

**Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Interview with May Siciliano,
Civilian employee with Signal Corps Radar, 1942
by Tom Hanley, Monmouth University, NPS intern
January 26, 2004
Transcribed by Tom Hanley 2004**



May Siciliano 1942

[Editor's Note: Fort Monmouth's Signal Corps tested Radar on the beach about 3 miles north of the entrance to Sandy Hook from the 1933 to 1943. This was inside Fort Hancock's Gate, but south of the main buildings. During the War, a drafting school was established there. By 1943, the entire facility had moved to Camp Evans in Wall Township, NJ.]

This oral history of May Siciliano took place on Monday January 26, 2004. It was recorded over the phone in the WMCX 88.9 FM News Room at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, New Jersey. It was conducted by Tom Hanley, a Monmouth University student and intern for the National Park Service.

Q: When and where were you born?

A: I was born in Asbury Park, New Jersey in 1923.

Q: Did you attend high school there?

A: I was still in high school.

Q: What high school did you graduate from?

A: Asbury Park High.

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

A: No. My father was, he had too many kids. He didn't go in. He would have been in the First World War.

Q: It was during the Second World War that you worked at Fort Hancock?

A: Right after school.

Q: So you went right from school to out there?

A: Right.

Q: What exactly did you do out there?

A: Well, just before graduation, six weeks before, the government came and they asked... they were giving courses and one of them was mechanical drafting. So I signed up and for six weeks we took lessons and then they gave you a test and if you passed the test then they would hire you and you would continue your school. So that's when a lot of the kids went to Fort Hancock.

Q: Were you a civilian employee of Fort Hancock or were you actually in the military?

A: No, a civilian.

Q: Did you actually work in the Fort?

A: Well like I said, it was about three... how many miles is it out to Fort Hancock?

Q: Honestly, I couldn't tell you right now. Several.

A: I think it was three, two or three miles out from the Gate that we had to go and they wouldn't let us into Fort Hancock. They wouldn't let us go in there at all.

Q: Did you work with drafting people?

A: It was a school. Yes.

Q: Do you know your start and ending date at Fort Hancock, when you began and when you finished?

A: In June is when I went in.

Q: Of which year?

A: Forty-two.

Q: June of 1942.

A: Right after graduation and then I went to a ... I don't think it was that long. It was about eight months I guess. Then I was transferred to Camp Evans.

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

A: No. I never knew anything about it.

Q: Did you know about the type of job you would be performing before you came?

A: Oh yes. It was a school and they were going to teach us mechanical drafting. I worked for four years at it. After I got out of school, I was working four years.

Q: Did you have a specific title?

A: Yes. It was... oh gosh what was it. I know it was "SP". "SP" was sub-professional one or two. I think it was two but I'm not sure. It was a long time ago. All I know was it was about a thousand dollars a year... somewhere around that.

Q: You mentioned that your job was machine drafting. What did that entail? What was a normal work-day like for you?

A: Well after that we worked with the engineers. They gave us things to do, draw, and we had to do it by scale. It was always machinery, because I didn't know what they wanted. It was a secret. They wouldn't tell us what it was for.

Q: The military was trying to keep things secret because it was a time of war?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: Did you live on Sandy Hook? Where did you live during this time?

A: I lived in Asbury, with my parents.

Q: How did you get to the Fort every day?

A: I had to get up at five o'clock every morning. There was one bus. That's all it was, one bus. One time I woke up too late and I had to have my father drive me to the Gate and he couldn't go in. So, I had to get a ride with somebody that I didn't know, which I was scared to death. I wouldn't do that anymore. I wouldn't do it anymore but it was, I loved it there. At lunch time we ate over at the bay. We didn't go to the ocean part but I had lunch at the bay outside. In the summer time it was really nice. Then they had a bomb shelter for us because of the German submarines off the shore there. Every time they rang that bell, boy, we had to rush into the shelter.

Q: I understand that during that time period some of the main offices of the Fort were in an underground bunker. Was that similar to this?

A: Yes, underground. Yeah.

Q: Were you there a lot?

A: Oh yeah, Quite a few times.

Q: Were there ever any legitimate sub-sightings?

A: I don't know. They wouldn't tell us that. There must have been, if they saw ships there because the blimps or the planes when they drove over, they would have seen them.

Q: What did the bomb shelter look like? If we were in there now, how would you describe it?

A: It was like... under dirt. It was scary. It wasn't a beautiful thing to look at. It was just like a tunnel and it was under dirt.

Q: There weren't any concrete walls?

A: No. I don't remember. I guess it had to have some kind of reinforcements but I don't remember that.

Q: Was there any electricity?

A: I tell you I couldn't remember that. It must have been. I think there was because it would be too dark down there.

Q: About how big was it?

A: Well there were a lot of us going in. I would say it was enough for fifty people when I went in, could be more.

Q: When you went down there did you actually perform your normal job, or would you be waiting out a sub attack?

A: We waited until the "all clear" sign.

Q: So you never actually worked in the bomb shelter. It was more of a precaution in case a sub was off the coast?

A: Yes.

Q: You mentioned earlier that you would take the bus at five a.m. to go to Sandy Hook. How did you get home at night and at what time did you go home?

A: I got home... around five o'clock we got home. We didn't go to work until seven o'clock. We had to be at work at seven. It took about a half hour, three quarters of an hour to Fort Hancock from Asbury I think. A lot of times in bad weather, in Sea Bright, the bus would get stuck in water because of all the water there and we would have to wait for another bus to come to pick us up. It wasn't any fun.

Q: At five o'clock at night you would be coming home, correct?

A: Yeah.

Q: I understand that in the fall it tends to get darker earlier and I know from another veteran I interviewed that you had a black out at night.

A: Oh yeah. During the War we couldn't have any lights. We had to put shades down all the time. If we put lights on in the house, we had to put shades down.

Q: With cars, they had to put tape over the head lights so the light couldn't be seen. Was this done with the bus?

A: I don't remember that. I was on the bus. I don't remember what they did. They had to have lights to see because it was dark.

Q: Was Asbury Park blacked out as well?

A: All along the shore it was blacked out.

Q: You could still have light in your house, but you had the shades to keep from seeing that any light was on.

A: That's what we had to worry about. I don't know if they had black out shades or not, but like they do now, they had that dark shade on the outside and the inside is white. I don't know if they had them then or not. At Christmas time, we couldn't put any decorations out. Are you familiar with the film "Blue Christmas"? During the War, everyone put blue lights on their Christmas tree. Mostly everybody that I know did because it was a blue Christmas. It was terrible.

Q: Was it like the Elvis Presley song?

A: Yes, like that.

Q: Did you have those on your tree as well?

A: Oh yes.

Q: Is that similar to when we put a yellow ribbon out in hope that are troops come home?

A: Right. When they came home, it was different than they do now. They would greet everybody. I had two brothers in the service. I didn't know when they were coming home. There wasn't any grand finale with them. And my husband had... there were five boys in his family, they all went. They shouldn't have sent all five. One of them should have stayed home, like they do now. One son always stays home I understand. They didn't do it then and it was a very blue time and during the War my brothers met in Okinawa. My brother Sal was in the Army and he knew my brother's ship was coming in, who was in the Coast Guard and he got permission to get a boat to go out there and see my brother. That's when they met one another.

Q: They met while they were fighting?

A: Well, I guess they were fighting then. My one brother had just gotten there and then my other brother, who was in the military service, and he knew that my brother's ship was coming in. So he got permission to get a motor boat to go out to the ship. I guess the ship was landed there. They didn't tell me too much of the story. The boys that came home from World War II, they never talked too much about what happened over there. Not like they do today, you know. They were very quiet about everything that happened while they were over there.

Q: What years did your brothers serve from?

A: Right from the beginning to the end. Forty-one to Forty-five and also all the boys that I went to school with. It was sad. They all enlisted. A lot of them enlisted to go in when Pearl Harbor and you worried if you would ever see them again. And our first ten-year reunion, we were looking through our yearbook and there must have been about fourteen boys that died in that time in the service. It was sad.

Q: While you were working at Fort Hancock, was there anyone you went to school with out there?

A: Yes, there was. I see them once in a while but I know that a lot of them are sick. Some died and maybe eighty years old now and I don't know where they are today, most of them. I don't know where they are.

Q: Getting back to Fort Hancock, we mentioned that you worked outside of the Fort and we talked about the shelter, but was there any specific building that you did most of your work in?

A: Yes, there was. It was hard to tell you. I can't remember that far back. It was right before they wouldn't let us go into the Fort where all of the military was.

Q: So it was right out in front of the Fort as opposed to being in the compound?

A: Yes, it was right outside of the Fort there.

Q: Do you know if it still stands today?

A: No. I went a couple of times to Fort Hancock and I can't remember where it was. No, I don't think there's any buildings there because I didn't see any. I went riding through. Its very nice out there now.

Q: Yes it's a beautiful place. Was it beautiful back then?

A: Oh yeah. It was nice.

Q: Could you describe the building you worked in; what it looked like?

A: It was a plain oblong building, metal building of some kind.

Q: Was it one of those buildings with the full metal walls and the ceiling like a solid metal sheet wall?

A: Yeah, it was one of those buildings you could take apart. You know if I'm not mistaken, I think when I first went out there we were in tents. It got so hot in the tents that they had to put us in the building. Some of the girls fainted. I just remember that now and that we didn't stay there too long because it was so hot in the summer time in tents.

Q: It was actually cooler in the metal building?

A: Oh yeah. It was cooler there.

Q: Did you have any kind of special air conditioning or fans?

A: Fans. I guess they had fans. I remember my instructor. Her name was Blanch Weinstein. I don't know where she is now. She was a very nice person. I don't know where she is. She came from the north somewhere.

Q: North Jersey or even further?

A: North Jersey. I don't remember what part.

Q: She was a civilian?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you work with civilians and military personnel or just civilians?

A: It was always military personnel. They all went to Camp Evans and then after that they transferred me to the Air Force.

Q: Were they officers or just enlisted men?

A: All officers. There was always a Major or a Colonel or somebody.

Q: While you were out there, where did you girls eat.

A: We had to bring our lunch.

Q: Did you eat at your building or was there a specific place that you went?

A: Yeah. We ate in our building or else we'd go out at the bay or the river. What was that river? The Shrewsbury. Yeah, it was right over there by the bay. The other part was the... on the other part of the road was the ocean, but we used to eat out in the bay.

Q: I imagine it was very nice during the summer months and the spring.

A: Oh yes, it was very nice. I loved it, especially in the summertime when you would ride on the bus with the sun coming up. It was beautiful.

Q: Were there any social activities that you took part in at the fort or in the area?

A: No. I know that just one time the gang got together and we went to the Fort and we had a gathering. It was the summertime there. There's a place in Wanamassa called Cold Indian Springs. Its like a lake and they have a grounds there where you can go. We had a party there once. I do have a picture of that. I do have a picture. I could send that to you. It was Red Becker, he was there and Audrey Viamopa. In fact, I think they got married together. They married one another. They were going to school there.

Q: Were there all civilians at this social gathering?

A: Yeah, and there was Mary Martone, she passed away. I remember some of the other kids. It was a... I had a lot of fun. It was terrible to say that during the War that I had a lot of fun. I was lucky. My father couldn't afford to send me to college because I always liked art. I was lucky that this job came along because back then most of the girls ended up at a five and ten or being a waitress. That's one thing I didn't want to do.

Q: You said your job involved art?

A: I love art.

Q: How did your job involve it?

A: The drafting is art, but its a little harder. You have to know figures and drafting. But art, I loved the other art... you know painting. In fact, I still do it today. (*coughs*) I'm doing a lot of art. (*coughs*) Excuse me. (*coughs*) I put some pictures in the senior

citizens art that they have... contest and the last two years my pictures came in second place.

Q: If there is someone listening to this tape in the near future and they would like to see one of your pieces, is there any place where they might be on display where they can go check it out?

A: Well, my kids have all my pictures. In fact, I just finished doing a wine bottle and then my daughter, of course, she claimed them. I only have one or two at my house.

Q: Did you do any painting while you were at Fort Hancock?

A: No, but I did do... I remember they wanted me to do, not Fort Hancock, this was Camp Evans. I had to do a picture of an army truck, the transportation truck that they transfer all of the soldiers in. I had to go out and measure a truck and do a picture of the truck. I don't know why they couldn't take a picture of it.

Q: Was this to be placed up as a work of art or were they using it for strategic purposes?

A: If they were, I don't know. I don't know what they did with it after that.

Q: Did you go to any clubs or theater or sporting events while you were out at Fort Hancock?

A: No, not at Fort Hancock.

Q: So there was no socializing with the soldiers?

A: No.

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

A: No, none of that.

Q: You mentioned that you went out by the river to eat your lunch, when it was nice out. Did you ever go to the beach?

A: No, in fact I don't think we were allowed to go there. I don't think they wanted us to go.

Q: Being so close to New York City, did you ever take any excursions to New York?

A: Oh sure. Every Wednesday they had a women's day excursion. It was cheaper for the women to go to New York every Wednesday.

Q: Was this set up by the government or a private company?

A: I guess the train company must have decided that.

Q: Did you get to New York by trains, boats or cars?

A: I went by train. We didn't have any cars around here. They weren't making them.

Q: During that time period gasoline was rationed, I imagine.

A: Oh yeah.

Q: Did you have special coupons that allowed you to...

A: Coupons.

Q: You weren't a military person, but you worked with the military. Did you get any special treatment because of that? Did you get any extra ration coupons?

A: No, no no.

Q: So you got the same amount that any civilian would have gotten?

A: Nope, nobody got anything, that I know of anyway.

Q: What was the ratio of men to women where you were working?

A: Well (*coughs*) I think it was about half and half. It was men and women. When I say men... we were like kids then. They were boys. When I went to Camp Evans there were a lot of men working there. Of course, they were the older men. They didn't go into service.

Q: Were there any racial minorities or were the people mostly Caucasian? Where there any African Americans?

A: Oh sure. There was a few.

Q: What about Hispanic people?

A: No, I don't remember any of them.

Q: Was it mostly white people and African American people?

A: Yeah, because Hispanics just started coming over. You know, I worked for the Army Map Service because my husband was going to school at Georgetown. I worked for the Army Map Service in 1951.

Q: Did your work at Fort Hancock aid you in this at all?

A: Well, it was drafting. I did drafting there too. It was different drafting. It was map-making, making the maps, but it was different than the mechanical drafting. But that helped me get a job there.

Q: Did it help you in the way that it gave you experience and that it gave you connections that would help you get such a job?

A: No, because it was so different. I did have to learn how to do more things over there when I got there but drafting... you learn the pen and figures. You had to do it in ink. It wasn't easy work. It was hard.

Q: Did you work on map drafting a lot after you left Fort Hancock? Was this what you did in life? Did you do anything else besides that.

A: No, I did ... for four years I did that. Then I came home and had my children and that's it. I haven't worked since then.

Q: While you were working at Fort Hancock, before the map drafting, would you say that Fort Hancock was a fun or boring place to work or something in between?

A: I loved it there. It was fun. It was different. At least I was learning something. That's what it was. It was learning how to do drafting, which was good. Otherwise, I don't know what I would have done. It was a job. There weren't any jobs you could do here.

Q: So your experiences at Fort Hancock gave you a really good foundation for the future.

A: Oh sure, sure.

Q: While you were out there, did anything especially humorous occur?

A: No, not really.

Q: What would you say is your most fondest memory of Fort Hancock?

A: Just going out there and... before I got to Fort Hancock to see the sun rising. Being an artist, I always loved art, I loved the sun set coming up because every day it was a different kind. It was different every day. It was beautiful. Working over there, learning how to do things, doing the drafting with all my friends there. I had a nice time there.

Q: Is there anything that stands out the most in your mind about Fort Hancock?

A: No, not that I can remember.

Q: Do you keep in touch with any of the people you met at Fort Hancock?

A: No. I don't know where they are, half of them or most of them. I don't know where they are.

Q: The time we live in today is in many ways similar to what happened during World War II, maybe not in the same extent where we were blacking things out, but we are involved in a War on Terror today. Being that you served your country, what advice would you like to give a girl coming out of high school who would like to serve her country?

A: I would say that they all should go to college and learn things to get a good job. That's the most important thing and its easier to go to college today than it was when I was a young girl, getting out of school. The best thing is to get a good education so you can get a good job and take care of yourself for the rest of your life. You don't have to depend on anybody really, like your husband for instance. There are so many divorces today. If she gets divorced, at least she'll be able to hold a job, a good job and take care of herself. That's what I would tell some girl today. I tell them that going to school is the best years of their life, this is what I tell my grand kids. Its the best years of your life because when you get out of school and go into the real world and its so different. So that's what I would tell them.

Q: Those are words of wisdom. Thank you very much. I just want to clarify one thing. You served at Fort Hancock from 1942 until...

A: Until some time in 1943... I don't remember when.

Q: May, once again, thank you very much. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me this afternoon.

A: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW