

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Interview with Robert E. Truesdale
Interviewed by Thomas Greene, Monmouth University, NPS intern
April 27, 2003
Transcribed by John McGovern, NPS



Mr. Truesdale

Mr. Greene: Hello Mr. Truesdale, thank you for taking the time to do this interview with me.

Mr. Truesdale: You're welcome.

Mr. Greene: Okay, I'd like to start off by doing a few general background questions. When and where were you born?

Mr. Truesdale: I was born in Albany New York, 1927

Mr. Greene: And, where did you attend school?

Mr. Truesdale: I attended school in South Plainfield, New Jersey, North Plainfield High School in New Jersey, and Newark College Engineering, Newark.

Mr. Greene: Were, were any of your relatives such as your father or grandfather in the military?

Mr. Truesdale: Yes they were.

Mr. Greene: Could you explain?

Mr. Truesdale: My father was in World War II. And he was in the, I believe it was the, the, the fifth or seventh Calvary out of Fort Bliss, Texas. And he never got overseas in

World War II but he was chasing Zapata or one of them Mexicans across the border down, in Southwest Texas.

Mr. Greene: Okay.

Mr. Truesdale: And that was about the extent of it. He was in the Horse Calvary. Because after the war, he went into the New York State Mounted Police. Mounted meaning horse. And he said he had to take better care of his horse, than he took better care of himself, so, he didn't stay in there too long. That's about the extent of it.

Mr. Greene: Okay. How did you become involved at Fort Hancock?

Mr. Truesdale: Well, I was drafted in around May out of high school, 1945. Right after the Germans surrendered. At the time, they were taking young fellas like me very early, because they had just come off the Battle of the Bulge. So, I was drafted and sent, spend about three days at Fort Dix or four days, something like that, under the supervision of a German prisoner of war, on wartime, details surrounding the camp. And then they loaded us in a train and sent us to South Carolina. Camp Croft, which was in Spartanburg. And at the time, most of the healthy boys were drafted into the infantry. If you're substandard, physical shape, only by the portion of being not 1A but maybe 1B, they would've went into the Navy or, or a, a different branch, but they were really concerned with the, the infantry, and that's what it was, spent about seventeen, eighteen weeks down there in infantry training, Spartansburg, South Carolina. And it was tough. I mean really tough. I thought I was in very good physical condition, but at that time they started drafting some of the fellas that had gotten deferments so we were in amongst fellas that were twenty eight, thirty years old, basically most of us were eighteen, or nineteen.

Mr. Greene: Okay. Now, you started here in 1945 you said?

Mr. Truesdale: Not here, not in Fort Hancock.

Mr. Greene: When did you start, when was, what was your starting and ending date at Fort Hancock?

Mr. Truesdale: At Fort Hancock. The war had ended. We were still at Spartanburg, South Carolina and actually the war had ended with Japan. And I suppose it was sometime in September or maybe in October and they really didn't know, it seemed to me, looking back on it, they really didn't know what to do with us. So they sent not necessarily from down there, but they sent a lot of soldiers, that had either returned from war or fellas like me who were basically raw recruits, in the army for four months or something like that, maybe even five, so they set us up here at Fort Hancock, as a staging area I suppose. They didn't really, I think, I'm sure, I'm fairly sure I'm right, they didn't know what to do with us. You know, so we come out here at Fort Hancock and I don't recall how many of us were here but I would say three or four thousand maybe. Living in tents out here in the fields someplace. And my recollection is that there was like four of

us to a tent and I think I was in here from like November, December, January, and then they dispatched me to Salt Lake City, Utah.

Mr. Greene: Okay. Did you know anything about Fort Hancock before you came here?

Mr. Truesdale: Not a bit. I didn't know anything.

Mr. Greene: Okay, did you know about what type of jobs you would be performing?

Mr. Truesdale: Here?

Mr. Greene: Yeah.

Mr. Truesdale: Well, I was in the infantry. I had no idea where they'd send us. I said, at that time they sent me up to the Aleutian Islands. At that time, the Air Force was apart of the Army. So they sent me up to the Army to Utah, eventually through Seattle, and up through the, the, Seward, Alaska, and down the, down the Aleutian Chain. So we were down almost to the end of the Aleutian Chain, where I spent nineteen months there. And as a, Link Trainer, they taught me how to be Link Trainer Instructor, which is, which is instant flying at that time, you know in the Army.

Mr. Greene: Okay. Alright. What was your rank?

Mr. Truesdale: I came out as a Buck Sergeant.

Mr. Greene: Buck Sergeant, Okay.

Mr. Truesdale: And they weren't promoting anybody. It was tough. When I was here I was a private, and when I got into the Aleutian Islands, I got promoted to PFC, but earlier on in the war, you, you sort of got on basic you were a PFC. So, getting up the line was, was tough after the war because they had no use for you.

Mr. Greene: Right.

Mr. Truesdale: And at the time a lot of, afterwards, a lot of the veterans were coming back in. Guys that were Majors, they coming in as Staff Sergeants, or Master Sergeants and what have you, to stay in the service, and, make the twenty years or whatever it was.

Mr. Greene: Okay, do you feel that the work you did at Fort Hancock aided you in your future jobs?

Mr. Truesdale: No, no, none whatsoever. Possibly the hardship of living in a tent for three months, in the very bitter cold. This, like I said, I was in the Alaskan Aleutian Islands, this is the coldest spot I was ever in, in my life. You know, you couldn't keep warm out here. You know, they'd give us four or five blankets, and living in a tent, my recollection is that they had a little coal spot stove in the center of the tent, with four of

us. They gave us Army comforters. You couldn't get warm. It was terrible.

Mr. Greene: Were there ever any potential alerts of potential enemy attacks here, probably not?

Mr. Truesdale: No, not to my knowledge.

Mr. Greene: Okay, alright, did you work in any of the buildings on...?

Mr. Truesdale: We spent, we had nothing to do, we spent most of the time, a lot of us, spent a lot of our time in that building that's next door, [Interview took place in Bldg. 58, Park Headquarters] or within the, lighthouse. And they'd play those World War II songs, you know Reiner? And it was like a PX atmosphere, but it was kind of great looking back on it. I go by and its so darn small I can't believe it, you know. But the reason I can remember many morning days in there just shooting the bull with other guys and, kind of having a good time. My recollection is you could get a hotdog or something there but I'm not sure about that.

Mr. Greene: Okay. Lets see, where did..., where did you eat and what did the meals consist of?

Mr. Truesdale: It seemed to me, I'm a little foggy on this, but the meals were terrible. The, the, the trays that we ate off, you know, they were compartmentalized, but they're always greasy because they didn't have any hot water. And I'm fairly certain we ate out in the tent area. And I think it was over that way, but I'm not, over east of the lighthouse, but I'm not sure about that. But I think the food was cooked in the field kitchen and the dishes were washed in the field kitchen. But I know, not dishes but the trays, the trays were invariably as greasy as can be.

Mr. Greene: Alright, what social activities did you take part in when you were here?

Mr. Truesdale: I would say, my recollection is practically none. Now I don't recall whether we had any old basketball stuff or something like that, but practically none. What would happen is, I was part of this, you know, we had nothing to do. So we were bored. So, we would go out on the road that leads into here. And if a tractor trailer would come by, the truck driver, he would tell ten or fifteen of us to get in the back, you know of an open trailer. And, we'd go down to the entrance road, and when we got to within a half a mile of a gatehouse, which was patrolled by soldiers, he would stop. The truck driver would stop and that was our queue to be very quiet. So when we went through the gatehouse, the guards did not inspect the trailer. But were all in there, fifteen or twenty of us, sitting there keeping quiet as can be. As soon as we got out of ear shot or out of view of the gatehouse, you know, or down on the main road, we'd all get out and hitchhike in which ever direction we wanted to go. So we were essentially AWOL and my recollection is they took here, type a roll, enrollment, or I should say like, I can't think of the word, but they were taking enrollment so you could have somebody else...

Mr. Greene: Like attendance.

Mr. Truesdale: Attendance, is what I should use. They would take attendance. It was here. They would read off your name or your number, I forget which, zero number. And you would holler here. So, you would have anyone holler. Some guys were still asleep and they'd holler here. You didn't know who...at least one here. And then they'd do that at night. I don't think we had any, any regimental duties, or anything while we were here. They just didn't know what to do with us.

Mr. Greene: Okay. Did, were you able to attend religious services while you were here?

Mr. Truesdale: Yes, yes.

Mr. Greene: Yes, Okay. Did you ever go to the beach while you were at Fort Hancock?

Mr. Truesdale: No.

Mr. Greene: No.

Mr. Truesdale: No, my main interest was, going home, to see my friends, and that was it.

Mr. Greene: Okay, did you ever take, any trips to New York City while you were here?

Mr. Truesdale: Yeah, they had a... yes, yeah, they had the ferry. It was out here someplace. And we used to beat it over to New York City. In my case, I would say, not very often, maybe two or three times, tops. Then when we got discharged from here. The ferry to New York, and then the train to in my case, to Chicago and Seattle and Grand Central Station.

Mr. Greene: Okay, let's see. Would you say that this was a fun place to work or a boring place to be?

Mr. Truesdale: Well, in my case it was boring because they didn't have any work details for us or anything like that. So, it was really kind of boring.

Mr. Greene: Okay. Do you have any stories where anything especially humorous happened while you were here?

Mr. Truesdale: I would say not really, nothing humorous, other than the, you know, camaraderie of all new acquaintances really, you know. And then, I guess I became more interested in this when I started, Civil War, studying the Civil War with, with [referring to Winfield Scott Hancock, the namesake of Fort Hancock] Winthrop Hancock. Who was out of the The War between the States. And I read the book on him and all of that. He was quite a guy really and I'm still, you know, and I was, I kind of thought that, that

some of the Generals that they named after a lot of the forts, were named after Generals, a lot of them out of the world war, I mean out of the Civil War...

Mr. Greene: Out of the Civil War, right.

Mr. Truesdale: And he was one. But, and I thought jeez, he hadn't done too good by him. A small little place like this, you know, because, but let's see, what was Hancock's first name, Winthrop or something, John...?

Mr. Greene: I, I believe.

Mr. Truesdale: So, it was a very interesting book about him. And how he, how he actually was instrumental in Picket's Charge which they make such a big deal out of, the Picket's Charge in the South, 'cause I spent a lot of time in the South. But he kind of repelled that, John Hancock.

Mr. Greene: When you look back at your time at Fort Hancock, does anything stand out in your mind?

Mr. Truesdale: The biggest thing that stands out is, cold and and lack of something to do.

Mr. Greene: Okay. And do you keep in touch with anyone who you were here with?

Mr. Truesdale: No.

Mr. Greene: No.

Mr. Truesdale: I don't know, I don't recall ever being in, in my subsequent year in the Army, I was in the Army another almost three years, but never came across anybody that came through here.

Mr. Greene: Okay, and for the last question, do you think that they should teach children of today about the history of Fort Hancock and all that went on here?

Mr. Truesdale: I think so, I think in New Jersey, that's one of the reasons I come up because, seeing what they're talking about with developers or something like that and I know, you know, that Officers' Row over there which Larry ???, you know, okay, recalled from being here, and then I come up here when they have the great ships, the second or third time, to watch it around the corner there, you know, so, it kind of brought back memories. But I'd say from driving through here seeing all the dilapidated buildings and forts, you know, I don't recall that, you know, at that time.

Mr. Greene: Right.

Mr. Truesdale: And I know we did go out on the beach to look at some of the gun

emplacements that they had, but that was pretty much the extent of it.

Mr. Greene: Okay.

Mr. Truesdale: And that's about it.

Mr. Greene: Well I'd like to thank you for taking the time out for doing this interview with me Mr. Truesdale and it was very interesting and thank you very much.

Mr. Truesdale: It was my pleasure.

Mr. Truesdale: Okay fine.

Mr. Greene: Nice to meet you.

End of interview.