

## **WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL COLLECTION**

### **ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

INTERVIEWEE: M. Renee Sisk

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: August 17, 2013

[Begin Recording]

TS: Today is August seventeenth. My name is Therese Strohmer and I'm at the home of Renee Sisk in New Bern, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women [sic] Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Renee, how would you like your name to read on the collection?

RS: M. Renee Sisk.

TS: Okay, that's M—M as in—you said Mary—

RS: Mary, yes.

TS: But just the initial?

RS: Right.

TS: Okay. Thank you. Well, Renee, thank you for letting me come here and talk with you today.

RS: It's my pleasure.

TS: Why don't we start out with you having—telling me when and where you were born?

RS: I was born September 13, 1940 in Great Falls, Montana, at three p.m. in the afternoon.

TS: Oh, you even know the time, huh? [chuckles]

RS: Yes.

TS: Now, did you have—Do you have any brothers or sisters?

RS: Yes, I came from a family of four. I have an older sister, Sharon, and two younger brothers, Brent, and then Steven[?], the youngest.

TS: Okay, and then your parents?

RS: Were Marcus and Mary McCann—M-C capital C-A-N-N.

TS: And what did your folks do?

RS: Well, my dad did a couple of things. For a long time he had a farm machinery business, and that was in Livingston, Montana; we moved to Livingston when I was a child. And then he—As he got older he developed a heart problem, and the work was too heavy so he was the county tax collector.

TS: Oh, okay. [both chuckle]

TS: Did he enjoy that job?

RS: I think he did. He was very, very serious about it, and by the time he became the tax—I said collector, I should have said assessor.

TS: Oh, right.

RS: By the time he became the tax assessor, he knew so many people he knew their—[both chuckle] what their belongings were, and so he was very good at that.

TS: Yeah. Now, did your mother work outside the home?

RS: She did; as we got older she did. I remember her working in a department store called Hennessy's. I think it's two n's, two s's. Then she became a bookkeeper for—Let's see, what was it? It was another department store but I don't remember the name of it. [unclear]

TS: So a bookkeeper—

RS: Yes.

TS: —and then—then, like, working in a department store?

RS: Right.

TS: So you're growing up in Livingston, Montana. Was that like a rural town? What was that—What kind of town was that?

RS: Livingston, Montana is a place that you see in the movies all the time, when there are movies about—about Montana, because it was very picturesque. And it's about—It has a population of about twelve to fifteen thousand, I guess; somewhere in that area. And it's located in what is called the Paradise Valley. It's beautiful; it's just gorgeous there. And it's rural—yeah, I guess it's rural, but also now—since probably the seventies—Hollywood has

discovered it and we have—I should say—I sound like I still live there—numerous movie stars who have part-time homes there and it's quite a celebrity collection place.

TS: Is it? So like, housing prices went up and all that with—?

RS: Oh yes, all of that, and all these galleries appeared. [both chuckle] Lots of galleries.

TS: Yeah.

RS: So it's more of a touristy place now than it used to be.

TS: Did you live in town or outside—

RS: In town.

TS: In town? Okay. So what did you and your family and siblings do for fun?

RS: Well, because it was and still is Montana, it was a cultural desert. [both laugh]

TS: Cultural desert, okay.

RS: But we—we did a lot of things as a family. There were lots of picnics and camping trips, and one of our favorite things was to go to Chico Hot Springs [Resort and Day Spa], because we could go there even in the winter; C-H-I-C-O. And sometimes we would come out of the nice toasty water and the air would be so cold—

TS: [chuckles]

RS: —that it would freeze our hair temporarily.

TS: Oh, it would? [chuckles]

RS: Yeah.

TS: So you'd actually swim in the spring?

RS: Yes.

TS: Oh, okay. Were you an outdoor kind of girl?

RS: Not really.

TS: No?

RS: [chuckles] I mean, we—we did all the—We pretty much had to be outdoor to a certain extent but I never could catch them all.

TS: No?

TS: So growing up, when you went to school, did you walk to school, or—

RS: Walked to school.

TS: Okay.

RS: Another thing about Livingston is the incredible wind. And I remember I had probably a four mile walk to school, and I would turn a corner and the wind would just hit me. And I—Seems like probably four days out of five I had to fight the wind walking to school, but it was at my back coming home, so.

TS: I never would have thought that about Montana, having a lot of wind, but I guess that open space. Is that what it comes from?

RS: The what?

TS: Having an open space?

RS: Well, this was not really an open space because it was a covered—it's like, on four sides mountains.

TS: Oh, so you're in a valley.

RS: Yeah, it's a valley.

TS: Okay. Neat. Well, so then—So, did you have—What was the name of the school that you went to?

RS: Well, Park County High School [Park High School].

TS: And did you like school?

RS: Well yeah, sure.

TS: Did you have a favorite teacher or subject or anything?

RS: Well, I really didn't like English in high school.

TS: [chuckles]

RS: I thought that I would be a nurse but I—I really was not cut out for nursing, so English was easy. So that's what I did, but I don't remember having a favorite teacher.

TS: No?

RS: No, I don't.

TS: Were you a reader, or—

RS: Oh, voracious.

TS: Voracious reader?

RS: Still.

TS: Why did you like reading?

RS: Well, I'm not sure because it was—I was always able to get high on a good book—

TS: Yeah?

RS: —and go somewhere else. And one of my—Our house was not all that big and there were six people in it, but my mother had her own car and so I'd often—would just go sit in her car and read so I could be alone.

TS: Have some alone time?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Have some space to yourself? Sure. As a young girl growing up then, what did you—what did you think about, like, how your future looked? Did you think about that at all?

RS: Oh, all the time. I was sure, because by now we're in the cold war and people are building bomb shelters.

TS: Did you—Did your family build one?

RS: No, we did not. But we did have a large supply of food on hand. I just figured that one day I would be evaporated in a—in a bomb.

TS: Did you really?

RS: I really did. I just hoped that I could live to graduate from high school.

TS: So were you fearful?

RS: No, I think I was resigned.

TS: Okay. Now, did you do the duck and cover things under your desk?

RS: Always, yeah, we had to get under our desks and had all those little drills, yes.

TS: So were you, like, aware of the—what was going on in the world then? You have an awareness—world view then?

RS: I did, and it was kind of a strange thing. The reason that I did—I don't know if you ev—if you ever heard of the McCarthy hearings?

[The Army–McCarthy hearings were a series of hearings held by the United States Senate's Subcommittee on Investigations in April and June of 1954, for the purpose of investigating conflicting accusations between the U.S. Army and Senator Joseph McCarthy]

TS: Yes, I have.

RS: Well, my father worked at Malmstrom Air Force Base during World War II, and he was in charge of loading airplanes, that it turns out to be was uranium; turned out to be uranium that they were sending to Russia. So [chuckles] he was interviewed. Mr. McCarth—Not Mr. McCarthy, but some—Some guy came to our house and interviewed my father about that. So that made me aware because then we always had to listen to what was on the radio about the—about the hearings. So yeah, I guess so.

TS: Why did they—So he worked at a job where they—that the work sent the uranium to the Soviet Union?

RS: The United States did; it went from Malmstrom Air Force Base. At that time Russia was an ally.

TS: Right, so then later they came back and interviewed your father as though he had done something wrong?

RS: No.

TS: No? Just wondering what had happened?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RS: Just wondered—wanted to know what had gone on.

TS: Okay. And so, is your father in the service?

RS: No, no.

TS: He was a civilian working there?

RS: Yes.

TS: Did you know anybody in the service as a young girl?

RS: I had two uncles that were in. Actually, I had three uncles that were in, yeah.

TS: Okay. What was it like growing up in the fifties, besides just the Cold War?

RS: It was great fun.

TS: Yeah?

RS: I mean, it was—it was very much the poodle skirt and boyfriend's ring around your neck, and bobby socks, and saddle shoes. And we did do a lot of dancing and we went to a lot of basketball games; it was too cold to go to football games. [both laugh]

TS: So inside sports were fine?

RS: Yeah. They—They had football games but we didn't go; it was just too cold. So, yeah, we had a good time. And [International Order of the] Rainbow [for] Girls and that sort of stuff.

TS: What kind of girls?

RS: Rainbow?

TS: Oh Rainbow, like Girl Scouts, but a different kind of—

RS: No, it's actually a auxiliary of the Masons.

TS: Oh, okay, I hadn't heard of them; Rainbow Girls. And what kind of things did you do through that organization?

RS: Well, of course we was [sic] like a club, but they—it was rituals but it was also social, and so we had parties and things. And we had—Before the basketball games, and the early football games [chuckles]—the ones in September—we would have what we called pitch in[?], and it was several people in a group, several—and we'd go to one person's house and have dinner and then we'd go to the game.

TS: Oh, neat. Kind of like a potluck?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Now, did you—What kind of music did you listen to? Were you—

RS: Oh, I have to say that I'm still listening to it; fifties music. I [chuckles]—

TS: So, like, the big band?

RS: Oh no, that was the forties.

TS: That was the forties, okay, so what did you like?

RS: So we're into rock and roll.

TS: Oh, you're rock and roll, okay. What bands did you like; groups?

RS: Well, none of them lasted very long. But of course—

TS: Well, if you're still listening to them they definitely lasted.

RS: But I'm still listening to the same ones. I mean, they didn't go through—

TS: I see.

RS: Of course, there was Elvis [Presley], and Fabian [Forte], and—Who was that?—Marty Robbins, and well—and who is the one that married Sandra Dee? [chuckles]

TS: Oh, yeah, I'm not sure; I know who you're talking about though, yeah.

RS: I can't remember names very well any more.

TS: Well, that's okay. How about movies; were you a movie-goer?

RS: Yes.

TS: Remember any actors or actresses that you really admired or—

RS: Well, of course, Jimmy Stewart and Alan Ladd, but we had a thing in our town, and every Wednesday night was "Take a Chance".

TS: "Take a Chance"?

RS: Yes.

TS: Okay.

RS: "Take a Chance." And we went to the local theater and it cost twenty-five cents and we just went to the movie; we didn't know what we were going to see until it came on the screen. And we were all there, [both chuckle] and it was fun, and lots of times we saw old movies. I—I remember the first movie I saw there was *Beau Geste*, and it was probably one that was made in the thirties, but—



TS: What was it called?

RS: *Beau Geste*.

TS: *Beau Geste*?

RS: Have you ever seen that?

TS: No, I have not.

RS: B-E-A-U G-E-S-T-E. They've made it a couple times, and it's about these three brothers who go off and join the French—

TS: Legion?

RS: French Legion, yes; French Foreign Legion.

TS: No I—I have not heard of that one. So you—So you had your dances, you went to the movies, and you're worried that you're going to be evaporated. [chuckles]

RS: Yes. Pretty much.

TS: Okay. When did you—When did you graduate from high school?

RS: I graduated in 1958.

TS: In 1958?

RS: And I was seventeen. I graduated in the top ten percent. I wasn't the valedictorian, but—

TS: Yeah.

RS: —I was up there.

TS: What did you do after you graduated?

RS: Well, my sister was married and living in Salt Lake City [Utah], so I went and spent, probably, a month with her. And then I came back—Or I start—got on the train to come home and I didn't know what I was going to do. I didn't think my fa— parents could afford to send me to college and—

TS: Did you want to go to college?

RS: Not really.

TS: Okay.

RS: Not—Not then. So—You’re going to think this sounds really stupid, but on this train I—I met this sailor, and he was just out of boot camp from Sandy Oak[?] or something. He was dressed in his little white suit, and so immaculate, and I had brought a bag of cherries with me from my sister’s to eat on the train and I shared them with him. He didn’t get a drop on himself. [chuckles]

TS: On that white suit.

RS: That white suit was just as finish—clean when he finished that bag of cherries as before, and then it occurred to me that I could probably join the navy. So I thought about it and thought about it and when I got home I told my mother that’s what I was going to do.  
And they said, “No, you’re not.”

TS: And you were seven—eighteen—

RS: I was seventeen and I had to wait until September—

TS: When you turned eighteen?

RS: —when I turned eighteen, yes.

TS: So both of your parents said no.

RS: Oh, they did.

TS: Why did they not want you to join the service?

RS: Oh, I think women probably had a—a bad reputation, and they didn’t understand it. They had no knowledge at all. But after I joined they were very, very proud of me.

TS: Yeah? Now, did you only consider the navy?

RS: Yes.

TS: Yes? None of the other services?

RS: No.

TS: So thanks to that sailor with the cher—that was eating your cherries? [both chuckle]

RS: Yeah. Yeah.

TS: Well, that’s kind of interesting. So—Okay, so you turn—so you turn eighteen a few months later.

RS: And I turned in September and then I joined, I'm thinking, on the fifth of October. I think that might have been the day that I was sworn in.

TS: Yeah. So you're pretty much defying your parents then.

RS: Yeah, but—and my mother told me that when my dad put me on the train to go be sworn in, that—that he cried. They had to—But they got over it.

TS: Yeah. Now, had you—had you been, like, an independent kind of—

RS: Always.

TS: Okay. Yeah.

RS: Yeah. My—My sister was the one who was less dominant, and so my mother took such good care of her and babied her and everything. I had to be independent, so I was.

TS: Yeah. So you had, like, a sense of yourself and you made your decisions and—

RS: Yes.

TS: You weren't all that distraught that your parents were like, "I don't—We don't want you to do this"?

RS: No.

TS: No. [both laugh]

RS: Didn't occur to me to be distraught.

TS: When you went in and talked to the recruiter, did they tell you, like, "Here's the kind of jobs you can have," or how—how did that—Do you remember how that went?

RS: Well, yes, and—and I have—as I've said, I had thought about being a nurse, so that was really the only thing I really considered—

TS: Okay.

RS: —was the Hospital Corps. And he told me that—Well, especially after I'd been to Seattle and taken tests, that I could be anything I wanted to be.

TS: Okay.

RS: That I could go to any school. And I—That's where I wanted to go to.

TS: So that's where you went?

RS: Yes.

TS: Then, in like—I'm sorry, forgot what month you said you went; October? So you get—you get a—Where'd you go to your basic training?

RS: [United States Naval Training Center,] Bainbridge. So I flew from—

TS: This is in Maryland, right?

RS: Yeah. I flew to Washington, D.C.

TS: Had you ever been on a plane before?

RS: Yes.

TS: Oh, you had? Okay.

RS: Yes. So I flew to Washington, D.C. and—I was pretty cute. [laughs] Not to sound too vain but I always got a lot of attention, and this—there was—and I was also very dumb.

TS: [chuckles] Okay.

RS: There was this man sitting on the plane next to me that had gotten on in Cincinnati and he asked where I was going; I told him, "To Washington." He asked if I'd ever been there before and I said, "No."

And he said, "Well—" I said I had to go to the—to the train station and catch a—catch a train to Bainbridge, but it was for—wasn't for several hours. And so he said, "Well, let me show you Washington."

TS: Just some stranger?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RS: And he was a total gentleman.

TS: Yes.

RS: Took me in a taxi, and we saw Washington.

TS: Just drove around, or did you get out and look at things?

RS: Well, we did both.

TS: Okay. What did you get to see? You remember?

RS: Oh yes. I saw it all; the Capitol, the Washington Monument, and Jefferson [Memorial] and Lincoln [Memorial], and all those people, yeah. It was—It was really wonderful; took several hours, and that was very nice of him. And then—

TS: Did he just work there? Or did he say—

RS: He had business there.

TS: Okay.

RS: And it never occurred to me that he was being anything but nice and I wished him well and went on my way. [both chuckle]

TS: And then you went to your station and—

RS: Got on a train and went to Bainbridge. And we didn't get there till quite late, and I remember they herded us all into the mess hall and gave us cold cuts and fruit. Seemed that we were hungry and we probably were. I don't remember it that much but—

TS: Yeah.

RS: Yeah.

TS: But do you remember experiencing basic training?

RS: Oh, sure.

TS: What kind of things did you do for training; do you recall?

RS: Well, we didn't do the things that I think the other services did. I—For some reason, I was selected as the recruit company commander.

TS: Okay.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RS: But—

TS: You were pretty young, though.

RS: Yeah.

TS: Probably one of the youngest ones.

RS: I was just barely eighteen. And anyway, then we—we went to school. We learned all about the navy; went to school all day long. And we marched to lunch, and we marched—well, we marched to all of our meals and we sang these silly songs on the way.

TS: You remember any of them?

RS: Let's see.

TS: You can sing if you'd like.

RS: You probably don't want me to.

TS: Oh, sure. You got a piano in here, so—

RS: [chuckles]

TS: —I can have you play.

RS: Well, we sang a version of “Bye, Bye, Blackbird”.

TS: Okay.

RS: And “Anchors Aweigh,” and something about the Navy Wavy Corps [Roll Along, Wavy Navy?].

TS: Okay.

RS: And then we went back to our barracks and cleaned our barracks and did our homework. I went to school for nine weeks, I guess.

TS: Yeah.

RS: And they gave us on-the-job training for a couple of weeks, and some of them did KP [kitchen patrol] and stuff like that. I worked in the education office. [laughs]

TS: Oh, really? What did you do there?

RS: Typed.

TS: Yeah. Had you—Had you been a type—Had you—

RS: I had taken one year of typing in high school.

TS: Okay, so you had a rudimentary—

RS: I can type.

TS: Yeah. So was—First of all, was it what you expected?

RS: No. But I liked it. [both chuckle]

TS: Yeah? Well, what did you expect?

RS: Well, I don't know. I expected push-ups and—

TS: Oh, did you—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RS: —and stuff like—Yeah, I thought that's what we'd have to do, but we were treated like ladies.

TS: So the most physical exertion was really the marching?

RS: The marching, and swimming.

TS: Oh, you did swimming too?

RS: We had to swim; and we had to pass a swimming test.

TS: How'd you do with that?

RS: Fine, I had—I knew how to swim.

TS: So that wasn't really—

RS: No, and we had some life-saving things, like pulling[?] jeans and filling them full of air and using them for flotation.

TS: Okay.

RS: You tie the ends of the legs, and then push them over your head and fill them with air, and put them on the water and then you can float on them.

TS: Okay.

RS: That sort of thing.

TS: Okay. Actually, I hadn't heard of that. [both chuckle] So—So you liked it?

RS: I did.

TS: It wasn't as—So it wasn't physically or mentally—

RS: No.

TS: —difficult?

RS: No. The—The worst part, or the most difficult part, was homesickness, I guess.

TS: Yeah? Were you pretty homesick?

RS: For the first week or two I was.

TS: Yeah? Now, had you spent much time away from home except—with your family even?

RS: Yeah.

TS: So it's the first time you're away from home; and you were a ways away from home, too.

RS: I was lonely.

TS: Yeah. Now—So you went through basic, and then you go to your first duty assignment which was—

RS: Well, yeah—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: No, you went to training first, right, or—

RS: Basic training and we finished around—in December so—

TS: Okay.

RS: —we were home for Christmas, and then we went to [Naval Station] Great Lakes; coldest place in the world; colder than Montana.

TS: Colder than Montana?



RS: Yeah, wind coming off of Lake Michigan. It looked like an ice storm all the time because it was damp and it would freeze around the branches.

TS: You mean you were there in the winter?

RS: I was there from—yeah, from January to May.

TS: And this was where you were learning about the Hospital Corps?

RS: Right; learning how to take care of patients and that sort of thing.

TS: Okay. Now, how was it—how did you—So when you went home, you went—did you go home in uniform for your—your—

RS: Yes.

TS: Yeah? How did that—How did that feel?

RS: Oh, my family was so proud.

TS: Yeah? And how did you feel? Did you wear it, like, on the plane ride home or anything?

RS: I did, and I felt very proud of it too.

TS: Yeah. And—Okay, so now you're—you're learning—How did the training go for the Hospital Corps?

RS: Oh, it went very smoothly. I—I breezed through that.

TS: Did you?

RS: Yeah.

TS: And you're—And so now, did you get to put in for a particular duty assignment? Did you say, "I'd like to go here"? Yes?

RS: Yes. I didn't put in for Bethesda.

TS: No? Where did you put in for? Where did you want—

RS: I thought I would like to go to [Naval Air Station] Corpus Christi.

TS: Okay.

RS: But I got to— went to Bethesda, and I got very easy [unclear] [laughs]. Other people were working on wards that were filled with dependents and lots of sick people, and I was put on female officers. And—

TS: Female officers that were in the ward?

RS: Female—Yes.

TS: As patients?

RS: As patients.

TS: Okay.

RS: So we never had very many, five or six, and there were three of us to take care of them, and— [chuckles]

TS: You weren't overworked?

RS: I wasn't overworked. And then I was transferred to a clinic—the orthopedic clinic—which also—I wasn't overworked, but I enjoyed it.

TS: Yeah.

RS: And while I was there I met my children's father who was going to lab school at the time.

TS: Was he in the military?

RS: He was in the navy.

TS: Okay.

RS: And so, we got married in October of 1960, and then I got out in November because they didn't want you if you were married in those days.

TS: Oh, they didn't?

RS: No, and Lord, if you were pregnant [chuckles] you were out in a minute. So they didn't want married or pregnant women. And then after I got out, there were all these issues that came about, so. Now you can be either one.

TS: Married and pregnant?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Well, when you were working and living in Bethesda, were you in, like, a barracks, or what kind—what was your housing like?

RS: Barracks.

TS: What was that like?

RS: Well, there wasn't too much privacy.

TS: How many people in a room; things like that?

RS: Two.

TS: Okay.

RS: And it wasn't—Actually, we sort of made our rooms out of lockers and things so that we could have some privacy. And we—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Did they allow you to, like, personalize it a little bit or—

RS: Yeah.

TS: —was it all military?

RS: No, we could personalize it, and we had barracks inspection but they didn't seem to mind if we did that. But we had to take our showers in the shower room, and—

TS: That was more open?

RS: It was—

TS: Wasn't like a private bath?

RS: No, it was open, but there were stalls.

TS: Yes.

RS: Yeah.

TS: Oh, okay, you could go in and take—

RS: Yes.

TS: And how are you—How are you liking the navy? What—What did you think about it?

RS: I liked it just fine. I got a little nervous because—I don't remember if you remember—I mean, I don't know if you remember the [Francis] Gary Powers U-2 flight over Russia?

[The 1960 U-2 incident occurred when a United States U-2 spy plane, piloted by Francis Gary Powers, was shot down while flying in Soviet airspace, and subsequently convicted of espionage.]

TS: I do know about that.

RS: You know about that.

TS: Yes.

RS: Well, that happened while I was at Bethesda and everybody was very panicky; thought that we would surely go to war because Russia wouldn't tolerate it. And so, that was kind of—

TS: Why—Why don't you describe for people who aren't familiar, like, that are reading this or listening to it.

RS: Well, it gave us the Cold War and still it was Russia and he was spying, obviously.

TS: So he was in a [Lockheed] U-2 flying over the Soviet Union—

RS: Right.

TS: —and got—

RS: And so, we were all afraid that Russia wouldn't tolerate the spying and would retaliate and—didn't happen but we thought it might.

TS: Did you think you were going to get evaporated again?

RS: Yes.

TS: Did you?

RS: Yes.

TS: [chuckles] See, I always had that kind of fear; that Cold War fear of the Soviets.

RS: Yes, and even through the Cuban [Missile] Crisis [chuckles], I mean—

TS: The nuclear war, sort of.

RS: Yes.

TS: So how—Did you ever—In the period that you were in, did you ever have any evaluations, or promotions, or things like that?

RS: Well yes, I started out as a seaman recruit and I became a seaman, and then I became a seaman, third class. I was evaluated however many times that has to be.

TS: Did you feel like you were treated fairly for your—those kind of things?

RS: Actually, I was probably treated more than fairly because I was kind of a rebel.

TS: You were? Well, you haven't really told me any rebel things; what are you doing?

RS: Well, not—

TS: [chuckles]

RS: I hated those shoes.

TS: Okay.

RS: [chuckles]

TS: What kind of shoes were they that you had to wear?

RS: They were—We called them granny shoes, and they had a thick heel about two inches high, and then they laced up and tied at your ankle. Well, they were really ugly. And so, there was—A dispensation came down from—from somebody—God, I guess—that we could wear low-heel pumps with our dress uniforms, but I wore them with the working dresses too.

TS: So you wore them with whatever you had on. You got rid of the granny—

RS: I got rid of them, yeah.

TS: Did you get in trouble for that?

RS: I got called on the carpet once for it, from the nurse that was in charge of the—a ward. She was actually in charge of several, and I told her I wasn't [unclear] wear those other shoes. [chuckles]

TS: And what did she say?

RS: She told me I was very impertinent, and she was going to write it down, and I guess she probably did but—

TS: Didn't affect your—

RS: Didn't affect anything, no.

TS: Now, did you have any kind of special training that you received on the job or—

RS: Just Corps School.

TS: Corps School. Did you have a curfew?

RS: No, there was no curfew but we worked long hours. We were on what we had called port and starboard watch, so we would work a thirteen hour day, from—from—fourteen hour day, from seven to nine one day, and then the next day we would work from seven to noon, but we worked every day, so—

TS: Not a lot of time off?

RS: No.

TS: Did you get some leave or passes?

RS: Oh yes, yes, yes; personal leave[?]

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: What did you like, Renee, to do for fun?

RS: Well, I dated a lot. And we did—We did all kinds of things. I mean, bowling and motorcycle riding and drinking; [both chuckle] dancing; a lot of different things.

TS: Yeah? Where'd you go motorcycle riding? I haven't heard that very often to be honest with you.

RS: [chuckles] I used to—I was just so stupid. There was this—

TS: Okay.

RS: —guy I dated, had a motorcycle, and he'd pick me up and take me for motorcycle rides and he always took me down Connecticut Avenue, and do you know what the traffic is like on Connecticut Avenue? [laughing] I—

TS: It's pretty busy.

RS: It's very—was very busy, but there was a restaurant we liked down there called the Roma[?], so we'd ride the motorcycle down and eat at the Roma. I don't know how we survived it.

TS: Now, did you—How did you feel like you were treated overall, as a—So when—Because when you talked about going into the navy your parents were like, “Oh, you know those kind of women—you don't want—”

RS: Well, they're—I grew up very fast.

TS: Okay.

RS: I learned a lot about life that I didn't know about, and—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: What didn't—What did you learn?

RS: Well, I learned that not everyone was as celibate as I was because I lost two roommates. [chuckles]

TS: Lost? In what way did you—

RS: Pregnancies.

TS: Oh, so they had to get out? That's where you said they got out lickety-split.

RS: The first one, when I woke up and I heard her eating crackers I didn't know what it was, but by the second one I knew, so—

TS: The science of pregnancy.

RS: Yeah. And I—I don't know, I just learned a lot about the world and I met a lot of interesting people. One of the ladies that was on our ward had been with the State Department in Nepal, and she had these wonderful pictures of herself tiger-hunting with the prince; [chuckles] a tiger stretched out in front of them, [unclear], an elephant behind. I thought, “That's got to be the most dramatic thing I've ever seen.”

TS: [chuckles]

RS: And I learned that people really did that, so—

TS: Did you meet people from all over the country that you worked with?

RS: I did.

TS: Did that, like, change your world view at all?

RS: Oh, yes; of course.

TS: In what ways?

RS: Well, I hadn't—I hadn't been to very many states before. Let's see, Montana and Idaho and Washington, Utah, Wyoming, and North Dakota, I guess, were the extent of my travels before that. And everybody was from somewhere else, and it was fun to talk to them and learn about where they were from and what it was like there, so yeah.

TS: Yeah. Now, did you have any humorous things happen to you while you were in the navy?

RS: I suppose, but I can't think of any right now.

TS: Yeah? No practical jokes or anything in the barracks—

[speaking simultaneously]

RS: Oh yeah, yeah, when I was the recruit company commander I'd come in from leave and they'd have short-sheeted my bed; that sort of thing.

TS: Yeah. So it sounds like you actually had, like, a few leadership positions at a really young age. What was that like? Was that—Were you comfortable with that?

RS: Oh, yes.

TS: Yeah? That's just, like, your personality?

RS: I guess.

TS: You had always done things that you weren't—Did you ever feel like you were put in a position to do something that you were really challenged in?

RS: [pause] I'm going through my life here.

TS: That's all right, take your time.

RS: I guess motherhood. [both laugh]

TS: Motherhood. There you go. Well, did anything—did you ever see any kind of sexual harassment, or—



RS: Oh, all the time.

TS: Oh, you did? What kind of things would you see? Was it anything—Did you experience it yourself?

RS: Of course. I told you I was pretty cute. [laughs]

TS: Okay; all right. So what happened?

RS: Well, I remember one. I went to the dentist, and he was a navy dentist, a commander, and he filled my tooth, and told me all about his lovely apartment and his nice car, and he said, “You’ll need to come back and have that filling polished.” I told you I was dumb.

So I went back to get my filling polished, and then he told me it would need one more polishing. And all this time he’s—he’s—he’s bribing me, I guess; asking me if I wouldn’t like to drive his car [chuckles], if I could go to lunch, stuff like that. Then I took a—This is another one; this was kind of fun.

TS: Did you—Did you actually go out and date?

RS: I did not.

TS: Okay, but he was trying to get you to.

RS: He was, and I just—I knew I wasn’t supposed to date an officer.

TS: Oh, okay.

RS: Wouldn’t stop me now, but— [both chuckle]

TS: At the time—

RS: At the time.

TS: Okay.

RS: I took a military hop. I was going to go home on leave, and I got as far as an air force base; South Dakota, I think. Anyway, I had to spend the night.

TS: Okay.

RS: So I checked in at the air force women’s barracks—but I’ll tell you before what happened. I’m sitting on the plane reading my book, and the steward said, “The captain would like to see you in the cockpit.”

So I went up to the cockpit, and he showed me all the—all the stuff, and asked me if I was free for dinner and I said “Oh, no. I’m not.”

So anyway, I went back to my seat and I checked into the—to the barracks, and he called me, and said “Are you sure you’re not free for dinner?”

I said, “Okay, I’m free.” [both laugh] I did go to dinner with him, and he introduced me to his commanding officer and all; we had a very nice time. He had a nice little convertible, and I enjoyed that. There were always guys hitting and I knew, but I wasn’t ever threatened—

TS: Right.

RS: —with anything.

TS: But did you actually feel like you were being harassed?

RS: No.

TS: So there was a lot of invitations for dating and—

RS: There was one guy that harassed me—

TS: Okay.

RS: —and that was in corps school, and he was—It was awful. I mean, he’d try to look up my skirt when I was coming down the stairs, and he was always propositioning me. And I finally reported him, I—

TS: Did you?

RS: Yeah.

TS: What happened when you reported him; what’d they say?

RS: Well, it was where I learned an important lesson. The chief that was in charge of our corps school group was a real salty guy, and he said, “McCann, you’re a good-looking tomato, what do you expect?”

And then the nurse was in charge, and she said, “You’re such a pretty girl, why don’t you?” So, it was like, what can you expect; just suck it up.

TS: And that’s how the chief nurse was kind of saying, that—So you had to be the one that set the boundaries—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RS: I had to be the—yes.

TS: —and the men could do what they wanted or say what they wanted and—yeah, you’re naughty. She’s—Renee’s naughty. [both chuckle] Yes? So, how did—They didn’t actually have the term sexual harassment in the fifties.

RS: No.

TS: But did you—did it make you uncomfortable? Was it something that you—

RS: Of course.

TS: Yeah. Did other women talk about it at that time to each other, or—

RS: Well, it was happening to them, too.

TS: Right.

RS: Yeah. Yeah, we all talked; “Stay away from this guy because—” yeah.

TS: Okay. Yeah. And so, there’d be like that network of—if you’re at a certain base, to know—Interesting.

So you—You’re, like—Even the nursing corps, you’re around a lot more females in the navy than some of the ones that weren’t in the—did—

RS: Well, there were a lot of guys, too. And I remember this old admiral, I was—I had to go down to the floor below us. You know that big tower at Bethesda?

TS: Okay—

TS: Have you’ve seen it?

TS: I don’t think so, no.

RS: Okay, well that’s—They call it the tower, and that’s where the wards originally were—

TS: Okay.

RS: —when they built the hospital, and so on the floor below me was—was a men’s ward. There was an old admiral there, and I guess he had Alzheimer’s or something worse. Well, he had—

TS: I can pause this for a second.

RS: Okay.

[Phone Ringing, Recording Paused]

TS: Alright, we'll go ahead and restart. Okay, we're back now.

RS: The old admiral who caught me one day.

TS: Caught you?

RS: Caught me. [cuhckles]

TS: Like cornered you, or what does that mean?

RS: I mean caught me by both wrists, and I could not get away from that old codger. He was strong.

TS: Was he a patient, or—

RS: Yeah.

TS: Oh, okay. So what—

RS: They had to rescue me.

TS: What—Who's "they"?

RS: The corpsmen had to rescue me. [chuckles]

TS: Did you have to call out for help?

RS: Yes.

TS: Oh, you did?

RS: Yes.

TS: So what was that admiral up to?

RS: We don't know. I guess he just—

TS: Did—Were you ever fearful?

RS: Oh, of course I was. I didn't know what he was going to do and he was very, very strong.

TS: Yeah. Did anybody deal with him?

RS: Well, he didn't have all his puppies on the porch, and they were just—extracted me—[both chuckle]

TS: Okay.

RS: —and I avoided him.

TS: I see. Okay. So you—What I was going to ask you was—Now, you've talked about this time and—in the Cold War. Did—Were there any leaders that you admired, either military or civilian? You were in during [President Dwight David "Ike"] Eisenhower's presidency.

RS: I'm trying to think if there was anybody in particular. I think I was—I just don't think I was that aware. I met the Secretary of the Navy. [chuckles]

TS: When you were working in the hospital?

RS: Yeah, he came up and he just gave me his card and wanted to see a particular patient, and I said, "I'll show you," and so I walked down and we're just chatting and chatting, and then when he left, I looked—pulled the card out of my pocket and it was [Admiral] Arleigh Burke, the Secretary of the Navy. I was— [chuckles]

TS: You didn't know who he was?

RS: I didn't know who he was.

TS: Did he—Was he in his uniform?

RS: Yeah, but—

TS: But you saw admirals, and—

RS: All the time.

TS: All the time.

RS: Yeah.

TS: What did—So that wasn't something that you were nervous about?

RS: Not a bit, no. [both chuckle] Ignorance is bliss.

TS: Okay. So—So you weren't politically tuned in to things like that?

RS: No.

TS: But you were tuned in to, like you said—like, the McCarthy and the U-2 incident and those kind of things.

RS: Those things we knew about, yeah. Yeah.

TS: Yeah. So incidents and, like—and also I think you mentioned, like, the Cuban Missile Crisis.

RS: Right.

TS: You had been out by then.

RS: I was out.

TS: So you—How did you feel overall that you were treated as a female in the navy?

RS: Well, I think I was treated better than most.

TS: Why do you think that?

RS: I never did know, but—and this is going to sound really bad—this is going to sound really bad, but I was smarter than [chuckling] most.

TS: Yeah?

RS: And I was a quick learner, and some of the others weren't—weren't.

TS: As far as the job went?

RS: Right.

TS: Yeah. Did they—So you think that—When you say you were treated better, how did you see that other people were treated then?

RS: Well, they got more menial jobs.

TS: Okay, like you said where you got to go to the library—

RS: Yes.

TS: —instead of KP, things like that?

RS: Right, and even with the patient care and all that—when we—They would go on—on wards that were filled with dependents and sometimes, like, fifty people on that ward. And they would just run their legs off, and so—

TS: So some people got a lot tougher assignments?

RS: They did.

TS: Now, you also worked in a period—time of, like, racial turmoil and—kind of creeping up on us. Did you have—Did you work with any blacks or—

RS: Of course, yeah.

TS: Men and women?

RS: Yes.

TS: How did you feel that dynamic was going on at that time in the—in the navy?

RS: I suppose—Well, let me tell you a little story.

TS: Okay, I love stories.

RS: There was a girl in the hospital corps, a young woman, and obviously she was—quadrant[?] maybe—I don't know that thing, but she was a very light black.

TS: Okay.

RS: And—

TS: Light-skinned.

RS: Yes.

TS: Okay.

RS: But obviously—[extraneous comments about pet redacted] So anyway, she liked to date the white guys. And I was doing an ambulance run one time with a young man and he said—he was talking about her, and—I forget what he said—“She's very bowlegged.” I said I hadn't noticed and he said, “Well, there's some speculation as to how she got that way.” [chuckles] And he said “You know, I knew her when she was black, and now she's trying to pass herself off as white.” So, I guess it would be still wanted to be[?]. It wasn't a time of black pride, but I don't think we treated them any differently.

TS: Did you have any friends that were black?

RS: Yes. They were—There were probably—I'm saying probably 25% were black [unclear].

[Speaking simultaneously]

TS: In the field that you were in, or just in the units that you worked in?

RS: Yes.

TS: Twenty-five percent.

RS: Probably.

TS: So you're—Are you saying that this young man was saying she's trying—she was trying to, I guess, pass as white, and that—and also that maybe she was sexually active?

RS: In order to do that, yeah.

TS: To do that—To get, like, acceptance and the dating and things like that. So that was like the—a stereotypical—

RS: I think so. But I think more than black and white—we weren't concerned with that so much as homosexuality.

TS: Okay, so how was that?

RS: Because that was just not tolerated. I had a guy I used to love to date; he was so much fun. And we—we'd go to this German restaurant and he had a wonder—and sing, and he had a wonderful voice, and I just loved to be with him, and then one day he was kicked out of the navy for being a homosexual. And I—I just couldn't believe it. [laughs]

TS: It never crossed your mind that that was—

RS: It never crossed my mind that he was.

TS: Yeah. Did anybody suspect it? Well, apparently some people.

RS: Apparently, but not I. I—

TS: Yeah. How about for the women?

RS: Oh, yes. There were those that we supposed were, but—so you just didn't get too friendly. [chuckles] You were polite and social and all, but you didn't want to encourage them. But yeah, that was just not tolerated. Now I guess it's still “Don't Ask, Don't Tell”, but—

TS: Well, that was just repealed.

RS: Was it?



TS: Yeah. That was repealed a couple years ago, I think?

["Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was repealed in 2011]

RS: That's how much up-to-date I am.

TS: Well, what do you think about that then if—with—So people now in the military can be openly gay or lesbian.

RS: Well, they're everywhere else.

TS: Pardon?

RS: They can be everywhere else.

TS: Yeah.

RS: So I—It's not my problem. I—I have several homosexual friends.

TS: Yeah. But some people say that it breaks down the unit cohesion, that it—that it makes it difficult to work together. Did you ever feel that way?

RS: No.

TS: No?

RS: No.

TS: What's your views, then, on women in the military today, and the roles they play that are different than the roles that you—

RS: Oh wow, they are different. We would never have considered going to sea. I mean, it just—We had a little ship on our boot camp; it was called The Ship Never Sail[?]. [both chuckle]

TS: Is that right? Okay.

RS: And we knew that we couldn't go to sea, and certainly never combat. We were just for support.

TS: What do you think about the opportunities that women—

RS: I think it's great.

TS: Yeah? Do you think there's any role that—or job that women shouldn't have in the navy or in the military?

RS: Yeah, I don't think they ought to clean bilges and stuff. [both laugh]

TS: Should the men do that?

RS: Men should do that.

TS: Okay. But—So now they're starting to put them on—or they're getting ready to put them on submarines.

RS: Well, the quarters are close. Submarines are much bigger than they used to be. I never thought about it but I think it's probably okay. And they go into combat and I think that's fine. My niece was in the army. She's with Homeland Security now but she's been a couple times in Afghanistan. She was a—a journalist, and was writing for *Stars and Stripes* but she had—she was in combat duty and combat areas, and she loved it. [chuckles]

TS: She loved it? And she was in the army?

RS: Yeah, the army.

TS: Where does she live?

RS: Where's she live now?

TS: Yeah.

RS: She lives in Anchorage, Alaska.

TS: Oh, is that right? Is she still—no, she's with Homeland Security.

RS: Yes.

TS: Oh, okay. So over time, then, we've seen the roles of women change. Do you see yourself as a trailblazer in any way?

RS: Maybe; maybe; but not much of a one. I—I didn't do anything that new and different, but—

TS: But you changed your parents' attitude about—

RS: Yes.

TS: —what—women in the military—

RS: Yes, I did. And I got the respect of a lot of my other relatives, too, that were—

TS: In the service?

RS: Right.

TS: And did you—Your friends, when you went in—I didn't ask you this before—What did they think about it when you decided, "I'm going to join the navy."

RS: Well, the reaction was something I hadn't thought, but most of them said, "I always knew you'd do something like that." [chuckles]

TS: Something rebellious?

RS: Yes.

TS: [chuckles] Because that's how they saw it, right?

RS: That's how they saw it.

TS: Yeah. That's interesting. Now, did you—Did you have any—Do you have any feelings about the Equal Rights Amendment or the women's movement?

RS: Well, I was—I think that the military's come a long way in that, allowing them to be married and allowing them to have children. I believe in equal pay for equal work; I don't think there should be a glass ceiling.

TS: So all the things that they're fighting for, the rights of equality—because when you were in there was more of a idea of—like, a maternalistic attitude about women in the navy, right?

RS: Yeah, we just back up men.

TS: Yeah. But also that you needed to kind of have this protectiveness from the physical activity and the—

RS: Right.

TS: —so you weren't running, you weren't—you weren't doing those kind of things, and then it kind of switched to equality. So you didn't necessarily resist that kind of—those opportunities, or the changes?

RS: No, I thought that was okay. [both laugh]

TS: Well, not everyone did.

RS: Yeah.

TS: Some people thought that it would change women, and change the—the military too. When you—How about the idea—It's interesting that a couple of your roommates got out on pregnancies so—because sometimes that's a controversial issue, about having mothers in combat. What are your thoughts on that one?

RS: Well, I don't think pregnant women should be in combat, but I think women can be.

TS: Right. And mothers?

RS: And mothers. I don't think both the mother and the father should be.

TS: Not both of them deployed at the same time?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Do you think that, like, if they—Should they select one gender over the other if there are both of them; I mean, who should be the one to stay behind?

RS: That's a hard question, isn't it?

TS: Yeah, it is. That's why I'm asking it.

RS: I would have to say they probably should pick the one that's best suited for the job.

TS: Yeah, it's a—that's a—that's probably a great—great way to look at that. Now—In 1960 you met—Did you meet your—the—your husband in 1960, and then you dated and then you got married, you said? Now, did you have to get out at that time?

RS: They wouldn't have let me stay.

TS: They wouldn't have let you?

RS: No.

TS: Did you—Would you have liked to have stayed?

RS: No, because I wanted to get out and make some money.

TS: Oh [chuckles]. So you weren't getting that much pay?

RS: Oh, no. And I wanted to get out and get a job, and I had no trouble with that. That experience qualified me for several things, so.

TS: And then you said you—I think you told me off tape that you had used your GI Bill. You want to tell us what you used that for?

RS: Well, I worked for the—for the Department of Defense for several years, and then when I—when my husband was transferred to Florida, I just decided it was time, so—and the kids were in school—so I went back, and I had done some college while he was in Vietnam; I had done some of it, and I just went back and got my degree. Then I decided [unclear], and I got a job teaching school at Orange Park High School, and then I decided that while I still had GI Bill I'd go ahead and get my master's, so I did; I was busy being a mom, and a teacher, and working on my master's all at the same time.

TS: Now—So when you got out your husband stayed in?

RS: Oh, yes. Yes.

TS: And so, he went to Vietnam?

RS: Yes.

TS: What years was he in Vietnam?

RS: Sixty-five and '66.

TS: Oh, real early then.

RS: Yeah.

TS: What was that like as a—being home for that?

RS: Well, fortunately I was at Pearl Harbor, and there were a lot of us, so it was all right; we kept really busy. There was—

TS: In the military community—

RS: In the military community. We were all very busy with the beach and the pool, sightseeing, one thing and another, and so that was a—that was a good experience. Of course, it was very hard being alone on an island—

TS: Right.

RS: —without—but I did have family. My sister-in-law, her husband was also in Vietnam. He was in the army, and so they were at Schofield Barracks, and so I had her and she had me and that was good.

TS: That was good to have that kind of family together during that time that your husbands are off—

RS: Yes.

TS: —on deployment.

RS: I used to go to Schofield Barracks and pull up in front of her quarters and get out of the car, and all these neighborhood kids—and they were every color in the rainbow—they'd yell, "Hi, Aunt Renee!" [both laugh] Made me feel so good.

TS: You did visit quite a lot then; they recognized you there? Would you recommend service to young women today?

RS: Oh, I think it's wonderful.

TS: You said your niece—niece was in the army. Is there anybody else that you've talked to that have—Do they know that you were in the WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service]?

RS: Oh, yes. I thought—I had a really good time; in spite of everything I had a really good time.

TS: Well, it sounds like you did.

RS: So yes, it was—And I learned a lot, and I grew up a lot, so—especially somebody from such a protected family and protected area. It's good to get out in the world and see that there is a world out there.

TS: Do you think your life is any different because you joined the military?

RS: Well, I wouldn't have been a navy wife, probably, for twenty-two years if I hadn't. So in that respect, yes, for sure. I'm sure that I would have gotten my education no matter what. I—I was determined to do that. I don't know about the political offices I've held.

TS: Well, talk about those. What political offices have you held?

RS: Well, I did two terms here in the River Bend city council, and then I did two terms as a Craven County commissioner. So, I don't know if that had anything to do with that or not, except that it probably gave me a confidence that I might not have had.

TS: Right, that you could do anything. Well, like I—They chose you as a leader—Still, I'm amazed at barely eighteen, that you're picked in charge of the—your company.

RS: I don't know why either, but I think it's—I think it had something to do with test scores, I really do. [laughs]

TS: Test scores?

RS: Yeah, I really do.

TS: Well, you had to have carried yourself a certain way, too; had to have some sort of military bearing, and—

RS: Well, I—I’ve always been confident.

TS: Yeah.

RS: I guess. My mother said I was.

TS: Now, do—Is there anything that you—in particular, that you’d want a civilian to know or understand about the military that you think that they might not appreciate or understand?

RS: Well, I think that they need to know that the experience is what you make it. Everybody’s going to have a different experience, and you have to put yourself into it and make it yours.

TS: Yeah. And then what do you say about patriotism; what does patriotism mean to you?

RS: Oh, I—Oh, I still cry when I see the flag go by, [chuckles] and the “Star-Spangled Banner”. I’m such a patriot.

TS: Yeah, and you belong to the American Legion?

RS: I don’t. I don’t know why she said I do. They don’t—They wouldn’t—They don’t want me.

TS: They don’t want you?

RS: No, they don’t want Cold War people.

TS: Oh, that’s right, because you weren’t in during active war.

RS: Yeah.

TS: That’s right. Even though you thought you were going to be evaporated.

RS: Right.

TS: You should be in that club.

RS: They don’t want me, no.

TS: That’s right. Well, I don’t have any more formal questions. Is there anything that you’d like to add that we haven’t covered?

RS: Oh, I don’t know. I think I’ve talked myself hoarse here.

TS: If there anything you’d like to summarize about your service that you’d like to say?

RS: I'm just going to—I think I've said it in so many words before, but it was a great experience; I wouldn't take anything for it. I had a great time, and I'm sure that it had a great deal to do with my growing up.

TS: The maturity level and things like that?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Excellent. Well, thank you, Renee, so much—

RS: You're welcome.

TS: —for inviting me into your home. Appreciate it.

[End of interview]