't recall, but do you think that if they were permitted earlier do you think women would have been treated differently? You were there in '91 you said?

MCNIEL: Yeah, February '91 to December '92. I don't know if I'm understanding the question.

POGANY: Well, I guess with changing times and I guess my question is probably just for my own wonder, but do you think that the Air Force treated women differently at all even earlier than when you were there in 1991?

MCNIEL: That's hard to say because I don't have anything to gauge it on.

POGANY: Sure, okay. Can you tell me were there other female missileers at your facility?

MCNIEL: While I was on shift?

POGANY: Sure or assigned there period, you know.

MCNIEL: In my squadron there were other female missileers. I was not crewed with them, I was crewed with males.

POGANY: Okay.

MCNIEL: And most of my shifts that I have ever pulled have been with males just because there were so many more of them. I don't know if I answered your question or not.

POGANY: Oh, sure. Could you tell me were there any sort of special relationship or camaraderie among crew members from the same facility, that were working at the same facility?

MCNIEL: You know, they had been with people in the same squadron just because we always saw each other and we worked with each other. I think people that went on shifts together several times probably ended up becoming friends. You know, you're out there and you talk and you get to know each other.

POGANY: Did you form any relationships or friendships with other support crew at the site like the security personnel or facility manager?

MCNIEL: I myself did not, it was always at a professional level.

POGANY: Now as a missileer and not a pilot in the Air Force did you ever have a sense that you were treated differently than pilots were or did you . . . were you perceived as an equal part?

MCNIEL: I think as a missileer we were seen as different. I don't know how we were seen by others because I didn't really receive any indication of treated differently because I really didn't hang out with pilots.

POGANY: Sure. When you were stationed at Ellsworth as a missileer did you ever feel that a threat of a Soviet missile attack was real?

MCNIEL: Actually I did because when I came into missiles it was toward the end of the Cold War and that was the culture I came in on and when I went in, you know, I very much thought, you know, maybe it would happen. I didn't dwell on it, but I didn't see it as an impossibility either.

POGANY: Were there particular times that you thought that the threat seemed heightened to you?

MCNIEL: No not really.

POGANY: No? Being that you came in 30 years after these missiles were placed there did you ever think in 1991 that the missiles would ever be used?

MCNIEL: I didn't know if they would ever be used, but I very much felt they were necessary because of the relationships we had with other countries at the time. I didn't go in thinking the world was a warm and fuzzy place. I did not think that.

POGANY: Sure. Do you recall any interaction between your crew and locals or local ranchers that lived in the area where the facility was?

MCNIEL: In what way?

POGANY: Well I know in earlier days when the missiles were first being constructed, you know, these missiles . . . the land was basically from area ranchers, you know, and of course there were incidents where ranchers weren't happy, you know, that these silos were being placed there and I know this was 30 years later when you were there and I just did not know if you had any interaction with area ranchers or any incidents with any locals or anything like that?

MCNIEL: No, while I was there there wasn't anything like that.

POGANY: Okay. What exactly were your duties after the missiles were taken off alert?

MCNIEL: Our duties were the same as they were before. We continued going out in the field and making sure that everything was working properly. Basically that part of it . . . I don't want to say it was invisible to us, but it really didn't affect what we did in the capsule. We still went out, we still maintained the facility, maintained the launch facilities and made sure that everything was working the way it was supposed to. And a lot of those policies, we just worked with the best we could.

POGANY: So when the START Treaty was signed what were your feelings at that time? When the treaty was signed and the missiles were ordered to be deactivated?

MCNIEL: I was happy and apprehensive. It was good that the tension seemed to be lessening in my opinion and I was also hoping that it was real it wasn't just something we would deactivate the missiles and then something terrible would happen and we would have nothing. But I'm glad it worked out the way it did.

POGANY: Can you share some of your best or favorite memories of being stationed at Ellsworth and having this job?

MCNIEL: Oh, I think my favorite memories were the camaraderie with other missileers. We very much had a unique job, something a lot of people don't have. A lot of people don't always understand and even today when I talk about it a lot of people still don't understand what I really used to do.

POGANY: And how do you explain to those people that don't understand, how do you explain to them what you used to do?

MCNIEL: I try to tell them the analogy of the people underground that would push the button and a lot of people seem to understand that the button pusher underground is a nuclear missile. That analogy they seem understand even though we don't push buttons but if you tell them in that sense a lot of them understand, but some still don't, they still ask me have I ever launched a missile.

POGANY: Really?

MCNIEL: Yeah, which tells me they're not understanding what I used to do. Another great memory was just being a missileer which was an awesome job. It was a lot of hard work and there was stress involved, but it was the best job I had in the military.

POGANY: And what level of stress do you think there was for you?

MCNIEL: It was, I don't know if I can gauge a stress level, just being out with nuclear missiles actually just has a stress level with it because of the nature of what you are doing those 24 hours.

POGANY: Sure.

MCNIEL: Everything has to be right all the time.

POGANY: Right. And if something wasn't right then how did you deal with that? Were there incidents where something went wrong that you recall?

MCNIEL: No, not that I recall.

POGANY: So there was no like emergency situations when you were there with the security of one of the silos or anything like that?

MCNIEL: Not in an emergency sense. We would have the security indicators would go off like if a rabbit went outside or something like that because the security indicators couldn't tell if it was a person or a rabbit. So we had lots of rabbits and lots of animals getting on especially in the winter, you know, they were trying to find a warm place and just things like that. And of course they were always treated as if they were serious in nature.

POGANY: So if something like that happened somebody was sent out to just check it out?

MCNIEL: Yes, we always had security police at the launch control facility up top and we had security police up there 24 hours a day and they would on a different shift than we did but they were always up there and whenever we received any kind of a security indication we would let them know and then they would follow their procedures that they had . . .

POGANY: And the security indication came down to you first, is that correct?

MCNIEL: Pardon?

POGANY: You talked about a security indication and you received that down in the capsule, correct?

MCNIEL: Correct.

POGANY: And then you would call up then to the security facility?

MCNIEL: Yes, we would call upstairs to the launch control facility and there was always a security member upstairs at the top of our elevator. I don't know if you noticed there was a door in which you entered the elevator and you went down.

POGANY: Right.

MCNIEL: That little room right there always had somebody in there and they rotate shifts. They're our constant contact with the topside, they're the ones we always talked to.

POGANY: Now I did get a tour of the center and there were some bedrooms and bathrooms and almost like a little home up there. Did you ever stay there or was, I guess, I'm a little confused about your 24 hour shift.

MCNIEL: We slept and lived downstairs in the capsule. We never went upstairs unless we changed over then we'd go upstairs or, you know, it never happened in my case, but if there was ever an emergency in the capsule in which we both had to leave for some reason we would go upstairs. But during the shift we never left downstairs. We just stayed down there. There was a bed down there we took turns sleeping and that's where we lived.

POGANY: Okay.

MCNIEL: See the upstairs where the bedroom and the showers that's for the security police with the facility manager and the chef. You know, there would be

somebody up there to make sure that they were fed and that was their job and then whichever other guests they had there at the time.

POGANY: What were your worst memories or what are your worst memories of your time as a missileer?

MCNIEL: Worst memories, I didn't always sleep very good. I remember just not sleeping very good.

POGANY: Were there ever arguments over who was going to sleep when?

MCNIEL: No, we basically had a system of who slept when, and who drove out and who drove back so that was really never an issue.

POGANY: And that was easy because you were pretty much with the same person you said?

MCNIEL: Most of the time I was, but that's just was really well set among them all. Went with other people that system was pretty much in place and worked really well.

POGANY: Let's see, let me check out my questions here and see what else I may have forgotten. What other kind of, I guess I want you to tell me some stories about, you know, I'm not sure what I'm exactly looking for. I mean, do you have any funny incidents that happened when you were working there or at Ellsworth that you want to share here? Or is there anything that you think I missed that you want to share?

MCNIEL: Let me think a minute. I guess I just want to make a general comment that people who are on alert at the launch missile control centers it's very much an invisible thankless job. There are people who don't get seen, you know, nobody sees what they do, nobody cares about it. I see them as almost invisible warriors, the security police that are there, the facility managers, the chefs that are there, they're just out there in the middle of nowhere 24 hours a day and I think it's good that people know that they're out there, you know, doing a job that not everybody can do and not everybody wants to do.

POGANY: I guess that's a nice segue to my next, just a couple of more questions here. What are your feelings about Delta-01 and Delta-09 becoming a National Historic Site?

MCNIEL: I think it's wonderful we're having a National Historic Site to let people know the work that was done out there and to know the facts. A lot of times what people know about missileers is what they see on television. You know, with the one person shooting the other if they don't, you know, push the button, those types of things. And it's good that we have the national centers like that just to give people the facts. To let them know what went on and just to give people more

of a sense of pride among military just to let them know just the different facets of how this nation is protected and hopefully it will give people an appreciation of the costs of living in this country. I think people don't always understand what that it costs to live here and a lot of those costs are paid for by the people who do these thankless jobs in terrible weather and are just out there doing it.

POGANY: So if you were to visit the site in a couple of years from now when it opens up, what kind of interpretation would you like to see there, you personally?

MCNIEL: Interpretation?

POGANY: How would you like to see the Cold War interpreted through these sites?

MCNIEL: I would like to see it as we were a very positive factor in ending the Cold War. The people that were in missiles while I was in have a pride in that in that we contributed to the end of the Cold War. You know, because we did our job there was no war and because the country knew we were able to do the job and there was a respect for the power this nation had that it alleviated a potentially ugly situation from developing and because we were there we served as a deterrent and that's something to be very proud of not only as missileers but as a nation that we were so well armed that we didn't have to do anything in that sense.

POGANY: All right. Let me turn over my tape.

[End of side one, tape one]

[Begin side two, tape one]

POGANY: What else do you think that we may have missed here that . . . I think I hit on all my questions so is there anything else that you want to add about your time that you served at Ellsworth Air Force Base or your time as a missileer?

MCNIEL: Well, one great memory I have of Ellsworth Air Force Base is that's where I met my husband. He was also a missileer.

POGANY: Oh, he was.

MCNIEL: He was actually there before I was and was a 1st Lieutenant and I was a 2nd Lieutenant.

POGANY: And what is his name?

MCNIEL: Sam.

POGANY: Sam McNiel?

MCNIEL: Yes.

POGANY: Okay. And was he stationed at the or did he serve in the same missile or launch control facility center that you did?

MCNIEL: No he was in a different squadron.

POGANY: No? And how did you meet him?

MCNIEL: I met him because he was an instructor and the people at Ellsworth were just naturally close to begin with. I mean, you work in the same building and we take the missileer recurring classes together and you just get to know people. And through that process we just got to know each other.

POGANY: Sure, that's kind of interesting that you're both missileers and, like you said before, it's such a unique job in the military that many people don't even know about let alone understand exactly what you do or have done and I think that's great that you're with somebody who understands that.

MCNIEL: It really helped it really makes a difference.

POGANY: Sure. Well, I've finished the end of my questions here and I want to go on the record here and say thank you very much for your time. We appreciate it. I'm sure the National Parks Service will too. It surely does give . . . your story only adds to the story of the Cold War and what exactly went on at . . . in South Dakota. So unless you have anything else to add I think we're through.

MCNIEL: Okay.

POGANY: I'm going to shut this off here.

[End of interview]