

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Self Interview with Kenneth J. McCormick
S2 Headquarters Battery 3rd Missile Battalion 51st Artillery
1964-1966
Recorded Circa 2005
Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2011



Ken McCormick
Photo courtesy of Ken McCormick

Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

Ken McCormick: My name is Kenneth J. McCormick. I entered the Army on December 6, 1963 and was discharged on December 5, 1966. I first came to Fort Hancock I believe it was sometime in January or February. I know it was right after basic training. That was in 1964. I was assigned to S2, Headquarters Battery of the 3rd Missile Battalion, 51st Artillery. It was also known as ARADCOM which is the Army Air Defense Command. I worked for a few months in S2 and my primary duty was burning secret documents. I used to have to take them down to the beach and try and burn them in a huge oil drum and after they were burned I used to have to take the ashes and mix them with sand and then bury them.

I had been engaged to be married when I was in the Army and when I asked for a couple of weeks off from the commander of S2 he told me that if I insisted on taking the time off he wouldn't deny me but he wouldn't let me work in S2 anymore. I would be sent to the motor pool. I took the time off and I was sent to the motor pool. In the motor pool I received a few different promotions and when I left I was an E5 specialist fifth class which was equivalent to what is known as a buck sergeant. I was the motor sergeant at the end. That was maybe for the last year, 10 months or a year. I am not exactly sure.

In that time at the motor pool a lot of interesting things happened. We had received a shipment of Ford Econoline vans and I think these were the first ones made. And one of my duties was I used to have to teach people how to drive and I did teach many of the people on base how to drive trucks, cars, different vehicles. One person took a van out and when he brought it back the sides were all crushed in and I said, "What happened? It's a new van." He said that he took it through a tunnel at Fort Hancock not realizing the tunnel was smaller than the van and it crushed the vehicles sides in. Well, I had to send that out to our contractor to have it fixed otherwise he would have ended up in the Guardhouse. So, we didn't mention that to anybody.

We all had several duties while we were out there and for the lower ranks it might have been KP (kitchen police) or duty driver and I had pulled duty driver a lot. All that meant was that maybe one night a week they'd use you to send messages to other posts around the area. For example like Fort Monmouth or Edison, New Jersey which was part of the 3rd Missile Battalion or even Holmdel. I remember going to Fort Monmouth and I entered an area known as the "war room." It looked like something out of the movie, *Dr. Strangelove*. It had all kinds of screens and maps of the United States from the air and different things like that, trajectories drawn on it.

Also another one of my duties was to drive the bus. We had a bus that drove from Fort Hancock into Atlantic Highlands. It would pick people up and bring them back to Fort Hancock. This ran at night after five o'clock. The bus was barred from the civilian motor pool at the end of the base. At that time the head of the civilian motor pool was a man named Robert Tancredi, a very nice guy. Their motor pool and our motor pool at the time were the only motor pools on the base.

I believe the buildings are still there that they used for the motor pool. We had oh I would say thirty or forty vehicles at any given time in the military motor pool and we would repair them, gas them up, and keep them clean. Although keeping them clean what we would do is anyone that took them out when they brought them back they would have to wash and clean them out and also refill them. Trip tickets had to be filed in the motor pool to show exactly where a person went and the mileage and that is how we tried to keep unauthorized miles off of the vehicles. These vehicles were composed mostly of civilian type vehicles, not military vehicles. We had some Dodge sedans, some Ford pickup trucks, some Ford vans and a few assorted odd vehicles like a stake and platform trucks. We did have a few tactical vehicles, not many. We had a wrecker called the dragon wagon. That was able to tow a vehicle as big as a tank. We also had some tactical deuce and a half trucks. It was easy for us to keep the commercial vehicles running because we had contracts for parts and things. It was very hard to get parts for the tactical vehicles. You could wait for months, even years for a part to come in on a tactical vehicle.

Our biggest tactical vehicle was our missile trailer. Now at my time at the base all the batteries were composed of Nike-Hercules missile. The Ajax had been replaced before I got there. The missile trailer was usually used to haul a dummy missile and a dummy

booster in parades. It was very large. It was a hundred feet long and pivoted in two places making it almost impossible to back it up. I remember one time we had to back it into the shop because the officers' wives wanted to decorate it for a parade that was coming up. It took a half an hour to get this vehicle back into this spot that they wanted it. We all took a hand trying to get it back.

This is a vehicle we had sent the dummy missile and dummy booster to Red Bank on. Unfortunately, the missile fell off and blocked the Red Bank Bridge. I sent the wrecker out right away to put the missile back on the trailer and I managed to get it back on there before the story of missile falling off the bridge ever made it to the newspapers or the news programs because the missile looked like a real missile. Probably scared the heck out of the people who saw it. (laughter)

When I was at the base, they decided that they were going to blow down all the towers in the area. That they had become a hazard but the towers were very sturdy. The towers were composed of a, it looked like a pipe that was about eight feet in diameter with a tower on the top of it and at the base of the tower was cement. And the Navy came in and planted charges all around the towers, set them off and the only thing that happened was they blew a chunk of cement out of the base but the tower never came down. That was why the motor pool....I think the towers are still up today. (laughter) I am not sure.

We were always fishing when I was there and we used to be able to catch stripped bass that were very big. I don't know. I don't want to exaggerate but the stripped bass must have been 42-43 inches long. We had caught so many that the chef in the mess hall refused to cook any more.

Now we had a soldier that used to come in the middle of night drunk all the time and some of the people that I was with thought it would be funny to put one of these stripped bass in his bed. So what they did was they put the stripped bass in his bed with the bass's head on his pillow and covered the bass up to beginning of his head with the blanket. He came in inebriated, climbed in the bed on top of the bass, screamed and ran out. We didn't see him for the rest of the night. He never mentioned it the next day when he came in. I guess he thought it was a nightmare.

There was a fella that worked in the motor pool. I won't mention his name for obvious reasons but he was always getting himself in trouble. What he did, he would go AWOL (away without leave) and after a couple of days for some odd reason he would turn himself in to me. Now, I lived most of my time on the base in a house trailer with my wife, in the trailer camp. Before I was married for about a few months I lived in the barracks. Now this guy comes knocking on my trailer door and would say, "Look. I want to turn myself in again." I would always say to him, "Why do you always come to me?" I hated to do this you know. He would say, "I feel more comfortable with you. Would you please do me the favor?" Now an example of this was apparently he had frequented one of the prostitutes downtown and didn't pay her and she told the sheriff or whatever he was downtown that the guy tried to rape her and they had a warrant out for him and he turned himself into me. And of course, I had to turn him into the commander.

My wife had some girlfriends that liked to come and visit. They were not in the military. They were from Scotland where my wife was from but they had come to the United States. This one girl in particular, her name was Elsa, caught the eye of one of the young MPs (military police) on post. And after a while every time Elsa would come in I would hear knocking on my door and he said, "Ken, can I come in?" I would invite him into the house and he said he really liked her. But as fate would have it, I don't think they ever went out together.

Another strange thing happened to me one day. I had my car parked in the parking lot for the trailer camp and it was the only car in the whole lot. At that time the lot was huge. Maybe it was a thousand feet wide and maybe 400 feet deep. I heard a knock on my door and it was my neighbor, a sergeant that used to work at C Battery. He said to me, "Ken I don't know how to say this to you." I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "I just hit your car when I was parking mine." (laughter) It just struck me very funny and I started to laugh. I said, "How could you possibly hit my car? It was the only car in that huge parking lot." He said to me, "I know it's crazy, isn't it." He said, "It was the only car there. I don't know how I hit it." I mean it was just an impossible situation. The house trailer I had I bought from another soldier so it stayed in the same place. It was a nice house trailer. In those days it was considered big. Today, it is very tiny. I think it was 48 feet long and 8 feet wide. It had a living room, kitchen, a bathroom and bedroom.

When I worked in the motor pool we had a fella who was from New England. For some reason he always wanted to get in with the guys from the south and he would walk around with his phony southern accent which really sounded ridiculous and for the guys from the south he really was a joke. Now, they had this car that had a broken crank shaft and it was an old car. They managed to sell it to this fella for five or six hundred dollars. And he was never able to fix it and he could have got a used car of the same kind cheaper than it would have cost to fix the old car they sold him. One day when I was going into the motor pool, I was the first one in and I heard screaming coming from the shop. And I went down there and there was this fellow. He had his hands and feet tied with rope and he was hanging upside down from the hook on the wrecker. The hook was hooked into the rope on his feet. Of course I let him down.

Now one thing about working in the motor pool, it really destroyed your clothing and there really wasn't much you could do about it. The reason for this was you were always dealing with battery acid and heavy grease. Battery acid would make these little holes throughout your uniform, fatigues. Some of the grease was so bad that even when you washed these things you just couldn't get it all out. Now, we were due for an inspection and I being a platoon leader of the motor pool had my men fall out and I stood in front of them and the first sergeant came along and he took one look at us and he said, "McCormick, I never want to see you and your men out here for an inspection again." He said, "If there is ever an inspection, I want you guys to disappear." Well, of course, we all got laughing but not in front of the motor sergeant because this was like the greatest thing that anybody could have ever wanted. You got to remember that these inspections took hours to get ready for. So I mean we didn't have to do anything and we

didn't have to be there. It was sure a lot better than when I worked in S2. We had, I used to have to go down to the beach in the summer with that hot fire burning those documents.

Now our parts were mostly for commercial vehicles and we would get them in Red Bank, New Jersey and the other towns around the area so often we had to take a truck and go down to town and pick up parts. Now if there was anything we had to do we had it made because we would just do it and say we were picking up parts. Nobody cared and nobody knew where we were.

Now when I worked in S2 in the intelligence office, the captain there was extremely strict. I don't think I ever saw him smile. As fate would have it our company commander went on leave and who did they appoint to fill in temporarily was my old captain from the intelligence office. And the first thing he did was he came in and announced that there was going to be an inspection. So we worked on a weekend on a Friday night we worked all weekend and he was going to inspect Saturday morning when usually we were off. So he comes in on a Saturday morning with his sergeant. His sergeant takes out a pen knife goes over to the wooden staircase takes the pen knife out and jams it in between two steps. And of course pulls out a little old wax that was that you couldn't help that will always be in there. And said this place is a pig sty. You are all restricted to barracks for the weekend. He was just not a nice man.

Now in the motor pool we never had every thing we needed for different things. For example, I was told that the motor pool had to be painted and re tiled. I didn't have any paint and I didn't have any tile. So, what I did was I called Mr. Tancredi from the civilian motor pool and I told him my problem and I asked him if there was anything he needed. And he told me some stuff he was looking for and couldn't get and we happened to have it. So what we did was we traded. Bob Tancredi, he got the things he needed and I got the paint and the tiles and redid the motor pool.

As far as my house trailer I was finally able to sell that to a place that sold trailers as offices for construction companies. I did get some money back. I never got my \$1200 back that I paid for it originally but I did get \$600 back which meant that my whole time in the house trailer only cost me \$600 to live there because the grounds themselves, the trash removal and things like that all came to only \$23. That included electric, water, everything. It was \$23 a month in those days.

While I was in the motor pool a colonel pulled in and he was driving a I think it was a Triumph sports car and it was making a noise. And he said to me can I please look at his car. It's making this terrible noise and he would be back later. I said, "Sure." He dropped his car off. I crawled underneath and lo and behold stuck in the fender was a branch of a tree which I pulled out right away and solved the whole problem. Of course we didn't tell him it was only a branch of a tree. He came back and we told him we worked on his car and we fixed it and etcetera. He took it for a spin. He thought we were the greatest mechanics in the world.

In the motor pool, I mean on the base rather was a sergeant major. His name was Sergeant Major Bonzell. Sergeant Major Bonzell had bought a new Cadillac. And it was a copper color and when he got on the road that led to the base for some reason seagulls would start dropping their clamshells on his car trying to break them open. (laughter) Well, Sergeant Major Bonzell went into a panic, raced into the MP station and demanded that the MPs do something about it. But unfortunately all they could do was double over in laughter. And they said to him, "What in the world do you want us to do?" So got back in his car and he raced back to his office which was at the end of the Post and the seagulls followed him all the way dropping stuff on him. (laughter)

One of the things that I thought was strange was the Nike Hercules missile from what I was told had three atomic warheads. These things were in Holmdel, New Jersey and Edison, New Jersey and of course on Sandy Hook. We had the double battery which was C Battery. So all these areas had atomic weapons apparently and I don't think anybody knew it.

We used to have another duty and that was called charge of quarters. What that meant was that on the weekends somebody, I forget was the minimum rank was. I don't remember if it was E4 or E5, had to be in charge of the barracks. I would get this duty once in a while. One day I was sitting at the desk on the first floor and lo and behold I look up and three naked women go running by. I said, "Oh my god what is going on." I found that some guys had brought their girlfriends into the barracks. Well, I promptly got rid of all of them before we all got court martial.

One of my duties when I was in the motor pool was I used to have to go from battery to battery and check and help the people fill out the trip tickets for the vehicles so I would get to see that batteries every once in a while. Another advantage was after hours you could use like the different tools and things to work on any projects of your own. And that is if you worked in the motor pool or you had a friend who worked in the motor pool.

We were in the need of a car so what I did I had purchased a 1956 Plymouth from a junkyard. The body was in perfect shape but the engine had a broken crank shaft. Then I had purchased an engine from another junkyard for the same car that was in good shape and we, me and another friend of mine we built the whole car and it looked beautiful. It passed New Jersey inspection immediately and I had a great car for the rest of my time on base.

It never seemed that I had enough money because after a while we had a child and my wife couldn't really get off the base to work since she didn't drive so I used to pull extra duty and I wasn't proud. I would even pull KP but I was an E5 and you weren't supposed to. One day I was pulling KP on the weekend and the first sergeant walked in and saw me and blew his stack. He told me if I liked KP so much he would let me pull it as a private so that's when I stopped pulling KP. The reason I pulled KP of course is because I would get paid for it for somebody else's duty.

The lucky thing for me is when I first came on that base the guy that slept in the bed next to me was the chef so every night after he was done with his duties over in the mess hall he would bring food back. And I remember he was Hawaiian and he used to make Hawaiian pizza and the guys used to love that. That's the first time I ever had that.

Now of course we would always run out of money before the end of the month because the salaries were low. You never had much money and in those days everybody smoked. You couldn't help but smoke because they either made the cigarettes so cheap or they would give you free cigarettes. It was hard to resist. Not that it mattered but we all seemed to smoke the same brand. Pall Mall unfiltered, everybody that I knew used to smoke Pall Mall unfiltered. Now we would smoke a cigarette we would save the butts, all of us. And we had made this huge water pipe and we were in the motor pool at the end of the month it had like eight hoses coming out of it and we would take all the tobacco from the butts and would put it in the water pipe and we would smoke it. We would also use the tobacco from the butts for pipes and when it got near the end of the month we would take the tobacco put it in a pipe and smoke it.

Now before I moved on base we had lived in two places. I had lived in a place in Atlantic Highlands near the bridge and I lived in another place in Atlantic Highland that was a few blocks away in from the first place. Well, my wife and I had gone for a ride and we were about seven or eight miles away from the base. I forget what town we were in and we got in a traffic accident. I got out of my car. I was hit in the rear and as incredible as this sounds the guy that hit me was my landlord. (laughter) We were both in a state of shock at that and that's just about all the experiences that I can remember from Fort Hancock.

END OF INTERVIEW