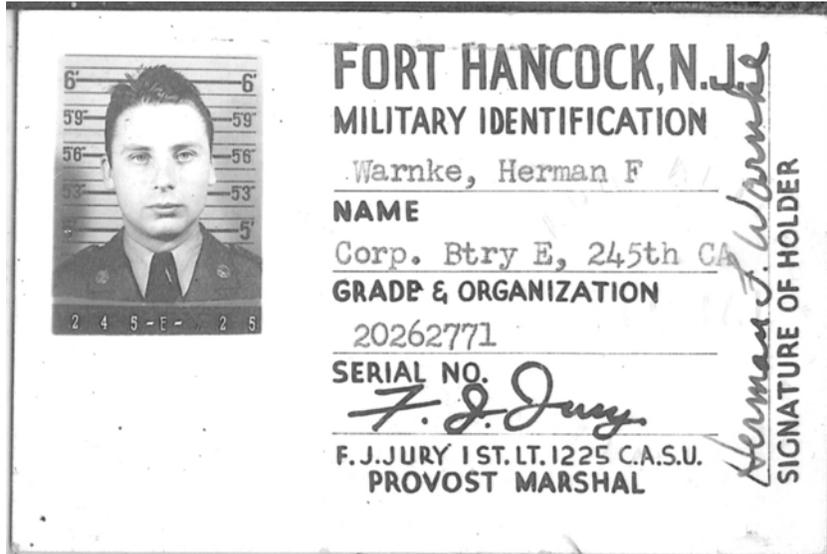


Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Interview of Herman Warnke,
Battery E, 245th Coast Artillery, 1940-42,
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS
August 11th, 2005.
Transcribed by Tom Minton, NPS 2008



World War II military pass for leave time from Fort Hancock.



Herman Warnke on guard duty at Battery Mills, 1941.



50th Anniversary of Federalizing 245th Coast Artillery, Fort Hancock Parade Ground, 1990.

Rasa: Hi, today is August 11th, 2005. My name is Mary Rasa, I am the Museum Curator for Sandy Hook, and I am on the phone with a veteran who served at Fort Hancock. I'm going to ask you, first of all, to state your name for the record.

Warnke: (Inaudible)

Rasa: Go ahead and state your name.

Warnke: I beg pardon?

Rasa: Go ahead and state your name.

Warnke: Herman Warnke.

Rasa: And when were you born?

Warnke: New York City, in 1919.

Rasa: And can you tell me where you went to school?

Warnke: Newtown High School, out in Queens.

Rasa: Is that where you lived?

Warnke: Yeah, I lived in Ridgewood, Queens when I was kid.

Rasa: Did you also graduate from there?

Warnke: I beg pardon?

Rasa: Did you graduate from there?

Warnke: Yes, I graduated from there.

Rasa: And did your father or grandfather serve in the military before you?

Warnke: (laughing) My parents were from Europe. My father was in the army in Germany long before World War One.

Rasa: Mhmm.

Warnke: And he got out, and he said 'the heck with this,' and got on a boat and came to the United States.

Rasa: And what years did you serve in the military?

Warnke: Let's see... I started in the National Guard in 1938, and then we were federalized in 1940 for the draft. And then we were in for the war after Pearl Harbor. And we were in the Coast Artillery, going after the U-Boats that were in the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico.

Rasa: And you were in the 245th Coast Artillery?

Warnke: Right, that's correct.

Rasa: What Battery?

Warnke: Battery E.

Rasa: And what did your Battery specifically do?

Warnke: I beg pardon?

Rasa: Your Battery, what was their primary mission?

Warnke: Let's see, I was a Sergeant Gun Commander.

Rasa: What type of Guns?

Warnke: Well, let's see, we started in, well, going way back was a 10" disappearing gun, I was a gun pointer. And then at Fort Hancock, we were on a 12" barbette...

Rasa: Were you on both Battery and Kingman and Battery Mills?

Warnke: Right, Battery Mills, that was us.

Rasa: Battery Mills, okay. When did you come to Fort Hancock?

Warnke: Oh when we were federalized, 1940.

Rasa: And you lived in "Tent City"?

Warnke: Yes, started in at "Tent City," right.

Rasa: When you got there, was there anything there at all, or were you there while they built the whole thing?

Warnke: No, they were in the process of building barracks and all that stuff, getting ready for the draft. That was it.

Rasa: And when you were in "Tent City," how many people do you remember? Was it a lot in the tent, or were you –

Warnke: It was our whole Regiment was there.

Rasa: But in an individual tent, how many people.

Warnke: In the tents? Let's see, there were, what? Six of us, I believe. Yeah.

Rasa: And before you came to Fort Hancock when you were federalized, had you been working on the other guns in New York Harbor?

Warnke: Oh geez, we learned the old .30 caliber machine guns, and oh God, that was it.

Rasa: Were you at other forts in the area?

Warnke: No.

Rasa: Oh, just at Fort Hancock?

Warnke: Fort Hancock, and then... this is when we were federalized, was Fort Hancock, that was the only one.

Rasa: Did you know anything about the place before you came there?

Warnke: About Fort Hancock?

Rasa: Yes.

Warnke: Truthfully, no.

Rasa: Did you come down by boat?

Warnke: No, we came in by truck – Army trucks.

Rasa: With the whole Regiment?

Warnke: Yup, we all came in.

Rasa: So, your job was working at the gun?

Warnke: Yes, it was well ...I'm trying to think of the first gun... Battery Mills, that was the one.

Rasa: Okay, so you worked on Battery Mills.

Warnke: And there was one big Fort. When I was in the National Guard, we went to a – I can't think of the name of the fort – it was out there at the... off Montauk Point, at the – protecting the entrance to Long Island Sound. Out there, we were on a 10" disappearing gun.

Rasa: Oh, okay, was it Fort Wright?

Warnke: I beg pardon?

Rasa: Fort Wright?

Warnke: No... wait... I can't think of the name.

Rasa: Okay.

Warnke: Oh God, I'm getting old.

Rasa: That's okay. So, what was your job at Battery Mills?

Warnke: Ah, let's see, I was Gun Pointer, and then I became a Gun Commander.

Rasa: And what type of work did that encompass?

Warnke: I beg pardon?

Rasa: What type of work did that require you did?

Warnke: The Gun Pointer was the one who set the gun at the points that were sent to us by the plotting unit...

Rasa: Mhmm.

Warnke: ...and then when I became Gun Commander, I just gave the orders, ya know.

Rasa: Do you remember what they were? Do you remember what you would say?

Warnke: Oh geez... we had between the shell being put in, and the powder magazines and all that stuff... ugh.

Rasa: Do you re-

Warnke: We were all well trained, you know, you didn't have to give many orders for any of that stuff.

Rasa: But do you remember, what was the process of bringing the artillery shell out to the gun?

Warnke: They came out from the storage place, and it came out on a cart.

Rasa: And how many people pushed it? Because that artillery shell weighed about a thousand pounds.

Warnke: I dunno, I think only one pushed that, with the shell.

Rasa: And then they would put the shell in the gun, and then the gunpowder?

Warnke: And then the powder was put in behind it, right.

Rasa: Did the powder bag vary in size, or was it always the same?

Warnke: I'm sorry, what?

Rasa: Did they always have the same amount of gunpowder, or did they vary it?

Warnke: No, no, we always had the same amount of powder for the shell.

Rasa: Mhmm. Did it take long for them to close it up and get it ready to be fired?

Warnke: No, not really. Everybody was well trained, and the shell went in, the powder went in, the breech was closed, and we were ready to shoot.

Rasa: And how far were you able to fire?

Warnke: I, let's see, I forget how many miles that we fired that thing, oh God, because I remember, oh no, I don't want to get ahead of the story, whatever you want to ask.

Rasa: No, I was just wondering, when were you firing at an actual target?

Warnke: We had a target that was towed by a boat, and then after Pearl Harbor, we, we fired, at one time we had a U boat out there in the ocean, and we got it. [Editor's note: this may have occurred elsewhere, no U boats were sunk in New York Harbor.]

Rasa: Really?

Warnke: Yeah, we just got credit for it, what? About eight months, nine months ago, they gave us the credit for it.

Rasa: Did you know that you were firing at it, at the time?

Warnke: Yep. Well, we knew there was an enemy out there. We didn't know whether it was a U-Boat, or a Japanese boat, or what, but it was a German U-Boat.

Rasa: So, at the time, did you think that you had sunk it?

Warnke: I beg pardon?

Rasa: Did you know you had sunk it then, or did they just report it.

Warnke: We really didn't know.

Rasa: Ok, do you know what the name of it was?

Warnke: No, no... I don't know. I think I have it down in my album; I have to look for it. I don't remember which one it was.

Rasa: Okay, so what was the typical alert like, when – obviously if you were there after Pearl Harbor, it must have been a very tense, and there must have been a lot of alerts going on, right?

Warnke: Oh God. We were on the alert for so long that it wasn't funny. And then, after Pearl Harbor, we were sent down to Camp Pendleton, VA, and there they issued us .155's from World War One. And then from there, we went to the Padre Islands off the coast of Texas, stayed there for awhile and kept after the U-Boats, and when they found out we could shoot 13 miles, they would thumb us, and a PBV used to come out of Corpus Christi with a depth charge under each side of the wing. And then we left there, and came around to Pascagoula, Mississippi, and protected a shipyard – an English shipyard – and then we ended up in Seattle, and ended up in the Aleutians.

Rasa: And this was all with the same unit? Or did your number change?

Warnke: Well, they broke us up, after the war, they made cadres and we formed all new units. The Regiment was broken up.

Rasa: So, when did you actually leave Fort Hancock?

Warnke: Oh lemme see, it was either late January or early February, something like that.

Rasa: Of '42?

Warnke: Of '41.

Rasa: '42, after -

Warnke: 1942, right.

Rasa: So, pretty quickly, they decided to move you out.

Warnke: That's when they sent us down and they gave us the .155's.

Rasa: So, can you tell me what – had you been drilling I guess as a National Guard Regiment, you were drilling before you were federalized?

Warnke: Yes, well, I had joined the National Guard for the Athletic Program, which was great, and everything else was... well we protected the harbor in New York, and that was it – it was great.

Rasa: Tell me about the Athletic Program.

Warnke: I beg pardon?

Rasa: Tell me about the Athletic Program.

Warnke: Oh, we had an awful lot of track meets. I've got an awful lot of medals from that. We had a pretty good team.

Rasa: And who were you competing against, other National Guard units?

Warnke: Yup.

Rasa: Ok.

Warnke: You know, and we did that, and like Memorial Day, we did the parades, and all that stuff. It was a great, great... well, it was a great feeling, that's all I gotta say.

Rasa: Mhmm.

Warnke: Well, what else can I tell you?

Rasa: Well, I'm going down a little list here. What type of work did you do after you left the service?

Warnke: Well, let's see, when I came back after the war, I got into the Board of Transportation, and operated a trolley car for a while.

Rasa: Really?

Warnke: And then, I left that and I went into NYPD.

Rasa: Oh, did you retire from the police force?

Warnke: I retired from the police force, yes ma'am.

Rasa: Ok. Can you tell me when you were on duty, were you on duty for a certain number of hours at Fort Hancock? Or did they do 24 hour shifts?

Warnke: Oh, let's see... I remember it was either 12 hours or 24 hours – I forget which.

Rasa: And when you were off, would you go back to your barracks, or would you stay at Battery Mills?

Warnke: Oh no, we went back to the barracks.

Rasa: Oh, ok. Anything interesting happen while you were at Battery Mills, because it's on the water, did everybody go fishing?

Warnke: Well, no, well, actually, before Pearl Harbor – that's the summer of 1941 –

Rasa: Right.

Warnke: We had Burgess Meredith and Lana Turner come to visit the Fort.

Rasa: Mhmm.

Warnke: And that was very interesting, and I got Burgess' autograph and all that stuff. Very interesting.

Rasa: What other social things – did they have a lot of dances when you were there?

Warnke: No, the only dance was the one big one when I was still with the Regiment in Brooklyn.

Rasa: Okay, was there sporting events?

Warnke: Well, the track meets and that, you know when they came about –

Rasa: Did you ever go to the theater to watch movies?

Warnke: The what?

Rasa: The theater?

Warnke: The theater, which theater?

Rasa: The movie theater?

Warnke: Oh, we went to the movies. I think it was right behind... We had a movie theater on the Post.

Rasa: There was one -

Warnke: Yeah, we used to go.

Rasa: Did you go to the chapel at all?

Warnke: The what?

Rasa: The chapel.

Warnke: Wait a minute, you lost me.

Rasa: For any religious services. Did you go to any services?

Warnke: Oh, not that I recall.

Rasa: How about the beach, did you ever get to go to the beach?

Warnke: Ah, you know, truthfully, no!

Rasa: You're too busy!

Warnke: We didn't get to the beach 'till we went to Texas, to the Padre Islands.

Rasa: So, how was the food?

Warnke: Well, that was the Gulf of Mexico, and it was great, all that stuff.

Rasa: Is there any other things that you remember about your time? Did you get to go home to visit your family often?

Warnke: Yeah, well, I, there were...let me see... there were 6 of us there, a special – a guard detail for Battery Mills and Kingman, and I had every other weekend, you know, every other weekend I was off. So, I was able to go home.

Rasa: And did you go by boat, or by train?

Warnke: No, no, I went by car. We had a car, my buddy had a car, and we'd just go in that all the time.

Rasa: Can you remember anything else, that was of interest while you were there?

Warnke: I dunno, not really, ya know it's too bad, I've got an album with every picture we took of Fort Hancock. In fact I've got an album from the beginning of the National Guard duty to the end of the war. And of course, we had Regimental reunions after the war, and most of that was down in Florida. The first one we had was at the Fort.

Rasa: Ok.

Warnke: That was it.

Rasa: Anything else about your work details at the Battery, anything –

Warnke: No, the only thing there was like when we had guard duty, and then we had the prison detail and all that, you know security for that. But outside of that, no. Really, no.

Rasa: At the prison, were there many people in that prison?

Warnke: No, the unit was on guard duty, and we also took care of the stockade.

Rasa: Was it still in the guardhouse, or was it a bigger building by then?

Warnke: No, it was in the guardhouse. And of course, they had details where the prisoners had to go out and work, and all that.

Rasa: Okay, did you suffer a lot of hearing loss from listening to the guns firing?

Warnke: Wait, the what?

Rasa: When the guns fired, did you lose a lot of hearing because of that?

Warnke: Well, really, at that point in time, it really didn't have many effects, but later in life, I have a little hearing problem in my right ear – that was the ear that was always closest to the gun.

Rasa: Now, when they were firing those guns, were they always firing with the 12” projectile, or did they sometimes do a sub-caliber firing?

Warnke: Wait a minute, you wanna repeat that?

Rasa: When you fire the 12” gun, I saw a photograph showing that they didn't always use a 12” projectile, but sometimes put in a smaller projectile and fired that. Did you ever see that?

Warnke: No, not that I recall.

Rasa: And how often would you fire them?

Warnke: Before or after the war?

Rasa: Well, actually, both. How often before, and then after it started?

Warnke: Well, before, we had target shoots, and of course, we usually beat the Regular Army in shooting, and so forth. But then after Pearl Harbor, oh Christ, we were ready to shoot at any moment's notice.

Rasa: So you would just be there constantly, then?

Warnke: I beg pardon?

Rasa: So the guns were completely manned as soon as Pearl Harbor happened?

Warnke: Yes, yes. Do you have any pictures of that?

Rasa: Yeah, we do have pictures of the gun battery when it was firing.

Warnke: Because I've got some beautiful pictures of it.

Rasa: Okay. Anything especially humorous ever happen?

Warnke: Any what?

Rasa: Anything that was really funny happen?

Warnke: No, not that I recall.

Rasa: Anything stand out in your mind about Fort Hancock?

Warnke: I'm sorry, what?

Rasa: Anything stand out in your mind about the Fort?

Warnke: Well, the Regular Army that was there and that, we all got along great. And I appreciated every bit of my stay there, because we were there to do a job, which we did. And that's why I... if I didn't live so far away, I would help things that were needed at the Fort. But here I am down in Georgia – what am I gonna do? But every time I come up for a visit – I have family in New York, I drop by.

Rasa: Okay, great. Well, thank you very much. I'm going to end the interview now.

END OF INTERVIEW