

**Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
A Telephone Oral History Interview with Carl Cochran
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS June 26, 2004
Transcribed By: Melissa Shinbein, NPS 2009**



**Beach hut made from debris left by Hurricane Donna, 1960.
L to R Sp4 Cochran Sp4 Hurley and Sp4 Hardison.**



**Softball champions of 71st Artillery, C Battery. Lt. Marmon accepts trophy. Carl Cochran
on far right.**



Mess Hall in Barracks 74. Carl Cochran on left.

Editor's note: Mr. Cochran has sent in corrections/clarifications to the interview and they appear in parenthesis().

MR: Today is June 26, 2004. My name is Mary Rasa, Sandy Hook Museum Curator. I am on the telephone with Carl Cochran who was stationed at the Nike Missile site at Fort Hancock. And we're going to ask a few questions. First of all could you state your full name.

CC: Yeah, Carl Cochran.

MR: And when and where were you born?

CC: Jacksonville, Florida on 2/25/40.

MR: What high school did you attend?

CC: Robert E. Lee High School, Jacksonville, Florida.

MR: And what year did you graduate?

CC: 1958.

MR: Were your father or grandfather in the military?

CC: My father was young too young for one (World War I) and too old for the other. I couldn't tell you about my grandfathers.

MR: Were you drafted?

CC: No.

MR: So you signed up. Did you sign up for a specific branch of service?

CC: I was in college and I dropped out for dumb reasons. So, I decided to get my obligation behind me and one of my buddies who was in the Marine Corps advised me to try and get in a field that could help me out when I got out and I joined the missiles. I asked for the New York area.

MR: Okay, so that's how you became involved at Fort Hancock? By asking for it?

CC: Yes.

MR: So, did you go through any training at Fort Bliss, Texas?

CC: No ma'am, we did not. Our training was strictly on-the-job training.

MR: So, when you signed up did you go through regular basic training and then get assigned here?

CC: Yes ma'am. I went through basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

MR: What were your start and ending dates at Fort Hancock?

CC: I'll have to guess on this. See, I went in service in September-October, (September 11, 1959) I would say the later part of November. (I got to Fort Hancock.)

MR: What year?

CC: 1959.

MR: And your ending date was round '61 or '62?

CC: My ending date was around September 10th 1962.

MR: Were you actually processed out at that point in time?

CC: Yes, I was processed out at Fort Hamilton.

MR: Did you know anything about Fort Hancock before coming here?

CC: Nothing. Except it was up north.

MR: Did you know what type of job you were going to be performing?

CC: Really, no. I knew there were some missiles, I signed up for the missiles, and you had three choices at that time for where you'd like to be stationed at. I said the northeast. It was my first choice and I got it.

MR: So, were you a private when you came up here?

CC: Yes ma'am, I had had some reserve time but I was a PFC (Private First Class).

MR: What unit were you assigned to?

CC: C-1 Launching Area. 71st Artillery under Captain Oswald, who I still talk to today and have the most respect for in the world. He retired as a Lt. Colonel.

MR: And what was your job while you were here?

CC: I was the panel operator in the launching area.

MR: Okay, did this help you in your future work?

CC: As far as job-wise goes, I don't think so. But did it help, I think so. I was stationed with some good people and I've worked in danger all my life and, as you know, those were nuclear warheads and all. I have you know, we kind of took it (them for) granted. But I think later on in life, my job as state director working with the railroad industry and I think it helped me to that degree. It seemed like I always worked around dangerous things.

MR: So, tell me a little more about your profession after leaving the service.

CC: After leaving the service, I went to work for the railroad where I was a conductor for the Old Seaboard which is the CSX. Since 1988, I've been State Director in Florida for the United Transportation Union. Which at one time I was part of the National Safety Board Team. I mostly work in Tallahassee, Florida and Washington DC on legislative items.

MR: While you were here, were there any alerts of potential attacks?

CC: Oh yes, the Cuban Alert, we were all on high status at the time.

MR: Could you tell me a little more about your job at that time and how you were feeling? Was everybody nervous?

CC: Well as I stated before, we were pretty young at that time. And all we referred to as “young and dumb” and maybe sometimes that was good but we were all on alert quite a bit, red alert status. We were up and down all the time, it seemed like. As a missile man, we were always taking hatches off for inspection. Before we could get them off, you would have to put them back on before we could go up to alert. So, back during the real hot spots during the Cuban (Missile) Crisis and I’d say that’d go back to ’61-’62, we really didn’t have the opportunity for a good inspection.

MR: During one of these alerts, would you be doing anything differently than on regular duty?

CC: Well, I would say not really because, we were behind barbed wire so much. But, I think I spoke to you before, where one time we came close enough to really having an actual (fired missile), but it was, an unidentified I think a passenger plane. That was really the closest we came to firing one. We had it up and ready.

MR: So, you were ready to launch?

CC: Yeah, we were ready to launch several times, but I would say that is the one that sticks out in my mind as it was an unidentified plane, but it was one of ours and it was a passenger plane.

MR: How close were they to launching?

CC: I would say we were on countdown as far as launching. We never did launch. But as best I can recall we were on countdown.

MR: And how long is the countdown?

CC: Well, it depends what phase you’re in. Let me put it to you this way, we were close.

MR: Okay, so, your duty assignment was in the pit?

CC: Right I was in the pit. As I said, I was a panel operator. I was the guy who pushed the missile to launch it. I pushed the button (only when in Section Emergency).

MR: When you were on your 24 hour shifts were you staying in the barracks that were right on site?

CC: Well, you can’t really say 24 hour shifts because people lived out there. We lived out there. We had two different areas. The old hospital (Barracks 74) there was our barracks when we weren’t on alert. But when we were on alert we lived out there. Yes, Ma’am.

MR: So you lived in Barracks 74. When you were off duty, I guess when you weren’t on alert.

CC: I don’t know about 74.

MR: That’s the number of the building.

CC: We just referred to it as the old hospital.

MR: So, did you ever see any civilian employees while you were there or were they all military?

CC: Oh yes. We had civilian employees and I think they came from Camp Kilmer.

MR: And they were basically maintenance people?

CC: Right, right. They had quite a few of them, yes ma'am.

MR: Now, when you were down at the launch site was the food a lot worse than when you were up at the barracks?

CC: I will say this, I had stomach problems when I came out. Don't get me wrong, but I was a pretty good athlete and I really thought I was going to go back to college and or play pro-football. But, because of my stomach problems I wasn't able to and later on, it just tapered off I never had any problems before. And, I thought, it was because of eating food out of them canisters. That's just a guess.

MR: So, when you were down there they would bring you down food in metal canisters?

CC: Right, and with hot water to keep it hot. And, sometimes, it'd be there forever before we'd have the opportunity to eat because we were on the hill (launch pits). Now, I would like to tell you a story about a panel operator. We had to pull checks every so often. So during alert status, sometimes the most time we got to sleep was maybe three and half hours. And then we'd have to go up on the hill and pull checks. And being a Florida boy up there in that cold weather and everything to me that always reminds me of. And another thing that, and we had to sleep in our boots. A lot of us had feet trouble after that because if you get those boots wet and then you'd have to sleep in them, that's pretty rough on the feet. That's the one thing that sticks in my mind the most about being a panel operator. That we had to go up there (launch pits) and to get back to your 24 hours, that 24 hours around the clock you got to pull them checks. And you always had to pick someone to go up with you because, you could never up the hill by yourself.

MR: When you were actually in the pit, did it collect a lot of water down there?

CC: I would not say that it collected a lot of water, but it collected a lot of dampness. And I know a lot of the guys had a lot of trouble with piles. As you know, cement will draw a battery dead. That cement was pretty rough on you.

MR: So there were probably a lot of allergies from mold and things.

CC: Oh yeah, like I said we were young and dumb and tough.

MR: Tell me a little bit about the social activities. I know we have some photos of you in different sporting events. Do you want to talk a little about that?

CC: Oh yeah, I think that's one great thing about the military back there and I was fortunate enough that I got to go to West Point and play on the team in a flag-football tournament and everything. But, I really think the one thing that stands out in my mind that was really good was the first Shirt which is the First Sergeant or like that of the Coast Guard. But I don't what the First Shirt is equal to, or the Air Force but we were usually playing them in a softball game, and there was always a keg of beer. And the First Shirt would have to pay for the keg of beer if we lost. And that was always the most important game. You didn't want to lose that game, because the first shirt had to buy that keg. As far as activities on that post, I don't think they could have done anything better. The fishing was the greatest. We could get our fishing rods/reels checked out there. The service club, them women were just outstanding. You could go in there and play bingo on Wednesday night and win underwear, T-shirts, and just stuff you would need, we would always look forward to that, believe it or not. The barber there was a fantastic guy, we had our own barber shop. And naturally we had the beer garden, the NCO club, the enlisted men's club and the officers club. I think we had one of the nicest beach houses. Our beach house overlooked Coney Island.

MR: So you were at the north end. The enlisted men's beach was near the north?

CC: That's right. I was also a lifeguard. When I had the time to be. So as far as that goes I don't think they could have done much more. You know, as far as having someone there that would really crack the whip to the point and really didn't let a person enjoy their off time. I don't remember that during the three years I was out there.

MR: Did you ever take excursions to New York?

CC: Oh yeah.

MR: Did they still have the boat running at that point?

CC: The Army boat. Yes, ma'am.

MR: Okay, so you were able to go up by boat and come back by boat?

CC: I really never took the boat because every time it was made available, I was on duty. I pulled some bad duty, trust me.

MR: So how did you get there? By car?

CC: Oh yeah. We always had a car. That was a funny thing. I don't know if its something that you want to hear. But the main thing for a service man was transportation, and the hardest thing for a service man was insurance. Right outside the gate there, there was a place where if a person couldn't get insurance they could park their vehicles. You were pretty much a hero if you had a car. Most of our activities such as dancing and stuff like that, we would go to Fort Monmouth. They had a good band and everything there. So we spent a lot of time at Fort Monmouth.

MR: Did you ever go to the Highlands' bars?

CC: Oh yeah. Remember the old bowling alley?

MR: In the Fort, yeah. (Actually referring to bowling alley in Highlands.)

CC: And also I don't know if anybody ever said anything to you, but that old sailboat that sank out there with the mast sticking up. That was up forever.

MR: No, I hadn't heard about that.

CC: Right when you came in the gate, it was to the left, and it was a sailboat that sank. And you could see the mast. It was up forever, the whole 3 years that sucker stuck out of the water. It was kind of a marker to us.

MR: So, you enjoyed your time out here?

CC: Oh, I had a fabulous time out here, but the only thing was, I had to be there. That was the only bad part about it.

MR: Did anything especially humorous occur while you were here?

CC: Humorous. Well, probably when I hang up I'll think of something.

MR: Anything stick out in your mind?

CC: Well, let me say this, I was from Florida, like I said before I thought the world of my Battery Commander which I had there which was Captain Oswald, which we called Scooter. And since I was from Florida, he put me in charge of the snow plow. And when we had a hurricane there, the big hurricane where we went completely underwater...

MR: Hurricane Donna

CC: Well, I drove the snow plow. And basically sometime the only way I could get around because the water was so high, I had to put the plow at the certain level to push the water away, actually that was a diesel, so I could keep going. At that time, I'm positive I was driving the only vehicle that was moving. And periodically, I had to go up on the hill to get an officer or somebody from the Air Force base in the Highlands and bring them back to their families. In doing so, I had to push big boulders out of the road with the plow to get back on post. Believe me, at times, I could not see land because of the ocean and the bay there. It was completely covered over. So, that was kind of a scary moment, not knowing if I was going out into the ocean or the bay.

MR: Did you assist the people in Highlands who needed help getting out of their houses?

CC: No, at the time we did not because we had our own problems on the post. Like I said before,

I was just about the only moving vehicle at one time. In fact, I don't think anybody was allowed to go on or go off. All I know is that I had to make a couple emergency runs in order to go get people and bring them back to their families. I brought people off the post. That sounds kind of weird, but that's the way it was.

MR: Oh, Okay. Anything else you'd like to talk about?

CC: Let me just think a minute.

MR: I know you have a good friend, Chuck Schneider, who we also interviewed, any other names of people you'd like to mention?

CC: Well, Bill Hardsion. We called him the deacon. He was probably one of the nicest guys you'd ever met. But there were a lot of nice people. There really wasn't anybody that I could put my finger on and really tell you I didn't want to be around at that time. I do know that the city guys who lived in New York City, all could do was mainly want to get home. My first year there, as a private, or PFC, I pulled a lot of KP and guard duty for them and I'd say I picked up a lot of money. And all them local boys, those city boys, there was something about it, they just had to go home. But I'm trying to think, all I know was the fishing that was great. It was really a good place to be. I know I had orders that would send me overseas and sometimes I kind of wish I had done it and all but they sent somebody else in my place, maybe it was because of my sports or something.

MR: And you also played on the baseball team?

CC: Oh, I played everything.

MR: What other sports did they have?

CC: Oh we had a fabulous ping-pong tournament. It was great. We had ping-pong, we had basketball, we had softball. We didn't play baseball, it was softball. Not that sucker pitch you have today it was fast pitch. Flag football, and at the time we would have some pretty decent tournaments but it had to be in that area because one of the presidents, I can't remember who it was. It wasn't Kennedy, probably Eisenhower, kind of put tabs on the military going long distances. Just as I was getting out of the service, it was lifted and the softball team was going to California, but I wouldn't extend my time to go because I wanted out. With all this Cuban episode and all. I would like to say to you one thing that's kind of cute. We were there during the Cold War with the Cubans, my two daughters married Cubans.

MR: Well you are in South Florida.

CC: I think that maybe before we go to war with some nation we should get one hundred people, not politicians together to figure out why we want to kill each other. So, we'd have less wars. And again I said something to you about statue out there of a little girl and a dog.

MR: I am unfamiliar with that. Would you like to say something about that.

CC: I asked a couple of my buddies about that. It's a story of a little girl and her dog walking over on the ice and getting stuck over on Sandy Hook and freezing to death. And I know there was a statue out there of the girl and that little dog.

MR: Do you know where it would have been?

CC: I was out there again at the hook about three or four months ago or five months ago and I road out there and tried to look for you but I didn't have any luck. You were gone or something. I tried to look for it. I know it was up where the roads divided

MR: So it was up in the fort area where all the building are? (It was actually by Horseshoe Cove and the IFC area)

CC: Right, right. but I know good and well and I asked some of my buddies if they remember and they said yeah. But the story is that a little girl and her dog walked on the ice and froze. And there was a statue there. I don't think I'm dreaming because my buddies still remember it.

MR: Interesting. Do you have anything else to say before I turn the tape off?

CC: Like I said before, later this afternoon I'll probably think of a million things. All I can say is, one thing that kind of might be off the wall, but just before I got out I asked to be put on a little leniency duty because I was a short-timer. I had been there just about longer than anybody. I started running the ration run. The ration run was the women on the fort would give you a grocery list like bread, eggs, milk things like that and the ration driver would pick all that stuff up for them at Fort Monmouth. So really, Fort Monmouth was the life of Fort Hancock.

MR: That's also where you would go for medical treatment, right?

CC: Right, and anything related to the missiles was Camp Kilmer.

MR: Okay, thank you very much. I'm going to turn the recorder off.

MR: Okay, we are back on the tape with Carl Cochran

CC: Yeah, I'd like to add a two items to that. One, I was raised in the south and went to college in Mississippi and my whole attitude towards black and white really changed once I was stationed out at Fort Hancock because I felt we all got along real good there and I was awarded the special allocation in 1961 for one of the top firing batteries. And I was a panel operator. I was taught my panel from a guy name Felts, I think his name was Jim Felts, he was a black soldier out of Newark, NJ. And my philosophy started to change right after that working with black, whites, and other things and got along real well.

MR: Also, where was the missile testing where you went through to get this award?

CC: Oh yeah, 1961 we were firing in White Sands, New Mexico, two of us received a special allocation which I don't think was done too much in those days for firing and being the top Battery at White Sands, New Mexico. Remember all nations come there and fire. In the IFC which is the radar area it was Bill Martin. And in the launching area it was Carl Cochran. To this day some guys still call me special allocation Cochran. And that was kind of nice because General Daly was the guy who gave us our accommodations and a money item amount that was. And Bill Martin and Carl Cochran was actually first out to get their specialist ratings. And they held us up for three months for the parade and guys ran around us for three months because we had to wait for our special allocations.

MR: So by the time you left the fort, what was your rank then?

CC: I was a Spec Four, Specialist 4. At that time, usually if you re-uped (re-enlisted) they would make you a Specialist 5. But if they knew you weren't re-uping they wouldn't do it.

MR: Who was the commanding officer of Fort Hancock at the time you were here?

CC: Captain Oswald.

MR: Was there also a higher up ranking officer?

CC: As I said before, General Daly. General Daly was a one-star general and the best I remember he had something wrong with one of his arms, I think it happened during war time.

MR: And was he assigned to Fort Hancock? Did he live here?

CC: Right, right. He lived there in one of the big houses.

MR: Okay, I'm going to stop....

CC: Like I said before, and you probably heard me say it again to me Captain Oswald, he was the guy. I don't know if you interviewed him.

MR: Yes, I did. He was a very nice gentleman.

CC: He was super. Oh, hard, he was very hard. We all loved the guy. The ones that came after him, just weren't scooter. Don't get me wrong they were good guys. And one Lt. in there, I remember quite well, Lt. Ulmer. He was a super guy. Very nice guy. In fact I think Lt. Ulmer made a career of the military. He was from a New England state. And a Sgt Green was our section chief. The whole time I was there I think a Sgt Fernandez was Staff Sgt. And first shirt gee I can't think of the guys name. Laney was one and I can't think of the one before. (Most of the time was Sgt. Henson was the First Sargent. After him it was Sgt. Blaney.)

END OF INTERVIEW