

**Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Interview with Kenneth Colburn,
555th AA, 1951-52,
By Thomas Greene, Monmouth University, NPS intern,
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Transcribed by Thomas Greene 2003**

Question: Good morning Mr. Colburn. Thank you for doing this interview with me.

Answer: You're welcome. My pleasure.

Q: Okay, I'd like to start off with some general background questions. When and where were you born?

A: I was born on January 20, 1931 in Medicine Lodge, Kansas on a farm as a matter of fact. I was not born in a hospital.

Q: Where did you attend school when you were growing up in Kansas.

A: I attended grade school in a little one room school. Eight grades all in the same one room school. And then I attended Medicine Lodge High School through my sophomore year. I finished in Thayer, Kansas in 1948. Graduated in '48.

Q: Did you have any relatives such as your father or grandfather or anyone in the military?

A: My father was in during World War I, and my daughter has researched our family history and found a relative in the Revolution. And I had three brothers in World War II. Two of them were in the Navy. One of them was in the Marines. And my younger brother and myself were in the Army during the Korean War.

Q: Alright, how did you become involved at Fort Hancock?

A: I was trained on radar repair and we were a little five man detachment, service battalion radars. When they couldn't fix our own we'd go out and service it with the help of a Western Electric engineer also. I came here in 1951. I believe it was in June, and I was here until about September of 1952.

Q: Did you know anything about Fort Hancock before you came here?

A: No I did not. I didn't know where it existed either or that it existed (laughs). I was stationed at Fort Monmouth. I went to a radar school there prior to coming to Fort Hancock.

Q: Did you have any idea of what type of job you would be performing before you came here?

A: No I didn't. Out of our basic company, I was one of three guys that went to addition training. One of them went to radio operator and the other one went to a fixed station radio repair. That was the only three out of three hundred that got to go to any advanced schools. The other guys all went to the engineers or tank battalions.

Q: What was your rank or title while you were at Fort Hancock?

A: I was Staff Sergeant. Well, I was promoted to staff when I was here at Fort Hancock.

Q: And what unit or department did you work for?

A: We were called the 555th Ordnance Integrated Fire Control Repair Detachment. That's a mouthful isn't it? (Laughs). We serviced radar sites from Atlantic City up to Cape Cod, Massachusetts. We would also go out when they fired the anti-aircraft guns, we'd go out on Montauk Point in Long Island and observe or assist if they needed any help with the radar that was having problems.

Q: Could you explain what a typical day on Fort Hancock was for you?

A: Some of them weren't very nice (laughs). Normally, we would gather at our little shop and find out who needed help. And our C.O. (Commanding Officer) would assign them someone to go to the sites that needed help. Myself, usually I got to go to Bayonne by the Bayonne Bridge. We had one there and we had one over...what's the bridge that goes over to Staten Island?

Q: The Outerbridge?

A: No.

Q: Goethals?

A: Goethals. Yeah. We had a radar site right by the Goethals Bridge. I would service that also.

And that didn't really have any set procedures they way we did. We kind of ran our own selves. and the boss didn't know anything about radar so he let us handle it ourselves.

Q: What kind of things did you do for fun while you were at Fort Hancock? Or recreation?

A: Special Services had buses that would take us to New York to the ball game, baseball games, football games. And I got to see some of the Giants, Yankees, and also the old Dodgers were still over in Ebbets Field. Made a trip or two over there. And Special Services also had fishing tackle that we could check out, go up by the old lighthouse on Sandy Hook Bay and fish for blues.

Q: Can you explain the background and education you got before coming here like with what

you said, radar and things like that?

A: I attended high school. Then I joined the service, and I went to, after basic training, went to Camp Gordon, Georgia and went to Basic Radio, actually Basic Electricity first and then Basic Radio Repair. From there I came up to Monmouth and attended a Basic Radar School, and from there I went down to Aberdeen and picked up this Advanced Radar that Western Electric had come out to assist with the anti-aircraft guns. And after I finished that I came to Fort Hancock in mid to late '51 and stayed here through '52.

Q: Did the job that you did at Fort Hancock ever aid you in your future work?

A: The training I got did. Yes. Well, I went to work at IBM servicing computers. Well, they didn't have computers when I started. I serviced punch card accounting machines. And eventually as computers developed I serviced computers for the remainder of my career. I spent thirty-four years working with IBM, carrying a tool bag. Called us, "The White Collar Mechanics." (laughs).

Q: While you were at Fort Hancock, were there ever any alerts of possible enemy attacks?

A: No, there were not any while I was here.

Q: What were the primary buildings that you worked in while you were here?

A: I can't even place them now. Fifty years is a long time to try to find them. I think I saw an old brick building out here somewhere that resembled the one that we worked in, but I couldn't name the building. I don't remember exactly where I saw it.

Q: When you were working at Fort Hancock, were you working with civilians or military or both?

A: We had a civilian electrical engineer from Western Electric that worked with us, and in our same building they had some sign painters that painted signs for the building. They were civilian contracted. And we were able to get our logo and gold leaf put on our jeep. They called us "the triple nickel." He made three nickels, and underneath it in gold leaf he put triple nickel.

Q: Do you recall where you ate when you were here and what types of meals they served?

A: We were in a consolidated mess, ate in there. It was served family style for us. There wasn't any, no K.P. duty here. I was a staff sergeant so I didn't have to pull K.P. Our detachment, none of us had to pull. Guard duty, we got out of that too.

Q: Were you able to attend religious services while you were here?

A: I could have. I don't know that I ever did though. I don't believe I did. I did all my praying down on the beach I guess.

Q: Now, you just mentioned the beach. Did you periodically ride along the beach and if so, which beach if you recall? And you were talking about the jeep story if you want to talk about that.

A: We had a little jeep that we drove up and down the beach. We were really not supposed to I guess, but we did anyway. It was an old, I believe they call it a T-38. I'm not real sure about the breed of it, but we had a snorkel for it. But the Commanding Officer said he would not let us put the snorkel on it because he knew we would have drove it in the ocean. Now we drove, pretty much on the beach, we'd drive from practically the north end as far as we could go to the south towards the gate. Nobody ever really bothered us.

Q: Now you mentioned going over to New York to see some of the ball games. Did you travel there by boat or train or car? How'd they get you there?

A: No, just in the buses. They took us over in buses.

Q: Did you know of any servants or minorities or women who worked at Fort Hancock doing either civilian or military jobs?

A: No, we were the only minorities I think (laughs). They had some Navy here that were even more minorities than we were (laughs). There was two or three Navy personnel going, I don't know what their job was. They were here... We got along fine with them though. I'm just kidding you.

Q: Overall, would you say that this was a fun or boring place to be working at?

A: It was a fun place. Especially in the summertime when we could go down to the beach and Asbury and all the beaches, Long Branch and just anywhere we wanted. As a matter of fact, I met my wife on the 4th of July 1952 on a beach at Asbury Park. And we were married on November 1, 1952. This was after I was discharged.

Q: What if anything do you think stands out in your mind still about your days at Fort Hancock?

A: Oh the camaraderie with my fellow workers. I still have contact with two of them. One of them has passed away and my old C.O. just passed away last fall, last September.

Q: Do you remember anything that was particularly funny or humorous that occurred to you while you were here? Any funny stories?

A: Well, we had coal fire furnace and hot water system or hot water heater. And whoever was the C.Q. that was supposed to watch the water heater didn't get it shut down and the pressure built up on it. It backed up into the cold water supply. And Master Sergeant in charge of our barracks was Finance Chief Master Sergeant or whatever. And he got up first thing in the morning and went to take his shower and go to the bathroom, and he said he just got up off of the

stool and flushed it and it blew. The hot water came right back up (laughs). He said, "Boy, I'm glad I wasn't sitting down when that happened." That's about the funniest one I can remember from here.

Q: Okay. Now you said you were in touch with a couple of men that you served with. Did you keep in touch with them from straight after you left here up until recently?

A: Yeah, I have one that I'm still in contact with. He's up in Trumansburg, New York. We write Christmas cards or our wives did most of the writing, and they had never met. I had met Ed's wife, my friend Ed Brown up in Trumansburg, New York. I'd met his wife, and he had met my wife, but his wife and my wife never met. But they corresponded for about fifty years until my wife passed away.

Q: Now this is your first time here since 1952?

A: Yes, this is my first trip back here, not to New Jersey, but this is my first trip back to the fort here. And I wouldn't have been here if I hadn't come back to do some things for my wife (Crying) (Mr Colburn came to New Jersey from Kansas to scatter his wife's ashes in Asbury Park where they met.).

Q: Do you feel it was important to come back here to sort of reminisce about the good times you had during your youth?

A: Yes I do. I think it helps a lot.

Q: Many veterans who are still around today don't get the chance to talk about what they went through when they were signed or when they enlisted. Do you think it's important that children in schools today learn this part of their history that might usually be overlooked?

A: I think it's very important that they do, especially of the World War I and World War II generation. They're getting pretty thin down there and around the country. And they really need to know the history of what went on during those wars and why we were involved in them as well as Korea and Vietnam. I think it's very important that they do.

Q: And as a last question to this interview, when you think of Fort Hancock, just in a few words, what comes to your mind?

A: That's, that's a tough question to come up with an answer for. I guess the fact that I was able to spend time working with something that I enjoyed doing. I worked the rest of my career as an IBM technician and that's where I got my experience in electronics. I think that would probably be my best thought on it.

Q: That's all the questions I have as of now. I want to thank you very very much Mr. Colburn for doing this interview with me. I learned a lot and I'm glad that I took out the time to do this with you.

A: I'm very pleased to have been able to help you out, and I hope this will help you in your studies.

Q: Thank you very much. I'm sure it will.

END OF INTERVIEW