

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Interview with Carl DeFilippis
Ordnance Department civilian employee working with Nike Missiles
1958-1963
Interviewed by Billy Yirce, Monmouth University student intern
April 25, 2003
Transcribed by Mary Rasa 2010



Carl DeFilippis conducting a tour at Fort Hancock's Nike Radar Site in 2004.
Carl is a volunteer for the National Park Service.

Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

BY: This is an oral history interview of Carl DeFilippis taking place on April 25, 2003 taking place at History House at Sandy Hook, New Jersey for the National Park Service at Fort Hancock. First, when and where were you born?

CD: I was born in East Orange, New Jersey (in 1931) and graduated East Orange High School. Moved out of East Orange to West Orange. I went to what's called New Jersey Institute of Technology and I was in the ROTC program. I was commissioned an officer and I went to Meteorology School. I was a weather forecaster in the United States Air Force.

BY: Oh. How long were you doing that for?

CD: Four years and then voluntarily I was in the Reserves for another four years. I love weather forecasting. I still fool around with it. And after, when I got out of service, I

went back into engineering. I worked one year of engineering. I worked for Curtiss Wright as a test engineer. I went back in engineering.

BY: That's the propeller company?

CD: Yes. And I went with Picatinny Arsenal in Dover, New Jersey which was the research and development center for all the ammunition for the United States Army, which includes small caliber right up to, you know, nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons were tactical weapons, they were not strategic weapons. In other words, they were field, and Nike Hercules was one of them. And I worked there thirty two years and I retired about 10 years ago.

BY: And how did you become, end up in Fort Hancock?

CD: I visited as part of my duties from 1958 to about 1965. I was working on the Nike Hercules program and I used to visit sites throughout the United States because I was in operations maintenance. I also was in production before that. So, I visited missile sites throughout the United States, this place being one of them, Livingston, New Jersey being another, Franklin Lakes being another, and I was all over the place. And then part of my duties, I had to go to Army Depots where the nuclear warhead section was put together. Seneca Army Depot (New York) was one, Letterkenny (Pennsylvania) was another. Sierra Army Depot (California) was another. I forget names now, but you know in other words part of my duties was to visit other sites to give them hands on. I was hands on.

BY: Now, what was your specific job? What was?

CD: I was an engineer. And like I said, when I came down here initially, nuclear munitions with the Army was just starting. So, I was in production. And because there was no one in maintenance, I had to wear two hats for awhile. And eventually, I got involved in maintenance strictly because I got a promotion to go to that group.

BY: Alright, so you maintained to make sure everything was...

CD: Yes. One of the things that was, particularly with a nuclear weapon, was that procedures were very strict. They had to do everything by manuals so we were responsible for writing the manuals and correcting the manuals. And if there was any errors, they would come in, you know, and query us about it and if any general maintenance problems came up involving the weapons system. One of the things that might come up is what they called if they had a problem and they were going through an exercise and something happened. A red light came up, let's say that. Then, they had to shut down completely and we had to go out and go through the whole thing and get that thing back up to a green light status. They couldn't do anything further from that point.

BY: And you were involved in testing the weapons here?

CD: Pardon?

BY: Testing them, testing the weapons or not?

CD: No. No. No. The only tests on the Nike Hercules and even the Ajax was done down in White Sands Missile Range or McGregor Firing Range (New Mexico). There was never a Nike Hercules or a Nike Ajax ever launched from any place in the United States except those places. In other words, nothing was ever fired in anger.

BY: Okay. So that's good then.

CD: Yeah. Particularly if you've got a nuclear weapon. (laughter)

BY: Yeah.

CD: And most people in those days, it was highly classified and everything was secure. You could only get as far the, the, where the Ranger Station is in the middle of the road. Behind that was fenced. Then you need another clearance to get into the missile site. Then you had to have another clearance to get into another fenced in area which was the launch site. That's how strict it was.

BY: So, it was real secure.

CD: All, they carried loaded weapons. They had guard dogs and so on. Nobody could get near anything.

BY: Now, what was your relationship with the military that was stationed here? Did you have to, you had interactions with them obviously, right?

CD: Yeah. When I came down, obviously there were people manning those sites and I would go in and I would have discussions with them. You know, the problem they had or whatever. If they had a problem sometimes I would come down here to do something that I wanted to incorporate in our procedures or something like that.

BY: Did you make any friends while you were in this area?

CD: No. Because you were generally down, maybe for a day. And you know, it was like in and out. And like I said, I went all over the place. I think I was only down here once, twice.

BY: Twice.

CD: Twice. I think I was at Livingston maybe three times. Franklin Lakes I was only there once. So, I was out in Detroit, the west coast, south and whatever.

BY: All over.

CD: All over the place.

BY: So, you got to travel at least.

CD: Yes.

BY: That must have been a good part of the job.

CD: Yeah. Yeah.

BY: Now, do you remember anything about your visit here? Anything stick out in your mind?

CD: Well, I do remember as I said, I do remember the security. I remember coming up through here and I had a clearance with me, a teletype clearance. And a lot of times they would call back to the Arsenal. They even verified that you were. You had a picture pass. And a lot of places they would give you another picture pass to get into another area. So, it was very tight. I remember the security very well. I remember also going down. Because the missiles were stored below ground so I remember going to the missile launch site you used to go downstairs. You had to go down a ladder to get downstairs. The missiles were brought up on an elevator. They bring them up to the launcher which were on the ground surface and then they were slid over to a launcher and the cables were hooked up. And you know if something happened. Those were the things that I remember really.

BY: You didn't get a chance to go to the beach then. (laughter)

CD: Well, no. I would say that every once in a while I would stop and have a nice lunch and look at the ocean and something like that. You know things like that.

BY: Now, did they ever have a scare when you were around at all, like of an enemy attack?

CD: No. Once again, the only thing that I was told was that when the lights went off in New York City, when they had that big blackout which was probably the late sixties (1965). (Tape ends abruptly).

END OF INTERVIEW