

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Interview with Robert Latsch
U.S. Army Reserve 1975-85
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS
October 26, 2004
Transcribed by Mary Rasa



DETACHMENT 1 (EW)
453RD DIVISION SUPPORT COMPANY

TOP FROM LEFT

SGT O'BRIEN, SGT LATSCH, SGT KORONA, SSG QUIRK, SFC DERBY,
CW3 DEWEY, SP4 REYNOLDS, SSG LEUTTCHAU, 2LT DUNICH

MIDDLE FROM LEFT

1LT ISHIMASA, SSG CADMAN, SSG COSGROVE, SFC HOLDREN, SSG
NOCELLA, SGT COSTANZO, SGT LAJEWSKI, SFC MYERS, SGT BALDWIN

BOTTOM FROM LEFT

SGT ADKINS, SP4 ECCLES, SGT SZAKACS, SSG RYAN, SSG CONNELLY,
SFC SPENGEMAN, SGT LANG, SSG DECESARE NOT PICTURED SSG KIERNAN

Photo courtesy NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

MR: Today is October 26, 2004. My name is Mary Rasa, Sandy Hook Museum Curator. I am here today to do an oral history interview. Please state your name in full.

RL: I am Robert J. Latsch.

MR: Please spell the last name.

RL: L-A-T-S-C-H.

MR: Okay. When and where were you born?

RL: April 17, 1939. Staten Island, New York.

MR: What schools did you attend?

RL: I attended schools in Summit, New Jersey. Which was St. Teresa School in Summit and then in Westfield, New Jersey I attended Holy Trinity Grammar and High School.

MR: Is that where you graduated high school from?

RL: Yes.

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

RL: No. My Father served in what was the Bell Telephone Laboratories, the inventor of the Nike Missile. And during wartime he was in charge of auxiliary military police in Murray Hill, New Jersey, Bell Laboratories.

MR: What years were your entire service?

RL: My years began in 1975 and ended in 1995.

MR: How did you become involved at Fort Hancock?

RL: In 1973 or 1974, I came to Fort Hancock and found out there was a reserve unit on, well there, found out there was going to be a reserve unit because the Post was going to close in 1974. So, in 1974 I came back down and went to see the 99th Signal Battalion, Company B which was here then after the Post was deactivated. I then went through a long list of things to try and find paperwork with the government which had burned in 1973, all military records. I came back in late 1974-75 and went through all the testing and all the rest that was required and was taken on as a corporal and with the Military Occupation Skill (MOS) of 36C 20, which was telephone lineman. I was with the unit until it decided to move back to Fort Hamilton, New York, Brooklyn. Instead, I was then recruited to the 298th Army Security Agency which a Captain by the name of Savochech

ran. That was only for about three or four months and we became the 453rd Army Security Agency which finally became electronics warfare. We were accompanied by a Detachment A which was a detachment of 30 or 50 people.

MR: And these were all branches under the 78th Division?

RL: Yes. All of this was part of the 78th Division. Which also started here in the basement of what is now or what was the YMCA building.

MR: Okay. So, were you a corporal the entire time, or did you get promoted at some point?

RL: No. I got promoted to E-5 in 1978.

MR: Okay. And what year did you actually leave Fort Hancock? I guess when they stopped having Reserves out here?

RL: Okay. What happened was we were the last military, we were the last reserve unit left on Fort Hancock. And in 1985, I forget when it was, it was somewhere in the autumn and we were told to leave. We left and went to Newman Springs Road, Middletown to the Reserve Center and stayed there until 1986.

MR: Okay. Did you know the type of job, were you used to that type of job before you came here or was that something....?

RL: Yes, I was. I was used to the type of communications work because I had done that civilian wise. There is an interesting footnote to that and that is that I had KP (Kitchen Police) for one day. And we were not that active with the 99th Signal, and Company B wasn't. We put up the Osprey birds telephone poles and pieces on top and we did that. We did some other things. Prior to my getting here by about two weeks they had just finished redoing the signal system, the communication system for West Point. Then, as I said I had KP and I immediately became interested in cooking. I had the second building on Mess Hall row if you want to call it that (Building 57). I worked there for six months or so. Then I became a (MOS) 94B10 which was a basic cook. I went through on the job training and then from there I became a (MOS) 94B20. I went to Fort Dix for training and came back and then I was part of as I said the 453rd. I ran the entire mess operation.

MR: Now, were you doing this just as a weekend duty or were you full-time at some of this?

RL: No. It was, it was part-time at first and then it became full-time in 1987. I had a heart attack and open heart surgery and then got out of the machine shop business and communications business and went and taught culinary arts at Job Corps in Edison in (Camp) Kilmer. Then became proficient, more proficient and ran the entire mess section in different operations areas.

MR: Okay. So while you were at Fort Hancock your typical would be one weekend a month and two weeks in the summer? Was that your typical commitment?

RL: Yes. That's correct. Sometimes your two weeks was not spent here. It was spent at Fort Dix or Fort Drum or as it was in 1980 we spent the two weeks in Puerto Rico.

MR: Okay.

RL: Fort Buchanan (Puerto Rico).

MR: Was your barracks the one on the end, Barracks 25? Do you remember if that was the last one?

RL: Yeah. Our building, our Headquarters was Building 25, but this was the building that was set back in was our headquarter building, okay.

MR: Okay.

RL: But we did not have barracks so to speak, we had, we got use of different places through the Park Service, through the different commands, though the chain of command.

MR: But where would you, would you sleep in one of those buildings?

RL: Sometimes yes and sometimes we would sleep in tents outside.

MR: Outside.

RL: And if not that we would stay at the Coast Guard.

MR: Oh, okay. So, what was the typical meal that you would be cooking for the unit?

RL: I could arrange anything from a full course meal which would be salad, soup, mainstays, say meatloaf or turkey or roast beef. Meals were very good. The food was very good. And the people enjoyed that. In fact, I have people I have attested to because they set me as a standard going to other units and found out that my food was much better. The way I handled it they enjoyed it much better because I gave extra or did extra.

MR: So, how many people would you be cooking for at a sitting?

RL: No less than forty and sometimes no more than 150. Myself.

MR: Wow.

RL: I had a KP (soldier on KP duty) once in a while.

MR: Okay. Did you ever work with any civilians or were they just all reservists that you would be working with?

RL: No. All reservists, no, no civilians.

MR: Since, by the time you were here this was now a National Park did you ever take part in any activities that were being offered by the park or was everything very regimented?

RL: No, we as I said, we helped provide the Osprey nests. I think that was on part of the park.

MR: Oh, okay. Did you ever get to go to the beach?

RL: Oh yeah. Many times. I didn't swim so I wasn't particularly interested.

MR: Okay, so tell me a little bit more about the actual mission of the reserve unit that was here. They were doing communications type work?

RL: Okay, they were an electronics warfare (unit) and we first had a mission where part of the mission was to observe by tape recorder all traffic, communications wise of ships in the (Verrazano) Narrows out here going into New York Harbor or leaving New York Harbor. This was for security reasons. After that, then it became the, it's mission changed. Main Headquarters of the 453rd was at Pedricktown, New Jersey which was out the back door of Fort Dix. That was the parent company. So, as that happened, as they were there and we were up here. We had the same type of a mission. The mission was electronics warfare in so far as countermeasures and communications adaptability. In other words, correct communications adaptability. In other words, people using radios and radio frequencies could not use, had to go with a code or were under surveillance at all times when units were in the field. This unit would supervise how they conducted operations by radio.

MR: Okay. Do you have any humorous stories that you remember about being out here?

RL: We had a sergeant who his name was Miller, I think, and he liked to eat. And of course the ceilings in that mess hall over there, I think they were tin.

MR: Mmhmm.

RL: Okay, and they had fancy designs on them. And he had apple pie. And even though the pieces of painted ceiling started to drop on his food, he just ate it.

MR: Oh god. (laughter)

RL: That's how hungry he was.

MR: Could you tell me about a typical day as a reservist?

RL: A typical day here would be first off, it begins the day before, actually. I would go on a Friday and draw rations from Fort Monmouth. First I would, I was responsible for all of the, this is with the 453rd, I was responsible for all mess operations with the detachment. It was my responsible to also see to it that they would pass their inspections from division and such. And in doing so, I would go down and pick up the rations from Fort Monmouth. Bring them here. Put them in storage in the refrigerator and what have you. Then the next morning I would be here at 4:30, 4:45, no later than that and I would start in and start my, sometimes you would have breakfast. They were entitled to lunch. And I would start in and usually you would have coffee so I'd start a coffee pot on. And this is in cantonment. This is on Post. And this takes a dramatic change when you go in the field. We had our, we'd link up with our parent company which was the main company and we would go to either Fort Drum or Dix, whatever. Fort Dix, we would go down to qualify at least twice a year with the M-16. And so, we would be out in the field. So, out in the field you had to select a site where the mess tent was going to be. That was one of the responsibilities. And then you had to check on water availability and then you had to check with litmus paper to see if the water was potable. Then you had to be able to set up a water buffalo. And the water buffalo had to have a drainage pit and stone and all this and had to, you were Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey all in one. And then at night when everybody else was finished and going to have a beer or what have you or going off and out of the area, it was your responsibility to see to it that everything was ready for the next day. Because your commander was going to say he wanted a meal at a certain time and you had no right to stop that. So, long about you get finished and maybe you'd relax and have a cup of coffee or beer or whatever and about 1 o'clock in the morning you might have a forced motor march. And of course, you had the blackout lights with the pinhole and then you would drive, you would have to take the whole tent down and this tent was massive. You'd have to take the tent down and take the stoves out and put everything back in the truck. And then move and drive at night and you didn't know where you were going and come back to the same place and start all over again. And then they expected breakfast at the right time too. Getting up in the morning is a task. You had a sleeping bag which wasn't the best because the sleeping bag was designed not like the Canadians. Like a mummy, wrapped up in a cocoon. Whereas the sleeping bag the Canadians use was rectangular and you can fit in and you don't have a problem. Keep in mind that you have, it's your responsibility in the morning for everything. There's no lights. There's nothing. Maybe there's a sentry off someplace far off. You have to crawl around on your hands and knees to find the flashlight. And then you have to go and get equipment ready. Then you gotta get water. Then you got to get your wash line set up outside. You have to do all this in the dark. And then you have to have eggs cracked and because in the field you don't get eggs to order. You get eggs scrambled only. And then you have all that to do. And then by you are tripping over stuff. You are knocking over stuff and you are running around trying to get stuff done. You only have a certain amount of time to get it done in. And you got some help, but one team can only handle the mechanics of it. The cooks handle the cooking end of it. They are all part of the mess team so they will light the burners for the stove and carry it in and put it into the rack. And then you begin. Then you are using

what's called a square head upside down and you use the top of that. And you do your grilling and your eggs and all that sort of stuff. Then you have a line of people if they are separated they are separated by fifteen feet each. This is a long, long line. It was ridiculous the way it was done. But anyway it was like combat feeding so there was space so if anything happened there was enough space between them that you wouldn't get hit. Okay, so then you feed all these people and then you hand out Meals Ready to Eat (MREs) for lunch or if they were going to come back. And then if you had time, you started in on the salad and you started in on whatever the meal was going to be. Then you finished about seven o'clock at night because you had a third meal too. And once that's done then you lock up the tent and then you have whatever Post you are on, you have the Post Medics and the Post people from their food service operation higher headquarters come along and they want to have an inspection. Now, you have to have everything in apple pie order. And they come down and check and see if this is right. If this is six inches off the ground if all the food is stored off the ground. And they are going to check to see if you have water and if the water was good. So you have a long, I don't know who else, I think the mess section is the most un-thanked and the most necessary section that the Army has. And it has done great work in the field and also in the Garrison type feeding. Going back to the Garrison type feeding when you are on somebody else's property you sign for, well your commander signs for the equipment in that building. Also in Fort Dix you signed for the building that you were going to sleep, the barracks. And if you have 100 sheets they want 100 sheets back. In other words, it's accountability.

MR: Right.

RL: Otherwise you don't clear the Post.

MR: So, when you were coming to say Fort Hancock for the weekend you would have to go to Fort Dix first and get a truck with food?

RL: No. I would get a truck from the motor pool here.

MR: Oh.

RL: A three quarter truck and I'd chug and go down to Fort Monmouth and I would get the food and bring it up here. When we went to Fort Dix we would convoy down and we went to Dix by convoy in four or five trucks. And then we found out where we were gonna be and found out where we were gonna be in the cantonment area and also out in the field. And then we went out in the field and did what we were supposed to do.

MR: Okay. If you have anything else you would like to say about your time here?

RL: Just that the ten years that I spent year were the most glorious years that you could ever imagine. I thank the United States Army for being so kind to let me have that. It was the greatest time of my life.

MR: What time would you get dismissed on Sunday?

RL: What time what?

MR: What time would you leave on a Sunday?

RL: Sometimes two o'clock in the afternoon. That was the earliest right there. Other times it was all day. It depended on the commander too. But I would be here longer because I had to clean up. I had clean up work to do and all that.

MR: What time would you report on a Friday? Not everybody would report on Friday I would assume, just you?

RL: No. I would be here, it depended on what time I was working until. I would be here by no later than five or six o'clock.

MR: Oh, okay.

RL: That's, I would go from, sometimes it would be earlier because I had to draw rations.

MR: Right. Alright well, thank you very much and I'm going to stop the tape.

END OF INTERVIEW