Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Interview with Benjamin Mandel
1225th Medical Detachment, 1941-1943
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS,
June 22, 2004
Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2010
Editor's notes on parenthesis ( )

Benjamin Mandel's photo from 1225th Army Service Unit Medical Detachment's photo collage.

Benjamin Mandel in the Post Hospital Laboratory, c. 1942.
The photos are courtesy of Gateway NRA/NPS.

Benjamin and Mrs. Mandel and on June 22, 2004 at Fort Hancock

MR: Today is June 22, 2004. My name is Mary Rasa and I am here today with a veteran, Benjamin Mandel. And we are going to ask him some questions about his time at Fort Hancock. First I would like to start with your full name.

BM: My name, my full name is Benjamin Mandel.

MR: When and where were you born?

BM: I was born 1913 in New York City.

MR: Where did you go to High School?

BM: I went to High School in New York City, Stuyvesant High School.

MR: Did you graduate from there as well.

BM: Yes, I graduated from Stuyvesant High School.

MR: Was your Father or Grandfather in the military?

BM: Neither my Father, nor my Grandfather. I can't be sure about my Grandfather. He may have been in the military in Europe somewhere.

MR: What were your starting and ending date of your entire military service?

BM: I was inducted in January of 1941 and I was discharged in February 1946.

MR: How did you become involved at Fort Hancock?

BM: I had no choice. (laughter) I was sent.

MR: What unit, this was right when you were inducted, what unit were you assigned to?

BM: I was assigned to the laboratory of the Station Hospital. It was the 1225th Medical Detachment Fort Hancock.

MR: Did you go through Basic Training somewhere else?

BM: No Basic Training prior to my induction.

MR: Did you know anything about Fort Hancock before you came here?

BM: I never had any information or knowledge about the facility.

MR: Did you know the type of job you would be performing before you came?

BM: I had no knowledge of what was going to happen to me. When I was assigned to the laboratory as a technician, I assumed it was based on my past history and my educational training.

MR: And what type of things did you do before that helped you out?

BM: When I graduated from City College of New York, I had taken some civil service exams and apparently I did well. And I was offered a job in a laboratory of New York State Health Department in Albany. I was delighted to have that offer which I accepted. And ironically, about four months after I had started on this job, I had received notification from the government. They need my services elsewhere. And not being given an option, I ended up in Fort Hancock.

MR: What was your rank when you first came here?

BM: I, Private.

MR: What did you end up at the time you left here?

BM: At the time I transferred out of here I was Staff Sergeant.

MR: Tell me more about your job. What type of things did you do?

BM: Here?

MR: Yes.

BM: My job was to examine specimens collected from patients that were in the hospital. And it involved a variety of laboratory procedures. I think it might be a little bit of amusement that we were so terribly busy that one day after the usual hours in the lab, I went back to work after dinner and I worked well into the night. Using the microscope, counting things and so on and I left and I walked across the field from the hospital lab to the barracks. I was very tired and I had just stretched and looked up at the beautiful sky and all the blinking pinpoints of light and I began to count them because up to that moment I had spent maybe three hours counting. (laughter) And basically our job was to examine specimens and report to the physician as to whether they were normal or abnormal.

MR: Let's see. While you were here were there ever any alerts of potential enemy attacks?

BM: As near as I can recall, we never had any indication of any alert or some possible attack so it was all quotes, peaceful.

MR: Now, you worked in the Post Hospital, can you tell me a little bit about the layout of the building, since the building is no longer here.

BM: I can't, I can't recall anything unusual or unique about the building. It was pretty much a standard type of hospital building with wards and halls and doors and the areas with the laboratory facilities. So it didn't stand out in my recollection as being something military in that sense.

MR: Did at that time, were they also using the adjacent barracks next the hospital?

BM: I can't recall. I'm going to have to use that expression, I can't recall. My memory, I'm 91 years old and my memory isn't what it used to be.

MR: Do you remember there being 50 beds in the hospital or was it larger?

BM: I would say it was pretty much a standard kind of facility, wards and beds and laboratories. It was pretty much what you might find in a civilian setting.

MR: Were there any Army nurses?

BM: Oh yes. The person in charge of the lab, interesting perhaps was a civilian, a female civilian. And she was in charge of the lab. But other than that, all the other individuals were Army personnel.

MR: Were there a lot of male stewards and were there some nurses to supplement them? Is that kind of how it worked?

BM: I am not clear of the question.

MR: Were the patients cared for mostly by male stewards that were like enlisted men and there were nurses around.

BM: There were civilian female nurses.

MR: Oh, okay.

BM: And they were assisted by Army personnel.

MR: Okay. Well were there actually Army nurses?

BM: I hesitate to answer.

MR: Okay. Where did you live? Were you living in a brick barracks or a temporary wooden barracks?

BM: No. They were brick barracks.

MR: So you lived right on the parade ground then.

BM: Absolutely.

MR: Well, you were lucky. (laughter).

BM: The Officers' Quarters were here, the Parade Grounds here and we were housed in barracks.

MR: Do you remember which one it was? Was it the one nearest the hospital?

BM: I can't remember that.

MR: Just curious, okay. Did you eat in the mess hall that was right behind the barracks or in the building itself?

BM: No. I think it was in the mess hall. I'm just thinking now. It was in the barracks. I remember sitting at the long table with all the soldiers. I remember having dinner or whatever. One of the soldiers said, "Can you pass the coffee." And somebody would say, "Okay." And the pitcher keeps coming down and the last one with the coffee poured himself a cup and took a sip and said, "Oh, its not coffee, its tea." So another took a sip and we ended up with 50 percent coffee tea. Somebody said, "Let's call the mess sergeant." So somebody comes down and he came over and we told him the problem. I am describing this literally. He took the pitcher and took a sip and thought about it for a minute and said, "I don't know. What's the difference." Then walked away. (laughter) I didn't make this up.

Voice of Mrs. Mandel: No, I heard that story a lot.

MR: So from the panorama photograph you have, it looks like around a hundred men that were in your unit. Probably around that?

BM: I think it was probably less than that.

MR: A few, maybe about 80. Something like that?

BM: Something like that.

MR: Was the barracks just for this particular unit or were there other soldiers in there?

BM: I can't remember.

MR: Okay, no problem. Did you take part in social activities out here? Did you go to the theater, dances?

BM: Oh, whatever was available, yes.

MR: Do you remember anything interesting about a dance or…?

BM: Not really. These were kind of difficult times. We were training. Soldiers would come. I was there two and a half years. I saw so many come, stay a while and go. It was not a stable situation. I mean, that's to be expected.

MR: Did you ever go to the beach here?

BM: I surely did. I don't remember specific, I don't doubt that when we had the time to do things like that that we did.

MR: Now, did you work weekends as well, or was it weekdays?

BM: We had time off routinely, but we had to respond to situations. There was one period of time, I should bring this up, when we had a medical, almost calamity. Am I taking too much of your time?

MR: No, absolutely not.

BM: There was need to develop a vaccine against a certain disease. I am familiar with the history of this event because this was things that I was interested in. And researchers at, I have trouble finding the word. What's the…in New York City research center?

Mrs. Mandel: Public Health Research Center

BM: Rockerfeller. They started to develop, I don't want to take too much of your time. They developed a vaccine for this purpose. And it was distributed to various medical

facilities, military facilities. And it was started being used and a peculiar medical situation arose where suddenly a number of soldiers reporting to medical offices they weren't felling well. And so they were examined and hospitalized. And one of the unique things about the complaint was that the soldiers began to develop a kind of yellowish pigmentation in their skin and the whites of their eyes.

MR: This is from the vaccine?

BM: From the vaccine, well it began at first it was not clear how this came about. But then they looked at what has been done recently which is unique thing that has never been done before. It turned out that they were using this new vaccine. As it turned out there were dozens and dozens of people coming in with this same complaint. Part of my job was to go to wards and collect blood specimens and bring it to the lab. After a while, I wasn't feeling so well. I lost my appetite. I had no energy. And I became yellow also. So the suspicion was that it was the vaccine and it turned out to be so. And when this alert rose, everything stopped. All vaccines were called down. And it turned out that the vaccine was contaminated with a virus. And there is a lot of interesting history about this because the researchers were divided as to whether they should use something or not. And that something was to stabilize it using normal human blood. There should never be normal used blood because there is no telling what's there that isn't normal. In any event, the vaccine was contaminated with a virus and that virus happened to be a hepatitis virus. Hepatitis B and I've had that ever since, but it hasn't caused me any problems.

MR: Now, did you have the vaccine as well or was it from dealing in the…

BM: No, I was given, I took the vaccine.

MR: Oh, you did.

BM: Because it was going to be given to everybody regardless of whether they needed it or not. So this was one of the undesirable events during the time I was there. But it turned out that this infection was not debilitating. Long term possibilities do exist.

MR: Did you go to New York City at all on excursions?

BM: Oh, we always, we had a pass, we'd take the boat into New York. Or we'd get off the Post, and hitch a ride. This was a frequent, within limits.

MR: So it was a nice place to be stationed.

BM: Right, oh yes. And they sent me to Staten Island which is even closer.

MR: Do you know of any servants that were around, that were working, say for an officer? Servants, maids

BM: No. The only non-military person who was there permanently was the head of the lab. The woman, I forget her name. And we also had one lab technician. He was a civilian.

MR: Okay. Did anything especially humorous occur while you were here? Do you remember anything? Does anything stand out in your mind about it?

BM: Nothing. Nothing outstanding.

MR: Okay. So, explain how you ended up coming to leave Fort Hancock and going onto your next assignment. And what date that was.

BM: Well, as I said before, the Commanding Officer (of the medical detachment), we had things in common. We kind of had similar backgrounds and such. We did crossword puzzles every day. I am assuming that he had a friendly attitude towards me. So when he told me that he thinks the orders are coming through to move personnel. You know turn over personnel. That's when he said, "Why don't you apply for a commission." And soon thereafter, I was transferred to Staten Island.

MR: And when was that?

BM: That was about two and a half years.

MR: It was around 1943?

BM: Let's see….Right. Right. It was the mid year, 1943.

MR: And then where did you end up after your temporary transfer to Staten Island?

BM: Well, I was there about three months and then the commission came through. So, I was discharged and I was assigned to the Barracks in Pennsylvania.

MR: Carlisle?

BM: Carlisle (Barracks) for training. And after that, I ended up I was assigned temporarily to two or three places until they decided where to put me, sort of permanently. I ended up in Jackson, Mississippi. And again, I was assigned as one of the Officers in the lab. And I was there, its hard to pinpoint the dates exactly.

MR: Oh, just kind of generally.

BM: I was there probably about eight or nine months and an overseas unit was assembled including me. And we were stationed in Washington State for a short time and then we went overseas. I ended up, this was in December, the reason I remember it, because we ended up in Hawaii and we immediately changed into summer gear. And we stayed in Hawaii, we weren't assigned. We were now, not a station hospital but a general

hospital. And in retrospect I could see what was going on. So were we were in Schofield Barracks (Hawaii) for a few months. And then we were shipped out and we stopped at the Olithy(sp) Island for awhile and one or two others. Until we ended up in Okinawa.

MR: And that's where you were…

BM: And that's where we set up the hospital. And I was there until about two months after the Japanese surrendered. I was, by that time a First Lieutenant. And I could show you that I was eligible for discharge, I mean sent back home. And one of the commanding officers sent a note to another officer saying, If he is willing to make a deal," and this is the word he used, "to stay on six months longer, we'd give him a promotion to Captain." It didn't appeal to me. (laughter) And so I was back home in December. And in February, I was discharged in '46.

MR: And what did you do for your civilian career?

BM: In as much as my formal training in school was in science and the five years or so that I worked in hospital labs, I was always interested in science. So, I was fortunate enough to get a job as a lab technician in one of the departments of the New York University Medical School. And I was there for a few months and the person for whom I was working, suggested he says, "You are a very bright person, why don't you enroll in graduate school and keep your job and take your courses at night or in the evening." It sounded reasonable. Particularly, in as much financially I could get help from my years in the Army.

MR: You had the GI bill.

BM: Sure. I did that. I enrolled and after two years in graduate school, I earned a Masters degree. And then I stayed on for three more years and I received a PhD. Then I started to work, I was already a middle aged man after all and I got a very good job. I worked in a research institute.

MR: Which one?

BM: The Public Health Research Institute of New York City.

MR: Okay. What was your PhD in?

BM: It was in the biological, medical, fundamental sciences, like virology and biochemistry. And I stayed at this job until I retired.

MR: Okay.

BM: And in the interim, I had a wife and two children.

MR: Sure.

BM: It was a very simple interim.

MR: I was just curious, while you were at Fort Hancock, did you go out and set up field hospitals?

BM: No.

MR: No. You didn't do any of that.

BM: It was all sort of in house. That kind of thing we did in part when we were in Okinawa. Setting up a hospital was a matter of building a tent. Or the wards were in Quonset huts.

MR: So they didn't practice any of that here while you were here. They didn't say, "okay go out and…"

BM: No, they dumped us on the beach raw. As a matter of fact, they dropped us off and they took us to our location. And that was in the middle of a cornfield. You couldn't see anything. And our Commanding Officer learned that there was an engineering unit a mile or two down the road. And they made a deal, I don't know what was involved in the deal, maybe liquor or beer. The engineering unit would come in with their equipment and they cleared away in five minutes. So we had a field on which to build tents.

MR: Is there anything else that comes to mind about your time at Fort Hancock?

BM: It's a unique experience to be taken from civilian life to something like this. For me individually, I was not exposed to any kinds of hardship. I am an adaptable person. If I had to have dinner at a long table with 15 other people that didn't bother me. With the variety of people I could point out four or five that we became friendly. And when we had time off, we'd socialize. We'd go to a movie or the PX or hang around or do things just to pass the time. To summarize my two and a half years, there were positive aspects and negative aspects. The positive, you learned about people because you are necessarily close to people. You are in a barracks with maybe twenty others. And on each side maybe two feet away you have two people. You learn to make due. You learn how to adjust considering the best possible way. And this is experience that has a life long benefit. If something doesn't work out right at home or whatever, think of what else you can do and do it. That's survival. And if there's anything good about being in the army, it's that kind of thing. You meet new people, you learn about people with other religions or other interests. So if you are willing to open your mind and take advantage of the possibilities.

MR: Great. Well, thank you very much for the interview and I'm going to end the tape.

End of Interview