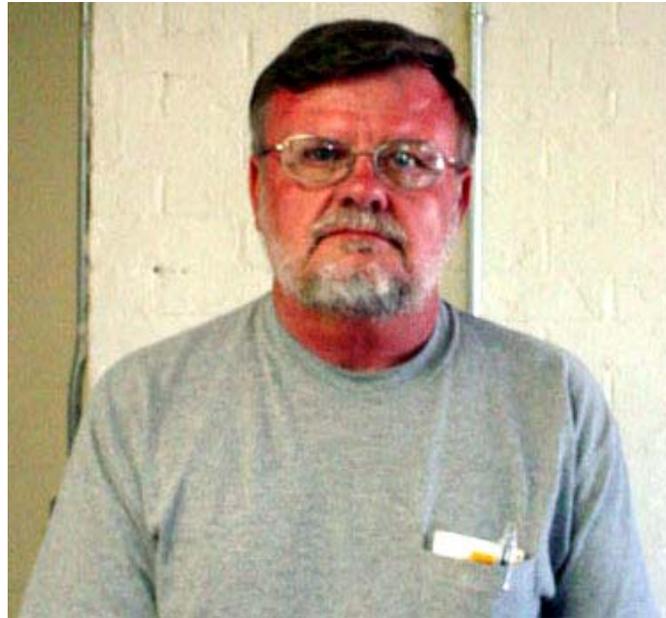


Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Interview with
Doug Stecher
71st ADA
1960-62
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS
June 21, 2004
Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2011



Doug Stecher at Fort Hancock in 2004.



Fort Hancock Generator Building in 2003.

Photos courtesy of NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

MR: My name is Mary Rasa, Sandy Hook Museum Curator. I am here with Doug Stecher who served here with the Nike Missiles and we are going to conduct an interview. Today is June 21, 2004 and we are in my office in the Education Center, Building 102. First of all I would like to ask you when and where were you born?

DS: I was born in Dubuque, Iowa in 1938.

MR: Where did you graduate school from?

DS: I graduated from high school in Dubuque, Iowa, but I got my engineering degree from the University of Colorado in Boulder.

MR: And what year was that?

DS: '72.

MR: Did you father or grandfather serve in the military?

DS: My father was a veteran from World War I.

MR: Where did he serve?

DS: Mostly in the United States, but I really couldn't tell you where. The War over just he was trying to ship out for Europe.

MR: So, what years did you serve in the military?

DS: I was drafted in November of 1959. And I should have gotten out in two years, but because they built the Berlin Wall I was extended on active duty for seven or eight months and got out in February 1962 instead of November of '61.

MR: How did you become involved at Fort Hancock?

DS: After Basic Training I was sent to a three month Electrical Equipment Repair School at Fort Belvoir, Virginia and my orders were to report to Fort Wadsworth where I spent a week or so before being assigned to Sandy Hook.

MR: So, what were your start and ending dates at the Fort?

DS: It would be hard to remember the exact dates.

MR: Generally.

DS: Sometime in early May of 1960 and just about a week prior to my discharge at Fort Hamilton in February of '62. I can't remember the date.

MR: Did you know anything about this place before you came here?

DS: No, not at all. It was completely, when I left Fort Wadsworth I didn't even know where I was going. (laughter) I was in the back of a van.

MR: I guess you had never been to New Jersey before?

DS: I, yes, I had. When I was a teenager with my parents, we took a trip to visit relatives in Jersey City and I had visited that portion of New Jersey and New York City and the Bay and so on, but I was not aware of Sandy Hook or the Jersey Shore.

MR: So, you knew what type of job you would be performing once you came here?

DS: Yes. I assumed it would be what was referred to here as a generator operator. There were other duties but we had a lot of civilian contractors who performed the tough maintenance.

MR: So, when you were at Fort Belvoir were all those guys getting assigned to Nike Bases or were they going to different places?

DS: It was strictly a Nike school and it was a real showplace. There was two sets of equipment. Some of which we never got to use. It was just used to show off to VIPS. And I had heard that it was really a top rated school, probably the best school that a draftee could go to.

MR: Because it was right outside of Washington so they would have a lot of dignitaries.

DS: Right. And you were limited to two years of service so they didn't want to send you to a six or nine month school. There were an awful lot of draftees with really high qualifications in my class at Fort Belvoir. A lot of graduate engineers, electricians, technicians for IBM and things like that.

MR: What was your rank?

DS: I made E-4 about eight or nine months I guess before I got out of the service. Maybe a little bit longer than that.

MR: Did you have a special title?

DS: Do you mean like Specialist 4th Class?

MR: Like your MOS (Military Occupational Specialty)?

DS: Oh, the MOS was just electrical equipment repairman. It was a 357.1.

MR: Oh, you remember that. (laughter) So, you operated the generators. Now they functioned, I guess constantly?

DS: Actually no. It was kind of a scam. I believe we were hooked up to Con Ed and I think it was Con Ed (actually JCP&L) and, of course, the power never failed like in 2003. And so we ran the generators hooked up to nothing just to put hours onto them.

MR: Oh, so they were emergency backups.

DS: Right. And they, we virtually never, only in one extreme drill that I can remember did we ever hook up the whole site on the generators. Not that we didn't do it just for test purposes once in a while but 99% of the time we ran the generators, they just ran and we just sat there and listened to the noise eight hours a month or whatever was required.

MR: So, what was your typical work schedule?

DS: Including days on the beach?

MR: Sure. I want to hear about those.

DS: Because the school was a top rated school, they cranked out electrical equipment repairmen more than they needed. And there was plenty of us here and plenty of them in the New York area and so we had more than enough guys. We never had other duties other than our MOS other than KP (Kitchen Police), which didn't occur very often, maybe once a month. And if you were an E-4 like I was then you didn't have to do it.

MR: Were you on 24 hour shifts?

DS: If we were hot. In other words, if the dual site was on an active status for one week per month. Of course, we were hot more than most sites because we were a dual site. I guess is what I am saying. We would have to stay overnight and sleep in the little huts down there, in the Quonset huts. And because we had so many extra guys we got the day off with instructions to get lost which meant going to the Highlands or taking a bus to New York City and staying in the USO facilities up there. The maintenance was mostly routine. We had a list of equipment we had to inspect daily. And the maintenance that we actually performed was limited. It was like changing oil. We didn't have to rebuild generators which some guys in Europe had to do that. They had to run their sets 24 hours a day. The biggest problems that we had were with frequency converters that because of the ocean air burned out which was not just a problem at Sandy Hook. My friends had the same problems on other coastal sites, east and west coast. They were finally placed in the tin tool sheds to help with that problem.

MR: Did that work?

DS: It worked, Mary, amazingly well. I think it generated its own heat and dried them out. We didn't have that problem. We went through that very expensive piece of equipment just weekly and there was one at every pit so they were very expensive. But we had a lot of time off. In fact, we had a sergeant who was just in charge of the engineers and he had the engineers at both the radar site and the missile site. And the sergeant, the first sergeant had a duty call once a day for painting walls or raking leaves or whatever. And almost always since we had a surplus of guys one of our guys the sergeant would volunteer one guy for that duty. But unlike many other sites where engineers also became missile launcher crewmen and other jobs. No, we were very fortunate in that. I recall one time a bus came up the road and it was filled with engineers surplus from other sites and I knew them. Some of them had gone to school with me. And I told my sergeant and (he) conveniently had them all transferred to other jobs immediately because he didn't want to have too many people. He knew we had a good deal then.

MR: So, what did you do after you left the service?

DS: After I left the service I got a job with IBM in Rochester, Minnesota.

MR: In engineering?

DS: No. Well, a technician's job and they built a new plant in Boulder, Colorado and I transferred to Boulder, Colorado and then the G.I. Bill came through. It was not active for awhile so I took a leave of absence from IBM and got a degree in Electrical Engineering from the University of Colorado and I went back to work for IBM and when their big cutbacks started I was 52 years old and I took an early retirement. I have been retired for 14 years now.

MR: That sounds nice.

DS: Yeah. It's almost as long as I worked there, not quite. (laughter)

MR: Now, did what you learned in the service help you in your future work?

DS: Yeah. Not technically. You learned a lot about organizations and how they functioned. And always said there were three ways to do anything. The right way, the wrong way and the Army way. But there were also the right way, the wrong way and the IBM way. So it was good lesson.

MR: Now, you must have had some alerts while you were here?

DS: Yes.

MR: Especially with the Cuban Missile Crisis.

DS: I was out before that.

MR: Oh, okay. What would happen during an alert? Would everyone be required to stay on Post?

DS: Only one time and I can't remember what the situation was that was when the Berlin Wall went up and everything got hot. We were brought up to active duty status and then within a few weeks they announced that officers would be required to have another full year of duty and that enlisted men would get out whenever they felt it was appropriate which in my case got to be six or seven months later. They very seldom were, at least as far as I know, taken seriously. I mean we didn't feel that there was any stray Soviet bomber coming our way or anything at that time. And the Soviets at that time didn't have much of the bombers. There were worries that they did. Now, that is before they had spy satellites and everything else. And so called "Bomber Gap" was a big deal in Eisenhower and Truman's election. Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) were just in their infancy.

MR: So, there wasn't, in other words it was kind of lax here?

DS: I would say it was. But when you were on duty, you were supposed to be on duty. I think when this Berlin situation went I had a rather strange situation. I was sitting in one of the local dance halls or saloons in Highlands and I can't remember which one it was and in walked a lieutenant and hauled all the launcher guys out. And at 2 o'clock in the morning or midnight and all of us half drunk load us in the back of a deuce and half (2 and half ton truck) and there was a school bus and all of a sudden he came back in the door and he said, he looked at me and said, "I want you to Stecher." (laughter) He got me on the bus and brought me back out. I believe that was the August 1961 period of time. But it was not, we knew we had dangerous things.

MR: Right.

DS: We were aware of the explosion up at the other battery in Leonardo. So, it wasn't lackadaisical in that respect.

MR: And there were Hercules here, by the time...?

DS: There were Hercs when I was here. Yeah. They had been replaced, the Ajax had been replaced a few months before we got here.

MR: And so you worked at the Generator Building in Launch Site?

DS: That would be where I reported to work every day.

MR: So you ate right on site there in one of those buildings?

DS: We ate there only when we were on alert. Which in the case of engineers was only one day and it was only one day out of maybe no more than two days a month.

MR: So, the rest of the time you were in barracks?

DS: The rest of the time we went back up to Barracks 74 and ate breakfast, lunch and dinner. We had no transportation. Sergeant would give us a ride or you'd stick your thumb out. Somebody would stop and give you a ride. The MPs (Military Police) would pick you up, anybody. You never had any trouble getting off Post. The general would stop and pick you up. The general's wife was a very nice about it.

MR: Who was the general when you were here?

DS: Can't remember.

MR: Was it Clapsaddle?

DS: Wow. We had a guy he had been wounded in Korea and he had a (inaudible) and he was a well respected man.

MR: I'll have to look it up.

DS: I can't think of the names anymore. I can only remember one battery commander we had and that was a Captain named Oswald.

MR: Oh, I met him.

DS: Oh, he was a very gung ho guy and he cleaned this battery up really good just before I came here. He tightened up the discipline really hard and I missed all that and it was something nobody really ever wanted to talk about. I think he really hit with a hard hammer. But then after that, he was a very nice guy a very fair at least that was my opinion. We had a very good first sergeant.

MR: Don Wood?

DS: That name doesn't ring a bell. He was an old veteran. He had been in the Bataan Death March in the early parts of World War II. He was a lot of years. Sims or Simpson was his name and a very nice guy too. A very good old soldier.

MR: Well, what social activities did you take in at the Fort? Did they still have the movie theater running?

DS: We had the movie theater, we had the library, the beaches and the beer hall which was the old mule stable which was very interesting and the NCO Club was above it.

MR: So, it was enlisted men down below and NCOs above?

DS: And the NCOs upstairs. When I got my extra stripe I got to go upstairs. (laughter)

MR: Were you still allowed downstairs?

DS: You probably weren't welcome.

MR: Oh. Okay.

DS: I don't really recall. I mean I, yeah. You probably weren't welcomed. They were nice places.

MR: Did you ever go to the Chapel out here? Was that working at that point?

DS: I didn't but there were some soldiers that did and the families there were a lot of military families out here that were not directly related to the batteries so they had regular tenants. We did have a dentist on Post.

MR: Was the hospital still functioning?

DS: No. For medical service they had a an old World War II building and a couple of medics that lived in there who were not assigned to the (Nike) Battery who were assigned to the Post and you would go to them and depending on how badly you were bleeding they would haul you up to Fort Monmouth or give you an aspirin. They had a regular sick call every morning. You could go down and they would haul you up to Fort Monmouth.

MR: Did you go to the Service Club?

DS: They had a Service Club here and they put on some plays some theater groups. The one great thing that they missed and I don't know why I missed it was there was an old USO building right at the entrance to the Fort that was connected to the old hospital that we lived in by the wing.

MR: Yeah, that was called the service club.

DS: The wing burnt down and they had a big USO troupe come. A traveling USO troupe show that everybody said was excellent. I don't know why I didn't go to it if I was on duty that day or was in New York or what. And I often regret not seeing it because it had been closed probably since World War II.

MR: Right.

DS: And the guys went over and cleaned it all up and put up chairs and everything. It was like opening a tomb.

MR: Did you attend any sporting events or participate in any?

DS: Ah, no they had fishing stuff that you could rent, not rent you could just check out and go places. They had some teams but other than football, I don't recall flag football or a lot of baseball playing and stuff. I went to Rutgers University twice a week for a year or two with a bunch of guys. We drove up there. The Army paid the bill. We took courses. And that was real recreation. And the sergeant was, the first sergeant was really great about that. He made sure you didn't have KP that day or some other duty and if you had an exam coming up and you had some kind of duty that would interfere with that exam, studying for it he gladly change the KP list. So he was a real nice guy.

MR: How about the Post Exchange? Was that still operating?

DS: Yeah. The PX was up there. I never did buy much there. You could get a haircut in there but there was always somebody in the barracks who cut hair. There was an odd situation. They had a little snack bar where you could get a hamburger and Oswald made us eat C Rations one day a month for lunch. And we would get off, however we hitchhiked there to eat our lunch and we found out we had C-Rations and the whole Battery would move up to the Post Exchange and buy a hamburger and the line would be out the front, all the way out the front door. I never could figure out what was going on. Anybody would buy a hamburger who had 35 cents left from their paycheck you know.

MR: What was the pay?

DS: \$90 a month, something like that for a PFC. And I believe as a Spec 4 I made like \$124 a month. But there was so many variable depending upon your dependents allowances of guys that lived on and off Post and stuff so pay was variable thing.

MR: Yeah if you lived there.

DS: A married Spec 4 or a PFC (Private First Class) who lived off Post would have a net income different, but it was very minimum living off here.

MR: Now which beach was the Enlisted Men's Beach?

DS: Well, it was the North Beach up near where the Proving Grounds is. And it was old. It was a wonderful beach, great surf and a beach house where you could get food, beer. It was just a nice place. There was an Officers' Beach down somewhere in the middle of the Hook (inaudible)

MR: And then they switched it while you were here?

DS: No, there was a big hurricane in the fall in 1961.

MR: That was Hurricane Donna.

DS: And it was a tremendous effect on Highlands and on Sandy Hook. I happened to be off that day and the only building that was out of water was the beer hall. So, I spent the

day in the beer hall with no electricity drinking warm beer with other guys who had nothing to do. And I had a friend who had a car parked at, had lost the keys the day before at the beach. A Chevy Convertible he parked it at the beach. The hurricane came and the next day the car was gone. It was buried with sand. And they dug it out and cleaned it up and sold it. And the beach house and everything was wrecked. It was the end of the season anyway. The swimming season was over. So, all the new beaches and everything was built was done after that. Actually, the car story was even funnier than that. We were sitting on the beach drinking beer after the beach was closed, dark at night and we weren't supposed to do that and the MPs came up and rounded us and we didn't know what was going on and the guy who owned the new Chevy had lost the keys in the sand and in all the confusion. So, we couldn't drive it off. So, the next day the hurricane came and he lost his Chevy. (laughter) It was like a '55 Chevy Convertible. They only found it by the antenna sticking out of the sand a few days later. I can't remember who that belonged to.

MR: That is pretty funny. I was reading about the storm and they said that some of the units had to go into Highlands and get people out of their flooded homes.

DS: Yeah and there was a call to the Post that I remember that they were out of water at some facility in Highlands. There was some medical clinic or something and they wanted water. And they wanted us to deliver water. Well, our Unit was not a mobile Unit. All they could do was fill big jerry cans with water and put them on a five ton truck which was only thing going to make it off the Post that night because the water was so high. You say that was Hurricane Donna?

MR: Yeah.

DS: I always wondered what the name. It was a big one.

MR: Do you remember people going to the beach at the private club at the entrance to the park? Sandlass Beach?

DS: No. That was not there. When I was here the Gate was not the one that is here now. The Gate was there when I visited in '89 but it's been torn down. It was right at the very entrance to Sandy Hook. So, nobody got on Sandy Hook

MR: Well, the Sandlass Beach was just before that Gate. It was where the ramp is and there is one house over there. That was a private beach club that closed down right after you left.

DS: Oh, you are right there was a thing that was there. I don't know anybody who went there. I don't recall what that was. It was a private beach?

MR: It was a private beach club, yeah.

DS: It could well be. I don't know. 'Til you brought it up I had forgotten all about that. I remember that. That was near where the original Gate to the Post was.

MR: Right. So, you only worked with military. You didn't work with any civilians?

DS: Yes. Oddly enough all our heavy maintenance and tricky stuff was all done by civilians out of Camp Kilmer. Most of them were old military vets and the maintenance we were trained for was really performed by them. But since then, I have talked to other Nike veterans who served over in Europe and they had to do all that stuff themselves. It was very difficult work.

MR: So, did you enjoy your time here?

DS: Yeah, it was great. I loved it while I was here and I loved every minute of it afterwards.

MR: So, it was very, it was a lot of fun.

DS: It was a lot of fun and it was a great location for going into the city and I got promoted and I got my G.I. Bill. I got a G.I. education and a G.I. loan on my first house and because I spent that extra time I didn't have to go in the Reserves when I got out. Some guys did and some guys didn't. I didn't and so I have no complaints about the Army.

MR: Okay. Anything especially humorous that you can think of?

DS: Oh a lot of thing but I am not going to tell you. A guy losing his car. I just thought of that this afternoon. I thought that was pretty hilarious. That only happened to a few guys like us.

MR: Anything stand out in your mind about Fort Hancock?

DS: No. Just that it was a really great duty. Some Nike duty as we talked earlier was really bad. You were in swamps and even right here in New Jersey when we took that ride down in that van from Fort Wadsworth and I didn't know where I was going and we went into a couple of these places and I remember going oh my god, you know this is like a prison camp and you know the driver said to us don't worry you guys are going to the cream of the crop and it really was. It was great duty and I had buddies at Fort Tilden as we talked about before and they loved it. Oddly enough they were guys from New York City, draftees who wound up. And they could take a bus and a subway and be home and visiting their wives and girlfriends and mothers. They loved Tilden. And the Rockaways aren't great now, but they were great as much as the Jersey Shore was and they loved their duty. They guys I talked to. There were guys in Vietnam and they were guys that joined I found. There were an awful lot of guys at Sandy Hook who joined the Army. You could select, you know, your MOS which was your occupation or you could select where you wanted to serve. A lot of these guys from New York City selected they

wanted to serve in New York. God know why. One of the great slogans was join the navy see the world. You know here I was from Iowa, if there was a Nike site in Iowa I would have been really disappointed to be in a Nike site in Iowa. There were ones in Chicago that were on Lakeshore Drive. Beautiful sites.

MR: Do you have anything else to say?

DS: No.

MR: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW