



Hands Across History

A joint newsletter for the White Sands Historical Foundation and the White Sands Pioneer Group.



Volume IX, Letter III

September 2013

Andres Portillo And Jim Eckles To Enter WSMR Hall Of Fame

White Sands Missile Range will induct Andres Portillo and Jim Eckles into its Hall of Fame this year during a special luncheon and ceremony on Oct. 23. They are being honored for their outstanding contributions to the missile range's mission and join an elite group of 48 men and women inducted since 1980.

The two inductees represent the opposite ends of the WSMR work spectrum with Portillo coming out of the technical, data collection area of the National Range and Eckles from the Public Affairs Office. Portillo was an expert in optics, developing and utilizing camera systems to capture test data as missiles screamed through the sky at supersonic speeds impacting targets with resounding explosions. Eckles explained such systems and tests to the public and grew to be known as the "range historian" when he retired.

Andres Portillo

Portillo was born and raised in El Paso, graduating from Cathedral High School. After a stint at Texas Western (now UTEP), Portillo joined the WSMR workforce in 1958.

Right away, Portillo grasped the business of using various camera systems to capture different kinds of missile information. By the mid-60s he was the team leader for "standing up" ballistic cameras on the north end of White Sands for tests of such night shots as the Athena. Athenas were fired from Green River, Utah in the middle of the night.

The cameras recorded the streaks of light from the Athena's re-entry vehicle as a booster propelled it down into the target area on White Sands. The trajectory of that vehicle was then analyzed using the exposed film.

Portillo's experience with all the different camera systems and the many needs of test programs placed him on the front lines during the late 1970s through the 80s. This was a time when the range was moving away from manned camera equipment and developing remotely controlled and automatic tracking equipment.

The new systems included the Aided Laser Tracking System (ALTS), the Multi-Mode Automatic Tracking System (MATS), the Launch Area Theodolites (LATS) and the Kineto Tracking Mount (KTM). These systems allowed closer

placement of optics to hazardous events since no humans were on board. Stunning photos were the result.

Also, video was integrated into some of them and suddenly, range controllers and program personnel could see what was going on in real time. They were no longer blind.

According to Portillo's nomination, his "leadership was instrumental in integrating the remote automatic tracking systems" into WSMR's data collection capability. When it came to operating and maintaining these systems, Portillo "was the go-to-person."

This type of recording capability was necessary for the future of testing at White Sands and serves as the "backbone of today's optical systems." It was so important because the missile systems changed and the program managers wanted to see particular events captured in great detail.

For example, the Army Tactical Missile System's missile can carry a variety of submunitions to be dispensed over a target area. These can vary from hundreds of little bomblets to a handful of smart weapons like the BAT that move out and seek targets on their own. Without these remotely controlled systems, the cameras used to capture the dispersion of the munitions would be safely placed miles away. Instead, because no humans are there, the cameras are in close.

By the 1990s, Portillo's experience and expertise put him in a position to help other military test ranges. In the Department of Defense there is a Range Commanders Council.

see **Hall of Fame Inductees**, page 3



Portillo



Eckles

A Different Point Of View On Military Life

Editor's Note: Johnny Lay's article in the last issue of Hands Across History prompted this response from Charlie Schneider. Obviously Charlie, being a low-ranking enlisted man, saw life at White Sands very differently. He continues his theme in the short piece that follows his letter. It is about his belt buckle. Who would have thought a belt buckle would be the grist for a good story.

Dear Editor:

If Johnny Lay hadn't included a photo of the Memorial Day parade, I would have assumed he was in a different 169th than I was. My day started with a trip to the Consolidated Mess where a cook reminded me it was a court-martial offence to take two half pints of milk and the food you got is what was put on your tray. The only time that seconds were offered was on Sunday evening when cold cuts were served.

My day started after breakfast. I made my bunk and cleaned the area around it. I then checked the shelf in back of the bunk to insure my gear was in proper order and my clothing hanging on a pipe below the shelf was clean and in the proper sequence.

I then performed one of the common area cleaning duties I was assigned. These ranged from picking up butts to cleaning the latrine. All these acts were done knowing that the barracks would be inspected by the First Sergeant and just a simple infraction would get you a couple of hours of extra duty.

I then fell out in formation. Our squad was inspected by Corporal Manning who would check us to insure we met all military standards. When roll call was complete, we marched to the motor pool where we climbed onto the line trucks and headed out to the desert.

Out there, I and other privates climbed poles in 100 degree heat, I never did see a Corporal or higher rank climb a pole.

Johnny's comment that none of the recruits volunteered to climb ninety foot poles isn't true. I had been climbing fifty-foot poles with ease and saw no reason why I couldn't climb ninety footers. My offer was declined. I was told they didn't need any more help.

Unless you had a car you were just about restricted to the base as the bus service to Las Cruces and El Paso was scheduled more for the civilians working on the base than the military.

On November 2, 1951 I left WSPG for Korea. During my year in Korea, I spent just one night in the Seoul company compound. For seven months I was loaned to GHQ as a cable repairman. The remaining five months I was in charge of a five-man cable repair crew. Most of the time I was in Korea, ranks were frozen. So I left Korea a Pfc with an MOS of 1238, three bronze stars and, most important of all, me.

Charlie Schneider

The Belt Buckle by Charles R. Schneider

During my two year Army "career" I stood for a formal inspection only twice. It certainly wasn't that I was given the option of standing for an inspection or not. It was that while stationed in Korea I spent only one day in the company compound. For the remaining time I drew rations and quarters from other companies and was not considered part of the company.

While in the states I was on KP during most inspection days. I am sure Sergeant Dinini would have rescheduled my KP had he had the option but, as I was assigned KP from an alphabetically arranged roster, he did not have that option.

For several days prior to an inspection the entire barracks would spend their free time preparing for the event. I would just disappear to the PX or enlisted man's club knowing that all I had to do was place a card on my foot locker with the letters KP written on it. I knew this irritated Sergeant Dinini when he saw everyone working except me. I also knew that it would be advisable not to be "gigged" when I did stand for inspection.

My first inspection went well as it was performed by our company commander. His only concern was how well I had darned the holes in my socks. When I assured him that I experienced absolutely no discomfort he went on to inspect the next "soldier."

see Belt Buckle, page 7

Statement of Purpose and Membership

The "Hands Across History" newsletter is published by the White Sands Missile Range Historical Foundation and the White Sands Pioneer Group (WSPG). Both nonprofit organizations aim to preserve the accomplishments of White Sands Missile Range.

The newsletter is intended to keep members of both groups informed about current events and share information of common interest. The edi-

tor is Jim Eckles. He can be contacted by email at nebraska1950@comcast.net or at either address below.

Membership to either organization is open to anyone who shares their goals. However, details of membership (dues, etc.) differ between the two groups. For more information, please contact the appropriate organization and we will send it via the Post Office or email.

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Hall of Fame Inductees — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

All the military services participate and the intent is to share knowledge, technical standards, and equipment, if possible.

Initially Portillo was the missile range's representative to the Optical System group of the council. In 1994 he was made the vice-chairman of the group and then chairman in 1996 and again in 1998.

According to Portillo's nomination, he took on the role of "leader for the development and operational readiness of laser tracking systems" across the Army, Navy and Air Force test ranges. He is also credited for ranges sharing instrumentation which resulted in enormous cost savings.

Finally, Portillo "was instrumental in coordinating the effort to develop digital imaging systems to replace legacy film-based instrumentation." In fact, when the effort began, he coordinated the program for White Sands to host an "imaging shoot-off" so developers could test their devices during live missile firings. The shoot-off gave them the background they needed to go ahead and build the instruments WSMR and others would use to move from film to digital.

As they say, the rest is history. White Sands no longer uses film which means it no longer needs a huge film processing facility which saves buckets of money. Also, data is available much, much faster now; that makes testers happy.

Portillo retired in 2001 and still resides in El Paso.

Jim Eckles

Jim Eckles was raised in Lincoln, Nebraska where he attended the University of Nebraska, majoring in English literature and psychology. He then earned his masters degree in English lit from the University of Washington in Seattle.

Eckles came to the White Sands Public Affairs Office in 1977 as a Department of Army intern. On arrival, he was pushed to learn as much about the missile range as possible. He wrote news releases and feature stories about White Sands capabilities, weapons systems under test, and the people who made it all work. In addition, he conducted tours and escorted visitors all over the range – to places like the Optics Lab, the Nuclear Effects fast-burst reactor, the Navy launch complexes, Trinity Site, and Victorio Peak.

That knowledge paid off when KOBE radio asked him to do a short radio spot every morning during the WSMR morning drive time. From 1992 to 2003, Eckles interacted with the morning DJ to talk about some aspect of White Sands. He was on the air about 2,400 times and often had to fall back on his diverse knowledge for a meaningful topic each and every day.

With his interest in the White Sands history before 1940, Eckles was always ready to arrange and escort former WSMR ranchers to their homes for a visit. At first, range officials were reluctant to allow the visits without a great deal of security. Eckles was able to demonstrate the visits could be done safely and easily by himself and other Public Affairs staff members. Because of Eckles, many family reunions

were held on the old ranches.

In return Eckles learned a great deal about what it was like living in such remote locations during the early 20th century. Also, he learned about the rancher side of the militarization of the Tularosa Basin. Often he was able to communicate that side of the story to missile range officials so they understood current attitudes.

His enthusiasm for the landscape and complex history of WSMR rubbed off on others. Employees were always asking about the UPRANGE areas. Eckles devised a plan to periodically take a busload of employees for the day to see many of the places they had only heard about. This program ran for many years.

Because of his historical knowledge, Eckles proved to be the go-to guy for many of the commemorative signs on WSMR. The Environmental Office obtained the funds and asked Eckles to write and design the signs for the national historic landmarks – Trinity Site and Launch Complex 33. There are two dozen signs a Trinity Site alone. He also created the interpretive signs for the Nike Hercules and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's kiosk at San Augustin Pass.

Early on, Eckles understood the potential of the Internet. When Public Affairs was first offered a page on the fledgling WSMR website, Eckles jumped in. Working mostly from home, he turned the office's information material - fact sheets, handouts, photos and other materials - into digital data. While most organizations simply had their phone number and an address posted, Public Affairs had most of its printed material available on line. The Trinity Site section alone had dozens of photos, visitor's guide, attendance numbers, maps, eyewitness reports and more.

Eckles was noticed for his extra effort and in 1990 he was given the Test and Evaluation Command's Professionalism Award. In 1998, he was selected as one of six WSMR employees nominated for the New Mexico Distinguished Public Service Awards. In 1999, he was selected as the WSMR Civilian of the Year in the Professional Category.

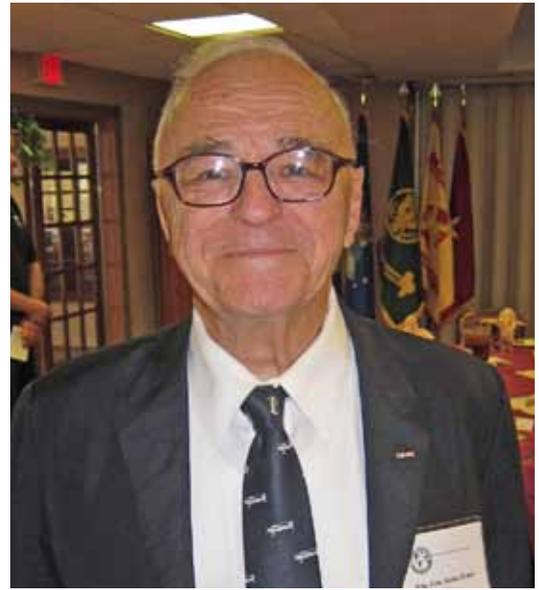
Finally, Eckles was often called on to tell some aspect of the White Sands story downtown. Over the years, he spoke to groups in places as far away as Albuquerque, Belen, Roswell and Carlsbad as well as those communities surrounding WSMR. Since he retired, it is something he has continued as people want to hear his "range tales."

Eckles retired from WSMR in 2007 and lives in Las Cruces.

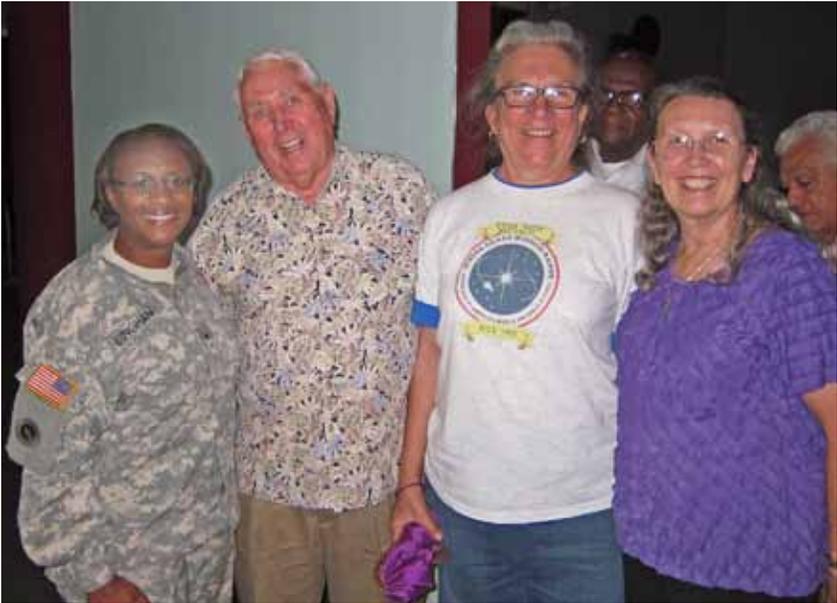
THE HALL OF FAME LUNCHEON WILL BE AT THE WSMR FRONTIER CLUB ON OCT. 23 BEGINNING AT 11:30 A.M. FOR TICKETS AND INFORMATION ABOUT THE MEAL, CONTACT THE RANGE'S PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE AT 575-678-1134 BEFORE OCT. 15.

A RECEPTION WILL FOLLOW AT THE WHITE SANDS MUSEUM WITH CAKE AND COFFEE.

About 90 Attend WSMR Reunion - August 29



Photos From Theater, Lunch And Museum



McFall Remembers His TDY On The Plains

Editor's Note: Mention of the Sergeant launches from the Plains of San Augustine in the May 2013 issue of Hands Across History, triggered pleasant memories for Lawrence McFall. He remembered writing this short piece about being out there for the firings and forwarded it.

Following the article is his response to a note I sent asking for more details.

The Plains of San Augustine by Lawrence McFall

As a PFC having finally received my secret clearance following four months of mundane details, my first assignment was with Systems Test Division, Nike Systems Test Branch. On May 2, 1963, my eagerness to begin my new job was interrupted with the receipt of TDY orders to the Plains of St. Augustine. Wondering why I was going to Florida with 124 other men, it was soon revealed that the area was only about 150 miles northwest of WSMR and deemed the second most sparsely populated area in the United States.

Our convoy of about 40 vehicles left the base early on Sunday morning, May 5, proceeding north on the dirt road that ran the length of firing range. It was late morning before we passed Trinity Site to enter US Highway 380, where we turned west toward Socorro. As the advance detachment we were to set up a tent city for ourselves and the Sergeant firing crews scheduled to arrive later that week. Newly white-washed rocks were carried along to encircle the command post we would construct for aerial photographing of our handiwork for publication.

Because of vehicle failures it was well into the afternoon before we passed through the sleepy little town of Magdalena where we stopped briefly to fill water trailers be-

ing towed by several jeeps. Daylight was not in abundance when we turned off US 60 and headed cross-country to the high-desert area that would be our home for the next month.

Using the headlights of the convoy vehicles we erected enough squad tents for ourselves, dug the necessary latrines, unloaded all supplies, and put the mess tent in order for the morning meal.

The following day we erected the headquarters tent with its flagpole and laid out company streets and outlined them with those white-washed rocks. Another day was required to prepare the launch area for the mobile launchers the firing crews would bring to the site.

With the bulk of the work completed most of the men returned to base with only about 25 of us remaining to keep things in order which included the nightly expulsion of rattlesnakes seeking the warmth of our tents.

After the missiles had been fired, our small group of soldiers dismantled the tents, removed all those white-washed rocks and equipment and left the area as pristine as when we arrived.

Etched in my memory is the single greatest temperature change I have ever witnessed in one day. That final morning found the water that filled my aluminum wash basin the evening before, frozen solid. By two o'clock that afternoon, the late May sun was a scorching 96°. I returned to WSMR sunburned and eager to begin my new job at the Nike site.

Lawrence's Response To The Editor

Thank you. I'm glad you like my remembrances sparked by your "50 Years Ago."

According to my notes we returned in the early evening of May 18, 1963. I still have my orders with the names of the 125 soldiers detailed to the Plains of St. Augustine. When reading down the list, the faces of many return. Most had Secret clearances, some Top Secret, a handful possessed Confidential, and just two or three had no clearances.

If any contact was made with the civilian population it would have been with an officer. We were off-road perhaps five miles southeast of Datil on US 60. Any approaching vehicle left lengthy dust trails. A daily jeep pulling a tank wagon was one of those dust clouds we rejoiced in seeing since it meant a possible cold shower that evening if the water held out. I don't recall any visitors or seeing anyone other than in uniform.

One aside, we learned that beer could be kept cool in a 2 to 3 foot hole dug in the floor of our squad tent with pasteboard covering the newly disturbed earth. An officer who liked beer as much as our small group went back to base and returned with six cases our second weekend out there. Except for the usual military discipline we experienced no harassment during our detail and generally remember having a great time.



A typical Sergeant launch from on WSMR in 1969.

see Sergeants On The Plains, page 7

Belt Buckle — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

The second inspection was performed by a “General.” Our company commander was “bucking” for Major and wanted to impress the upper brass so he invited a General from Fort Bliss to inspect the entire company. I felt hard times would fall on those that did not pass the inspection so as soon as I heard that next Saturday was to be a special day I started getting ready.

The Friday before the scheduled inspection started as a normal day. In the morning we fell out, were marched to the motor pool, climbed onto the line trucks and headed out to the desert to climb telephone poles. In the afternoon, after having our lunch at the base, instead of heading back out into the desert we were given the rest of the day to prepare for the inspection. It seems the company commander really wanted to impress the General.

As I had spent much of my free time for the past five days getting all my gear ready, I had nothing to do. Nothing is something you could not do on Army time so I sat on my foot locker polishing my brass belt buckle. When Sergeant Dinini came by a second time and saw me still sitting there polishing away, he asked if I had everything in order. When I assured him it was, he replied “It better be”.

This certainly was a challenge, one I was sure I would not lose. I had my hair cut. My uniform had been washed and pressed at the PX cleaners and the seams were so sharp, it seemed as if they would cut you. My shoes shined so brightly you could see your face in them. All my gear from my helmet to my poncho was perfectly placed on the shelf

behind my bunk and my uniforms hung in proper sequence on the bar below the shelf.

The following morning the entire company fell out in formation dressed in their class A uniforms ready for the big inspection. The General arrived ten minutes later. He was short and from his size it was obvious that he had consumed too many high calorie drinks at the officer’s club and did not exercise very much.

When the time came for me to be inspected, the General stood in front of me. The company commander was to his left and my sergeant, with pad in hand, was at his right. My weapon was checked. I was closely scrutinized from head to toe.

When finished, the General snapped, “His belt buckle isn’t polished.”

At that moment, both Sergeant Dinini and I knew what the other was thinking. I am sure the General, in his entire career, had never seen a belt buckle that had been polished for four hours and he had failed to recognize one that had.

After the inspection we were told that we were not to leave the barracks until we had corrected the problems. On my way into the barracks I passed Sergeant Dinini and as I did, I just casually wiped my belt buckle with my handkerchief. He said nothing. He just nodded his head, which I took as his approval for me to leave the barracks.

I went to my bunk, changed into civilian clothes and went to the PX where I had a can of cold, cold beer and smoked a big cigar.

Sergeants On The Plains — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

None of my notes mention the Sergeant firings other than the fact that the crews were from Fort Sill and I seem to remember 3 shots from their mobile launchers.

On my return to base, with work slowing at the Nike site, a few months later, I requested and was granted a transfer to the Shillelagh Anti-tank Missile R&D project and worked for then, Captain Daniel E. Duggan. In recent years we have resumed our friendship. He convinced me to have a brick put into the front of the museum. My son-in-law, a sergeant major, attending a school recently at Fort Bliss,

traveled up to WSMR and photographed it for me. I enjoy reading Col. Duggan’s articles in HAH about his experiences when he was deputy base commander.

My two years at WSMR hold great memories for me and my white WSMR baseball cap often evokes interesting questions when I serve as a docent at our local veterans memorial.

With best wishes,
Lawrence

WSMR Historical Foundation To Hold Annual Meeting

Members of the White Sands Missile Range Historical Foundation are invited to the annual members meeting on Nov. 20, 2013. The meeting will be held at the Frontier Club on White Sands and will begin at 10 a.m.

Anyone else who is interested in preserving the history of White Sands, especially through the range’s museum, is welcome to attend.

Also, if you have a suggestion for the foundation and its board of directors, please send it along so it can be discussed and considered. It is always nice to get a fresh

perspective on things and you folks interested in the missile range are the ones in a position to know what you are talking about.

During the meeting there will be presentations on the past year’s activities to include a treasurer’s summary of fund raising. For instance, the foundation’s golf tournament put together by Doug Messer in 2013, raised \$945 dollars.

Also, there will be an election of new board members.

For more information, contact Jim Eckles at nebraska1950@comcast.net or 575-521-8771.

**Hands Across History
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The Back Page



Karl Laumbach, local archaeologist and author of the report on the Hembrillo Battlefield, briefs NMSU ROTC cadets about the battlefield during a staff ride in 2010 for senior students. For the NMSU cadets, Hembrillo is a close resource to learn about guerilla warfare tactics and Laumbach is the readily available expert. Photo by Jim Eckles