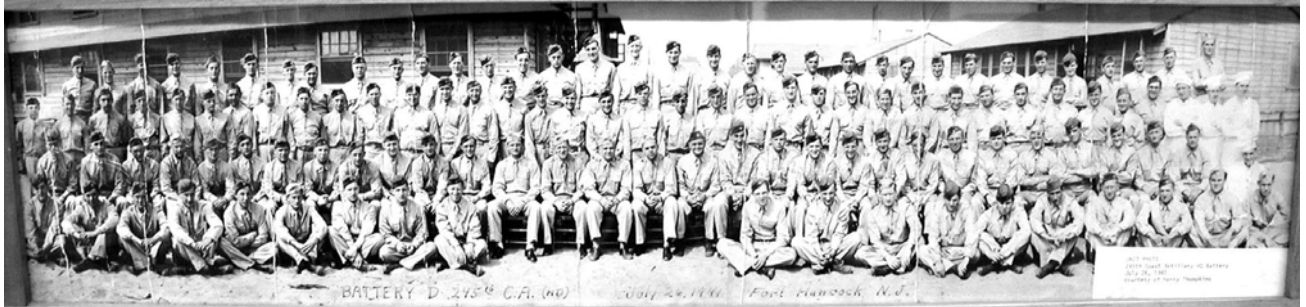


Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Telephone Interview with Edward Johnson
Battery D, 245th Coast Artillery (HD)
1939-41
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS
July 21, 2004
Transcribed by Mary Rasa
Editor's notes on parenthesis ()

Photos courtesy of Gateway NRA/NPS



Battery D, 245th Coast Artillery (HD) July 1941.



“Tent City” at Fort Hancock, c. 1940

MR: Today is July 21, 2004. My name is Mary Rasa, Sandy Hook Museum Curator and today I am conducting an oral history interview. Could you kindly state your name of the record?

EJ: My name is Edward H. Johnson. J-O-H-N-S-O-N.

MR: And tell me when and where were you born?

EJ: Born in New York City, Bronx, New York. 9-25-21.

MR: Okay. Did your...What type of schools did you attend?

EJ: PS. 16 and then Roosevelt High School. That's in the Bronx, Fordham Road.

MR: Okay. Did your Father or Grandfather serve in the military?

EJ: No. Dad came over from Sweden with Mom. That was way, way back.

MR: Okay. How did you join the Army?

EJ: I joined the National Guard, the old 245th (Coast Artillery). Actually it's the old 13th Regiment, one of the oldest units in the country. In fact, I will send you, I have a complete breakdown of the Regiment. The old 13th goes back like 100 some odd years.

MR: Right.

EJ: I don't know whether you have that or not.

MR: Yeah. We do.

EJ: You do have it?

MR: Hmmm.

EJ: Oh, oh, okay. And I joined the National Guard. That was 1939. I don't remember the exact date, through a brochure that they put out. The 245th and 13th (Regiment Armory was located at) Jefferson and Sumner Avenue, Brooklyn New York. And the reason we all joined, well, I'd say six of us joined at the same time, they had track, they had (a) swimming pool, bowling alleys and in addition, we had training. We got paid. I think we went every couple of weeks.

MR: Did you just go to an Armory in Brooklyn or did you go to the other Forts at that point in time?

EJ: What's that ma'am?

MR: Did you just go to the Armory in Brooklyn or did you have to go to the Forts in New York Harbor?

EJ: No. No. At the time it was just to the Armory.

MR: Okay.

EJ: And then once a year we went away for I think it was a seven or ten day camp tour. That was 1939 was my first one.

MR: Okay.

EJ: And that was Sandy Hook. We went to the old CC(C) barracks (former Civilian Conservation Corps camp located in Horseshoe Cove) if you are familiar with that.

MR: Yes.

EJ: We went there at the beginning. It was the old pot belly stoves. We froze our fannies off. (laughter)

MR: So that was what, two week or one week training?

EJ: That was then and then all of a sudden we got federalized September 16, 1940.

MR: Did you immediately have to report then?

EJ: Well, we never left Sandy Hook.

MR: Oh, okay.

EJ: They kept us there. This is what is happening, you know, over in Iraq. They kept us there.

MR: Right.

EJ: We were federalized, so they kept us there and then they started building up the Post. We went into the CC(C) barracks first and then there was a "tent city." I forgot how long (we were) in that and then we went into the barracks as they came along.

MR: And how long did you stay at Fort Hancock?

EJ: We were on strike duty. I mentioned there was a strike at Bendix, Teterboro (New Jersey).

MR: No.

EJ: I'll mail you pictures of those. We were called out on strike. Hold on a minute, I think I have that picture. Put my glasses on here. October 31st of 1941 and we were called out on strike from Fort Hancock and we went to Bendix. They took 40 men from each Battery. That's (Battery) A all the way up to Battery M. We moved all the tents. We brought field kits for kitchens and we were on strike duty up until December when Pearl Harbor happened. In fact, I was on a weekend pass from the strike and I was called

back and I had to hitch a ride over the George Washington Bridge. A state trooper took me across and I hitched right back to Fort Hancock.

MR: So what did they mean by strike duty? They were on strike and you were protecting the peace?

EJ: No. The strike duty was at Bendix Teterboro (NJ). That's Air Associates (an airplane manufacturing company with many war contracts) in Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey.

MR: Okay. What exactly does that mean?

EJ: They made, they manufactured nose cones, electronic equipment for the P-40s (airplanes) and the P-38s and we were called out to protect because the workers were on strike at the time.

MR: So, you were just protecting the facility?

EJ: The facility plus all the equipment in the building, yes.

MR: Oh, okay.

EJ: I'll mail you a whole set of strike pictures.

MR: How long did the strike last?

EJ: It lasted for several months. Well, let's see. October, up until December 7th.

MR: And then they finally went back to work after Pearl Harbor?

EJ: Well, I can send you a resume on that. We fired .30 caliber machine guns over their heads and they all ran like hell. And then they finally went back, I forgot who was called in, somebody was called in from Washington and they settled the strike because war was declared, you know.

MR: Right.

EJ: Pearl Harbor. But right after that we pulled out of there and went back to Sandy Hook.

MR: Okay.

EJ: And from then let me see... That was '41 we were headed for Java. They took forty men from each outfit again; Batteries A all the way up to M. They sent us to, we were headed to Camp Pendleton.

MR: Okay.

EJ: And we were all stationed there. And we were headed for Java (Indonesia) and Java had fallen. And then they called us, broke us up into various cadres. I took one contingent of 15 men. (We) took the guns onto flatcars plus a lot of equipment to Louisiana. I can't think of the town there right on the gulf coast.

MR: Mobile?

EJ: No. No, not Mobile. It'll come to me. It was in Louisiana.

MR: Okay. We'll go back to that.

EJ: And I forget, he was a second Lieutenant from Fordham in the Bronx. And we took, I took the guns, I left the guns there. We took two guns. Our outfit was the 50th Coast Artillery. We changed from the 245th to the 50th Coast (Artillery). And then they changed us again. They broke us in three cadres. The 270th, the 271st and the 277th. One batch went to...let me get this straight now, one batch went to Sabine Pass, Texas. The other went to Port Arthur, Texas and the other batch went down to Antigua, British West Indies. We stayed at Sabine Pass, Texas just for several months and then we were called back to Pascagoula, Mississippi to protect Ingalls Shipyard which was building these miniature aircraft carriers. They were converted freighters with a little flattops. The first aircraft carriers that came out. We stayed there for awhile and then we were called, let me see now...(voice trails off). From them they pulled the ones in from (inaudible) and ourselves and we went up to Fort Lawton, Washington. We went to the Aleutian Islands and we stayed there to V-E, I mean, V-J day and then we came home.

MR: Okay.

EJ: But we came home at different times. You know what I'll do; I'll send you some pictures if you wish of various...

MR: Specifically, I'd like to see the Fort Hancock pictures.

EJ: Strictly Fort Hancock?

MR: Yes.

EJ: Oh, okay. I see. Okay. That's fine. But we were a hell of a bunch of guys. And like I say, it left a very bad taste. A lot of us walked away from Hancock after that.

MR: Okay. I want to go back to a little more about your timeline while you were here. Did you know anything about Fort Hancock before you came here?

EJ: No. All I knew was it was an outpost, period. And we did a lot of work. I mean when we got there, the CC (C) barracks were still up like I say and we had to build up and maintain some of the buildings. We had to update them. Fix the windows. Fix the

roads. Pulled out all the damn, what was it, poison ivy. My god almighty they had poison ivy. (laughter) That was on the beach. Then, we fixed the roads. We fixed some of the railroad tracks for the 52nd railway was there. The 7th mine laying was there. They used the rail tracks for the big guns. And what else...we fixed the tents.

MR: Did you get to work on the guns while you were here?

EJ: Oh yeah, oh my god. Those guns, I was ammunition NCO (Non-commissioned officer). A buck sergeant and I pulled out shells out of those magazines that were from World War I. They had rust and corrosion and cosmoline. We had to clean up all the shells. We cleaned and all the guns. Took all the old cosmoline off. That was on 10-inch, 12-inch, the 155 (mm gun) was on the beach. The 155 was a(n) artillery piece. They were on the beach. We had to maintain those. We fixed the guns, we fixed the magazines, we fixed the roads, what else. We fixed the kitchens. We put up the field kitchens. We built everything from scratch. Actually we didn't even have the hospital there. My god it was a run down hospital. I had my first operation there. It was up in the attic. They put me in the attic. I said forget it, but then stuff started to come in slow but sure. We got our first Jeeps. We got our first ambulances. Even the Red Cross came in with new uniforms. But we did an awful lot of maintenance work on the Post.

MR: So you weren't specifically assigned to any gun battery, you were basically maintaining them.

EJ: I think it was Battery, Battery Richardson.

MR: Okay.

EJ: Well, they actually...different batteries...Batteries A through M. And they alternated. Some were on 155 (mm), some went on Battery Bloomfield, Battery Richardson, Battery ...

MR: Alexander?

EJ: No not Alexander.

MR: Granger?

EJ: I think it was Potter.

MR: Oh, okay.

EJ: Potter, Richardson, Bloomfield and the 155s. That's what we, we switched off every now and then. A couple of weeks on each one, because basically we were all the big guns, the 10 and 12-inch and the 16-inch.

MR: Did you ever work with the fixed guns, Battery Kingman or Battery Mills?

EJ: Fixed guns...no I was on disappearing guns.

MR: You were on disappearing guns. Okay.

EJ: And then of course, some guys went up to Twin Lights. That's up in Hasbrouck Heights (Highlands, New Jersey). They had the Twin Lights. Somebody would say Twin Lights. That was the searchlights up on the Jersey side. On the other side of the bridge (from Sandy Hook peninsula). We had guns set up there too.

MR: So, they were just searchlights or there were some anti-aircraft guns?

EJ: They were 16-inch guns (Battery Lewis) in the beginning but I think they changed to anti-aircraft later on Rasa. In fact, a lot of the stuff went to missile and AA guns later on.

MR: Right.

EJ: But we were actually HD which is harbor defense.

MR: Yes.

EJ: That's 10, 12, and 16-inch guns.

MR: Okay.

EJ: And the 7th was mine layer. The 52nd were on the railway. That was about it as far as the guns go. And of course we had .30 caliber, .50 caliber and that was about it. The anti-aircraft came later on.

MR: Okay,

EJ: I think the 212th pulled in I think after Pearl Harbor. The 212th came in from Illinois I think it was. They were anti-aircraft. And they brought some of those collapsible anti-aircraft guns. That was the first anti-aircraft guns we saw.

MR: Did this job you had here aid you in your future work?

EJ: No. I was in, I never worked before in my life. Actually, after that I went into the hydraulic fitting business.

MR: Okay.

EJ: Being up in the Aleutians I got intrigued with the fittings and the hoses, you know. They were all fancy colors. They were blue they were red. So, when I came home I went into the hydraulic fitting business and I stayed in that until I retired in '65.

MR: So, while you were here, were there any alerts that you would do?

EJ: Well, we had practice alerts. We invaded New York Harbor.

MR: Oh, that's pretty neat.

EJ: We invaded Fort Tilden and we took over the Tri-Borough Bridge. (laughter) Stopped even. I'll never forget that. We broke the fences down, I think it was on Sea Breeze, I forget the area, but we actually invaded New York. We had a battle, you know, with the home defenses. That was the 245th. And we used the mine layer (ship), *Ord* and I think it was the other one was the *Silf*(sp) took over from Fort Hancock to invade those parts of the island, Long Island.

MR: Okay.

EJ: Other than that it was Parade Grounds and we did have a couple of later on at the tale end they did start bringing in some different people from Hollywood, you know. But we didn't see much of that ourselves. We left right away. The first contingent left right after December 7th.

MR: Okay. So you went from the Civilian Conservation Corps barracks to tents to temporary barracks?

EJ: CC (C) barracks, the old CC (C) barracks to tents and from tents into the new barracks which was two-story. We even had, we painted them later on. They were, they didn't paint for quite a while, but then we painted them white.

MR: Which Battery were you in?

EJ: I was Battery D.

MR: Okay.

EJ: Battery D. We were on 155s (mm guns). And the 10-inch disappearing gun.

MR: And how many guys lived in one of those barracks?

EJ: Let's see. Just give me a minute.

MR: More than a hundred?

EJ: No. There were less than a hundred.

MR: Okay.

EJ: There were like 30 on a floor. Plus we had a squad room in the rear end. The Sergeants had a room. Two Sergeants went in one room and at the other end there were like six guys like Corporals. And in the middle were the Privates and the PFCs (Private First Class). I think there was no more than 30 on a floor.

MR: Okay. Was the mess hall outside?

EJ: The mess hall was outside, a separate building, yes. We had very good food. We had a good Mess Sergeant when he was sober. (laughter) He used to steal half the stuff. My god it was awful. But then we had latrines. We didn't have to freeze, I mean when we got the new buildings. It was great we had showers, we had everything, you know. The mess halls were great. The food was fantastic, very good.

MR: What type of social activities did you take part in?

EJ: What's that?

MR: What type of social activities did you take part in?

EJ: Social, very little to tell you the truth. We were very damn busy. We went out on a weekend pass and I went back to New York. We went on the *Ord* and the *Chauncey M Depew* (boats to New York) on a weekend pass. We would go down to the pier and the *Silf* was the one that towed the gun targets. If you got there early enough you got on that you'd get into New York pretty fast, but on the *Chauncey M De Pew*, that was for weekend passes more or less. That took a slower trip into the Battery (lower Manhattan).

MR: Did you ever go to dances at the Fort?

EJ: At the tail end, yeah, they started doing that at the tail end. I remember that. I think Ina Hutton, Ina Hutton was a bandleader. She came with an all band, it was an all woman band. And Fred Waring, I think came. And like I say after that we didn't get, later on, I say, we moved out pretty fast.

MR: Right.

EJ: Actually, I say moved out. The first batch, they split everybody. All the outfits were split in half. We went down to Camp Pendleton right away when War was declared. The others stayed there for I understand for about a year. Let's see, '41, '42 and then they went down to the Islands. But everybody was like, you may say was cut in half. You know whatever the strength was.

MR: Right.

EJ: We went out right away. The others stayed for about a year. They trained a lot of new fellas coming in and like I say we made the rounds.

MR: Did you attend any religious services at the Fort?

EJ: Oh, yeah. I went, I'm Lutheran, but we had one church that was for everybody at the beginning. Later on, I understand they did have different denominational churches.

MR: Did you ever go to the beach?

EJ: Are you kidding? We never went to the beach. (laughter) No time for that. Number one, the poison ivy was real bad.

MR: Right.

EJ: By the way, do they still have it there?

MR: Oh yes.

EJ: Oh, god almighty, we dug up so much of that stuff. We tried to bulldoze an awful lot of it and that was, what was it there, was berries there?

MR: The bayberry.

EJ: Yes. Bayberries.

MR: And beach plum.

EJ: Yes. That's correct. You are right. But no that poison ivy, we did very little swimming. Because actually, we were on patrol duty all day long. I mean when the War started it was patrol through the day and patrols during night. We went in as far as I think, Asbury Park. We had patrols, some on foot and some by $\frac{3}{4}$ ton vehicle and one time we even took a 155 (mm gun) into Asbury Park trying to join up new volunteers before we left the Post. That was in Asbury Park.

MR: Was the blackout already being enforced by the time you had left here?

EJ: No. That was the trouble. We had lost in the beginning, I was quite surprised about the blackout. The government was never really strict in the beginning. And the German U-Boats, actually one of the reasons we went down to the Gulf (coast) was because we lost in the Gulf of Mexico we were stationed through the different islands, we lost 111 ships.

MR: Wow.

EJ: And actually the reason they were sinking all the ships, the United States was lit up like a Christmas tree. You could see the freighters, you know, coming out with supplies for the, what do ya call it, convoys. They would be silhouetted against the backdrop. The U-Boats would just come in and knock them off, 1,2,3. We had very little blackouts.

We did have a couple of trial blackouts when we made that invasion, I said into New York.

MR: Right.

EJ: They went through a mock blackout there. But actually, in the beginning in 1941, there was very little blackout in the United States. I think that came later on.

MR: Okay. Did you enjoy your time at Fort Hancock?

EJ: I had a...best years of my life.

MR: Oh. Okay.

EJ: Best years of my life. Like I say, the food was fantastic, the guys were great, and we had one hell of a good time.

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

EJ: Humorous. Do you mean humor?

MR: Yes. Funny or...

EJ: There was a lot of shenanigans' going on at different batteries, you know. I mean, I can't tell you, you wouldn't believe some of the things that went on. (laughter) Some of the food, what they did to the food and everything. No. We had a good time. We enjoyed ourselves and we were very regimental. We had a good Colonel Glime. He was our commander. He came with us from Brooklyn and they sent him out to..where.. China-Burma. He took a Sergeant along with him as a cook and he wound up in the China-Burma area.

MR: Oh.

EJ: But he was a great man. We had nice parades on the parade grounds. That was about once a week that we did that. And it was nice. A lot of people came in on the weekends to visit us on weekend passes. Some of the people came in, ya know. And the ones that didn't make it in on the boat going on weekend pass, I think it was we had a bus come in from Brooklyn. I can't think of the name, but that drove us in from Fort Hancock to Brooklyn on weekend passes.

MR: So everybody in your unit was a New Yorker, right?

EJ: Actually, yes. Actually, Brooklyn, New York. And then when the first draftees came in. The draftees came in, let me see, we picked up about 1941 before we left, we picked up about 35, 40, close to 50 men each. They brought us up to 1,200 troops, ya know, the outfit. They came from Syracuse, Rochester and we had one group of about 15 fellas that

came from North Dakota, South Dakota. And they were very helpful because they knew how to run tractors.

MR: Oh. Sure.

EJ: To pull the guns and everything. The New York boys, well, they had to learn the hard way. (laughter) And we bought our dress uniforms. We bought them ourselves in the beginning. We took pride in our outfit, the 245th and actually the Regular Army called us the National Guard Army group. We were very educated as far as military wise. The only thing we missed was the old campaign hat. You know the old cowboy hat?

MR: Oh, yes. Yes.

EJ: We had that in the beginning. They took that away from us. Boy we loved it. Like Teddy Roosevelt, Rough Rider.

MR: Yeah.

EJ: They were beautiful. They took those away from us. They were made by the....

MR: Stetson, right?

EJ: Who.

MR: Stetson.

EJ: Atta girl, you got a good memory. (laughter) Very good. And we had red tassel on it for being artillery. The infantry had blue for infantry. But you know, like I say we had a good time.

MR: Anything else stand out in your mind about Fort Hancock?

EJ: No, nothing really. I mean everything was good. I can't complain. We were there from '39 to '41 and we pulled out right away. Now some of the guys who were in later, stayed there from the 245th. They should have more detail because they had a lot of new fellas coming in from all over the country. And you could imagine losing like, let's see we had 1200, 600 men leaving, they had 600 and then of course they had to beef that up even bigger. Actually it was a replacement center, really. A replacement and a training center. The only thing I think I should have grabbed some of the flags we had. I could have taken them home with me. (laughter)

MR: Okay. Well, thank you very much for the interview and I'm going to turn the tape off now.

End of Interview