

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS  
Oral History Interview with  
John Reardon CMTC  
Interviewed by Tom Hanley, Monmouth University student intern  
February 2, 2004  
Transcribed by Mary Rasa 2010

Editor's notes on parenthesis ( )



John Reardon with flight crew in World War II.  
Photo courtesy of John Reardon



John Reardon in 2004 at Sandy Hook Education Center.



Image of Citizens Military Training Camp just north of Officers' Row, c. 1939.



Most popular place on the Fort

Image of CMTC Mess Hall from a participant's photo album.



Those 3 inchers really shake things up.

2420

CMTC members firing the three inch anti-aircraft guns.  
Bottom four photos courtesy of Gateway NRA/NPS

(Editor's note: The Citizens Military Training Camps existed between World War I and World War II from 1921 to 1940. Select Army Posts throughout the country hosted these young men for a one month training session. It was done with the intention that many men would later become Reserve Officers. At Fort Hancock, the camp was set up just north of Officers' Row near where the present day Post Chapel stands.)

TH: Its February 2, 2004. I am Tom Hanley and I'm here with John Reardon at Fort Hancock in Sandy Hook. Good afternoon John.

JR: Good afternoon Tom.

TH: Now, a couple of quick general questions not regarding the military that we ask before everyone before we start an interview. When and where were you born?

JR: In Jersey City. October 22, 1922.

TH: What high school did you attend?

JR: St. Michaels High School in Union City.

TH: And you graduated from there?

JR: Yes. In June 1940.

TH: Was your Father or Grandfather in the military?

JR: My Father was in the military in World War I. And he was in the infantry.

TH: So your Father served, do you know what years during World War I that he served?

JR: No. I don't.

TH: How did you become involved at Fort Hancock?

JR: I was in the CMTC, the Citizens Military Training Corps. I went to Fort Dix the year before. I gave a phony age. I was really a year younger and I went to Fort Dix which was infantry. I spent a month there and enjoyed it. But I wanted to come to Fort Hancock because it would be nicer here. So, I came the following year which was in the summer of '39. I came here and then I planned on going back to CMTC, but it was done away with. The draft was starting for World War II and the CMTC was eliminated.

TH: So, what year was it, you were here in 1939?

JR: '39.

TH: And what year were you here until?

JR: Well, just for one month.

TH: One month.

JR: The summer of '39. I moved away for a month. It was the month of July I imagine part of July and part of August.

TH: And you said you wanted to come here as opposed to Fort Dix?

JR: Yes, because I knew it was nicer here. Fort Dix was the infantry and you drilled all day long and just marched and stuff. So I wanted to come here. It was much nicer here. And at Fort Dix, I never recall getting any pass. While here, we did get off a couple of weekends, which was a pretty good deal.

TH: While you were here when you had a weekend pass, did you ever take any excursions to New York City?

JR: No, because coming from Jersey City, I was familiar with New York City. I went down, I had some friend that used to summer in Keansburg so I'd meet, go down and meet him.

TH: So you'd go to the Jersey Shore spots.

JR: That's what we did. That's where we spent that time.

TH: Did you have a specific job while you were here?

JR: No. Not really. We (were) just learning about artillery, military affairs. They did bring their three inch anti-aircraft guns here and we shot those off. Shot them and operated them. And when they were here, they were here for a very short time. I can't remember just how long, less than a week, I would say. And West Point Cadets would come down. They were there to see them too and operate them. General Drum came, who was a pretty big general. He wasn't a Brigadier General to my recollection. I always remember there was a major that was dressed exactly like him and he used to walk one step behind him all the time. He looked like a real boot (inaudible). I always remember that. So he was here for one day. That's the most significant amount I can remember about operating equipment. Sitting while the guns were spinning and all that sort of jazz and shooting.

TH: While you were here you were basically here to learn?

JR: Yes. Learn to be artillery was the main reason and the military life. I think the private made \$21 a month. I forgot what we got for that one month. A couple of dollars. It depended I think on how far you traveled from your home. But I was sorry. I planned on coming back. I was interested in becoming an officer in the reserves. I was disappointed when it was eliminated, the program.

TH: Now when you were participating in this program, were you assigned a specific rank or title?

JR: No, we were privates. The ones that... you had to have one year of experience in the CMTC to come here. And so that we were at the bottom of the ladder because we were here and everybody else, we were two years which was the bottom. All the others were three and four years, fourth year in CMTC. So we were really the bottom of the ladder and privates and to that effect.

TH: Did you have a specific unit or department that you worked in while here?

JR: No. I can't recall what battery I was in. We were in a battery assigned. We had a battery number but I can't recall. There weren't too many. There were fewer people in the CMTC here than there were at Fort Dix. There were many more at Fort Dix. That I recall. I also recall admiring the officers' homes here, thinking they were the greatest things on earth.

TH: Down on Officers' Row.

JR: Right. I thought that, boy, that's the place to be.

TH: Where did you live while you were down here?

JR: In tents. There were, by my recollection, there were six in a tent. It could have been eight, but there were at least six in a tent. We lived in tents. Off on weekends, I mean we didn't get off the camp or the Fort all the time, but we were off. And I can remember going swimming, being at the beach. And I recall, there were very few instances that I recalled this time, but I recall one. There was a dog and he was mad and he was foaming. They had a hole and they had him tied in it and it was right at the beach and an MP (Military Police) held his gun up and shot him. And as he shot him, he wounded him, he didn't kill him. And the poor dog was yipping and going around in the tied hole there. And you know what John Wayne looks like? A Sergeant of the MPs that looks like John Wayne got off a motorcycle, walked over, grabbed the dog's snout put the gun in his ear, pulled the trigger and looked disgustingly at the private MP. Got on his motorcycle and rode away. I will always remember that. That incident is stuck in my mind. Also the background here helped me when I went in the Air Cadets because I became the Squadron Adjunct, the second in command of the squadron. And pre-flight and the Flight Lieutenant in advanced navigation when I was there. So the military background helped me become a cadet officer, which made more privileges while you were a cadet of course.

TH: So you became a cadet officer in what branch?

JR: I was in the Air Force (Army Air Corps).

TH: The Air Force.

JR: Yeah. I was a navigator and then I flew in the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force daylight bombing over England. When I started to fly there were 25 missions, but they got belly and waste tanks on our fighters, so we didn't lose as many planes after that, the fighters, so it was 35 when I left or returned back to the states.

TH: So your work here at Fort Hancock really gave you a good foundation for the air force?

JR: Well, again a good foundation for military life and helped me in the cadets become a cadet officer as they called them in those days. So it gave me certain privileges. That was beneficial for me there. I don't know what else was significant. The anti-aircraft guns, the Officers' Row, dog, going to the Worlds' Fair.

TH: You went to the Worlds' Fair?

JR: I went to the Worlds' Fair from here.

TH: Was that in New York?

JR: Yes. It was in New York at the time. And I can't remember how we went there but we went to the Worlds' Fair and I was over there and I remember my parents told them we were going and they were over there and we just spent the day there and left. That was New York, the Worlds' Fair at the time.

TH: Now you were from Jersey City and you said earlier that you didn't go to the city that often. Was that one of the few times you went while you were down here?

JR: No. I went to the city all the time. That's when I was there. That's why on my days off I didn't go there on the weekend because I was used to going to New York. That's the only time I went to the Worlds' Fair there. I had gone to the World Fair I think it was Amsterdam or The Hague wherever they had the Worlds' Fair in Europe in '55 I think it was. It was a great experience I always look back upon what little I remember of it.

TH: What background or education did you get before coming here in regard to regular education and perhaps military?

JR: Just before coming here I was still attending high school. I graduated high school in June of '40. So I was attending St. Michael's High School in Union City which doesn't exist anymore. Came here and of course I went to school on the GI Bill after (the war) in the evenings. I got a Bachelors' degree from Rutgers and a Masters' from Columbia, nights thanks to the GI Bill. I have fond fond memories of the military.

TH: While you were here were there ever any alerts of enemy attacks?

JR: None whatsoever and in fact they didn't show us some of these places where they had guns around here. I was surprised when I came back when I moved down here later on in life and brought my dogs up here finding some of those places around. They never showed them to us. So we were kind of kept in a restricted area.

TH: So you didn't know about all the artillery and everything else around here?

JR: No. Didn't know about it.

TH: So your primary objective was to train and don't worry about anything else, right?

JR: That's correct. That's right. I was surprised how much they had here.

TH: Speaking of what they had here, I have some pictures. Let's see if you recognize any of the stuff I've got here. This is a fun one. It says, "The most popular place on the Fort." (referring the mess hall)

JR: I can't remember where we ate. So, it must be there. The food, I have a recollection, no bad thoughts about the food. In fact, I have no bad thoughts about the place at all really. That's the mess hall. (referring to photo image.) Of course that goes back a few years. We are talking over 60 years.

TH: I have another photo. I am not sure you are familiar with these. This is where the radar was housed.

JR: You know I knew nothing about this at all.

TH: Yeah actually at the time period you were here, they were beginning to test radar. I'm not sure. Did they let you know anything about that?

JR: No. No. I didn't know anything about it. I didn't know anything about radar until I got in the Air Force.

TH: I'm pretty sure that this was not here while you were here, this radar antennas.

JR: If it was, I never saw it.

TH: I think you will recognize this place.

JR: What's this, the Officers' Club?

TH: The Officers' Club.

JR: Well, we weren't officers so I didn't go in there.

TH: Were you allowed anywhere near it?

JR: No.

TH: This was interesting, because I know, I imagine there wasn't much privacy with regard to bathroom privileges.

JR: Oh no. You all sat right down and had a conversation. It was just like it was in the cadets. You sat down and you talked to the guy next to ya. (laughing) and the guy down the end got very little privacy.

TH: Did they have that when you were in the Air Force? Were you on an Aircraft Carrier in your flying missions?

JR: No. I was flying daylight bombers out of England. I always said England was one big airbase. You'd get up early to go flying and you'd see planes flying all over. It was something I did.

TH: Did you have any more privacy in England than you did at Fort Hancock?

JR: Oh yeah. Well I was an officer then and you had better things. Then I got to the Officers' Club. I knew the Officers' Club.

TH: What rank were you as an officer?

JR: first lieutenant.

TH: first lieutenant.

JR: Of course I was only in the service for a couple of years. I went in in '43 and out in '45. I was down south and then went over to England and then came back and went down to Houston and stayed there and then was discharged.

TH: So your military career spanned from '39 when you came to Fort Hancock to '45?

JR: Well, no. I was out of the military. I was civilian all the time. Yeah. I was a civilian when I came here and just had this training. And I enlisted and took the cadet test and I had to wait maybe 6, 9 months before you got in. And I went in the cadets in '43. Graduated the class of '45. Went to England in '45, March, flew our bombers over. And I was home for my Mother's birthday in October of '45.

TH: Was that a surprise for her?

JR: Yes. Yes. It was. I'm sure it was a strain. My Brother was in the Air Force in the Pacific. He was a fighter pilot. We both came home.

TH: That's good to hear.

JR: Yeah.

TH: So I left the most important thing for the end. I have a photo here.

JR: This one here.

TH: You said you lived in the tents.

JR: Right.

TH: There's some tents here. If that looks any at all familiar?

JR: Yeah. I'm sure that was the tents we were in. Well, it looks; it reminds me of the tents we were in.

TH: There was a tent city here. It was 1938.

JR: Okay. I came here in '39. Training Camp Fort Hancock.

TH: Here's one that was taken with a couple of ....

JR: They used to have a, can't think if it was here or in Fort Dix. A big crap game, a big crap game for the GI's not us on payday. The master sergeant was running it. I remember that. I was walking past and I can't think of where I saw that.

TH: They were having gambling going on on payday?

JR: Oh yeah. That was, I'm sure that was thing. And it was run by the master sergeant.

TH: Speaking of that was one of the many social events that took place, did you participate in any social events while you were out here?

JR: None. None to my recollection. None whatsoever. No I can't remember. The only thing I can remember of course is leaving once or twice. I can't recall how many times because I met that friend down in Keansburg. I can remember that specifically meeting this guy I went to school with out there. Now, I got worried, I guess I phoned probably.

TH: How did you travel to Keansburg?

JR: I don't know if we took a taxi or a bus. They may have had bus service out of here at that time going somewhere and you took a bus out. That's very possible. But I'm not sure. Not a private car. That I'm sure. Of course, I didn't have a car. So, it wasn't private car.

TH: Okay. I've got a couple more pictures. I've have two more. And I don't think you would have seen these because they didn't showed you guys what was protecting you.

JR: Right. No.

TH: These are just two shots of the big guns that were out here at Fort Hancock.

JR: Yeah. I didn't see these.

TH: Now was there a specific building that you worked in while you were training here?

JR: What?

TH: Was there any specific building that you worked in while you were here?

JR: No. We were always, to my recollection, we were always outside. Always outside. The only thing that I can remember the mess hall of course and the tents and outside. And drilling, marching and stuff like that.

TH: Aside from drilling and training did you have any specialized or specific duty?

JR: None. None. There was no class work and I had no specific duty. I don't even think. I know in Fort Dix we had guard duty. I don't recall having guard duty here.

TH: Okay. Now you were a civilian when you were training here?

JR: Right.

TH: Did you work with military personnel at all?

JR: Just in I can only remember the reserve officers that they had that came for the same period of time, the training. And probably we mixed with the regular army when they were showing us the guns of course and how to use the three inch anti-aircraft guns. That I can remember specifically. Aside from that, that was the only contact we had with the military. Except in the mess hall we had KP or something we were talking to guys in the mess hall, the KP. Because I remember that's how I found out the \$21 a month and stuff like that. But we didn't mix. We were separate.

TH: You were separate from the other than the ones that were out here. Did you know of any servants or minorities or women who worked out here?

JR: No.

TH: So it was Caucasian men?

JR: Yes. Right. You didn't see any minorities. We really didn't when I was in service either. They were all segregated.

TH: Okay. So it was the same way overseas as well.

JR: Yes. When I was in service, absolutely. It was absolutely segregated. I was a cadet officer as I told you before and I had two cadets come up to tell me a couple of black guys had worked in the mess hall were drinking out the water fountain. And that was to stop. I was in Louisiana.

TH: That was your education in the Louisiana way.

JR: Someone felt that way in Louisiana. And these two guys, one was from Tennessee and the other was from Louisiana, I think. Cagey. Very nice guys, but boy, were they in a different world. And I was from the north.

TH: How did you handle that situation?

JR: I said that I would look into it and they just went away. What happened was I was second in command. The commander had transferred from the Army to the Cadets. He flunked out in pre-flight so I became the commander like the last of the nine weeks, maybe the last two weeks or something, okay. And that's when that was brought up to me. But it was certainly segregation in the service.

TH: When you were out at Fort Hancock, you were training. You wanted to be trained for the military. Would you say this was a fun or boring place to be?

JR: I found it at my age fun or I wouldn't have come back from Fort Dix. I don't know if fun is the right word but say interesting. I would probably put that ahead of fun. It made me feel worthwhile. And I also had the ambition to become a reserve, an officer, a reserve officer. But it wasn't dull at all to me or boring.

TH: Did anything particularly humorous ever occur while you were out here?

JR: No. Nothing that I can think of. That dog incident I will never forget.

TH: That's definitely something if I had witnessed that it would stick out in my mind. The way you described it you really painted a picture for me.

JR: Well, that and Major (General) Drum being followed around by the Major which I thought was an awful waste of manpower. Those two things and shooting the anti-aircraft guns and the cadets being there. I don't remember really any incidences. I remember being at the beach that day for swimming so it had to be a weekend where the dog was there. I can remember that.

TH: So you went to the beach often?

JR: No. It was just you could go there on weekends. My recollection of going on weekends. You couldn't go at night or anything you were always busy. You ate, did KP. They kept you well occupied.

TH: Now you left here before December 7, 1941.

JR: Yes indeed. I was just here. I arrived here sometime during the summer of '39 and left in the summer of '39. So I was here for four weeks approximately.

TH: While you were here though, World War II had begun in Europe. (World War II in Europe began on September 1, 1939)

JR: No. Oh in Europe, yes.

TH: Not for us we hadn't gotten engaged.

JR: That's right yes.

TH: I know that after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor there was a blackout on the entire eastern seaboard. During this time before the Japanese bombed us was there any black out conditions here because of the War.

JR: Yes, I think. Well, I don't know about here but I think we started to have blackouts looking back at that we were sort of practice blackouts. You'd pull down your shades and you had to, the warden walk around and if your shade wasn't down or you left a light on outside or so forth, yes.

TH: So it was more preparation work?

JR: Yes. It was like preparation because we never did get bombed.

TH: No. Thank God. But all that stuff to go to practice a couple of years later after you already left.

JR: That's right. You go to London you really saw what it was like. You saw the people go down into the subways. Buzz bombs coming as well as bombing at night. Of course we could have warned them were off, they were getting bombed all the time.

TH: What did the city look like? Did you, what could you compare it to?

JR: Well, it still was London but you would go to places and there would be wrecked houses knocked down and so forth. What astounded me was people took it right in stride. Where we were in our base, the buzz bombs started to come over right where we were and only one guy, the guy who handled the mail would go out in the private building

there that we had if it was bombing. Nobody else did it. But as you were flying along right near the end you would start getting nervous about cracking a little bit on you.

TH: It was a very tense place to be.

JR: Yes. You were flying because more often than not you always lost people from you squadron. A plane would be shot down, stuff like that. And then you got up the next morning and you fly again. It was a schedule. You'd rest for two days and you fly again.

TH: Did you get any time off while you were over in London?

JR: Yes. You'd get, you didn't fly, you know, maybe you flew about.. You know it was a brand new group so we didn't start flying our missions right away. Yeah, you'd fly about three times a week. You'd have the squadron group that would go up every day, but you wouldn't.

TH: Was there any recreation there for you?

JR: Yeah. There was the Officers' Club and we were right in the heart of town so you got to London maybe every four weeks or so. You'd get a three day pass and go into London. (inaudible) once and see what that was like. Usually you'd go to London. A lot of women around. I was 21. Then of course, at the base they did most of the entertainment at the base was at the Officers' Club. We'd go there and we'd play cards, drink and screw around.

TH: What stands out most in your mind of your experiences in Europe?

JR: Flying over, the thing that stands out in my mind most is bombing Meersburg (Germany). Meersburg was a big target. And they do things two ways. One is they send flack to track you flying in, the Germans. The other is they put a wall of flack up and you have to go through it. We were going behind another group and they went through a wall of flack and then they drove a few minutes to the target, few miles from the target. That's how they know you are coming that way. That's how they set that wall up. And then you go through as I went through, out of twelve planes in the last squadron there were two left. And the fire walls were coming in. And I remember saying, "Stay up there you son of a bitches don't come back here." And just then our B-51 fighters came and they took off. I remember seeing those planes go into it and seeing on the other side the fire had shot down ten of them. That's a hundred guys right there. That sticks out in my mind the most. And me saying, "Stay up there", to myself.

TH: What kind of plane did you fly?

JR: B-24 first bomber then a B-17. They were what they call heavy bombers now of course they have smaller. But they were the heavy bombers then.

TH: All of this pretty much began when you trained at Fort Hancock, your military service?

JR: Well, I was, it began, but then I went into the military and I guess I had a certain feeling. I had never minded anything about flying but my Brother went in first. He was older. And he said, you got, I think it was \$75 a month as a cadet and you got more money. I can't say I was patriotic to get into flying like that. It paid more money than the other. You got flight pay when you got, I said, "Geez, I might as well do that".

TH: Do you keep in touch with anyone from either your experiences in Europe or your experiences at Fort Hancock?

JR: No. Not anymore. I was in touch for a while but not anymore.

TH: With the Air Force friends?

JR: Yes, the Air Force friends. And I do, I don't drive now to I used to go to Florida and would stop. They have a big 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force in Alabama or Georgia on the way down right by (Interstate) 95 is a big museum. And it was very interesting.

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

JR: The anti-aircraft. I would have to say the shooting of the dog and the anti-aircraft guns and the officers' quarters, their homes there.

TH: What advice would you have to anyone who is interested in pursuing a career in the military, whether it's the Army or the Air Force?

JR: Well, first, certainly attempt to get into the academies. I had hopes of that when I graduated from high school. But I looked at the exams and I don't think I could really get a good grade. You have to get an appointment. But I would say certainly going to the academies. That would be the number one way to do it. And that would be my answer. If you can't do that then I don't know what is next best.

TH: Is there anything you would like to say to anyone who is going to be listening to this tape perhaps in the future and learning about World War II and the experiences at Fort Hancock?

JR: Not really. I can't think of anything that I hadn't said. I will say that Fort Hancock taught me what a military life was so that when I went in the cadets I had no problem. I was perfectly at home. It helped my career as a cadet, become a cadet officer and have certain privileges that I wouldn't have had. It also kind of helps your ego a bit if you are a cadet officer. It gives you some more self assurances in life. I think Fort Hancock played a part in training me.

TH: John, thank you very much for coming down today and thank you for serving our country so greatly.

JR: Oh gee. Thank you, Tom

TH: I'm Tom Hanley with John Reardon. It's February 2, 2004.

End of Interview