RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH RONALD TUNNERMANN

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Molly Graham: This begins an oral history interview with Ronald Tunnermann on May 14, 2016 in Hillside, New Jersey. The interviewer is Molly Graham. There were some things you wanted to add to the record.

Ronald Tunnermann: Yes, yes, I want to add a couple of things to the record. One of them, a minor part of history, the Cuban Missile Crisis was in October 1962. Now, I was in the service then. Actually, that was my second year, and I had just one year to go, yeah, because I got out in November '63. The Cuban Missile Crisis, I don't know if you know what that is. You do. [Editor's Note: In October 1962, photographs taken by an American U2 spy plane revealed Soviet nuclear missile installations in Cuba. President John F. Kennedy responded by ordering a quarantine, or naval blockade, around Cuba to prevent more Soviet weapons from getting there. For thirteen days, the public feared imminent nuclear war between the U.S. and Soviet Union. The Cuban Missile Crisis was resolved when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles from Cuba, in exchange for the U.S. not invading Cuba. Secretly, the U.S also agreed to remove its missiles from Turkey.]

MG: Yes, but talk about it from your perspective.

RT: Well, it affected where I was, the company I was in. Well, you know then it was Kennedy had the blockade, and the ships were going. Khrushchev was sending the ships from Russia, the Soviet Union, to Cuba, [carrying] the missiles, and they believed there were missiles on the ships. I don't know if it was one ship or more than one ship, but I remember getting orders, because I was the company clerk in the company I was in in Georgia, for two of the guys in the company that were transferred. One was transferred to another section of Fort Gordon, and the other was transferred to Florida. The way I was told it was like they had something called tent city. It was a temporary-type thing. I never saw them again. The idea was, especially from Florida, they were ready to go over to Cuba. It was only ninety miles. I think a lot of people, I believe, a lot of people in this country didn't realize how close we were really to war. If Khrushchev didn't back down and had the ships turned around, who knows what would have happened. Would Kennedy have proceeded and sunk the ships? Thankfully, Khrushchev did. He gave in, and the ships turned around. That was the end of it. I guess the point was that two of the guys in my company were gone. I never saw them again, and one of them [went] to Florida, which was ninety miles [from Cuba] and off they go. I don't know how many people were down there. That was that.

MG: Were you following that event closely as that was taking place?

RT: No, because it was just something that was over, and that's that. I remember hearing about it and then about the transfers, but then that was over. So, I didn't really follow any beyond that, yeah. The other thing is, this was the one that I thought of when you were here and then I forgot, and to tell you the truth, I'm glad I forgot, [laughter] because it gave you a chance to come back. Anyhow, this had to do with, like I told you, I was drafted the day before Thanksgiving [in] 1961. Thanksgiving is on a Thursday, right, so it was a Thursday. We were out of Newark, with a bunch of guys, and we were told, "You men will be going to Fort Jackson, South Carolina." I think I had said this before. We said, "What happened to Fort Dix? Everybody goes to Fort Dix." It was because Kennedy was drafting so many people because of the May Day with

Russia, Soviet Union, I guess they still called it that, [and the arms race and buildup of the Soviet Army]. They were sending one month Fort Jackson, South Carolina, one month to Fort Dix, and one month [to Fort] Leonard Wood out in Missouri. I was in the month that was going to go to South Carolina in November. A friend of mine, he went in in December, and he went to Fort Dix, so his family could come visit him. Off we go. That was the day before Thanksgiving. We're on the train, because the story we were told was that, I'm repeating what was said at the first interview, we were told that they used to send people like that down there or to Missouri by plane, but a month or two before, a plane crashed and a lot of soldiers died. So, they were sending us by train. It was late in the afternoon. We were on the train, and we went to Washington, D.C. We had to get off the train and go to a different train, and I remember I was walking through the cars. They had the berths, bottom, top, bottom, top, up, down, up. I got an up. [There were] no windows, nothing, and down on the bottom there were all windows. I heard a guy say, "Wow, look at that, there's the Washington Monument. Wow, look at that." I couldn't see anything, because there were no windows up on top. Also, it was kind of small. I'm tall. I remember my feet touched the bottom; my head touched the top. Off we went. The next day, we're down in South Carolina, and somebody said something. I don't know if it was the conductor, that we had to pull over to the siding because there's an express train coming through. I said, "That's fine with me." I didn't want to go anyhow. So, off we go to the siding. Now, this is a little side story. We're sitting there waiting for the express to pass, and these two guys get on the train. They had white lightning. Do you know what that is? Moonshine, yeah, a pint. [It cost] a dollar-fifty a pint. Try it before you buy it. I said, "I'm not going to try that. I might be blind the next day." "Try it before you buy it." It was down South. They had that little accent. Vicky makes fun of me if I say something like, "Try it before you buy it" [said with a southern accent] and then a dollar-fifty. I don't know if anybody bought one, but I would have never bought it, because I probably would have wound up in the stockade, if you buy stuff like that. They got off. The express went by, and off we went. This is Thanksgiving, the day, because we were on the train all night. We get off into Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and we went into the mess hall. A big sign on it said, on the food, "Take all you want, but eat all you take." That was Thanksgiving. We had the food and all that stuff. We were off for the day. [We could] hang around, do whatever. Guys played basketball, all kinds of stuff. See, that's with me, I never wanted attention. I still don't, so I didn't play basketball or any of that stuff. I worked in a liquor store after high school, but I didn't want any of that attention. Anyhow, that was Thanksgiving. The next day, we get called out. It was always around four in the morning, five in the morning, something like that. [We got in] formation. There was over a hundred guys in the company. A sergeant, or some rank, said, "The following men will take one step forward." I don't know how many were there, but I would think close to two hundred usually in a company, maybe less. Eight people were called out, "Take one step forward." I was one of them. I told you you have your last name on the thing, "Tunnermann," of course, so I took one step forward. I said it turned out there were eight of us. They dismissed the rest of the company, and we got into a truck with no windows. It was like a bakery truck, but there were no windows or anything and small. We didn't know each other, and off we went. We drove, I guess, about five minutes, maybe longer, and stopped. We got out. We went into a building. One level [was] like a classroom, and we sat at tables, separate tables, again, because we didn't know each other, [for] five minutes or more, maybe a little longer. Then, all of a sudden, two guys come out in the front on a small stage, suits and ties and white shirts, and they start talking. They said that, I don't remember the exact words, but paraphrasing, that there was something where if we went

ahead with this, we'd have to reenlist for three years. By the way, [I thought], "Shoot, I've got about seven hundred or something days to go. I really don't feel like reenlisting for a third year," because I wanted to get back to school. I went to school at night, and back to work, my career. Reenlist for a third year, if it was just the two, [I would have considered it]. We'd have to go through basic training with the uniform and all that. After basic training, we would never wear a uniform again. We'd be in shirts and ties and that kind of stuff. It was CIC, Counterintelligence Command, like the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], [but] it was CIC. [Editor's Note: Formed in 1977, the United States Army Intelligence and Security Command (INSCOM) handles intelligence, security operations and electronic warfare for the U.S. Army. During the Cold War, the U.S. Army Intelligence Agency existed as one arm of Army intelligence that dealt with counterintelligence. Previously, it was called the U.S. Army Intelligence Corps. During World War II, the Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) functioned as the Army's intelligence agency. (inscom.army.mil)] I looked it up on the computer the other day, and it still exists or it was still up there, counterintelligence. I think about that today, what my life would have been like, [had I joined] Counterintelligence Command. I found that out mainly from, it was at Costco five, ten years ago. I don't know how I got involved in a conversation with some guys behind me and we were talking about the military and the one guy had just retired from something and I said, "Yeah, it was CIC." I said, "It was Counterintelligence. I can't remember." He said, "Oh, you're Army. That was Counterintelligence Command." Like I said, I think of it today what my life would have been if I had taken that path. Someone I was talking to about this said, "You might not be alive." I don't think they would have had me as one of the operatives out there [makes a machine gun noise] killing people. I don't think so. I'm guessing that it might have been more administrative, but maybe not. Maybe they figured, "This guy, we can use him as an asset." They always call you an asset. Then, they handed us each a sheet of paper, and it was a spelling test. I think this is, again, where the reading really helped me. Two words on that thing, and I don't remember all the words, but I think there was maybe one, maybe two pages. It was multiple choice, and two of the words I remember were occur, is it one C or two Cs, one R, or two Rs, and you had to pick which one, four or five choices, which one was right, occur, occurs, occurred, again, two Cs, one R, two Rs, one C. The other word was occasion, same thing, one C, two Cs, and one S, two S, and you had to pick out which one was [correct]. I don't remember the rest of the words. What else? I think there was something on there, I don't remember for sure, of where you could say, "I'm not interested," whether it was just check off a box or you just said it, I probably had to do something. Like I said, I think today what my life would have been. When you finished basic training, like I said, then you wore a suit and tie and all and I'm guessing maybe go to Washington somewhere, like the CIA. I had never heard of the CIC, counterintelligence.

MG: Why do you think you and these seven other guys were selected?

RT: I think it had to do with the tests that we took before we went in. When I went out for my physical, you had to take all kinds of tests, and I think I scored very high. Let me add to that why I say that [about] those tests. That's why when I finished basic training, a lot of times after that, you go to advanced training. I don't know if you know that. You do. I didn't go to advanced training. I went to Georgia, OJT, on-the-job training. I think it was because I scored very highly on those. The reason I say that is, and maybe these people at CIC felt, "This guy, maybe we can use him as an asset and send him out to get shot." Who knows? A few years ago,

I got something in the mail from the military having to do with an identification card, and then I went to Westfield, and there's some kind of government thing there. I had to bring my DD214, you know where it tells you you're discharged and all. They took my picture, and they made up a card. I have it. I use that when I go to the store to get the military discount. There was a guy standing there, a young guy, and I got talking to him while they were fussing around and taking my picture. I look like a fool in those pictures they take. I said, "The CIC." "Oh, you must have been a genius." I don't want to brag; don't put that in the transcript. I said, "Oh," because I never thought about that. Then, I thought about maybe that was why. How come eight of us out of a couple hundred? Maybe there was something I did very well on that made these people [pick me]. I guess the computer. Did they have computers then? I don't think so. No, they didn't. They didn't have any computers.

MG: Not the way we have them today.

RT: Not at all, no. Probably that big, what do they call it, [ENIAC], the giant thing that filled the whole room somewhere, [ENIAC, Electrical Numerical Integrator and Calculator]. This guy said that, "You must have been a genius." The girls in there said, "Whoa, what do you mean?" He started talking. Then, they handed me my card, and I left. I never really pursued it with him or anything. Maybe that's what it had to do with. Maybe I did so well on the tests that I jumped out of the whatever they fill out. Then, again, I think about it, what my life would have been.

MG: Do you know if the other guys checked yes?

RT: I don't know, because the next day when we fell out, they didn't say anything about take one step forward, none of that, so maybe they all said no. I just have a feeling it was really because of that reenlist for three years. I'm guessing we were all probably drafted, because that's what was going on at that time. Maybe they didn't want to bother with it either. In a way, I'm glad I did get called at that time, because a few years later, we were really heavy into Vietnam and a few years later maybe I would have been sent over there. I think I told you that Bill (Cisco?), he went over in '68, and he had all that Agent Orange sprayed on him. Then, he got the prostate cancer. He's still okay, but his heart's bothering him. He has to go every so often for tests, and they kept telling him, the doctors kept saying to him, that's because of that Agent Orange. In fact, the government pays. On the tax form, you know they have all these different categories, and one of them says Agent Orange, because the government pays people. He was collecting, but then when he had the operation for the prostate, the government stopped paying him. Well, what about his heart that's bothering him? He went in in '68, and he went over. He lived, thankfully, and he came back. He doesn't talk about it, like most men that were in the war, even women now. I guess women really aren't in combat. They're talking about doing it now, combat. Something was on television about having a draft again for girls. I think about my granddaughters. I hope they don't have it. That story, I think, was interesting. [Editor's Note: The chemical defoliant Agent Orange, which the United States government used in Vietnam to clear jungles, causes a number of serious health problems in humans, including cancer. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs offers health exams, health care, disability compensation and other benefits to veterans that were exposed to Agent Orange during their military service.]

MG: It is, yes.

RT: Because it was like the mystique, and, like I said, what would I be? Would I be alive? What experience would I have had there at the CIC, counterintelligence? That would have been neat, but I didn't do it.

MG: Are there any other stories you want to share or anything else you want to add to the record?

RT: No, that was the two things, especially the CIC thing. Like I said, I'm glad I forgot. I'd been talking to you like this, and then I think, "Oh, CIC." Then, I get going, and then I totally forgot about it until after you left. I think it was the next day or something. Then, I called, and I left a message that I had something else. To me, that was important, because there was only eight of us and because I think about the CIA and the CIC and that I wouldn't be wearing the uniform anymore and that I'm part of some kind of an organization.

MG: It must have given you some confidence.

RT: [What]?

MG: Did it give you any confidence?

RT: I'm sorry.

MG: Can I turn this off?

RT: Yeah, turn it off a second.

[Tape Paused]

RT: That was the main thing, that CIC, because, again, it would have affected me if I had done it and signed up and who knows where I would have wound up, the whole thing, what your life would be.

MG: Yes, there are a lot of crossroads that put you in one direction or the other.

RT: Yeah, yeah.

MG: This has been such a treat.

RT: For me.

MG: I am happy to come back again.

RT: Oh, I hope so. I hope so. I can think of something. I don't know what. It doesn't have to do with this maybe.

MG: I will let you know what I think about all these books you have given me.

RT: Yeah, yeah, I'm glad that I had these. I mentioned them last time, and then you left. I'm so glad this happened about the CIC and your coming back, and then coming back was delayed how many times. Then, unfortunately, you had that accident. I really feel bad about that.

MG: It is okay.

RT: I'm so glad you were not hurt bad.

MG: Yes, me too.

RT: Is that on?

MG: I will turn this off. Thank you so much.

RT: You're welcome.

MG: This has been a treat.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Transcribed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 9/27/16
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