

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Telephone Interview with Mary (Duff) Heckendorn
Women's Army Corps
By Tom Hanley, NPS Intern
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Transcribed by Mary Rasa 2010



Mary Duff (on left and top) working at Post Library Orientation Map, 1944.
Photos courtesy: NPS/Gateway NRA



Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

TH: This oral history interview of Mary Heckendorn is taking place on Tuesday March 9, 2004 at Monmouth University's WMCX studios over the phone. I'm Tom Hanley and I will be conducting the interview. Good afternoon, Mary.

MH: Good afternoon.

TH: Now, when and where were you born?

MH: I was born in Prince George's County, Maryland. September 28, 1916.

TH: Did you attend high school?

MH: Yes. Graduated (from) Annapolis High School.

TH: Do you know what year was that?

MH: 1933.

TH: The class of '33. Was your father or grandfather in the military?

MH: During World War I, my father was in what they called the National Guard and I remember that he had duty guarding a warehouse in Baltimore.

TH: So he served during World War I?

MH: One, ah huh.

TH: Now how did you become involved at Fort Hancock?

MH: I was sent here by the Army. I was WAC (Women's Army Corps).

TH: Do you remember around your starting and ending date at Fort Hancock? What that was or anywhere a ballpark estimate of that?

MH: Well, I was the editor for a while for *Sandy Hook Foghorn*. (Fort Hancock's newspaper) Something called the *Column Left*. And my earliest one was in February '44.

TH: Yeah, I actually have a photocopy of the *Foghorn* from Thursday May 4, 1944. And your column is in it. *Column Left*. What was that like? Writing a column for the *Foghorn*?

MH: Well, I had, yeah, it was fun. I was not restricted in any way. I could be funny or I could be informative, but it was a good deal. I had written columns before.

TH: Now how did you normally put your column together each week?

MH: Well, I was working in the library which gave me access to a lot of people coming in and out and I could pick up good gossip that way.

TH: Now, would you base your story on pretty much gossip that was going around or like news, something that you felt was just going on at the Fort?

MH: Ah huh. People who were married or engaged.

TH: What would you say, and this is a tough question, what was the most interesting or most fun story that you ever worked on doing the *Foghorn*?

MH: I couldn't tell you. I don't remember.

TH: There were just too many to choose, huh?

MH: Huh.

TH: Too many good ones to choose from?

MH: Well, they're all pretty inconsequential actually.

TH: Was the *Foghorn* the only thing you ever did at Fort Hancock or did you have another job?

MH: I was working at the Library.

TH: Did you know you were going to do that before you came to Fort Hancock?

MH: I had worked in the Newark, New Jersey Public Library for several years before I joined. So, they immediately seized on me when they saw where I had worked and assigned me the Post Library.

TH: So I guess your experience in Newark really helped you out with you work with the Army?

MH: Yeah, uh huh.

TH: Now, what was your rank or your title at Fort Hancock?

MH: I was more interested in getting overseas, than I was in being promoted. I was T-5 when I went overseas.

TH: What year was that, if you remember?

MH: Do I remember what?

TH: If you remember that, when was that you left Fort Hancock to go overseas?

MH: I'm sorry I didn't get that question.

TH: When did you leave Fort Hancock to go overseas?

MH: I had to go to Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. And I think in June for overseas training.

TH: Now while you were at Fort Hancock, I guess the unit or the department that you worked for was termed as the library or the WAC? What would that be termed as?

MH: What was that?

TH: When you were at Fort Hancock, the unit or the department that you worked with, did that have a specific name?

MH: It was the Post Library.

TH: It was the Post Library and your job was Librarian?

MH: No, I was working under the civilian Librarian.

TH: Now, what background and education did you get before coming to Fort Hancock?

MH: Just graduation from Annapolis High.

TH: Did your work at Fort Hancock and the library aid in any of your future work?

MH: Not really.

TH: While you were there, again, you were there during World War II, correct.

MH: Yes, ah huh.

TH: And that was a very tense time for America to say the least. Were there any alerts of potential enemy attacks while you were at Fort Hancock?

MH: No, and we were in a very vulnerable position. You know, well of course you know, you are at Fort Hancock. There were German submarines that sneaked in. Didn't one come ashore in Long Island? I think so. No. We were not alerted to any of these things.

TH: What would you have done? Was there a specific plan in place in case there was a potential attack coming?

MH: No, not that I was aware of.

TH: Now, what building did you work in?

MH: The Library. It was a separate building. Just marked Post Library, as far as I remember. (It was a temporary wooden building located on the North Parade Ground just west of the Post Commissary, Building 47.)

TH: Can you describe the building?

MH: No, I'm afraid not.

TH: Where did you eat while you were at Fort Hancock?

MH: At the mess hall.

TH: What was that place like?

MH: It was a barracks type thing. It was interesting. I don't know if I should tell you or not.

TH: Oh, please tell me.

MH: Roosevelt was really interested in integrating the Army. And of course, there were many people who were violently opposed to it at the time. When things were, when blacks were admitted to the Army.... And as far as I know we marched from our barracks down to the mess hall for our meals and I think we had the second shift. All the (male) soldiers, of course had the first shift. WACs' had the second. And there was a detachment of black soldiers who took the third shift. I never saw them. They came in after we had left. The Army was very careful to keep us separated. I don't know if they were postal workers as they were in France, or not. I don't know why they were there or anything about it except they had a shift in the mess hall. I never heard of any trouble between the white soldiers and the black soldiers, but that was an interesting thing that was going on at that time, I thought.

TH: Yeah, so you had African-American soldiers, but they were kept separate from the rest of the population and you never saw them yourself.

MH: Yes, I don't know where they were stationed. I don't know what their job was. I know that when I was stationed in Paris there was the mail, postal units of black soldiers stationed at Versailles. And you know how terribly important mail was to the soldiers

that were fighting in Germany. But I never saw any of these people on the streets of Paris. Apparently they were kept back in Versailles. They sorted the letters.

TH: So they did all the work, but they were never really out there or visible?

MH: As far as I could see, yes that is true. It seemed too bad.

TH: Yes. Now back at Fort Hancock, what building did you live in?

MH: I think it was, reading some of this material I think it was called Barracks 25. It was a big two story, two story building with a big stairway in the middle. And two rooms, each one accommodated I guess about twenty cots..Twenty or twenty five cots. And all the showers and everything else was downstairs. So we slept upstairs, but went downstairs to brush our teeth and so on.

TH: Was it a comfortable place to live?

MH: Oh, yes, as Army cots go. Yes, uh huh.

TH: So, by the time you got to Fort Hancock were you used to sleeping with that many people in the same room?

MH: Oh, yes, uh huh. Basic training we had, no quarters. And the barracks was supervised or the whole thing I guess, run by (a) First Sergeant who was probably about 50. And she and her husband lived in an apartment somewhere nearby. And she was universally called, "Mom." People were very fond of her.

TH: Do you have any stories about Mom that you would like to share with us.

MH: No except that, no I was never disciplined by her. Which I understand she was very harsh. But she was a nice person. And I don't, it was amazing it seemed to me that she was as old as she was. I suppose she was more than 50.

TH: Now, the conditions that you lived in were similar to the men. I know that men, as far as bathroom conditions and showers, those were very, well, there was a lack of privacy. Was that the same for the women?

MH: Well, not quite. I think, we were private in the shower. It wasn't lines in the shower all at once, like the men I think. Well, the women had the you could use the cubicles. We had more privacy than the men.

TH: Did you take part in any social activities while at Fort Hancock?

MH: No, I didn't. I went to the Service Club and danced a bit. I went down to... of course I loved the water. Having been raised in the Chesapeake Bay area, I used the

beach. It was surprising how many people did not use the beach. I often many times had it all to myself.

TH: You went down to the beach often?

MH: Yeah, when it got hot, yes. Ah huh.

TH: Do you know which particular beach it was?

MH: That question came up in your outline here and I didn't realize there was more than one beach.

TH: So I guess you wouldn't know exactly which beach. There's a lot of really beautiful areas out at Sandy Hook. So you know.

MH: The big thing for me was that I had dear friends in Greenwich Village in New York and the Coast Guard ran a boat every weekend over to New York and I could get off and enjoy the city.

TH: Yeah, that was going to be my next question. I was going to ask you if you ever went over to New York City. You did. How often did you go?

MH: Anytime. Almost every weekend. I was standing on the street corner one day and someone came up to me and handed me two tickets and it was for a relatively new musical called, *Oklahoma*. And I just loved it. And I got the seats for free. And it was really a departure from any musical I had ever seen. I really love the theater anyway.

TH: It sounds like a great experience. What was New York City like during World War II?

MH: What did you say?

TH: What was New York City like during that time period?

MH: To me it was just the same. Crowded, lively, I don't... I wasn't living there. I would of course not know how things had changed. How many people overseas and people were grieving. But my friend, it was a couple that I visited, but her husband joined the Marines very quickly and he was gone most of the time.

TH: Getting back to Fort Hancock, would you say was it a fun or boring place to work?

MH: I'd thought it was fun.

TH: Did anything humorous or out of the ordinary occur while you worked there? Any funny stories?

MH: I'm afraid not.

TH: Do you keep in touch with anyone from Fort Hancock?

MH: No I don't. I was thinking of various people. When we went down to the mess hall, there was a woman called Brodsky. B-R-O-D-S-K-Y who delighted in, I mean we weren't marched down, but she set the rhythm. And did that little song, "You had a good home but you left". And of course, your left foot went down on the word left. And she put us in a good rhythm.

TH: Now, when was that around?

MH: Well, everyday.

TH: So that was part of your normal routine at Fort Hancock?

MH: Yeah.

TH: Have you been down to Fort Hancock recently?

MH: No I haven't. I've never gone back.

TH: What stands out the most in your mind about Fort Hancock?

MH: Pardon?

TH: What stands out in your mind the most about Fort Hancock?

MH: Again?

TH: What stands out the most in your mind about Fort Hancock?

MH: I've got some static. What's that strange noise?

TH: To tell you the truth I'm not sure where that came from. Can you hear me now?

MH: Barely.

TH: We have one more question to go. Hey the noise is gone. Okay, how do hear you now.

MH: Can't hear you.

TH: How about now? I'm going to try something else. How about now?

MH: Okay.

TH: Mary, what stands out in your mind the most about Fort Hancock?

MH: For me it was a wonderful experience. I was sent down there from Madison Barracks, New York at (Sackets Harbor) Watertown. I had frozen to death and they were closing the unit. I guess they were closing the whole thing. And it was spring and a nice job in the library and all together it was really pleasant. If I hadn't had my heart set on going overseas I would have gladly stayed there.

TH: Thank you very much Mary.

END OF INTERVIEW

Mary Heckendorn's maiden name was Ellershaw and when she was stationed at Fort Hancock her surname was Duff. Her first husband passed away shortly before she enlisted in the Women's Army Corps.

To learn more about Mary Heckendorn's life both before and after her time at Fort Hancock, you can view another interview posted on the web.

Visit: <http://marvin.cs.uidaho.edu/~heckendo/MuttiBio/muttibio.html>