

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS  
An Oral History Telephone Interview with Sal Gioenco  
Fort Hancock soldier, 1940-1946  
By Susan Douglass, Monmouth University  
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Transcribed by Mary Rasa 2010



Sal Gioenco using theodolite to prepare for launching hydrogen filled weather balloon, c 1941. All photos courtesy: NPS/Gateway NRA



Launching the weather balloon from the roof of Battery Potter, c. 1941.  
Sal Gioenco is on the right.



Sal and Juanita Giovenco met and married at Fort Hancock in 1942.

Editor's notes in parenthesis ( )

SD: This oral history interview of Sal Giovenco is taking place on August 3, 2004 at National Park Service, Gateway National Recreation Area, Sandy Hook Unit at Fort Hancock, New Jersey. I am Susan Douglass, special Professor of Public History at Monmouth University. I will be conducting this interview.

Sal served in the Army from...When was your first... You joined the reserve unit when?

SG: I joined the Brooklyn National Guard on September 19, 1940.

SD: Okay. To July 1, 1963. He was stationed at Fort Hancock from 1940 to 1943. He returned... he retired on July 1, 1963 with the rank of Sergeant Major, E-9. Is that correct?

SG: That is correct.

SD: Okay now, Sal, when and why did you join the 245<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery Regiment in the Brooklyn National Guard?

SG: Well, one of the reasons, if you recall the years, there was kind of a depression on so we fellas in the town felt it was good way to get a vacation. So we joined the Brooklyn 245<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery National Guard unit for that two weeks vacation. I didn't realize we would stay for years.

SD: (laughter) That's interesting. What was your military training like before you were sent to Fort Hancock?

SG: Well, the military training was twice a week...a month at the National Guard and we used to meet there and we would go through some drilling and training on classes. And I assigned to the meteorological station. So I took my training as a meteorologist.

SD: What exactly did you do as a meteorologist?

SG: Well, as a meteorologist first of all to fire one of the Coast Artillery guns, the batteries have to know the direction and the speed of the wind. So therefore the meteorological station would set up a hydrogen filled balloon and track it with a theodolite to determine the wind direction and the wind speed and that could be plotted on a board and then sent down to the fire direction station.

SD: Okay and what was your first impression of Fort Hancock when you arrived there in 1940?

SG: Well, when we arrived at Fort Hancock, it looked about the most desolate place I've ever been to in my life. It had only maybe 300 soldiers there, Regular Army. And of course we came in with the National Guard with over 200... 2,000, I'm sorry. And of course we took over the place. And there was a little resentment from the Regular Army but finally we got to be a team that works together.

SD: Okay, and what was your rank when you first came to Fort Hancock?

SG: Oh, I was a good PFC (Private First Class). I made PFC quickly at the Armory in Brooklyn. And when I got on active duty for a couple of months I was a PFC, then I was made a Corporal and then I moved right on up, by the time I retired as a command Sergeant Major.

SD: What unit or department did you work for while you were at Fort Hancock?

SG: What unit?

SD: Yeah.

SG: I was with the meteorological station assigned to the artillery engineer office.

SD: What do you think was the most challenging part of your job while you were at Fort Hancock?

SG: Well, I think on of the most exciting things of the job at the time was they brought in a height finder. And we took a sounding by sending up a balloon and tracking it with the theodolite and the meantime there was this height finder who did exactly what we were doing in less than half the time. I thought that was very exciting to see. In fact, I understand that picture is in the Army archives in Washington, D.C.

SD: What type of uniform did you wear at Fort Hancock?

SG: Oh, I thought you'd ask that. Well, I had a campaign hat that was too big for me no matter what size they gave me, so I had to put paper in it. And it was like one of those old boy scout caps, hats and we had a brown uniform at the time and we had leggings to go with it.

SD: And what was your pay at Fort Hancock?

SG: Well, now that was something. I got a pay that was exactly 21 dollars a month. By the time I paid the tailor, the barber and extra food at the PX, I had to call home for more money.

SD: And how would you describe food at Fort Hancock and the Commissary?

SG: The food at the Commissary, well at that time I wasn't privileged to buy there. Only the first three graders were. But we did go to the PX a lot. And we had our hamburgers and milkshakes and they were very good.

SD: Were there ever alerts of potential enemy attacks while you were at Fort Hancock?

SG: Oh yes. Oh yes. We had many alerts. And in fact, it got so routine that after a while we had to carry our helmets, our rifles, and our gas masks on us all the time. And whenever the siren blew we had to report to our stations and be on the alert for that.

SD: Did you ever see any indication of evidence of the enemy?

SG: Well, the only thing we saw was at one of our observation towers one night. I was up on duty and it was about, I guess maybe one or two o'clock in the morning and we saw this big flash out in the bay. And later on we found out that the next day it was one of our American destroyers that was torpedoed.

SD: Do you remember a date or a year of that event?

SG: I'm sorry.

SD: Do you remember the year or the month of that event?

SG: Yes. It was 1941 right after the war broke out, probably '42.

SD: Alright. How would you describe an average day at Fort Hancock for you?

SG: An active day?

SD: An average day.

SG: An average day was get up in the morning at reveille and have breakfast and then do a little drilling. And I'm going to boast a little bit.

SD: Go ahead.

SG: But we did not have a USO. So for entertainment, every Tuesday night we met at the auditorium. And I happen to be a singer and my friend Willie Hoar, Sgt. Hoar, played an electric guitar, a friend played a regular guitar and Mickey O'Brien played a bass fiddle. So we entertained the troops and I was their singer as the Sandy Hook Beach Boys.

SD: Look at that, what an interesting name you had. The Beach Boys. Great. Now, when you were at Fort Hancock, what were your living quarters like?

SG: At Fort Hancock?

SD: Yes.

SG: Oh course we lived in the barracks. And they were wooden barracks recently put up and as soon as I made Corporal, then I got into a private room. While I say a private room, we were four men to the room, but we were not in the open barracks.

SD: Did you ever live in a tent while you were at Fort Hancock?

SG: Oh yes. Yes.

SD: When?

SG: The very first time we arrived at Fort Hancock. We were in five man pyramidal tents, 'til the quarters were built. And they were cold nights living in the tents.

SD: When you were working at Fort Hancock did you work with civilians or military or both in your position?

SG: No. Just military.

SD: Just military. How would you describe your relationship to the officers that you met?

SG: I'm sorry.

SD: How would you describe your relationship to the officers in your unit and officers in general on the Fort?

SG: Well, coming from a National Guard unit, the officers were very socialized. Well, let's say they wouldn't pull rank so much. The only time they were really strict about things was during inspection. But other than that they were very friendly. A very friendly group because we kind of knew each other from Brooklyn and as a National Guard unit. And some of them were salesmen, telephone men in civilian life and only put the uniform on when we had meetings. So when we were federalized, the officers weren't too strict and all, but we knew our place, we enlisted men knew our place. And they respected that too.

SD: Okay, what other social activities did you take part in in the Fort besides this wonderful Sandy Hook Beach Boys singing group?

SG: Well, some of the activities of course were softball and volleyball and I never got to play baseball. I was never that good. But I would say that was the sports we played.

SD: Okay. What about movies, theater at the Fort?

SG: Yes, we always went to the movies whenever we can. Of course it cost us 15 cents to get in. Whenever I took Juanita to the movies, her Dad being a Chief Warrant Officer, insisted that I sit in the back row which was reserved for officers. And for a while I had a little hard time sitting there with her. But after a while, the ushers began to know I was escorting my wife, Warrant Officer Gooch's daughter, so I got to sit there with her. Movies were as I say popular pictures. They weren't old time pictures.

SD: Okay. Did any movie stars ever visit Fort Hancock while you were there?

SG: Oh, yes.

SD: Who?

SG: Lana Turner was the big star that came to visit us at the Post. In fact, Juanita's brother George was in the hospital with a broken leg and she visits the hospital and autographed his leg.

SD: Did you have any opportunity to speak to her?

SG: No. I did not. The officers kept her distance.

SD: How long did she stay at Fort Hancock?

SG: Just for the day.

SD: Okay. That must have been very exciting.

SG: Yes, it was.

SD: Did you get to go to the beach while you were stationed at Fort Hancock?

SG: I went to the beach with Juanita as often as I can. But I'm not a good swimmer.

SD: Which beach did you go to?

SG: Sandy Hook beach, right off the post, on the post.

SD: Alright.

SG: There was an Enlisted beach and an Officers beach.

SD: Okay so where did you people go?

SG: I'm sorry.

SD: Where did you people, where did you go with Juanita?

SG: I went to the officer's beach. Being in a bathing suit they couldn't tell. I was with Juanita. Most of them knew her anyway.

SD: (laughter) Did you take excursions to New York City from Fort Hancock?

SG: Well, actually we didn't take any excursions because when we got a pass, which was once a week, I used to go to Brooklyn on the CHAUNCEY, the Hudson day liner boat that they had, the Army had. And then I'd get to the Battery and take a train, subway to my Mother's home.

SD: Alright. What was religious life like at Fort Hancock?

SG: What was what?

SD: Religious life at Fort Hancock.

SG: We had a chapel. St. Mary's Chapel was right near Juanita's home. And being Catholic I used to go there quite often. Juanita was, well sometimes she went to the bible study class at the library. But gradually, as we got to go together more often she started to go to St. Mary's Chapel.

SD: Now, you have anticipated my next question. How and when did you meet your wife?

SG: How and when did we meet?

SD: Right.

SG: Well, as I say, being a good Catholic, my friend said to me, “Sal, they are having a passion play by the Protestant group at the Theater and there’s some very nice girls there. Why don’t you come along.” So I became a Sheppard in the passion play. Juanita was Mary.

SD: Okay. (laughter)

SG: That’s how we met.

SD: Great. And then when did you get married?

SG: We got married on July 12, 1942. We met in ’40 and kept company for a couple of years and then married in July 12, 1942.

SD: Okay. And when you got married would you describe your wedding, which I know was on the Fort.

SG: The wedding took place on the Fort. And my family as I said before, with gas rationing came up on a bus. We had a wonderful time. Some of my buddies were ushers. In fact, we had three bridesmaids and three ushers, and a maid of honor, so it was quite a big wedding. And at that time, my father-in-law having served in Panama had these wonderful khaki jackets. So we all put on these khaki jackets with our belts. It was very impressive.

SD: I am sure.

SG: One nice thing too, my battery, when they heard about the wedding, they made all the sandwiches, all the salads and all the potato salads and all the soft drinks for everybody. No one cooks in my family.

SD: That’s great. Where did you and Juanita live as a married couple?

SG: One more thing that wife just reminded me. When my family came from New York, from Brooklyn, they brought two large trays of Italian cookies. And boy, did they go. They go fast.

SD: (laughter) Okay. So once you return from your honeymoon, where did you and your wife live?

SG: After the honeymoon?

SD: Yes.

SG: We lived at Quarters 29A. Well actually we lived with my Mother-in-law and Father-in-law until I made Staff Sergeant.

SD: And then once you made Staff Sergeant, where did you live?

SG: In Quarters 29A.

SD: Okay, now where were you when you first heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

SG: Where was I? Well, Juanita and I were getting ready to go and have lunch, so she came over to the day room and we were shooting pool and the radio was on when we heard President Roosevelt's speech about Japanese bombing Pearl Harbor.

SD: Okay. Do you remember your initial reaction?

SG: Yes.

SD: Which was?

SG: Who the hell would want to do a thing like that.

SD: How did this attack change your role at Fort Hancock?

SG: Well, for one thing it was no more a game. It was serious. And each of us knew our mission. We knew what we had to do and we did it.

SD: So was there any change in the responsibilities that you had at the Fort after Pearl Harbor?

SG: Not in the way of duty, but we all knew what the situation was and we took it very serious.

SD: Now, why did you end up leaving Fort Hancock in 1943?

SG: Well, if you remember there was a news broadcaster by the name of Walter Winchell, and he came on the air one night with his "Hello Mr. and Mrs. America. What are all those troops doing on the coast here while the war is over there." Well, needless to say, most of us were shipped to Camp Chafee, Arkansas to become Field Artillery. And from Field Artillery is where we did our training and we went over to Europe to World War II.

SD: And when were you shipped overseas after your training?

SG: I left the states in December of '44.

SD: And what military action did you take part in while you serving...?

SG: Well, I was in two campaigns. One was called the Battle of the Saar Basin. And the second one was the Battle of the Rhine. The Rhine River.

SD: What stands out about your participation in those battles?

SG: Well, the thing that stands out in my mind was that the German soldier was a good soldier, very disciplined. But he could be analyzed because every thing was done specifically at a time, date, and place. They were routine like robots. So whenever we had to attack we knew what we could do and we did it. We did what we had to do.

SD: Okay. Where were you when peace was declared in Europe in May of '45? Where were you located?

SG: I was right in a town called Bel Kirschseeon which is just twenty miles away from Munich. What happened was our unit was heading for Berlin. I was with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army, Patton's unit and we ran out of gas. And our unit stopped. And finally when we were supplied with the gas we were told to head towards Munich. That's where we ended up, no, I'm sorry, right outside of Nuremburg and that's where we ended our campaign.

SD: Okay and after the peace was signed in Europe, where did you think you were going to be sent next?

SG: Well, being a surveyor with the artillery unit, I was then asked to be transferred to the 13<sup>th</sup> Brigade for training to go with the unit to go to Japan. We were heading for the Pacific. However, it was on August 2<sup>nd</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> that the atomic bomb was dropped and Japan surrendered. After Nagasaki and I think it was Hiroshima.

SD: Right.

SG: Both places and once that happened the Japanese surrendered and I had enough points having been awarded a Bronze star medal, that gave me additional points I was able to come back home.

SD: So, when did you return to your wife at Fort Hancock?

SG: That was in, I believe October of '45.

SD: And what were your responsibilities when you came back to Fort Hancock?

SG: Well, when I came back, the first thing I wanted to do was get out of the Army and become a civilian and get my job back in Brooklyn. But talking to Juanita's Dad, he said, "You know Sal, you won't get rich in the Army, but you'll always live comfortable." So I thought that was a good choice. And since Juanita was an Army brat, it made it much easier.

SD: So you continued to stay at Fort Hancock in what capacity?

SG: Okay, I stayed at Fort Hancock as a Staff Sergeant. And then I went to, I was shipped to Korea. The war was not on yet. So I got there in April of '47. And Juanita joined me about two or three months later. And we both lived in Kimpo Air Force Base in Korea until 1948. And the Army anticipated something going on so they shipped us, all dependents back to the states.

SD: I see.

SG: So that's when I came back to America in 1948.

SD: As you look back at your years at Fort Hancock, what stands out in your mind about your time there?

SG: Well, I thought it was nice place to be. I thought it was desolate when we got there. But once we got acclimated to the surroundings, I felt very comfortable. Of course, meeting Juanita and her family made it that much nicer for me. And I had very little restrictions in my Headquarters Battery to return every night. As long as they knew where I was I was able to be away for the night reveille.

SD: Are you in touch with anyone that you served with at Fort Hancock?

SG: Well, only at Christmas time, I write to my very good friend Elliot Ruben. I've got his address somewhere. I know he worked with his dad and they sell big machinery in Rockefeller Center in New York. They have a big place there.

SD: Well, Sal, I want to thank you for taking part in this project. Is there anything you would like to add to the interview about your time at Fort Hancock?

SG: No, I think I have said all that I can. But if it's possible, first I want to thank you for what you're doing, very, very much. And secondly it's so nice that I'm reminiscing with you because I just returned from Washington, D.C. where I stood at the World War II memorial.

SD: Oh, how great.

SG: Yes. And it sure as heck brought tears to my eyes.

SD: I am sure.

SG: I want to thank you very much trouble we would be glad to pay if you could send us a copy of this tape. We would love to have it.

SD: I will pass that request on to Mary Rasa. I want to thank you very much for taking part.

END OF INTERVIEW