

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Interview with Roger Cote`
51st Air Defense Artillery (ADA)
1968-69
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS
July 22, 2004
Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2011



Nike Missile Launch Area at Fort Hancock.



Mr. Cote` with his 1966 Chevy Corvair across the street from Barracks 74.



Friend of Mr. Cote`, Rich on his way to work.

Photo courtesy of U.S. Army and NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

MR: Today is July 22, 2004. My name is Mary Rasa, Sandy Hook Museum Curator and I am here to do an oral history interview with a veteran of Fort Hancock. Please state your full name.

RC: My name is Roger Cote`.

MR: When and where were you born?

RC: I was born in 1947 in Pottstown, Pennsylvania.

MR: What schools did you attend?

RC: I attended the Pottstown School District. The elementary school was Franklin. High school, junior high was Pottstown Junior High and then Pottstown Senior High.

MR: Did your father or grandfather serve in the military?

RC: Yes. My dad served in World War II. He had served over in North Africa. His MOS (military occupational specialty) at the time being a rifleman was also a cook and once they found out that he could speak French they moved him out of the kitchen and he became a translator.

MR: How did you become involved in the Army?

RC: At the time when I enlisted in the military back in 1966, Vietnam was very prominent. Because my uncle, my dad, a lot of my relatives had served I felt that I had a duty and obligation to serve. So, that's why I enlisted and I always had an interest in missiles. And I think this stemmed back from when I was a child from the days of Sputnik and our launch and our efforts to launch rockets. Put satellites in orbit. And I took the test and qualified for the Army Air Defense and I went right into (the) Nike Hercules Program.

MR: Now, did you choose that before you enlisted or was that while you were at Basic Training that you chose missiles?

RC: I chose missiles at the time that I was with the recruiter.

MR: Oh, okay. Now from, from, where did you go to Basic Training?

RC: Basic Training was Fort Jackson, South Carolina. After that, I went to Fort Bliss (Texas) and from Fort Bliss I was assigned to Fort Wainwright (Alaska). I was sent to Site Peter which was assigned to Fairbanks (Alaska) and actually Fairbanks was like seventy miles away above the Air Force Base. I believe at the time was Eielson Air Force Base.

MR: Okay and then from there you came to Fort Hancock?

RC: Correct.

MR: What year was that?

RC: I was transferred to Fort Hancock in 1968 and finished up my career here in 1969.

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

RC: Absolutely nothing. (laughter)

MR: I assume you had never been to the east coast at that point?

RC: I had no idea that they had this type of a facility here.

MR: So, but you knew the type of job you would be performing?

RC: Yes. I knew the type of job I would be performing. I had no idea of the size of Fort Hancock. You have to understand in Alaska everything was confined to a small mountaintop area. Alaska Air Defense served, you had like four or five batteries that formed a circle and we were maybe only a few hours away from the Arctic Circle up there. So, everything was confined. All the people lived in one particular area. There was just two launch areas. Nothing was underground. Everything was topside. And at that time

in the launch areas we had two sections A and B section. And each section contained ten rounds. We also used the railroad tracks to bring the missiles in and out from the launchers. The IFC (Integrated Fire Control) Area also contained all the living quarters for all the military personnel and the distance we usually walked every day from one area to another was about a quarter mile.

MR: Okay. When you came to Fort Hancock what was your rank at that point?

RC: At that time I was an E-4. I was a, what we refer to as a panel operator. I had left Fort Wainwright with two recommendations for promotion to E-5 from both my platoon officer as well as the command officer at Bravo Battery in Alaska. Soon after I was here I was promoted to E-5.

MR: Okay. Explain a little more about your job.

RC: The job at the time being a panel operator. A panel operator coordinated what was going on as far as topside in the preparation of the missiles and also had coordination with the LTC trailer which was the Launch Control Trailer. And also if that particular scenario was, let's say, the launch trailer was taken out of communications and my communications would be direct with the IFC Area. And then at that particular time if either the IFC Area was not able to fire the round I would be able to fire the round from the panel on which I operated.

MR: So you actually worked in the trailer...?

RC: I actually worked down in the pit where the actual panel itself was.

MR: Oh, okay.

RC: The people would report to me topside saying when the round was moved over to a launcher. Okay. Then they would tell me that the round was hooked up and it was ready to be launched, ready to be raised. I commanded the electronics to raise and lower the missiles from underground.

MR: From down below.

RC: Exactly. And I also had the ability to go ahead and fire that round should it come to that at my station.

MR: Down below.

RC: Exactly. But everybody reported to me. I coordinated everything with the IFC Area.

MR: Okay.

RC: And after that...

MR: By telephone? How were your communications?

RC: No. That was done, that was done by headsets.

MR: Okay.

RC: You know our headsets were on and that was all. No phone lines as far as you would have today.

MR: Did it work well underground?

RC: Yeah. I had no problems with them. I had no problems with them in Alaska. Everything always worked fine for me. And soon after I received my promotion then I was an assistant section chief in charge of Delta and that consisted of making sure that people would take care of the maintenance that was required on the missiles, launchers and all the rest of the equipment that we had.

MR: How many missiles were in each pit?

RC: If I remember correctly I think each pit contained ten. That part is a little fuzzy but I think it was about ten rounds in each section.

MR: Okay. What type of work did you do after you left the service?

RC: (laughs) Well, that was sort of a tough decision at the time. I was, I was normally on border of whether or not I wanted to get out or stay back in. I knew I wanted to stay. If I was going to stay in I wanted to stay in this same type of air defense and I knew the program was soon to close. So, I decided to get out and I became involved in finances. Actually, I started with a financial company called Household Finance and that has lead to a career.

MR: It's a big credit card company isn't it?

RC: It is. It's led to me being a credit manager. So, for all these years since 1969 I have been involved with credit collections.

MR: Okay. So your job didn't really help you in your future career. (laughter)

RC: No. Not at that point. I mean you had to understand you had to have a secret clearance to have to be able to work with the type of warheads and different things that we were exposed to. And then again during these course of the year this was sort of on the way out, but you still had to maintain that type of because of a particular clearance you couldn't afford to become overly in debt. There was no way you could be involved in any type of criminal activity. I mean you had to keep yourself clean.

MR: So, there were some things that were similar. I assume working with people and all those things that you learned.

RC: Oh yes.

MR: Those were very helpful.

RC: Absolutely. Absolutely.

MR: While you were here were there ever any potential alerts where you were on standby or hot I think they called it?

RC: Well, we those hot status I can't recall anything of any great significance, everything was basically routine. All the people that we had and that's the other thing I can recall because of my extensive training that I received in Alaska when I was promoted to E-5. I spent a lot of time teaching a lot of the fellas that were here for their, this was going to be their first assignment. And I recall teaching a lot of the fellas what the black dot meant that was on top of the warhead. I meant I would teach the people pertaining to the different boxes that we would have to check for stray voltage before you would actual hook the launcher up. There were a lot of things that I knew about the Nike Hercules system that a lot of the fellas didn't. I just took a lot of time to teaching and training them to be as proficient as they could be. I was rather proud of them because our Delta Section was one of the best ones on the hill.

MR: So, in the pit were all the nuclear warheads all attached and ready to go?

RC: Oh yes. Absolutely. The other thing we had to do was put in the mission pin.

MR: So, you could activate them?

RC: And turn the keys right and you could activate those. There were two, two different types of nuclear warheads. You had the lower grade and then you had the higher grade. The higher grade was the red stripped. The yellow one was the lower grade and then excuse me, the yellow one was the highest the green one was the lower grade nuclear warhead. The red one was the high explosive. So they would...

MR: They would alternate what they would put in it or was there...?

RC: No. They were all set. The red stripe was the nuclear high, high nuclear warhead and the lower nuclear warhead was the green and then the yellow was just the plain high explosive.

MR: Okay. When you were on, you were on twenty-four hour shifts?

RC: Yes.

MR: During the time, you would be sleeping in the barracks at site?

RC: Yes.

MR: Did you have to keep your boots on, someone told me?

RC: Oh yeah. Normally you had to keep your boots on because the (inaudible) sounded you had to be up and running. You didn't have a time to put your clothes on. You had to... you slept with your clothes on. That's what you really did.

MR: How many hours would you actually be in the pit during the day if you were on a twenty-four hour shift?

RC: You'd be there your normal eight hours. That all depends if the site was going to be evaluated. If that was the case then you would have to spend additional time going through the drill process and everybody would be critiqued in regards to work performance.

MR: And you also ate down there. How was the food while you were on duty?

RC: I don't recall ever really having to eat meals down there in the section area.

MR: Okay. Now your other housing unit was Barracks 74 in the Fort. The U shaped barracks. So, did you just have a bunk or were you completely out in the open or did you have a little privacy?

RC: No, actually I was, I was fortunate enough to actually have my own private room.

MR: Okay.

RC: I was there by myself for gosh a number of months and then I had another fella who joined me. So, there were just the two of us in a private room.

MR: Do you remember what floor it was on?

RC: 2nd floor. I have pictures of that as well. (laughter)

MR: And the mess hall was on the first floor then?

RC: The mess hall, yeah, the mess hall was on the first floor at the very end to the left of that building.

MR: Did you like living in there?

RC: It was okay. It was different. What I really liked about it was when you were done with your duty you could go out. You could, it was totally different than where you were

in Alaska. You have to understand you had one of two places you were going to exist. In the Launch Area, the IFC Area and that's it. You really didn't have mobility to go into a city or anything day to day as we did here. We had access to our vehicles. We could jump in those. If you wanted to eat at the mess hall fine. A lot of time we didn't. We'd go off base to go eat. We'd run down to Asbury Park. We'd go off base to do our laundry, things of that particular. I mean just a way of getting away. That was one of the real nice parts about that. Yeah.

MR: Do you remember where you used to go eat often?

RC: There were some pizza places. I remember driving through Sea Bright. It's all changed.

MR: Yeah.

RC: It's all changed even where the pizza place was a couple of doors down was where the laundry mat was. Everything has just changed.

MR: Did you ever work with any civilians?

RC: No. Not at all.

MR: What type of social activities did you take part in at the Fort? Did you go to the clubs or the theater?

RC: Oh, we went to the NCO (Non-commissioned Officers') Club. We frequented that. There was another that we did. I can't remember the warrant officer's name but I have his picture. We used to modify our cars. I had a blue '66 Corvair that my one friend in the Missile Assembly Area, Bob Simpson was very good at mechanics. The warrant officer allowed us to use his garage. We pulled the engine from my Corvair and stripped everything out of it. I saw all the pieces on the floor and it was like, that's my car. We put everything back together but we put in a four barrel carburetor. We put in greasy parts and we hopped up that Corvair pretty well. There's a part and it's in one of the roads. I think its Atlantic Road that will take you to a back road all the way near the back and that's a pretty flat stretch and we used to race back there. (laughter)

MR: A little drag racing.

RC: Yes. That's exactly what we would do. We would drag race. Some of the guys would actually go out and purchase new cars. I remember one fella actually purchased a new GTO Judge. That was orange with black stripes at the time. He used to go back there and race back down and you would hear that as well. MPs (Military Police) would try to catch us, but it never really worked. I can recall there was one time that the MPs had set up a radar to monitor the speed and the fellas in the IFC Area targeted the radar to the MPs radar and melted it. Literally melted it.

MR: Really?

RC: Yes. There was a lot of hell to pay for that but we... it was funny when we heard about it. It was comical. (laughter)

MR: How many guys were living out here? How many soldiers would have been stationed at the time you were here?

RC: It had to be maybe around a hundred, hundred and fifty I would think. Considering...

MR: With the missile batteries?

RC: Yeah. Considering with your IFC, the launch, your administration support area, the various NCOs, officers. Yeah.

MR: So, there weren't a ton of people out here?

RC: No.

MR: You kind of had your own private place.

RC: What we used to do was when we got off duty we had to go back and get properly dressed to go out to the parade field and stand at attention while other veterans who were coming back from Vietnam would be receiving their medals.

MR: Did you ever go see movies out here?

RC: No. Never seen movies on base. We usually went in town.

MR: (Did you) participate in any sports?

RC: There really were no sports, at least not in my time.

MR: When you were here did you go to the beach?

RC: Ah, yes we did patronize the beach. I can recall specifically my security clearance was pulled approximately one week before my discharge and there was no place to go other than on the beach.

MR: Oh.

RC: So, you just worked on your tan for that period of time. And those that were being discharged, we all lost our clearance so that meant we can't get into the exclusion area so we would all be down at the beach and spend the day there.

MR: Were you, did you have to, when you were discharged did you have to leave and go get out processed somewhere else or did they do it here?

RC: No. We were processed at Fort Hamilton, New York. We were discharged from there.

MR: And did they give you a bus ticket home? How did they...?

RC: No. A lot of us had our cars with us so we drove. Those that didn't find their way home, but we received our pay and we received our orientation as to benefits and things of that nature and that was it.

MR: Did you ever go to New York while you were here?

RC: Yes. We were in New York a couple of times.

MR: And did you drive there? Is that how you would get there?

RC: Yep. We would normally drive there.

MR: And the Army was integrated at that point in time so you would have had African-Americans soldiers in your unit?

RC: Oh, my gosh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Sure. We had African-Americans. We had Spanish, yeah.

MR: Was this, I am going to assume that this was a fun place after your last assignment? (laughter)

RC: I was. It really was. Alaska was a hardship tour because you were so limited as to what you could do. And you have to remember too that Alaska has its drawbacks as far as the night and day. You go through your period of time up there where it's dark twenty-four hours a day. Sure you see the Northern Lights practically every time, but the amount of sunshine that you get would be just like opening a blind and pulling it back down and that's it. That's it for the day until the very next day. And then it slowly goes around and you get daylight twenty-four hours a day.

MR: Now, it must have been kind of strange to try and sleep in the daylight?

RC: It is. A couple of times you wake up at two, three o'clock in the morning and you think it's, you know, noon. But yeah you got used to that. But that was the fun times in Alaska we got snow every Labor Day. There was enough snow on the ground that you could scrape it off and make snowballs. Soon after that then the rest of the snow would just start to fall.

MR: Anything especially humorous occur out here?

RC: (laughs)

MR: Or interesting? Did any storms happen while you were here?

RC: No. Storm wise we were okay. We really didn't have any problems there. I mean we had the typical problems where some of the guys would perform maintenance of the launchers on the topside they would forget to turn the valve and close the valve. Certainly what would happen, we would have an inspection and the launchers would raise and you would just hear the whining sound and you just knew what happened. Then you had (to) pull extra duty. That only happened to our group once. That was it. But other than that, no nothing. I can recall we went to White Sands in New Mexico for our SNAP (Short Notice Annual Practice) drills. That went extremely well. Everything there went real good. The only thing I can remember as far as something that will always stick with me is Claude Smalling was with me the entire tour. He was from Louisiana. He was in the IFC Area. We had (a) drill here where the LTC was taken out of action. Again, a lot of the people here weren't trained as well as we were from Alaska. Claude got on his headset. I got on mine and established the first round of communications with him and we got everything clicking between Launch and IFC Area and because of what we did and we just ran with the ball the entire Battery passed. But we did receive a special commendation from the captain because of our knowledge our skill and what we did to ensure that the entire drill went smoothly. Because if not, everybody would have a real price to pay with extra training and duty time and everything else. So it worked out.

MR: Anything especially in your mind stand out about Fort Hancock?

RC: The water that always surrounded us which caused a constant maintenance upgrade. You would no sooner do your maintenance on your launchers as far as grease fittings and things of that nature are concerned that you would have to go back to do those again. The salt air was horrible. It really was. But we had a particular maintenance routine that we had to follow and if it didn't you would spot it right away that maintenance wasn't being performed.

MR: Do you keep in touch with anyone that you were stationed with?

RC: I have not.

MR: Is there anything else you would like to say?

RC: No. I think that is about it really.

MR: Okay. Thank you very much.

RC: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW