

**Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS  
Oral History Interview with Al Zwiazek,  
52<sup>nd</sup> Coast Artillery (Railway) 1937-39  
Interviewed by Elaine Harmon, NPS  
July 11, 1981  
Transcribed by JoAnn Carlson, NPS Volunteer, 2006**





Al and Marge Zwiazek, 2003

**EH**

Today is July 11, 1981. I'm Elaine Harmon representing the Sandy Hook Museum. I'm a Park Technician. I just got into a conversation with veteran Albin E. Zwiazek about the subject of minorities, women, and the sort of philosophies of years ago. And I wonder if he could record for us some of the very interesting remarks that he's been telling me about. I'd like to have him first introduce himself: tell us the years he was here; what was his unit, just to refresh our memories.

**AZ**

My name is Albin E. Zwiazek. I came here in February of 1937. I was assigned to Battery C, 52<sup>nd</sup> Coast Artillery Railway. I left here near the end of 1939 when I was transferred to Governor's Island. I think I can tell Elaine a few things about what took place here in those days, I think. You mentioned minorities. I happen to have a Battery Commander in 1939 whose name was Walter H. Carlisle, and I understand he was a full-blooded Cherokee Indian. A very dignified gentleman, tall, erect, very dark skinned, black hair, very stately looking, if you can call it that. We also had another Indian, earlier, by the name of Charles Faulkner. He was a corporal at the time, a short man. But, he also had dark skin and brown hair. And I would say the majority of the people were of Slavic background, German, Irish, Spanish. And at the time there were no blacks at Fort Hancock, not to my knowledge. I don't recall ever seeing a black soldier at the Fort. Of course, they also had Civilian Conservation Corps here at the time. But I don't recall any black C.C.C. people also. They were in separate outfits too. And I don't think they had blacks here, not during my period.

**EH**

Did you say that there was a predominant Irish aspect of the post?

**AZ**

I would say the hierarchy was White-Anglo Saxon Protestant and maybe Catholic-Irish in the upper ranks from the commanding officer on down. Every now and then you heard an Italian name, or something that sounded Polish. But most of them had names like Fleming or Flaherty.

**EH**

Who was the Commanding Officer?

**AZ**

Well, I had three during my period here. The first one in 1937 was Col. Roy B. Magruder, who was a member of the 7<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery. I was in the 52<sup>nd</sup> but the Commanding Officer always came from the 7<sup>th</sup>, the Commanding Officer of the Post. He left to assume the duties of Recruiting Officer at 39 Whitehall Street in New York. And he was replaced by Col. Fulton Cusy Gardner. That was 'round 1938. Col. Gardner was promoted to Brigadier General and transferred. He was replaced by another Colonel whose name was Forrest E. Williford. Of course, they were all in the 7<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery when they were here. I would say, if I may, Col. Williford was most military looking. Col. Gardner was next, and Col. Magruder looked like he was a little out of shape. He had quite a belly, and he was very tall. Sort of less impressive. I thought that's the way all Colonels looked. But I learned later that it wasn't so. Just because a person was older didn't mean he had to look not in good physical condition. Of course, some women lived here also. But I didn't have too much contact with them. Most of them were officers' wives, officers' children, and non-commissioned officers' wives and children. And some employees, like domestics, worked in the Officers' Quarters. I can think of one lady who worked in the PX (Post Exchange) who was married to Sgt. Gledhel from my battery. She was a middle-aged lady at the time. She worked in the PX. There were several other ladies there but I didn't know who they were. I don't know if they came in from town or if they were non-commissioned officers' wives. And we had some social activities here occasionally. People got together and put on shows at the old YMCA building. They had dances there where women came from Union Beach, Keansburg, Atlantic Highlands...

**EH**

In bus loads? Is that it?

**AZ**

I don't remember the busses. A lot of them were brought over in cars. But I'm not sure about the busses. Probably some of them came in busses. There weren't that many. There were only a few. Not many women came. It wasn't like during the War when we had just loads and loads of women who wanted to come to make the soldiers forget about the War or something. I'd say maybe about 10, 12 girls came to

a dance, maybe a few more. But I remember some of the names of some of these young ladies. And we had one very prominent young lady who was very active in social activities here like putting on shows, singing in shows. And her name was Thelma Duze. Her father was Sgt. Duze who was the Post Tailor. He lived right out here past Building 74 in a little house there. I remember her well because she was visible. I remember she sang a song called "Shortnin' Bread" on the stage. I don't know if she was a top singer or not. But it sounded good to me because we were starving for entertainment. If you want to know a little bit about the Indians ...

**EH**

... Getting back to the American Indians ..

**AZ**

I can only recall two. They were both very serious looking people. And they seemed to be very serious in everything they did. They didn't go very much for fun or kidding around. Plus the Battery Commander never talked to us. That was the common practice in those days. He was a very strict looking officer, but I don't think he was any more strict than any of the others. It just appeared that way, real solemn. And Faulkner was a Corporal. I think he thought he was a Major General. He was 100% GI, very duty bound. But he wasn't a bad person. I don't think he ever looked to get anyone in trouble or anything like that. (Faulkner was) very straight and wanted to do his job. Most of the soldiers in those days were trying to be military. They tried to do their job right because they went in voluntarily and I think they went in because they wanted to be soldiers. There weren't too many who were delinquents. The percentage was very small. For all the men we had here, there weren't that many people in the Guardhouse. We had infractions, for which you had to go to the Guardhouse, that were non-existent in civilian life. If you came to work late, in civilian life, nothing happened. But if you came late to work here, you were in trouble in the Army. So, people think the boys were bad.

**EH**

Were there any jokes about American Indian people? Was there any so-called ethnic jokes in those days?

**AZ**

I'll tell you something that occurred with Captain Carlisle. In 1938, we went to Delaware on the maneuvers and it was the duty of the Battery Commander to climb aboard the barrel of the gun, to sight the gun, to set it up. I think they shoot the sun that way first. That's what they called shooting the sun, to get this cannon calibrated. And he was up there because it was his job and there was a Reserve Officer there by the name of Lieutenant Preslock. He was sitting on the ground and he looked up at Captain Carlisle who was up on the barrel of the gun with his back to us and Lieutenant Preslock. And Lieutenant Preslock shouted, "Say Chief, do you see any Indians out there?" He was talking to an Indian. The Captain just ignored it. I don't know if he realized it or not. The Captain ignored it. He didn't pay any attention to it. He was smart. He didn't make any noise over a thing like that. I thought this

Lieutenant had a lot of nerve. It was a foolish thing to do. I would never do it. Nothing happened.

**EH**

But in general there were no ethnic jokes. Were there at the time?

**AZ**

No. Quite a few people were of Slavic, Russian, and Polish extraction. But I think most of the people who got promotions were Irish.

**EH**

You suspected. You were telling me there was a bit of prejudice as to how high people went up.

**AZ**

There was a little bit of it I think. Maybe not too much. But I noticed, if your section chief was Irish, and you were Irish, you became a Corporal. If you were Polish, and there was a PFC (Private First Class) rating open somewhere along the line, maybe you got it. I got one. But there was some German decent. These are all American born people I'm talking about. They didn't have accents. Except for a couple of gentlemen who were of the Jewish extraction. And they had accents. They came from foreign soil. We had a First Sergeant by the name of Herman Rappaport. He was very soldierly. He was a First Sergeant with maybe, 12 years of service, which was very unusual in those days. He became a First Sergeant early in his career. He had an accent. We had this Mess Sergeant by the name of Morris Sandleburn, who everybody called Sgt. Murphy. He had an accent, a very strong Jewish accent. If you went on KP (Kitchen Patrol) and he wanted you to get a damp cloth to wipe something down he'd say "Get that dempe raeg". "Get that dempe raeg and vipe this". But he was good. Both of these men were good, serious soldiers. They were a credit to the service, and they were respected. I noticed something about Sgt. Sandleburn. He, I think, was proud of his ancestry. And we had a couple of Jewish fellows in the outfit that weren't much for soldiering. And he used to really rip into them when he had a chance as to tell them to shape up, and that he was ashamed of them and all of that. And one of these fellows may come down here one of these days to talk to you about acupuncture.

**EH**

Were there any religious prejudices?

**AZ**

I'm sorry to say this. But religion didn't seem to play a very important role here. Most men here never talked about religion. Most of them didn't go to church or the synagogue. They had a Catholic Church here, with a chapel. And Maj. Sliney was the chaplain. He was a Catholic Priest. And maybe 4, 5, (or) 6 men went to the church in my outfit on Sunday. Many of the men used to go home who lived not far away on Sundays. Maybe they went to church at home on weekends. But I would

say most of them didn't even bother going to church. There was nothing much about religion.

**EH**

Offhand you were saying that probably above all the cultural types, the Jewish were the most, as you put it, needed.

**AZ**

Right. I don't think soldiers paid too much attention to religion. But some of the Jewish boys, I would say, would be needed once and a while. Kidded about their ancestry and what not, and the usual stuff that people do to certain minorities. We didn't have too many Jewish fellows. They were American born people. But, every now and again, someone would throw an ethnic slur at them.

**EH**

Mostly because of their names?

**AZ**

I don't think it was anything serious though. I don't think anyone had any big arguments over anything like that. It was just needling, kidding. You had to get along. There weren't too many fights, things like that. Because you are supposed to operate as a unit. And if you got to dislike people, they dislike you. It wasn't a good position around the place.

**EH**

You said there were virtually no black soldiers here. Where were they? Did you know of them? How were they connected...?

**AZ**

Black soldiers were in separate organizations. If they were on a certain post, they would have their own battalion- their own company. Some of them would have white officers, only the enlisted men would be black. Later on during the War, they had some black officers, who also commanded these black troops. But they always kept the blacks separate from the whites. When I was stationed here at Fort Hancock, I don't think there was a black soldier here. I understand that Fort Riley in Kansas had a lot of black troops. I saw some later in Camp Upton in New York where Joe Lewis was stationed. They brought him up from Fort Riley. I saw some in Fort Custer, Michigan, Fort Meade Maryland, but they were all separated from whites, separate organizations. But I don't recall seeing one black soldier here at Fort Hancock. If he was here, he would have been spotted.

**EH**

How about the whole harbor defense area, the harbor defense region, were there specifically black....?

**AZ**

I was familiar with Forts Totten and Jay and Hamilton and Wadsworth and I don't recall ever seeing a black soldier from any of those places.

**EH**

So you were in the metropolitan area...

**AZ**

I understand there were some in the field artillery at West Point, I'm not sure. They had a field artillery out there and there was a lot of white people there and I think they had some blacks there too.

**EH**

Is that something you heard through common ....?

**AZ**

I heard about the blacks at West Point. But the others, we used to go to New York once in awhile, and I used to recognize soldiers outfits by their regimental insignias and I don't remember seeing a black uniform at Jay, Hamilton, Totten, any of those where you can spot where he comes from. I don't think there were too many around.

**EH**

What was your remark about the best Lieutenant Colonel which was rare that a black soldier had reached that rank?

**AZ**

This was in 1943, I saw this Lieutenant Colonel in Fort Custer, Michigan, I was very impressed by his appearance and military bearing and by the rank that he had achieved. I don't know how long he was in service, but he was really a soldier. He was a Lieutenant Colonel. He was the first black Lieutenant Colonel that I had ever saw in my life. And I was surprised to see this. He commanded black troops and he had a Battalion Commander. But there was not one white person in this outfit. We were next door, and there was not one black person in our outfit. I think President Truman changed this around in 1948. Of course, the troops were segregated, the blacks from the whites, and vice versa during World War II. Overseas they had black truck drivers, black Quartermaster Corps outfits, laundry people, like that. There were no white people in those outfits at all, they were all black. There were white truck drivers, but not in the same outfit. It was like the Red Ball Express, black. They didn't integrate them at all. So, we never mixed with them.

**EH**

What did Red Ball Express refer to?

**AZ**

Red Ball Express was an outfit who ran a lot of trucks to haul supplies to the front in Europe. They operated these trucks, these black fellows. I'm not saying the whites

did it, but they weren't together. I could tell you when we go off, away from Fort Hancock... You were talking about prejudice...I was stationed in England, and these little towns at two or three pubs, you know beer parlors. The MP's (Military Police) to avoid trouble, used to keep the troops segregated so they wouldn't drink in the same pubs. The blacks would drink in one pub, and the whites would drink in another pub. I'm talking about American soldiers. But if you drove by in a Jeep or walked by a pub where you were expected to see blacks - look for blonde girls. That's where all the black soldiers were, where the blonde girls hung out. Where the brunettes hung out, were all the white men. It worked every time. You see a lot of blondes, you see black guys walking out of the pub. They were sort of attracted to the blacks. And the brunettes... I noticed that myself. It was pointed out to me, and I notice it. And I was very surprised to see this. For over the years, I learned that is what happens. Blondes go for blacks. You know, I'm not talking anything about prejudice or rotten. Disliking or liking them. That's the way it was in those days. If you went by a black pub, blondes, black guys (were there). It just was separated. Maybe it was better. There were less fights that way. Guys used to fight over women, arguments.

**EH**

I'm sure. There was a lot of competition.

**AZ**

I'll tell you something. Even when the women were plentiful. I don't want to say anything derogatory about women. But boy, if you didn't make out in England, you never made out.

**EH**

How about getting back to the status of women here at Fort Hancock, as much as you can recall. You said they were pretty much family oriented. Part of the officers' wives type of mentality. You seldom encountered anything.

**AZ**

Enlisted men were not allowed to walk around the Officers' Quarters, except the sentry men around Post No. 2 who walked behind the Officers' Quarters. Occasionally, you would see officers' wives (and) daughters. They didn't talk to you, and you didn't talk to them. So, you just knew them by sight. These two dark haired girls were Capt. Carlisle's daughters. They looked a little bit like him. They were Indian, dark skinned.

**EH**

I even expected there to be a Post Laundress. Where did the laundry go to?

**AZ**

There was no laundry here, not then. It went to Staten Island, to an outfit by the name of Mojecki. That was an outfit who had a contract to do our laundry. We paid a dollar eighty cents a month to have our laundry done. Nothing was done for nothing.



During the War we had a lot of freebies. But not before the War. We paid for everything. So, the laundry went to Staten Island. We changed our bedding on Fridays. We got our laundry back on Fridays. It took a week to have our laundry done. We put on clean sheets and everything for Saturday mornings inspection. Air your mattresses out. I have a picture by the Guardhouse on Friday of our mattresses hanging for the quarters of Building 74. Then you went to the Post Tailor for your other stuff, your slacks and blouses and what not. Sgt. Duze was the head of that. He was the Post Tailor. And of course, you paid him too. You had to have three haircuts a month. These were all men, no women around. Maybe women did the laundry in Staten Island. I don't know who worked in that company. There were no laundresses here.

**EH**

You even mentioned that in the hospital ... This was quite a revelation... that there were no nurses.

**AZ**

There were no nurses in the Station Hospital at Fort Hancock during my period of service here.

**EH**

You said they were ordinary soldiers.

**AZ**

They had men in the medics. They were called orderlies. I'm sure they didn't have much training. Maybe they knew how to put a bandage on and what not. And they had a doctor there. They had an older doctor, a Lt. Col. Winter, who was the Commanding Officer of that Hospital. Then they had some Major, who was rotten. He's a dentist. He pulled teeth. He pulled three of mine. He called the Colonel in and said, "I want this man discharged. He doesn't have enough teeth". I could have been saved by some competent dentist. I think he was just an old man, who was incompetent, behind times. He had a racket here and didn't feel like working. As far as I am concerned, he was no good. If I could remember his name, I'd tell you his name, because I hate him.

**EH**

So there were really no women involved in the medical division here, really.

**AZ**

No. In those days, nurses were sort of like really insignificant. Nobody saluted them. They called them "Miss". I moved to Fort Jay, and that's where I first ran into Army Nurses. They didn't call them Lieutenant, they called them a "Miss". Some of them were civilian. They were hired by the Army. I remember Miss Leon. I was in the hospital, and here assisting me was this young lady by the name of Miss Leon. I understand she was a girlfriend of one of the Generals there. She was a civilian employee. She was a nurse. Of course, there were others there, Miss Corning and

Miss Summers. Miss Summers later got the Silver Star at Corregidor. Fort Hancock had no nurses when I was here. There were two men. A fellow by the name of Kirpatch (spelling?) took care of me here, when I had poison ivy. I saw him in England, some years later. He looked like a pauper or something a PFC

**(break in the tape)**

I don't think these orderlies, these enlisted men, had much training. But they were ordered by doctors and directed by the doctor. Like when I was treated by this PFC, the doctor told him what to do. And he just did what the doctor said. (They did) simple procedures like that. Like if you are ready to faint or something, the doctor will say "Watch it, he's going to faint". And this fellow would be right there to grab you. I don't think they were trained to much. We had several names for these fellows, like "pill-rollers", "shanker mechanics" and stuff like that. But they were nice fellows. They tried to do their jobs. We just didn't rate nurses here. They didn't do any major surgery or anything like that here. They used to send people up to Fort Jay. Like something happened to this Captain Carlisle's daughter. I understand the Coast Guard cutter sped to Fort Jay from here to take care of her. They couldn't treat her here.

**EH**

What was the general point of view towards women, that their place was in the home, stemming from the 30's and 40's as you remember it?

**AZ**

In those days, we just never thought anything about women and careers or anything. It was just something the men here never dwelled on. All we thought about is whether she was a good looking girl. What else is new?

**EH**

Was there any feeling like they were inferior in intelligence? Was it mostly the glamour types, like Lana Turner, and the sort of movie idol tree?

**AZ**

Most of the fellows were young, like 18, 19, 20. I think a lot of them admired these stars, and probably carried pictures of them in their wallets of them. But I don't recall anybody saying anything about women being inferior to men, or stupid, or anything like that. I don't recall any of that. I don't think any of us were even aware of anything of that. We weren't even thinking about things like that.

**EH**

And yet, from what I hear, there were pin-up calendars in everyone's locker. The standard thing was the body. In fact, I even have newspapers in the Museum, even from the 60's that every month had a pin-up.

**AZ**

To be honest with you, I don't recall one pin-up picture in any barracks here. During the War I saw it in tents, in little shacks, whatever... Service Clubs. But, here in Fort Hancock, I do not recall seeing a picture on the wall anywhere, of girls. They were kind of strict about it. But, during the War, they became loose, like gave guys a break. But, before the War, you couldn't have a string on the floor. It was strictly GI (Government Issue). I don't think they would have allowed it. I don't recall any of that. But I saw a lot of it during the War. But not at Fort Hancock before the War.

**EH**

So it was pretty tight-laced here.

**AZ**

Yeah. You know, guys like girls and all. But some went out with them, some didn't, some were shy, some weren't shy, some had money, some didn't. But nobody ever said anything about women being dumb or not measuring up. I don't recall any of that kind of stuff. I hear it a lot now. We didn't hear it then. I never thought that way. I didn't think women were inferior or stupid. Now I'm aware of these things because I hear people talking about it. I still don't feel they're inferior, I never will. But I notice now it's out in the open. People talk about it. In those days a guy just wanted to know if she's good looking.

**EH**

Were there blind dates and stuff like that arranged? Or odd social things.

**AZ**

Once in awhile, somebody would fix a fellow up with his sister, his sister's girl friend, or something like that. That would happen. I didn't meet girls that way. I met my wife that way, later. I did meet them on my own. In 1939, I started going out with girls. And I was in the Army over two years already. That was because the Army sent me to South Amboy. That was a grateful day, when they sent me there. That started my career. I really can't dwell too much on women because we didn't have to much to talk about.

**EH**

And the awareness was different. And the whole mentality was entirely different.

**AZ**

It just occurred to us that women are striving to do what we do and what not. We never thought about things like that. We didn't think about women wanting to come into the Army or being WACs. WACs were unheard of then. The first time I saw WAC was in 1942. I was amazed to see women in uniform, soldiers. You know the kind you can talk to, enlisted personnel. But before that, we never paid attention to that. There wasn't too much contact with women because most of us were poor, didn't have money. Some fellows would keep all their money, went out more frequently. You know, you got twenty dollars and seventy five cents. It cost you about ten, twelve bucks a month for your expenses to a soldier. So you didn't have

much left. Many a time I thought maybe I could ask some girl for a date. But why ask her if I can't take her anywhere. I couldn't do anything. I can't take her to a movie. I need the money. It's embarrassing so you didn't do it. So a lot of us didn't have too much contact. Maybe some fellows who went home saw some people. Like I said, in 1939, I met some people up in South Amboy and went out a few times. I was making more money then. I was a PFC and an expert gunner. I was making big dough, like thirty four seventy five a month. But as far as women are concerned, nobody really thought about them as competitors. We just thought about them as the opposite sex, are they good looking, and things like that.

**EH**

What if women were drafted back then? Could you imagine that, ever? We are getting closer to incorporating more and more female personnel into the military ranks.

**AZ**

I can tell you what I think would have happened. There were a few pregnancies here. There would have been a lot more if women were drafted, because that's inevitable. It just happens that way. I personally don't think women should be mixed in with men in organizations like that. Not because I think women can't handle it. It makes it too intimate a thing.

**EH**

What about out on the battlefield, though? Women in combat, and doing the very tough things, that the famous classic soldiers ...

**AZ**

I personally would not want to see that. Because it would bother me to see a woman wounded or dying. It would bother me very much. It would probably decrease my capabilities as a soldier.

**EH**

It's a very good point. Because someone else who is in the upper ranks of the reserves came in one day. He said he doubts it would ever happen because, that women would be drafted, simply because the subconscious, the immediate response of men is to protect women. And if surrounding them, these women are being shot. And they come to their aid, and then they endanger their own troops by that. This would create many complications that people wouldn't even foresee what would happen. It's a very good point though.

**AZ**

That's right. I spent eight and a half years in the Army, and all of World War II. And I know how I would feel. I'm talking for myself. That would bother me. I would probably lose my capabilities.

**EH**

That's the traditional person. But I wonder if the modern man would except it and he would overlook ...

**AZ**

Maybe some of ones that are growing up now, because they are used to the equality bit. I consider women equal to men. But as far as doing the same jobs together, maybe they are more acclimated to that kind of stuff. During World War II, I certainly would not want to see a woman fighting along side of me and probably getting killed there, or wounded. It would bother me. If she was pregnant, this happens, she'd be killed, and the child would be killed too. That would be like a double thing, a double jeopardy.

**EH**

In fact, the Army Reserve man remarked to me, that a secondary consideration, not just the subconscious protectiveness of men toward women, (which is) inborn, engrained, or even learned behavior. But also the fact you would have to have latrines for women out in the trenches or whatever. The third thing he mentioned was physical capabilities. Could women carry heavy packs, gears, and equipment? Could they really be trained to that degree of physical ability?

**AZ**

You brought up latrines. When you go into a forward area, everything is primitive. They had these straddle trenches. There's no privacy at all. You have to expose yourself to anybody that's around. I don't think that's right. Maybe some women don't care, or some men don't care. But I feel there should be a little barrier there. If you have a little modesty, you can't do it there.

**EH**

I personally wonder, if I myself, should want to be drafted. If presented with the necessity and the requirement that I protect my country, and fight for my country, would I do it? Would I be willing to go? I question that myself.

**AZ**

If there was an all women Army on both sides, fine. But, it won't be that way.

**EH**

But look at other cultures and other nations, like Israel, for example. Its just one out of many where so much of the Army is made up of women. I wonder if we would ever arrive at that, if we would see into the future.

**AZ**

I was reading a report, written by some General from Europe, an American General. I think he said nine percent of the women in his command are always pregnant. Always, nine percent pregnant. You know that's a lot of people. Half of them are unmarried. It causes a lot of trouble, I think. In addition to the stuff of not wanting to see them hurt.

**EH**

There is so many factors involved. It's a very complicated subject. When I think about women in the military, I'm really not sure myself how I feel about that. It's a very complicated question.

**AZ**

During the War, World War II, they came out with the WACs. I think, maybe I'm wrong, I think they created jobs, these girls. There were jobs that were being done, that were never done before. There were no such thing like some of these jobs, all kinds of secretaries. They didn't need a lot of that stuff, I think. If a woman replaces a man as a truck driver, she can't be in his outfit. She needs a new outfit at that time. There weren't many truck drivers. They worked in offices and what not. I don't know if this was all necessary. But they have women there, WACs. Of course there was a Missouri outfit, that became part of the Woman Army Corps. Now I understand they are right in the Army. And I went to West Point one day, and I saw a plebe, with a nice rounded uniform. Next thing I thought. "That's a girl". It wasn't flat like a guy's uniform.

**END OF INTERVIEW**