

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Interview with John B. Van Street
with some comments from Pearl Van Street
Fort Hancock Garrison 1957-59
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS,
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Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2010
Editor's notes on parenthesis ()
Photos courtesy of Gateway NRA/NPS



John and Pearl Van Street in Quarters 338 c. 1957



John Van Street behind Quarters 338



Karen Van Street on Christmas morning c. 1957.

MR: The date is January 23, 2006. My name is Mary Rasa. I am the Sandy Hook Museum Curator. Today, I am doing an oral history interview and the first thing I'd like to do is please state your name for the record.

JVS: John Van Street

MR: And also do you give your permission to the National Park Service to use this interview.

JVS: Yep. I do.

MR: Okay. The first thing I am going to ask you is can you tell me when and where you were born?

JVS: Okay. I was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. On the 9th of September, 1929.

MR: And did you live in that area for long?

JVS: Yes. Until I joined the Army, enlisted in the Army when I was eighteen years old.

MR: Okay. So, you graduated from High School there?

JVS: Right.

MR: And what was the name of the High School?

JVS: Liberty High School.

MR: Did any of your relatives before you serve in the military?

JVS: Not that I know of. No.

MR: Okay. And did you get drafted?

JVS: No. I think I just wanted to get away from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

MR: So tell me what you did when you signed up?

JVS: When I first came, went into the Army, I was put in the Infantry and was sent to Germany after four, five months. Well, I actually went to Air Compressor School in Virginia. And then they sent me to Germany and put me in the Infantry.

MR: What type of training did you take?

JVS: Air compressor training.

MR: Okay.

JVS: How to operate an air compressor, portable air compressor.

MR: So then you went to Germany. How long did you spend there?

JVS: About two and half, three years. Something like that. And then I came back to the United States and got out of the Army. And I stayed out for about two months and there was really no work in Bethlehem at that time, so I decided to go back into the military.

MR: What year was that then?

JVS: In '49.

MR: Oh, okay.

JVS: And then from '49 to '69, I stayed in the Army.

MR: So once you came back in, were you still in the Infantry?

JVS: Ah, no, I learned my lesson. I went to work, I...Let's see, I enlisted, I went to San Francisco, California and worked on an army transport. And we took troops overseas, you know, and dependents to Japan and Hawaii and Okinawa and stuff like that. And I worked there, on that ship for I guess about two years. Then went back over to Germany for another couple, two years, something like that. Then came back to the United States. And I was working in the Post Office in Germany. And then came back to the United States and went off to work in Camp Irwin, California, which is out in the Mohave Desert. Really didn't care for that so I, sent me over to Japan. And in the meantime, my Father had passed away, and I got married in the meantime. And my Wife came over to Japan with me. And our first daughter was born in Japan.

MR: What year was that?

JVS: What year was Karen born? (asking his wife, Pearl) '56. And then after Japan, I came to Fort Hancock.

MR: And did you ever hear of the place before you came here?

JVS: I had never heard of it and the transportation officer who was going to send our household goods back, he had never heard of it either. He had to really dig to find out where it was. And then we came to Fort Hancock.

MR: Did you know what you'd be doing once you got there?

JVS: No. Well, I figured there might have been a Post Office, because I had been the past few years at the Post Office. Why when I got to Fort Hancock, why they really didn't have a Post Office. They had a civilian Post Office and that was all. So I started working in what they called, Message Center/Post Office. Actually, I had done a lot of little jobs. I ran a mimeograph machine and a whole bunch of other little things within my little area there.

MR: How were you... What unit were you assigned to?

JVS: It was the US Army Garrison at Fort Hancock.

MR: Oh, okay so you were actually working for the Garrison. And at the time it was pretty small, wasn't it?

JVS: Very small. Yes.

MR: Less than a thousand?

JVS: Oh yeah. The Nike site, their headquarters was there also I believe at that time. And I was there during the time when the Leonardo site had the big explosion.

MR: Okay.

JVS: I think we had to go over there and provide security for the area, you know, for a brief period of time.

MR: Do you remember what building you were working out of? Were you working out of the Headquarters building?

JVS: It was the Headquarters building. It was a white building right near the water there.

MR: Okay. And you wife and child came with you at the time?

JVS: Yes.

MR: And where were you living?

JVS: We were, well, when we first, we were living at Fort Hancock. We didn't go back to Fort Hancock, did we. (speaking to his wife) Yeah, we got there in January and went right to Fort Hancock and started living in that little house. In fact it was only a one bedroom and we had a daughter by that time. So we decided to make the... they had a closed in front porch on that house so we used that as our living room. Used the living room as our bedroom and the regular bedroom for our daughter.

MR: So this was January of '56 or '57.

JVS: (speaking to his wife) When did we get to Fort Hancock? January, yeah, (1957).

MR: And you lived right by the water plant, so I'm pretty sure you were assigned to Quarters 338, which is still there.

JVS: Right.

MR: Did you have your own car?

JVS: Yeah, we had a car there.

MR: And did you come ahead of your family or did you all come at the same time?

JVS: I think we all came at the same time. Pearl (talking to his wife) I have to think about that. Pearl, did you stay at Fort Monmouth for awhile? I'm not sure. We might have had quarters at Fort Monmouth for a little while.

MR: Until you got the house?

JVS: Before I got the house. I think that's true. I think we did because I remember riding back and forth to Hancock from Monmouth with a friend of mine.

MR: Oh. Okay. And were there a lot of... there couldn't have been too many people working for the Garrison at the time, were there?

JVS: No. It was just an MP (Military Police) company and must a few people in the office. That's all.

MR: What other functions were you doing out there? Was the movie theater still functioning? Or was that closed?

JVS: Oh yeah. Yeah. In fact, I was the manager of the movie theater.

MR: Oh okay.

JVS: For probably about a year I guess.

MR: Was that your regular job or was that something you got paid extra?

JVS: No. That was just at night time. After duty hours.

MR: What type of...did you actually run the movie yourself or somebody else do that?

JVS: I was the manager of the movie. We had another guy that ran the projector.

MR: Do you remember how much they used to charge for movies?

JVS: No I don't remember. (laughter) I do remember our babysitter who used to baby sit for us. I used to let her in free.

MR: Oh, well that was good. Was she a child of one of the other...

JVS: She was a child of my boss in fact. Master Sergeant Mittermeyer (sp). He was, he had family there. She used to baby sit for us.

MR: Was the PX working or did you go to Fort Monmouth for everything?

JVS: No. The PX, there was a small PX there. I think we went to a small Commissary at Fort Monmouth.

MR: Okay. What other, what typically did you do during a work day or was it a little of everything?

JVS: It was a little bit of everything. I handled the mail for the post. Within the building there, there was a budget, finance section, special services section and things like that. And I just distributed mail to them. And then I also, like I told you, I ran the mimeograph machine which we operated on a daily basis. I ran that off. And once a week I drove to Fort Dix to pick our publications. From the publications department there. I used to go on a Friday. That took up the whole day on a Friday.

MR: Well, that's a pretty far trip. I can see that. What type of publications would you be bringing back? Would they be manuals and things?

JVS: Yeah. Like Army regulations. There were changes in regulations and things that people needed in the office.

MR: Were there any civilians working there or were they all military?

JVS: Oh yes. Mostly civilians. Yes. In fact, I think there were two civilian secretaries. Older ladies and they were always arguing with my boss. They didn't get along.

MR: He was a Sergeant?

JVS: Pardon.

MR: Your boss was a Sergeant?

JVS: Yeah. A Master Sergeant.

MR: Okay. And what was the person who was in charge of the Garrison? What rank was that?

JVS: He was a Lt. Colonel.

MR: Do you remember who he was?

JVS: I forget what his name was. The Executive Officer was Captain Chalmers. In fact, he made Major while I was there. His name was Chalmers. He actually ran the Post, really. The man in charge the Lt. Colonel he wasn't in the office very much.

MR: Can you spell his last name? The person, the Executive Officer.

JVS: C-H-A-L-M-E-R-S.

MR: Okay. Typically, the garrison did things like take care of quarters, right? That was part of it.

JVS: Right. General housekeeping things and with the quarters. Yes.

MR: Okay. What do you remember about, was there always a salute gun that fired at night, or...?

JVS: No, I don't remember anything like that. I don't recall anything like that. They might have, I'm quite sure they did, but I never noticed it.

MR: So when the explosion happened in Belford, you went over there just to protect the perimeter?

JVS: It was Leonardo.

MR: Right.

JVS: Yeah. That was all. To keep onlookers away. Stuff like that.

MR: Did they do a lot of safety things at Fort Hancock after that. Were there a lot of memos?

JVS: Not that I remember. See we weren't really connected with the Nikes at all.

MR: Right. Did you ever eat on post other than at your house?

JVS: I don't remember if there was an NCO club there or not. (speaking to wife) Yeah, at Fort Hancock, but I don't think we ate there, no. We ate at our house.

MR: I guess it was really small at the time. Were there any sporting events going on at the time?

JVS: No. We spent a lot of time at the beach.

MR: And was it life guarded?

JVS: I believe it was, yeah.

MR: Was there.....

JVS: I think they had two beaches, one officers and one for enlisted.

MR: Yeah. I was just about to ask that. Did they have like a little snack bar there or was it kind of primitive?

JVS: I think it was primitive. I don't think they had a snack bar at the beach or anything like that.

MR: Okay, I'm just trying to...Now, how long did you end up spending there?

JVS: When did we leave there? (speaking to wife) How long were we there? Probably in '57, no '59 we left there.

MR: Oh, okay.

JVS: We went to Fort Monmouth then.

MR: Oh okay and how long did you spend there?

JVS: I went to school there. I went to Radar Repair School at Fort Monmouth. It was a nine month course.

MR: And then where did you end up going?

JVS: I went to Oklahoma, Fort Sill, Oklahoma as a Radar Repairman.

MR: Was that with Nike missiles or was it another type of

JVS: No. It was with the Target Acquisition Radar.

MR: Oh, okay. Was that with any, what particular systems would you be....

JVS: It was for anything. The radar at that time was designed to track a shell that was fired from a howitzer and to tell you where the howitzer was fired, the shell was fired from.

MR: Okay.

JVS: So, you know, we could knock out that gun. In fact, they used some of the radar over in Vietnam.

MR: Now, when did you leave the service?

JVS: When did I leave? In '69.

MR: So, did you have your full twenty years and retired from the military?

JVS: Yes. I had 23 years.

MR: Oh, okay. Did you do anything after you retired?

JVS: Yes. I worked for the Post Office for a couple of years. And then I went to work for National Steel. And then I retired from National Steel.

MR: And was that, where was that located?

JVS: In a town called Delanco, New Jersey.

MR: Oh, okay.

JVS: Its, we lived in Willingboro at that time. Willingboro, New Jersey. The plant was in Delanco.

MR: Anything else you want to say about your time at Fort Hancock? Anything especially humorous happen while you were there?

JVS: No. Really, the only thing that stands out was we were isolated during that one period of time there. And we lost power for about three or four days.

MR: Was there a storm?

JVS: Yeah. I think the ocean came over the seawall. You know, it froze and we were closed out. The only reason I really remember it because my wife was cooking a roast that one day and the power went out and she, the roast was only half done and she tried to finish it up in a chafing dish.

MR: Oh, did it work? (laughter)

JVS: I don't remember but I remember her trying to do that to try and finish the roast.

MR: Well, you were sort of isolated from the rest of the people that lived out there too because you were...

JVS: Yes.

MR: Do you remember the people that lived next door to you?

JVS: The Balmans, I remember them. The guy that ran the plant, the water plant there. And the people that were in the other half of the house with us, they were, Pearl was more friendly than I was. I didn't see them that much. Because she was around during the daytime.

MR: Sure. Were the mosquitoes really bad down there?

JVS: Pardon.

MR: Do you remember the mosquitoes being bad?

JVS: No, but I tell you I was afraid to walk past my house out in the woods back out there. I thought I would get lost. 'Cause it was really thick out back of our yard.

MR: Yeah. It is kind of wooded back there. Anything else you would like to say about your time at Fort Hancock?

JVS: No. I enjoyed it. The only reason I left was because I couldn't get anywhere as far as advancement in the Army at the job I was at. And I couldn't see that I was going anywhere so I decided to try another area to work in.

MR: Also, what was your rank while you were there?

JVS: I was a Sergeant.

MR: Oh, okay. I am going to stop the interview now. Thank you very much.

End of Interview