

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Interview with Robert Peterson
51st ADA, Battery C
1971
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS
November 20, 2003
Transcribed by Mary Rasa



Barracks 74 as living, working and eating space for Battery C, 3rd Battalion, 51st ADA.
Photo courtesy of Gateway NRA/NPS



Robert Peterson outside his business headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon, 2010.
Photo courtesy of Robert Peterson

Editor's notes on parenthesis ()

MR: Hello. My name is Mary Rasa. I am Sandy Hook Museum Curator. I am here with Bob Peterson. It is November 20, 2003. We are here to do a little interview and I would like you to state your name for the record and where and when were you born.

RP: Bob Peterson. Born the 8th of March 1949 in Longview, Washington.

MR: Where did you go to school?

RP: Eugene, Oregon at high school and two years of college before I joined the Army in 1970.

MR: Did your Father or Grandfather serve in the military?

RP: My Father was in the Seabees in World War II in South Pacific.

MR: What years did you serve?

RP: 1970-1971.

MR: Were you just at Fort Hancock or did you go other places?

RP: I had basic training at Fort Gordon, California and advanced training in Field Artillery in Fort Carson, Colorado. And then of course, with that for a background, they sent me to a Nike Herc (Hercules) site. (laughter)

MR: How did you end up getting stationed at Fort Hancock?

RP: Strictly luck of the draw.

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

RP: Absolutely nothing. In fact, I couldn't find it. My orders sent me to Philadelphia, which was where I was supposed to find Fort Hancock and just a coincidence, twist of fate, I found somebody who knew Fort Hancock was on this end of the state rather than the other end of the state.

MR: How did you get here?

RP: Bus. Back in the day, you got reimbursed for your travel expenses. Fortunately, I rode the bus, found my way out here. Picked up a ride at the bridge with one of the guys who was stationed here who was headed out. And I guess seeing somebody with a duffle bag along the side of the road was a clue that, "Yeah, here's a newbie." So that's how I made my first trip out.

MR: What type of job did you perform while you were here?

RP: I was a clerk. I first worked as a training clerk and then moved into the orderly room with this battery clerk. Also took care of the mail clerk and the pay clerk.

MR: What was your rank?

RP: I was a spec 4. (Specialist 4)

MR: So, what was the, what battery were you with?

RP: I was with Charlie.

MR: Of what unit?

RP: C-3, 51. (C Battery, 3rd Battalion, 51st Air Defense Artillery)

MR: What type of background or education did you get for this type of job that you would be doing?

RP: None.

MR: Okay.

RP: I was, because I had gone to school for a couple of years, I knew how to type and I had this quirky background record of being a disc jockey. When I was in Colorado, I got pulled off the guns and I worked as a clerk. And I manned the radios for the camp there. And at the time all the active units were short on manpower so they broke up a field artillery group in Colorado. A third of the guys went to Vietnam. A third of the guys went to Germany to reinforce troops there. And a third of us got scattered across the states to ARADCOM sites. So my training for what I was doing here was exactly nothing.

MR: Okay. Did this job aide you in future work?

RP: Indirectly. I think my background when I came in, I had a pretty good understanding of what was expected. And as I pulled my (inaudible) I came out here and was willing to work. And as long as they found a job for me it was fine. As far as being a good soldier with trimmed hair and polished boots I was never very good at that sort of thing. But because I did my job, we got along famously.

MR: That was good. What building did you work in?

RP: The old barracks building. The orderly room was downstairs and I lived upstairs.

MR: Which is Barracks 74. Did you ever work with any civilians or were they all military?

RP: All military.

MR: Where did you eat, in the same building?

RP: In the same building. That was the, that was the universe. Get up in the morning, go downstairs, go to work, work through the day, and when you got finished, go upstairs. And once I was finished with my day, a lot of guys would gravitate towards the NCO Club. I typically headed off-post and I also had a part-time job at the Service Club. I would play records like back in my disc jockey days. Play records and service Kool-Aid to guys coming out there.

MR: Did they serve any alcohol?

RP: No.

MR: No.

RP: No. There was a little itty bitty place and I can't remember which one of the buildings it was in, but I think we had a pool table and that's about it. Not a big club at all.

MR: Was that in a little house, a little white house?

RP: Hmmhmm. I think so. I think so.

MR: It was 112. It burned down a few years ago. Tell me more about things you did with your job, like going to Fort Hamilton to get to, explain that?

RP: Well, my primary job was clerical. And at the time everything was by hand. Everything was on the typewriter and it was a big deal when I moved into the Orderly Room because I got an electric typewriter. That was hard to come by. And typing up morning entries. Anybody coming into the Battery, anybody going out of the Battery, anybody who was advanced in rank, anybody I don't know, who was in trouble, TDY, Temporary Duty Assignments, all of that was mainly each morning. Morning report went in and then after that it was just the taking care of administrative stuff. I worked as the mail clerk, so just before lunch, I would go down and sort the mail and hand out mail to the guys. Once a month for payroll, we'd drive over to Fort Monmouth and if I remember correctly our cash payroll was about \$50,000 or something like that.

MR: For how many men?

RP: Oh, there were 128 people in the Battery. That was a lot of money at the time.

MR: I guess so.

RP: So, we'd go over, count out the cash, get back in the van and I got to play John Wayne. I had to qualify with a .45. So, I carried a .45 and an M-14. The officer that went with me carried a .45. We both agreed that if we were ever stopped, it was the government's money. It was not ours. So, we weren't going to put up any kind of a fight for it. And if they wanted green stamps we would give them green stamps too. That duty driver at night, I didn't have to pull KP (Kitchen Police). Everybody up through if you were a E-5 or above or a Specialist, you were exempt from KP. I missed KP because I worked in the Orderly Room. But I did have to pull a job as the duty driver. The duty driver was sent over to Fort Hamilton for spare parts for the radar to keep it running at night. One of the dog handler stories. We had a dog transfer with the handler, where they tried to change the dog and handler. The dog didn't like the new handler. Bit him on the hand. Didn't do anything except clamp down and if I remember right it was a trip to Fort Monmouth where we had a medical service. His hand was about the size of a football. (He had) 14 broken bones just from the dog bite. So, that was a little dog called Jo-Jo and Jo-Jo had to be disposed of after that.

MR: Were they all German Sheppard's or were they different breeds?

RP: Strictly German Sheppard's. Big German Sheppard's.

MR: Were there many?

RP: I can't remember exactly but I think we had eight handlers and eight dogs. Those took care of 24/7 for patrolling.

MR: And that was, they just did the launch site, they didn't do the radar?

RP: Right. Just the launch site. The dogs did the perimeter. The handlers on rainy sloppy days, of course no one would admit this, but they would stay inside. The dogs would go out and work the fences for them.

MR: Did you ever get to watch a drill where the missiles were being raised?

RP: Yeah. Yeah. We got locked down from time to time on one of the training sessions. I always did my best to stay on the other side of the fence since there was always something that had to be done in the Orderly Room. Because the guys who were locked in those were two days or three days, a long time with out having a chance to have a meal off-post.

MR: So you didn't have to live in those little barracks down on the site.

RP: No. No. And I was, from an enlisted guy's standpoint working as a clerk, one of the advantages was you didn't have to do that. The disadvantage was there was always

something extra that needed to be done. But extra duty compared to being locked in, that's fine.

MR: So, in the whole building that you were in, was just one battery living in there or was there any others?

RP: We had one battery, plus we had a military police detachment. They lived on a far wing and they were completely separate from us. They had the same mess hall, they slept in the same building, but socially they were totally isolated.

MR: Was that a large group?

RP: No. Probably 12, 15.

MR: So you remember any other barracks having any other soldiers of any groups at that time?

RP: We were here as we were very contemptuously weekend warriors would show up. Come out on Post on the weekend. The Coast Guard was out on the other side, but that was about it.

MR: So it seemed to be just Reservists at that point in time?

RP: Right.

MR: And when the reservists came out, were they working with the Nikes at all or were they doing other things?

RP: They were doing other things. I don't think we had a reserve troops with the Nikes at all. They had a support maintenance operation here, the reservists. And we used to sit on the barracks and they used to drive on on Saturday mornings and we used to thumb our noses. And they would drive out on Sunday afternoon and we'd thumb our noses again mostly because they got to go home and we didn't.

MR: Right. Right.

MR: So, what type of social activities other than the NCO Club did you take...was the theater in operation at the time?

RP: No. The theater wasn't working. Social opportunities were get off work as close to 5 o'clock as possible. Get into the day room because Star Trek came on at 5 o'clock and we had a huge Star Trek following. After that in the evenings most of time, it was hang around the barracks, some of the guys would go down to the NCO Club. If I was working at the Service Club, I would go over to the Service Club. One of the nice things for me through the Service Club was we did get to go up to New York City a couple of

times. I got to see Zero Mostel in Fiddler of the Roof. I drove NCOs and their wives up a couple of times. That was another thing I picked up. I was the bus driver.

MR: Was it a big bus?

RP: Yeah. 52 passenger, full size.

MR: There were no more, they never took any boat from the docks up there at that point right?

RP: No.

MR: It was all by car.

RP: You'd take the bus, drive around and this was another one of the fun things, in fact a first sergeant says, "We need a volunteer." And I was told before I went in, you never volunteer for anything. And I said, "For what." And he said, "For a bus driver." I said, "That's fine. You know I've never driven a bus but, I suppose I can be trained." Well, training was as complicated as going down to the motor pool to the sergeant in charge, gave me the keys and said, "Can you drive around the Post without hitting anything I will endorse your license for driving a bus." (Laughter) So, I made it around Post without hitting anybody or anything and then I found out I was driving to New York City. And through the Lincoln Tunnel and into New York City and driving a bus and all those things.

MR: Now where did you park? Did you use a garage?

RP: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Find a garage and if you said today where was it that I'd park I don't have any recollection. I do remember getting crossed up with a very unhappy citizen on the streets of New York. He was spitting on the windshield of the bus because he didn't like our activities in Vietnam at the time. And it was the one time I had the opportunity to be lethal with a weapon which was the bus and I just sat and waited for him to get finished and I drove on. One of the things at that time that people would lose track of is that if you were in the military you very easy to spot. Nobody had short hair except for us. And if you had short hair, you were socially unacceptable. And driving a holly green bus through New York I did not elicit typically a lot of support from people. The cold side of the social scene.

MR: Did you ever go to the Highlands for anything?

RP: We'd wander into Highlands. There were a couple of places that we were accepted. Fisherman's bars that I remember going into and playing pool. But as far as anything else, transportation was extremely difficult. As most places there was one car among four or five guys. Cars were not very dependable. A friend of mine came up from Tennessee with a car but it didn't have a heater in it. That was fine I guess in Tennessee but it didn't work very well in New Jersey in the wintertime. A lot of time we spent

holed up in the barracks, hanging out with other guys telling stories, either telling stories or making them up, one of the two.

MR: Was the Post Exchange operational?

RP: Little itty bitty tiny store. Nothing in the exchange that was of value. If you wanted to shopping and take advantage of the exchange you had to go over to Fort Monmouth.

MR: I guess, were there any busses that would have taken you there?

RP: No.

MR: You were just kind of on your own.

RP: Yeah, once you, it was kind of interesting in hindsight, because you were in the most populace area in the United States, but you were absolutely isolated out here.

MR: Still are.

RP: Yeah. It hasn't changed in that regard.

MR: No.

RP: You used to be able to walk out and watch the ships coming in and out of the harbor saying, "Boy I wish I could go someplace." 747 flight paths used to be right down the hook and watch people coming in and say, "Someday I will get to..."

MR: I understand what you mean. Did you go to religious services out here?

RP: No.

MR: Did you go to the beach?

RP: Occasionally. Occasionally wandered over to the beach, but spending any time on the beach was not my priority. I had a motorcycle at the time. Where I come from out on West Coast you can ride out on the sand. Here I found out that the sand is not packed as tight so the first thing I did was get my bike stuck about 100 yards off the road. So, one time on the sand and that was all.

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

RP: I think the most memorable funny thing that happened and you have to give credit to the people who were out here. We were out at the far end of the supply chain. The priority chain was not our way. And there was a project to improve living conditions at the barracks. And Sergeant Strickland who was our supply sergeant was a could be a famous horse trading supply sergeant. If you need something Strickland could find it for

you. So the floors were pretty tattered and pretty worn and they ripped up all the old linoleum and got new tile to put down. Well, Strickland got the adhesive for the tile. They put the adhesive down, they put the tile down, but the tile just wouldn't set up. It turns out that he actually got roofing tar, not cement for tile. And there was black goopy tar, like you wouldn't believe from one end of the building to the other end of the building. And it was funny until we had to clean it all up. That was one of the attempts. The other attempt was spraying for cockroaches. The construction of that building is of course masonry, lathe and plaster over the top. Cockroaches just absolutely loved that place. They would get in behind ..

MR: Really,

RP: A constant, constant problem. Tim Curnon, a friend of mine from South Carolina, he used to have his "breakfast of champions". His habit was to have a beer at night, put it out on the window ledge and let it go stale. And he would get up in the morning before he went to work and he would drink his beer and head into work. Well, that habit got broken the first time he took a swig and came out with about four cockroaches floating on the top. (laughter) So, they sprayed for cockroaches, which was wonderful except the floor was covered with thousands of cockroaches. I guess that was when we declared peace and said you guys live back there and we will take care of the barracks. All kinds of you know and there were plenty of things that happened and they are also unfortunate things that happened. But for the most part it's just like any group of people that get together. There is always something funny. A fair amount of horseplay, pulling pranks and setting people up was just part of the routine. Part of passing a pretty tedious and monotonous type of job.

MR: Now in your barracks, was it all one big open room or were there separations at all?

RP: Well, when I first got there it was open bays. And that building used to be a hospital. So we had these great big huge open bays with bunks lined up in rows. While I was there they brought in dividers and kind of rearranged things. There was a little bit of privacy. There were three private rooms. Cooks occupied two of them. And then myself as one of the clerks and Tim Curnon as the other clerk, Tim and I occupied the third one. So we had more privacy than most. But most people would have a locker with a divider with a set of bunk beds and then another locker with a bunk bed on the other side of the divider. Not private, private rooms.

MR: Was there a wall locker and a foot locker?

RP: Just a wall locker.

MR: Just a wall locker. Anything else stand out in your mind?

RP: Dog handlers. Going up and picking out, driving up to Newark to pick up the handlers and the dogs and bringing them back. Dog handlers were always a different group from everyone. And of course, there is always the groups and sub-cultures and

things. The lifers, the guys who were in for twenty years or more, the junior lifers, that's the draftees and myself as a two year enlistee made for an interesting mix. At the time, Vietnam was the prime concern for most people. So a lot of guys who served here were six year, had signed up for six years. Choice of school, choice of assignment. The most interesting person that we had in the Battery was a guy who lived at home with his parents while he served his six years in the Army.

MR: All here?

RP: Yeah. And he lived down the road. So at night, rather than going to the barracks or heading out to quarters on Post, he'd drive back home. And his Mom did his laundry for him. And it seemed very, very strange to me. The assignments in the areas were supposed to be for 24 hours on and 24 hours off. So for 48 hours. But because we were so short handed nobody ever got that kind of hours. Everybody kind of worked a day and a half long shifts and sleep down there and work part. So that end of the schedule, those guys were constantly slipping and sliding to provide coverage. And again, because I was an 8 to 5 typical work day week. I missed out on that fortunately. But for the guys who were working down in the areas, tough schedules, long schedules. But again, I think going home, and staying with Mom and Dad while serving your years in the service was most interesting.

MR: So what were the years you were actually here?

RP: I arrived in January of 1971 and I left in December of 1971. They had a program for an early out to go back to school. And I actually served 18 months and one day. And then went to school.

MR: So you were able to avoid having to go to Vietnam or anything?

RP: Yeah. Yeah. And it's interesting because I came from Eugene, Oregon and one of my best friends growing up went to Port Richardson, Alaska. (He) was on a Nike Herc(ules) site there. Another good friend of mine went to Germany and worked as a pay clerk in Germany. None of us saw combat. All Vietnam era, but none of us saw combat. And of course, I lost a number of friends in Vietnam.

MR: Now, the guys working in these batteries, were any of them going to Vietnam afterwards or did it seem if they were in the Nike batteries they really didn't go?

RP: Yeah, the MOS, that was the Military Occupational Specialty, most of the guys in this type of group were technical's. We had the radar technicians we had the hydraulic guys down in the Launch Area. And those people tended to stay pretty close and they were typically on a twenty year path. We had our fair share of warrant officers, again, high technical type of skills. The typical path the Nike Herc(ules) guys would have they would stay stateside or they would help the batteries in Korea so they would rotate in and out of Korea. We had a couple of guys who actually came back from Vietnam. They

came here, said, "I don't want to be here. Send me back to Vietnam." And requested to go back.

MR: Wow.

RP: This was a, because we were stateside, part of the amusement for us was putting up with things like paint rocks. Well, why were we painting the rocks. Well, if we painted the rocks and we were ever attacked, the missiles won't work, but the sun might bounce off the rocks and blind the pilots so they crash into the sea and we will all be fine and dandy. So there was a lot of maintenance, a lot of busy work. Another one of those fun stories is me working as a clerk and a first sergeant coming in saying, "Pete, you need a haircut". And my reply was, "Which one?" And the first sergeant being much bigger than me, put my hat on and his hat on and we walked hand in hand from the barracks over to the barber shop where I got a military haircut. But again, the first sergeant being a kind and wonderful guy he paid for my haircut. A quarter, I think it was. So, from that point on, my hair was trimmed up. But things like uniforms, if you're in Vietnam in a combat outfit, uniforms aren't the most important thing. Like here, if your trousers weren't bloused, your shirt wasn't pressed, somebody would get you for being out of uniform. Those sorts of things for guys who had seen duty in Vietnam, hard to take. But for the most part, they couldn't make the adjustment.

MR: Okay. Well, thank you very much for your interview. And I'm going to stop the tape now.

End of Interview