

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Interview with Ronald Hyers
Civilian employee working with Nike Missiles
Interviewed by Billy Yirce, Monmouth University student intern
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Transcribed by Mary Rasa 2010



One type of radar antennae for the Nike Missile system serviced by Ron Hyers during his employment with the Army's Ordnance Department from 1959 to 1974. Soldier poses with equipment.

Photo courtesy of Gateway NRA/NPS

Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

(The interview of Ronald Hyers took place on Fort Hancock Day, October 26th, 2003 in Park Headquarters, Building 58.)

BY: First off, where and when were you born?

RH: July 23, 1937 in Long Branch.

BY: Okay, and what was your education?

RH: I went to school in Belford at Belford Grammar School. Then I went to Fairview School, Fair Haven to 8th grade and the High School in Leonardo, Middletown Township High School.

BY: And what did you do after high school?

RH: I enlisted in the Navy and I went in the Navy. I was in the Navy for about four years. And then I got out and went to work for the Army.

BY: What was your job in the Navy?

RH: I was a Fire Control Technician.

BY: Okay and how did you get the job with the Army?

RH: Ah, it was interesting. The guy who lived next door to my Father and Mother down in Belford worked out of Staten Island. Out of the Combined Field Maintenance Shop out on Miller Field on Staten Island which was where they were taking care of all the Nike sites on this side of the river. While I was in the Navy I used to talk to him and he told me when I was, he said, "Oh yeah, we need your kind of skills for the Army," doing (work) with guns back then, 90mm and 120s (millimeters anti-aircraft guns). So when I got out, I said, "You still need people?" He says, "Yeah. We are looking for people." So he got me the application. I filled out the application. Sent it in to Fort Wadsworth and that's where I was hired, Fort Wadsworth and then went to work at Miller Field. And then at that time we were doing the Nike Ajax Missiles. And we had missiles as far north, missile sites as far north as Spring Valley, New York and Fort Hancock was the furthest one south. We had, I think it was 26 batteries that we took care of at that time.

BY: So, then you were just bouncing from site to site?

RH: We'd go from site to site. Perform maintenance and when they had troubles, we would troubleshoot the equipment and get it back on here.

BY: What did you know about the missiles beforehand, before joining that program?

RH: I actually didn't know a heck of a lot, but it was easy, the equipment used was similar to what I used in the Navy for guns. So, of course they sent me to school. The Army sent me to school in '59. I was in school for six months and came back. And then I was in school, totally, the whole time with the Army about three and a half years. They sent me back and forth to different schools. And then we moved from Staten Island, Miller Field in 1960. We moved over to Combined Field Maintenance Shop at Camp Kilmer which is now part of Livingston College. And a part of the old barracks is still there up in Kilmer. But we were stationed there from '59 'til '70 when they closed the shop. And then I came down here and took over the site here at Fort Hancock, the dual site. And we provided maintenance support right there on site. We had, if you go into the IFC (Integrated Fire Control also known as the radar site) Area, the barracks buildings way down on the end, we had our office down there and our supply and everything else.

BY: Okay. Growing up in New Jersey, before you started working for the Army, what did you know about Fort Hancock?

RH: Ah, that is interesting. My first run in with Fort Hancock was, I was about six or seven years old and I was on a boat out here on the Bay and that was during the (World) War (II). And you couldn't be out there unless you had a permit. So, I was out with my Uncle, my Father and my Brother. And evidently the Coast Guard saw us. And they

came out here and got us. Brought us in here and locked us up in one of these jails around here. I think it might have been the jail in Fort Hancock at the time. And we got stuck here until about 10 o'clock at night until they finally got us out. But that was my first....

BY: That was your first experience here was being arrested. (laughter)

RH: At Fort Hancock, yeah. Really, it used to be all closed off. You couldn't get out here unless you had business out here. Even when I first started coming out here in the sixties, the gate was way down the end and you had to go in there and get a pass. Even if you had a government vehicle we used to go in there and get passes and come out. It was pretty secure out here.

BY: Now, you said that your Grandfather and your Father both worked here?

RH: My Great-Grandfather was the night watchmen on the pier over here, I guess the Coast Guard dock (working for the Sandy Hook Proving Ground). And he only had one arm, but he lost it on an accident out here, crane accident of some type. And then my Grandfather was a carpenter that worked out here taking care of these buildings. My Father was a messenger, when he was a kid. He was about fifteen years old, I guess. He had a bike and he used to ride around and deliver. He was like a courier. And then my Grandfather stayed here until 1917 when they transferred the Proving Ground out of Fort Hancock to Aberdeen. And then he more or less lost his job. He was a carpenter and he worked locally for different people. My Father of course, he was a carpenter for a while and then he became a milkman and that's where he retired as a milkman.

BY: Now, as your job in the Fire Control, what was your job? Give me the average day, what was your job?

RH: On an average day? Well, normally if the site was on a "maintenance" status, they had three different statuses. They had "A" status which was a 20 minute status. Which meant that the whole crew was there the whole time 24 hours a day and within twenty minutes they could get a missile up and off the launchers. On "B" status they were on backup status. So, you could do some maintenance but not a lot. Normally we would come down if we had different parts to replace that were broken.

BY: You could only do that if were on "B" status?

RH: On "maintenance" status.

BY: "Maintenance" status.

RH: "B" status you could normally run some tests if they had problems with certain things without putting them out of action. You could actually run tests on the equipment. But they had to be ready to get back up in a half hour. So, that was a three hour status. "A" status was 20 minute status. "B" status was three hours status, and "Maintenance"

(status) was they could turn the power off and we could fix things that you had to have the power off, you know, inside the transformers and stuff. But normally, you know, it was a tube system and it's not a solid state like they are today. And we used to have a lot of failures so they did call us. They, the unit, if they had a problem they had a half hour to fix it. If they couldn't fix it they had to call us for support. And then we would come in and work with them to get the system back up on the air.

BY: Now were you on call 24 hours a day? How did that work?

RH: Well, the shop, we had a 24 hour shift. We were 24/7. And normally what would happen if when we got stationed here from '70 to '74, then we did all the maintenance. We didn't have a shift. We only had day shift and I'd come in at night and fix anything that was wrong. But we, I spent a lot of hours out here over the years, putting equipment back on the air that was off.

BY: Now, were you ever here when there was any potential enemy attacks or anything? When they got worried?

RH: I was here, I was here, there was a couple of times. There was a, I guess, a Russian bomber that got off course and came in. And we were on "A" status at the time, and they were actually on count there getting ready to shoot 'em down. And then I was here during the Cuban Missile Crisis. As a matter of fact I was putting in a modification in one of the terminals and we had the power off. And it was getting near the end of the day so I said, "Well, I'm going to go back home and be back in the morning." And they said, "Okay." But by the time I got to the gate was when word came down that Kennedy had been assassinated. And they put the site, they wanted the site back up on the air on "A" status.

BY: So you had to go back...

RH: I had to tear all the (inaudible) that I had put in and then get it back up to the original status and then get 'em operational to go back up on "A" status. I was here, I guess I put in about 22 hours that day.

BY: Oh wow.

RH: Before I got 'em back up. But they stayed up on "A" status for three or four months. They never came down.

BY: After Kennedy was assassinated?

RH: The whole batteries, the whole defense system went up.

BY: Wow. So, you couldn't do any maintenance or anything?

RH: No, not for three or four months. You know, we come down and we'd work around different things that we could do. We couldn't get into where we were really affecting the equipment or anything.

BY: Now, what was your relationship with the military since you were civilian?

RH: We were civilian. Well, of course, once you have been in the military, we had a good working relationship with them. You know, they had to call us and we would come in. But they worked with us. You know, we'd troubleshoot together. And normally, the big thing about it was a lot of the guys that were in school, a lot of the GIs, military, Army, didn't learn a lot. They never got any hands on training. So, when a maintenance guy came here, the warrants (officers) that used to be in charge, the site warrant, he'd say, "Well you go with this civilian and he'll show you the ropes." We would train them. And I tell you what, we made some darn good technicians out of a few guys. They were really good. Some of them just didn't. They really didn't care. They weren't interested. You know, they were here for so many years just to get out.

BY: Did they feed you when you came? How did that work or did you have to bring your own food?

RH: No. The PX was here.

BY: It was right here, right?

RH: Yep. Yep. And we used to come down to the PX. But a lot of times, we'd go to the chow hall because we were working on the equipment so they'd say, "Come on and go to the chow hall and we'll have lunch up there." We used to pay. And then if you were here all night we'd come down to the chow hall and they'd fix us breakfast and coffee and what have you. But when they were on "A" status, originally they used to bring the food right out to the site and they used to eat in the Ready Room which is right next door, well if you know where the vans are up there. There was a brick building right next door. There was the Ready Room and they used to eat in there. They had big containers, insulated containers they'd bring the hot food out and used to sit there and eat. And there was about, I guess there were about 10 or 12 bunks in there. They used to sleep there when they had (inaudible). Originally, going way back, back in the late fifties, early sixties, they used to live right out there.

BY: Oh, right out...

RH: Right out at the site, yeah. You go down the end, there's a bunch of barracks down there and they lived there inside the fence.

BY: Right on the site.

RH: Right on the site. And then they used to drive up and go here in the mess halls right over here somewhere, one of these buildings, I'll show you which one it is. (Barracks 74) And they used to go there to eat, and then drive back out, but they lived right on the site.

BY: Alright.

RH: And then the mid-sixties, they moved them into the Headquarters Building here. (Barracks 74) There was barracks upstairs. They slept upstairs and then Headquarters was downstairs. And then the only time they were out there was when they were on 20 minute status. They stayed right out there and they had these bunks in the Ready Room where they used to sleep.

BY: What status were they on most of the time would you say?

RH: Oh, they used to pull, they used to pull a week of "A", a week of "B" and a week of "Maintenance".

BY: And they just went on a rotation?

RH: Yeah. They just went on a rotation. Of course, now, if another battery went down, of course there was this dual battery. And, you know, one side would be "A" and the other side would be "B".

BY: Okay, so you could work on one side a little.

RH: Yeah. So then what would happen whenever "A" went down, they'd call the "B" battery back up.

BY: Okay.

RH: And of course very seldom both of them got down on maintenance. But that posed a problem in the launching area because the launching area was a single launching area.

BY: So you had to launch out of the same one.

RH: Yeah. They had to launch missiles out of the same launching area. So, the launching area didn't get a lot of maintenance time.

BY: Because it was always on "A".

RH: Yeah, we used to concentrate on that. When we got our maintenance time we used to all go down there and do the things we had to do down there.

BY: What about the beach? Did they let you use the beach here at all or how did that work?

RH: You know, all the years I was out here, my wife got to use it once or twice. I never did. But when we got here in 1970, full time, '70-'74, we had a lot of times in the launching area when the guys were on "A" status. The guys couldn't do anything down there. So, I had a guy from Keansburg, who passed away. Jasper Brookes was his name. He used to go fishing. And he'd catch a fish on the beach and he'd come back and fillet it and clean it and we'd have fish stew for dinner the following day. So we had it real nice. But I never got much beach time. Some time, but the beaches back then, it was still rough. They are still rough.

BY: Yeah. Yeah. Big waves.

RH: Yep. Riptides.

BY: What was the most interesting thing that you would think about, like that you remember about serving here? What interested you the most?

RH: Oh, I spent from '59 to '74 and from '70 to '74 constantly here every day. Even in the sixties I was out here all the time because it was closer for me to come here than it was for me to go all the way to Camp Kilmer, get a truck and come back. But just working on the site. We used to a lot of time at lunch time we'd sneak and go off into some of these old places that were all boarded up at that time. They wouldn't allow you to go in. We used to go in. And there was an old, during the Second World War they had submarine nets out here.

BY: Did they really?

RH: And the Bay was mined. So, at the bottom of one of these buildings here was a control center that controlled all the mines that were out here. So we used to sneak into these buildings. Some of them were vacant and look around. See what you can find. But it was interesting out here with all of these old buildings. The old guns, I guess they have some of them fixed up now, but back then, the breeches were, you know, were sitting in a box on the side. I mean, it was, the batteries were just abandoned and they didn't want you in them, but we used to go in them all the time. Being out here, you know this thing, this place is full of holly. It's the world's largest natural holly forest.

BY: Is it really?

RH: I don't think they talk about it much, but if you go back and look, there's actually the holly tree grow up and there's the salt spray from the bay and the ocean come across and the trees die off right at the top. So, the actual holly forest is curved from the salt and the salt killing the top of the trees. And we used to cut holly here around the holidays and use it.

BY: Ah, that's good. Now what did you do? You said you closed up in '74. What did that consist of? What did you guys have to do?

RH: We had to take all the equipment out. Everything.

BY: Took it out.

RH: Yep. Took everything out.

BY: Where did you bring it?

RH: It went back to Letterkenny Army Depot (Pennsylvania) where they kept it. I don't know where they took it after that. But, I'm in the process of trying to get some of it back. Wow, three months ago I got a call from a guy in Redstone (Arsenal) in Huntsville (Alabama). He has the Hi-power radar building you know, on the installation where they train us. Because I went to that site. That's where I got trained there. The radome and tower, they want to get rid of it. So, I called the National Park Service, I called Mary.

BY: Okay.

RH: And she turned it over to somebody here.

BY: Okay.

RH: I told them to coordinate with them. I gave them the email address and I gave them the guy's name. But they can get that radome and tower if they want it.

BY: That would be good, yeah.

RH: It's not a cheap thing to do, but they can at least get it here and sit it here and someday put it up. And its going to take some work, because we took the other one down and it is not an easy job.

BY: I can imagine.

RH: And all of that equipment, we had to take all of that equipment out. But you know there is some stuff out there that I don't know if they know is theirs. There is a fuel tank that I filled with water that is under the ground. It must be a five or six thousand gallon tank that is underneath the ground out there.

BY: You just buried it?

RH: Yeah. It's buried. I had the fill pipes, but it's full of water. We filled it full of water so it wouldn't come out of the ground. We pumped all the oil out. And take all the cabling out. I cut all the ladders off the towers so that nobody could climb up on the tower and fall off and get hurt. But that is when we closed it down. We closed it.

BY: How long did it take you to close it?

RH: It took us three months to take everything out of here. And we had two sites. We had Charlie 1 and Charlie 2 and all the equipment. Charlie 1 had the most equipment because it had the Hi-Power. And then boxed it up and shipped it back. It cost them a lot of money to take it out. And in the launching area, took all the racks out of the launching area. And all the launchers. A ton of stuff. I tell you.

BY: Now, what did you do when you were done in '74? What did you go on to do?

RH: I got a job with Fort Monmouth over there in the CECOM office building. What they called Green Acres over there in Tinton Falls. I stayed there until '80. I was with ECOM.

BY: What was your job there?

RH: I was supply. I changed fields. I went from electronic tech to supply type. Then I went to work for CORADCOM in '80 and stayed there until '81. And there I was taking care of some equipment they had down in Fort Bliss, Texas. And then in '81 I went to work for the Satellite Communications Agency at Fort Monmouth in SATCOM. And I stayed with them until '93 when I retired. Let's see, I retired in December of '92 and I had 38 1/2 years in. And then I went as a contractor and I still work. I have fifty years with the government next year.

BY: Oh, wow. You still doing it?

RH: Yeah. As a matter of fact, I just got back from England. I was on a trip over there.

BY: What were you doing?

RH: I was in the, I was up on the (inaudible) ballistic missile early warning system. And we have a terminal there that provides the connectivity, the traffic back.

BY: That's interesting.

RH: So we were going to do some work there. Change out a radome and stuff.

BY: So your job here, it linked you to, you're still doing it.

RH: The Navy, the training I got in the Navy has given me my whole career. And you know, the government has been good to me.

BY: That's good then. Alright well, thank you for doing the interview with me.

END OF INTERVIEW