

## **WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT**

### **ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

INTERVIEWEE: Tricia Sutter

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: March 23, 2013

[Begin Interview]

TS: Alright, today is March 23, 2013. My name is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the home of Tricia Sutter in Greensboro, North Carolina to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Tricia, why don't you state your name the way you'd like it to be on your collection?

SUTTER: Tricia Sutter.

TS: Okay. Alright Tricia, well, thanks for having me over. Why don't we start out by having you tell me when and where you were born? What's the kitty's name so when he—

SUTTER: Bianca.

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: I was born in 1963 in Cape—I'm sorry, in Carteret, New Jersey.

TS: Carteret, New Jersey?

SUTTER: Yes.

TS: Is that where you grew up?

SUTTER: No, I grew up in Barnegat, New Jersey.

TS: Is that nearby?

SUTTER: No. My folks were moving when I was born, and so I grew up in a new place.

TS: Oh, it doesn't seem like New Jersey's all that big though, so it seems like it would be kind of close to me.

SUTTER: Well, one's—you know, the north is in this—more the city towards New York, and then where we lived was rural and the beach.

TS: [comments about cat redacted] So did you have—what kind of—did you have many siblings at all?

SUTTER: Yes, I was one of six; number five.

TS: You're number five?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: How many boys, how many girls?

SUTTER: Two boys, four girls.

TS: Oh, okay. And so, what did your folks do for a living?

SUTTER: They were blue-collar. My father was in the navy and then he learned—he was like an engineman in the navy and he was a mechanic by trade, you know, when I was a kid. We had a marina, we had boats and bait, and he worked on the boats; he did different things. And then he ended up going to work for Peabody Coal [Company; now called Peabody Energy Corporation] when I was in the fifth grade and we moved to Kentucky.

TS: Was he career?

SUTTER: No. When he went to Peabody he—I guess he thought we was going to—I don't know, he was the—the—head of the diesel mechanics, so he was a, you know, pretty good—got a pretty good promotion. It was good for our family then.

TS: Yeah? But I mean in the military, in the—

SUTTER: No, no, he was only in there for three years. He wanted to marry my mom and she wouldn't do it because he was in the navy, you know, and at the time it meant you partied a lot and—which she did too. I don't know, but her mom was like, "Don't marry a navy man," you know, and so then he got out to marry her and they were so poor; they had nothing, you know; nothing. [chuckles] And they had three kids real fast.

TS: And then another three over—

SUTTER: Yeah, over—

TS: —so many years.

SUTTER: Later on, yeah.

TS: Yeah? Well, so what was it like growing up in this—was it—say the name of the town again.

SUTTER: Rural; it's Barnegat.

TS: Barnegat?

SUTTER: It was one high school, one elementary school. We had one stop light, one grocery store. It's a small town.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Did you live in town or rural or—

SUTTER: It was a small town, it was a rural town, and we lived, you know, at the shoreline of it. We had a—We were on the water.

TS: Oh, really? Okay.

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: What was that like?

SUTTER: It was awesome; I loved it.

TS: Go to the beach all the time?

SUTTER: Oh, yeah. We had, like—We lived on the inlet. You know, boats would come in and get gas at our house.

TS: Oh, really?

SUTTER: Yeah, and—and then later on, you know, we had that marina that we rented boats out at and, you know, my mom had a restaurant in there and it was a fishing—it was fishing station. So, it was awesome. I loved it.

TS: So, what kind of things did you do fun that—when you're by the water?

SUTTER: Fish and swim and look for rocks and, you know, go crabbing and every—everything you could think of; throw rocks at bees nests, you know; [both chuckle] tie your sister up; whatever.

TS: Tie your sister up?

SUTTER: Oh yeah.

TS: Did you do that very often?

SUTTER: No, I did, kind of, bully up on my younger sister though.

TS: Yeah, your younger sister?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Well, you were five and she was six then?

SUTTER: No, she was—let's see—

TS: I mean, number six.

SUTTER: Yes.

TS: Number six, yeah.

SUTTER: Yeah, she was a brat.

TS: [chuckles]

SUTTER: She totally was.

TS: Yeah?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: You want to say her name on tape so—

SUTTER: Leslie.

TS: Alright. Alright, so Leslie got beat up.

SUTTER: Yeah, a little bit, but you know, she deserved it.

TS: Alright. So—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SUTTER: In all fairness.

TS: Alright. So, you're—you're around the marina, you get to do stuff with the water. Did you guys sail or anything like that?

SUTTER: No, we—we did—you know, my uncle had this awesome sailboat. He had a sixty foot catch, and he had—he owned—he owned the shore—it was called Seaman's Shores[?]; that was his last name. Anyway, so—and he was the mayor of the town. [chuckles] He had a great boat. When my folks would go out with him they'd party a lot. They would run aground and, you know, they—yeah, they would stay out all night and sail, but mostly we had motorized boats, yeah. When we moved to Kentucky we got a boat, too, and went on the river so it was—but my parents, they totally partied.

TS: How old were you when you moved to Kentucky?

SUTTER: I was in the fifth grade. I think I was twelve, or ten; twelve. Yeah, twelve.

TS: How long were you there?

SUTTER: For—From then on till I went to California, and then I joined the Coast Guard in California.

TS: Yeah?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: What—What was it like; how was it different? Where in Kentucky were you at?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SUTTER: What? Kentucky? We were in Owensboro; it was completely different.

TS: How? How was it different?

SUTTER: Well, there's no more ocean, and also the—you know, it was like a cultural shock. I mean, it seemed like a totally different world; the people that lived in Kentucky.

TS: So, it'd be, like, around the mid-seventies, right?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: What was it—How was it different?

SUTTER: Well, the—just the obvious things, like the food was different, and then in some ways it was really—it was a city; it was the first time I lived in a city for one thing. It was—The streets were, you know, two lanes going one way and two lanes going the other way, which was major for me; I was like, “Whoa.” And our—our—our social class was considerable different. We went up a lot more. The house we lived in at the beach, they sold it, and we lived in a really nice house, you know, and then lived in a—we had a boat and, you know, it was just—comparably the money you would have in New Jersey compared to Kentucky was better. You know what I’m saying?

TS: More money—more—you got more for the money that you made[?]

SUTTER: Yeah, yeah.

TS: —in Kentucky than in—on the beach of New Jersey?

SUTTER: The cost—exactly, the cost of living was a lot lower, so anyway.

TS: What’d your mom do?

SUTTER: When we moved to New—to Kentucky she didn’t work. She stayed at home and started, you know, buying old furniture and antiques and doing stuff that she wanted to do. She had a sewing room and she canned and, you know, she would stay at home, and then she started volunteering at a mental health center. She wasn’t—She graduated high school but she was really—she was really smart, you know? She was mostly just a mother and worked blue-collar jobs to get us through.

TS: Yes.

SUTTER: But she was—

TS: Well, she had six kids, right?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Your dad’s working all the time.

SUTTER: Yes. Yeah.

TS: Well, now, were you somebody who liked school at all?

SUTTER: I had a hard time in school. I had learning issues that they did not—I have bad ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder].

TS: Yeah?

SUTTER: Yeah. And then—

TS: Did they call it that then?

SUTTER: No, we called it just lazy.

TS: Yeah?

SUTTER: So I was lazy. I didn't like it. I didn't like school. I wanted to be outside. I mean, who doesn't? But, you know, I had a hard time learning; a really hard time learning. And I went to col—I went to—I tried to go to college, you know; it was just hard. After a year I'm like, "Okay, this is— it's too much.

TS: Was there any particular, like—did you have any teacher that you liked or any—any class in particular that, you know, engaged you at all, or was it all just hard?

SUTTER: You know, the beginning stuff is English and Humanity—I didn't enjoy much of it at all, no, plus I didn't have a lot of study skills.

TS: This is in college, you're talking about?

SUTTER: Yes.

TS: What about in, like, elementary, junior high, and high school?

SUTTER: Oh, I liked stuff like shop and PE [physical education] and, you know, science. There is a lot of science I liked but math I just was like—I hated it. I liked music; you know, I played an instrument in—I liked that.

TS: What did you play?

SUTTER: I played the guitar. I didn't play it, you know, formally in school but I liked—I played it and I liked it.

TS: Do you still play?

SUTTER: I can play it. I don't very often, but yeah. Yeah, on occasion.

TS: On occasion? Well, that's cool. What about—So, did you—Were you—So, you liked to be outdoors, so did you—were you on any, like, sports teams or anything like that?

SUTTER: In high school?

TS: Yes.

SUTTER: No. I started—the most interest I had was in, you know, being aware of my sexuality in high school. That’s where I just—I was with a girl and that’s what we did all the time; we just hung out; we were together. I spent all my time doing that.

TS: Was it—What was that like? I mean, were you worried about other people—

SUTTER: No, not at all.

TS: No? Like, were you totally out?

SUTTER: No. No, but I didn’t care. I was certainly not thinking about that, you know, and I—

TS: Did your girlfriend care?

SUTTER: We were worried; like, “What about when they find out?”  
“Well, we won’t worry about that for now.” They did find out and then, you know—

TS: Who’s “they”?

SUTTER: Our folks, you know.

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: [chuckles]

TS: So that didn’t go over real well?

SUTTER: Not so good on her side. My parents were—We stayed together the whole time, like, through—from eighth grade to twelfth grade, and our parents found out when we were, like, in the ninth—end of the eighth grade, ninth grade.

TS: But then you still stayed together after that?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: How did you manage that?

SUTTER: Well, I mean, we went to the same school and we still had all the same stuff, and we snuck out; you know, I snuck to see her out in the nighttime. I’d climb down off the roof and get off the, you know—because once they found out it was like, “Yeah, no, you can’t spend the night anymore.”



“Why not?”

“Well, because.” [chuckles]

You know, my—my parents were, “If your sexuality—If you’re going to be gay, alright, it’s not going to be easy, and it’s not our first choice for you, but that’s okay. I mean, if that’s who you are that’s okay, but you’re—no matter who you are you’re not having sex when you’re thirteen. You’re not going to be sleeping overnight in the same bed. No.”

I was like, “Oh, alright.” Well, that concept is kind of—it’s hard to—it’s hard to get it, you know? As a parent, now I get it, but you know, at that time I’m like, “Yes, I can.[?] We do what we wanted to do and [unclear].” Being a older parent—my parents, you know, they tried to—they knew it was probably going to happen, but—

TS: Her parents had a harder time with it?

SUTTER: Oh yeah, her parents were—you know, they didn’t want her to see me anymore. We weren’t supposed to be—After a while they let us but, you know, it was me; it was all my fault. [chuckles]

TS: You were the bad egg that was—

SUTTER: Yeah, and they put her into therapy and—I don’t know. It was hard for her. Her parents divorced. Not over that but, you know, the next year that I came out, and her mom tried to kill herself. It was a—She had a rough time.

TS: Well, while you’re growing up in this—in Kentucky—

SUTTER: Yes.

TS: —and you’re—you’re struggling a little with school.

SUTTER: Yes.

TS: Right? You’d rather be out—outside. Did you have, like—Did your parents say, “You’re going to do this,” or you know, “We want you to go to college,” or did you have some kind of idea of what your future should be?

SUTTER: My parents kind of manipulated me to go to college; like, “Okay, you’re—” you know, once I mentioned I thought I would they wanted me to. And they, you know, kind of pushed that if I really tried at something I could do it. Which, you know, I can if I try, but it fucking was hard for me and I didn’t—I was—you know, I didn’t want to try. It was the first time I ever smoked pot and drank anything was at college. I’m like, “I just—” there was a lot more I wanted to do. I wanted to go to California, be with my sister.

So, it was like, “Okay, stay in—just stay in school.”

I'm like, "Well, what if I join, you know, the navy?" Because my father was in the navy.

"No, don't join the navy. If you join now you'll be swabbing decks. Just finish school and then join the navy."

I'm like, "Okay."

So, they—they got me this car—this [Ford] Mustang—I wanted really bad. This—I didn't, you know, say, "I want this particular car," but they—they knew I loved it, and my father saw one, got it, and rebuilt the motor and gave it to me; this '67 Mustang with a convertible. I'm like, "Awesome."

So, I'm off in school, you know, trying to learn but it was—it was hard, and learning other things about life. You know, going out to the bars for the first time and—

TS: What college did you go to?

SUTTER: I went to Western Kentucky University. I was going to be a recreation—and I kind of liked special ed[ucation]. You know, I thought I could be somehow—I couldn't decide. I never really could decide what I really wanted to be, because I hated math and I couldn't do it either, you know, like, "Oh, what can I do? I don't—Oh, don't pump gas." That's what I knew I didn't want to—you know—

TS: Right.

SUTTER: "You'll be pumping gas if you don't finish school."

TS: So, you had a lot of pressure on you to, kind of—

SUTTER: Well, not a lot but, you know—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Some pressure.

SUTTER: —there was a—if I went to college I didn't have to have a job and they gave me a car and all I had to do was be a good student, you know?

TS: So, what happened?

SUTTER: That's kind of stupid. I didn't stay. [chuckles] I went to California to live with my sister.

TS: Now, when did your sister go to California, and which sister in the hierarchy of—

SUTTER: My—Let's see, the third born—

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: —so there's—yeah, one above me and then her.

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: But she's a hippie, you know. She was cool and I was—She just—She had two kids, and her youngest daughter, I adored her. I just wanted to go out there and hang out with them.

TS: Where'd she live?

SUTTER: Fresno, California. She wanted me to go to Finegold[?] School. There's a school out there—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: What's that?

SUTTER: —where you could—It was like a hippie school and it, you know—it's where you could find who you are and, you know, all different kind of people go there and she thought I would do really well there.

TS: Did you go?

SUTTER: No. I went to Cali—I went after school—after high school and stuff but I wanted to live with her.

TS: So, at first you went to Western—

SUTTER: Kentucky.

TS: —in Kentucky, and how long were you there?

SUTTER: One year.

TS: A year? And then so this—after—you didn't enroll for any classes the second year?

SUTTER: No.

TS: Just thought you're going to take your Mustang and get out to California?

SUTTER: No, I went out there for a visit. I knew I wanted to go and I just called my parents up. I said, “Can I sell the car and, you know, send me the money and stay out here?”  
They’re like, “Okay.”

TS: So, what year was that?

SUTTER: Eighty-two.

TS: You sold your Mustang?

SUTTER: Yeah. Well, they sold it and sent me the money. Yeah. California was cool though. I liked it a lot.

TS: So, what did you do when you got there with your sister?

SUTTER: I got a job, yeah. I started—I moved away from her, and I met a woman and hooked up with her, and then, you know, just didn’t want a thing. I never really wanted to go to school. [chuckles]

TS: At what point, then, did, like, the military come back into your radar screen?

SUTTER: We—This woman that I was with was, like, eleven years older me, and then my—we—my father died when I was twenty. They moved out there after—you know, I went out there and then he—they bought them—

TS: Your parents?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Moved out there—

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: —to Fresno?

SUTTER: Yeah, went out and bought some land and he was—they were using their retirement money. They bought this land and my father had gotten a job, and he hadn’t gone actually to work yet and he had a massive heart attack and just died. And—

TS: He didn’t even get to spend any time in—

SUTTER: They were there for about—No, they were there for a little while; like, six months or so, maybe. They came in the summer and he died in November [unclear]. He died in December, I’m sorry.

TS: Yeah?

SUTTER: But he was really—He was fifty-five, you know, and so I—it rocked my world. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do but I felt like I was old when I was twenty-two. You know, I was freaked out. [chuckles] It really did freak me out. You know, looking back on it, it was intense. But—So I went—yeah, it's like, "I'm just going to do something. I feel like my life is slipping away and I'm going to do something. I can't—" I'm not in college. I had two jobs and, you know, sometimes three jobs; I was a lifeguard. And I just—I wanted to do something that meant something but I just didn't want to be in school. I started little businesses on my own, like cleaning windows and I had a window washing business for—you know, whatever. I just needed to do something that I thought was something.

TS: At this point in your life would you say you're pretty independent?

SUTTER: Oh yeah. [chuckling] Oh yeah. I was independent, you know; yeah.

TS: So, how'd you settle on the Coast Guard? What—What—What path did you take to that?

SUTTER: When I was out in California we had gone to Monterrey. We went on a week up to the—and I—station—we went into Coast Guard Station Monterrey, I'm like, "Alright, that—I'm joining. [unclear] come here and work," you know. In my mind that's what I—I'm like, "This rocks." I had never been to the coast, you know; the Pacific. Well, we went—

TS: Little trips?

SUTTER: —with Clor[?]-when I went with [unclear] when we visited out there before I moved there, I visited as a—you know, a younger woman and went on the—when I was a kid. We went out to the—you know, the North—up the PCH [Pacific Coast Highway] and camped and stuff. It was gorgeous. So then when I went to Monterrey, that's it. I knew I wanted to work there. It's—You've been there? It's—

TS: I went to language school in Monterrey.

SUTTER: Really? Yeah. So, that's where I wanted to be and that's pretty much what prompted me to go there.

TS: It's not from watching *Private Benjamin*?

SUTTER: No. I was—you know, I wanted to be navy. I knew I wanted to be on the water and I—you know, the Coast Guard. I'm like, "This is awesome."

TS: You didn't consider any other service?

SUTTER: No, no.

TS: No? Not at all?

SUTTER: Nothing that wasn't on the water.

TS: So, it was [U.S.] Navy or Coast Guard basically?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: So, how did you settle on Coast Guard instead of [U.S.] Navy? Was it because of that station?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SUTTER: Because of that station.

TS: Really?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: So, tell me—So, you, like, walked into a recruiting station and said, “Sign me up”?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Did you say, “I would like to have this particular job or that particular job”?

SUTTER: No, I said, “Well, this is—I saw this and that's why I want to do it.”  
And, you know, they were like, “Well, you could. Go for it, man.” [chuckles]

TS: Did you have any idea—Did you say, “I—” you know, did you sign up with the intent of being stationed there in Monterrey?

SUTTER: No, they didn't say that I could. It's like, “Well, if there's an opening there and, you know—but if you do well in boot camp you can choose where you want to go,” which I could have gone—I could have—I had a—good top choices but I, you know, was going to go to Florida and be in a small boat station or stay at the gym. And I knew if I stayed in the gym I wouldn't go further in the Coast Guard. I would be a—because it had nothing to do with, you know, any rating. It wasn't a rating, you know? It was just a—you were assigned to it at the—if they—if you wanted to go there, and they were pretty clear that if you—you know, if you go there it's not an E[?] school of any kind, it's just a place to work, so.

TS: Okay. So—Alright, so let's go back a little bit then. So, you signed up for the Coast Guard.

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: You—And where did you sign up; where were you at; what station?

SUTTER: I was in Fresno when I signed the papers and I went to boot camp in Cape May [New Jersey].

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: I graduated—Before I graduated, while I was in boot camp, they asked me if I would like to consider staying there and not picking from the billets.

TS: Why did—Why did they ask you?

SUTTER: Because I fit that criteria. I was in shape and I was a lifeguard, too, and so there I had an aquatics background. Those were the things that they were looking for. They needed an instructor and asked me if I wanted to; I was like, "Yeah—

TS: Yeah?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SUTTER: —I think so." First, I didn't know, you know? I wanted to—to consider it. They said, "If you're interested let us—you know, we'll talk about it." And of course, the other people that worked there, the instructors, were people my age—you know, they were—and it's like, "Look, just chill out. I'm going to talk to you for a minute about this job and you can decide if you want to come."

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: "Because you're not going to, you know, be on a boat. You're not going to work on a—a helicopter. You're going to work in a gym, you're going to be swimming, and that's what you're going to do.

I'm like, "Do I want to go back to California? I'm not going to be at Station Monterrey." I want to get—I wanted to be on a ship or I wanted to go there, you know? I was like, "Okay, if I go to Florida I'll be on a ship." And I thought, "Well, you know what? After—After I'm done there, then I'll go somewhere else."

TS: After you finish working in the gym?

SUTTER: Yeah. Yeah, because, you know, the people that work in the gym are like, “This is what we do. This is the duty we stand. People out here stand port and starboard, like two on, two off, and you know, rotating weekends. We’re off at four every day, we have an hour and half for lunch, and this is what we wear, is sweats, you know, and this is our chief. As a seaman, this is where you want to come.”

I was like—

TS: So it was, like, a cush [easy] gig?

SUTTER: Oh my God, yeah.

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: It rocked.

TS: Well, go back to basic training, then, at Cape May.

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Alright, so I don’t know much about the Coast Guard. What kind of stuff do you do in basic training there?

SUTTER: You do—You learn about, you know, the rights and the ranks in the military. You learn basic—You learn the history about the Coast Guard and why it was, and you learn about military bearing; you learn how to tie knots; you learn how to be a—a Coastie, and they teach you the Coastie secrets that I can’t disclose right now.

TS: Really? Maybe later?

SUTTER: Maybe off tape.

TS: [chuckles] Okay.

SUTTER: If you know the song[?]. [both laugh]

TS: Was anything particularly hard, either, like, academically or physically or emotionally, for you during your time in basic training?

SUTTER: Well, you know, I was a kid emotionally and I thought it was hell.

TS: Why?

SUTTER: Because it was—you’re in boot camp, you know. You don’t get to see the news or, you know, you don’t get to talk; you don’t get to go to sleep when you want to; you don’t get to eat much. I—We didn’t get to eat much. I was tired all the fucking time and I



couldn't talk to anybody about, you know—couldn't talk; couldn't even sit down on the bed for Christ sakes, you know? I didn't like that.

TS: What do you mean you couldn't sit down on the bed?

SUTTER: We weren't supposed to be sittings on the racks at all—

TS: No?

SUTTER: —when you were in the—you know, in the barracks.

TS: Where'd you sit?

SUTTER: On the floor in the—in the head. You had to sit somewhere on the floor, and don't fall asleep either. Don't you remember boot camp? Come on, man. The people I was in boot camp with took it seriously; they did not screw around. [chuckles] I didn't like it.

You know, I was—Although, here's the thing, I was in SCD—a Special Ceremonial Detail—in the boot camp, and so really, I was in the same squad with everyone else but I had a different company commander and our—I was in Whiskey Company. Our—regular Whiskey had a woman—a chief boatswain [mate] that was hardcore. You know, they—and my boot camp experience was not bad[?]. I was—that Ceremonial barracks was not—

TS: Wasn't as hardcore?

SUTTER: No.

TS: And this is—

SUTTER: It wasn't as hardcore as far as they had to bus down there—they had to break down their entire barracks and set it back up on, like, the parade field, you know, and they were always out having to—they were doing calisthenics at all times. I mean, she was just—she would inspect them more. Our—Our—It was a ceremonial, so it was like the musicians and the—the people that did, you know, the—

TS: Plays?

SUTTER: No, the [makes noise with mouth], arms on the—

TS: Drill?

SUTTER: Yeah, the drill team.

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: So—

TS: So, how did you get in this?

SUTTER: This is how; because I don't—I was—I couldn't read music and I wasn't—they just were looking for girls, you know, that they had to keep it in that config—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: It was coed?

SUTTER: —wear their uniform well. Yeah.

TS: It was coed? Was the other—Was the other part of the Coast Guard coed at that time?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: All basic training in '85 was coed?

SUTTER: Yes. The Coast Guard was. There was only one—it had been for as long—because there was only that one training center.

TS: So you were kind of filling, like, a quota slot—

SUTTER: Yeah, kind of.

TS: —for a woman.

SUTTER: If you look good in your uniform and you're not stupid you could be in the—

TS: So you didn't do the drill or the—the nice—

SUTTER: No. Well, you had to; it was part of boot camp. You had to learn, you know, coat of arms. You had to learn how—I mean the—you had to learn the routine; the—do you know the word for it?

TS: [chuckling] I'm not sure. The—

SUTTER: The command—the commands with a weapon. "I order [makes noise]!"

TS: Oh, okay.

SUTTER: "Order arms," and it's called the—

TS: Right.

SUTTER: You had to know all the positions.

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: Okay, so the—but I wasn't on a—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: We didn't have to do that, so that's not anything I had to do.

SUTTER: Oh, really? Like, "Present, [makes noise]!" You didn't have to clear your weapon and present it and—

TS: We got the weapon on the rifle range—or the range, to shoot the M16—

SUTTER: Yeah?

TS: —one day. We didn't have a—

SUTTER: We had to qualify with the M16—

TS: We qualified but we didn't have it, like, with us, other than on that day.

SUTTER: Oh, really? With a—and with a rifle and with a shotgun.

TS: No, none of that. So, you qualified on a rifle and a [unclear]?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SUTTER: And with a .45 too. Yeah.

TS: Really, all those weapons?

SUTTER: Yeah. And I remember thinking—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Nineteen eight-five?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: The .45 was awesome, but I remember thinking, “This is not why I went in here, and they didn’t say we were going to have to do this. I thought we were, like, life-saving, not carrying guns.” And I was really, kind of, you know, [unclear]. “We’re supposed to help people. We’re not going to be shooting people,” you know? That—I didn’t—This is while I was in boot camp, and also I was on Medicaid[?] and I really, you know, had a hard time keeping my mouth shut. I did, but after I graduated I didn’t.

TS: Well, how—what about this part—oh, I don’t know—no gays allowed in the military?

SUTTER: Well, yeah, I pretended I wasn’t gay. I mean, what—you know, come look at me. I’m the picture of femininity. I mean, they—you know, they—I don’t know. They just didn’t ask me that. When I—When I got my job—When I got my first job at the gym is when, you know, I had been—I had been not—I was in boot camp. I didn’t try to, you know—there was some girl that said something to me. I’m like, “No, we’re in boot camp and I’m getting done, man.”

TS: Said something to you to—

SUTTER: About, “Hey baby. I think—If you’re thinking what I’m thinking—”  
I’m like, “You know what? Yeah, that’s true—”

TS: So when you say you’re the “picture of femininity,” you’re having—there’s some sarcasm attached to that?

SUTTER: Yes, totally. I’m totally—

TS: Because the transcriber may not be able to, you know, put that—

SUTTER: My situation, you know—Yeah, I’m more masculine, and obviously most people would look at me and say, “Oh, she’s gay.” Some people say more things than that, but [laughing] you know.

TS: So, you—So, were you worried about that at all?

SUTTER: No. No. I mean, because—no, it never even crossed my mind. I mean, it crossed—I knew I wasn’t supposed to be gay but I didn’t think—you know, no.

TS: Well, I mean, you were out to your family.

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: And your friends, I'm sure.

SUTTER: Yes.

TS: So it wasn't like it was going to be a big surprise—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SUTTER: And everyone [unclear] been in the closet really; no.

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: And I, you know—

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: I also didn't think anybody could make me do anything I didn't want to do. I was, like, really cocky. I didn't consider that being gay would hold me back in any way.

TS: But—So—But on the form that you signed—

SUTTER: I knew that I wasn't supposed to be, oh yeah.

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: And I said that—I don't know if they asked me that but I knew that I was lying when I went in there, yeah.

TS: I think in 1985 it was on the form that you had—

SUTTER: Yes, you say, "No, you're not."

TS: Right, yes.

SUTTER: I lied. I didn't care. As far as I was concerned I was in service. [chuckles] So take it how I give it, damn it.

TS: So, what did your folks, then, at that point—well, you'd lost your father.

SUTTER: My father had died but my mom was—oh my God, she was so happy.

TS: Happy? Yeah?

SUTTER: Oh yeah.

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: And that's what she said; "Oh, my daughter's in service." I mean, when she—my sister got married, she wanted me to wear my uniform because it's always appropriate. [chuckles] God, she was beside herself. She couldn't have been happier.

TS: Your mother?

SUTTER: Yes. [background noise] It was awesome. Sometimes it would just—you know, "Come on, mom."

TS: What about your—rest of your siblings?

SUTTER: Oh, they were cool. I mean, they—yeah.

TS: Yes.

SUTTER: "Oh, Tricia's in the Coast Guard." My brother's like, "Sir, yes, sir," you know, and he's the jokester. He—He's dead now but he never left New Jersey and he was a fisherman, and you know, he knows the water like his—the back of his hand. And so, he knows the Coast Guard. You know, it's just, kind of, a—like kind of a [unclear].

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: It was a good fit for you.

SUTTER: Oh yeah.

TS: Yeah?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Well, okay, so—and your friends? They were okay with it too?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Okay. And so, you get through boot camp. You're not all crazy about everything that you had to do, although maybe following orders.

SUTTER: Yeah, well, you know, there wasn't a lot at the gym; wasn't too bad. And also, the chief of the gym let us—it was—that job was—it was great, you know?

TS: The night[?] job?

SUTTER: No, the job working at the gym, because we were all—everybody was over twenty and most people knew about fitness so he took our opinions into consideration. It wasn't like going to a new place and being a brand—I mean, there was newness about it, but when your—first come out of boot camp and you go to, say, a small boat station, you really have to—you know, you have to pay dues. You have to, kind of, be the FNG for a while and you have to do stuff like—

TS: What's FNG?

SUTTER: Fucking New Guy.

TS: [chuckling] Okay.

SUTTER: And you had to do stuff like, you know, go find eighty feet of shoreline and go get, you know, stuff that's—you know, you go through a point of—where they think you know nothing, which it was—

TS: Kind of like a level of hazing?

SUTTER: Yes, exactly. And so, there was—there was a—you know, there was a respect as a peer already, and you know, the other people that worked there kind of were like, “Yeah, well, you're going to be the one that has to do the—whatever, menial jobs,” but it wasn't—you weren't treated as if you didn't know anything just because you had just gotten out of boot camp. So I thought that was a—I didn't have—you know, what I said mattered so I didn't have to say a bunch of crap later; like, “This is bullshit.” You know, that stuff that happened when I went to the station; yes.

TS: Well, when you—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SUTTER: Oh my God.

TS: When you originally signed up how many—did you sign up for four years?

SUTTER: Yes. I spent three of them at the gym.

TS: And so—But—But going back to when you first signed up, did you—what was your expectation?

SUTTER: To get on a ship, go around the world and see how many women I could meet really.

TS: [chuckling] Okay. And so—

SUTTER: [chuckles]

TS: —did you—did you plan, like, staying in for a long time or just—

SUTTER: Yeah, I thought it would be exactly what I wanted. I thought it would be, you know, my dream life. Aside from being a pirate I could be a lifesaver, hey.

TS: Okay. Well, what was it like, then? Tell me about—Okay, so you—you get through boot camp, you stay at Cape May.

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: You're working in the gym.

SUTTER: It was great. That job rocked. I made some of my best friends. I had a really good time.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Well, tell me about it. What'd you do?

SUTTER: At the gym?

TS: Yeah. You told me already it was like—I don't know, like a two to four o'clock job.

SUTTER: Yeah, we got—you know, we taught—when you first come in boot camp you go to the gym for a fitness test. You know, you learn—you jump off, you know, the—

TS: Oh, so you're an instructor for the boot camp?

SUTTER: Yes.

TS: I—Okay, I didn't understand that. Okay.



SUTTER: Yeah. And so, you know, a group of recruits would come in and they'd be assigned to me and my partner, and we would have to get them in shape. You know, we had eight weeks and we—we put them through a program. The first—The people that didn't know how to swim in the company ahead of them, we would train their—their non-swimmers and run our company. That was your job for eight weeks; you know, the company ahead of you swim—you gave your non-swimmers to the company.

Anyway, that's what I did. And then at—you know, in the afternoons I—on the weekends you would lifeguard, and our—the pool was huge; you know, it's a training center pool, it was an Olympic size pool, and it was open to the public too.

TS: Oh, okay.

SUTTER: And so, you know, people would come to the gym and that was our duty. Every, you know, four weeks you'd stand duty at the gym for the weekend; you'd close it—

TS: [unclear] and stuff?

SUTTER: Yeah, close it at five and Sunday at, like, three or something. But we had keys to the gym. We'd go in there at night, and I did. You know, we'd take people in there—oh my God—and then—

TS: What were you doing at night in the gym?

SUTTER: We would swim and party in the pool. Yeah man, and do all—whatever we wanted to do in the gym. Yeah, it was awesome.

TS: The keys to the gym have the power.

SUTTER: Yeah, you know, just having your own—you could work out whenever you wanted to; in the sauna; I mean, it was—you bring people in there that—you know, you could bring a date in there. Who gets to go, you know, to the gym? You'd look under the pool and the pool lights go under—underneath the pool, and the water and the lights. It was—It was awesome.

Anyway, it was like I had it made then. You could go to the—to the E Club, which was, you know, right on—

TS: What's the E Club?

SUTTER: The Enlisted Club.

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: Where you could buy a pitcher of beer for a dollar, you know, and sit out there on the water and eat [unclear]. It was awesome. I loved it. We had a great time.

TS: Well, how was your relationship with your peers? Like, were—did you have—would you work with a lot of men or women, men and women; how was it mixed in the Coast Guard [unclear]?

SUTTER: There were hardly any gay people that I—we were in a small town and, you know, I—there weren't too many gay people at all. The first girl that I met that I knew stayed at Cape May that might have been gay I, kind of—I approached her a little bit later on, but that was the first person that ever came through that I thought might have been, or even I was willing to consider, “Okay, I need a social life a little bit. There's no one here, and in the winter, there's really no one there.” So—

TS: How about for your male/female relations?

SUTTER: Oh, I had a guy—a lot of guy friends, yeah.

TS: Well, you know, in '85—you know, in the mid-eighties, there was a lot of talk about, you know, sexual harassment and things like that. Did anything like that ever—

SUTTER: No, no.

TS: No?

SUTTER: No. So, I met this girl and I started dating her and she was in New York, and this was, like, within my first year—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Was she in the Coast Guard too?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: She had to stay at the—she had to stay—she could—she was a fitness failure. I mean, we called them P—she was in PF; [Physical] Fitness Hold. And so, I got to know her a little bit and then we started dating after she graduated, but she was kind of a wackjob and started, you know, sending—when I realized this was not going to work out, you know, she got me in trouble by sending perfume mail and calling me all the time on the FTS [Federal Telecommunications System] line, and I told them—I told my chief—it's like, “Alright, this woman won't, you know, take no for an answer.” And so—

TS: You told who?

SUTTER: My—I told my chief. I’m like, “She’s call—You know, here’s what’s going on.”

TS: Did he know that you were gay?

SUTTER: No. I said, “Here’s what’s happening. This person is calling me all the time at work.” You know, she would call and they would—and then she came to our house on Thanksgiving and I had to call the police because she wouldn’t—I didn’t invite her to come. And—And, you know, at this point I was like, “Don’t come around me,” and she put her hand through my back door, so we called the police. So the chief knew about that too.

So anyway, so I say this about the—“She’s calling me. I don’t know what to do.”

He’s like, “Come on. Let’s go down to—Let’s go down to CGI [Coast Guard Intelligence], we’re going to tell him what’s going on, because she’s not supposed to be using the FTS line to call you.”

TS: What’s the—What’s the FTS line?

SUTTER: The Federal Tele—The Federal telephone. She was calling me from, you know—from Governor’s Island, New York, down—on the—on the Coast Guard’s—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So, it’s an official lifeline—

SUTTER: Yes.

TS: Official Coast Guard line?

SUTTER: Yeah. But it’s long distance. You know, it’s an 800 FTS line. So, she’s—she’s not supposed to be doing it anyway. So, he’s like, “Let’s go—Let’s go report that. At least that’ll get the—”, you know.

So we go down there and we sit down and I tell them my name and they ask for my ID. He’s like, “Okay, Patricia Sutter, you are being investigated for illicit homosexual activity, and you need to know that according to the UCMJ [makes noise]—”

I’m like—You know, after he spits it off to me I look at my chief, I’m like, “Wait a minute, I—I thought we were coming here because of—”

He’s like, “I did too.” And, you know, he didn’t know. He’s like—And—

TS: He didn’t seriously know?

SUTTER: No, he didn’t. And I said,” Well, I—you know, I—”

He said, “But this woman—” this woman I was talking about—he’s like, “She’s under federal investigation already, and because you know her, that’s from[?] bringing you in too.”

I was like—He says, “Besides, we’ve been looking at you because of her; we were.”

I’m like, “Okay.” And then I said, “Okay, can I—can I—” But, I mean, there I am, I’m under investigation. I was like, “Time out. Can I talk to you off the record?”

He’s like, “Yeah.”

So the—You know, my chief was there, he’s like, “Just don’t say anything you don’t need to say.”

I’m like, “Alright.” I said, “Well, you know, what’s going to happen—”

They offered me counseling, you know, “If you want a lawyer.”

I was like, “Okay, if I ask for a lawyer, does that make me guilty? Because I, you know—I’m not going to say I’m guilty.”

He said, “No, if you ask for a lawyer it’ll probably—you probably won’t hear much of it after this because they’re not willing to spend the money to do that to get you involved in it anymore [unclear].”

TS: Who was telling you that?

SUTTER: The CGI guy.

TS: Oh, he was? He told you that?

SUTTER: Yeah, because I asked him, “Can I talk to you off the record?” Because I—I thought I was going down there for something else, and I guess he realized that, you know.

TS: Right, okay.

SUTTER: So—And that was it. That was pretty much all I heard about it, but then, you know, it came out to the people I worked with, too, because I was like, “Here’s what’s happening, and I don’t—she can’t call me, and this is what’s going on,” and that was pretty much all I had to do at work.

They were—Some of them were like, “Well, you know, is that cool? Is everything—” but they kind of knew, and so they already knew me, who I was, and nobody thought it was an issue. So it worked out in the end.

TS: So, you came—you came out to everybody, even your chief too; did you come out to him?

SUTTER: No, he told me not to.

TS: He—He told you—

SUTTER: He's like, "Don't tell me—Don't tell me anything that I have to—if they ask me, I have to answer.

I'm like, "Okay."

He's like, "I know—I know what's—your deal is. I know what's going on with you. Don't—"

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: "But don't tell me anything"?

SUTTER: "You don't need to tell me anything that they can ask me."

TS: I see. So, he was covering for you in that way?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: So, did you—So, this is, like, before "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"?

SUTTER: Oh, yeah. This was like, "If they find out you're going down, sucker." Which, you know, unless they can really see you doing it, or have some proof in some way, there is really—I just thought, "Well, how the hell are they going to know? I mean, they can think all they want. Until they have a picture of me—" and you know, I was invincible then—

TS: Did you exchange letters with this girl, or anything?

SUTTER: Did—I don't know. Letters, you said? Probably. But, you know, she—if she implied her—me, she was going to imply herself, too, you know? She—She didn't want to get kicked out. She was just a nut job.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: What ever happened to her?

SUTTER: I don't know. I don't know. I tried to—

TS: Was that the end of your contact with her, after this?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Pretty much?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: This was what year; do you remember?

SUTTER: Not really.

TS: You went in in '85 and then—

SUTTER: It was probably '86.

TS: Eighty-six; the next year? So, a year into it.

SUTTER: Yeah, it was December of '85 when I—I mean November of '85, so it turned '86 right off. It was within my first year, yeah.

TS: Did you continue to date, then, after that?

SUTTER: Yeah, I met another person in New York and dated. She was a radioman up in Governor's Island.

TS: Well, how did you hide your relationship? I mean, what'd you do to hide it? Or did you?

SUTTER: I didn't have to hide it from my gym coworkers; they knew.

TS: Because you—Because you came out to them, right?

SUTTER: Yeah, and they liked her, you know. She was an awesome athlete. It wasn't so much about—you know, people—I think people are people, and I think that if you're a decent person and people, you know, like for you—for who you are, then when they find out, "Oh, you're gay", well, they kind of knew anyway and they don't want you to treat them like they're stupid, and you know, if—

TS: The people—

SUTTER: —it doesn't have to matter.

TS: You mean your coworkers?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Don't treat them like they don't—

SUTTER: Yeah, I mean, it's like, alright, you know, you can—some folks I already knew, because we were pretty—there was only, you know, ten of us who—we knew each other

when we were—it was a small town. It wasn't like, "What are you doing?" You know what I mean? You kind of—anyway, they knew.

TS: But, okay, so let's say that you were with some—you know, somebody in that ten people, though, was really against homosexuality. That—Do you think that could have made more problems for you?

SUTTER: Yeah, but I—you know, I don't know that—there's—I never experienced that kind of thing, thank God.

TS: Right.

SUTTER: Like, if they did—you know, we were friends. I don't know why they would hate me just because of that, you know? I don't know. It'd have to—And everybody else, if they did—if one or two of them did—you know, we were a tight kind of—when you get really—you know, when you're with somebody all the time you start to be—you know their personal stuff, and you know, we weren't in a—fighting for our lives together or anything, but we were—we were an extended family, you know. We did holiday things together because we were all—didn't—weren't from there, so we got to know each other's families, and it starts to be a bigger, you know, thing.

TS: Were—So, how many—like, in the mix of ten, how many were women, how many were men?

SUTTER: Two women, who's—both of her kids, I'm their godmother, and I still, you know, am in touch with her, and the—her son came and stayed here for a while. He—You know, we're still—her husband is one of my best friends, but he was my—he was our boss at the gym.

TS: At the time?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: So, they dated and got married?

SUTTER: Yeah. It was a big, "Oh, fraternization," you know, but yeah.

TS: But they got away with it? Was he an officer?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SUTTER: Yeah, he was really—no, he was a second class airman, or a—

TS: He was in the chain of command?

SUTTER: Yeah, he was above us. [chuckles] He was a big gun[?].

TS: So, you liked your job?

SUTTER: Oh, I did.

TS: Now, what was it about the winter in Cape May that was so—that drove everyone away?

SUTTER: Because it's a—it's a beach town; there aren't any jobs there, really, you know?  
There's nothing there.

TS: So, what'd you do in the winter time?

SUTTER: We'd drank a lot, you know; we did. We partied so much.

TS: Is that, kind of, what you did for fun then?

SUTTER: Oh yeah.

TS: Yeah?

SUTTER: Oh yeah.

TS: You still go out to the beach in the winter?

SUTTER: I did. It's cold, you know; you're out on a peninsula out there in Cape May. It's windy, and in the winter the beach is—it's cold there. It's one of—That's when the heavy weather is, is in the winter.

TS: Some—Some people believe that the military had a certain peculiar sense of humor about things, and work. Did you ever have any experience with military humor; anything that you would like to share; a story?

SUTTER: Military humor?

TS: Yes.

SUTTER: [chuckling] I don't know.

TS: No? Like, when people are being sent off to go to a different station or anything like that.



SUTTER: Oh yeah, there was that. That's just more examples of military drinking, for me. I mean, I drank a lot. I've got a scar from—I broke my ankle from being drunk. I've passed out on a heating pad and got a big burn. Oh my God.

TS: On a heating pad?

SUTTER: Yes, because—probably because I had so much to drink that I was convulsing. Whatever they—I was shaking, so they put me on this heating pad and the—the top came off—I mean, the [unclear] came off of it and it melt—it melt—burned me; totally burnt against my hip bone against my—so anyway, I woke up in the morning, I was like, “Oh my God.” That was from drinking—one of my friends was leaving; this woman whose kids, I'm their godmother. I was there when her son was born in the hospital, because she was afraid her—that Ron would be—he was at the air station as a—

TS: Her husband?

SUTTER: Yeah, and she was afraid he would be underway, so I went to the classes with them and we just both went to the birth. It was, “Come on.” It was awesome.

TS: So, you were there too?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: That's pretty cool. So—So the kind of things that you did for fun while you were in the Coast Guard were—

SUTTER: We worked out. I was like—Fitness was my main interest, you know.

TS: Yeah.

SUTTER: So we'd work out, you know, and talk all about different workouts and do all these swim—you know, swim, and we lifeguarded on the beach there. It was—But mostly, you know, we'd go to the Ugly Mug [Bar & Restaurant]. We'd go drink beer downtown, and you know, have parties of our own and just cut up.

TS: Did you travel very much?

SUTTER: I went on a—I went sailing with my uncle. We'd sail to the Bahamas and we—I went—I went to California. I didn't go out of the—no, not with the—not on duty or anything like that, no.

TS: No? You didn't have any special—

SUTTER: We went to the Poconos for a—for a—for, you know, WSI school, but—  
[chuckles]

TS: What's that; WSI?

SUTTER: Water Safety Instructor. When it was just a, you know, designation; being at the gym.

TS: So, just to get, like, a certificate?

SUTTER: So you could train other lifeguards; that's what it was.

TS: I see. You got to do that at the Poconos?

SUTTER: Yes. It was freezing, but, you know, we're at this—a camp, in May, in the Pocono Mountains. It was frigid. It was one of the first times I adjusted the hot water heater as a—out of my own, you know, personal stuff. I'm like—like, two people would get a hot shower. And the water was cold and we had to sit out there after you're wet, you know, and sometimes it was cloudy. It was freezing. It was in the sixties, you know, in the air; in the sun.

TS: Did you—Where did you live? Did you live on—like, in barracks or—

SUTTER: I lived on the barracks for—just for, like, six months, and then when the next female instructor came, who I picked out and brought, which was Denise—the same one I'm talking about from before—you know, I started—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: This is your friend [unclear]?

SUTTER: Yeah. So, we needed another female and I'm like, "Let me pick her."

TS: How did you pick her out?

SUTTER: Because she was looking for someone that was fit—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Like, going through the training?

SUTTER: Yeah, while they were boot—while they were recruit—

TS: Out of boot camp?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Same way they got you?

SUTTER: Yes. And she wanted to go on a ship too. I'm like, "Man, you should come to the gym." And so, I talked her into coming to the gym and she did, and we became fast friends and we moved off campus. I mean, we moved off base.

TS: Right.

SUTTER: Yeah, which was—it was awesome. I'm like, "You know, people are probably going to think you're gay if you move with me."  
She's like, "I don't care. They can think what they want to. Let's move off base."  
I'm like, "Alright. Let's do it."

TS: Did people think that about her?

SUTTER: Yes, they did.

TS: Yeah?

SUTTER: In fact, her husband now didn't ask her to go out because he knew that she and I lived together. He thought she was a lesbian.

TS: So how did they finally get married?

SUTTER: Because after a while, you know, they worked together and it came up. She's like, "No, I'm not gay. No, she's not my girlfriend. And yes, let's, you know—" but they had to be careful because he wasn't supposed to be, you know—

TS: He wasn't supposed to know about you being gay.

SUTTER: Well, no, he wasn't supposed to be trying to date her—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh, fraternization.

SUTTER: —because she was his subordinate; you know, his—

TS: Right, so they had to do that under the—

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: —radar too.

SUTTER: Yeah. We used to “Love Shack,” baby, a lot at our house.

TS: What does that mean, Tricia?

SUTTER: You know, the love shack, baby. You know it.

TS: The song? Yeah.

SUTTER: Yes, exactly.

TS: Now, did you ever do any special TDYs or anything?

SUTTER: What’s that; TDY?

TS: Temporary duty assignment. Any special training anywhere besides the Poconos?

SUTTER: Not really, no.

TS: No? Now, was Cape May your only assignment?

SUTTER: Yes.

TS: Was that the only place you were at?

SUTTER: The little gym and then across the base at the small boat center. [unclear]

TS: Was there anything at all in the whole time you’re in the Coast Guard that was particularly hard for you to do?

SUTTER: When I—When I did go to the station, and was on a small boat crew, it was hard for me to be in the military. It was not—I was not really in the military, really. I mean, yes, you know, we had inspections and we had to deal with—

TS: Did you have—well, fitness, obviously, wouldn’t have been a problem for you.

SUTTER: No, but it was not—my boss was not a dick, okay? When I went to the station, the people over there were typical military people who—

TS: What station was that; the Cape May?

SUTTER: Station Cape May.

TS: So, how often did you have to do that?

SUTTER: Well, after my three years, that was it; my billet was up; I had to go somewhere else. And so—

TS: But you stayed at Cape May?

SUTTER: Yes, because I was involved with somebody and I didn't want to move, you know.

TS: Right.

SUTTER: I knew I could just jump over.

TS: Okay, so then, how was that? So you had to deal with—

SUTTER: It was like a—a different world, and I had already—okay, everybody that went through training had to go through the gym, so they kind of knew who I was, you know, and they didn't like the instructors because they felt like you didn't—you know, you didn't really—

TS: You had a cush job?

SUTTER: Yes. You weren't really in the Coast Guard but, you know, hey, they were just—you know, partly, they couldn't have that job and so—

TS: Jealousy?

SUTTER: Yeah, that's some of it. You know, if you're right there on the—on the—on the base and you're not in that job but you're the same rank, it's kind of like, yeah, they suck because—you know, whatever. [chuckles]

TS: So—So, what was your job, then, after—

SUTTER: As a—I was a crewman on a small boat, which is what I really thought I would—wanted to do, you know. There I had it but the—I had to have that .45, I had to have that gun belt, and I had to stay port starboard and sleep at the station and, you know, live there three days on the weekend and—like a firehouse, you know, and it was—but some of the people that were above me—just a little bit above me—were king dicks and I hated it; that they could tell me anything to do when they didn't know anything more, they were just a little higher.

TS: So it was like a power trip?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SUTTER: It was lucky that I made it through that year, because seriously, I couldn't keep my mouth shut and I couldn't—

TS: So, what—tell me—give me, like, a scenario; something that might happen.

SUTTER: Okay, so I'm mowing the lawn—you know, I'm twenty-five, at least, at this point.

TS: Twenty-five years old?

SUTTER: Yes. I've mowed a yard before. I don't need someone a little above me to stand and watch me mow the yard, you know? I'm like, "Okay, what?"

TS: So, what'd you do?

SUTTER: Mow the yard, but I'd be pissed and then I—you know, I'd cause a lot of shit about it.

TS: What would you do? What would—

SUTTER: I would talk out loud about it and piss the person off that's trying to watch me and say something to them to.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Like, be grumbling about it, sort of?

SUTTER: "Okay, what the hell? You don't need—" you know—  
"Well, I'm just trying to make sure you know what you're—"   
I'm like, "Oh my God," you know? Yeah, I would get myself in trouble.

TS: And then what would happen? When you say you would get yourself in trouble, what would happen?

SUTTER: Well, we would—I would have to do something else I didn't want to do, like have extra duty or paint some other thing or go do some—you know, whatever, until I finally just—"Okay, I'll do it. Whatever."

TS: So, do you think, like, this extra grief you were getting was because of the job you had before?

SUTTER: Maybe a little bit, but basically it was because I, you know—I didn't want to—I didn't want to be in that situation. I didn't want someone trying to macho me out, you know? I didn't like it.

TS: Was there any gender tension, or was it just, like—

SUTTER: Some, you know, but—and if there was the thing of they didn't like you for whatever reason—you know, because you came from the gym or because you're a girl or because you're gay or because whatever it is—it didn't matter. They could be a dick to you and you had to listen to it, and that's the part I didn't like.

TS: Right.

SUTTER: It wasn't because they could really have something important that I thought was valuable, or even if I didn't, somebody did, because it has some value.

TS: But you didn't like this authoritarian figure over you telling you what to do?

SUTTER: No, I don't like people trying to tell me what to do just because they like telling people what to do; not because they need direction. Yeah, that kind of stuff I just—I couldn't do it, hardly.

TS: So, this was a tough year for you?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Yeah?

SUTTER: Then I just got out and I'm like, "Forget this, this is crazy." This could be the most awesome job ever. I mean, we—I did have to go on several, you know, lifesaving calls where I was the one who did CPR [Cardiopulmonary resuscitation], and where we pulled people out of the water, and you know, people didn't live or, you know, they did live.

TS: How often did that happen? This is Cape May so I guess in the summertime—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SUTTER: Yeah, in the summertime it was on.

TS: Yeah? Well, describe that. Describe how, like, a call like that would go out, because I'm sure people that are listening or reading this transcript really don't understand—

SUTTER: Okay.

TS: —what you do, you know, for that kind of duty.

SUTTER: Stand—In the—In the small boat station the people that are boaters in the area go—the small boat station is responsible for the safety of the—the immediate, you know, area and all the aids to navigation in the area, so for the radio traffic, if you hear someone asking for help, it's most likely in your area or somewhere close by. So, you're keeping track of all the boaters and you're responsible for what's going on out there if there's a problem.

TS: So, this is why you call it, like, a fire station, because you're—you got to—someone has to be there—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SUTTER: You're standing duty, yeah.

TS: —to be ready to go out immediately.

SUTTER: In the room, right. So, you get to the station, you're on a—you're assigned on the—on the boat crew or not, and it's on a—on a rotation, and it's based on if—can you carry a certain weapon, because there has to be five people and, you know, you have to be certified; everybody has—you have to cover all the things you need with five people. You know, someone has to have a shotgun, someone has to be able to carry the .45, you need a—you need a coxswain, you need an engine motor guy—you know, a fireman—and then you need a regular deckhand person.

TS: What's the coxswain do?

SUTTER: The boat driver. So then, you know, you—the duty section is—the boat crew's chosen, so you're there for the day and if something happens while some—while the—you know, in the radio room, there—they hit this—the SAR alarm, the search and rescue alarm, [makes noise] you got to go on the call, and you go running down the dock. You know, it's what you practiced; where you run down there—you know, go to the—to the armory, get your weapon, run down to the dock, and get underway.

TS: Do you remember any particular rescue—



[Speaking Simultaneously]

SUTTER: Oh, yeah. I remember—I do. I remember every—all of them. The first one I was on I was only there, like, a week and it was in—it was early in the Springtime and it—the waves were high but it was—the air—it was beautiful, and this—a grandfather, with over[?] three generations—like a son, his father, and his father—and they went out fishing and they were in a little Boston Whaler and it—the waves were, like, four feet but it—they capsized, and they weren't far out, but it was cold—the water was cold, and they tried to stay with the boat but the—the middle—the father had to—his father got tired and was—it was too much for him. They didn't all have lifejackets, so he was holding onto the boat and he was trying—you know, his son had a lifejacket but he was trying to hold his son up and he couldn't hold his son and his father and stay on the boat, so he had to let dad go and his father drowned [unclear].

We got them all out of the wat—we got the father and the young—the son. We had to run, you know, a search pattern for the father; the grandpa. When we found him he was face down, and since I had just come from the gym I—I was the one who was most up on CPR and all the things that we needed right then, so I got to be—and I think the other people on the—they were just scared of it, you know?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Scared of doing CP—

SUTTER: We pulled a dead guy out of the water, you know, and we had to do it right then.

TS: Right.

SUTTER: So it was me doing it, you know, and then eventually I realized, “Oh, I can say ‘Switch’.” [chuckling] He—You know, the—his son was there and the grandson; we had to put them in the cabin and—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh, they were still on the boat? I see. I see.

SUTTER: —he was white and stuff was coming out of him. It was intense. And it was loud[?] [makes noise]. You know, the waves are hitting and so you can't really hear if—we knew he was—you know, he wasn't going to come back around, but we had to keep on doing it till we got there and the paramedics took him away. But, you know, it kind of sucked. I remember that pretty well. Can you—

TS: Pause? Yeah.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay, I'm going to turn it back on. Okay, we had a nice, little short break there and I had some brownies. Thank you.

SUTTER: [chuckles]

TS: So, you said you had another story that you'd like to tell me—

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: —about—

SUTTER: This is a funny story.

TS: Is this a rescue story?

SUTTER: Kind of.

TS: Okay. Alright.

SUTTER: In a—Roundaboutly [sic].

TS: Okay.

SUTTER: So, the girl that I'm seeing, she's a radioman and she's in New York; what's it called—Governor's Island. It's an awesome place to go. So, she's in the—you know, the middle of nowhere in this little, tiny room, and this guy comes on the radio and he says, [using drunken voice] "Coast Guard. Coast Guard, I'm lost. Coast Guard." You know, this is—he's, like, loaded beyond belief.

So, she's like, "Okay, Skipper." You're kind of trained to know the landmarks around so that when they get, you know, lost they can tell you what they see and you can say, "Okay, you need to go this way," or get help or whatever.

But he's like, [using drunken voice] "Okay. I can see—I can see the Statue of Liberty. I can—I can see the whole—" and then he starts talking about everything he can see. And so, she's asking him more questions and he's telling her stuff. He like, "Okay, Coast Guard, I'm right under the moon. I'm right under the moon." [both laugh] "Can you see me? Okay, I can see I'm right under the moon."

TS: [chuckles]

SUTTER: So, that's my funniest one.

TS: That's pretty good, though. That's good. So, you said you—you actually rescued someone and they survived too?

SUTTER: Yes, he was a drunk guy and there—he fell off the boat, and it was late at night and right where all the people would—it's like a little marina area that people would drink on the dock and, you know, there were some restaurants there. Well, he was on a boat and they were out there with the—it's just really—a really social area, and he had fallen off the boat. And so, they called for us and we were not far; came up on scene and didn't see him, and bump, he comes to the surface. We pulled him onboard, and again I got to be the—one of the CPR people, but this time he coughed it up and he starts—he's getting mad. He's like, "Guh," you know, "what happened to my pants?" Like, he didn't have any pants. I don't know what happened to them, but, you know, so he was going to be all right, and he went to the hospital and he did have—you know, he had water in his lungs. There was a—he came up and he was okay but then there were some complications, but he was—he lived and he was fine. You know, he got sick—

TS: Like, almost pneumonia from the water in the lungs and stuff?

SUTTER: Yes. Yeah, but he was like, "No—" I mean, he didn't—he was so drunk still that he didn't even realize that—what had happened.

TS: That he almost died?

SUTTER: Yeah. No, he was just mad about things, you know.

TS: Not having pants; having people—

SUTTER: Yeah, what was he doing there—[both chuckle] Oh, [unclear]. Sorry.

TS: So, you—you liked the job but not so much the grief that you got with these power struggles?

SUTTER: Yes, plus I worked for a guy at the station, he was just hell bent to get a drug bust. Because at the time it was zero tolerance, Ronald Reagan was the president, and we were boarding boats and—and just doing regular searches on them, and if you found anything—seeds, a roach, anything—that boat was seized, and it didn't matter whose it was, even if the captain, you know, had a—a crewman, because it was—you know, a lot of fishing boats that went out and fished for the restaurants and stuff. But if any of them got caught with any kind of drugs, that boat was seized.

TS: So, you did a lot of that too?

SUTTER: Yeah, because he was so dying to get a drug bust. He was for sure there was going to be a—so we did a lot of searching—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Searches?

SUTTER: Yes, and searching particular boats that were known to be, you know, smuggling and—that part was crazy.

TS: Yeah.

SUTTER: You know, and we had to be a certain—it was summertime, you know? We could—we had to go out wearing everything and it was—you had to wear the bullet proof vest, and then the dark blue shirt, and then the lifejacket, too, and then pants and, you know, boots, and just couldn't fish ever; no—no fishing off the boat, you know? It was just things that were—it could have been—it could have been a lot better than it was, you know, had it not been the military and all. [both laugh]

TS: Well, were other commanders less “oohrah” in the way that they—I mean, could other boats—could you fish off the boat?

SUTTER: Oh, like, if you were on—yeah, it depended on who your—

TS: You had?

SUTTER: Yeah, your CO [Commanding Officer] was, because if someone is—you know, the work is all done and—you could.

TS: Yeah? So it just depended on who the leadership—

SUTTER: Yeah, and then, you know, the time of year and who was going to see you and what, you know—I don't know. I guess it—since it wasn't all—it had to be all or nothing with some people so.

TS: Well, would you say, like, in general—how would you say—how would you say, in general, your treatment was by your superiors?

SUTTER: My particular experience was mostly around one particular boss who I really thought was exceptional because he was just a regular guy, you know? So that was fine, but he wasn't the norm and when—you know, had I spent more time in the regular ranks, I would have probably had a problem, because I did on my shore[?] time. Just—

TS: You were butting heads because of the—

SUTTER: Yes, because of guys that want to boss around girls or because of—I have a particular strong, you know, will and I'm not—I don't want to—I'm ready for somebody to do that to me. At the time I was always like—I had a chip on my shoulder too. I can't say it was just—you know, I was equally—I wasn't just going to let anything go—

TS: Right.

SUTTER: —at all. I don't have a chip on my shoulder but, you know, I was really aware of it and I was—just dare me—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: You were ready to push back.

SUTTER: Yeah, yes; exactly.

TS: Right. Well—So, how about with your peers then?

SUTTER: No, because they didn't do that. They didn't—

TS: All was good with the peers—

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: —normally. How about for ratings that you had or that you were up for?

SUTTER: Ratings that we—

TS: Like evaluations.

SUTTER: I was good; I was fine.

TS: Yeah?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: And we talked a little bit—you didn't have any personal experience with sexual harassment, but did you ever hear about it or know about it or see any of that going on?

SUTTER: You know, there was a lot—because we were a training center and the company commanders were there, and then after the recruits would—after the people would

graduate, they still, kind of, looked up to their company commander, and I think there were—there was really a strict rule from that particular command that was against fraternization of any kind, so they tried to really keep it down, and if you did it had to be really secret, and it was—you know, that was pretty hard to pull off, so. During my time and under that command there was not a lot of problem.

TS: What about—Did—So, you're in a—in a period where, like you said, Ronald Reagan is president and—but the Coast Guard was known for opening up careers to women earlier than the rest of the services. I mean, they pretty much made every job available to women before—I mean, in the eighties, I believe, they had every job open to women. There wasn't anything that you couldn't do; a particular job set.

SUTTER: Right.

TS: So, do you think that translated to treat—better treatment of women than, maybe, in some of the other services? I mean, I know you weren't in any of the other services, but—

SUTTER: I don't know. I mean, I guess because, you know, it's not—it's the Department of Def—of—not Defense, of Transportation.

TS: At that time, right?

SUTTER: Yeah. And so, it became like—we came under the—under Defense if there was a war, but I think it was a little looser, and I think the—the military, kind of, experience was a little bit—it was different. I think—I think that—you know, during the Vietnam War and during that time, it was harder to go into the Coast Guard because people wanted to go in there, so you had to go through more—you had to be able to pass a different test; you know, a written test, I'm pretty sure. I don't think there was physical thing. But not that many people wanted to go answer[?]-or less women, so the—I think the overall attitude of people in there was better, and maybe it was just my experience on the, you know—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: On that station that you were at.

SUTTER: Yeah. I just don't remember any women saying, "Yeah, they treated me a certain way just because I'm a woman." I don't think it was—but[?] it was widely known that it was frowned upon. At least, it was drummed into me, you know, and all the people around me.

TS: Yes. Well, did you have any thoughts about—like, did you—were—did you have any kind of political idea, you know, about—with—like, did you like Reagan, did you like [President George H.W.] Bush?

SUTTER: Oh no, I didn't like Reagan.

TS: No?

SUTTER: No.

TS: Anything—Because you had—some of the stuff that was going on when you were in—just as you were getting out we probably had the Panama invasion.

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Were you still in then?

SUTTER: No.

TS: You were out by then? And then just after you got out we had the First Gulf War.

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: So, you weren't, you know—you were, kind of, pre—

SUTTER: Was I in Panama? I don't remember. It didn't really—

TS: It was '89; like, near the end of '89.

SUTTER: I got out in November of '89.

TS: Yeah, it was right, probably, just before you got out.

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: I mean, just after.

SUTTER: It did not affect my, you know—

TS: Yes.

SUTTER: No.

TS: The Challenger exploded while you were in.

SUTTER: Yeah, I remember that really well.

TS: Do you remember that?

SUTTER: Oh, yeah.

TS: What'd you think about that?

SUTTER: I was sad. I mean, I don't remember thinking any way or another as far as women or men are concerned. I remember thinking how sad it was.

TS: Well, what do you—what do you think about the repeal now of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell”?

SUTTER: I think that—I think it's good. You know, the more growth of—you know, towards equality, in any way, I think is better, and it's a matter of time. You know, and it's—it's ludicrous to think any other way. It's just a—a delay, you know, and us—I think as—as human beings, to be—to separate ourselves from each other in different ways that we do, I just think it's—it's not towards growth as a race, at all. But I—You know, I don't know how long it will take to ever go away, or if it ever will, but the further we get towards equality just as people, I think the better off we'll be, you know.

TS: Well, as—and equality, too, for mil—women in the military, the issue of opening up women to all combat; it just came out in February this year by [Secretary of Defense] Leon Panetta. Do you think there's any—what do you think about the idea of women in combat? I mean—

SUTTER: I think it's—

TS: —infantry and—

SUTTER: I think it's a choice, you know, that you—if you sign up and you want to be in the infantry, and you're a woman, you know, you're already past eighteen, and you know what that means, and you're taught the implications, and you're—“Are you sure? Are you sure? Are you sure?” I'm pretty sure that's how it would go down, because—and otherwise, why would you go there unless you were choosing that, so.

I would never choose that, you know. I don't want to—I never have and I don't want to put myself in a position of being vulnerable to a—you know, a man, in any way; like in a—no. You know what I mean? No, I wouldn't want to do that. Even as a young woman thinking that I, you know, was stronger and—than some men I knew, I still would not; no.

TS: But what if women wanted to do that?

SUTTER: I think that's a, you know—it should be their choice. I don't think anybody should be forced to, I don't think I should have to go in the infantry either, but if you choose to



put yourself in a place where you can lose every—you know, lose your life and lose it in a painful, degrading way, too, or not lose it and just be degraded forever, you know, or—that's a—kind of, the choice you make. I don't think—I think it should be open to everyone; if they want to make it, I don't think it should be held back, but I think it's—personally I think it's a poor choice. No, we're not; we're not as strong as men are; we're just not.

TS: Well, when you talk about getting out, right, so it was because of this—circumstances that you had in your—in—at Cape May in the second—

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: —after your—what did you call it? I forget what kind of duty you called it.

SUTTER: [unclear] duty.

TS: [chuckles] Yeah. So, you—so, you decided to get out.

SUTTER: Yeah. I would have stayed at the gym. I would have stayed forever in I could have stayed in the gym, you know, but I got out because I felt like I was—you know, it was all the time, butting heads with someone; I couldn't do it. I couldn't wait to get out. My parents were not authoritarian—they didn't, like [makes noise]—you know, me and I just have always had a hard time, you know—

TS: When you got somebody over your shoulder like that—

SUTTER: Yes. You know, from a young age it was always like, “Do what—” you know, we were pretty independent, just as little kids even.

TS: So, how was your transition back into civilian life?

SUTTER: I was fine. Everybody was like, “What are you going to do? What are you going to do?”

I'm like, “Well, I'm going to try to go to work at UPS [United Parcel Service],” you know, and so I did. It wasn't like it was—it took some effort, but I worked at UPS and, you know—I wasn't afraid to try, and certainly I wasn't afraid to get out. I thought, “Well, no. This was good but I can do better than this.” You know, I just couldn't see myself as a lifer, and not knowing who I was going to work beside, and what if I hated them, and there I was, you know?

TS: Right.

SUTTER: I knew my limitations. [both chuckle] No.

TS: Would you recommend the service to other men and women?

SUTTER: Yes. I think it was an easy way to—you know, relatively easy. I've had many hard—in the picture of it, it wasn't hard work. You know, there were moments when it was hard, but you know, you got a regular paycheck whether you had a hard week or a not hard week, which was mostly not hard, and it was fun, you know, and it was—it was a good life. You could get—you could move ahead and you were supported, you know, by a—I liked the camaraderie, I liked, you know, being on the water, I liked the whole idea of it. It was awesome for me.

TS: Is there anything that you miss about it?

SUTTER: I miss being on the water, and I miss, you know, those people I met; of course, yeah. I miss being twenty-two a lot.

TS: [chuckles] Well, do you—do you think your life is any different because you decided to join the Coast Guard?

SUTTER: Yeah, you know, I wouldn't probably be right here, today, in this house, with this person.

TS: Why?

SUTTER: Because I—I met somebody; I met a woman in the Coast Guard that I moved to North Carolina because of. So, that's how—

TS: That put you here, in this place—

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: —and time?

SUTTER: Right.

TS: Well, what about the idea of—is there anything that you think a civilian misconstrues about people in the military, or the military itself? Like, a misconception?

SUTTER: I don't know. Prob[ably]—I don't—you know, there probably are some but I think mostly what you think it and what other people think it's like is close to what it's like.

TS: Do you think it's different today than it was when you were in in the eighties?

SUTTER: Probably.

TS: Yeah; with the current war we have in Afghanistan and the roles that women are playing?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Well, would you recommend, like, to—for your daughter, if she wanted to join?

SUTTER: Yeah, it wouldn't suck, you know. I—You know, I would like for her to—same as my parents, wanted me to go ahead and get a degree and then go; it would be much easier.

TS: But if she said, “Hey, I want to go in the air force or army or something like that”?

SUTTER: If she said—No, it'd be fine.

TS: Yeah? Well, what—what does the word patriotism mean to you?

SUTTER: It means, you know, being there—being—having—being there for your country; being—doing what you need to do if you're asked to do it because you believe in freedom and fighting for it and for people who don't have it. It just means standing up for what we believe in as Americans, you know? It's—It's a—United under one idea, you know, and I'm one of those folks who thinks that too. That's what it feels like to me.

TS: Yeah?

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Well, we covered a lot of territory.

SUTTER: Yeah.

TS: Is there anything that you're not telling me that you want to add?

SUTTER: No, I think we said a lot.

TS: We covered it; yeah? Alright. Well, I appreciate it very much.

SUTTER: Absolutely, thank you.

TS: Alright, well, I'll go ahead and turn it off then.

[End of Interview]