WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Heather L. Gonzalez

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: August 12, 2013

[Begin Recording]

TS: Today is August 12, 2013. This is Therese Strohmer, and I am at the home of Heather Gonzalez in Raleigh, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Heather, if you would state your name the way you'd like it to read on your collection.

HG: Heather L. Gonzalez.

TS: Okay. Well, Heather, thank you for letting me come and talk with you today. Why don't we start out by having you tell me when and where you were born?

HG: I was born in Panama City [Florida] in 1971 to, of course, my parents who—now Glenda Morgan and my dad is Hector Gonzalez. Dad was stationed down there; he was active duty air force.

TS: Okay. And do you have any brothers or sisters?

HG: My family, we call it his, hers, ours, and theirs.

TS: Okay.

HG: I'm an only child. My dad has a daughter from a previous marriage, my mom had a daughter from a previous marriage, and their current marriages, my mom—I have two step-siblings on my mom's side, and I have two step-siblings on my dad's side. [dog barks]

TS: Okay. So within—that's Marley[?], right?

HG: That's Marley.

TS: Okay. That's alright; Marley can be part of the tape. So you're growing up and—were you by yourself mostly, as a child?

HG: Yes.

TS: Okay. What was it like growing up in Panama City?

HG: Don't remember.

TS: No? Did you move pretty quickly?

HG: At the age of about three months we moved to England.

TS: Okay.

HG: Dad was stationed out there; we lived in [Royal Air Force] Upper Heyford for five years. Came back to the states; Dad got stationed in California; trying to remember what base it was. We lived in Marysville.

TS: Marysville, California?

HG: Yeah, Marysville, California.

TS: How old were you then?

HG: I was five when we came back to the states, and we ended up staying there until I was eleven, maybe. And at that point in time Dad retired, my parents split up, and then things get a little fuzzy there because I was kind of moved around from family to family until things settled down, and Dad was in Minnesota and Mom was in Fort Worth.

TS: In Texas?

HG: In Texas.

TS: Well, do you remember much about growing up in the period that you were in England, at all, as a little girl?

HG: No, but my mom likes to tell the story, when we came back from the—from England, when we came from to the states, the first time I went to the restroom, when I came out

my mom would ask me if I flushed, and she says my eyes got really big and I'd look at her and say, "But Mummy[?], there's no chain."

TS: [chuckles]

HG: Of course, back then they had chains to pull to flush the toilet.

TS: Oh, I see; that's right.

HG: Mom loves to tell that story.

TS: So were you at a number of different schools growing up, then? Did you have—

HG: From the time I started school to the time I graduated high school, I had had a total of twelve schools.

TS: That's a few.

HG: Four in one year.

TS: Yeah?

HG: And that was—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: What was that like?

HG: It was difficult, and—and it's funny because my son said to me the other day, about us moving to West Virginia, he said, "I'm not going to have any childhood friends."

And I said to him, "Well, you know what? You will. You'll just have more than the typical person that grew up in one place."

Being a—what you call—a military brat, your used to moving around a making new friends and—and stuff like that, and I've stayed in contact with several of them. Was it difficult? It was always scary starting a new school, with new people, but I was very outgoing, and it didn't take me long to meet people and make friends and—would I say it was difficult? Looking back now, I think the moving around has made me the person that I am. I don't know. I—A lot of experiences that most kids don't normally have, that grow up in one town and don't get to go places, and don't get to see things—

TS: Was there a place that you were at that you really liked a lot; like, you were hopeful to stay there, or anything like that? Do you remember anything like that?

HG: For the longest time after we moved from Texas, I wanted to go back.

TS: Yeah?

HG: Texas is where my mom met my stepfather, who is retired navy. He was stationed out at Andrews, and I was there from middle school to—through freshman, sophomore year; loved it there, loved it there. And then we moved to the [Washington] D.C. area between my sophomore and fresh—sophomore and junior year; hated it. Gosh, did I hate it. It was like going from a small town school, where my graduating class would have been about a hundred and fifty, two hundred, to a school where my graduating class was over a thousand. It was—It was just unbelievable, the difference.

TS: Was it just the numbers, or was it anything else about the schools that was different for you?

HG: There was a lot that was different. Society, as a whole, in Texas was a lot nicer, a lot—laid back, everybody got along with everybody, versus D.C. area—which I was in southern Maryland but I was at a vo-tech [vocational-technical] school where they bused students from D.C., so there was a lot of rivalry. I went from a school that had—maybe one percent was minority, to me being the minority.

TS: What was the—most of the population?

HG: African-American, and that made it very difficult, because my way of thinking and—and I am not a racist person by any means, but it just—it was—it was rough; it was rough. I remember my junior year, it was my second or third day of school, I left campus and went home, and I told my mom, "I'm not going back to that school." There was kid from a rival school that had showed up at my school with a gun.

TS: What year, approximately, would this have been?

HG: Eight-nine? I graduated in '90 from high school.

TS: Okay.

HG: Showed up with a gun. I was petrified. I went home, I'm like, "I am not going back to that school."

Of course, my mom was just a petrified when she heard about it and she called the principal, and the principal said to my mother, "Tell her to come on back to school. I'll be in the parking lot and I will escort her to her class. The problem's been resolved."

It was a daily thing to have fights and—and that sort of stuff in the halls. But I eventually made my friends, and we were a close knit group of friends, and we just stayed together. One of my friends graduated salutatorian; everyone went off to college. Shawn did a couple years of college and then went into the military himself. I went to the community college; was there for a year and a half before I joined. And I'm still friends with, I'd say probably, fifty percent of the people I graduated with, through Facebook.

TS: Yeah? That's a great tool for keeping in touch, yeah.

HG: Isn't it? Social media; it's amazing how things have changed over the years.

TS: Well, what was it—what was it like for you, as you're moving a lot, and all these different schools? Did you any kind of extracurricular activities? Were you—Did you have anything that you were involved in?

HG: Oh, absolutely.

TS: What were you busy with?

HG: I did volleyball, I was on the swim team, I was on the tennis team. In Texas I was on the color guard. In fact, we—my sophomore year, a group of friends and I started the color guard team at Lake Worth High School. And I was in French club. And it was kind of neat, my French teacher in high school also taught at the college; at the community college. So I took my two years in high school, went to the community college, and took her class there in college, and started the French Club at—at PG Community College.

TS: What's PG stand for?

HG: Prince George's Community College.

TS: Oh, okay.

HG: So I kept myself busy doing a lot of that stuff, and then I had other extracurricular activities such as, when we lived in Texas my parents, my mom and my stepdad, were members of the Moose[?], and I was a member of their youth club. I was in this—I don't remember what it stood for. Some other—

TS: [unclear] club?

HG: I was—I was a spokesperson for Teens Against Drugs [and Alcohol], for the local area at the—the Moose. And then from that—When we moved to D.C. and my parents became very active in the American Legion, and I joined as a junior member. I was sixteen; did a lot for veterans; became an auxiliary member when I turned eighteen.

TS: Was that how you got involved and stayed with the Legion over the years?

HG: Absolutely. Because when I joined the military, I then became a member of the Legion myself, and then when my son was born, within twenty-four hours he was a member of the SAL [Sons of the American Legion]; my parents saw to it.

TS: [chuckles]

HG: I'm in the hospital, I had just had my son, and my mom's like, "Here, sign this form." [both chuckle] So of course, the first thing that Joe did—Joe's my stepdad—was he runs to the Legion, turns in the paperwork, and within twenty-four hours he was voted as a member; the youngest member of the SAL, at that time.

TS: What was—What was the reason for having the kids as part of the American Legion?

HG: We liked—Okay, the American Legion is a family organization, and of course, your eligibility is through the service of a—your husband, your wife, yourself, grandfather, brother, through their service in the military. And it has to be a sanctioned war by the government, and there are specific times when—during World War I—and there's dates; you have to be active during those dates. I, of course, signed up under myself through [Operation] Desert Storm, because I was—I signed up under Desert Storm. And the—the youth of parents, grandparents, whatever, we taught them a lot about veterans. Community service is big. The SAL is their own chartered organization, they have their own charter, but they are a program of the American Legion. The [American Legion Auxiliary] Juniors is a program of the auxiliary, but they don't have their own charter. So it's—it's basically you become a junior member until you turn eighteen and then you automatically become an auxiliary member. But they have the same programs that we have on the adult—the auxiliary on the Legion side.

We spent a lot of time in Maryland. We spent a lot of time—my local post—at Charlotte Hall [Veterans Home], which is a veterans home for the elderly; a nursing home, if you will. [unclear] with the Juniors, we played bingo with the—with the folks and—and they loved seeing the younger kids come in. So it was a great program. When I turned eighteen I became an advisor to the Juniors, because I could relate to them.

TS: Sure.

HG: And that was kind of my foot in the door to the various offices that I held in the American Legion. I was unit president two different years, and then I went on to district level; held offices in district level; held offices in the state level. And then through my services in the auxiliary, I was invited to join the Eight and Forty [Forty and Eight], which is—membership in the Eight and Forty is by invitation. And what they do is—their service revolves around children with lung and respiratory diseases, and they do nursing scholarships for people that are going into the nursing field. And in that organization I was the—what we call a [unclear], which is the equivalent of the president, on the salon[?] level and then on the state level. And then in the Legion, I've held a couple of offices; on the Legion side. I think my highest office was Assistant Adjutant at Post 259.

My son never got active in—in the SAL, although they're very, very supportive of him and his scouting career.

TS: You said he's just shy of becoming an Eagle Scout?

HG: Six months shy; six months shy. I'm very excited. That's kind of bittersweet. I mean, he started out in first grade and I was his den leader at the time, all the way through till he got his Arrow of Light, crossed over to Boy Scouts, then I became an assistant scout master. I camp with him, I do all that stuff. And in fact, I've gotten to where I'm very active on the district level, and I'm currently District Program Chair here, and I've been District Program Chair in three different counsels, totaling, what, five years now, I guess; four years I've been District Program Chair. But yeah, it's been a long road, and seeing the light at the end of the tunnel is really cool; it's really cool.

TS: Well, let me go back a little bit to when you—when you're in high school in D.C., and as you're—as you're growing up and moving around, do you have a sense of what you want to do with your life or when you grow up or when you get older?

HG: [laughs] That's funny. I wanted to be a doctor.

TS: Okay.

HG: And I am a far cry from being a doctor but—

TS: Why did you want to be a doctor?

HG: Math and science were by best subjects, and it just intrigued me and that just seemed the right path to go. And when I went into college, I was doing prep classes for a medical career. Then I got into the gaming society at—in school and starting not doing well in college. And my mom said to me one day, she said, "Well, here's the thing. You're not going to school fulltime, you're getting ready to turn twenty-one, which means your medical benefits will cease."

Of course, in the military if—if—by the time you're twenty-one you're—you can no longer have medical benefits through [the] military, as a child. So I thought, "Well, I can solve that. I'll just join myself." And that's how I joined the military, thinking that I would eventually go back to college and—and finish that career, but I didn't.

TS: About—So what—you were in community college at that time?

HG: Yes.

TS: And what—why did you settle on the navy?

HG: Because my stepfather was navy.

TS: Yeah?

HG: And when I went to MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Station], we talked about the different branches; talked about air force. My dad—My biological father's retired air force, my stepfather is, of course now retired, navy, my sister was in the army, my—

TS: Was she in the army before you, or after you?

HG: I don't know.

TS: I was just wondering if you knew she was in the military before you went in.

HG: I don't think I did. I think it was after me. She's younger than me.

TS: Oh, okay.

HG: I think it was after me. And then my grandfather's Marines in World War II, so, I mean, I come from a line of military, it just runs through my family, and I just, I guess—I don't know.

TS: It didn't seem, like, out of the ordinary to just go up and join up—and join the navy, right?

HG: No, just—

TS: So what did your parents think about that?

HG: I came home and I told my mom, I said, "Look, I leave for boot camp on the twenty-sixth of May."

And my mom's like, "What?" [chuckles] "What'd you do? We never talked about this. I never thought that you would do this."

And I'm like, "Well, I did, and I'm leaving."

And she's like. "Okay."

I mean, coming from the military background it only seems kind of fitting that I would go that route. I mean, I served veterans at that point in time, I was very active in serving veterans, and I was the epitome of—of a military child, if you will.

TS: What does the epitome look like?

HG: Everything I thought and—and I was very all about Americanism, and yeelasses[?] is number one and I defend her in everything she stands for, and the veterans before me and their time in service, that gave me the opportunities to do what I was doing in choosing the choices that I was making, and I was very proud; very proud to be an American; always have been; always have been. So it just seemed fitting.

TS: When you signed up to join the navy, then, and you selected it because most—mostly because of your stepdad, then, or were there things about the other services just didn't appeal to you?

HG: I think because of my stepfather, because he was a big influence on my life. At this point in my life my biological father was not in the picture. He decided when I turned eighteen that he no longer—he no longer needed to be in my life or be a part of me because he no longer had to pay child support and support me; that I was an adult; "Go on and do your merry—your thing."

So Joe became my dad, so to speak. Through thick and thin he was there for me, and maybe that did have a lot to do with why I chose the navy. I respected him. I respected him a lot. It's not every day that you find a man that will take on—that will marry a woman that's got a teenage child and a dog. [chuckling] You know? It's a package deal or nothing, and he gracefully just took it all in and accepted it all and—yeah.

TS: How long did you sign up for?

HG: Signed up for four years, to start with.

TS: Okay. Did you sing up for a particular job at the time or—

HG: Nope.

TS: No?

HG: No. I was told at the time that I wasn't guaranteed an A-School, but once I got through boot camp, that I could decide at that point what I wanted to do. So I just did it.

TS: What did your friends think about you joining the navy?

HG: Well, they threw me the biggest party ever; "We're going to miss you!"

TS: But they weren't really concerned about it?

HG: No.

TS: No?

HG: No. Of course, all of my friends were—at that point in time my group of friends had changed, because the ones that I had in high school were all off in college. So my friends then became those that were in the American Legion, so they were veterans, associated with veterans, so it was a good thing.

TS: So tell me then, when you went off to the—to boot camp, what was that like for you? Now, you been in the military, you've been a military brat, you're pretty familiar with expectations, I would think, right?

HG: Oh no.

TS: No? [both laugh] Well, talk about that. Let's hear about it.

HG: Nothing prepares you for boot camp. I mean, Joe had been in—I don't know. Joe was in during Vietnam, and so when he went through boot camp it was a whole lot different from when I went through boot camp, and being a female going through boot camp is a whole lot different from a male going through boot camp. Of course, at that point in time, the whole spiel about hazing—"We can't do hazing. We can't—We've got females, we've got—" so a lot of things changed from—

TS: And this—this was 1990—

HG: Two.

TS: Nineteen ninety-two. Do you remember what month it was?

HG: I went in—I left Maryland May twenty-sixth of 1992. It all seemed like a blur because the—the navy way of thinking is, "Hurry up and wait." I can't tell you the lines of—of waiting to get your uniforms, get your shots, go through medical, go through dental. I

mean, they got to make sure that their—their folks are tip-top shape, right? So those first, I want to say, week or two was just a blur because you were a mass going through and doing things. And they—they treated my company a little bit different.

I was in the twenty-second integrated company, so there were males and females in my company. And my cousin company was the same, so we had one floor in the barracks, and there's three—I think there was—there was either three or four wings. We had our main wing, where everybody had a bunk. That's where all inspections were done, all of that stuff, and then at night the women left that wing and went to another wing that we shared with our cousin company. So the men slept on the original wing and the women would go to a third wing, from both companies, and stay in that wing to sleep.

TS: So you had two separate, like, bunks?

HG: Yes.

TS: Really?

HG: Yes.

TS: Okay.

HG: We had two separate bunks but we had to carry all of our stuff back and forth; yes, had to carry our self—our stuff back and forth. I was in the first company that had two male instructors; I had a chief and a senior chief, and they were like mom and dad. Senior chief was the very sympathetic one and if you ever needed somebody to talk to he was the one to go to. Chief was the hardcore, "Buck up. Suck it up. Get it done," guy. Although in the end, when graduation came through, I think he cried just as much as the senior chief did.

TS: So before there had—the woman had run these or—

HG: Before it was one male, one female.

TS: Okay.

HG: You had a male—

TS: Oh, because it was integrated?

HG: Because it was integrated.

TS: Okay. But now two males—

HG: Two males.

TS: —they thought, would be acceptable?

HG: Yes.

TS: Okay.

HG: Which, I mean—Did we win a lot of—of competitions? No, we did not. My company, they called us—we were the—the screw-up company, if you will. If there was something to be screwed up, my company screwed it up; somehow, someway; we never won anything.

TS: So you were competing against other companies that weren't integrated and—

HG: No, no, no, no, no. We competed against other integrated companies, like our cousin company—

TS: Okay.

HG: Yeah.

TS: So it was just the mix of people you had at that time?

HG: Yes.

TS: I see. So what was—Is there anything—Were you thinking to yourself, "What have I gotten myself into?" or anything like that, or were you just ready for the long haul?

HG: Boot camp was hard for me. It was very difficult. I ended up getting shin splints, so running the grinder[?] was very difficult for me, to the point where I ran on shin splints and ended up with hairline fractures in my legs. And they found those in—when I went to medical, and they had me drink some dye and that sort of stuff. So my experience with boot camp is probably different from a person that just went through and did everything and—and no problems, graduated, blah, blah, blah.

I was put on medical hold, which separated me from my company during the worst time ever. They have, what's called, Hell Day, where the instructors come in and they basically turn your world upside down to break you; inspection, they turn—I mean, they—they—they—my understanding is they run through and they yell at you; "You're unsat[?]. You're—This is wrong. That's wrong," and people are just shaking in their boots. And then at the end of it all they played "God Bless America". They started playing patriotic songs and everybody was standing on the line bawling; just bawling.

And I missed it. I missed the first part of it. I begged to go back to my company because I didn't want to miss what my company was going through, and within two days I was back with my company. So I got the end of it. That was difficult. It made almost, like, that bonding—because you go through things as a company, and you bond because you went through it and you survived it together. I missed a little bit of that bonding because of those two days that I wasn't with the company when I should have been. I told myself I would suck it up and just do it, just get it done, and—but I couldn't. I graduated with my company but I was on medical hold for two weeks after everybody left because I couldn't do my run.

I—I—It—I was twenty-one when I went in, and at twenty-one, based on your age, you get more time to do the run. I think I had—I want to say I had, like, twenty-two minutes, or something like that, and I just—I couldn't get it done. That very last day, the last opportunity I had to do it, senior chief showed up; senior chief ran it with me. He was amazing. I don't think I would have made it if it weren't for him running with me, and I remember him saying to me, "Those gates over there, that's your goal. On the other side of those gates is McDonald's." [both laugh] "Think of those French fries." I remember him talking about, "Think of those French fries. Sweet—" or "Salty French fries."

I remember when I did finally cross that line and I was in so much pain and agony, I was crying, and it was a petty officer that was doing the timing. She looked at me and she yelled at me, and she said, "Get up on your feet, recruit! Go pack your shit and get out of here." And I did not know whether I had passed or not passed.

And senior chief looked at me and he said, "You're moving on." And at that point in time I knew that I had made it, but I didn't know by how much or whatever, but boot camp was really tough for me.

TS: So you think that he helped keep your pace on so you could make the time?

HG: Absolutely.

TS: Yeah?

HG: He helped me with breathing, he helped me with—

TS: Motivation?

HG: Motivation. Oh my gosh, he was the best ever.

TS: So you had really bad shin splints?

HG: I had shin splints that turned to hairline fractures from running on the shin splints.

TS: [unclear] You had mentioned, when you started telling this story, about grind—a grinder. What's that?

HG: Oh. [chuckles]

TS: I didn't know what that was.

HG: In Orlando—And I don't know if it's that way in the Great Lakes or whatever, but there is this big open, I would say, football field size, what we call, the grinder; it was asphalt. And that's where you went and did the run; we would do the run on the grinder. We would do marching. Oh my gosh, marching; "Right of leagues[?]. Left of leagues[?]. About face." It was all done on the grinder. We had what we called grinder reminders. Of course, you—we had to wear our garrison covers; females, garrison, and the guys wear the—the white caps. But we have, what you call, grinder reminders, because you're—you're garrison had to be two finger lengths from your eyebrow to the top of the cap; here, in this area right in here, was suntanned. This area up in here was white, and they called it a grinder reminder from hours of being out on the grinder, marching.

TS: The sun spot was a grinder reminder?

HG: Yes.

TS: Okay. Gotcha.

HG: Yes, that was your grinder reminder; "You've been out there. You can tell."

TS: So would you say that the physical part of basic training was harder than the mental, or was the mental also difficult?

HG: The physical part, for me, was the hardest. The mental part was the easiest. I absolutely loved the gas chamber, I loved shooting the guns, I loved sitting in the class and learning; that part of it was a breeze; a breeze. I remember coming out of the gas chamber and I was one of the few that did not throw up, and my everything was just the clearest it had ever been; my nasal passages, my—everything, and I was like, "Senior, can I do it again?"; tears just running down my eyes and it was great; it was great.

TS: [chuckles]

HG: I'd do that again—

TS: I don't believe I've ever had anyone tell me that about the—the—that part of the—[chuckling] basic training.

HG: It was exhilarating to me. It was—It was—I guess—

TS: Yeah?

HG: Yeah. I'd have done it again.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Because you got through it and you didn't—you didn't throw up and—

HG: Well, yeah, because you're standing outside and getting instruction, and then you go into this room—or this building—cinder block building, they close the doors, it's dark and you're scared. You are so scared. You don't want to be the person that throws up. You don't want to be the person that does not make it. You don't want to be that person that fails the gas chamber. And then by the time you get out—and for me, I was like, "Yes! I did something. I survived it. I am good."

TS: [chuckles]

HG: "Gas me all day long. I can do this one." [both laugh]

TS: Okay. So after basic training, then, what was your first duty station? And had you been at home—Had you been away from home for any period of time before this?

HG: Let's see. The longest I'd ever been away from home prior to boot camp was probably the week that I was—Well, I spent summers with my grandparents, but that's just being with family. Between—The American Legion has a program—the men have what's called Boys State[?], the women have what's called Girls State—and you spend a week with other girls from your state learning about the government; how the bill becomes a law. You're separated into parties, you run your parties, you run for offices, and then at the end of the week you elect two senators and a governor. It's really a neat program. You meet people from across the state. You learn a lot. And then your senators end up going to what's called Girls Nation, where all of the senators from across the states go to D.C. And they'll get to have tea with the president or that sort of thing. But I think that week is the longest I have been away from family, by myself, and it was really cool; it was really cool. But anyway.

TS: So your first duty station after basic was—

HG: Was NAS [Naval Air Station] Cecil Field, VS-27.

TS: This is in Florida, right?

HG: This was in Florida. My best duty station ever; loved that place. If somebody were to come to me today and say, "We are recommisioning VS-27 and we're looking for some of the old folks to come back," I would be there in a heartbeat.

TS: What was it that you liked about it?

HG: Everything. I had friends there, I loved what I did, I was—I went on deployments, I went on two carriers, went down to Puerto Rico, bombing range, [unclear], down there. It was just a lot of fun, a lot of fun, and I think I worked all shifts. I had worked all shifts and not one shift was better than the other.

TS: What was your job that you did? Did you go to a—any kind of job training before you joined[?]?

HG: No. I went straight to VS-27, into the line shack.

TS: What's that mean, line shack?

HG: The line shack is where basically your—your airmen go, because I was an airmen; I went airdale[?], I didn't—I wasn't a seaman; where your airmen go straight out of boot camp that haven't gone to an A School. If you go to an A School and you get your—you become a—a mech[anic] or something like that, then you go into that particular office. I went to the line shack, and in the line shack you learn basics. You become the one that takes care of airplanes; you tie them down, you wash them, you learn to become a plane captain, which is what I was.

TS: Did—So is line shack, like, on the job training, sort of?

HG: Yeah. Yeah. That's where you can spend time going into other shops, whether it's the mech shop or the ordnance shop or whatever, and getting things signed off and learning a trade by hands-on training.

TS: I see, okay. Do—Do you choose to do that or does someone choose for you?

HG: You choose.

TS: Okay.

HG: You choose. As a plane captain, you get to dabble in just about everything there is in—in the military; all fields. As a plane captain at VS-27, you were assigned a bird—a plane—and that became your bird and you had full responsibility of that bird. If there was anything wrong with that bird you went to whatever shop it was, whether it was AE or—

TS: What's AE?

HG: AE, they did, like, the parachutes; that sort of stuff. Whether it was the mechs or whether it was AL—Let's say it's sonic buoy release light had come on inside the cockpit or something, you go to the ordnance shop and you say, "This is wrong," and you do, what we call, a gripe. You write up a gripe and you would turn that in. That plane did not leave the ground without my signature. [noise in background]

TS: What kind of plane was it?

HG: I had an S—My squadron was S3s; S3Bs.

TS: What kind of plane is that?

HG: They called them the Hoovers [War Hoover]. It's an anti-sub[marine] warfare aircraft. The wings folded. It was a seagoing aircraft, and I was in a training squadron, which as a training squadron, the pilots are learning how to fly that plane.

TS: I see.

HG: Learn how to bomb things with it, and we had a ASW [anti-submarine warfare] training there as well for those that were in the backseat that did the bombing and that sort of stuff.

TS: So this is where other men and women came to learn their craft.

HG: Yeah, yes.

TS: So was it a train—was this—was this a training station, the whole thing?

HG: Yes. It was a training squadron, yes.

TS: Squadron?

HG: Yes.

TS: At Cecil, Sesal?

HG: Cecil Field.

TS: Cecil Field, okay. So you're—So you're there and you're helping—[background noise] you're the captain who's helping to—Do you want me to pause for a minute? Okay.

HG: [unclear]

TS: So you're helping to—learn—you're learning about this plane and how to take care of it, and then at the same time, like, new pilots are coming in, learning how to fly and do things.

HG: Yeah, yes.

TS: Okay. Now, what kind—was it a mix of men and women; was there a lot of women there at this field?

HG: VS-27 was a good mix of men and women; a very good mix. And it was a very cohesive group. We all got along well; from one shop to the next we got along very, very well. The squadron as a whole was an amazing squadron. We got the meritorious unit accommodation, and that is basically inspection. They come in, they inspect the squadron from top to bottom, and if you pass you get the MUC [Meritorious Unit Commendation], which we got.

At VS-27 the world was at my feet; absolutely loved it. I—I ended up spending a lot of time in the ordnance shop. I was working on getting my QA, quality assurance; I was hush house qualified.

TS: Hush house?

HG: Hush house. When there's something wrong with the engine, the mechs may take it to the hush house so they could go to high power, because you can't do it on the flight line because of noise restrictions.

TS: I see.

HG: So they take it to the hush house, we twelve point tie it, and then rev the engine up as high as it'll go. And it is the most exhilarating feeling to be sitting in the hush house behind this glass wall and seeing this plane at full power inside this building. And this isn't an F18 or whatever, it is just a little Hoover plane here. The S3, which has two cowl[?] door engines hanging off the wings and it—it's scary but exciting at the same time to think that you're—you're there seeing this and—so yeah. I was working on a lot

of things there. I was working on—I was already a brown vest—what they call a brown vest, on—on the carrier.

TS: And what does that mean?

HG: That I was a plane captain; that's brown vest.

TS: Okay. What do, like—kind of, what vest you wear signifies the kind of job you had or—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

HG: Yeah, yeah.

TS: —like a leadership position?

HG: No, no, no, no. In—In the navy if you—Like, when you're watching TV and you see a carrier, you'll see different colored vests. The brown vest is—is basically your plane captain; the one that takes care of the planes; that launches the plane. I was the one that stood in front of the plane doing all these weird signals to the pilot; that was me. And if I said that plane was grounded, that pilot could not fly that plane.

And then there's the red vest, that was your ordnance people, and the white vest was the QA, quality assurance, and I was working on getting my QA signed off.

TS: How long did it take you to become a captain—the captain for it; the plane?

HG: Let's see. I was—I was there two years. I don't think it took me that long. I want to say maybe six months to a year. I don't remember off the top of my head. I don't remember it taking that long though, because when I got in there was—the day that I reported, I was the only one that reported that day, but I want to say a week or two prior to me recording—reporting there was about six folks that had reported for duty. So we were all a close knit group that were going through everything together; getting qualifications done and signed off, learning how to use the equipment and that sort of stuff. So we pushed each other, which made it a whole lot easier.

TS: So would you say, like, your treatment at this particular—in this squadron was, for your peers—

HG: Yes?

TS: —you were treated really well?

HG: Oh, absolutely.

TS: And—

HG: Absolutely.

TS: —same with your supervisors?

HG: Absolutely; absolutely. We had—When I was—When I worked the night shift—And I'm sure that people hear stories all the time of military people are drinkers and blah, blah, blah, and when sailors hit port they ran—they—they tear the place up; that sort of stuff. I will say I did my fair amount of drinking, but I will also say this, on the other hand, it made us closer, we bonded together, and with that bond you were able to work together well.

We had, what we called, mandatory training every Friday night, where we would do a collection of money and senior chief would go and buy the beer and we would meet at the barracks and we would drink and have a good time; Friday night mandatory training is what we called it. That was good times; that was good times.

TS: Did you live in the barracks?

HG: I did.

TS: How was that? Was that a coed situation there too?

HG: It was. I had some things happen to me in the barracks that—I don't know. There's this—I don't know how to say it. My group of friends and I were great; got along, we helped each other out, we—back then pay wasn't the best and so we would cook together and—and help each other out financially and—and that sort of stuff. And then there were people that were a little bit—not nice, if you will. I had somebody that stole my ATM card. They caught her using my ATM card and—and she had totally wiped out my account, at the ATM on base. I'm like, "Are you stupid?" But they caught her.

The locks weren't great on the doors. I remember waking up one night and seeing a shadow standing over me, and it was a guy. And when I came to from—I was in a deep sleep and you just—I guess I just felt the presence or whatever, and I rolled over and I saw who it was and I called his name; he turned around and left. Didn't try anything, don't know what his thoughts were, why he was there, but the locks were not good. So—But anyway, that's—that's—

TS: Did you worry about your safety with that then?

HG: When I was in a room by myself, on the second floor, on the top far corner, that's when this happened; yes, I was a little leery. But after this incident—And I brought it to the attention of the—the—they had people that were assigned to barracks.

TS: Like senior enlisted?

HG: Yeah, they're petty officer.

TS: Yes.

HG: She moved me downstairs, and then I was fine because I ended up getting a roommate at that time and—and things were good, except that my roommate's boyfriend ended up being a piece of work and physically abused her, in our room. Broke my stuff and—

TS: What happened to him? Did he get in trouble?

HG: I don't remember. I don't remember. That was a very love hate relationship that didn't last very long. So I don't know. There was all kinds of stuff that went on in the military.

TS: But—So the barracks that you're in—so it was a coed barracks, or was it—

HG: Yes.

TS: Did women only live in a certain wing—

HG: No.

TS: —or was it just all mixed up—

HG: Nope. Yep.

TS: —just—like your next door roommate could be—or not roommate necessarily, you didn't have—

HG: No, my roommate was female.

TS: But, like, the person next door could be—

HG: Could have been a male.

TS: Okay.

HG: Yeah, yes, it was coed.

TS: What kind of things did you do for fun?

HG: Oh my goodness, what did we do for fun?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: You told me a little bit about it; your mandatory meetings on training on Fridays.

HG: Yes, mandatory trainings. Oh, we—we went to clubs.

TS: Okay.

HG: My roommate and I—There was a lot of dance clubs in town, in Jacksonville [Florida][?]. We barbecued a lot in the barracks. Some of my friends ended up getting married and moving off base so I would go to their house. I had my mom away from home, if you will, and this kind of led to why I chose to transfer to VP-30 [Patrol Squadron THIRTY] when we decommissioned [VS-]27. A family that was in Maryland that I had known, he got stationed to VP-30, he was a cook on one of the P-3s for the higher ranking military officials, but I got to know the family very well. And then when I got stationed to Cecil Field, they basically took me in and I was like their third daughter, because they had two girls and a boy, and I would spend my weekends at their house. If I didn't have something going on with my friends in town, I would just going out and spend the weekend with them. So that be—they became my family, and that was—that was really nice having my family away from home, if you will, and they knew my parents, my parents knew them, and—and—so that was a really nice situation for me. I knew that I could always go home with my laundry—

TS: [chuckles]

HG: —to their house and get my laundry done over the weekend and—and—washer and dryer that I knew, versus barracks washer and dryer and having to spend money.

TS: Yes.

HG: When money was—Towards the end of a pay period, I would go to their house so I could eat for free and get laundry done and—and that was always nice.

TS: Now, you said you had some deployments out of Cecil Field?

HG: Yeah, I was on the USS [*Dwight D.*] *Eisenhower*. Neat story about the *Eisenhower*. My stepfather commissioned that ship. He was one of the original crew on the first voyage.

TS: Do you know what year that would have been?

[The USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* was commissioned in 1977]

HG: Oh, geez.

TS: Approximately. No?

HG: I have no idea.

TS: Okay.

HG: Twenty years later I'm on that same ship.

TS: Yeah, okay.

HG: And I call—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: He was probably pretty excited about that.

HG: He was all kinds of excited. He says to me, "I know a lieutenant that's still stationed. You need to go down and you need to ask for Lieutenant—"

And I said to him, "Are you crazy? Are you crazy? I am an airman and you want me to go to Officers' Quarters and ask for a lieutenant? Yeah, that's not happening. Don't think so."

TS: [chuckles]

HG: "Oh, but he'd be so excited when you tell him that Chief Morgan said, 'Hello'."

And I'm like, "Yeah, you can call him and tell him that. I am not trying to risk my butt going to Officers' Quarters."

That was my first ship that I was on; my first boat.

TS: How'd you like it?

HG: It was an interesting experience. I was assigned to Officers' Mess, front galley, and—

TS: What does that mean when you're assigned to Officers' Mess?

HG: Every duty—Well, let me back up a little bit. When I was first assigned to VS-27 as my duty station, you have to do your time in, what they call—See, and I don't know if there's any other place where you do your time, but we had, what you call, the geedunk, which is like a mini store, if you will, for snacks and that sort of stuff, and everybody assigned to the line shack made their way through and did their time at geedunk. So you basically ran it. You did inventory, you—you did all that stuff; you cleaned, you—that sort of stuff.

Well, when you go to the ship you have to do your time in a galley, whether it's just your first detachment to—whatever. On my first detachment to the ship, which was the *Eisenhower*, I had to work in the galley before I could—once I did my time in the galley I was done, I would never have to do it again; I could—from there on out I was on—on top.

So I was assigned to the Officers' Mess and I ended up breaking my nose. On ships you have what's called knee knockers, which is the doorway; it's like an oval shape and you have to step over it. If something happens and the ship starts taking on water, you can close the doors and block off water. Well, on the other side—on the sides of each knee knocker there's supposed to be none-skid, and I was walking from one part of the galley over to the dishwashing part of the galley with this big container, and I stepped over the knee knocker, and there was water on the floor, and I slipped and hit my nose on the—they have this rail that you run your tray along as you're going through the line, hit my nose on it and my nose was bleeding and—and I—I was a raccoon. They sent me to medic, packed my nose, and I went right back to serving. And I'm like, "I can't believe that I'm here. My head hurts, my nose hurts, and I still have to serve food. Really?" But yeah, I broke my nose.

TS: Ouch.

HG: So I will never forget my first debt[?], even though it was—should have been my most memorable because I was on the *Eisenhower*, the same ship my stepdad had been on, but no, no.

TS: How long were you on the ship?

HG: My total sea time between both ships was twenty-three days. So I think I was—I was ten on one and—whatever.

TS: Were you headed somewhere or—

HG: Well, that one, on the *Eisenhower*—Let me think. How did we get on? We heloed[?] on—

TS: On a helicopter?

HG: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

HG: We heloed on and we catapulted off.

TS: Cat—What does that mean, catapulted?

HG: On a carrier, when airplanes land, they catch a wire. When they take off, they catapult off. And what that is, is they have this bar that comes down and catches this little thing that is—it basically shoots the bird off the plane—I mean, off the boat.

TS: Like a sling shot?

HG: Yeah, like a sling shot, right off the ship.

TS: So that's how you left the ship?

HG: Yes, yes. I catapulted off; that's the weirdest feeling ever.

TS: What kind of plane was it? Do you recall?

HG: No, I—I don't remember.

TS: Had you—Had you done anything on a plane before then? I mean, flown much?

HG: Other than, like, US Airways, commercial flights, no, I had not.

TS: So was that kind of a scary experience?

HG: Yeah, and I remember sitting down and—and I was facing backwards and I remember somebody saying to me, "Be prepared, because you will be slung forward," and I had—the seatbelt came down like this—

TS: In front of you.

HG: —and—around the front and then across my lap, and we had to brace ourselves like this—

TS: Put your arms crossed in front.

HG: —and—

TS: Like, your head down crash position?

HG: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And somebody said to me, "Be prepared. Be prepared, because it's going to happen and it's like a roller coaster ride; you don't know when it's going to happen." And I kid you not, if I didn't have my hands like this and—

TS: In tucked position?

HG: Yeah, I'd have been like this. [laughs]

TS: Spread out? [chuckles]

HG: Spread out.

TS: We're doing that for the transcriber who can't see all of your emotions that you're making.

HG: [laughing]

TS: Which we should have the video for it. So that—So was that a good experience, then?

HG: Oh yeah, it was neat. It was just one of those experiences that you never forget, you know? So that was my first deployment on the carrier. The second carrier that I went on was the [USS] *Washington*.

TS: Okay.

HG: And we flew up to Norfolk—

TS: Okay.

HG: —walked on the ship, rode it down the coast, and heloed off. I have to say, other than breaking my nose on my first deployment, the second deployment was my most memorable. It was the neatest ever because this time I was plane captain qualified; I was

qualified to be on the flight deck. And I remember them scaring the crap out of me saying your head has to be on a swivel, and I've never really realized exactly how much that is very important when you're on the flight deck during flight ops [operations].

I was in front of my bird, getting ready to launch it, standing there waiting for my pilot to give me the thumbs up to start our process that you have to go through to launch the plane. I had QA on one side of me, I don't remember who was on the other side of me, but it was almost like you couldn't breathe if I—if I—if I spread my wings out like—you—this is spread your wings, to open the wings up. If I'd done that I would have hit somebody, so I had to look. But there were all kinds of planes on top of that boat that—there was one that was called the Huffer[?] and—

TS: The Huffer?

HG: Yeah, and I don't remember the actual name of it.

TS: That's okay.

HG: The—The numerical—But this thing, when it turned, I mean, it turned, and—and if I didn't have people standing around me holding me, I probably would have gone over the side; I probably would have gone over the side.

TS: Because it, like—of—of—of a wind or a pressure?

HG: Yeah, the exhaust.

TS: Okay.

HG: The exhaust from the bird. When you're on top, of course, there's not a whole lot of room and you—you're starting flight ops so you've got a dozen planes that are starting up. When they come out of their spot they turn to hit the catapult—because the catapult at the front, the wire's at the back—and when it turned to go hit the catapult the exhaust came straight onto me and I could not hold myself up. I ended up with five people around me holding me. That was the scariest thing ever. I was so expecting myself to go over, and there were some mad people. QA calling up, "Who the blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah! My plane captain's trying to launch this bird and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." There were some not nice words coming out of his mouth.

TS: So there's lots and lots of activity going on up top, all at once?

HG: Oh, absolutely; absolutely.

TS: So it wasn't what—you had expected that.

HG: No, no. No, and even though I'd been told, "Keep your head on a swivel," you still—

TS: Right.

HG: I did not see him turning, because they tell you, "Keep your head on a swivel. If you see something coming, grab a padeye."

TS: What's that?

HG: A padeye is—is kind of a hole in the ground that's got this metal thing that goes up across that you use to tie a bird down with. When you put a bird to bed at night, you have to do—and depending on whether it's normal winds, whether there's a hurricane coming, determines how many points—and when you say a point you're talking about a chain; you chain your birds down at night. If we were back at Cecil Field and it was just a regular night, there's not going to be a storm, whatever, you do a four point chain; a four point tie-down is what they call it. Max being—The heaviest I ever had to do was a twelve point tie down. But they tell you if you see something coming, you hit the deck and grab a padeye. So—But anyway, that was really neat.

TS: That was a good experience?

HG: Oh yeah. And then I actually got to go up front to the catapult and get some QA signed off up there, and that is amazing; absolutely amazing. The sea on—If you're watching a TV show and there's a carrier and there's a plane that's getting ready to be catapulted off, the guy that's wearing the white vest, that's QA. He is the absolute last one that gives the okay for that bird to leave the—When the pilot says, "We're good" —because everybody else has done their last minute checks around, said that we're good, pilot says that we're good, the pilot tells the QA and the QA's thumbs up, is what tells the guy to hit the button to make the bird go. That was really cool; that was cool. I mean, it was cool to be the one that had to sign off for this bird to be able to fly, but to be the one to say, "Yeah, hit that button. Let that bird fly."

TS: Did you get to do that a few times?

HG: No, no.

TS: No? But you got to watch it?

HG: Yeah.

TS: Up close.

HG: Yeah.

TS: Very neat; very neat. So now, all this time, would you say your relations with both your peers and your supervisors are good? I mean, did you have—was there any tension?

HG: Not at VS-27.

TS: No?

HG: Loved that squadron; would absolutely love to go back to that squadron any day.

TS: Did you have anybody that you would consider a mentor?

HG: We all mentored each other.

TS: Yeah. But you didn't have anybody that you looked up to that really, kind of, helped you through?

HG: I can't say that I can single out any one person. I mean, I have to say that my—my shift supervisor, Roar[?], was—he was funny, he was amazing, he was really cool; we all liked him; we all liked him. Petty Officer Hernandez was really cool.

TS: But you were all just, kind of, pulling together?

HG: Yeah. Yeah.

TS: So it's like, when you're learning your ropes on being a captain, you didn't have anybody that kind—you—was it a lot of book learning or did people—

HG: Well, no, and here's the way that kind of worked. A plane captain that is already fully qualified would train other airmen to be plane captains. So—I don't know. I think Justin was the one that became plane captain first, and then—I can't remember a whole lot of first names, but I sure can remember last names. Smalley[?], she was my best friend. She and Justin were dating and the two of them kind of took me under their wing, because they were—they were there before me. So yeah, I guess you could say that the two of them, but they were both airmen just like me.

TS: So—So a lot of peers helping each other out?

HG: Absolutely; absolutely.

TS: Now, did you have any ratings done up to this point; evaluations or anything like that—

HG: You'll—

TS: —for promotions?

HG: Yes, absolutely.

TS: And those are all going along fine?

HG: Three point eights. Three point eights up until my last one where I got the 4.0 where I made ordnanceman.

TS: Is 4.0 the high—highest?

HG: Yes. Yeah, I was 3.8 all the way along until that last one when I got 4.0. I was passed for PO3 [Petty Officer Third Class] but I did get—I did make grade[?].

TS: Now, did you—did you ever feel like you experienced any kind of discrimination at all?

HG: Not at VS-27.

TS: Did you receive any memorable awards at all? You said your unit had the one—

HG: Yes.

TS: —but any personal ones?

HG: I don't know. Don't remember.

TS: [chuckles] Okay. So—So for two—Now, did this unit shut down when you were there? Is that what—

HG: We decommissioned.

TS: You decommissioned.

HG: Yeah, towards the end of my two years there we got word that they were decommissioning, because this was at the point where they were starting to close down Cecil Field, and being the training squadron we were the first squadron to go.

TS: Okay.

HG: So we decommissioned that and it was a nice ceremony; it was really nice. It was neat to be a part of that. And then everybody, one by one, got to go and choose duty stations, depending on what billets were open; that sort of stuff. And when my time came I had to choose between a helo squadron, HS-1 [Helicopter Anti-Submarine Squadron ONE]—excuse me—or VP-30, both out of NAS Jax [Naval Air Station Jacksonville].

TS: That's Jacksonville?

HG: Yeah, Jacksonville. Hindsight, 20/20, if I had known then what I know now I would have taken the helo squadron, but because my friend Mark, who was a chief, was stationed at VP-30 that I was telling you about earlier, I thought, "Hmm, that'll be cool to be stationed at the same duty station as Mark and—" Yeah, that was the worst decision I ever made in my military career. I probably could have made it to retirement if I had chosen the helo squadron.

TS: So what happened?

HG: I got very stagnant. VP-30 is a training squadron as well, but they are very by the book; very backstabbing. I hated that squadron. I hated it, and I feel like that was a big demise of my military career.

TS: What sort of things happened to make you feel that way?

HG: This would be the squadron where I ran across a chief that said to me women should not be allowed in his navy. And my reply to him was, "With all due respect, but it's not your navy," and he didn't like that. And things just, kind of, weren't good for me at that squadron.

They ended up deciding to—I mean, when I first got there I was assigned to the line shack, because they were like, "Well, you were an excellent plane captain, blah, blah, blah—Even though you're an ordnanceman, we're going to send you to the line shack. You can still do ordnance stuff but we don't have a billet there within the OA[?] shop yet, so you're going to go to the line shack."

Well, being a plane captain for a P-3 squadron—yeah. I got in there and was basically shoved around, pushed around, like I was nothing. Things were a lot different there.

TS: Why do you think they were different?

HG: Because it wasn't a cohesive group. There was a lot of tension in there. The—I don't know, it was just—

TS: Well, often times they say that leadership is what makes something good or bad. You think—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

HG: I'm sure it was, and I can't even tell you anything about the leadership. I just—What I remember is bad vibes. And they say the mind is a—is a funny thing; you remember things that are good, that you enjoy, that you like, that make you feel good. There's not a whole lot that I remember about the line shack, other than I didn't like it, I wasn't happy, people didn't get along. It was a very backstabbing place; very backstabbing.

TS: Now, what was the mix here for, like, males and females?

HG: There were more males than there were females, from what I can remember, in the line shack. But I was only there, maybe, two weeks, three weeks, before I was reassigned to OA shop.

TS: Okay.

HG: And then it was—When I was assigned to the OA shop, oh, it was testosterone city there. There were two females, the rest were males.

TS: How many males, then?

HG: Day shift was, I don't know, maybe ten, twelve males to the two females. The other girl was a petty officer and she just gave them crap right back. I was an airman. There's a difference. As an airman, I'm supposed to do as I say, notbuck the system, whatever. That was the first time in that—That squadron was the first time I ever ran into any issues with being a female.

TS: Yeah? The whole time in the navy?

HG: The whole time. I mean, I'd even been on ships, and—and even talking to the people on ships I never had a problem there.

TS: So what kind of things would you experience that—that would make you feel like it was your gender that was the problem?

HG: I think after that run in with the chief who—

TS: Was this in the—what was it, the OA—

HG: OA.

TS: OA shop?

HG: Yes. Yes. Things were just a little rough. There were a couple of them. There was this one guy—Zuwaga[?] was his last name—but he was really, really nice.

TS: I mean, were there, like, sexist kind of jokes or derogatory comments to you personally, or—

HG: Oh, there was all kinds of sexist jokes and—and stuff; just stuff. At this point, I was very unhappy; didn't really care much if I stayed in the military or not; wished I wasn't there. I ended up—I went to the club one night and met somebody from [Naval Station] Mayport, and he was stationed on a ship out of Mayport. So then I found myself driving to Mayport and spending all my time out there, because I didn't want to be in the barracks, I didn't want to be around these people; didn't want anything to do with them outside of work. If there was ever anything that needed to be done, I was on that detail; anything; I don't care what it was. It was a female, lowest man on the totem pole that did it. And I remember the other female who was a petty officer, she used to say to me, "Just overlook it. You're here for a reason. Do your job and then forget it." I remember her—she used to say that to me. I can't remember her name but she was half African-American and half white, so there was even a race issue that they could have pulled on her but I don't remember race ever becoming an issue. It was more of a gender thing there. Not a happy situation.

TS: So because of her rank she got out of some of the more hard, difficult situations that you got yourself.

HG: Yeah, I believe so, because she would flat out stand up to them and tell them to bug off or whatever.

TS: Right. So what'd you do, besides try to get out of it and go to the other place on your off time?

HG: I did what I had to do.

TS: Did you complain to anyone about your treatment?

HG: There wasn't really anybody to complain to there; there really wasn't. Because when you've got the management, so to speak, that's onboard and doing this stuff, what do you do?

TS: Right. Did you feel sexually harassed?

HG: Not sexually harassed. They just made it very difficult.

TS: Like a hostile work environment, sort of?

HG: A very unhappy place.

TS: Yeah?

HG: Very unhappy place. I think at that point I had just, kind of—I don't know; I didn't care anymore. I didn't care anymore. It got to where I didn't want to be there; wished that I had chosen the HS-1 squadron over VP-30.

TS: So how long were you there?

HG: A little over a year. I did three and a half years in the military; two of them at VS-27, the rest of the time at VP-30 before they let me go. When I say "let me go" they used failure to control weight as the reasoning for letting me—letting me go, although I got an honorable discharge and eligible for reserve.

TS: Yes. And benefits?

HG: And benefits, yes.

TS: So you just—you got out, like, a—six months early?

HG: Yeah. They basically said to me, "No, you're—you're getting out."

TS: So you felt like you were pushed out?

HG: Yeah. They discharged me because of failure to control weight. And at that point in time—and I understand—somebody told me not too long ago that they no longer do measurements—my weight was fine—

TS: Was your BMI [body mass index]?

HG: —my BMI was not, and it was always .5, or one percent, over the maximum for my height and my weight, which I never could understand, other than they just didn't want me there; they just didn't want me there. I could do the swim. By the time—In the navy, once you get out of boot camp, you can do—you can swim, versus run. I always did the swim. I did my push-ups. I did my sit-ups. I could pass the PT. I just—The BMI is what got me; BMI is what got me. And I don't know if you've looked at me, but I have wide hips. I have a small waist. There are a lot of females out there that are shaped like me.

TS: Yes.

HG: I'm Cuban; what can I say? It's—I come by it honestly. So I feel like it was very unfair and unjust.

TS: Yeah.

HG: Did I fight it? No, I didn't fight it, because at that point I didn't care if I stayed in the military. I wasn't happy so, "I'll just let them force me out."

TS: Right.

HG: And—And that's what I did, so.

TS: Well, one—one deployment we didn't get to talk about was when you got to go to Puerto Rico.

HG: Puerto Rico was fun.

TS: Were you with the other unit then?

HG: I was VS-27 at the time.

TS: Okay. So tell me about that a little bit.

HG: Oh, Puerto Rico was fun. That was training for a bombing.

TS: Oh, okay.

HG: There is a bombing range—There was a bombing range out there, so—

TS: This was the Roosey [pronounced "Rosy"] Roads or something?

HG: Yes, Roosey Roads. [Roosevelt "Roosey" Roads Naval Station is a former United States Navy base in the town of Ceiba, Puerto Rico]

TS: Okay.

HG: Roosey Roads, Puerto Rico. That was a lot of fun. When that deployment came up, they would put it up, and there was a sign-up sheet; you signed up. The senior chief would always call me, "Heather, we got Roosey Roads coming up."

"Sign me up. Put my name down."

That was the deployment where we could always refill our liquor cabinet, if you will. Yes, we did the training; we did what we had to do. And it was a lot of fun because, I mean, everything was in—maintenance was one big room. So you had a corner for line shack, you had a corner for the OA, you had corner—it was just one big room.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: This is while you're in Puerto Rico?

HG: Yeah, this is in Puerto Rico.

TS: Okay.

HG: Because it's—it's temporary.

TS: Okay.

HG: You're only there for ten, twelve days per—

TS: How many times did you go?

HG: I went three or four times.

TS: Oh, okay.

HG: Three or four times. So you're all in one room and there's this big vat[?] board and we would do the word of the day, and somebody would come up with some huge, weird word and put it on the board and everybody would talk about it all day long; "What is that? What does that mean?" I remember that's how I learned was discombobulated is. [laughing] That was one of the words one day; discombobulated.

Puerto Rico was fun. We ate together, we worked together. Puerto Rico was one of those places, too, they said, "What—What happens on deployment, stays on deployment. Oh my goodness. We—We would grill every night in the barracks because, of course, we were all put up in—in the barracks. So we would grill. We would drink, card games. Oh my goodness. You name it, it happened.

TS: [chuckles] So good times?

HG: Good times. Definitely good times. I've got picture somewhere of standing on top of the second floor, looking down at a table, just a mass of people and just taking pictures. And one of the guys was looking up at me taking a picture of me taking a picture of him; it was funny. And I think that's—it was in Puerto Rico where I got the picture of—which I will find and send a copy to you—of me standing beside my bird— which you're assigned a bird and your name's put on it—fully loaded.

TS: That'd be a great one to see; sure.

HG: Fully loaded bird with me standing—seven one seven was the number on my bird; I'll never forget it. It used to be the stepchild of—of the parts plane, if you will, until I pulled it out and started pulling it together and—and I said to my shift supervisor—I was like, "I want that plane. They're piecing it together and—and—" it just seemed fitting to me and it ended up being an awesome plane. But I've got that picture from a Puerto Rico trip.

TS: Let me ask you something, Heather, on that point; what you're saying about, "I want that." So did, like, getting that plane all—in good shape, did it give you, like, a sense of pride in what you could do? I mean, how did you feel about that?

HG: I loved everything about VS-27. I loved what I did. I was very motivated to learn things, to—and the more sign offs, the more qualifications I got, the happier I was. Which I will give you copies of all of my licenses. If it went on the flight line, I had a license to run it; operate it; I don't care what it was. I could drive anything on the flight line. I could—I did it all; I did it all.

TS: So—So even though you're—when you were at—what was it, VP-30?

HG: Yes.

TS: That was not a good experience?

HG: No.

TS: How—But the S-27?

HG: VS-27.

TS: Had to write it down to get the—What's the VP stand for?

HG: Something Patrol.

TS: Okay. And then the VS? I could look that up.

HG: Submersive [sic] something or other.

TS: Oh, okay.

HG: The—

TS: Patrol and Submersive, is the difference.

HG: Yeah. The VS-27 is an S-3 aircraft that is sub warfare something or other.

TS: Okay.

HG: It basically seeks out bombs—I mean, not bombs, submarines—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Submarines?

HG: —and it can actually bomb and it's a seagoing aircraft.

TS: I see.

HG: VP-30 is a P-3 plane, which everybody has seen a P-3; it's a prop[?] job. It does kind of the same thing as the S-3 in many aspects, except that it is not seagoing; it cannot land on aircraft.

TS: I see, okay.

HG: It is fixed wing and it is about, oh, four times the size of an S-3.

TS: Okay. So overall, you had an experience that was really good—you had a hard time in basic with the physical—

HG: Yes.

TS: —and then you went to a place where you had a—it sounds like a really great experience.

HG: Absolutely.

TS: And then a really not so great experience. But overall, if you're looking back at how the military treated you, like for pay, promotions, and assignments, how did—how did you feel about that, if you're putting it all together?

HG: I feel like we didn't get paid enough to do the jobs that we did. Even though I was not front line, did not see war, my job was hazardous. I mean it was my job to put the struts[?] in the wings every night before—when I was putting the birds to bed, which means you crawled up on top of the airplane and you put this thing from the top of the wing to the actual fuselage of the bird so that the wings don't move at night. Cleaning the canopies; oh my goodness. You had to lay down on top of—you'd get up on top of the bird, lay down on your belly, to clean the canopies.

So I mean, I feel like we weren't paid enough to do—and—and as an airman you live paycheck to paycheck, and before that next paycheck comes you may not have enough money to buy food or whatever. And granted, there was always the galley but the galley, from where I lived, was other side of the base; not walking distance, so you had to get into a vehicle and drive. So gas—whatever.

As far as rank and rate, I feel like that was fair. That was testing; you had to pass a test. You had to get qualifications signed off by somebody, so you had to actually do things and you were rewarded based on your knowledge, and I feel like that was fair. Yeah, but I think the pay could have been a little bit more. But you hear that today too. Our military is very underpaid, unless of course you're officer status, so—but bottom of the totem pole, not so much.

TS: Do you have any humorous or amusing stories that you would like to share?

HG: [laughs] One that I like to tell quite often, which may not be appropriate in mixed company, in many—but—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Stop—Stop reading the transcript now if you don't want—

HG: [chuckling]

TS: Right?

HG: There is a lot of people out there that know military just—it is what it is. People—They have a lot of fun and whatever. We had this one first class petty officer, he was about as hillbilly as it comes, and like most typical men, bodily functions were absolutely hilarious, and I believe that his insides were rotten. He could clear the line shack in two seconds, without saying a word; without saying a word. And this would be the same guy—and I tell this to my son all the time and he finishes the story because I've said it so much, but being involved in scouts I am very familiar with what's funny to young men.

But anyway, this first class would walk across the hangar, stop, pass gas, and keep on walking, get to the other side, and he'd stand there and watch, waiting for people to walk through his cloud of unpleasant smell. And he would get the biggest kick out of it. He would stand there, and then he would just cackle. He was about the funniest guy ever; ever. He was so funny.

Funny—funny things. Let me think. Yeah, morning after partying, if you will—In Puerto Rico, of course, every night was a party; grilled, drank, whatever. It was funny to see how the line would stack up outside, what we called, the roach cro—roach coach, where everybody would go and get their sandwiches in the morning. The greasiest ham, egg, and cheese sandwich you had in your life, but it does wonders for a hangover, just the same as a shot of straight oxygen from the airplane does. You had to have your friends in the right places that could help you out.

TS: A—A shot of straight oxygen—

HG: Yes.

TS: —on the airplane. Oh yeah?

HG: Yes. [laughing]

TS: Okay. I—I haven't heard of that one.

HG: Oh yeah; clears the head. It does wonders.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: That's after a hangover, too?

HG: Oh yeah, that—that cures the hangover. Once you get the sandwich in your belly and your—your shot of oxygen, you're good.

TS: You're good to go?

HG: You are good.

TS: Well, in this time you're in—so you're in '92 to '94ish?

HG: Ninety-five.

TS: Ninety-five? Was there anybody that you admired, like, nationally; politicians or just people that you admired in general?

HG: Nope.

TS: No? Not—Because I think—was—Let's see. Who—You have Colin Powell as the Secretary of [State]—

HG: No, I was in during the [President William "Bill" Jefferson] Clinton years. I was in during the time when Clinton decided to downsize the military, so he was offering the early out program.

TS: Okay.

HG: So people that signed up for four could get out in three and a half. Yeah, let's not go into the political views because my political views are very—

TS: You don't want to share them?

HG: I don't like Clinton; didn't like Clinton. I am a true Republican in every sense of the word.

TS: Well, when you were in you had—you were at the—the end of the Gulf—the First Gulf War. And then—But we also had—there was deployments to other places; Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo.

HG: I knew you were going to say Somalia. For some reason I just felt that one coming.

TS: Did you?

HG: Yeah. I don't know. I guess for me I felt like if my time came and I was sent, then it was meant to be. I was in the military for a reason; to serve my country, however that meant. Whether it meant me being stationed on board a ship, whether it meant me being stationed overseas in a hostile environment; whatever. If—If that's what was given to me or assigned to me, then that's what was meant to be. I didn't think about, "Oh, I could get killed," or—So to me, I didn't pay a whole lot attention to what was going on in the world. It was what it was.

TS: Right.

HG: I would have happily gone and served wherever.

TS: Well, what are your thoughts about—So when you were in they would have instituted "Don't Ask, Don't Tell".

HG: Yes.

TS: What'd you think about that, and then its subsequent repeal recently?

HG: Well, I will say this. During the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" I actually had a friend in the line shack who was dating a female petty officer, which was definite no-no.

TS: Female, female? Male—

HG: Female, female.

TS: Okay.

HG: I was absolutely fine with it. It did not bother me. And to this day I'm just like, if—I feel like nobody should tell anybody who they can love, how they can love. That's your own thing. I will live my life my way, you live your life your way, and I'm fine with that. Some of my best friends are gays and lesbians, and it does not bother me.

TS: What did you—What do you feel about the argument that people say about—that issue of unit cohesion has broken down because of those issues with they're open.

HG: I feel like that's a crock of bull. I feel like it's a crock of bull only because—like I said, one of my best friends—I would say two. I have a guy friend up in Baltimore [Maryland] that's married—has been married for years. I love him to death. And then of course, the couple that I knew when I was active duty. She was in the same squadron as me; both of them; love them to death. Ran a normal household; they live together, ran a normal

household, and I have no problem with it whatsoever. And I don't feel like it affects the workplace at all.

TS: How do you feel about what's happening now with women in combat positions and serving in submarines; things like that?

HG: I don't have a problem with it. I don't because I am a true believer that as a veteran you sign up willingly. Whether male or female, if you sign up to be active duty you know what could happen. If it scares you and you feel like you can't deal with it, then don't sign up. But you know when you sign on that dotted line what you have signed up for and what could possibly happen. I—I—

TS: So you don't think there should be any restrictions on the difference between what men and women do in the military?

HG: Absolutely not. Absolutely not. I feel that women are just as equal as men, and sometimes—sometimes can do things better than men. [chuckles] I mean—

TS: Is that because they are women or just because of their individual talents?

HG: Both. Both, because I know a woman's way of thinking of things is different from a men's—man's way of thinking things. Sometimes I feel that women think through things a little bit differently, and because of that women can sometimes do certain things better than men feel like they can do them.

TS: Can you give me an example?

HG: No, not really.

TS: [chuckles] Okay, that's fine. That's kind of on the spot.

HG: Yeah. No, not really. I feel that—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: When you say—I guess when you say 'think things through' do you mean, like, maybe men sometimes make more rash decision?

HG: Yeah, absolutely. I feel absolutely they do sometimes. Women think better on their feet I think, and I don't know if it's because I'm a mom and I—I—I have that—it's natural for

a woman to think on their feet as a mom and—and I feel like sometimes that rolls over into your daily life of—of work environment.

TS: But you felt this even before you became a mom?

HG: Absolutely, and I think that a lot of that has to do with mothering nature and just the make-up of a female and their thought process, versus a male and their thought process.

TS: How about—Was there anything going on, like, in the culture at the time you were in that was important to you, like for music or TV or activities like that? Did you play any sports or anything in the service?

HG: I was in a mentor program where—and I will say this about the military, and I absolutely loved this. I don't know if you can tell but I am a big advocate for volunteering. I do a lot of volunteering; have all my life.

When I was active duty—When I was in VS-27, they had a program—it was a mentoring program—where there were four of us that twice a week we left work and went to—it was kind of like a Big Brother[s] Big Sister[s of America] program but it was at a school. So we went to the school and we sat down with at-risk students, and just talked. And they even gave us the leeway to—if we wanted to do things outside with that individual, because they have a single mom or whatever the case may be. And I was assigned to this—to a little girl, she was twelve; cutest little thing ever. And, I mean, at the time I was twenty-two so there was only ten years difference between us, but she was a very, very sad case; very sad case. And she respected me as a military—Of course, we wore our uniform when we went to go mentor. Our relationship got to a point where she was very open with me, told me a lot of things about her life, and I felt very sad for her, very sad for her, and she needed that out; that somebody to talk to; somebody to look up to; and I was that person for her. And I remember there were days where I would come and she would say to me, "I have been so looking forward to this day because I have got so much to tell you." And that's all she needed, was just somebody to talk to.

TS: Right.

HG: So I did that. Let me think. Did I do anything else? Not really. I mean, we would, as a group of friends, get together and play baseball or that sort of thing, but—

TS: But nothing like organized?

HG: No. No.

TS: When you—When you left the service, you didn't really leave it on good terms, then, necessarily?

HG: It left a bad taste in my mouth; I will say that.

TS: Yeah?

HG: Did it change my opinion of the military as whole? No. No.

TS: Just that particular unit?

HG: Yeah, just VP-30. I—I did not like that place. I would never go back there. I—If I had two people standing in front of me and somebody' saying, "We're recommissioning VS-27 and you can go back to V—VP-30." Oh [VS-]27, I'm all about it; all about it; all day long.

TS: How was your adjustment back to civilian life?

HG: It was easy because when I left for the military I worked at a flower shop. When I came back from the military, I went back to working at that flower shop.

TS: The same one?

HG: The same one. This would also be the same flower shop that sent me money to come home during Christmas to be with my family and work in the flower shop—

TS: How nice.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

HG: [chuckling]—because they needed help. "If you've got the time, Heather, we'll send you money so you can come home and—"

TS: Did you take them up on it?

HG: Oh, absolutely.

TS: Very nice.

HG: Absolutely. So I went back to working in the flower shop; became assistant manager at the flower shop.

TS: So that was a stable, kind of, transition, from something—

HG: Oh, I didn't miss a beat.

TS: There you go.

HG: Didn't miss a beat.

TS: Well, did you consider yourself a trailblazer at all as a woman in the navy?

HG: Not really.

TS: Other women had been there before you—

HG: Oh, yeah

TS: —in those positions?

HG: Yes.

TS: Would you recommend the service to other military—other women or men?

HG: Absolutely; absolutely. In fact, my son is—he is ROTC here; it's army ROTC at Millbrook [High School], and he is planning on joining the military after he graduates from high school. I'm all about it. He comes from a long line and it runs in his blood so I could not tell him, "No."

TS: There is a long line there, for sure.

HG: Yes.

TS: And now, have you ever used any of your veterans benefits?

HG: I had not until recently. In—We have in the American Legion a service officer that constantly tells us about military—veterans benefits and that sort of stuff—and I've always been the one that said, "I don't need it. I'm young, I don't need it." I let my GI Bill go. I never went back to school, until—almost two months now—June, July—Almost two months now I've been unemployed. And I have been to the VA [Veterans Affairs] office here, and I have talked to the gentleman there—really nice guy—about filing for VA disability, which has prompted me to get my personnel records. And then he told me about a program called VRAP [Veterans Retraining Assistance Program], which I had never heard of before, but it is basically a tool for veterans who

are unemployed to earn a—to learn a technical skill and get a certification; going back to school basically. But it's a full time—for unemployed, to learn a new skill, and it's really cool, and I got approved.

TS: That's great.

HG: Yeah, except that I'm not going to use it, again, which is why I'm moving to West Virginia, because my cousin and I are—are going to be working together. I've been in insurance for fifteen years now and have three designations, and we're going to be an excellent team; excellent team, so.

TS: Good. Well, good luck with that. That's great.

HG: Thank you.

TS: So do you think that your life has been any different because of your time you spent in the navy?

HG: Yes. Yes, in that a lot of places, or a lot of corners, that I've turned to or whatever, where it's been asked, "Could all the veterans stand?" or whatever, it seems to me that there are a lot, a lot, a lot of people out there that respect veterans.

For instance, I'm very active in scouts because my son is, and they had—at one of the round tables they called for all the veterans to come to the front of the room, and I sat there and I thought to myself, "Yeah, I'm not going to do it. I don't need to go up there."

But my friend that was sitting next to me knew that I was a veteran and she said, "That's you."

"No, I don't need to go."

"Yes, you do. Go."

So I go up, and a lot of people were kind of like—afterwards said, "I didn't know you were in the military. What branch were you in?" And it created conversation, and in turn, a different respect. They respected me for the position I was in scouting, but now I'm also a veteran, which creates a different kind of respect. So yeah, yeah, I think so.

TS: That's interesting.

HG: Yeah.

TS: Is there anything in particular you would want a civilian to know or understand about what it's like to serve in the military that they may not understand, or maybe they have a—don't appreciate?

HG: I feel—my personal experience—that there is a deeper camaraderie between veterans that have served together, versus a civilian that has worked with another civilian for years. And I say that because in the military there are hardships, unspoken understanding of who you are and where you've been and what you've done together. And I think the bond that a military veteran has with another veteran that has served together, is very strong. It is—is—I don't know. I guess I feel like it's an experience that everyone should go through to understand it, and it's—it's one of those things that if you haven't been there and done that you don't really understand; I think.

TS: When—When you think about the word patriotism, what does patriotism mean to you?

HG: Love for—And I'm going to throw out a word—Love for God and country. I don't have a religious affiliation. I—I do believe that there is a higher power out there that does help lead and guide us through life, and with that is our country. The love for our country, our freedoms—pride. A sense of pride in belonging to the greatest country in the world. You've got this big smile on your face. Did I hit it right? [laughing]

TS: No, it's what you feel. It's what you think about it.

HG: That's what I think it is. Love for God and country and the best country in the world.

TS: Well, that was my last formal question, but is there anything we haven't covered that you—you would like to bring up or mention or talk about?

HG: Now, I will say this process has brought me through a lot of emotions and a lot of thinking, a lot of remembering, and some things that I, I guess—I had partially forgotten. Definitely a rollercoaster of emotions going through this whole interview. It's been interesting.

TS: Is that okay?

HG: Oh, absolutely.

TS: Okay.

HG: Absolutely. And now I'm back to reality and what I'm supposed to be doing this afternoon.

TS: [chuckles]

HG: I'm like, "Really? Can I just get back to talking about my military career again?"

TS: There you go. Well, at that, then, Heather, I think we'll—I'll go ahead and shut the tape off. Okay?

HG: Thank you.

TS: If you don't have anything else to add.

HG: No, I'm good. Thank you very much.

TS: Well, thank you.

[End of Interview]