

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS  
Oral History Interview with Bill Jackson  
51<sup>st</sup> Air Defense Artillery, Nike Hercules Missiles 1968-1972  
Civilian employee 1972-74  
Interviewed by Billy Yirce, Monmouth University student intern  
September 14, 2003  
Transcribed by Mary Rasa 2010



Bill Jackson's photo from 51<sup>st</sup> ADA Unit Roster



Bill Jackson in 2003 at Fort Hancock Cold War Day  
Photos courtesy of Gateway NRA/NPS

Editor's notes in parenthesis ( )

BY: This is an oral history interview of Bill Jackson taking place at Sandy Hook National Park. Where and when were you born?

BJ: I was born in Washington, D.C. July 14, 1947.

BY: Okay and how did you end up joining the service?

BJ: (laughter) In 1968, I received a draft notice, which I promptly ignored and then subsequently received a report or else letter go to jail. So, I reported and wound up having a physical and everything else. Was classified 1A and they were coming after me so I went down to my Army recruiter and enlisted to try and get something because I knew they would have my tail stamped Vietnam right away. So, I enlisted for Army Air Defense, Nike Herc (Hercules).

BY: And did you know anything about Fort Hancock or this area before you came here?

BJ: Very, very vaguely. Not really that much. In fact, in my enlistment, part of the enlistment deal was that I could pick my choice of duty site. And my choices were being young, Key West, Florida first choice; Homestead, Florida second choice; third choice was Seattle, Washington. About three or four days before I was about to report for induction, I got a call from the Army recruiter asking me to pick a forth choice because there were no opening at my first three choices. So I promptly said, "Well, Providence, Rhode Island, Hartford, Connecticut group". He said, "I'm sorry, I was hoping you were going to say Fort Hancock because that's where you are going to go."

BY: So, you had no choice then.

BJ: Really had no choice. No. I wound up here, and you know it was just as good because I had just married a young lady from Long Branch.

BY: Well, then.

BJ: So, it worked out.

BY: And what was your job while here?

BJ: From '68 to '72, I was down in the Launcher Area. (I) started as a launcher crewman. By the time I had completed my tour of service I was an E-5 section chief. In fact, I was the only E-5 section chief down there.

BY: And what was your specific job? What were you in charge of?

BJ: Down there in the launcher area is where the actual Nike Hercules missiles were stored and prepared for launch. And our primary responsibility were those birds

(missiles) down there. Daily, weekly, monthly, semi-annual and annual checks on all of the launcher control systems and the missiles themselves. You know, we did periodic tear down and rebuilds of the missiles. Maintenance of the equipment down there; launchers, handling rails, frequency changers, control, launch and control indicators, section control cabinets, frequency changers, full range of equipment down there.

BY: Now, did they ever launch a missile while you were at Fort Hancock?

BJ: Actually we didn't launch from here. This, Fort Hancock was a unique site. Charlie Battery here was a rather unique site in that it was a dual battery. Normally, it was Hercules sites consisted of three launcher sections and a fire control section. This one was a dual section. You had four launcher sections and two fire control sections. They were divided up Charlie 1 (C-1) and Charlie 2 (C-2). Every, once a year you had to go down to McGregor Range. It's a Satellite Post of Fort Bliss (Texas) where the Army Air Defense Training Center was located. You went to McGregor Range. It's actually in New Mexico where you would actually do your launch, your firing of the missiles. You either, when you went down there, you either fired one Herc and one Ajax or you fired two Ajax's. You still had to do all the work.

BY: Now what was that like seeing those things launch off?

BJ: Being a launcher crewman you didn't get to see them go. You were underground.

BY: Okay. So you just saw the...

BJ: You might get to see another unit across the desert fire theirs. It was an awe inspiring sight to see one of those things go up. Being, when you were launching and the missile was right above and you were underground, the ground would shake. Dust would be coming down. It was an awesome experience.

BY: Now did you guys have any scares while you were here? High alerts or...?

BJ: Oh, yeah. Numerous. Numerous. Anytime an aircraft, mostly commercial airliners would be making a transatlantic and if their IFF wasn't working; Identification Friend or Foe. If that wasn't working we would prepare to launch. And it would be the real deal. Safe plugs would come out of the warheads. Arm plugs would be put in and you would stand up to a condition that was called a twenty minute to a five. 20 to 5 drill. You had twenty minutes to prep the birds and once the birds were all prepped you went into a hold while they tried to identify the target. And if the target was determined to be an unfriendly you had five minutes.

BY: Wow.

BJ: And from that, as soon as you got that word, five minutes to launch.

BY: So that must have been nerve racking then?

BJ: It could be. Yes, it could be. Even scarier things we had happen, we had well, it was classified back in the sixties, seventies. The birds here were nuke (nuclear weapons).

BY: Okay.

BJ: We had a few blue bell incidents, a couple of blue bells. We had a fire in one of the magazines.

BY: Oh wow.

BJ: Scared the piss out of me. You always had an emergency disarm team on site twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. A team is a two man team. They would rotate every twenty-four hours. Another pair of people would be designated as a disarm team. In the event of an incident, their job was to disarm as many of the missiles as possible.

BY: Okay.

BJ: If there were other people in the area they had the luxury of evacuating. I was part of the disarm team in the fire.

BY: So you couldn't leave?

BJ: Two of us were trying to disarm as many of those missiles in there as the fire department was on their way in there. The fire was caused by an overheated heater in the magazine. Those were underground. Out here in the winter, it is cold. God, it's cold. No matter which way the wind is blowing it is coming off the water it is damp and it cuts right through you. The missiles had to be kept at a set temperature. They had a heating blanket on the missiles but the magazines, they also heat the magazines. And one of these heaters overheated and melted and went to flames. Now, it went to flames.

BY: And you had to go in there and..

BJ: Had to go in there and disable. What was scary was that one of the components of the solid fuel boosters is ether.

BY: That's highly toxic.

BJ: And they were always seeping ether. You could go to the back of the booster and stick your head up in there and get in the blaster and (sniff) and get high. We had guys that would do that. That was the scary thing that if the flames hit one of those boosters, set it off and we could have wound up with another incident like what happened in Leonardo, when Leonardo blew.

BY: Okay. So now we talked about your job, now what about social activities? What was going on around this area when you were serving here? Where was the place to be?

BJ: (laughter) (In the years) '68 to '72, the height of the War in Vietnam, soldiers were not looked upon with too much favor during the height of the protest period. Most of us it seemed to hang pretty much close to one another. We would have our barbeques out here. We had a bowling alley we could go to, a movie theater, stuff like that. So, anytime anybody went down to the Highlands it inevitably wound up trouble. They'd get into a fight. Pretty much we stayed together. We partied hardy when we went down to McGregor Range. We'd get over into Mexico and have a good time.

BY: I can only imagine. And what about the beach? Did you use the beach here a lot? Is there a certain one that you used to go to?

BJ: During my off duty hours, I came here as an E-3, I was married, I didn't have housing. I was living on the economy. So, I was living in an apartment down in Long Branch and commuting. So, during my off duty hours, I would utilize more the beaches down in Long Branch.

BY: Okay.

BJ: I had, when I got out of the Army and was working here as part of Army Direct Support Contact Team (part of the Ordnance Department's Maintenance Operations) I would fish quite a bit during my off duty hours along the beach here. And to this day my wife and I love to come out here to Sandy Hook. And we do it regularly.

BY: That's good that you still come back.

BJ: Oh yes.

BY: Do you remember any of the food here when you did eat here what was the food like?

BJ: The food was not back at all. The mess sergeant did the best he could with the personnel that he had. The cooks, you realize that this being a nuclear site you had to have clearance to work in either one of the areas. We would get soldiers sent to us and it would turn out that they during the process of verifying their clearance that something was amiss and they couldn't get a clearance so inevitably they wound up being made cooks.

BY: Oh okay.

BJ: They did the best they could. The food wasn't bad, I don't think.

BY: That's what everybody says. They said it wasn't bad.

BJ: No. It wasn't bad. You know the mess sergeant took pity on quite a few of the younger enlisted men especially if you worked hard for him when ever you had KP (Kitchen Police) duty or something like that. You worked hard for him, you didn't give him any lip, did what you were told at the end of your tour of KP he might throw you a couple of steaks. Uncooked, "Here take them home".

BY: That's not bad.

BJ: It wasn't bad. I appreciated the mess sergeant tremendously. Every mess sergeant we had here was great I thought.

BY: Now you were pretty close to the city. Did anyone ever go to the city, New York City? Did you ever take any excursions?

BJ: (laughter) Oh, there was one instance. Yeah, guys would go up to the city. I can remember we as an Army Air Defense unit, we were the only active Army unit that was ready for quote unquote combat on short notice within the continental United States. We were not a show unit for parades and stuff like that. On occasion we had parades alright you know, they'd get us all decked out in our Class A uniforms and we would be issued our weapons and after the parade was over you were supposed to go back down to the arms room and turn in your weapons. We had one guy, a flake, after this incident they pulled him. Pulled his clearance and got rid of him in a hurry. He took off in New York City in his class A's with his helmet and gear and his weapon to walk the streets of New York. He got picked up by the cops. MPs had to go up and get him and bring him back. Then the shit hit the fan.

BY: You guys must have got a kick out of that.

BJ: Oh yeah. It was funny.

BY: What was the easiest way to get to the city back then?

BJ: I would say probably bus. If you didn't have your own car, it was bus.

BY: Do you still keep in touch with anyone you served with while here?

BJ: Within the last year I located and spoke on the phone with another NCO. He had been my section chief when I was promoted to E-5. They made a section chief and he was my section chief. (Staff) Sergeant Arthur R. Damboise. He is in El Paso, TX. Near the old ADA School. He retired out there. And a hell of a nice man, sharp soldier. There's a lot of guys that I wish that I could locate but all attempts so far have come to naught.

BY: What did you go into doing after you had done your service? Did any of the skills they taught you help you?

BJ: I was, like I said, after I ETS, I was hired as an industrial equipment repairman and made a part of the Direct Contact Team right on Fort Hancock, right back here.

BY: So you got a job, they helped you out.

BJ: Well, the base didn't. Some of the guys that worked as part of the Direct Contact Support Team, knew me and when I was getting ready to ETS I said, "What am I going to do? I got a wife and two kids." At that time all the major companies were under affirmative action programs and I would get hired (snap fingers) if I was black or a woman or Hispanic like that. But they kind of backed off being a white so I can't find a job. I had been to JCP&L and New Jersey Bell and numerous other big companies. They told me, "Go down to Philadelphia". Put in an application down there at the United States Army support element down in Philadelphia. Because this direct support contact team was a satellite of theirs. I went down there, applied was hired. And they sent me right back up here.

BY: That's good for you then.

BJ: Yeah. It was good for me. And I was here until they closed the place in '74. And then I was picked up at Fort Monmouth. In fact, I just retired from Fort Monmouth in February of 2001.

BY: Congratulations. What stands out in your mind the most about your time here while you were here?

BJ: The setting here is idyllic. It's a beautiful place without a doubt. The work was long and hard. Realize that this is the height of the War in Vietnam. Most of the personnel coming into the Army were being channeled over to Vietnam. We were extremely shorthanded. The minimum size for a launcher crew (was) six men. Normally a launcher crew should have eleven to twelve men.

BY: And you guys were working five men short?

BJ: Five, sometimes six men short, seven men short. The, we were working putting in a 90, 80, 90 hours a week.

BY: Wow.

BJ: In fact, it got to the point where they actually were having us record our hours on site because they were trying to figure out how they could...

BY: Even it out.

BJ: ...Get more men. There was one stretch I put in 120 straight hours on site awake without sleep.

BY: Wow.

BJ: Totally exhausted.

BY: I can only imagine. That's a long time to be up.

BJ: Yes. See we had, you would periodically have a higher headquarters come to the Post and conduct a war game. Simulate that we, the United States is under attack. That normally is a three day event. Hardly anybody got any sleep during that. When during that 120 hour straight stretch I am in charge of quarters the war game started so I didn't sleep I was in charge of quarters. The war game started for three days. When it was over I was in charge of quarters again so I ended up without sleep for five days. And the reason I didn't get any sleep for three days, the war game was the evaluators came in and said we want to watch your junior section chief.

BY: That's you.

BJ: I ran every mission. I changed off my crew as much as I could. You know, I could see when they were getting exhausted. You know, I'd call the launcher control officer and ask them for, you know, a replacement for crewman 1, crewman 1 whatever I needed and they would send them from another section and I would send those two guys to go get some sleep but I ran it. I was there the whole time.

BY: What was that like when it was over? You just collapsed.

BJ: I was exhausted.

BY: Slept for days.

BJ: I was living on adrenaline only. And as bad as that period was still my tour here is nothing but fond memories.

BY: That's good then. Well, I'd like to thank you for doing an interview with me.

BJ: Okay then.

BY: And thank you for coming out.

#### END OF INTERVIEW

(Editor's note: Mr. Jackson added some notes to this interview in 2010. They are written below in his own words.)

In the summer of 1970, our unit was called into action from "Cold (Maintenance) Status. This was no drill as the code words for a drill, (Blazing Skies) was not used. Instead we



received "Battle Stations". This meant that we were installing the Arm Plugs on the nuclear warheads and actually preparing the missiles for launch - no simulation steps - actual preparation! We got to the point of being 5 minutes from a launch when we were instructed to "Hold Fire", and we stayed at that point in launch preparations for about an hour. What had happened was a Soviet Bomber had intruded into what we considered our airspace and we prepared to shoot him down. At the same time that we were preparing our missile for launch, U.S. Air Force Tactical Fighters were scrambled and instructed to intercept the bomber, turn him around, or failing that, shoot him down. The Fighters were successful in turning the bomber, but we remained on alert for almost a hour just in case he/or another bomber returned. Believe me, the atmosphere in both the IFC and Launch Areas was extremely tense that day. This was the scariest day I experienced while at Fort Hancock.

Also, this unit [Charlie Battery, 3rd Battalion, 51st Air Defense Artillery (Nike Hercules)] was the first Regular Army unit to fire a perfect score (100%) at their Short Notice Annual Practice (SNAP) . This feat was accomplished in the fall of 1971 and was never repeated by another Regular Army unit in remaining history of Nike Hercules system. The Battery Commander was so pleased to be able to have this accomplishment on his Officer's Efficiency Report (OER) that he took the entire SNAP Crew over the border into Mexico where he treated everyone to a lobster dinner and drinks. Additional rewards we received included being allowed to wear civilian clothes, instead of uniforms, on our return trip to Fort Hancock and, for married personnel; our wives were bussed to Newark Airport to greet us upon our arrival. This was the proudest accomplishment of my Army service.