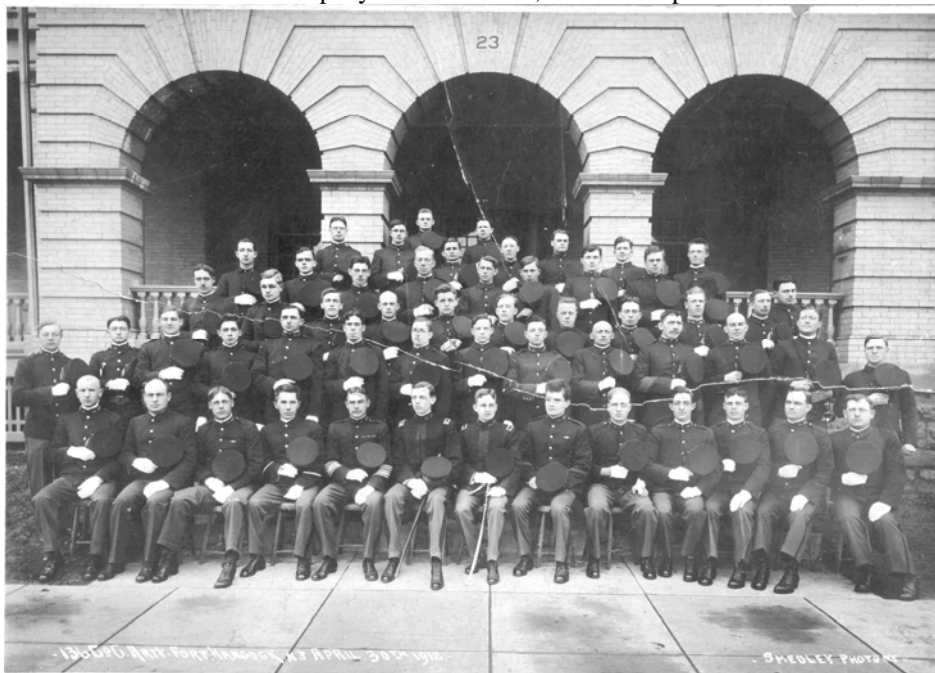


Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Interview with John Borris
136th Company and 7th Coast Artillery
1912-1924

Self recorded interview, circa 1985
Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2011



136th Company Football Team, 1915 Champions.



136th Company outside Barracks 23 on April 30, 1912.



136th Company Baseball Champions.

Photos courtesy of NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

John Borris: My introduction to Fort Hancock, February the 12th, 1912. My buddy and I are at the foot of Wall Street, Pier 10 waiting in the *Harvey Brown*. I think that is the name of the steamboat that took the men on pass to New York City and brought them back. It was an economical and the quickest way to New York City. We got to Fort Hancock. Phil fixed me a place to sleep. Oh, I was introduced to reveille. That the part of bugler I never did like. The day was cold and bright. Fort Hancock looked so clean; the officers' building so outstanding. Breakfast was a good. Fellas came to our place at the table. My buddy Phil was well liked. He was a good baseball player, a lot of introducing and well wishes exchanged. Now the introduction, the recruiting officer. Passed every test and sworn in. Now I am a soldier. February the 26th, 1912 assigned to 136 Company, Mine Company. The 136 Company was the best in many ways so I wanted to contribute what I could. Sergeant John Swartsman was my drill sergeant. He taught me all a recruit should know fast. (I was) now a recruit ready for service. One of the earliest was KP (Kitchen Police). (I was taught) how to handle dishes. If you broke any you found them on your payroll and guard duty was bad in the winter. 2 to 4 am

(guard duty) you were glad you made it. In summer the mosquitoes knew you had the best blood they liked. Just a few of the bad things. There were more good always. The 136th Company had an advantage in many ways. First we had a pig pen. A recruit came in from a farm who could care and even slaughter pigs. I came in on this. This was a good way to save money on the meat so the mess sergeant could buy fresh fruit and vegetables. 136th Company was lucky in another way. A recruit that could build a boat joined the company. Commanding, our company commander gave permission to build a boat. We bought a dragnet so we are in business. Three or four drags and we had enough fluke and flounder with another few other kinds to supply the company with a good meal. More money saved. The 136th Company were champs in many ways. For example, football, baseball, the proof is in the pictures, five mile race, boxing, 160 pound champ (in) 1916. (I) beat Vance Severn 48th Company Fort Hancock. This fellow was a good fighter. I was lucky to beat him. Two wins, one draw. When he came back from France with his French bride he lived in Highlands. He fought many of those good fighters from Long Branch. He challenged me for a ten round bout but I had given up boxing due to an injured shoulder. In 1919, I entered the AEF (Army Expeditionary Forces) boxing tournament in Germany. Gene Tunney won the 175 pound crown. Kid Broad the 160 pound. He was an old timer, a has been. I would have had a good chance. I won my first bout by a TKO. Two days later I played in a football game and had my shoulder busted. Lay in a hospital in Koblenz for a month. Well, the First Division, the "big red one" finally had orders to go home. First over, last back. Back at the (Sandy) Hook once again. (I) reenlisted for a year; 1919-1920. (I was) discharged out of service for a year. Disappointed that year, so (I went) back to the Army and thirty years then the Old Soldiers' Home. That's what I thought. A few side effects of life in the Army. I was assigned as guard and conductor on the train that plied between Sandy Hook and Highlands for passengers merchandise and so forth. Andy Kelly was the engineer and he became good friends with me. We did many things together like digging clams, steamers. He knew the engineer at our pumping station. Mulhern was his name. He knew the best way to fix these clams, butter onions, seasoning and a steam pipe, no water. In a half hour the clams were done in a half pail of best clam juice in the nation. Frost fishing you needed boots to catch the live ones. It didn't take long to pick up all you could eat. Make a fire, put the fish on the live coals, turn once season well, when done you scrapped off all down to the white meat. Good eating. The married sergeants packed away enough for the winter. I think the name of the fish is ling. 1921 to '24 at Fort Hancock were good years. Good, better, best. Rated expert gunner February the 4th, 1924. Battery Gunnison contained a 6-inch disappearing gun. It is hoisted to its firing position by an apparatus when fired it recoils to the loading position. Its shell is put in position with a tool called a ram rod. The powder is pushed into a chamber. The breech block is closed. The range, which is raised or lower the gun and the azimuth, which moved the gun to the right or left, is operated manually. This data or reading comes from observation stations in the vicinity called primary and secondary. The azimuth taken from the station need not be used except the first shot. So Captain Bordeaux, our company commander told me to use the splash system. This is what the gun, when the gun is fired, stop following the target and look for the splash then put the middle of the sight in the middle of the splash. This was done now the second shot. I held my breath and then I almost fell off my platform. The target was demolished, a record for Battery

Gunnison. Made friend with Alfred Koons, secretary, YMCA. Staff Sergeant Davenport's two sons not in the Army picked a team each to play basketball. It was not my sport and I wasn't good at it but when asked I agreed. I played hard and at the end I was wringing wet with sweat. I'd throw my over coat over my back and ran from the auditorium to the barracks, about a half mile. It was very cold and windy. The next morning I could hardly get out of bed, a stiff back. I went about my duties and the back kept getting worse, so in June I was admitted to the hospital. They found nothing wrong that they could relieve the pain. I was told that I was to be sent to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. While waiting for the transfer, I read an article how ailments of the back were cured in Germany. So I dragged my blanket on the roof of the porch to go give it a try. Now another event took place in my life at this time a missionary Richard Hill came in the ward and gospel from Exodus 12:13. He made it clear that Israel was to kill a lamb and sprinkle the blood on the doorpost and the lintel. This would be a sign that the death of the first born would not come upon Israel. This fact is true. They keep the Passover. They were allowed to leave Egypt. The next morning, I read in the gospel of John 1:29 behold the lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world. I was convicted. I received Jesus as my savior. Cured my sick soul. I kept on with the treatment. I could feel a relief from pain right in the beginning. The month of July and August 1923 were the hottest I experienced at Fort Hancock so after a month I was out of the Army. Out of the hospital and back for duty. The S-U-N of God cured my back and the S-O-N of God cured my soul. I was a new man, new ideas and aspirations. I went about my duties with a new vigor and a new life taken over. The winter passed without any events. The spring started off great. All the companies competing in a sports event for the prize to be made champion. You could volunteer or be appointed for some event. I was not in any condition to take part so I didn't sign up. But our first sergeant Martin took advantage of the situation and assigned me for the five mile run. The new convert to Christ can't even participate in the field meet, doesn't look good. I had a month to go so I accepted the challenge. My breathing had to be worked on. The gymnasium was used a lot. My legs had to be strengthened. Running and rubbing the muscles brought strength. I needed timing. Sergeant Martin saw that I was in earnest about the race and wanted to help. We measured a mile circle. We compromised on a six minute mile and I ran it. The third week with my overshoes on so I was in good shape for the fourth week. I won quite handily. Twenty nine minutes thirty seconds. I had been blessed with a strong body. Now at 94 years, I am in pretty good shape. 1924, I was appointed chief planter so it was planting the mines and picking them up again most of the summer. In September three mines with explosives in them were laid. A target was towed over them. A primary and secondary observing stations sent data to the plotting room where it could be traced over what mine the target would go. The signal would go to the casemate and the switch would be pulled. After it was all over those that had boats and nets had fun. One more of the many good things at Fort Hancock was the beach plums. Even my failing taste buds are longing for some beach plums now. Al Koons and I talked about Christian work after I left the Army. So in July I decided to leave. Now October the 11 1924, I said farewell to Fort Hancock, John Borris. Napoleon Bordeaux Captain 7th Coast Artillery, Commanding Battery D signed the discharge.

END OF INTERVIEW