

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Interview with Seymour Kurtz
245th Coast Artillery, Battery C, 1939-1946
By Melissa Kozlowski, Monmouth University, NPS intern,
April 11, 2003
Transcribed by Melissa Kozlowski 2003



Battery C, 245th Coast Artillery unit photograph, 1941

This oral history interview of Seymour Kurtz is taking place on Friday, April 11, 2003 at Sandy Hook, NJ. Mr. Kurtz from September 1939 to January 1946. He served with Battery C, 245th Coast Artillery and was discharged with the rank of Corporal. Mr. Kurtz currently resides in Monroe Township, NJ.

Question: When and where were you born?

Answer: 1921, in NYC.

Q: And where did you graduate from?

A: Samuel J. Tilden High School in Brooklyn.

Q: Was your father or your grandfather in the military?

A: No. Not that I know of, no.

Q: How did you become involved at Fort Hancock?

A: Through the National Guard, through the 245th coast Artillery at Sumner and Jefferson Avenues in Brooklyn. I joined

Q: What was your start and end date at Fort Hancock?

A: When I joined in September we went to winter camp for a week in I think November or December, we went away to Fort Hancock for a week, and then we went away in the summer of '40, and in September '41 we were nationalized and we went into the regular Army. I think it was September '41, or '40.

Q: Did you know anything about Fort Hancock before you came here?

A: No.

Q: Did you know about the type of job you'd be doing here?

A: Well, we trained in the National Guard, in the armory, the 245th Coast Artillery Armory, we had our machine guns, I guess, and later on when we got here we got the three inch anti aircraft guns, I believe that was later on when we were nationalized. But we had searchlights to; I think we had them in the armory in Brooklyn. I think, I don't remember.

Q: What was your rank or title?

A: Corporal. I started as a private and become a corporal.

Q: What unit or department did you work for?

A: Battery C of the 245th Coast Artillery.

Q: What was your background or education before coming here?

A: Well, I started out as an electrician, and then I became a soldier.

Q: Did your job at Fort Hancock prepare you for your future work?

A: Not really, no.

Q: When you were here, were there ever any alerts of potential enemy attacks?

A: Well, no, there was none, but after December 7th we were sent out to Sea Bright in Jersey. We established a searchlight and a three-inch gun in Sea Bright, right off the ocean. It was off the post, terrible living conditions for a while. Then we could see submarines being hunted, or sinking ships right off the coast.

Q: What were the living conditions like in Sea Bright?

A: Terrible, the worst, because they just pushed us out in a moments notice, and we lived in a pup tent in the middle of --with a million mosquitoes, and it was very cold, and wet and damp. I got sick and wound up in the hospital for several days, as did most of my crew. Boy, was that lousy. At Fort Hancock the conditions weren't bad, we lived in tents--

Q: You lived in tent city?

A: In Tent City, yeah. But off the post in Sea Bright...I don't think we ate for two days, until they organized...until the Salvation Army came as a matter of fact, and they came around with sandwiches, and coffee and sweet tea, whatever.

- Q: What was your job while you were in Sea Bright?
- A: Well, I was a corporal, I don't know if there was a sergeant, but there were a couple corporals in charge of the crew, and we maintained a vigil on the three inch antiaircraft guns with the searchlight and so on. Incidentally, I heard a story that the only reason we didn't go to overseas after the war started was because we were practically the only trained troops on the Atlantic seaboard. That's what I heard.
- Q: Did you work with any civilians?
- A: No, no, except once, maybe when I worked on the radar installation at Spermaceti Cove. I worked on there for about a week, that's about the only thing.
- Q: Where did you eat when you were at Fort Hancock?
- A: In the mess hall, I think, we had a mess hall. At Fort Hancock, and then later on they put up a building for us that was off the post at Sea Bright. They established a building for us, and so we had a mess hall there, and we slept there, and so on.
- Q: Were there any social activities at the Fort?
- A: Well, they had the movies, they had some dances, and I guess that's about it. But like every other week we were off. They had movies, the dances, they had a library I used, and they had a PX.
- Q: Do you remember any of the movies you saw here?
- A: O yeah. Bud Abbot and Lou Costello in *Buck Privates*. O, that was some show; they had the line going all the way around the theater. It happened I knew the ticket taker so he let us in.
- Q: What was the theater like?
- A: What was it like? Well, it was a theater a small theater, that's all it was. I saw many shows there, but Bud Abbot and Lou Costello in *Buck Privates*, I remember a tremendous audience for that show.
- Q: Did you attend any religious services while you were at the Fort?
- A: I can't remember. I don't think so.
- Q: Did you go to the beach while you were here?
- A: Well, we used to do our firing...there was a train that came by and picked us up in the morning, and took us out to the lower end of the beach, and when we could we used to fire our machine guns there, and we used to practice the drills there, with the three inch anti air craft. This was before WWII, and we used to practice

loading and firing and so on. We also had a range finder that was supposed to...some kind of machine that determined the height and so on and the information was fed into the three inch anti aircraft guns and they were supposed to fire if it came to that.

Q: Did you make any excursions to NYC while you were here?

A: O, I lived in NYC, I used to go every other week, quite often, I lived there.

Q: Did you know of any servants, minorities, or women that worked at the Fort?

A: Well, there were some people who worked in the PX, one of the men I knew eventually married one of them, but that's about it. Our life was pretty well regulated here, except in the evening, and then we wound up in the PX, or the movies, or the library or something.

Q: Would you say this was a fun or boring place to have worked?

A: Well, I'll tell you, I didn't mind it at all. I didn't mind the military life at that time at all. I mean, standing watch at Sea Bright was very boring, then I thought it would never end, but that was very boring.

Q: How long were your shifts?

A: About two hours on, and four hours off, or something like that, all through the evening and the day.

Q: What stands out in your mind about Fort Hancock?

A: Well, first that I didn't realize it was so big, because I was used to traveling by train, and...there was plenty of poison ivy, and poison sumac, and several of the people got it so bad their eyes were practically shut, it was terrible. But I didn't mind it, in general, but that was before the war. Then when the war started, and they took us off, and we stayed there for several months at least, maybe close to a year, I don't recall offhand. They put us back onto the post, and with the excitement with the war it was a lot different—training new troops, and so on.

Q: Do you keep in touch with anyone that you served with at Fort Hancock?

A: Yeah, I the-- 245th Association, I'll send it to you and they have a lot more people. I don't know, we're getting kind of old, I'm past eighty, so we're dying off like you wouldn't believe.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about that we haven't covered in the interview?

A: My life was pretty easy here on Fort Hancock, there was...I went down from here to Camp Davis in North Carolina as a replacement, but I know quite a few people that went overseas from here, I was lucky. What with one thing and another, I should have went overseas, but I didn't. I wound up in the Philippines just as the war ended. But otherwise, I stayed mostly in the United States. When I was at fort Davis, I went in to apply for a transfer to the Air Core, but the staff sergeant wouldn't let me, and the next thing I know, he sent me to Fort Monmouth for repair courses. So, two days later I was offered to be a staff sergeant to a group that was shipping out from Camp Davis, but I had been ordered by then to go to Fort Monmouth, otherwise I would have gone overseas and been on the invasion. But that's the way it is, I missed it by two or three days, or else I would have gone. I wanted to go overseas, as it happens, but I was talking to my cousin, who wound up in the United States too, and he was telling me he was dying to go overseas also, but his last tour of duty he was in – taking care of the patients that came back from overseas on the hospital ships, in Massachusetts somewhere. He said he saw these people come back with no arms, no legs, blind...and then he wasn't so anxious to go overseas.

Q: Can you tell me about an average day at Fort Hancock?

A: Well, we used to do close order drills on the parade grounds, and then...in the mornings, some days we went down to the beach and practiced our-- with the guns, with the three inch guns and the searchlights, and then the afternoon, I don't remember now. Some days we used to do close order drill, and go to the movies, the theater, and see training films, I think. Saturdays, we had inspections. Saturday morning, we had the band playing, it was very nice, the only place I had it. The band played for us while we went through inspections. Saturday afternoon we were off, that's before the war.

Q: What were these inspections like?

A: We'd line up on the--I even made the colonel's orderly once. There were two selected, one was the general's orderly and one was the colonel's orderly, and I made—that's before we went on guard duty. We'd stand guard duty at various spots here on Fort Hancock and if you were pretty sharp, or I don't know how they picked them, the colonel's orderly.

Q: What did it mean to be the colonel's orderly?

A: Well, you didn't have to stand guard duty or it so happens in the case of an emergency, you're supposed to go to the colonel, kind of like a runner, because we didn't have telephones, there were no telephones at that time. And I remember there was a fire in one of the tents because we had the coal stoves, you know, so I ran over to the colonel, and I said... I was a corporal of the guard once at Battery Potter. And it was so cold that night, it was the middle of February, it had to be in '42, or '43, the early part of '43. It was so cold that night, it was like 20 degrees

below zero, the actually air temperature was about 2 degrees below zero, and from where we were it was so cold. We were where there stored the ammunition, nobody stood watch, it was terrible. You couldn't stand; you'd freeze to death out there. We could see from Battery Potter-- from the end where they took the observation-- we could see all the convoys, the big convoys sailing out of New York harbor, it was really something. As a matter of fact, when we looked we could see Brooklyn across the bay—the Steeple Chase Pier, and Coney Island.

Q: What was it like inside the tents in Tent City?

A: That wasn't so bad, it was pretty warm, we had the stove and we kept it pretty warm, so there was no problem in the winter, and in the summer it wasn't so bad either. But in Sea Bright, we had those mosquitoes, you couldn't believe it. We had—then they gave us nets, and o! They were terrible those mosquitoes, in the spring, all the time in the summer. We had a terrible time with them. That was terrible. But, Tent City wasn't bad, I have no complaints.

Conclusion of Interview