

**Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Interview with John J. McKenna, 1963-66
By Melissa Kozlowski, NPS intern
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Transcribed by Melissa Kozlowski 2003**



John McKenna 2003

This oral history interview of John J. McKenna III is taking place on Friday, April 4, 2003 at Sandy Hook NJ. Mr. McKenna served at Fort Hancock with the US Army, C Battery, 3rd Missile Battalion, 51st Artillery Brigade from June 5th, 1963 through June 3rd, 1966. He was discharged with the rank of Sergeant and currently resides in Brooklyn, NY.

Question: When and where were you born?

Answer: In Brooklyn, 1943, April the 18th.

Q: Where did you graduate from?

A: St. Augustine's High School. I had a couple years of college, but after that I went into the service.

Q: Was your father or your grandfather in the military?

A: Yes, my father was in World War II, and my grandfather was actually in the Spanish American War.

Q: When did you first become involved at Fort Hancock?

A I was assigned here in the summer of 1964 after completing 44 weeks of training at Fort Bliss, Texas to become a Nike Hercules fire control mechanic.

Q: And you served here until 1966?

A Till June 2nd, 1966.

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

A I knew absolutely nothing about Sandy Hook. I knew it was here, by looking at maps, but I had absolutely no idea what Sandy Hook was about, or what was involved here.

Q: Did you know about the type of job you'd be performing when you came here?

A Yes, with the 44 weeks of training, it was a quite extensive course down there in Fort Bliss, so we knew what our assigned tasks would be. They were to be to maintain all the equipment, the radars, the computers, and all of the equipment, to keep the fire control area running.

Q: What was your rank or title?

A: My final rank was Sergeant. My title was Chief Fire Control Mechanic.

- Q: What unit or Department did you work for?
- A: C-2 Battery, 3rd Missile Battalion, 51st Artillery Regiment, 52nd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Brigade.
- Q: What exactly were your responsibilities here?
- A: When I started off I was a technician, working for other senior people who were eventually transferred out. What I had to do was maintain all of the equipment. There were the four radar systems, plus the computer systems, plus all the control equipment in both the radar control van and the battery control van. And that was on a routine basis, and when we had alerts my job was to effect immediate repairs of anything that would malfunction.
- Q: What were your 44 weeks of training like?
- A: There were approximately 8 weeks of basic electronics training, and then they broke it up into component training, each of the different radars, there were a number of weeks of those, and then the computer system, and then they tied everything together for us. In the morning you normally would have classroom work and in the afternoons it would be laboratory work where you would go and work on the equipment.
- Q: Did this job or any of the training you received help you in your future work?
- A: O absolutely. Although I was somewhat technically oriented all my life, when I left the service I went to the city and started working on electronic systems, eventually getting into computers.
- Q: Where there ever any alerts of potential enemy attacks while you were here?
- A: On a number of occasions we had alerts. Normally, they were planes, usually military planes that were not flying in the proper air corridors, planes from McGuire Air force base or planes that flew off of carriers from out in the harbor, off the East Coast.
- Q: What was your job at these times?
- A: In the beginning it was to shake a lot, to be nervous. As I developed a certain amount of confidence, both in myself and in the ability of the equipment to function properly, I would walk around in these alerts between the two vans, ensuring that all the equipment was operating as it should and trying to be a calming influence on the kids. At the time I was what, 22, maybe?
- Q: Tell me about the site where you worked.

A: C-2 site, which is the eastern or southeastern most site. It was not a family atmosphere in a sense, but a very team oriented type site. Very interesting characters. You'll never meet the kinds of people- the people you meet in the service are absolutely unique, you'll never meet people like that again in your life. They come from all walks of life and we just- there's a certain amount of boredom, there's a certain amount of anxiety when you have either major inspections due or you have alerts or those kinds of things, but just dealing with each others personalities was something that added a little bit of levity to the whole thing.

Q: How often did you have inspections?

A: Quite frequently. There were several different statuses that you could go on, alert statuses. Alpha status means you were a line battery, which means you would have to be ready to fire these missiles, which had nuclear warheads, within 15 minutes of being alerted of a potential attack. We were at line battery I would say once a month, that usually lasted a week. Then you could become a battery with a backup status of either maintenance, M1-M6, M1 meaning that if Alpha battery had a problem, they would bring you up and you would become the Alpha battery until they got their stuff fixed. So, we would be...there were different stages of alert. If we were on M1-M3 status, we would always have to be right there on the site; in many cases you'd get your meals on the site. M4-6 you would be able to go into the main battery area which was at the main part of the post, and you'd get your meals there and relax. And quite often if you were on a low maintenance status you would get the night off too. But generally, you worked a lot of 24 hour shifts. There was always a crew on the site.

Q: You said during the Vietnam War you were very understaffed?

A: As the Vietnam War started to heat up- I was here from 1964-1966. I think it was in the end of 1965, beginning of 1966 when President Johnson had the big call up, or activated many additional personnel. We initially started off in Vietnam with several thousand and we went to probably 500,000 or more. So there was a great demand for personnel, meaning there were fewer people to staff the missile sites.

Q: How did that affect Fort Hancock?

A: In general, we just worked many longer hours. I went from working 6am till 6pm type of shift and then getting off on weekends occasionally to 24 On and 24 off, not always getting the 24 off.

Q: Did you work with any civilians?

A: Yes, as a matter of fact. We had secondary support, or backup maintenance support, from the civilian government employees who worked out of Camp in NJ. In fact, one of them lives in the area now.

Q: What can you tell me about your living quarters?

A: I guess for army quarters it was not too bad. I lived on the site for about 8 months until I made sergeant. Once I made sergeant than I moved into the bachelor sergeants' quarters, and the only difference there was I had my own room as opposed to living in a barracks area or dormitory type area which was out at the site. The buildings were cold in the wintertime, hot in the summertime, and...being isolated it was not a fun place to be. Especially in the wintertime, Sandy Hook in the wintertime is not a fun place to be.

Q: Did you get a chance to participate in any social activities at the Fort?

A: Especially sporting events, we would have basketball games, softball games, baseball games and those types of things. Touch football, flag football, that kind of stuff. Those were obviously in the spring and the summer and the early fall because after that everything sort of went indoors. I spent a lot of time in the NCO club though. In fact, our mission I think at one time was kind of changed to making sure the NCO club didn't run out of beer.

Q: Did you attend any religious services while at the Fort?

A: In the Fort itself, no. There's a Catholic Church out on route 36 that I from time to time would go to.

Q: Did you get to go to the beach while you were here?

A: Very often, although my complexion doesn't –it's not good for my complexion to be out in the sun a lot, but you did go out to the beach in the early evenings and relax, because it was only a few feet from the barracks area to the beach itself. It was almost like having your own private beach.

Q: Did you make any excursions to the city while you were here?

A: Well, my family lived in-if by the city you mean NYC, from time to time we'd take the new guys into the city and then I'd visit my family from time to time. The bus ride was about a 2 ½ hour bus ride form here to NYC Port Authority, and then another hour home, so its not something I did quite often. We had a big family anyway and it was always crowded, so it was better to be here. I did go down to Asbury Park quite often in the summertime.

Q: What would you do in Asbury Park?

A: There were a number of establishments that we frequented.

Q: What can you tell me about the treatment of any minorities or women that worked at the Fort, either in civilian or military jobs?

A: Well, we didn't come in contact with women too much. It was pretty much a male dominated site. There were family members and some of the wives worked in the PX and those places, but we really didn't have much contact with women. With the minorities, Hispanics and blacks, I thought we had a tremendous relationship with them because we mostly based on your skill levels and some of these guys were just as good as- it ran the whole gamut, you had the highly skilled black guys and the highly skilled Hispanics, as well as not so skilled. It ran the gamut; I don't think there was a bit of prejudice. I never saw any, we would always socialize, and we would go out all the time together.

Q: What stands out in your mind about Fort Hancock?

A: It was definitely the personalities of the folks I met here. I met heroes from WWII, people who taught me a lot, some leaders. Mr. B, who was our warrant officer, probably taught me more about personal responsibility and a strong work ethic than anything else. We had people with a whole wide spectrum of beliefs, we had some fellas that were members of the KKK, and for some reason, changed their opinions while they were up here, because it was a very integrated army at that time.

Q: Can you tell me about an average day here?

A: Average day, we'd probably eat between 6 and 6:30, and then report to the site. At 6:30, we would talk about what our plans were for the day, what kind of equipment we'd be working on. Then usually we'd participate, or be observers, the maintenance folks, would be observers for the team running their drills, they would usually run a series of drills in the morning. And once the drills were over, and then there would be the normal maintenance tasks. The operators would normally be painting and cleaning the area, and maintaining that, and the fellas I worked with would all be working on the equipment, and in the afternoon, we'd usually have some more drills, and some more maintenance, and it—it was a routine thing, but routine in a good way because you learned a lot and you learned how to react to problems very quickly. It was more of a training atmosphere than a work atmosphere.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about that we haven't covered?

A: Once I got to know a little bit more about the history of Fort Hancock, I mean it was a fascinating place, to go down my the old gun batteries and see the evolution of coastal defense, which was fascinating. To meet some of the old salts, the fellas that fought in WWII, and all that sort of stuff.

Q: What were the men from WWII doing here?

A: It was only 1963, so if they wanted to be in for their 20 years...we had one fella here Milton Bucksbaum, who I think was a major, won a silver star, a couple of bronze stars, in the Pacific theater, and he was working as a technician on the radars because he...after WWII they had what they called a RIF, reduction in force. If you wanted to stay in the military and you were an officer you couldn't necessarily stay as an officer you had to go back as an enlisted man. And some of these guys, because they wanted to put their 20 years in...and Milton I think got out around 1964. But he was a--he walked around with little stooped shoulders; he looked like a little old man. In fact he used to bring in—when he worked nights with us, we'd kind of give him a lot of slack. He was a watchmaker, so he would come in and he'd bring all these materials, and he'd go around to the different—he lived in Parsippany, NJ--and he'd bring all his materials from the jewelry shops down, and fix all the watches at night and then he'd go home in the morning. But, he was one of the great characters of all time. And he looked like a little old man, but when you heard the story of what he did in the Pacific theater when his unit was attacked and overrun, he was actually a hero. He's one of those unsung heroes, and he never bragged about it, it was always others who told us about it. There were—Mr. B., he was a warrant officer, and he was in the Korean War and he was overrun by the Chinese, but fortunately he escaped and wasn't captured, so he had some experiences there. And then we had another fellow who was in WWII, and worked with graves registration, they're the ones who have to go out to the battlefield and bring the guys in, and make sure they're identified and all that kind of thing. So, there are tons of stories. But the best story of all was the time that I was working-- I was a sergeant and they were paying us one dollar an hour to work at the Officer's Club as waiters, and I was going out to take a little break right after dinner, and there was a lieutenant, who I won't name, he was obviously inebriated, and falling all over himself, and he started throwing up. And he was getting it all over his uniform and everything and a colonel that was there walked over to him and started screaming at him. There were some MP's there, and he told them to take this officer down to the Provost Marshall's office and he would see him in the morning, he would be down there in the morning. So he, the colonel, leaned over to see his nametag, and he pulled his arm up and he saw on his left hand his West Point ring. Immediately changed his mood, and said, on second thought, take this officer back to his room and extend him every courtesy. It was the West Point ring that did it for him. I won't name that officer, because last I heard a bout 4 years ago he was just about ready to retire, so he might still be active.

Q: The men were allowed to consume alcohol?

A: Not on the site, no, although a few guys would slip in a bottle of wine or some beer at night. On the Fort, yes, there weren't too many outlets for the guys. One of the problems we always had was there just weren't enough activities for single, enlisted men. Because, there was no access to meet women, there were no enlisted

women, and this was not close to any colleges. So we'd go to the NCO club, or the enlisted club, and sit around drink beer and watch ball games, those kinds of things. It was probably the single-most, the single biggest shortcoming, in my belief, that the army had, and that the service still has. There's not enough outlets for single enlisted people.

Q: You mentioned before something about the officers and enlisted men...

A: Right. There were certain personalities that when you worked together you know that you could be someone's best friend. Obviously I was a sergeant and there was a lieutenant I worked with who, we had common views on a lot of things and we could have been the best of friends. But you weren't allowed to socialize. The only time we could actually talk about different issues were those times when we were on duty, on the site. And he would have to always show a dominant posture, in a sense, because he was an officer. That was something I was kind of against, because there were some officers I would have liked to have known better, but I couldn't. Mr. B said he would--we should go out one time, and have a couple of beers together, but he couldn't do it. If we were ever caught, he would be--I think fraternization, it was just something you never did. So all of my friendships were developed, most of them were developed, amongst the enlisted people. One of the strange things about that is you never know anyone's first name, you always call everyone by their last name, because you have a nametag that says McKenna, or Ferno, a Matt Ferno I worked with, and I didn't know his first name for months, and I talked to my son about this, and he said it's the same way now, in the marine core with officers, they all know their last names, they don't even know their first names. So when they get out, sometimes it's hard to maintain contact with them because you don't know their names, or what their hometown is. Sometimes you know their hometown.

Q: Did you keep in touch with many people when you left the Fort?

A: With one fella Matt Ferno for a year or two, and a couple of the guys, but all the sudden it drifted. I got into something new; I was working in just normal civilian work, trying to start a new career. It's not until you're in separation for a while that you appreciate what you lost when you remember what those guys were like. I miss that today, which is why I get involved in reunions and a lot of things, both in my high school and here.

Q: Have you had any opportunities to go to reunions with the men from Fort Hancock?

A: We tried to do that once, but the people I have contact with are all over the country. I met one fella who lives somewhere in NJ and he came down one day, had a few laughs, and talked about a few of the old characters including ourselves. If I had to do it all over again I would definitely maintain contact with some of these people. I'm sure some of them are gone now, Mr. B I know is gone, I tried

getting hold of him in 1991 or 2, and I reached is wife and found out he had died the year before, so I missed him. It made me feel bad.

Conclusion of Interview