

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS  
An Oral History Interview with Joe and Peg Donegan  
Military Police Officer and Wife  
1957-1958

Interviewed by Billy Yirce, Monmouth University student intern  
October 26, 2003

Transcribed by Danny Gutch, volunteer 2010



Joe Donegan in Quarters 1.



Peg Donegan at Fort Hancock gathering.  
Photos courtesy of Donegan family.

Editor's notes in parenthesis ( )

BY: Where and when were you born?

JD: I was born in the Bronx, New York. October 1933.

BY: Okay. And how did you end up becoming in the Army? How did you end up joining the Army?

JD: R.O.T.C. (Reserve Officers' Training Corps)

BY: Where did you go to school?

JD: Seton Hall (University)

BY: Okay. And what did you know about Fort Hancock before you were sent here?

JD: Nothing.

BY: Nothing.

JD: Funny thing was we were in Officers' Basic (Training) down in Georgia and there was a thing on the bulletin board saying on day, "Looking for volunteers to go to Fort Hancock." (I said,) "Where's that?" Looked it up, New Jersey. "That's close to home. I'll go." And two of us from our class came up here. But they were only looking for six month people at that time. Then when you got commissioned you stayed on active duty for six months then you went to the Reserves. And in the mean time, I had put in for an extended active duty, which meant I would stay on longer. So I got here and they said, "Eh, well we really didn't want you." (laughs) "We wanted six month people to be here to do nothing and then move out." But they were stuck with me.

BY: What was your rank and title when you were here?

JD: I was a second Lieutenant. I was a military police officer and eventually provost marshal.

BY: So as military police, what did your average day? What would your average day consist of?

JD: Sitting around the office doing nothing.

BY: Did you guys ever have problems where they needed you? Really rarely?

JD: The problems were all local. I mean there was nothing big. It was always the MPs (military police) would arrest someone for being on the Post who wasn't supposed to be here. You know, this was a closed Post back then.

BY: Yeah. No one was allowed in.

JD: No one was allowed in. And there was a Coast Guard commander who liked to fish, and his buddies liked to fish. And he was always bringing them in.

BY: And you'd have to arrest them?

JD: And we'd pick him up. The MPs would pick him up. They'd call the Post Commander. The Post Commander would get all over me because, "Why are your MPs doing that? Why you guys doing that?" And I'd say, "Rules say no one on the Post." So if they're there, we'd pick them up. So you know we'd be between a rock and a hard place. That was the biggest kind of problems. You know you had drunks and stuff like that.

BY: You always have that. Were there any ever alerts of potential enemy attacks when you were here?

JD: No.

BY: Nothing. What building did you live in?

JD: Quarters 1.

BY: Quarters 1 on Officers' Row?

JD: Right.

BY: And it was just you and your Wife?

JD: That's it.

BY: That's a big house for just two people right? So that was nice. How old were you? You were young, right?

JD: Probably about 21, 22 (years old).

BY: Living in, that's not bad then. So, you were probably happy about that.

JD: You know, it was a good life when you weigh all the different things, you know.

BY: Now what about social activities? What went on here? Theaters, dances, anything?

JD: Not much. The Officers' Club was only open, I think on weekends. You gotta realize at that time, there were probably no more than six officers assigned to the Post Headquarters. You had the Navy Detachment. You had a Coast Guard Detachment. And you had the Nike people.

BY: Okay.

JD: All separate units. So at the Headquarters that I belonged to, probably only six or seven officers. So were wasn't a lot.

BY: There wasn't a lot of officers.

JD: You didn't have any young officers my age. These were all World War II vets.

BY: So you were the young guy.

JD: Oh yeah. Just young kids really compared to the rest of them.

BY: Did you get along with the enlisted men? How was your relationship with them?

JD: I liked them. Again, the way it was here we didn't have a lot of...

BY: No social time.

JD: The sergeants took care of the enlisted men. You know, they didn't trouble me or anything. I survived. It was, the time it was so different from what someone might think it was like here in the Army. We were at the time, it was after the Korean War, no other wars were going on. Most of the people here were old World War II veterans.

BY: Just riding out their time.

JD: Just riding out their time. That's it.

BY: What about religious services? Did you attend any?

JD: Yes, now, we were Catholic. Chaplin used to come in I think from Fort Monmouth. I asked my Wife, "Where was the Chapel? Where did we go?" And I don't remember. We didn't go to the main Chapel, the white building. (St. Mary's Catholic Chapel was located in Building 123 which is inside the fence of the Coast Guard Station.)

BY: Okay yeah.

JD: We didn't go there. It was some place where they had Mass when the Chaplain came. And it was custom that someone would invite the Chaplain to their home for breakfast. So like that was part of the social. And I think we had bowling.

BY: Yeah someone said that there was bowling right here in the PX right here. Four lanes I think they said.

JD: Yeah there was a bowling alley here. And I think there was a bowling team. Again

those seven or eight and their wives.

BY: So, nothing too big.

JD: No. And I remember we did have a big dance once because Captain Burkheimer, who was my boss, he was an infantry officer, but he was provost marshal at the time. He was in charge of the dance. I remember working with him on setting up this dance. When it was, what it was for....

BY: No idea. What about the beach? Did you use the beach a lot?

JD: There was a separate beach for the officers.

BY: So you had your own beach.

JD: The Officers' Beach. Now you didn't have beaches...

BY: Not like they are today. So you had your own section. What beach did they give the officers? Do you remember what part?

JD: No idea.

BY: What about New York City? Did you guys ever go to the (New York) city?

JD: No.

BY: No.

JD: Second lieutenant didn't make much money. You didn't have money to go. And of course, we came from the area. We came from Northern Jersey.

BY: So it was nothing new?

JD: No.

BY: What was the most interesting thing you remember about Fort Hancock? If you had to think of one thing?

JD: It's hard to you know, try to pick out one thing. I remember the pack of wild dogs that was here. And I can remember at Christmas time getting holly.

BY: The man I just interviewed told me about the holly. He said this is one of the largest holly...

JD: We used to go out and pick holly to decorate the house. The movies, I think, that was only weekends. There wasn't a lot of social life like you'd think of. It was a small

group.

BY: What was this pack of dogs you were talking about? This wild pack of dogs.

JD: We, you asked what we did all day. I said very little. We'd be riding along in the jeep. Didn't have all these roads. A lot of dirt roads through the back. And I was going out with one of the sergeants and as we got to where two dirt roads came together, all of a sudden there was a howl of dogs. There must have been fifteen to twenty of them come running past us. We came back, the sergeant got a carbine and said, "Let's go out and see if we can get some of these dogs." We were afraid that the dogs were going to come onto the Post.

BY: Going to attack someone.

JD: Yeah. That might of hurt or killed someone. We went out and we never saw them again.

BY: Only one time?

JD: Only that one time. And I said, "Where did they come from?" and the sergeant said "People that were here left the dogs and the dogs went off and lived in off the land and went into the woods and maybe some from the Highlands." We really don't know where they came, and we don't know where they went.

Q. Do you keep in touch with anyone you served with still?

JD: No.

BY: No. Not at all. What did you end up doing after you go out of the military?

JD: I was a teacher.

BY: Oh yeah? Where did you teach?

JD: Montclair Public Schools.

BY: Do you have anything else to add? Well, overall was it a fun or boring place to work?

JD: Well, again, if I was a single bachelor, I would have said it was boring. But my Wife was here. We went home at night, watched television, did things you did. We had a nice house, mostly military furnishings. We had some of our own stuff. It wasn't a good assignment in that I was a young, military police officer and all of the others were old.

BY: So you had no one to really socialize with.

JD: I remember the Coast Guard, or the Navy guy, Commander Reddick. He was a nice guy. He had a big family and he had a dog. And the dog used to go to the MP Station and drink out of the toilet bowl when he was thirsty. It's the little things like that I remember. I remember one time we went out on his boat. He had a minesweeper I think. And he had some of the officers and their wives, what, who, where, church people or what (I don't remember) and we went out for a little cruise at night on a Navy ship.

BY: That's nice.

JD: But little things like that.

BY: Well, thank you for doing the interview with me. I appreciate it. Enjoy your day.

(Tape stops to change interviewee from Mr. Donegan to Mrs. Peg Donegan.)

PD: Well, just the living quarters themselves were so exciting. We were newly married.

BY: You guys were young and had a huge house.

PD: I mean this huge, huge house that I mean many years later we could have raised a family in there very easily. But it was just like it was kind of a dream to be there, you know in a big home.

BY: And how did you guys meet? Were you high school sweethearts? Or did you meet in college?

JD: College years.

BY: College at Seton Hall?

PD: Well, he was in college I was in high school. I was dating a college guy.

(inaudible conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Donegan)

PD: I was saying I was trying to remember the people. And I was saying how did I get to know the people? And I think it was through the church, through the Chapel, you know. But it would be after Mass that people would gather like in front. Because the military is like another family, you know and you would get to, that's really where we got to know most of the people that we....

JD: Well, the ones that went to church.

PD: Yeah. Yeah.

JD: I closed my mind, with something like, I can't remember what it was now.

PD: You could come back to that.

BY: Now did you have a job?

PD: No.

BY: You stayed at home.

PD: Mmmhmm.

JD: I can't remember what it was.

PD: Yeah.

JD: But as a Garrison, I don't think there were more than fifty enlisted men.

BY: It was a small. When you were here it was a very...

JD: Half were MPs and half were clerks and the people who worked in Post Headquarters and Post Engineers.

BY: Now was the Nike site open when you were here?

JD: Yep.

BY: Do you know anything about that or?

JD: They didn't bother with us and we didn't bother with them.

BY: Just kept separate.

JD: They were just like borders here if you wanted to put it. The Post would have provide them with whatever they needed. But they had their own command structure.

BY: So it was like a totally different section.

JD: They didn't come under our command.

BY: Oh okay.

JD: I mean if there was a soldier in trouble the MPs picked him up and we took him over to the unit, but that was it. We had a front gate. You know the house at the very beginning. That was the gate house. We had an office down there where we took care of checking people in and out with a gate there with soldiers. I knew we had to go to Monmouth for stuff.



PD: The commissary too.

JD: I had to go to Monmouth for pay to pay the soldiers.

BY: Oh did you?

JD: I had to go over there to Post Finance and I had to draw the money and come back here.

BY: What about food shopping? Where did you guys?

JD: The commissary.

BY: Yeah. Oh, you had to go all the way to Fort Monmouth.

JD: We didn't do much in the town here. We'd go to Bahr's (Landing). That's still here I think.

BY: What?

JD: The restaurant. Bahr's in Highlands.

BY: Oh, I'm not familiar. I'm sure it is.

JD: Yeah that was a restaurant we used to go to and that was about it. We were here less than a year.

PD: It was less than a year.

BY: Where did you go after here?

JD: Fort Dix.

BY: Fort Dix and how long were you there?

JD: It was a real empty place. (laughter) and we were there for a year and then I went to Germany.

BY: Oh okay.

JD: I was with the MPs in Germany.

END OF INTERVIEW