

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Interview with Don Wood
51st ADA 1970-72
By Mary Rasa, NPS
September 14th, 2003
Transcribed by Samantha McArthur, NPS 2008



1st Sgt Don Wood from 51st ADA unit photo.



Don Wood at Nike Radar site in 2003.



Eugenie Wood at Fort Hancock NCO Club, 1970.



Eugenie Wood at Nike Radar site in 2003.

Rasa: My name is Mary Rasa. I am the museum curator for the National Park Service at Sandy Hook, New Jersey. Alright, I am here with Don Wood and his family and I'm gonna start out by asking Mr. Wood a few questions. When and where were you born?

Wood: I was born in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Rasa: When did you graduate, where did you graduate from?

Wood: High school?

Rasa: Yes.

Wood: Well I didn't graduate I got my GED when I joined the service. But I went up to the third year in high school...

Rasa: In Massachusetts?

Wood: With the boy's trade school in Worcester, Mass.

Rasa: Was your father or grandfather in the military?

Wood: No. Neither one.

Rasa: And what years did you serve in the military?

Wood: 1954 to 1974.

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

Wood: I got stationed here in 1970. And I come in here and took over as First Sgt. of the unit.

Rasa: And was that, what unit was that?

Wood: That was C Battery here on Fort Hancock.

Rasa: With the radar or launch?

Wood: Well, I was in charge of the whole unit as First Sgt.

Rasa: Oh okay.

Rasa: So what was your start and ending date here?

Wood: 1970 to '72

Rasa: Did you know anything about this place before you came?

Wood: No, I did not.

Rasa: Did you know that type of job you would be performing when you came here?

Wood: Yes I did, except to the fact that it was dual unit rather than a single unit.

Rasa: And that was, did you say the 51st?

Wood: Yes, hmm.

Rasa: And your job was to?

Wood: Well, First Sgt. is an administrative leader of all of the whole unit.

Rasa: What education did they give you before you came to this unit the military?

Wood: As far as what, I'm sorry?

Rasa: As far as the job you would be performing here.

Wood: Oh well, I had leadership courses during my service in the military and also went to school on the radar. Went to school on generators so my knowledge of everything that was here was pretty, pretty good.

Rasa: Did this job aid you in your future work?

Wood: I wouldn't say so, no, no.

Rasa: Were there ever alerts or potential enemy attacks when you were here?

Wood: Well, we had many alerts but potential enemy attacks, I don't remember any, no. Not during those years

Rasa: And when there was an alert, what would your job be?

Wood: My job was to control the troops that took care of perimeter, guarding of the units and all that.

Rasa: What building did you work in most of the time?

Wood: The building number, I don't know. But it's, I think the marine, it's that U shaped.

Rasa: It's building 74.

Wood: 74, yeah okay.

Rasa: What building did you live in?

Wood: We lived over where now is the Coast Guard unit. It was the first big house before you get into the new housing area of the Coast Guard on the left.

Rasa: Did you typically eat at home?

Wood: Yes, at home

Rasa: Did you go to any mess halls for lunch?

Wood: Sometimes I used to go over to the Coast Guard mess hall for lunch and also at home.

Rasa: What social activities did you take part in while you were at the Fort?

Wood: We had a small NCO club here, and that's about the only thing we had here.

Rasa: Did you go to the theatre?

Wood: And of course the theatre. We went to the theatre quite a bit and so did my sons.

Rasa: ...Any dances here?

Wood: Oh and of course the beach

Rasa: Oh okay.

Wood: The beach

Sons: For fishing

Rasa: Oh ok, did you attend religious services here?

Wood: Yeah, yeah, I think, yeah, yes, I think we did. Very nice little chapel

Rasa: What religion?

Wood: Protestant.

Rasa: And you did go to the beach while you were here. Do you know what beach you went to? Was it in the Fort area or was it down further south?

Wood: In the fort area, yeah.

Sons: Used to work there.

Rasa: Did you take excursions to New York City while you were here?

Wood: No ma'am.

Rasa: Did you know of any servants, minorities, or woman who worked at the fort in either civilian or military jobs?

Wood: No, no.

Rasa: Was this a fun or boring place to be working?

Wood: It was a very nice place to be working.

Rasa: Did anything especially humorous occur while you were here?

Wood: Yeah, one day at the NCO club, my, one of my best friends who was an airborne Sgt., there used to be a second story porch up there in the NCO club, and we gave people certificates who jumped off of it, and survived. We gave them fictitious airborne certificates.

Rasa: Okay.

Wood: That was humorous.

Rasa: That, I guess so. Was it pavement down below or was it grass?

Wood: Grass.

Rasa: Oh okay, that's a good thing to know. What stands out in your mind about Fort Hancock?

Wood: What stands out in my mind was that I think it was a very, very nice place to raise children. I don't think you could ask for a better place to be if your gonna be stationed somewhere.

Rasa: Do you keep in touch with anyone who you were stationed with?

Wood: I keep in touch with my orderly room clerk who now lives in Oregon and owns two big businesses out there.

Rasa: And what's his name?

Wood: Bob Peterson.

Rasa: Anything else before I move onto your family? Is there anything else you would like to point out while you were here?

Wood: The only thing we did was we did start the Rod and Gun Club here at the post. We also worked with the boy scouts here on the post, actively. I was also what they call the Post Game Warden which they I knew was hard (inaudible).

Rasa: You were also, oh, there was one story, the story with the quail. You know the Story. What happened with the quail?

Wood: Yeah, well what we did was pick up whole bunch of small young quail at the airport my friend did Bob Han... I mean Don Harrington who was the First Sgt. of the headquarters unit up on the hill (Highlands). He went to pick 'em up and

then he and I raised 'em, and we actually trained our poodle on those quail to get 'em back home when we turned 'em loose. It was quite interesting.

Rasa: And then, and then were they being hunted afterwards?

Wood: Afterwards when we turned 'em loose, they did open hunting season after that.
Yes.

Rasa: And was that from boat or from shore?

Wood: From shore.

Rasa: Oh okay and what general area did you do that in? Out near the tip?

Wood: It was off on this side here.

Rasa: More near the ocean?

Wood: Yeah.

Rasa: Alright. We are also here with Eugenie, who is Don's wife, and I'd like to ask you a few questions as well. Now how did you enjoy living out here?

Mrs. Wood: I did enjoy it, I did. It was a nice place for the kids. I never worried about 'em. Yeah, I, I worried about 'em but not where they were because everything was so open and you knew just about everybody who lived here.

Rasa: So where you were located which was more with the Coast Guard personnel, did you actually live very close to the Coast Guard personnel at the time or were there more Army people up there?

Mrs. Wood: We were more involved with the Army people. I don't remember there being many Coast Guard, do you?

Wood: No, they didn't have them there.

Mrs. Wood: They didn't have housing.

Wood: Near there, there was no housing area for them.

Mrs. Wood: Except by the lighthouse.

Rasa: Oh okay, did you, was there a non-commission officer's wives club? Were you apart of that at all?

Mrs. Wood: No.

Rasa: It didn't exist at that point in time.

Wood: No.

Rasa: Did you go to Manhattan, at all?

Wood: No. No I was just pretty much just a stay at home wife and mother.

Rasa: Where were the typical places you would go shopping when you were out here, for clothes?

Mrs. Wood: Oh my goodness, where did we go?

Rasa: Did you go to Red Bank or Atlantic Highlands? By that point in time was there a Monmouth Mall?

Wood: I don't think there was a Monmouth Mall back then but we did go to Fort Monmouth (inaudible).

Mrs. Wood: Well, I know we went to Fort Monmouth, but as far as clothes I honestly don't remember where we went shopping.

Rasa: Where did you go shopping for food, out here or Fort Monmouth?

Mrs. Wood: Fort Monmouth.

Wood: Also the store in Sea Bright.

Mrs. Wood: And also the grocery store in Sea Bright.

Wood: Sea Bright, a beautiful store.

Mrs. Wood: Take a trip every once in a while out to Fort Monmouth.

Rasa: Was it very isolated being out here?

Mrs. Wood: In the beginning, yeah, but once you start to know people, you know, and your kids start to make friends, you know, I enjoyed it. It was nice.

Rasa: Anything special, especially humorous you remember happening while you out here.

Mrs. Wood: Well for one summer I worked the beach, you know, at the food stand.

Rasa: Which was the first army recreation area?

Mrs. Wood: Huh, I guess that's what it was and my kids were there everyday.
(Chatter)

Mrs. Wood: And everyday I saw these three faces looking at me waiting for their handouts, that somehow just stands in my mind.

Rasa: At that time were, were, people that were in the Army coming out with their RV or tent and camp or was it more of a day traffic?

Mrs. Wood: It was not just Army that came out to the beach

Rasa: Oh, I thought you were actually you you weren't associated with just the Army you were actually with the state park?

Mrs. Wood: No, no, I mean when I worked out there, there were people there that I never saw. So I'm just assuming that they came from the outside.

Rasa: Well, I believe that is was open, it was actually at one point called the Fort Monmouth Officers beach so it could have been other military personnel from a lot of different areas. But did any of them stay like over night?
Was there accommodations, I mean, because I there's ,there's, a building up there with a trailer that was set up for laundry for people with RV's and tents so I was just wondering...

Wood: Yeah, the other side of the officer's club there was an area there, they made things...

Rasa: Yeah, it's converted into bathrooms now, but it originally had the washer and dryer there when we, when we renovated it.

Mrs. Wood: Yeah see that I didn't even know...

Rasa: And that was located, you were up in the north end when you worked?

Mrs. Wood: Yeah and that was fun, to be close by. I always knew where my kids were. They always knew where I was. As a matter of fact, that's where they really learned how to swim. Remember?

Mr. Wood: Oh yeah.

Mrs. Wood: Yeah, I worked at the PX for 6 months before we left here.

Rasa: And how was the PX? Was it, It must have been pretty small

Mrs. Wood: I was just gonna say it was small, very small.

Rasa: And was that still in the building with the bowling alleys in the basement or did they move it?

Mrs. Wood: Yeah, huh, right.

Rasa: Were the bowling alleys still being used when you were here?

Mrs. Wood: Do you remember that?

Wood: I can't...

Mrs. Wood: I can't...

Wood: I think, yeah they were. I think they were.

Son: I do too, I think they were

Rasa: I recently went in there and found a calendar from like 1974 strewn all over the basement so I guess...

Mrs. Wood: So I guess it was. I don't remember because I was never in it

Rasa: So you just worked upstairs then?

Mrs. Wood: Upstairs, yeah.

Rasa: What would be, what would be the typical things that would be sold up there?
Cosmetics and that type of stuff?

Mrs. Wood: Yeah. More necessities because they, you know, beer, camera's, toiletries.

Rasa: Did they have things like milk there too? Bread?

Mrs. Wood: No no. Didn't they have a grocerteria out here somewhere? I don't remember milk or bread being in there. Yeah, you're asking me something 31 years ago and I only worked their 6 months. I can't remember that.

Rasa: So the most typical thing you'd be selling would be beer and...

Wood: Cigarettes probably.

Mrs. Wood: Cigar, oh yeah, cigarettes, camera, candy, toilet articles, mostly things that the GI's would need.

Rasa: Okay, and was it most, there would mostly be the single guys coming in there?

Mrs. Wood: Yeah and some of the wives would come in there. You know...

Rasa: Were there still, how, how many people do you, were here at the time you were here? Like military and their families, were there 100, more than that?

Mrs. Wood: There had to be more than that

Mr. Wood: More than 100. See we, we had also Fort Monmouth people that lived in this big trailer park that used to be across the street from our barracks, well a lot of Fort Monmouth people used to live in those.

Rasa: Like, like the unit you were assigned to, how many soldiers would have been in that?

Wood: I knew you were gonna ask that and I was gonna look that up but I failed to do that before I come up here, even in that picture I believe that there were about 80 people.

Rasa: And was there any other unit here at that time that had to do with the Nikes or was that just the one?

Wood: No, just the duel unit, so we had more people than that but they weren't all in the picture, right now I can't remember to tell you exactly how many people we had because they weren't all in the picture.

Rasa: So, there was maybe about 200?

Wood: I would say a little bit less, yeah.

Johnny Wood: It didn't seem that crowded.

Donald Wood: No.

Mrs. Wood: It was nice, the kids would just wander and...

Johnny Wood: No, when we had a few kids here, we stuck together, me and my two brothers.

Donald Wood: Darl and Alfred, and who else,

Johnny Wood: Harrington's

Donald Wood: Harrington's, Scott

Johnny Wood: Keith, Scott

Donald Wood: Scott

Rasa: Okay, what I would like to do is if you would go ahead and say your name and I'll....

Johnny Wood: Johnny Wood:

Rasa: Okay and how old were you when you came out here?

Johnny Wood: 13, no 11.

Donald Wood: Yeah, because I was 13.

Johnny Wood: Yeah 11, we had the teen club out here.

Donald Wood: Right I was going to the teen club...

Johnny Wood: Yeah and I wasn't.

(Laughter)

Rasa: What school did you go to?

Johnny Wood: Middletown oh wait, wait, Bayshore .

Donald Wood: Bayshore.

Johnny Wood: Bayshore and then Middletown Township after that was full. Bayshore used to get bused out, bused out.

Rasa: So you used to pal around with the kids out here.

Johnny Wood: Yeah, I didn't know everyone that was on the bus because there was like all ages, I think, wasn't it?

Donald Wood: Yeah.

Johnny Wood: We was on a bus together, right, separate trips, separate ages.

Mrs. Wood: You went to Middletown.

Donald Wood: I went to Bayshore too.

Rasa: So, so you also went to the middle school and then to the high school or were you...

Johnny Wood: No, not the high school just...

Rasa: Just the middle school?

Johnny Wood: What do ya call it elementary, I guess it was, when I was 13 or 12.

Mrs. Wood: Yeah, you went to elementary...

Johnny Wood: Bayshore Elementary and then Middletown was...

Mrs. Wood: We moved was when you....

Johnny Wood: ...in 73' right?

Mrs. Wood: Well, that's the um...

Johnny Wood: I did go to Middletown Township, didn't I?

Rasa: Well it's all Middletown Township.

Johnny Wood: Oh, okay, well, I remember Bayshore.

Rasa: So you actually had two sep, different schools in the same school zone?

Johnny Wood: Yeah, right

Rasa: What do you remember most about being out here?

Johnny Wood: I had a lot of fun, boy scouts, fishing with my brothers, mostly just me and my two brothers, stuck together like glue, the teen club, we had the teen club, we were mad at him because he was aloud in because he turned 13 before us.

(Laughter)

Johnny Wood: You know, the boy scouts was cool, it was real cool here.

Rasa: Was it just the Fort Hancock boy scout troop?

Johnny Wood: Yeah, yeah, we were good. We had Klondike derbie, or something like that. We had a good good good team... Remember that?

Donald Wood: Yep

Rasa: What type what type sports did you did you play any sports out here?

Johnny Wood: No no, just fishing, fishing, going to school, that about what we did right?

Donald Wood: Yeah.

Rasa: And going to the beach.

Johnny Wood: Going to school, fishing, going to the beach, just fishing fishing fishing, on the docks. You know run around, just, we had a dog and a cat so, we'd bring him with us a lot.

Rasa: Did you ever get in a boat while you were out here?

Johnny Wood: No, no, we used to hang out sometimes, the Coast Guard boats would let us, you know, hang out or something, basically we were on the docks, you know, on the beach.

Donald Wood: We used to dive off the Coast Guard boats.

Johnny Wood: Yeah, yeah

Donald Wood: Right off the top peak.

Johnny Wood: Mmm huh.

Donald Wood: Man that was far.

Rasa: Do you just want to go ahead and say your name?

Donald Wood: Oh yeah, I'm Donald Wood.

Johnny Wood: We used to walk to the bunkers and just wonder around.

Donald Wood: Yeah people, every once and a while, you find some dead mattress' in their, people would be...

Johnny Wood: Yep yep.

Rasa: And you were 13 when you came out here?

Donald Wood: Uh huh.

Johnny Wood: Well you were actually 12. Well I was like 10. I think I just turned 13 before we left here. I had to have been like 11.

Mrs. Wood: Don went to intermediate school while we moved to Beachwood. So you had to be...

Donald Wood: I went to Beachwood in junior high school.

Rasa: And then you were not here by the time you were in high school.

Donald Wood: Right, and then I left there.

Rasa: So tell me what you remember?

(Laughter)

Donald Wood: I remember the butterflies used to, Monarch butterflies, used to paddle up over here, swarms and swarms of em, right by are house where we used to live. And that was something every year to see, that was amazing. They used to do that right across the ocean. That was something.

Johnny Wood: The beach plums, the beach plum fights

Donald Wood: Right, beach plums

Johnny Wood: You don't see beach plums where I live.

(Chatter)

Rasa: This is a bad season for them. Normally we'll get a good crop...

Donald Wood and Johnny Wood: Oh yeah

Rasa: Yeah this was really bad.

Johnny Wood: We used to have fights with 'em.

Rasa: And throw 'em at each other.

Johnny Wood: Oh yeah, and eat 'em too.

(Laughter)

Rasa: Did you ever eat a prickly pear cactus of the fruit?

Johnny Wood: Yeah, yup I did.

Rasa: Did you get a lot of thorns in your fingers?

Johnny Wood: Yup... a lot of thorns from wrestling.

Donald Wood: Good god did we have a lot of thorns in us.

Wood: You guys found a bomb out here too.

Johnny Wood: Yeah a couple bombs.

Donald Wood: The boy scouts.

Rasa: Like a grenade type.

Johnny Wood: No.

Rasa: Like bigger?

Donald Wood: Like shell bombs.

Johnny Wood: No, no like shells. Sit there digging in the sand and I'm like whoah. They called the...

Wood: D.O.D. (Department of Defense) outta Fort Dix

Johnny Wood: Yeah something like that.

Rasa: What else do you remember about...

Donald Wood: They did a lot of dredging too when was was here. We used to have a fort and they buried it on us.

Johnny Wood: Yeah.

(Laughter)

Johnny Wood: I went out there the next day, you couldn't even see the top of it. It was like this...

Donald Wood: It gradually went and they covered the whole thing, it was like, I don't know, pretty high, about 6 feet.

Johnny Wood: Oh yeah

Rasa: Would you typically play, or hang out in the area where you lived or were you all over the place?

Johnny Wood: Most, mostly by the house

Donald Wood: Yeah.

Johnny Wood: By, by, by the lighthouse.

Donald Wood: Yup.

Johnny Wood: Almost to the lighthouse.

Donald Wood: Going to the dock everyday, the beach.

Rasa: Did you ever get to look into the lighthouse when you were here?

Johnny Wood: I don't think so. I don't think we were allowed.

Rasa: Probably not.

Donald Wood: No, I don't think we were allowed.

Rasa: I bet you weren't allowed in the batteries either, but you went in there.

(Laughter)

Donald Wood: Oh yeah, I know, we did, we got in trouble. I got in trouble out here

Mr. Wood: I used to, I used get to be able to teach out there, and they let me take 'em. I took my parents through there..

Rasa: Did you ever get in trouble for going down near where the Nikes were? Were they...

Donald Wood: No, we never did that.

Rasa: Did you ever get to have a tour of, of the missiles?

Donald Wood: Nope.

(Chatter)

Donald Wood: Isn't there a cannon sitting somewhere.

Rasa: Yes

Johnny Wood: Is it still there?

Rasa: Yes

Johnny Wood: Yeah

Donald Wood: That's still there

Johnny Wood: That's the one they threw paint on it or something. No. Was it us?

Donald Wood: I don't know. Somebody did something to it.

Johnny Wood: Somebody threw paint on it and had to clean it off or something, had to wash it off or something. We got in trouble.

Donald Wood: Yeah
(Laughter)

Rasa: Anything else anyone else would like to say before I finish?

Wood: You peddled papers out here..

Donald Wood: I did deliver the newspaper out here.

Rasa: Asbury Park Press, Red Bank Register, do you remember, Long Branch Record?
(Chatter)

Donald Wood: Probably the Press

Rasa: Star Ledger

Wood: That's what it was, I think.

Mrs. Wood: And they can leave it at the gate and we had to go pick it up.

Donald Wood: Yeah, we had to go pick it up

Johnny Wood: I'd never forget living out here.

Rasa: How many newspapers would you deliver

Donald Wood: It was a lot because I was hurtin' when I first started.
(Laughter)

Rasa: Doing it on bicycle

Donald Wood: Uh huh.

Johnny Wood: Well don't forget the house we lived in was far away from the other houses.

Donald Wood: Right.

Johnny Wood: So...

Rasa: Would you be going down Officer's Row and Sergeants Row?

Donald Wood: Yup. All.

Mrs. Wood: But I took you on Sundays.

Donald Wood: Oh yeah, that's right.

Rasa: Oh, it must have been really heavy.

Donald Wood: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Rasa: Did you also go to the trailer park when you delivered the newspapers?

Donald Wood: I don't believe I did, the trailer park.

Mrs. Wood: I don't remember the trailer park. Where Graham lived..

Small Girl: All I know is you guys just got a big house.

Donald Wood: Wait till you see it.

Small Girl: I already did.

Donald Wood: When?

Small Girl: I took a picture of it.

Donald Wood: I probably did, I probably did. I had a pretty big route.

Rasa: At this point in time, they probably weren't using any temporary barracks, so the wooden barracks were kind of abandoned, so everything was just in the brick buildings and some where the Coast Guard is today? Is that...

Wood: Yeah.

Donald Wood: Now you say didn't you, that you rebuild, restoring one of the barracks out there right.

Rasa: Yes, there's two barrack, there's, there's two, wooden barracks and both of them are being worked on. One is seasonal housing and the other one is probably gonna be more seasonal housing. And that's all we have left, everything else got demolished over time. Anything else?

Wood: No

Rasa: Well, thank you very much for coming. This has been very enlightening. You might here yourself in our new visitor center, when we do our oral history interviews section, so...

Johnny Wood: Too bad Jeff wasn't here, our younger brother.

Rasa: Okay, well thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW