

Interview of Rich Lowery

Soldier at Fort Slocum 1959-1961, surface-to-air missile battery.

Produced primarily by the staff of Tetra Tech EC, Inc., working under contract to the US Army Corps of Engineers, and material produced by the New Rochelle City Historian and members of an informal history and advocacy group, the Fort Slocum Alumni and Friends

Date of Interview: October 23, 2007

Holding Institution: New Rochelle Public Library
Digital Publisher: New Rochelle Public Library

Title: Rich Lowery trscpt
Notes: Transcribed by Paula Brokaw
Date of Original: November 5, 5007

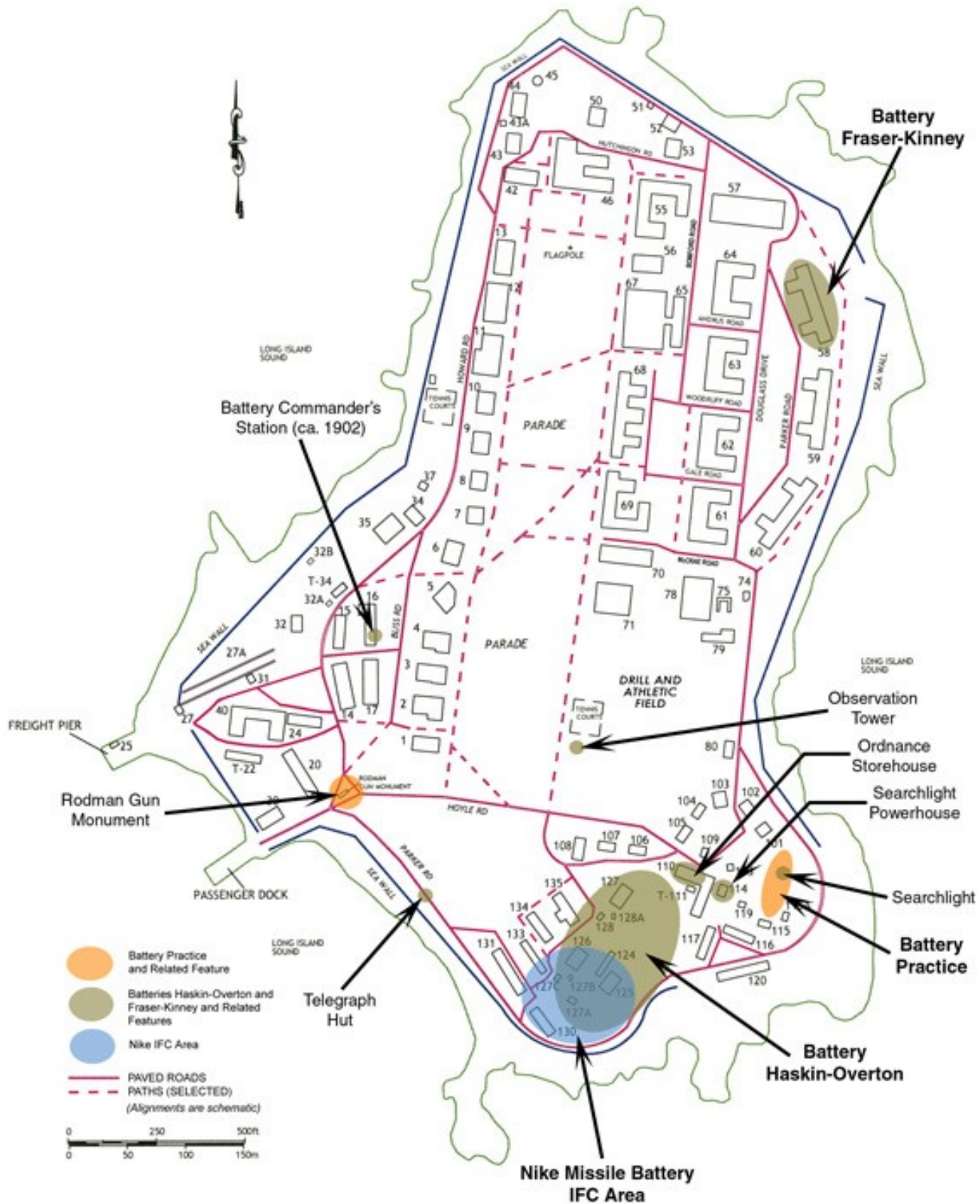
“In a 2007 interview, Rich Lowery, who served as a radar operator in the Sighting Station from 1959 to 1961, described daily life at the battery. Most of the work was routine: daily radar adjustment, constant tracking of local commercial and military air traffic, regular shifts on guard duty and administrative tasks, studying, waiting and watching. There were drills too, of course, and on a couple of occasions, there was the excitement of a real alert when an unknown aircraft flew into the battery’s patrol sector.

Mr. Lowery remembers the pride he and his fellow crewmen felt in their work. It was the Cold War, and they ‘were a... combat-ready outfit.’ ”

The Army’s Century on Davids Island
Fort Slocum, New Rochelle, NY
Westchester County Archives and the Westchester Historical Society

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**Fortifications, Defense Works, and Related Elements
At Fort Slocum, Davids Island, 1891-1961**

*Approximate locations. Base map shows Davids Island circa 1965.
Some elements had been partially or wholly removed by this date.*

MR. JACOBY: ...Tetra Tech E.C., and I am speaking to day with Rich Lowery at his home in Midland, North Carolina, on October 23, 2007. This interview is part of a program sponsored by the United States Army Corps of Engineers and the New Rochelle Public Library, to collect oral histories about the experiences and memories of people who are associated with the US Army Post, Fort Slocum, located on David's Island in New Rochelle, New York.

Good afternoon, Rich. First of all, would you tell me how you're associated with Fort Slocum?

MR. LOWERY: After getting out of basic training in April of '59, I was assigned to the Nike Air Defense Battery on Fort Slocum.

MR. JACOBY: What was your rank?

MR. LOWERY: Upon arrival I was Private.

MR. JACOBY: And what were your general duties?

MR. LOWERY: I was a radar operator for the Nike system, operating the target track radar, or as we call it TTR.

MR. JACOBY: Were you trained at Fort Slocum in this?

MR. LOWERY: It was all OJT, on the job training.

MR. JACOBY: And describe for me an average day in your assignment.

MR. LOWERY: We would arrive probably at about 5 in the morning, about 5:30 in the morning. We would have a formation out in front of the barracks. We would do essentially a head count. We would be read any kind of pertinent information that we needed for that day, any kind of special assignments or anything that might be going on that we needed to be aware of. So, just a general announcement, usually lasted no more than a few minutes. And then we would go for breakfast at the mess hall.

Coming back we would go up and -- to our assigned work area which we called "up on the hill" because it was up on that bluff, kind of a bluff area overlooking the southeastern part of the island. So we would go up there and we would begin working on that Nike system, just to make sure that it was -- each day, that it was in tune, that it was, you know, the accuracies were checked for all the radars. Computers were checked. We would go and first thing we would do would be to go out to the antennas and make sure they were level. They had little bubble levels on each of the legs of the antenna and we would go out there and check, raise up a little lid and look down at the level, and if the level was off we would have a big wrench that we would turn a screw and it would raise or lower the leg of the antenna, and you'd watch the bubble and turn it to make sure that the bubble then became in the very center.

So the very first thing we'd do is make sure that the antennas were physically level, so that all other checks and measurements from that point on would be predicated on the antenna being at a good starting point. And we would also check for what was called the "azimuth" or the horizontal direction of the antenna. There was way out in Long Island Sound, way up in sort of the northeastern part of Long Island Sound, a good distance away was a lighthouse. And on top of that lighthouse was a lightning rod. And what we would do would be to take a telescope that was about two or three feet long, and there were some clamps on the side of the antenna, and we would clamp that telescope to the antenna, and we would insert a cable into the power box of the antenna, and you had a manual knob that you could turn, and you could physically turn that antenna around.

So, what we would do would be to go up and look through that telescope and point it to that lighthouse. And not just to the lighthouse, but to the lightning rod on the very top of the lighthouse, and we set the cross-hairs of that telescope on that lightning rod. And that point had been surveyed at some point and was to be a known, accurate azimuth.

So what we would do when we got that antenna turned where that telescope was dead on that tip of that lightning rod, we would go down and look at the dials on the base of the antenna, and see if read the right azimuth. If it did not there was a little allen wrench adjustment that you could do to physically turn that dial and force it to read the azimuth that it was supposed to be reading.

MR. JACOBY: This was done everyday?

MR. LOWERY: This was done everyday. That way the antenna, you knew, was level, was accurate in an azimuth plane, or horizontal plane. Once we were satisfied that all of that was accurate, and the same thing would be done on the missile track radar too, because there was two radars involved there. And identical checks would be done on both of them. We would assure that the azimuth was exactly the way it was supposed to be.

MR. JACOBY: Tell me the purpose of the Nike base.

MR. LOWERY: The Nike base was one of a number of air defense batteries around the New York Metro area that was in place at probably the height of the Cold War for any kind of aircraft threats that they thought might come from the Soviet Union or elsewhere. So there were batteries all around the New York area, all out on Long Island, over into New Jersey, on up into Connecticut and they were all strategically placed so that each battery would have what was known as a sector of fire, that it was basically responsible for.

And our sector of fire was kind of sprayed out on the northern portion of Long Island Sound. It was also placed there because if you ever had to fire the booster that was a part of the missile would be jettisoned. So they had to always keep in mind, if there was a firing, where would that booster fall? They didn't want it to fall into any kind of populated areas. So, in our case it would have fallen basically into Long Island Sound. So, there were considerations, I don't know all of them, but there were considerations about where each sector of fire was assigned to each battery.

MR. JACOBY: How big was the detachment?

MR. LOWERY: We had probably -- we probably had maybe 150 men, overall, in both areas. Our battery was split, physically split by Long Island Sound, in that our fire patrol area was on the southeastern portion of Slocum, and the launching area where the missiles were actually contained, was on the northern tip of Hart Island. So, combined, the personnel at Hart Island and on Slocum probably was about 150.

MR. JACOBY: And which part were you in?

MR. LOWERY: I was in the fire patrol section of -- that was located on Slocum.

MR. JACOBY: Who was the commanding officer, do you remember his name?

MR. LOWERY: When I arrived there was -- the commanding officer was a Captain by the name of Captain Wisnack (phonetic). I'm not sure of first names because the military, you generally deal with last names only. So, Captain Wisnack was the battery commander. And then over the course of time we went through several changes. At one point we had a Lieutenant Ledbetter that was our battery commander. And at another point we had another Captain, I think he was -- if I'm pronouncing it right, I think it was a French sounding name, Captain Guy Deshadines (phonetic).

MR. JACOBY: 150 men, how many were officers at any one time?

MR. LOWERY: Officer complement was probably -- probably maybe 10. I'll guess at maybe 10. We had a battery commander, we had an executive officer, then we had -- we had some people that were technical people that were officers also. But most of those were known as warrant officers. They weren't true commissioned officers, they were officers that were, I guess the rank of officer was conveyed upon them because of their technical expertise in certain areas. So, we had some maintenance people and technicians that were warrant officers because of their expertise.

MR. JACOBY: And the number of sergeants?

MR. LOWERY: Sergeants, we probably had -- probably on our side of the battery, on the Slocum contingent was probably about five or six. Or maybe more, maybe eight or 10, I'll say. We had some maintenance people that were master sergeants. We had a battery -- a first sergeant -- our battery first sergeant was a master sergeant. And we had several master sergeants that were technical maintenance people.

MR. JACOBY: You said that you worked on the radar.

MR. LOWERY: Right.

MR. JACOBY: How many other men worked on the radar?

MR. LOWERY: A crew that would probably consist of maybe eight or nine men. And of those eight or nine, maybe four of them would be radar operators. And the rest might be computer people. So I would say maybe four or five would be the ones that would work on the radar themselves.

MR. JACOBY: Now, did you have a single assignment, or could you rotate through several different tasks?

MR. LOWERY: No, it was pretty much a, you know, a single task, because you had -- you had your particular spot on the duty crew, and that was -- that was pretty much the part that you worked on exclusively. You wouldn't change, for example, from a radar operator to a computer operator. Because they were kind of specialized areas and you really couldn't switch from one to the other.

MR. JACOBY: But within the radar section you could -- you said there were four radars in any one --

MR. LOWERY: Yeah, there would be about four or five people that would be radar operators. And you could -- they were somewhat interchangeable. So, you could, if you worked on a target track radar, or what they call a TTR, you might work on the MTR, which would be the missile track radar. So, they were very similar. One of them just simply tracked the missile and one of them tracked the target plane.

MR. JACOBY: Was the post manned 24 hours a day?

MR. LOWERY: It was. It was. There was -- we would have like three crews. One of the crews would be physically there all the time, 24 hours a day. You might have another crew that might be on standby that would not actually be physically up at their station, but might be still on the grounds, in the barracks or on the island. And then you'd have another crew that would be completely off. They might have left the island on pass or something.

MR. JACOBY: So, basically three shifts through each day?

MR. LOWERY: Three shifts, yeah.

MR. JACOBY: Were there any alerts while you were there?

MR. LOWERY: We had -- we had drill alerts all the time. There would be periodic drill alerts where you'd go through a simulated shoot status. But there were occasions -- there were two occasions that I remember when we had actual alerts that came down from the higher command. One was when there was some northern lights activity up over Canada and they weren't sure exactly what they were, so they -- the North American Air Defense Command issued orders to bring some batteries up to alert status, ours being one of them. Lasted for maybe a couple of hours. And it was determined to simply be an electrical disturbance, atmospheric disturbance that they just couldn't identify. So, to be on the safe side they went ahead and brought their batteries up to alert status.

MR. JACOBY: Do you remember being scared or anxious at that time?

MR. LOWERY: I remember we all kind of -- you know, when the siren went off and then we found -- we went up and, you know, went through our procedures. We eventually heard what the circumstances were that brought us up to alert status, so we were probably a little bit anxious. And one of the things I think that did kind of make us a little more anxious, was that under normal drill circumstances, whenever we'd go through our drills and practices, there was a connection to the missiles themselves called a booster squib. And that was a connection that actually was inserted in the tail of the booster that actually ignited the booster material to make the missile take off.

Well, in normal drills, they would -- everybody would report in, their duty station would report in that this station is ready for action. Then another station would be ready for action. And we would get on -- over the radio we would get a notice that the missile launch area was ready for action. And usually in drills they would always say that, you know, missile launch ready for action. And they would always include the statement, "booster squibs have not been connected." And that was to make sure that, you know, they didn't have them inadvertently done for any kind of accident.

Well, on this particular occasion, when everybody reported in their duty station ready for action, they mentioned about booster squibs had been connected. So when we heard that, we did get a little nervous, because, you know, that had never been done before. And that was an indication that they meant business. When they connected the booster squibs that was an indication that, hey, we're ready to go.

MR. JACOBY: And at what point was the alert called off?

MR. LOWERY: I would say we remained on alert maybe 30 minutes, maybe 45 minutes, as best I can recall. And then there was a stand down. We would get orders that, you know, we could stand down from A-status.

MR. JACOBY: Was it strictly business, or did the officers go around to the enlisted men trying to calm you down or at least talk to you?

MR. LOWERY: No, there was none of that. Everybody was busy doing whatever their job was, and there was no -- no indication of, you know, any kind of undue anxiety. Everybody was just simply a little on edge, that's all. But no, no widespread anxiety or anything like that.

MR. JACOBY: You mentioned a second alert.

MR. LOWERY: The second alert, as best I can remember it, was that there was supposedly, and I don't know who actually would have done this, but there was supposedly some sightings of possible submarines

in Long Island Sound. And being at the height of the Cold War, and everybody knew that Soviet and US submarines shadowed each other and probed each other and so forth. So, this one alert was because there supposedly had been some submarine sightings in Long Island Sound. So, we also got notification from our battalion to go on alert in that occasion also.

MR. JACOBY: What were the dates that you were at Fort Slocum?

MR. LOWERY: I was there from around May of 1959 till approximately August, I would say, of 1961.

MR. JACOBY: A little over two years.

MR. LOWERY: Right.

MR. JACOBY: When and where did you enlist?

MR. LOWERY: I enlisted in Rock Hill, South Carolina, that's a little town about 30 miles south of Charlotte.

MR. JACOBY: And what was your first assignment?

MR. LOWERY: First assignment was at Fort Slocum. Well, first assignment was a Fort Jackson for the basic training. I was there for about 10 weeks or so for the basic training at Fort Jackson.

MR. JACOBY: Had you ever heard of Fort Slocum before?

MR. LOWERY: I had not.

MR. JACOBY: Do you remember your first impression on seeing it?

MR. LOWERY: Well, my first impression was that it was nothing like Fort Jackson. Fort Jackson had the old World War II style, kind of yellowish wooden barracks buildings. It just kind of had that atmosphere of a World War II base. But Slocum seemed just worlds apart from that. Slocum did have that appearance though, just a nice university campus or college campus, old buildings, nice grounds. So, I was impressed at how un-military like it looked.

MR. JACOBY: Was there much association between the Nike detachment or the permanent party or any other force at Fort Slocum?

MR. LOWERY: There was very little interaction. Being down on that one corner of the island and the nature of our mission, you might say, made it such that we didn't mingle too much, or have much contact with the folks at the rest of the island. We did use their mess hall. And we did take advantage of things like the Service Club and the NCO Club, and some of the activities of the island. But as far as mingling, or having much to do with the others, we just really didn't have it because of the nature of our -- we were physically isolated from the rest of the island. We were down on just one corner of the island. So, from a physical standpoint, we didn't have much -- we had a good long ways to walk to get to the mess hall. And --

MR. JACOBY: Was the Nike post fenced off from the rest of the island?

MR. LOWERY: It was. It did have a fence around it. It did have guards posted 24 hours a day. So from that aspect of it it was what we always considered, or what was termed to kind of be a line outfit, that was kind of determined to be different from the schools and things that were going on at the rest of the island. We were -- we were more or less -- I want to say we were kind of a combat-ready type outfit, just by the very nature of the battery.

MR. JACOBY: And that really set you apart from the --

MR. LOWERY: It did. And I'll have to say it might have been a little bit of a pride issue, too. You know, we might have thought of ourselves as a little more than just information school students or that sort of thing, because, you know, it was just a little -- kind of a little ego trip, too, I'm sure.

MR. JACOBY: Describe your quarters?

MR. LOWERY: We stayed -- our barracks was an old World War II WAC barracks that was right down on the edge of the island. We were separated from the seawall by just a road. There was a road that went around the perimeter of the island. Our barracks was right at the edge of that road. Then you could go across the road and across the seawall and you were down at Long Island Sound. People used to go down there and fish sometimes. The barracks were very old. They were not very substantial buildings, because I guess being built back in the World War II area they just -- they were not likely buildings on the rest of the island. Not brick buildings or anything, frame buildings.

MR. JACOBY: How were they heated?

MR. LOWERY: We had a coal fired furnace in a room that was right there near the front of the barracks that was simply known as the furnace room. And it was heated by radiators. It might have been steam I guess -- yeah, probably steam radiators. And whoever was on the guard duty in the wintertime, it was their responsibility to make sure that the coal was always put in that heater. And there were times when somebody might forget to put that coal in there and the barracks would get pretty chilly.

MR. JACOBY: Everybody rotated through some form of guard duty?

MR. LOWERY: They did, yeah.

MR. JACOBY: Describe guard duty.

MR. LOWERY: Guard duty, you were issued a weapon. It was a little 30-caliber M-1 carbine rifle. Kind of a short version of the regular M-1. And I think you were given a clip of live ammunition, and you simply walked the perimeter of that area. It was fenced in, like I say, it had a cyclone type fence enclosure with the barbed wire on top, and you would just simply make the rounds. Your tours of duty on that, I think were like two hours on, and four hours off, or some such schedule. So, you'd go out there for two hours and then you'd be off for four hours, and you might have to go back on and do it for two more hours. So, sometimes you'd be out there, you know, in the wee hours of the morning.

MR. JACOBY: How many guards would there be at any one time?

MR. LOWERY: Just one. Just one. But we would also have -- we would also have some people that might be on duty that might actually be working during the night hours too.

MR. JACOBY: Would there be passwords given out a day or --

MR. LOWERY: No.

MR. JACOBY: -- when someone approached you, what would your -- what did you have to do at that point?

MR. LOWERY: I guess you would -- you would certainly challenge them. If they approached they would be outside the gate. So if they were outside the gate you really didn't have probably much of a concern. I suppose that if they -- if they actually tried to come in the gate, which would have been locked, I guess you could have had a confrontation at that point. And like I say, we did have a weapon and we did have live ammunition. So, I guess if pushed come to shove, you could probably challenge somebody. And of course, the island had an MP contingent there too. So, you know, we could have -- if you got into any kind of an awkward situation before you really did anything drastic, you could alert the MP contingent there too, and then they would certainly show up.

MR. JACOBY: Was the Nike post lit up at night? How bright was the area?

MR. LOWERY: That wasn't lit up. You know, it didn't have any unusual lighting or anything. I think there was a light pole maybe out by the gate. No unusual lighting at all.

MR. JACOBY: You were near the beach, at the south end of the island.

MR. LOWERY: Right. We were separated from the -- actually it was more rocks than it was beach. But we were separated from the water basically by just a road and the seawall.

MR. JACOBY: Did you patrol the shoreline as well?

MR. LOWERY: No, this was only within our fenced area. And I guess theoretically the MPs would patrol the island per se.

MR. JACOBY: Now, you mentioned drills that dealt with the actual equipment, the radar, etc., the missiles. What kind of training did you periodically do with -- for rifle firing? Or marching, etc.?

MR. LOWERY: We would -- every year we would go down to Fort Tilden, down on the lower end of Long Island, out beyond Jones Beach, in that area, south end of Long Island. And we would go down there every year for the annual qualifying with the weapon. In other words, everybody had to go once a year to re-qualify, you know, that you could fire, you know, and fire effectively and so forth and so on. So, we would go down there once a year and stay two or three days and shoot at targets, you know, and re-qualify them for the weapon.

MR. JACOBY: What about more physical training? Calisthenics, things like that?

MR. LOWERY: We would do that. We would very often, not everyday, but maybe once every other day, we would, as a part of our morning routine, we would maybe go out on a run, and we would run maybe the entire perimeter of the island. So we did have some physical activity there.

MR. JACOBY: There were some sports facilities on the island, tennis courts, baseball field. Did you make use of that at all?

MR. LOWERY: We did. We had a softball team, and some of the permanent party people on the island also had softball teams, and we would play them in softball games. In fact, I think it was about 1960 or so, we played and we won the post championship for softball. So we all had a big beer party out in the yard after that. So...

MR. JACOBY: You mentioned beer, how easy was it to get alcohol?

MR. LOWERY: You could go up to the NCO Club and of course, they had full facilities there. You could even get food there. You could get -- a lot of times we would go there and get snacks or hamburgers, or things, and they had a bar that, you know, you could go and have a beer if you wanted to. So, there was those facilities there. I don't recall -- I don't recall how people would deal with having it in the barracks. I don't recall anybody actually having beer and that sort of thing in the barracks, but I'm sure, you know, some people might, probably did. Because I know that when we had our beer party after that softball game, we had that down in our battery area. So we must have brought it back from the service club or something to have it there.

MR. JACOBY: Did any of the officers participate in your party?

MR. LOWERY: They did. In fact, we had some officers that was on the ball team. So, to that extent, I guess there was kind of violation of the no-fraternization rule that the Army has about officers co-mingling and fraternizing with enlisted men. We had that all the time. We had a very good rapport with our officers and some of them were -- turned out to be very good softball players.

MR. JACOBY: Did you have to report to any officers outside of the Nike post?

MR. LOWERY: We did. We were one battery out of four, I think, that made up the battalion. We were in the first missile battalion, and I think the headquarters for that was at Fort Totten, Long Island, which was just across -- basically across Long Island Sound from Slocum. It was right out there near Bayside Queens. So, they were kind of the headquarters of our battalion. And I'm not sure exactly which batteries comprised our battalion, but I do know that the one in White Plains, New York was in ours, and we were in it.

And there might have been one or two out on Long Island, like Hicksville, or Amityville, they might have been in it too. But there was four batteries in the battalion, and the battalion headquarters was in Fort Totten. So, we would receive -- we would sometimes be subject to inspection by that battalion. And they would come to Fort Slocum, they would come across on the ferry. I'm not sure what rank they were, but they came in by helicopter.

(END OF SIDE A).

MR. JACOBY: ...battalion commander would have been?

MR. LOWERY: I think the battalion commander might have been a major. I'm not exactly positive, but it was above the rank of captain, I'm almost sure. It could have been a colonel. And you know, I'm not sure whether it was a regular colonel or what they call "full bird" colonel, but it was either major or colonel, I'm sure. Now, one of the aspects of the inspections, kind of a little side story on that, was whenever we were going to have an inspection, and people from battalion who would be coming, we would obviously, go

through, you know, a little exercise --

(Pause in tape)

MR. JACOBY: ...did you have to report to any other facilities of the battalion, or Totten, or Hart Island?

MR. LOWERY: We never -- we would never really go to any of the other facilities, such as Fort Totten. We would -- if there was any kind of inspections or anything, they would basically come to us. And -- because usually, the inspection would be a barracks or that sort of thing, so they would necessarily have to come to us. So I never really went to the other places, until after -- after the battery had been phased out and I got reassigned, then I did go to some of these other places.

MR. JACOBY: The battery, the Nike battery was phased out while you were there?

MR. LOWERY: It was phased out in, I guess around mid summer of 1961, and it was being closed down, so all of those people that still had time to go on their enlistments had to be sent somewhere. So, I got sent out to -- I got assigned to a battery out at Rocky Point Long Island, somewhere out towards Mantauk.

Pretty far out on the island.

But there was a group that was stationed out of Fort Totten over there in Bayside, Queens, that was -- there was a special outfit, kind of a public relations outfit, that took a missile display around to schools, county fairs, and that sort of thing. So, I went down there and got interviewed for that and I got assigned to them, because at that point I only had about nine months left to go in my enlistment.

MR. JACOBY: What rank were you at this point?

MR. LOWERY: I was an SP-4, or the equivalent of corporal, Specialist Fourth Class they call it. So I got assigned to -- I got assigned on paper out to this Rocky Point battery, which was a Nike Hercules Battery, that second generation battery, but since I only had about nine months to go, I got assigned at what they called TDY, which was temporary duty, to this display unit out of Fort Totten. And we took the missiles, we had several missiles that we took on trailers. We took some actual physical equipment that was out of one of the batteries. We took it around to schools, county fairs, and so forth. So I did that for my last nine months.

So, even though I was technically assigned to that Rocky Point Battery, and I was carried on their roster, I never actually reported out there. I got shunted off to this PR outfit instead.

MR. JACOBY: Did you enjoy it?

MR. LOWERY: I did. I did, because we went -- we went to a lot of different places. We went to the Hamburg County Fair up near Buffalo, New York for a week. We were in one of the exhibit buildings there. We were at the Eastern States Exhibition in Springfield, Mass for a week. We went out to, I think it was Convention Hall in Atlantic City for a week. We went to various schools and the schoolchildren, of course, loved these sort of things.

MR. JACOBY: Would you do a simulated --

MR. LOWERY: We did a simulated shoot. We would actually go through -- we actually had a little script that we would go through a complete simulated battle stations type thing, you know. And we even had a missile that we would bring inside the building, and it could be raised on its launcher.

MR. JACOBY: Full size?

MR. LOWERY: Full size. It could be raised up on its launcher and pointed up in the air. And of course, the school kids were always mesmerized by this. And we would go through, just like you were going to do a shoot. They would go through and say, "Okay. Target track radar, ready for action. Missile track radar, ready for action." and they'd say, "Okay. Battery ready for action." You know, and all the lights would be coming on on the consoles, and the kids would be, you know, just mesmerized by it. And then they would raise the launcher.

And they would then count down and say, "Okay, ready to fire." You know, and then they'd say, "Five, four, three, two, one, fire." And at that point somebody backstage would have a little charge that they would set off in a bucket. And it would go, pow, you know. Kids would jump out of their seat almost. And at that point, there was a big screen where they would have a movie, that old demonstration movie that I guess everybody's seen back at that time of a plane being destroyed by one of the missiles. So, it was quite a thing. And we got to travel around quite a bit and see different things. So, that was great duty.

MR. JACOBY: When the battery was closed at Slocum, what happened to the equipment?

MR. LOWERY: I don't know. I can't say what happened to it, I just don't know.

MR. JACOBY: You weren't involved in tearing it down?

MR. LOWERY: I wasn't involved. The only thing that they did when I was there was that we basically just shut it down. We went through all of our procedures and so forth to protect all the circuits and things that was in the system, and basically the last thing we did was turn off what we called the main power switch, and everything just kind of hummed down to a stop.

And at that point, a lot of the guys at that point had already gotten out. Some people that had what they called an ETS, which is the end of their service time, they could get -- they got what they call an early out.

If they only had a month or so to go, they went ahead and got an early out and just left the service. Others that were assigned to other batteries at various times, there would be people leaving to go to this battery or that, and then, I think I was probably one of the last ones there before I got shipped out to that demonstration outfit. And so I don't really know what took place after that.

MR. JACOBY: Did the Nike Post have a separate power source from the rest of the island?

MR. LOWERY: As a part of our facilities there, we had a generator building that had, I think it was two, possibly three, huge diesel generators that generated all of our power. They were huge. They must have been about seven or eight feet tall. I don't know whether they were Caterpillar diesels or Buddha diesels, but they were very large, and they had big generators on them, and those could be cranked up and provide all the power that we would need in case there was an emergency. In case of emergency and civilian power was cut off, we could still operate on our own independent power. And those generators had the capacity, probably, to run the entire island if necessary.

MR. JACOBY: Do you ever remember equipment breaking down or failing?

MR. LOWERY: The system itself, since it was pretty much all electronic, and at that time it was all electronic tubes, there was no -- virtually no solid-state circuitry in existence then. So all the tubes, they all lit up and you could see them, you know, glowing and so forth. So there was always tube failures. There was always tubes burning out, had to be replaced. And the system itself was constructed in a kind of modular fashion, so that if one particular tube, or something, burned out and you couldn't quite figure out what it was, they could pull that whole module out and just stick a new one in. And then ship that one off to be analyzed and checked. But if it was just a tube failure, they'd just plug another tube in. And we kept a complement of vacuum tubes on site.

MR. JACOBY: Was it warm in the room because of all the tubes?

MR. LOWERY: It was. It was always very comfortable in the wintertime, very warm and since that system operated on a different frequency from the house current, I think it operated on, I want to say 400 cycles instead of the 60 cycle commercial power. So it made a kind of a little high-pitched hum all the time in there. So the combination of the warmth and the high-pitched hum going on would make it very comfortable in the wintertime. So, we would always not mind being up there a lot of times in the wintertime.

MR. JACOBY: I want to ask you a few questions about the island itself, and the facilities. Describe the chow in the mess hall.

MR. LOWERY: The chow was, I want to say, probably average. There were sometimes when it might be a little below average. We ate there, and it was a very large, it was what they called a consolidated mess. So, it supplied basically the entire island. All the contingents on the island was supplied by that one consolidated mess. So, it was large. They had to, you know, produce food in fairly large quantities. So, the quality was, I guess -- I guess was a victim of a little bit of the scope of the meals that they would have to prepare. It was certainly adequate. I have no real qualms about it.

But it was just -- the launching area mess hall that they had over on Hart Island, which they had their own mess hall, was very small and as a result it was very good. And whenever we had occasion to go over to Hart Island for anything, we would always try to arrange it during a mealtime so we could eat at their mess hall instead of our own. But we had -- you know, it got us through.

MR. JACOBY: Did you make use of Raymond Hall for any activities?

MR. LOWERY: Raymond Hall?

MR. JACOBY: That was the gymnasium up at the north end.

MR. LOWERY: We did. We would -- we went up there on occasion. The battery, in addition to having a softball team also had a basketball team. I was never on that, I was on the softball team. I was never on the basketball team, but they would go up there and play in a post-league basketball league.

MR. JACOBY: Did they show movies on the base?

MR. LOWERY: They did. They had a movie theater. I very rarely went to it. In fact, I don't recall ever going to it at all. But, several people did go. And I'm not sure exactly which building the movie theater was in, but I know they had it, and I know a lot of our people would go there.

MR. JACOBY: Now, you were aware that there were families living on the island, officers' families and some NCO families. Did you have occasion to meet any of them or associate with them?

MR. LOWERY: We did. We didn't. Beyond our own contingent of folks there at the battery, we very rarely had any contact with any of the other folks there. The doctor, we would go and see, you know, the post doctor occasionally. But you know, the barber shop and so forth. But for the most part we wouldn't have any contact with any of the other folks.

MR. JACOBY: Would you see kids on the island?

MR. LOWERY: I very rarely saw any kids. I know, sometimes I suppose I did. But, usually, you know, we would be working during the day, and at night we probably wouldn't have occasion to go up into that part of the island. So, I rarely, if ever, saw any children. I'm sure they were there, I just didn't -- either didn't see them or just didn't pay any attention, and it never crossed my mind.

MR. JACOBY: For a time the US Army Chaplain School was at Fort Slocum, and there was a chapel not far from the Nike Post itself, did you go to church or chapel on Sundays?

MR. LOWERY: I didn't myself, because I would either be on duty, which would pretty much restrict me from, virtually anything else on the island, or if I was off, I would generally leave the island and go into town or down into New York City or someplace. So, I very rarely had occasion to be there during times that, you know, you would have gone to there.

MR. JACOBY: So, chapel was not a requirement that the Army had?

MR. LOWERY: No. Now, for our battery they would have a visiting chaplain that would come around about once a month, and we would all assemble in a day room there, and of course, they didn't call it any kind of chapel or religious service or anything, I guess they had to kind of stay away from that, they called it "character guidance." That was the official title of that chaplain's visit. And they would have chaplains come, I guess the different denominations. I only recall one chaplain that was a -- must have been Irish Catholic, Chaplain Sullivan, I remember was his name. But, they would come to our battery, and they would hold what was called character guidance classes rather than true religious services.

MR. JACOBY: Were there other training sessions in which you were lectured or taught about citizenship or American history, or anything of that nature?

MR. LOWERY: No. We did have, on occasion, we would have, similar to the character guidance, we would have kind of historical type things where they would show movies of various parts of the services. They would show, for example, some old documentary films of World War II, for example, we'd show that in the day room. But as far as just any kind of -- any kind of historical -- I mean, any kind of classroom type things, we didn't have that.

MR. JACOBY: Um-hum. How old were you when you got to Fort Slocum?

MR. LOWERY: I was 21.

MR. JACOBY: Tell me something about some of the other enlisted men that you worked with.

MR. LOWERY: At that time, the Army had a program that if you enlisted you could pretty much pick your area of duty, your duty station. It was kind of commonly referred to as a backyard system. A lot of people could enlist and request to be stationed near their home. And a lot of people did that around the New York area. So, we had a lot of people in our battery that actually lived down in Long Island, or Brooklyn, or Bronx, or different places. They would just work there and on their time off they would go home, during the times that they could be off.

Our first sergeant lived down in the Bronx, and would basically leave everyday at the end of the day and go home.

MR. JACOBY: Were there men of a variety of different ethnic groups, or religion?

MR. LOWERY: We did. We had a Jewish kid, we had -- we had a number of African Americans, we had people from all over parts of the country. We had -- in my crew we had one fellow that lived down in Brooklyn. One fellow was from out -- somewhere out in Queens, out near Flushing somewhere, I'm not sure where, but -- and then we had one fellow from Iowa. One was from New Bedford, Massachusetts. So, they were scattered all over, and just different, it was a mix, typical Army mix.

MR. JACOBY: Did you go to the homes of any of the men that lived nearby?

MR. LOWERY: I visited a couple of times, I was friends with one of the maintenance sergeants we had. He was a Master Sergeant. Been in the military many, many years, and he was a maintenance man, and very personable fellow. I think he was Hawaiian, his name was Vincent Manili, and he lived over in New

Rochelle, had an apartment, I think, over in New Rochelle, and his family was there. So I went over to his house once or twice, I think.

MR. JACOBY: Do you know if he ever volunteered as a lifeguard at the beach?

MR. LOWERY: I don't know that. I never heard that.

MR. JACOBY: Okay. I'll tell you why later.

MR. LOWERY: Yeah, he was -- I think he was -- he had been in the military, he must have been, at that point, maybe in his late 40s I want to say. And he had been a World War II Veteran, and he was a full fledged Master Sergeant, so he'd been in a number of years, and he was a maintenance man that had gone through the schools down at Fort Bliss in Texas for that kind of system. And I think he was Hawaiian. He was either Hawaiian or Filipino or something, because of that name, Manili, was kind of a Hawaiian name.

MR. JACOBY: Okay. Tell me what you did during your off time?

MR. LOWERY: During my time that I was free to go, I would go, being from a small town in the Carolinas, I was intrigued by New York City. And being that close to New York City I just -- I would go down there, because it was just a subway trip down. Subways were only a nickel then. So I would go down into the City, and there was a place down at 37th and Lexington, right down below Grand Central Terminal, that military people could stay for \$1 a night. It was called the Soldier Sailor Airman's Club. So I could go down there, be right in the middle part of Manhattan and stay for just a nominal fee. They even had a little restaurant down in the basement and you could get some food there. They had kind of a social thing on Saturday nights, they would have dances, and they'd have a little band that would come in, and they would have a lot of ladies that would come in from Long Island and around, very nice. We would have dances there, and I made a lot of friends there, and enjoyed it.

And of course, being in New York in the military, you were -- you had available to you the USO. And I can't say enough about the USO. They treated you very well. They could get tickets for ball games, Yankees baseball, I used to go to Yankee Stadium quite a bit, Rangers ice hockey. Just plays, all kinds of Broadway plays, we could go and see for free. And it was just a great, great deal. There was just nothing not to like about that.

MR. JACOBY: Were you in uniform when you went into the City?

MR. LOWERY: No. I would always dress in civilian clothes when I would go down there. And most of the places -- there would be a few places that you would -- that if you were going to go by way to the USO you would have to be in uniform, but those were very few. Plays, ball games, things like that, you didn't have to wear a uniform.

MR. JACOBY: So how often would you get off post?

MR. LOWERY: I would go -- in a month's time I would probably go, probably at least two, and probably most often about three weekends out of the month, and then one weekend I'd be on duty and have to stay.

MR. JACOBY: And you could go overnight. You didn't have to return.

MR. LOWERY: You could go overnight. I would go, there would be a ferry that would leave Slocum, it was always known as the 5:00 boat. And everybody would scramble, if they were going to leave the island, to try to make that 5:00 boat. And then the last boat that you could catch, coming back, was 6:00 in the morning.

MR. JACOBY: And that was full of -- full of men?

MR. LOWERY: That was full of hung over people trying to make sure they got back, because we would have a formation -- I'm sorry, it would be the 5:00 boat. And the formation that we would have at the battery each and every morning was 6:00. So, 5:00 was the last boat that you could catch and ensure that you made that 6:00 formation. So, if you were out you had to scramble to be back.

MR. JACOBY: What would the consequences be if you missed that boat?

MR. LOWERY: If they had formation and you weren't there, you would probably get put on restriction. They had a -- they had one level of punishment under the, you know, Uniform Code of Military Justice, called an Article 15, and that was a punishment -- it was kind of a low-level punishment, and it basically restricted you. You were basically, maybe put on barracks arrest, you might say. And you were not able to leave or do anything. And I'm not sure what other consequences went along with Article 15, but I know restriction was one of them. And I guess if you had too many of those that accumulated you could -- you

might be busted down a rank or something, you know, which would cost you in the pocketbook. So, you know, you --

MR. JACOBY: Did you witness that ever?

MR. LOWERY: I witnessed some people being put on restriction. I don't think I ever witnessed anybody -- I think if you went anything above that Article 15, that's kind of a company type punishment. That's kind of a local punishment that's kind of confined within a company or something, you know, that the commander could do on his own. If you went above that level of punishment you were into the thing then of Court Martial. You could either accept whatever other punishment they might want to mete out above and beyond the Article 15, or you could probably request a Court Martial and really, really get into it.

MR. JACOBY: There was a brig, a guardhouse on the island. Did you ever know anyone that spent the night there or --

MR. LOWERY: I never knew -- I never knew they even had it. I knew they had a contingent of MPs there, but I never even was aware of a brig there.

MR. JACOBY: Did you get leave to go back home?

MR. LOWERY: I did. We would -- depending on how the scheduling would work, I would come home at Christmastime. I think there was probably one Christmas that I didn't come home, but the other times I did. I could catch the train out of there to Washington and then south.

One Christmas there was a sergeant in the battery that lived not too far from where I'm living now, that we would come home together and drive the distance together. He had a family there, so we would come with his family.

MR. JACOBY: How long would you get?

MR. LOWERY: You could get 30 days, or two weeks. You might want to do two weeks. But you had 30 days of leave a year coming to you. So you could do it all at one time, or I guess you could break it up. And I would usually take maybe a week's leave time during Christmas.

MR. JACOBY: Describe some of the other holidays that you spent on the island, like Thanksgiving, July 4th. Were there any special foods, dinners, etc.?

MR. LOWERY: I can't recall -- I can't recall any special activities of that nature. I just -- I'm sure they probably had them, but I just don't remember them. They might have had, maybe at Thanksgiving, they might have some, you know, special meals in the mess hall, but --

MR. JACOBY: What about Armed Forces Day? Was that something that was had special connotation?

MR. LOWERY: No. I don't recall anything special going on for that. I do remember one occasion we had, I think it was -- I think it was some school, probably in New Rochelle that brought some school children out there to the battery, and I don't know whether this was in conjunction with any type of Armed Forces Day, or whether it was just a field trip that they decided to take. But they came out and actually, you know, toured the area.

MR. JACOBY: What was your pay rate when you first got into the Army?

MR. LOWERY: When you first arrive, of course, you're nothing but just a recruit, and that's the lowest of the low. And you -- I think I made something like \$78 or something, as a recruit.

MR. JACOBY: A month?

MR. LOWERY: A month. And after I think I was there a while, the first thing you get after getting out of the recruit status is you become a Private. Which is no stripes of any kind. They raise your pay maybe \$5 or thereabouts. The next status is you become a Private First Class, which is the one stripe that you get on your arm, and I think you get a little pay raise on that, and it probably brought me up to -- I want to say maybe \$85 or so. And then the next step up from that would be the equivalent of Corporal, which would be two stripes, but in our case they had gone to what they called a Specialist type of ranking then, so I became Specialist Fourth Class, which was the equivalent of Corporal, and I maintained that, basically, until I got out. And I think that carried with it a pay raise up to about \$125 or so a month, I want to say.

MR. JACOBY: And you got paid once a month?

MR. LOWERY: Once a month. They would set up a pay table in the day room, pay officer would go down to, I think Fort Wadsworth, or some finance center and they would pick up the payroll. They would

bring it back and they would set up a table, it was paid in cash -- and they would set up a table in the day room and everybody would line up, and pick up their pay.

MR. JACOBY: And what would you do with your money?

MR. LOWERY: Basically, I would just simply, you know, save it for the rest of the month. And if I was going to go down into the City I would save it until I was going to go down there. I had my activities pretty much planned out to where I would run out of money just about the time the next payday would come around. So I lived from payday to payday.

But as I told you earlier, one of the funny aspects of payday was that they would set up the pay table, and there was various things that you would do on the post that you could do on credit. For example, the NCO Club, you could run up a tab at the NCO Club. So they would always have a table set up there for the NCO people to collect. And then they would have -- usually the town of New Rochelle, or Westchester County would always be having some type of charity drive like United Way or some such charity. And being good neighbors and so forth, we were always suggested that we would contribute to these causes. Well, they would have a table a lot of times that was set up there, they'd be collecting for United Way or whatever it was.

And then you'd have a table that you might have gotten something on credit from the tailor shop, or just -- barber shop or something, so they would have a table set up. So, we always joked about how the first table giveth and the subsequent tables taketh away. Because by the time you got your pay then you hit all these creditor tables, you know, you're pretty much tapped out.

MR. JACOBY: Did you have to pay for laundry?

MR. LOWERY: I did. Laundry was done...

(End of Tape).

MR. JACOBY: ... the laundry?

MR. LOWERY: Yeah, the quarter master laundry. During the week, I think you would -- you had a laundry bag on the end of your bunk and you put all your dirty clothes in that laundry bag, and then I think on one day of the week, I don't know whether it was Friday or whatever, but they would come around and pick all that laundry up and take it to, I don't know where, whether it was on Post or some other place, but it would go for cleaning and then they would bring it back. And they did charge you, I think taken out of your pay was the quarter master laundry fee, and I want to say that was about \$3 or \$4 a month.

And -- but I think at that time you were also given a little extra uniform allowance too, because I think they did try to take into account the fact that over a period of time your uniforms, you know, would get worn, and you might have to reuse them. So they did give you a little bit of a uniform allowance each month with the idea that you might have to replace some uniforms. So you did have that. So, in some respects the charge they would charge you for quarter mastering laundry would be offset a little bit by the uniform allowance that they would put in your paycheck each month.

MR. JACOBY: You had to pay for the barber?

MR. LOWERY: We did. The barber shop -- I think the barbershop was run by civilians on the post. And so they were -- you had to pay.

MR. JACOBY: Do you remember what a haircut and a shave cost?

MR. LOWERY: I don't. I really don't. We would have to go, I think once a month to do that, and it was just, I never really remembered about it. I'm sure it was just a nominal amount.

MR. JACOBY: Would an officer come up to you and say, Lowery, your hair's too long, get a haircut. Or was this just --

MR. LOWERY: Well, they would -- sometimes, during the formations they might just make an observation and say it looks like -- this looks like some of you may need to make a trip to the barbershop, just make sure you do that this month. Or, if there was going to be any kind of an inspection that was going to be coming up by either our own battery commander, or these battalion people, they would get a little more insistent on it. They would want to make sure everybody had a fresh haircut before that inspection.

MR. JACOBY: They would know when inspection was due?

MR. LOWERY: Oh, yeah, they would get -- they would know about it in advance. And you know, we would go through a -- you know, a good cleaning deal. We would have to, you know, wax all the floors and clean everything and so forth.

And another funny aspect about these inspections is that since our barracks was separated from the seawall by just a road, if there was going to be an inspection, we would take all of the things out of our rooms, and we did have kind of -- almost kind of seamy rooms, being an old WAC barracks, they actually had -- they were not full-fledged rooms, there were kind of partitions that would have a little opening at the bottom and a little at the top, but it was your space. And you know, you do accumulate personal things, you know, maybe some radios or record players or something like that.

Well, right before inspections we'd always take that stuff and hide it over there on the other side of the seawall. And then after the inspection we'd go over there and haul it all back.

MR. JACOBY: You were not supposed to have a radio?

MR. LOWERY: Well, I say a radio, I'm just -- I'm just saying anything that would be adding to the clutter of our rooms that, you know, just might not --

MR. JACOBY: Anything non-regular Army?

MR. LOWERY: Yeah, just you know, some people -- I don't know what they might have, they might have some softball trophies or something, you know, just anything that we just didn't want to have. I guess they just didn't want it to be too homey looking. So, we'd haul it all over there over seawall, and then after inspection we'd haul it all back.

MR. JACOBY: You were telling me earlier that payday had a festive feel to it. You described a little bit about the pay tables. Tell me about gambling and card playing.

MR. LOWERY: Well, paydays were kind of festive because, you know, that -- a lot of people would be eagerly anticipating payday, and of course, that had kind of a festive air to it. And after everybody would get paid, as soon as they would leave the day room, you know, and leave the pay tables, a lot of people that would be off duty would head into the barracks and there would be a lot of card games and things, start going on. And you know, a few dollars might change hands here and there.

I have heard of occasions where some people might lose their entire month's pay in one afternoon in those barracks. Because they would have some wild card games. And then used to play a lot of cribbage. I don't know, haven't heard that much in recent years, but there used to be a lot of cribbage games that would go on in the barracks, and a few dollars might change hands.

MR. JACOBY: You've talked about going into New York City, what about New Rochelle?

MR. LOWERY: New Rochelle, I never spent very much time in New Rochelle. My trips through New Rochelle was basically just that. It was "through" New Rochelle. I was going to a train station, heading for the City. So, I really spent very little time in New Rochelle. Not enough time that I could even tell you much about it.

Now, some of the people did. We had some people in our battery that actually had some part-time jobs over there in New Rochelle. We had a couple fellows that was bussing tables at a place called Giovanni's, an Italian restaurant.

MR. JACOBY: Was that regulation?

MR. LOWERY: Sure. Yeah, I mean, they could do that. During their off time. I don't know whether that restaurant is still there or not, but it was an Italian restaurant called Giovanni's and they would hire some -- they had some of our people that would bus -- you know, for very little money, but some money, that they'd go over there and work maybe four or five hours in the evening, bussing tables and -- and a lot of times we would -- we'd get them to bring us back something, you know, from there, like some kind of meatball sub or something like that. I remember standing up there on guard duty or something at night, and it would be cold, and that would taste mighty good, to have them bring back a real hot meatball sub from Giovanni's. And some of the guys worked there.

MR. JACOBY: Were any of the guys in your unit married?

MR. LOWERY: There were. A number of them were married. Some of the -- well, just about all of the NCOs, the Sergeants, just about all of them were married. And they either lived in a trailer park that was down there near the Slocum dock, or they would live in New Rochelle, or in some cases they lived over --

the First Sergeant lived over in the Bronx. And so a lot of them had their -- you know, married and had their families there.

MR. JACOBY: How did they deal with the possibility of having to get to the base quickly if they lived in the Bronx or elsewhere?

MR. LOWERY: Well, if they were on what's called stand-by duty and had to be on the island, they wouldn't leave, they would have to actually be there. So, they might have to spend the night there. But now, the ferry -- the ferry, I'm not sure what the schedule was for that ferry. It seemed like it ran about every 15 or 20 minutes. So, I guess theoretically somebody over in New Rochelle could get back. But, like you say, they couldn't make it back in a drill type time frame. They couldn't do that. So, I think if we were on alert status, or what's called A-Status -- because out of -- out of our battalion, out of the four batteries, that was in our battalion, I think one of the four had to be on a kind of alert status all the time. In other words, being ready to shoot in 15 minutes.

So you had to have a complement of men there to do that. Then, I think there would have to be another battery that would be kind of a standby battery, that if that first battery went out of action for something, had a malfunction, or had some kind of maintenance issue, that they couldn't maintain their A-Status, then the next battery that was on standby would have to step up and assume that A-Status for them until they'd get back on line, or whatever.

Then you had another battery in the four that would be on a maintenance status, for example. In other words, they weren't expected to be able to be on A-Status and be able to fire. They were in a maintenance mode. They might have a system torn down and being worked on or something.

And then there was another battery that would be on even a lower echelon of maintenance yet. So, out of the four batteries you had two that would be on maintenance, one that would be on kind of a semi-maintenance

stand-by status, and then one that would be on A-Status.

MR. JACOBY: And this would rotate?

MR. LOWERY: This would rotate around.

MR. JACOBY: Weekly? Monthly?

MR. LOWERY: Seemed like it was weekly. I want to say weekly. Or maybe -- maybe some odd time like every 10 days or some such time, but it was periodic, we'll say that.

MR. JACOBY: So, those high status batteries, your work would be perhaps a little bit more intense than if you were on standby or maintenance?

MR. LOWERY: Yeah, we would have to -- we would have to assume -- you know, we would have to have that 15-minute window to be able to fire if we had to.

MR. JACOBY: Now, how did you maintain communication with the firing facility at Hart Island?

MR. LOWERY: There were phone lines there. And there may have been some radio contact too. I'm not exactly sure. I know there was phone cables, they were probably laid under Long Island Sound that went from Slocum over to Hart Island.

MR. JACOBY: Dedicated lines?

MR. LOWERY: Yeah. Because I know, you know, whenever we would be in a kind of an operational deal, we would be going through our checks, we all had headsets on and we could all hear everybody else, what they were saying. And that's the way we heard in that one case them say that, you know, "launching area, ready to fire, booster squibs are connected." That's the way we heard that over the common phone line. So there was phone communications. And I'm not sure if there was -- undoubtedly there was some kind of backup, maybe radio communications. But for the most part all I ever knew was really basically phone-type communication.

MR. JACOBY: Were there any live firings from Hart Island?

MR. LOWERY: No.

MR. JACOBY: Launches? When you were there?

MR. LOWERY: No. No.

MR. JACOBY: Tell me --

MR. LOWERY: There wouldn't be any live firings from any of the batteries. Because you would have major problems if you had a live firing. For one thing, the entire region would be upset, quite a bit, because everybody would see it and hear it. And then you would have the, you know, you'd have the problem of what happened to the booster? You know, where did it fall? Because the booster disconnects from the missile after a certain number of seconds, and then it falls away.

MR. JACOBY: So there was a high confidence that the system would work?

MR. LOWERY: Right. In fact, that's what -- that's what our main function in going up there everyday was for, was to make sure that all the systems were within the parameters that they had to be in order to shoot. We would test for the accuracy of the radars, the computers, everything was -- everything was tested just as if you were going to shoot, stopping short, just short of actually shooting. In other words, stopping just short of connecting those booster squibs.

Because the booster squib was a device similar to photography's flashbulb, and that was inserted up in the bottom part of that booster which was a solid propellant. Gunpowder if you want to call it that. And that's what ignited it, you know, whenever you would put the voltage to it, that flashbulb type thing would go off, and it would ignite that propellant. So that's why they always -- they always simulated connecting the booster squibs, because they didn't want any kind of little accident, any kind of little static charge or anything just accidentally getting to that booster squib to set it off. So they would actually simulate the shoot, they would actually put little clothes pins, they would attach clothes pins on there and that was supposed to be connecting the booster squibs. There's no wires actually went into it, just paperclips.

MR. JACOBY: No chance of those going off. But you had live --

MR. LOWERY: They were live.

MR. JACOBY: -- launch? You had launch practice elsewhere?

MR. LOWERY: Each year one of the batteries in the battalion would go down to Fort Bliss, Texas, and then over into White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico, and we would fire three of the missiles. We'd fire them in what was known as a salvo shoot of two in rapid succession, and then a single shoot which would be just one. So there's three altogether. A one shot and then a salvo shot.

MR. JACOBY: Describe what one of these Nike missiles was like when it's launched.

MR. LOWERY: Unlike the missiles that you see on TV that kind of set there and for a second just kind of rise up slowly and gather speed, these are more like the Fourth of July rockets that you see. These things just go swoosh, just like that, and they're gone. Because they have to get up to speed very quickly, because you're dealing with an incoming enemy combatant, and there's no time to waste so you've got to have a system that could get a missile off the ground and up to where they need to go in virtually hardly any time.

MR. JACOBY: Were they supersonic?

MR. LOWERY: Yeah, they were. In fact, I don't know whether it's true or not, but I always heard the rumor from the launching area people, that by the time that back end of that booster left the end of the launcher rail which it was resting on, by the time it cleared that, it was probably going about 1,200 miles an hour in just that short of time. And we -- when we went down to Texas and we had some time to kill, and so we watched some of the other batteries doing their test firings down there, too, and one of them had a launching area that was reasonably close to us and we could watch them, and it actually shook the ground.

MR. JACOBY: How large were these missiles?

MR. LOWERY: They were a foot thick and 20 feet long. And then the booster, I think, was about -- I want to say about 10 feet long. And once it launched and that booster got it up and going, and when it burned out it was jettisoned, it just simply dropped off and there was an engine, rocket engine in there called a sustainer motor, and when that booster dropped off it pulled a little arming lanyard and activated the rocket motor in the missile itself. And then it took off on its own. So, it was pretty effective.

MR. JACOBY: On Hart Island, were these kept underground, or how were they covered?

MR. LOWERY: They were. They were underground storage facilities for them, and there were elevators that would bring them to the surface and then there were launcher rails that they could -- they could roll the missile out onto a launcher rail. So they could have one out on a launcher rail while they were bringing another one up from the pit on the elevator. And the launcher rails would raise them up to not quite a vertical angle, not quite 90 degrees, but just tilted slightly below 90 degrees, because when it took

off and that booster was disposed, you wanted to make sure it was going at an angle where that booster could then fall in an area that you wanted it to fall into.

MR. JACOBY: So, one could --

MR. LOWERY: Could be --

MR. JACOBY: -- and only at one time.

MR. LOWERY: One at a time. And that was one of the drawbacks of the Ajax system. You could fire -- I think you could fire probably about one a minute. And then the very last one could actually be fired from the elevator that brought it up. So, you could fire, you know, fairly rapidly, but still one at a time. And if you pointed the missile straight up, 90 degrees and you fired it when that booster fell, could theoretically fall back on you. So they cocked it at a little bit of an angle so that when it went up it would have a booster disposal area that would be way down somewhere else.

MR. JACOBY: And under whose authority would they theoretically have been fired?

MR. LOWERY: The battery commander I think was probably the only one that had the authority to push the button.

MR. JACOBY: And was there an actual button or a switch that the Captain or whomever would push?

MR. LOWERY: The very last thing in the firing sequence would have been the actual launch button, and that -- but that would be a button that would only be able to be pushed after a certain number of other sequence buttons were enabled. In other words, the -- when you went through all your checks -- when you went through the check, on say the target track radar, for example, and once you were satisfied with all those checks, you could declare that the target track radar was ready for action.

Then the missile track radar, it would be going through its checks at the same time, and then that operator could declare that missile radar are ready for action. Then computer operators might say that the computer is ready for action and so forth. And at that point, the computers -- at that point the computer's pretty much got command of the situation. Everybody has all done their jobs, they've locked on and so forth, and all the information is being fed into the computer.

And the computer then goes through a sequence, and the computer determines whether or not everything is in order to allow for firing, the missiles -- the range of the plane is within, you know, a range that the missile can actually reach it. All of that sort of thing is determined, and the computer will then give a series of lights, you know, target track ready to fire, missile track ready to fire, and then they'll -- then there was something like maybe battery ready to fire or something like that.

Well, when that ready-to-fire light would come on, that would be the only time that a firing, or launch could actually be done. Even the battery commander could sit there and push that button all day long, and if the computer had not determined that everything was in order, nothing would happen.

MR. JACOBY: And how long would that sequence take?

MR. LOWERY: Probably just -- well, the entire thing from the time the siren would go off till the time you would launch would be 15 minutes. So, all of this would have to take place within a 15-minute span.

MR. JACOBY: And that's what you drilled for? That 15 minutes?

MR. LOWERY: That's what we drilled for. We would drill constantly to get everything done and to be within that 15-minute frame.

MR. JACOBY: And the battery commander was independent of authority from the Fort Slocum Post commander?

MR. LOWERY: He was. Fort Slocum, the other personnel on Fort Slocum, basically, had nothing to do with the battery. It was a completely autonomous, isolated operation.

MR. JACOBY: I want to finally ask you about some of your impressions about being on the island, sights, sounds, smells?

MR. LOWERY: Basically, I know we were there in the winter of 1960, which was probably one of the worst winters they've had, snow was very deep. And our walk up to the mess hall when we'd go to eat, I remember the snow was probably about shoulder high there. I remember --

MR. JACOBY: Did that interfere with your radars?

MR. LOWERY: No. No. We would all clean that off and there was no problem there. Now, some of the Hercules batteries, that next generation of batteries, they had actual what they called ray domes that were actual fiberglass domes that actually enclosed the radars, so they were protected, but these were not. I know in using their mess hall when we would be going up, a lot of times we would be going up and we would have to stop because they would be having the flag lowering ceremony there at the parade field, and we would all have to stop you know, and salute the flag.

MR. JACOBY: Retreat?

MR. LOWERY: Retreat, yeah, that's it exactly.

MR. JACOBY: So, when you heard retreat, even those on duty at the missile control had to stop, or --

MR. LOWERY: No.

MR. JACOBY: No? You were --

MR. LOWERY: This would be anybody out there on the grounds in proximity to it. And I know one of the things that we used to always kind of get a kick out of was that since the chaplain school was there, and just about all the chaplains were inherently officers, we would always be passing them back and forth on the sidewalk going up to the chow hall and so forth, but it was almost one constant salute, you know, because there would be so many of them that you almost never even broke a salute. It was almost just one that you'd almost hold until you got there, because you'd be passing so many officers.

So, and I remember, you know, there was one ship I remember that got stuck out there on Long Island Sound because it froze around it, and the ship stayed out there for days before they could get it loose. And a lot of the guys would fish. They would go down on the rocks, you know, and fish. I don't know what they'd catch down there, but...

And we would --

MR. JACOBY: You were busy with your duties, or you were in New York City. Did you get the feeling that you were on an island much?

MR. LOWERY: By use of that ferry, we -- indeed. I mean, everything kind of revolved around when you could catch that ferry coming and going. So, that did dictate, you know, when you were -- when you would go, when you would come back.

MR. JACOBY: Rich Lowery, I want to thank you very much for participating in the Fort Slocum Oral History Project.

MR. LOWERY: Thank you.

MR. JACOBY: There's something you wanted to add?

MR. LOWERY: Yes. We had an officer, one of the officers in the battery by the name of Lieutenant Richard Block, and he was sort of a boating enthusiast, and somehow or other, he was able to get a boat from, I want to say the Philadelphia Naval Yard. He brought it up to the battery, we were going to use it for, I guess for people to go back and forth to Hart Island, but it was also just simply the battery boat. And it was kind of an old boat, and I'm not sure exactly what its function was in the Navy. It must have been about maybe 20 feet long or so and it had an inboard engine.

So he brought that boat to us and we made that kind of a project. We worked on the boat, we put new planking in on some of the sides, painted it, worked on the engines, and we just kind of made it just a little project that we worked on for months.

MR. JACOBY: Where did you keep it?

MR. LOWERY: We kept in -- it was actually docked -- actually we would put it up on the beach down there to do our work on it. So I guess maybe the beach became our dock, more or less. But we would work on that boat, and anybody that wanted to, and was going to be authorized to use that boat, they had to take a boatman's course.

So, several of us took a little boatman's course in order to receive authorization to drive the boat. And we would take it out sometimes on the weekends and it was just kind of a nice diversion, you know, of something that we had.

MR. JACOBY: You just showed a certificate that says, "New York State, Young Boatman's Safety Course. This is to certify that Richard D. Lowery has completed successfully the Young Boatman's Safety Course." And it's dated, "12 August, 1960." And did you take the boat out yourself?

MR. LOWERY: I did take it out a couple times.

MR. JACOBY: How long was it?

MR. LOWERY: The boat was about 20 feet long, had an inboard engine in it. And we did take it out, you know, sometimes on the weekends. And we -- one of the warrant officers took it out one day, and I think he might have hit one of the rocks out in Long Island Sound and kind of broke the hull a little bit. So, we drug it back up on the beach and we were going to repair it and keep it going. Well, about that time a hurricane hit, I'm not sure whether it was Hurricane Carla, or a major hurricane that kind of got up to the East Coast at that time, well, that was the end of the boat. It dashed it against the seawall and it just tore it all to pieces. So, the end of the boat saga was a victim of that hurricane.

MR. JACOBY: Thank you.

(End of Interview).

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