

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Interview with Nicholas Pinto
51st Artillery, 3rd Battalion Headquarters
1965-66

Interviewed by Tom Hanley, Monmouth University student intern
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Transcribed by Mary Rasa 2010



Nick Pinto as a newly commissioned 2nd Lieutenant in 1963.



Nick Pinto in 2010.
Photos courtesy of Nick Pinto

Editor's notes on parenthesis ()

TH: It is February 5, 2004. I am Tom Hanley and I am here at Fort Hancock with Nicholas Pinto. Good morning Nicholas.

NP: Good morning.

TH: And I have got a couple of quick questions. These are general questions that don't regard the military that we ask everybody. First of all, when and where were you born?

NP: I was born in Brooklyn, New York. September 17, 1939.

TH: And what high school did you graduate from?

NP: Xavier High School.

TH: Was your Father or Grandfather in the military?

NP: Neither.

TH: How did you get involved at Fort Hancock?

NP: Well, first I was...now we are getting into the military part?

TH: Yes.

NP: Well, first I joined the Army in 1962 and at that time we had an option on where to select our first duty assignment. So, after basic training at Fort Dix and I selected to be assigned to the New York Air Defense System, New York Air Defense. So, my first assignment was in Livingston, New Jersey which was part of Fort Hancock Headquarters, part of the 52nd Brigade. I stayed at Fort Hancock as and enlisted, excuse me, I stayed at Livingston, New Jersey for about a year and from there I had applied to OCS (Officer Candidate School), so I went to OCS in Fort Sill, Oklahoma in April through September 1963. And my preference again was to get back to the New York area, so I chose rather than the Field Artillery which was the OCS basic training, I chose to go back to the missile system. So I went to basic training at Fort Bliss, Texas for two months and then was assigned again to the brigade which was the 52nd Brigade. Part of the Brigade was the Battery in Old Bridge, New Jersey. Spent from the beginning of 1964. I got commissioned in '63. I spent the beginning of 1964 through the 196...it was probably around August of 1965 at Old Bridge, New Jersey. And from there I was transferred to work in the Battalion Headquarters which was physically located in Fort Hancock. So that is my thumbnail sketch of how I got to Fort Hancock.

TH: So 1965 was the first time...

NP: Physical time that I was working at Fort Hancock.

TH: So you came in the military in '62.

NP: '62.

TH: And you came here to the Fort in '65.

NP: That's right.

TH: What was your end date at Fort Hancock? What year did you leave?

NP: I left August 30th, 1966.

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

NP: Before I physically came here, I knew because it was part of Brigade Headquarters, I knew about it having been assigned to Livingston in 1962. So, I knew about Fort Hancock, but unfortunately I never came down here. The one time I was going to come down, we had a basketball tournament, but because I was part of the Nike part system we had to go on high power. They wouldn't let me come down and play basketball. So, that would have been my only trip. So, when I first got assigned to Old Bridge is when I say Fort Hancock. Usually, I had to go to the General's Reception and all that sort of stuff, so I took a ride. And that's really when I got to Fort Hancock. And then we'd come back and forth intermittently.

TH: You had already worked with Nike missiles before you came here?

NP: Yes.

TH: So you knew you were coming to work on the Nike Missile project?

NP: Oh, yes. Yes.

TH: So what was your exact job? What was your function out here?

NP: Well, when I was assigned physically on station?

TH: Yes.

NP: I came, when I was at the Battery in Old Bridge, I was Platoon Leader for the Fire Control Area. So I got to, they used to have these Operational Readiness Evaluations (ORE). So I got to know the system pretty well. So, they brought me down to work on the Battalion Staff, so I had a bunch of jobs. I was a Supply Officer, I was a... And everybody had multiple jobs because we were short of officers. I was a Supply Officer, I was Assistant S3. And this is at various times, not all together. I was the S2, everybody

was the Assistant S1. But the last job I had was the Guided Missile Officer. I had to go out and do the OREs on the tower (inaudible) and the batteries of the Battalion.

TH: Okay. What was exact rank and title while you were here?

NP: I was a first lieutenant.

TH: First lieutenant. Thank you. Now what background and education did you have before coming here?

NP: I was a Latin and Greek major and graduated from college. (laughter) And from there, I got a draft notice. I graduated from college in '61. I was taking credits for a Masters from Columbia and I got a draft notice in December of '61 because at that time if you weren't going to school full time, you were eligible for the draft. So, rather than be drafted and not choose my next assignment, the draft would have been two years. I opted to enlist although I had a three year commitment, I was able to pick my duty station, general locale.

TH: Now, did you work here at Fort Hancock, generally aid in your future work?

NP: No.

TH: What did you go onto become after this?

NP: While I was here, after OCS I had a two year commitment. So, I decided to extend for a year until 1966. And during the summer or spring of '66, I went looking for jobs. So, I went to New York and got the want ads. And I saw that IBM was hiring so I went and took a test to be a programmer. So, I took the test and I passed that test and I interviewed up in Kingston, New York for the IBM job and I got it. So, the day after I got out of the service I started working for IBM. I became a programmer and then I became a salesman.

TH: While you were here, were there ever, because during the era when you were here in defense of New York City...

NP: Right.

TH: That was a pretty high period of tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, where there ever any alerts of possible attacks?

NP: No. No. We used to have certainly, we talked about the Operation Readiness Evaluation as part of the evaluation given by various level of headquarters. From ARADCOM to Region to Group to Battalion. So, you had four levels of headquarters always coming for the Operational Readiness Evaluations and maintenance inspections. The only, I'm trying to think, the only time we really got... while I was here, the only time we really got into high levels of alert were when some National Guard pilots who

were flying out of Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn and they forget to follow flight plans or something like that. And they got outbound and then inbound the tracks from the fire direction sector up on the hill at the Highlands, they would pick them up on the radar screen so you'd have we call it an alert, but you'd step down after awhile, after they were identified.

TH: I guess you would operate under the apprehension that they were Migs?

NP: Oh, yeah. Well, an unknown. They were an unknown rather than a hostile.

TH: Yeah.

NP: And then the only thing, the scariest thing was the not here at Fort Hancock but it was during that period I was in the service at Livingston. They had the Cuban Missile Crisis in October-November of '62. And then we were really on alert. There was no fooling around. The missiles were raised for, you know, 48 hours.

TH: So you were ready to fire those at any moment?

NP: Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

TH: Well, what was your target exactly?

NP: Well, it wasn't a target we were just on high alert. There was no, there were no tracks, but because of the situation with the Cuban thing and this is again, back in '62, because of the situation with Cuba and the blockade, they had everybody on 5 minute status which meant that the missiles were raised and all you needed was a track designation and then track them and if you had to fire. But you had people at the perimeter with machine guns.

TH: So, you would shoot them if you would be using them to shot down a plane?

NP: Oh sure.

TH: Were there any nuclear capable missiles?

NP: Well, I don't know what is classified and what's not. Certainly the missile system has a nuclear capability. But I don't know what type of information I am allowed to talk about here.

TH: Okay, so what was like the main procedure for a day when there would be a high alert? Like was there any specific procedure that you would go through?

NP: Well, you'd go through this operational readiness preparation. You have 15 minutes to bring the missile to firing status.

TH: Now while you were here at Fort Hancock what building did you work in?

NP: I worked in the building that is probably the lifeguard building now. There is a one story building over by the lighthouse. I think it is where the lifeguards stay. That was Battalion Headquarters (Building 41).

TH: And where was your post, when you were here for the missiles?

NP: I didn't do the missiles up here. I did the missiles work at the batteries. At Livingston where I was a Parts Clerk and then when I was commissioned I was at Old Bridge. That's where I was a Platoon Leader. But then, I had nothing to do with the missiles, except the evaluations.

TH: So when you were down here your main job was to evaluate the missiles?

NP: Yeah. The missiles, evaluate the batteries in preparation, to anticipate their readiness by the missiles.

TH: What was a typical day like here at Fort Hancock for you?

NP: Oh, it was, it was kind of easy. I lived in Quarters 17 so I, you certainly didn't need a car. I was married at the time and I had two children. So, I would walk out of the back door. Walk across the Parade Ground, into Battalion Headquarters, have coffee with the staff and then see what came up. There was a lot of, depending on what the staff assignment was, say it was the S3 job, the Missile Officer, you'd take a look at the, you would know ahead of time what your schedule was. What battery you were going to go to. You know you would have to base your schedule on the alert system. The alert status was based on what group, there was a Group Headquarters like I say up on the hill (in Highlands). And different status were three hour status, out of action status, and A status, B and C. So if you were on A status that means the battery had to be able to fire in 15 minutes. B status said you had to fire in three hours. It was a timing thing. So you'd look at the battalions schedule to find out what batteries where on 15 minute status and you would base your ORE schedule on that status. You couldn't go to a, you could go to a battery with three hour status but usually didn't. So you would base your schedule on that. So in addition to the operational readiness, there was a lot of maintenance inspections because the S3, the operations division ran a lot of the maintenance CMMIs. Ran maintenance management inspections. On the staff we had technical line officers who knew how the equipment ought to be maintained, the missiles and the radar themselves. So you would participate in those types of evaluations. So that was basically the day. It was not, when you were in the office it was not a pressing day. You know, it was great duty. It was better than Field Artillery.

TH: A very enjoyable experience for you then?

NP: The best experience. Yeah.

TH: While you were working here, were there civilians as well as military personnel?

NP: The civilians were not so much part of the Headquarters. A lot of the civilians were contractors. I think they worked for the...they probably worked more for First Army. You know, I probably mentioned, you probably know, on the Post there was Brigade Headquarters, C Battery Headquarters, there was Battalion Headquarters, there was First Army Headquarters and there was the Coast Guard unit. So each Headquarters had their own staffs. And they think the civilians mostly worked for the First Army. I'm pretty sure they supported, the First Army had headquarters. It was a First Army Post. So actually, the Nike, the 52nd Brigade, all those people were tenants of First Army. The other civilian headquarters were people who did work on site to modify the missile and the radar systems. And they were out of Fort Monmouth or Camp Kilmer. But we didn't have any civilians working directly in our headquarters.

TH: Was there very high security being it was the Cold War.

NP: Oh, yeah. Yeah. You couldn't get through the gate. You had to, the guard shack. As you know coming in here there are two guard shacks. One is the state guard shack, the parking fee and everything. And if you are driving through and you had military tags you would just get by that you wouldn't have to pay. They you came to the Military Post where the guard would check your ID. And if you had visitors you had to call ahead with their license number and who they were and identify themselves. And then as you get on Post because C Battery was physically located on Post, that Battery itself had secure guard posts. There were two fire control and two missile control areas. So you had multiple layers of security. And the Post security, again, was a First Army function and they had a Captain in charge of the military police. (Note: In 1962, the southern portion of Sandy Hook was leased to the State of New Jersey and used as Sandy Hook State Park until 1975. The current Ranger Station was built by the Army as its new entrance gate in 1962.)

TH: Now, I know that during World War II, there were blackout conditions here. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, when you were working at Livingston, were there any special precautions besides having the missiles ready that you took?

NP: Not that I remember, no. No, I don't think so. There were special precautions and the security was enhanced. Added to the Nike site, you had one guard shack, which one sentry would guard the entrance to the fire control area and one sentry that would guard the entrance to the missile area. And I think during the Cuban Missile Crisis the number of guards on duty were enhanced to patrol the perimeters rather than just being stationed. And typically for the missile area, independent of any crisis, the Cuban Missile Crisis or anything, the missiles had dog handlers around the silos, around the pits. They had German Sheppard's with dog handlers to patrol 24 hours a day, just during the off duty hours.

TH: Now driving in here towards Fort Hancock there is one, not the big missile at Guardian Park, but there is a little thing on the side, I don't know if you saw it.

NP: I saw it. That's an Ajax missile. (Nike Ajax missiles were used from 1954-1960. The Hercules replaced the Ajax in 1959-60 and was used until 1974. The Hercules was larger, faster, and could carry a nuclear warhead.)

TH: That's an Ajax Missile?

NP: Mmmhhmm.

TH: And there seems to be a little bunker type thing?

NP: The van, the van.

TH: Okay, is that an accurate portrayal of the way it looked?

NP: Oh yeah. I think that's the exact van, isn't it?

TH: Yes. So, that's the way...

NP: There were basically three vans on site. In the missile area there was one van. I'm pretty sure, I forget if they had a van in the missile area. But the Fire Control Area had two vans. One van was the Battery Control (BC) Van where the Acquisition Operator and the Battery Control Officer, the Computer Operator and the Telephone Operator sat. And they had the computer there and the long range radar. And then in the other van was the Radar Control Van and the Missile Tracking Van you had the operators who performed the searches with the radar. A Range Operator, an Azimuth Operator, and an Elevation Operator and then you had the Missile Control Radar Operator. So, you (had) enlisted men in that van. The vans were connected by a corridor (Inter-connecting Corridor) and the corridor had a work bench and a lot of electronic test equipment. Basically the maintenance NCOs used to use it as their base of operations. And behind that, behind the corridor there's the FUIF, the Fire Unit Integration Facility computers which gave the data into the group computers. But those were two vans and I forget if there was a van in the launch area. But that's basically the vans.

TH: Would you say the set up was similar for the Nike (Hercules) Missile as it was for the Ajax?

NP: Exact.

TH: Exact same.

NP: Oh yeah. The vans, (it was) a bigger missile. Bigger missile, bigger payload. Well, you saw the missile. I think the Ajax missile had one booster to it. The Nike (Hercules) Missile had basically four of them. That gave it the extra range. Yeah. Yeah. And then, the pits where the missiles were held consistent also, it was just a matter of what missiles you wanted to store in the pits.

TH: So you, how were these pits set up exactly where the missiles were stored?

NP: Let's see, there were probably, I forget how many pits there were, but depending on the missile you could probably fit anywhere from 6 to 12 missile in. And on top, they were underground and the missiles were house underneath and they were housed on rails. And when you wanted to bring a missile up, you moved a missile up to the elevator, position it and raise the elevator. And then once the missile was positioned up top, you would slide the missile from the elevator to a position on the surface. And you would repeat that process until you got all the missiles up that you wanted. And then the operators would raise the missiles at the time when they were ready to go through the drill. So they used the elevators, they were not silos, they were large pits, they were large dug in ground. You know, rectangular in shape and they had rails on them and you know the launchers themselves were topside. So, you would raise the missile, take the missile from the elevator, go to a launcher and position it. And then they would get ready to raise it.

TH: Was that manual by hand to put them actually in the launcher?

NP: Oh yeah. Yeah. Manually to bring them from the pits to position from the elevator to position. They electronically, you know, mechanically lifted, you know from the pit to the top. And then the launcher crew would roll them the elevator to the launcher position.

TH: And if you launched one missile off, would you have instructions to reload it quickly?

NP: Depending on the situation, sure. Oh, you would have to. That was the whole idea. You'd have depending on what the engagement was, you'd have to, you know, do what you had to do until all the missiles were depleted.

TH: And there was never a time of course when you had to use these?

NP: Not in our time

TH: Luckily. Also, now the missiles were housed in pits, like the launcher that is set up on the way into Fort Hancock, would that always be out there like that?

NP: That was the launcher, that would be, the pit was rectangular in shape, right. So then you would raise the missile and then you would slide the missile to a launcher very similar to what that Nike Ajax is on. And then there would be, I think there were four of them on a pit on topside. So you'd be able to mount four missiles on launchers, you know, per pit. And since each battery had at least two pits, you'd probably be able to have eight missiles ready to fire. So if the situation occurred where you had to fire more, you'd fire whatever you had to fire and then you'd raise another up to take that fire position.

TH: Were the Nike (Hercules) and the Ajax fired from the same exact launcher or were there variations?

NP: Well, I think there had to be variations because of the sizes. I'm not sure I didn't spend a lot of time in the launcher area. And I never dealt with, we never had any Nike (Ajax) on site. It was always Hercules.

TH: Hercules, what's the difference the Hercules and a Nike (Ajax) Missile?

NP: Range, capability.

TH: Which one had the greater range?

NP: Oh, the Nike Hercules does because of the four boosters. And the onboard, well the booster just gets it off the ground. And then after a while you have different stages a pre-launch and initial turn at which point the booster separates and then the onboard motor comes on. And then that takes it out. It has onboard propellant. And then the missile gets, based on where the target is, the missile gets instructions from the missile tracking radar which at the point of impact being computed by the analog computer in that BC van. So overall the reason, the reason they did the Nike Hercules was to give greater defense capability to the system because of its greater range.

TH: Now, god forbid, if there ever was a war, how many missiles would the area of Fort Hancock be able to deliver? Say in one round if you fired all your launchers at once?

NP: I don't know. You'd have to take a look. You just figure that each site had, say each site had 12 missiles and then look at how many sites you had and multiply for the New York Defense and then multiply it out. I don't know that. You know its math, it's a matter of math. You have access to the missile sites.

TH: Now getting back to Fort Hancock, less crucial things that were done here. Where did you eat while you were here?

NP: I ate mostly home. Cause, you know, I married. Well, I was a first lieutenant when I was here, but because, you know, you didn't make a lot of money. So some of the higher officers went to the Officers' Club and everything but some of the junior officers went home to eat. I had breakfast home, lunch home and dinner home. You know, it was great duty. Sometimes in the summer time we'd go to the beach at night. Fortunately for the U.S. Army we had all of this beach and no people on it. And unfortunately for the civilians who couldn't get past the guard desk, the guard shack you had less beach and a lot of civilians. So, we used to go and we used to get off early, four thirty five o'clock and just take the car over to the beach area and just sit around with the kids and they would play in the water and everything four or five o'clock in the afternoon. It was great. But that is where I ate. Like I said, the Officers' Club was very popular. A lot of people ate lunches there. But if I did, it wasn't often so I probably don't remember.

TH: What was the beach, what would you say is there any difference between the beach of today and when you worked here?

NP: I don't know. You know I don't come to the beach here that often. I guess, well its public now. That is the biggest difference, its public. I know they draw a lot of crowds. Its really become commercialized. But I don't remember a lot of it then. It's just a matter of it's here. There was nothing to notice. It was a beach. And I don't come down here before. I have a beach (house) down at Long Beach Island, a house down at Long Beach Island. That's why I don't come here.

TH: Yeah. I understand it's a nice area. Anyway, now during World War II and times even before that. There were social activities for the soldiers who were stationed here. While you were here working with the defense was there any kind of social activity?

NP: Yeah, they had then, the biggest thing was Friday Night Happy Hour at the Club, which we didn't go every night because we had the two kids. Sometimes it was a little bit difficult getting a babysitter, but we'd go to happy hour. The drinks were pretty cheap. So that was every Friday we would go there. And sometimes we went and sometimes we didn't. One of the other, they would have a major event they would have like a, what they'd call a "Hail and Farewell". They'd, naturally the Army is kind of transient. They'd always have people coming in and moving out. So on a given Friday maybe once a month or something like that they'd have a "Hail and Farewell" party where they'd welcome new members and say goodbye to the old members. And that was a little more formal. Naturally, I didn't think we even wore uniforms but we might have. So we did that. And that was a big social event because you would get a chance you know, a chance to mingle, not mingle with the higher ranking officers but at least say hello to them and they'd know who you are. But each level of rank had their own contemporaries, you know, so we hung around with the second lieutenants and the first lieutenants and wives. The captain's wives and the captains hung around together. So we got to know, we got to be pretty friendly with three couples. Dick Squitiere, Eric and Dick Young, a couple of officers from other headquarters and our wives got along pretty well. Then there were some parties. We'd go to parties. One time like I said we lived in Quarters 17 so one time we had a cocktail party. And we invited the Colonel. It was a battalion thing and some of our friends so we invited them. And it was just a good time. So, we (did) a couple of things like that. You'd go to other people's places for cocktail parties. But the Officers' Club was sort of your center for social activities for the whole Fort. Because at that time you'd not only mingle with the Battalion people but you would also mingle with the officers from the other headquarters. There was only one Officers' Club on site so everybody used it.

TH: Now while you were here you said you had a garden?

NP: Oh yeah. We had, I had worked...one of the things I might have mentioned in my email probably one of the best things about this place was the people. It was not just the Battalion officers but all the officers. And not taking away from the enlisted men, 'cause

I didn't know them. Sure there were some good people that worked for me on different jobs were terrific. But in general socializing with the officers and having to deal with and report to them on a daily basis was terrific. I had this one major, Major Butts, he was the S3 and became the Executive Officer I think. But he asked me if I wanted to help him with a garden. So, right in front of the Officers' Club there is a road there and I can't describe exactly the direction but there were a whole bunch of, at that time there were a whole bunch of empty lots. So we said, "Come on, we are going to have a garden." So we marked it off, you know, that was something that they did. So that was the first garden I ever had. So, I ended up doing all the work. He just was telling me how to rake out the stones and everything. But we did that in the Spring of '66 and by the summer it was unbelievable. Stuff started sprouting up and everything. It was beautiful. It was a watering, you might even know, I don't know if you drive around a lot but there is a pipe with a tap on it, right in front of the Officers' Club, not towards the ocean side, but the back side and that's where we got the water from. There was always a hose there for watering the garden and everything. So Major Butts, he and I had this garden. And he was a terrific guy. I don't know, half of these people, more than half you wonder what happened to them. But he was terrific.

TH: Have you stayed in touch with anyone from the Fort?

NP: I haven't. You know John McKenna, right? You know McKenna.

TH: No.

NP: Oh, he is involved with the Nike site, restoring Charlie Battery. He was one of the Maintenance Technicians on C Battery. So, I got on the website and I saw his name and I emailed him. It turns out he lives in Brooklyn. So after I left IBM I got a job with a consulting company and he was assisting those guys so I got him a job for about a year and a half. So he was somebody, I didn't stay in touch with but he was somebody I talked about old times with. I've seen him a couple of times around here. He gets involved a lot with, oh boy, that young man who does all the work with the Nike system. You don't know who I am talking about. I forget his name off hand. But he has a website and talks about all the Nike sites. But you know I didn't keep in touch with him but I just found him afterwards. And there's nobody, everybody when there own way. There is nobody on site that I grew up with or anything so they all came from different parts of the country so you just go. When I was, after I got out of the service, a guy I worked for in Old Bridge, Matt Anderson, he was a Captain, got promoted to Major. I saw him afterwards, he stayed with us for a while, I saw him when he was working out of Middletown at the Air Force Base up there, Stewart Air Force Base. And then he left for Vietnam so I saw him, that was probably in '68, something like that. But other than that...

TH: While you were here did you attend any religious services?

NP: I did. I used to go to Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church up on (Route) 36 (in Highlands). Yeah, I don't know if I ever went here. I might have, but I remember going

there. I remember going to church because I remember coming back on Sundays because it was so crowded and you used to see these people being turned away at like 9, 10 o'clock in the morning from the park and I had my sticker on the car and I would just go right through. I was a terrific feeling.

TH: Did you get dirty looks from the people?

NP: No they were so exasperated they didn't know what was going on. Yeah, but I went up to Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

TH: Were there every any sporting events out here?

NP: We used to probably play more basketball than anything. I don't know they might have had softball and everything but I stayed with basketball. Some of the others might have done other things, I don't know, you know the batteries might have had more of a complement of people to do that stuff because they had the mass. We didn't have a lot of people in Battalion Headquarters to field a team, I don't think. But basketball we played, yeah. Well, now let's see, I shouldn't say that when I was at battalion I didn't play anything but when I was at that battery I played but I played down at Fort Hancock in the gym. And golfed too, we didn't play golf but because I was in the Parade Ground and this Lieutenant Dick Squitieri who I ran into at IBM, we knew each other at IBM also, he was a Special Services Officer. So, I'd go to him and get some golf clubs and some golf clubs and hit ball on the parade ground because it was right behind the quarters. So other than that no, I didn't do any sports while I was assigned, living here.

TH: Okay, question, there is a basketball hoop right out here by this building. I don't know if you saw it.

NP: No I didn't see it.

TH: Okay, I was wondering if you might have know if it was here when you were here.

NP: I think it might have been a little inconvenient with the time and the masses and all. That's why I went to OLPH, so I never got down this far. There was no reason for me to come down here. Maybe if I had spent more time on Post it would have been different, but once, you know, we never even drove around because we were living in Quarters 17, our lives centered around the Officers' Club and you know the garden. Maybe a couple of people's houses, but other than that, you know outside of me getting around to these batteries I didn't really take advantage of touring the fort. I mean, I knew what the history of it was, but I really never took a look at the bunkers because at that time the bunkers were all open. They are probably all closed now, right?

TH: I'm not sure. Some of them are open for tours.

NP: Oh yeah.

TH: I'd have to check it out. A lot of stuff is closed because it is being renovated.

NP: Yeah. The one thing, the other thing I used to go clamming. I don't know if that is important. You know by Spermaceti Cove. A couple of the warrant officers that I worked with on the S3 staff, Mr. Rosefeld, Manny Rosefeld and Joe Phillips, two warrant officers and they taught me how to clam so we used to go out, you know I don't know if you are allowed to do it but we used to go out there. Now, you probably wouldn't want to do it. But we used to have the clam rakes and everything. So we used to go out on a nice summer afternoon, not during the day, during the week rather, but on the weekend and go clamming. And Spermaceti Cove had a lot of the bunkers in there where a lot of the gun positions were, but other than that there is so much history on the Fort. As you get older I learned what I missed.

TH: Yeah, it's definitely a very historic site. It's gone through so many eras and now in 1974 when it was decommissioned as being a strategic site. I was just wondering when you were here, again your main focus was air defense of New York City, if while you were here let's say a scenario similar to September 11, 2001 had occurred during your time here, what would have been the procedure with handling that if any?

NP: Well, it's interesting, I don't know, when you have the Air Defense System, the Nike Missile System is the last line of defense. Usually what happens is that you anticipate a threat coming off shore, so there is a radius that says, here is my first line of defense at the time I remember it was called picket ships where they'd have these ships out in the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean depending on the coast. And those people would have enough sophisticated equipment to be detect an inbound threat. And if there was an inbound threat those picket ships would detect it and pass it up inbound. And then the inbound would be maybe some other long range tactical air defense system and they would pick it up and if they couldn't identify it they would send fighter planes out. So, all that threat depended on coming off shore. The unfortunate situation with the September 11th thing is that all that stuff was from on shore so there was no way, you know we'd get a plane in the air coming out of Logan Airport that wouldn't be, that wouldn't be determined to be a threat because it would not meet the criteria of the rules of engagement. Anything that had to be correlated was correlated coming from across the ocean. Typically what happens on a major airline coming from England for Europe say, inbound, they file a flight plan. A flight plan is fed into the computer. The computer picks it up and passes it to the computers into on the hill where they had the air defense radars. So they would correlate the flight plan. They would have flight plan correlation. If there was an inbound plane coming in you would say alright, here's an inbound plane and it's flying at such and such and its supposed to be in this corridor and it is. So that's a friendly so you pass it on there. So you wouldn't, you know, outside of being on a high level of alert within a military installation which I'm sure they were, there is nothing the air defense could have done given the technology of the air defense of the time there was probably nothing they could have done given the 9-11 situation.

TH: So do you think that even lets say it was still run the same way it was when you were here and it had been kept commissioned through 2001 for any of a number of reasons you

think that it still wouldn't have been that effective because you were expecting an attack of a foreign power across the ocean and not out own planes.

NP: We are not geared for that. We are not geared for that. I mentioned at the top of the interview that we used to get alerts from the some weekend fighter pilots who would be on a drill with the National Guard and it could have been any fighter pilots I use the National Guard because I know it was here, it could have been any one. But they go far enough out over the water and then turn around and be coming inbound so you get an alert because there was no flight plan filed and there is no flight plan correlation. So our system at the time was not geared to look at inbound flights.

TH: Okay and while you were here did you ever take any excursions to New York City?

NP: Oh yeah. Yeah.

TH: You were from Brooklyn, so...

NP: Yeah. I was born in Brooklyn and I was living in Queens at the time but we used to...I went in ..I mentioned I got to be friendly with some of the other battalions so one night, probably in, well it didn't matter when it was, probably in '66. Larry Anderson was one of the friends. He was the second, he was first lieutenant who had just come back from Vietnam and I had mentioned he became a captain. But he and I and our wives got along pretty well. And there was a Captain Carroll. Captain Carroll had C Battery and Capt Houser had A battery and their wives so the four of us and our wives went up to New York City and saw the play *Superman*. And then from there, from midtown we went down to Little Italy and had an Italian meal so we got home about I don't know 1 o'clock in the morning and then Larry's status was on, Larry was on A status. So I got home, I changed into my uniform and I did an ORE at his site in Hazlet. And when he walked in to this, when he walked into the van he said, "You bastard." Because I woke him up. (laughter) I was exhausted, but I was what 25, 27 at the time. You don't need much sleep then. But that is what we did once. But we, as a family went into New York a lot because my ex-wife's family was in Brooklyn and mine was in Queens so we used to go. We had a party in June of '66. My Grandmother turned 83. So we rented out the Officers' Club and I had all my family come down for a party. So they came down to see where I worked and everything. I showed them the garden. So we had, so my Grandmother celebrated her 83rd birthday down here. And they did a terrific job. The Officers' Club, the Officers' Club always did. So, I just went with the staff one time. Other than that we used to go up, when I wasn't on duty, which wasn't a lot on the weekends. Either I went up to Brooklyn or Queens to see our folks or they came down to visit.

TH: Did you go by like boat train or car?

NP: Car. Train was too prohibitive. It took, by the time, I didn't know where the train would leave me first of all. It was too long for me. The car was convenient. They didn't

have these ferry systems they have now. This is going back thirty some odd years. Almost 40 years.

TH: Did you know of any people who worked here who were minorities or women? I would imagine during this time period there were probably more than during the World War II era.

NP: I don't know how many there were during World War II but there were minorities. Oh yeah. Sure. And you would know they were a minority because a minority was defined as something but it never affected anything. You worked with minorities, minorities worked for me. When I said the people were terrific, I didn't say the non minorities were terrific. All of the people were terrific. One of the best people I worked for was Major Rollins, an African-American. And he was just a great guy. And you would never know, you would never know in this case color. I didn't anyway. I never did. When growing up I never knew it anyway so, but you know you depend of people no matter what the background was, especially in the batteries. It was such a team oriented thing. And these evaluations that we did, like the Operation Readiness Evaluations were so critical to the battery and to the commander of the battery that anybody that didn't do well was severely, their career could have been severely impacted. Not mine, because I was getting out just some of these career officers so the whole concept was teamwork. And you did everything to promote teamwork. So you didn't know minority. Everybody had to depend on each other. That's why I say they all were terrific.

TH: That's good to hear. What you just said right now show a bit of a contrast between years prior. Because actually I would say 20 years before you were here this was actually a Caucasian male fort. And it's good to hear that things had changed, became more of a representation of America.

NP: Well all I know is what I had. I'm not getting into a social dialogue. I just know the people who just met each other, it didn't matter what their background was.

TH: Would you say this was a fun or boring place to work?

NP: I don't know if you would say, I don't know if the contrast is fun verses boring. It wasn't boring but it was a great job. So was it a good job assignment? It was a great job assignment. Was it a nice place to be? Yeah. But I don't know how you describe fun. But it was not boring. It was not boring. It was a terrific place to be. The people were terrific, the job was terrific. I enjoyed being here with my family so if that's the definition of fun then that was fun for me.

TH: While you were here, did anything humorous ever occur? Any fun stories?

NP: No. I don't think so. I mean, we would laugh a lot because of our friends we had some good times. You know we had card games. We'd play cards and the wives would do something. And then we'd dine together and you know party together, but it was not

something that you would say was hysterical. It was just good. There was nothing that stands out that would be hilarious, you know.

TH: What stands out most in your mind about your experience at Fort Hancock?

NP: I don't think that there is any single event. I mentioned to you, I liked the people. They were terrific. Being part of that, just meeting the people and all. For a young, I got here I was 25, 26 years we lived in Quarters 17. That was the best place I ever lived in in my life. I was fortunate. I came from a nice family in Queens and we had a nice home and all that. But being in this huge house, we had a cocktail party I mentioned before. I don't know how many people were there. There were a lot and you had it in the foyer. I mean that's how big these houses were. And it had five fireplaces. That stands out as very special because it was something that I had never experienced. But the people and the work was challenging. It was interesting and the people were great. And those were the things that I remember the most. I don't think there was one single thing that stood out. Does that make sense?

TH: Now is there anything that you, as there are going to be students using this tape to do future research. Is there anything that you as a person who served in a very historic area in American history, defending this country, would like to say to anyone who is studying this area in the future?

NP: Start the question again.

TH: Is there a message you would like to give to anyone listening to this tape in the future?

NP: Well, you talked about the history of the place. At the time I knew it was historic so I can't relate to that. I mean again, I can't get into these social issues. Not for anything. There's a lot of social-political issues that are going on today and that sort of stuff, you know and I have a feeling and a lot of my ilk have feelings, the people I grew up with, the people I went to school with, the people of my age. I think it is important to remember what happened on September 11th. And sometimes politics confuses reality. You see Fort Hancock is just a symbol of a lot of other things in our country that people are more aware. Homeland protection is probably the key most important thing in this country. And I think people should remember that. How they approach that is their own way. But that probably is the biggest job this country ever had. And Fort Hancock is a representation of that climate. There are other Forts around the country with a lot of terrific people working hard to protect this country and I think people ought to remember it. Probably the biggest disappointment, I got into the service and I got out before the Vietnam thing started. And people can agree with war and disagree and I respect that and appreciate that. But when you bring it down to the personal level against service people that's a big mistake. Cause they are only doing what they were asked to do. So I just hope that people don't repeat what happened during the Vietnam era and how they treat our servicemen. And you can do anything as politicians. You can chastise, not vote for them, vote for them, praise them but when you get down to the operating people, the

people should be a little more respectful if you will and empathetic if you will and more appreciative of what they do for this country. That's my message.

TH: Thank you very much Nicholas.

NP: Okay.

TH: And thank you for defending our country during the Cold War era.

NP: I didn't do anything. It was a piece of cake down here. Thank a lot.

TH: I'm Tom Hanley with Nicholas Pinto at Fort Hancock.

End of Interview