

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Telephone Interview with Frank Swinford
235th Military Police Detachment
1965-1966
Interview by Mary Rasa, NPS
July 21, 2004
Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2010



Frank Swinford's Military Police Badge at Fort Hancock

OFFICE OF THE PROVOST MARSHAL
Fort Hancock, New Jersey

This is to certify that
HURLEY F SWINFORD, whose signature
and photograph appear hereon, is
authorized to conduct such inves-
tigations as directed by the Provost
Marshal, Ft Hancock, New Jersey.

Hurley F. Swinford
HURLEY F SWINFORD
st. Investigator

James T. Trembly
JAMES T TREMBLY, 1st Lt., MPC
PROVOST MARSHAL



Frank Swinford's roster photo, 1965.



Frank Swinford in Vietnam, 1967.
Images courtesy of Mr. Swinford

Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

MR: Today is July 21, 2004 and my name is Mary Rasa, Sandy Hook Museum Curator and I am on the phone with a veteran of Fort Hancock. And please state your name for the record.

FS: Frank Swinford.

MR: Okay. When and where were you born?

FS: I was born in 1944 in Huntsville, Alabama.

MR: What year, I'm sorry what was the date?

FS: April 6th.

MR: Okay. Where did you attend school?

FS: I went to elementary school in the country in southern Tennessee. I went to the city and Lincoln County High School and then my colleges were Middle Tennessee State University and the University of Alabama-Birmingham, an extension of Kansas State, an extension of the University of Iowa and I graduated from Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio.

MR: Okay. Was your Father or Grandfather in the military?

FS: No. Neither.

MR: Tell me how you became involved with the Army.

FS: You know, let me back up one second. My Dad had a heart problem from scarlet fever when he was young. During World War II, he worked for the Army. I think it was just called the Redstone Missile Command at Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama during the War.

MR: Oh, okay. So, tell me about how you became involved with the Army.

FS: Well, I volunteered to join the Army in 1965. I wanted to be on the coast. The Nike Hercules was the artillery units that were stationed all the way from the northwest coast through the south through Texas around Florida and up through New England.

MR: So when you volunteered for service, did you specifically say you wanted to work with missiles?

FS: Well, no. I was young and foolish. I specifically said I wanted to be near the beach. And the post opened and they found that it would be available after I got out of basic training with the Nike Battery at Fort Hancock. So, they assigned it to me after basic training.

MR: Where did you attend basic?

FS: I was at Fort Gordon, Georgia. Company E-2-1. How come you remember something like that?

MR: Did they send you to Missile School before you came to the Fort?

FS: No.

MR: You came directly to Fort Hancock?

FS: Actually, right after basic they sent me to Fort Hancock. I never joined the missile command at all.

MR: So what year was it at the time when you came to Fort Hancock?

FS: It was in August of 1965.

MR: Okay.

FS: You know, back then you were, some young people, I was one that was expecting to be trained for some technical services and I found that the MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) that I was going to be given was training for basically a policeman. So there was an opening. Well, they needed police for the military detachment there, the 235th MP Detachment. Someone asked me or asked if anyone could type. And although I wasn't a very good typist, that's for sure, but I got the job. (laughter) So I became basically the Radar (referring to MASH character Radar O'Reilly) of the MP detachment.

MR: Okay.

FS: And I loved it.

MR: That's good. Did you know anything about Fort Hancock before you came here?

FS: I never heard of it. I had been to New York City on a high school senior trip. We had gone through Virginia to Washington (D.C.) to New York, Philadelphia. And that was that. I had never, I don't know if down in Tennessee we had heard of New Jersey. (laughter)

MR: Did you know that you were going to the beach though?

FS: I did. I knew I was going to be close to the ocean.

MR: Well, that's good. Now, the type of job that you ended up performing, can you tell me a little bit about what your daily duties were?

FS: You know, I don't remember specifically what I did. I was the MP detachment for a company or detachment clerk, actually. I just did all the administrative, I did everything that the first sergeant wanted done.

MR: Okay.

FS: And I cannot remember his name, he was from, I believe it was Mount Holly, New Jersey was his home. Is there a Mount Holly?

MR: Yes.

FS: I think that was his home. I worked for him and a Captain James P. Trembly who was hoping to get into the FBI after his service. Whether he did or not, I have no idea.

MR: Did you work, the building where the MPs were, did you work out of was that right at the entrance after the State Park?

FS: It was down at the Post entrance.

MR: Okay.

FS: It seemed like there was a guard gate and then another mile or so up towards the Post was the MP detachment.

MR: Okay.

FS: And I think our first barracks was maybe the first barracks going in. Which was one of perks of being the MPs, you had a private room.

MR: So, you were in, that was a couple of miles north of there, your barracks right?

FS: Gosh I don't know distance. Yeah it was on towards the body of the Post.

MR: And was it viewing the Parade Ground?

FS: No, it was before that.

MR: Oh, okay. Was it a wooden building?

FS: Yes.

MR: Oh, okay. Was it right next to the Service Club, which was probably closed down at that point in time?

FS: I don't recall a Service Club.

MR: Okay.

FS: The only thing I recall was there was a NCO Club there somewhere and we had fun. There was an Officers' Club. I found my Mother had kept letters that I had written when I was in the Army. Over there and later when I went over to Swedesboro. And I read these letters after she passed away we found them. And I was telling her, I think I was

getting \$3 a night to mop floors at the Officers' Club after it closed. (laughter) I recall that there was a little Post Exchange there. They had a washerteria there in the basement. You could drink 3.2 beer (% alcohol) while you washed your clothes on the weekends.

MR: What was your rank?

FS: I was a Private E-2 when I was there.

MR: Okay. Were there any alerts that ever happened of potential enemy attacks while you were there?

FS: No. Nothing like that. We had a couple of whales, I recall, that washed up on the beach. I don't know if some of the marine life people came and got them. We had a couple of bodies of stowaways that when they would see the coast would jump overboard and try to swim and would drown and wash ashore.

MR: Oh.

FS: Actually we were sitting out on the north beach where you can see New York City the night the lights went out. December of '65 I think.

MR: I know that at the missile areas they went on big time alert. Did you have to do anything?

FS: Nope. We were, our MP detachment because we were sitting (inaudible).

MR: Yeah, I would think that they would need some help.

FS: That was a strange sight because the city was black.

MR: Did this job aid you in your future work after you got out of the military?

FS: You know what, the job that I did, the administrative duties and the responsibilities of the first sergeant and the captain, allowed me and I guess I wanted responsibility and they allowed me to take it and do things. Actually it assisted me all through the military and later.

MR: What was your, so you stayed in the military later on?

FS: I was in for three years. I was a volunteer.

MR: Oh, okay. And what did you do after you got out?

FS: I went to the, oh after I got out of the military?

MR: Yes.

FS: What did I do? Other than going back to school and get married. I went to work at the steel mills in Birmingham, Alabama. And I was going to school in Murfreesboro Tennessee and commuting back and forth. I was going to school on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and I would work Tuesday, Thursday and work a double shift on Saturday and on shift on Sunday and go back.

MR: Oh wow.

FS: Then I got married in 1970 and moved to Birmingham and went to work the Griffin Wheel Company. They manufactured freight car wheels.

MR: Oh, okay.

FS: Actually the beginning of the experience that I got at Fort Hancock had carried over to getting me the timekeeper job at Griffin, which was really a low, probably the third lowest job you could get as a salaried person with the company. And we kind of knocked around and moved on up to Kansas City with the company and built a 60 million dollar plant in Iowa and I was asked to go over there as assistant comptroller. Then we moved back to Birmingham and I became the comptroller of the Alabama plant. Then we built a 100 million dollar plant in Columbus and they asked me to move up here to Columbus as comptroller. And I stayed there for about 10 years and then I became the plant manager.

MR: Oh wow.

FS: Then I retired in 2000.

MR: So you had a good experience.

FS: I did. I had a great life. I had a great career with Griffin. We were the largest railroad wheel manufacturer in the world.

MR: Tell me a little bit about, so you lived in a temporary, like a wooden barracks. Where were the eating facilities? In that barracks or did you have to go somewhere else?

FS: There was a mess hall somewhere near the Headquarters Building for Headquarter Company. I don't know exactly where it was. I should know because I did KP (kitchen police) there many, many times. I was the back (inaudible) on the weekends. Some of the guys, I didn't have anything to do. I didn't have a car. The guys wanted to go to the city on the weekends. So, I made 50 bucks for a Saturday or a Sunday either day or both days if I could just pulling KP for them.

MR: They gave you some money.

FS: For pulling their duties. Yeah.

MR: Oh sure. Okay. So tell me about the Officers' Club. Was there a lot of activity going on up there or was it pretty quiet?

FS: You know in all honesty if I had not read the letters from my Mother I don't even remember the thing. I don't remember. I remember going to the NCO Club with a Sergeant Harper who would have to sneak me in there and I don't even remember it. I know that when I pulled the, I was making extra money as a private which was pretty good back then, you know. I can recall buying a Silvertone guitar maybe it was in Highlands. It cost \$100. And I made payments on it. We just didn't have any money so 50 bucks or 100 bucks on a weekend was a lot of money.

MR: I guess so.

FS: I was allowed to go in the NCO Club. They had a little crap game. They had it in the back. Every once in a while they would borrow some money from me. It was nice to have me around.

MR: So, aside from working a lot of KP, on your off time did you partake in any of the social activities? Did you go to any movies, dances, sporting events?

FS: No. Well, I played on the basketball, Post Headquarters Basketball Team. And actually we won the championship. I was a little guy. I was 5'9". I think we won the Post Championship that year.

MR: Did you travel to other Forts or where you just playing other units at the Fort?

FS: Well, we played on Post and I think that the team from Fort Monmouth would come over and play us there. I know we used to go over to Fort Monmouth to swim on Friday afternoons just so we could get out of the office for a little while. But most of it was we played there and Fort Hancock.

MR: Okay.

FS: We had a flag football team that fall. I never heard them play football

MR: Do you remember going to the movies or bowling or anything like that?

FS: Nope. Actually our barracks was a two story barracks. I had an end room which in winter basically allowed me to have a refrigerator outside my room. The storage room on the first floor roof was outside of my window. So I could store actually meat, milk and all that. And I had a television that I had, a black and white TV that I had purchased from some guy who was getting out. I gave him \$10 for it. It's funny, I relate everything to cost, but that was important. So, I had a TV and a window with cold storage. The guys just kind of gathered in my room. We just stayed there and watched TV. A couple of funny, and I have told this to many, many people since I left New Jersey being kind of a

redneck hick from down in the country I had never been exposed to a pizza until I got to New Jersey.

MR: Really?

FS: Never. I had never heard of one. I had never heard of a sub sandwich until I got there and absolutely loved both. So, that was great. And there was a boy named Lee Carol who just a terrific guitarist and he could finger pick like Chet Atkins and he talked me into buying that old Silvertone guitar which I still have by the way.

MR: Now how much did that cost you?

FS: It was a hundred dollars.

MR: Wow.

FS: On a charge at Sears. I think I paid that off the next year. Then he taught me how to play the guitar.

MR: So was there any favorite restaurant you went to in Highlands or in the local area?

FS: No. We didn't go to any restaurants.

MR: No. No pizza places or anything?

FS: I think we may have gone to a few beer joints. What they were I don't have a clue. (laughter)

MR: Did you ever go to the beach while you were here?

FS: Yeah. We used to hang out. There wasn't much there back then. We seemed to have other activities. I don't recall. I guess between basketball, flag football, the guitar and TV and other things and work I was pretty occupied. And again I was only there from August until January '66. I left in January.

MR: Oh, so you were there for about six months.

FS: Yeah.

MR: Okay. Did you enjoy your time here?

FS: I did. I had very fond memories although I'm so old now I can't remember very much. I can remember the memories that were good.

MR: Was it boring in wintertime?

FS: Excuse me.

MR: Was it boring in wintertime with the cold?

FS: I don't remember it being boring. Well, it was very cold. And it was a really harsh winter that I was there. And we had a terrific flood. I can recall driving from the Military Police Detachment into the Post and water coming up over the top of the wheels of the car. A little Ford Fairlane I believe it was or Falcons or something that we had. And that was really bad. Oh, I do have an odd little story.

MR: Okay.

FS: My Mother's Brother was in World War II and he was stationed at Fort Hancock.

MR: Oh really.

FS: And that I, of course, he had never told me anything about it but there was a gentleman there that I knew his name a second ago, but now it slipped my mind. Who was over the motor pool that my uncle had worked for. A Cornican, or Cornigan or something like that. I'll try to think of it one of these days. Anyway, when I had gone home on leave and I had met the gentleman there at Fort Hancock, when I was home on leave I was talking to my uncle and the same guy that I had met there, the gentleman that my uncle had worked for when he was at Fort Hancock.

MR: Oh, wow.

FS: Back there in World War II.

MR: Wow.

FS: That was kind of neat. So, he and I talked about the Post. He enjoyed it there too. He was another redneck came from down in Tennessee. (laughter) He was even worse than me.

MR: So, when you were there would you say that there was maybe two hundred to four hundred soldiers or was that way off?

FS: Gosh I would have thought more than that.

MR: More. Okay.

FS: At least that many. You know I don't recall. 'Cause I never, being attached to the MPs I never had to go to any inspections or anything like that. I just kind of stayed away from everybody else on Post.

MR: Did you do a lot of things like giving out fishing permits and checking IDs and things like that?

FS: Not that I recall.

MR: No. Okay. Anything especially humorous occur?

FS: No. I can't remember what it was. I thought that it was really odd that someone of my stature would be on the Post All-Star Team or whatever they called that getting that trophy. And they had the trophy engraved Tennessee Swinford, which had kind of become a nickname. No. I don't recall much else about the daily stuff. We just worked, played guitars, watched TV and I guess drank a lot of beer and ate sub sandwiches.

MR: Do you remember the PX at all? Do you remember if there was a snack bar in there?

FS: There was.

MR: Okay.

FS: It was upstairs. I don't know if there was much of a PX. I recall there was a snack bar though because we would go downstairs and put laundry in the washers and go upstairs and there was a few tables and drank a pitcher of beer. Down south I had never seen a pitcher of beer before. There was a lot of firsts for me in New Jersey.

MR: Well, what did they have in the south?

FS: Excuse me.

MR: They didn't have pitchers they had them in bottles or?

FS: You could get them anyway but you could buy a pitcher of draft beer back then.

MR: Okay.

FS: And we drank, it was probably 3.2 (%). It seemed that it was like most of the beer that the enlisted people drank was 3.2.

MR: Anything else stand out in your mind about Fort Hancock?

FS: No. Not that I can think of. I just recall, that even though there's not a lot of specifics, my memories of being stationed there were very, very pleasant. I can recall and enjoyed the people that I met. Although so many of them were from other areas. There was a boy named Huggins who was from Georgia. I actually talked to him two or three years ago. But I haven't had any contact with anyone since I left. I have often wondered what Sergeant James Harper, whatever happened to him. I have looked for

him through Army Locator Service several times. Somewhere on a military website I had posted that I had been at Fort Hancock and the unit that I was in and some guy sent me an email on time. He had also been there. My memories are pleasant, I just don't remember what them memories are. (laughter)

MR: Okay. So what was your next assignment after Fort Hancock?

FS: At Fort Eustis, Virginia. I'm going to have to change phones, my batteries beeping. Are you there?

MR: Yes, I am.

FS: Yeah, I went to, actually the Army had a two year obligation to keep me in the Nike program, so they couldn't move me unless I agreed to it. And I wasn't accomplishing much there. You know, I wasn't seeing any promotions. I was really interested in rank. So, there was an opening with, there was a new OCS Transportation Brigade that was being formed at Fort Eustis. And I was given an opportunity to go there, so I signed off to leave the Nike program and went down to Fort Eustis. And actually became the Radar of the OCS Brigade there. I always related to Radar because you know he was the administrative guy on MASH.

MR: Right.

FS: He was involved in everything that was going on. That's why I called myself that.

MR: So how long did you stay there?

FS: Well, I went down in January of '66 and I remained there until early May of 1967. And I can't remember if I had made PFC (Private First Class). I think I had made PFC while I was at Fort Hancock. And I went down to Fort Eustis and I stayed there until May of '67. I volunteered to go to Vietnam. And I was transferred to Fort Lewis, Washington where we formed two Infantry Companies. At that time the Infantry Battalions in Vietnam were only they had three rifle companies at least where I was at. They had an A, B and C Companies and they were forming Delta companies. We formed a Delta Company, my company which was the 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry, the big red one.

MR: Okay. And how long were you overseas?

FS: Well, my time in country, believe it or not I can remember was eleven months and twenty days. (laughs)

MR: Wow.

FS: We stayed in Fort Lewis until the 5th of July. We worked and trained and I can't remember exactly what we did there. Then we went over by ship. We boarded the *U.S.S.*

General John Pope on the 6th of July. We went over there on a boat. The Navy called it a ship. We called it a boat.

MR: Did that take a long time?

FS: It seems to me the total was 22 days. 21 days or something like that. We stopped in Okinawa for a day. And we set in the harbor on the 9th. We off loaded some troops in Okinawa. And then we off loaded I guess they were Marines on the 9th. And then we went down to Sano Springs, South China Sea down to Vung Tau, Vietnam. Which was an old French city, actually a really pretty city on the beach and debarked from there. The other company might have gone to the 1st and 16 Infantry and we went to the 2nd and 28th. Both companies went to the First Infantry Division, 3rd brigade.

MR: So were you in combat?

FS: I did administrative work in the S1 which is Battalion Administration until December. I had been promoted then to E-5. I did administrative work until December and then an opening came up in the system operations NCO for the Battalion. It was, actually it was an E-8 a master sergeant E-8 slot. I took it and made staff sergeant.

MR: So you got a nice promotion.

FS: Yeah. I was real happy. I worked for the stripes. I worked very hard for the stripes. So, I made E-6 in two and a half years. Unfortunately I made that one relatively easily because the gentleman was killed and had to replace him. It was unfortunate on October 17, 1967 two of our battalion companies that were involved in an ambush with the VC and we had about 130 casualties that day. We had 57 killed and two missing.

MR: Wow.

FS: Unfortunately, one of them left an opening that later on I was about to fill. So I went to the field probably around the first of January until I left Vietnam.

MR: When you left, were you then processed out?

FS: You know, actually, normally guys got to go back and work in the Headquarters camp, you know back in the brigade or battalion headquarters, oh, maybe two weeks, three weeks before they came home because of processing and all of the administration to be cleared. I was to get out of the service on the 21st of June and I was still in the field on the 15th.

MR: Oh.

FS: And we were engaged that day. And I worked for the Major. And he allowed me to fly back to Lakay on the light helicopter, the bubble helicopter, the two man. I hopped on with the pilot and he was going to the field and they allowed me to fly back in with him.

That afternoon after he had refueled and I was processed. The Major was shot in that helicopter.

MR: Oh.

FS: I was glad to get the heck out of there.

MR: So where did they process you out? Where did you...

FS: Well, believe it or not, I processed out at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

MR: Oh, okay. Wow, you went far.

FS: I did. We left, actually I got out a day early too. They said it took a week or two to process. I was pretty well versed in administration. I got out of the country in a hurry. We flew from Binwar to Japan to Alaska to Fort Dix. We got back on Friday and they wouldn't process us out because back in the states clerks didn't work on the weekends which really PO'd everybody.

MR: I guess so.

FS: We wanted to go home. So on Monday we processed out. It was so, I'll finish the story, you can cut out what you don't want. On Monday we processed out. It was so late in the day that I wasn't going to fly home. I went to Newark to fly back to Huntsville Alabama, the nearest airport. I stayed in the, I don't remember where it was or what it was, the airport. I stayed in the same hotel that I had gone to the first night that I had landed in New Jersey when I was on my way to Fort Hancock. The man who ran the bar's son was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam so I didn't have to buy a drink the whole night.

MR: Oh, there you go.

FS: Some people really supported us and the war effort in '68. After Tet (offensive), things really started to go downhill. But then I flew back to Huntsville and I had a rather serious headache at the time. (interview cut off)

END OF INTERVIEW