WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Susan D. Walker

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: August 17, 2013

[Begin Recording]

TS: Today is August 17, 2013. This is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the home of Susan Walker in New Bern, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Susan, could you state your name the way that you'd like it to read on your collection?

SW: Susan Daugherty Walker.

TS: Okay. Well, Susan, thanks for having me here. I really appreciate it.

SW: Thank you.

TS: Why don't you start off with telling me about when and where you were born?

SW: I was born in Cumberland, Maryland, in March 1, 1962. It was the only—I was born in a state that I never lived in.

TS: Go ahead and explain that.

SW: My mother was living with my grandparents while my father was up for—was in the Reserves and had been called up for Bay of Pigs, and she—the closest hospital was in Cumberland, and because it was a first birth and she had good insurance, the local doctor said, "You should go to the hospital," otherwise she would have had it in his birthing room and been home that morning—later that day.

TS: Where—Where was it that she lived?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SW: Romney, West Virginia.

TS: Okay. So you were born in a state that you never lived in.

SW: Yes.

TS: Now, do you have any brothers or sisters?

SW: I have a younger sister who's three years younger, and a brother who's four—six years younger.

TS: Oh, okay, so you're the—

SW: I'm the oldest.

TS: You're the oldest, okay. Now—So did you say that your—your—your dad was in the—

SW: My dad was in the Reserves.

TS: In the Reserves, so he got called up—

SW: And got called up for Bay of Pigs.

TS: Okay, so—so he—What did he do for his regular job?

SW: He was a agricultural economist for the United States Department of Agriculture.

TS: Oh, neat; okay. And now, did your mom work outside the home?

SW: Not until I was in high school.

TS: Yeah?

SW: And then she worked in a yarn shop as a professional knitter.

TS: Is that right?

SW: Yes.

TS: Neat. So she knitted throughout your childhood years?

SW: I grew up and knitted clothes and homemade clothes and hand-sewn clothes, and I didn't understand people who went and bought everything.

TS: Do you still?

SW: I still knit. I don't do sweaters because North Carolina's too warm for them.

TS: [chuckles] Yeah—

SW: But I make baby hats and children's hats and baby blankets and whatever.

TS: Do you get—Are you in demand sometimes?

SW: I do a lot of donating. I donate thirty hats a month—baby hats—to—for newborns to the hospital in Goldsboro.

TS: A month?

SW: A month.

TS: How much—How long does it take you to make a baby hat?

SW: About an hour.

TS: Really?

SW: That's what I do in the evenings.

TS: Oh.

SW: And I do—I make hats for adults and children, and donate them to the chemo[therapy] knitting group here in town. And I have also done for other—

TS: Organizations?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SW: —charitable organizations.

TS: That's really great.

SW: That's—That's my charity work, is to—

TS: To knit?

SW: To knit, crochet and—yeah.

TS: Really neat. That's—

SW: Make hats.

TS: That's really neat. Well, tell me a little bit about growing up. What was it—I mean—Now, what was the name of the town again?

SW: I grew up in—Well, I spent—We bounced around. Being with the Department of Agriculture, they moved my father many times until I was about five years old, and—well, yeah, six, and between kindergarten and first grade we settled in State College, Pennsylvania; Penn[Sylvania] State [University], Nittany Lions, hoo-rah[?].

TS: Okay. So you grew up more in Pennsylvania?

SW: I grew up—I spent most of my childhood in Pennsylvania.

TS: Okay.

SW: And it was—Growing up was kind of interesting because every year my—in January, my dad would say—come home and threatened us with a move, so we kind of never were sure if we were going to move or not, but we never did.

TS: So you stayed in Pennsylvania?

SW: Stayed in Pennsylvania through graduation. My parents moved—We moved there in '68 and my parents moved in '85 to [Washington] D.C.; the D.C. area.

TS: Okay. But you spent most of your formative years in Pennsylvania?

SW: I spent my formative years in State College.

TS: What kind of things did you do—like, did you live in town, then?

SW: We lived in a suburb.

TS: Okay.

SW: And we played and rode bikes, and there was a park down the street, and we had—we were in a neighborhood where there were a lot of kids our age so we were able—we were never home; we were always out playing and—

TS: Outside?

SW: Outside.

TS: Yeah. Now, did you—Growing up in the seventies, what kind of things did you—did you do?

SW: I was really in—My mother had me very involved in church and singing in the choir, and MYF, and I also learned to ride horses, and I took dance classes, and—because Penn State has quite—all kinds of different programs. We had a—There were a lot of behind-the-scenes programs. I remember going to one, it was, like, a sunny afternoon and they showed you behind-the-scenes of plays and musicals and dancing and what happened behind the curtain that you didn't normally see.

TS: Did you enjoy getting into that?

SW: I really did.

TS: Yeah?

SW: I thought at one point I was going to be a dancer, and another point I was going to—I had so many different careers I wanted to do. And now being a writer, I can explore them all.

TS: [chuckles] Through your writing?

SW: Through my writing.

TS: Oh, well, that—maybe that's one of the reasons that you—you have so many interests, is—Now, were you a big reader?

SW: Yes.

TS: Yeah?

SW: I learned to read very early. I learned to read in kindergarten. I went to a private kindergarten that was just up the street from our house, and it was in the basement of a church, and they taught us to read and write. And so, when I moved to State College and I go into first grade and I'm reading a second grade reading level, they kind of didn't know what to do with me.

TS: So what did they do with you?

SW: They'd send me down the hall to the second grade reading—when it was time for reading I'd go down the hall to the second grade class.

TS: Yeah.

SW: And eventually, I either lagged or everybody else caught up, but by second grade I was still in—doing—in that—in the right classroom; I was not ahead.

TS: So eventually you just kind of went—melded back into your—

SW: Yeah.

TS: —your class. So—

SW: I was still reading ahead of—of grade but they didn't feel the need to send me down the hall.

TS: To the fourth grade or something.

SW: Yeah.

TS: [chuckles] Okay. Well, did you have a favorite subject in school; elementary or high school?

SW: English was always a favorite.

TS: Yeah? What did you like about it?

SW: Being able to tell stories. I've been a story—I've been wanting to be a writer since I was five years old. I knew the first time I opened a Dr. Seuss book that this is what I wanted to do, and I have said more than once that this is a gift that God has given me, and I really wish people would just get out of my way and let me do my—do what he wants me to do.

TS: [chuckles]

SW: But that is—I've always wanted to be a writer and English was a necessity but it was also—I had fun at least doing the creative writing part. The diagraming sentences and learning all the participles and all of that was not so much fun.

TS: Did you like the literature that you were reading?

SW: I did. Being a reader, I loved reading everything. My second favorite class was social studies and history.

TS: What'd you like about that?

SW: Just learning about the past and how other people had lived and things that had gone on.

TS: Were you connecting, like, culture aspects in those readings, or it was just the stories that you liked?

SW: Just the stories, I think. It was—It was just something—There was something about it. Of course, my mother at that point was very in—big into genealogy and tracing our family, so that, kind of, probably played into it as well.

TS: Yeah, what was that that you told me about your genealogy earlier?

SW: My grandfather's ancestor was a direct—my grandfather's a direct descendent of a man who married the daughter of one of the Mayflower Compact signers; if that makes sense. [chuckles]

[The Mayflower Compact was the first governing document of Plymouth County]

TS: Yes, it does. It makes sense. So you had—Did—As a young girl, so you're—you got some friends—lots of young kids your age. How big was your school that you went to?

SW: I graduated from State College [Area] High School—Our graduating class was 524.

TS: That's a pretty good size.

SW: Yeah.

TS: And so, what did you guys do for fun in that—at that time, as you got older?

SW: Camping. I did a lot of babysitting on weekends. I became known as the infant specialist; I think is what they called me. And when parents had new babies my name was handed over because I did really well with infants to about age two.

TS: Oh, right.

SW: And I started babysitting when I was twelve, and babysat all the way through high—through high school. I didn't really have a job.

TS: Well, that would have been your job, right?

SW: I was babysitting.

TS: Now, did you have a favorite—excuse me—a favorite teacher?

SW: Boy, that's a long time ago. I did, and for the life of me I cannot remember what her name is, but she was my English teacher in seventh grade.

TS: Okay.

SW: Ms. Connor.

TS: Ms. Connor?

SW: Ms. Connor.

TS: See, you did remember her name. Now, what was it that made her your favorite? Was it the subject or was it her—

SW: She was a very gentle spirit and would take time to actually talk to you as a person, and she treated you as—at thirteen, as an adult and did not treat you as a child, because at that—that point you don't know exactly what you are. And she was very supportive of my writing and telling me to follow the dream, and at that point she was my very favorite person. [both chuckle]

TS: There you go. Well now, at—So as a young girl, do you have any memories of things that went on? You would have been very young, but, like, the Vietnam War or any of the counter-culture things?

SW: I do remember watching on TV, as a young child, pictures of the—the war and guys in green—I'm seeing flashbacks now of soldiers walking across fields and through mud—rice paddies and that kind of thing, and my parents were very non-political so we didn't really even discuss it. And—But I still see—can see—watching the black and white TV and the visions of these guys walking across fields and reports of casualties and this was going on and that was going on.

TS: Were you aware of any of the protests against the war, or even the—

SW: I'm sure that there were—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: —Kent State incident?

[The Kent State shootings involved the shooting of unarmed college students by the Ohio National Guard in May 1970. Four students were killed and nine others were wounded.]

SW: I'm—I don't remember Kent State. I'm sure that were the—the television was covering the protests, but I don't remember them—

TS: Specifically?

SW: Yeah, specifically.

TS: You weren't, like, tuned into the pol—political aspect of things at that time?

SW: No, because—What?—the Vietnam [War] ended in '72? Yeah.

TS: Seventy-five.

SW: Okay, '75; I was thirteen. I had other things on my mind. [both chuckle]

TS: Now, did you keep a—a journal when you were writing? Did you have, like, a—

SW: I kept a number of journals and I'd keep them for a couple of weeks and then they—I'd throw them away.

TS: Really? Why'd you throw them away?

SW: I didn't like what I was writing or I—I—I'd put it down and it would get lost in my room that was a very small room with two girls in it, and the room ten [feet] by eleven [feet] and my sister and I were in this room together, and it would get lost.

TS: Right.

SW: And a couple weeks later we'd find it and I'm like, "Well, that doesn't even apply anymore," and I'd throw it away.

TS: I see.

SW: And I wrote—I started writing stories when I was twelve and thirteen years old, and my father read a couple of them and he was like, "You can't be a writer," and—

TS: Why did he say that?

SW: His comment was, "You can't be a writer; you're getting a C in English."

And I immediately came back with, "Writing and English have nothing to do with each other."

And my father, being very left-brained, was like, "You're not making sense," and just, absolutely I could not be a writer, was his whole attitude. And now that I am, he kind of had to step back from his statement.

TS: [chuckles] Yeah. Well, so you said you always wanted to be a writer, then, at a young age, and so did you have a idea in your head how that was going to happen?

SW: No, I didn't. All I knew was I was going to keep writing and I was—I was going to write and I was going to publish. That was—That was the whole vision; was I was going to

write, I was going to publish, and I was going to be able to live on what I was doing. And it only took until I was forty years old to get my first book published.

TS: Well, awesome. There's nothing wrong with that.

SW: But I'm now writing eBooks and putting out a book a month; just about constantly, a book a month—

TS: That's terrific.

SW: —of twenty—twenty-five, thirty thousand.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So you've been doing it, like—The last ten years you've been doing—

SW: I started doing eBooks January of 2009, so the last four years. I have been hard at work. Before then I had several—had nine paperback books published.

TS: What kind of genre do you write in?

SW: They were—They were—Well, the paperback books were young adult and children's fiction, and now I'm writing erotic romance.

TS: There you go. That's a little switch.

SW: Yeah.

TS: [chuckles]

SW: It—It—The other end of the scale. [chuckles]

TS: Okay, so when did you graduate from high school?

SW: I graduated high school—I think it was June 6, 1980—1980.

TS: Nineteen-eighty?

SW: And moved into my dorm room at Penn State—Let's see, graduated Thursday night, moved into my dorm room Sunday afternoon, started classes Tuesday.

TS: Oh, right away?

SW: And went summer, fall, winter, spring, and at the end of spring I looked at my parents and said, "I'm not going back."

TS: Why not?

SW: My father would not finance a journalism degree, and—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So you have this fight for a while?

SW: —and he wanted—he wanted me to—he wanted me to get a degree in a career that would—basically he wanted me to get a business degree. Problem is I hate numbers, and he really—and so in that four terms—four semesters I was at Penn State, I changed my major five times, and at the end of it I just said, "I'm not going back."

And my mother said, "You have to have a marketable skill. What is it going to be?"

And at that point I said, "I'm going to go to business school."

And my father said, "We will give financial support as you see—as we see fit, but you've got to pay for it." And I had some bonds—some savings bonds that he had—had bought for me and have given me at my graduation and I'd kept, and I took out a Penn State—or a Pennsylvania Higher Education Loan and was—and got a job. And between those three I was able to pay for school and have a little bit of spending money, and they basically let—gave me food, room, and board. And that's how I got through a year of business school.

TS: Did you stay at home?

SW: I lived at home.

TS: Okay.

SW: And that's how I got through a year of business school, which helped—One of the things my mother taught me early was—in my career was to use what I learn—use what I learn to find a job to help build the skills that I've already got. So don't go changing from being a secretary to being a hair dresser to being a truck driver. Build on your skills, and that's how I ended up in the air force.

TS: Alright, well, tell me how that happened.

SW: I graduated high—or graduated from business school and—

TS: Where was that?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SW: South Hills Business School in ’80 —it was August of ’82.

TS: Okay.

SW: And I had two—two job interviews, out of 125 resumes sent out. No, three. One was for a job that paid three dollars and—basically minimum wage, forty hours a week, and I’d have to live at home and ride the bus. The second job was a four hour a week job as a transcriptionist, and I couldn’t at that point pass the transcription test. It was in a pediatric office. And the third job was as a personal assistant to a gentleman who lived eleven miles out of town on the top of a mountain, and—except his business was in New York City. And my mother later found out that this man had mob connections.

TS: Oh, really?

SW: And she—I was—I ended up passing the first round of interviews and the second round of interviews, and then the third round of interviews—

TS: For this personal assistant?

SW: For this personal assistant. Here I am, I’m twenty years old, and my mother was just like, “No, you will not.” And at the same time I’m going through this series of interviews, I’m talking to the air force because I had always—Since I was about twelve years old I always wanted to do military service.

TS: Why?

SW: I saw a segment, and I think it was Sixty Minutes—and that would have been, like, ’74—where they were talking about Israel, and how every person who graduates high school in Israel has to give two years of service to the—to the state, and I thought that was just the coolest thing. And I really wanted to go after high school, and my mother—my father said, “You’re going to college.”

And so, I got out of business school and I started talking to the recruiter—the air force recruiter—and decided that’s where I was going to go next.

TS: Now, why—Did you only talk to the air force? Did you consider any of the other services?

SW: I considered some of the other services, and it was really interesting because my father said, “Absolutely not,” on the [U.S.] Army and the Marines because he did not want me getting shot at.

TS: Did you want to go into either one of those?

SW: I thought about the Marines first when I was in high school, and—

TS: What made it interesting to you?

SW: I don't know. And then I—then I took the girls way out and I looked at the uniforms and I went, "Air force has got the best uniforms," [both chuckle] because I don't really look good in green.

TS: So it wasn't—Did you talk to all the other recruiters?

SW: I talked to some of the other recruiters, but the air force recruiter was very blunt and straight forward, and he said, "I'm not going to lie to you." And he laid it out step by step, and after I went in I realized he did not tell me anything that didn't happen.

TS: What kind of things was he telling you?

SW: He was very blunt about, "It's going to be—The first six weeks is hard, and after ten days—after your first ten days you're going to hate me. You're going to hate your mother, you're going to hate yourself, but by day twenty, you'll get over it."

And a lot of—At that point, a lot of recruiters were lying to get people into jobs that they may not have wanted to do, and I actually went in as—I didn't have a specific job secured—a specific career field secured, and just, kind of, went in under the—the general career field. And then we got to a certain day—and I'm not exactly sure even—what—was maybe eighteen or twenty, and they bring in all these people that have these general career fields, and bring them into a room and show them the options and, "This—These jobs are—These schools have openings this week when you're going to—When you get out school—out of basic training, these are the jobs you can choose from."

And since I couldn't go and become a pararescue, because only men were allowed to do that job, I started looking at some of the other jobs. I wanted—I thought about linguist, and I was looking beyond the four years in the air force, of, "What can I do with this career after I get out?" because I really was only planning to spend four years in, "and what can I do beyond the next four years with—" and—and there's not a whole lot of call for bomb technicians out in the real world. And medical administration specialist was—came—was one of the ones that—and I went, "That looks kind of interesting."

And when the career advisor looked at my paperwork and he said, "You've been to business school?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

He said, "You've been to college?"

"Yes, sir."

"I think you should take the—the end of course test for the medical administration specialist."

"Okay," and I took it and I passed it. And so, when I came out of basic training I had one stripe for the hours I had—I had earned at college, and I had my three level for my career because I'd passed the test, and I was going direct duty to Seymour Johnson [Air Force Base].

TS: Okay.

SW: I had ten days of vacation back in Pennsylvania with my family, and then I flew into Seymour Johnson and—

TS: Before we get to Seymour John, I want to talk about basic training a little.

SW: Okay.

TS: Is that okay?

SW: Yeah.

TS: So—And also I want to find out about your—your parents' reaction to you joining the air force.

SW: [chuckles]

TS: Let's go back to that.

SW: Okay.

TS: So you—So you—You were—You're working on a couple things; you didn't—the personal assistant thing you were talking about. So did that—Your mother said, "Absolutely not."

SW: My—My mother just laid down her—laid it down and said, "No, you will not." And then she made some phone calls to back up—She had—She actually met the man I'd be working for. He—She was working one day and I met him at a coffee shop around the corner—at a restaurant around the corner, and he—he—we were talking and he's like, "I'd like to meet your mother," because I was so young. He was—he was concerned because I was so young.

And so, we walked up and he met my mother, and my mother's reaction was, "He's a greasy Greek, and you will have nothing to do with him." And he called me a couple days later—And in the meantime I'm talking to the air force.

TS: Right.

SW: But he calls me a couple days later and says, "I'd like you to come for an interview at the house and meet my wife." Well, his wife worked as a pediatrician in New York City.

And at that point I said, “Well, I’m sorry, sir, but I’ve decided to go into the air force,” and he—he wished me well.

TS: Okay.

SW: Is was not—

TS: Right.

SW: There was not anything bad. But it was—My mother was concerned because in the last—the previous eleven years he’d had two secretaries. The first one—Let’s see; let me get the story right. The first one died in a fiery car crash on her way to town in the middle of the night. The second one was leaving his employ to move to California, and when she heard that she just went, “No.”

TS: [chuckles]

SW: “Absolutely not.” And then she—she met and got to know the lady who actually took the job, who left him after six months, having a nervous breakdown, because she could not leave the compound without a guard; without a driver, is how they put it. But basically he was a body guard. He had every known, at that point, security device known to mankind, in play, in his compound, and it was—it was a nightmare for her. And she just went—she ended up, after six months, having a nervous breakdown.

TS: Wow.

SW: So my mother was like, “See?”

TS: “See, I told you.”

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SW: “It’s a good thing.”

TS: [chuckles]

SW: “It’s a good thing you’re mother was listening.” So—

TS: How’d it go with your parents when you—

SW: My—My father just kind of looked at me and went, “Well, if that’s what you want,” and my mother—Neither one of them were really excited about it, but they also understood that there were not jobs in State College. There—There were so many college students

that there's not a lot of jobs in State College unless you are a highly skilled, professional something or another. And so, they—they went—And my mother's attitude was, "Well, you've been talking about this for years."

TS: Yeah?

SW: And she later told me that my father was busting buttons—

TS: Oh, really?

SW: —after I—after I got—he was—he was busting buttons, and they both took me to the bus and he—she said he actually was crying as the bus load[?] pulled out, which was surprising to me because I—we were not close; my father and I were not close.

TS: And he wasn't overly demonstrative or anything?

SW: No, he was—he was—he's a—I—Scots-Irish hillbilly and just not very huggy; he's not a hugger.

TS: Well, now, when he was in the Reserve, what service was he in?

SW: Army.

TS: Okay.

SW: I think that's why he told me I could not be in the army.

TS: He didn't really talk about that? He just said—

SW: He—He just kind of went, "You don't want to do the army," and I had decided against the navy—or the Marines, and I looked—I almost had to flip a coin between the navy and the air force, but then I looked at the uniforms and I said, "Air force has better uniforms." [both chuckle]

TS: Okay. So you're—So then you—How about your friends? What did they think about your decision?

SW: They didn't know what to make of it.

TS: Really? Were they surprised?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SW: They thought I was craze—They thought I was crazy. They really thought I was crazy because I was in a—I grew up in a town of—of academics. Pennsylvania does not have an air force base at all, and there's only a couple of small bases for other services. And so, they had no concept of why. They couldn't understand why, they didn't understand—they just didn't understand my—my thinking, and the—the guy I was seeing at the time was the only one that said, "Go, do it, and come home," and he was the only one behind me. That didn't last long after we—after I got to Seymour Johnson.

TS: What do you mean?

SW: We ended up breaking up.

TS: Oh, he had supported you until you broke up?

SW: He—Yeah, he supported me for—he supported me from December until February, and I went home for vacation and we ended up breaking up.

TS: Okay.

SW: Which was okay because I had a whole base of men; [both chuckle] I was suddenly surrounded by men.

TS: Well, tell me a little bit about basic training, then. So how was that experience for you?

SW: It was—People think I'm crazy, but I thought it was great. I was—I thought it was fun, but I went in knowing it was going to be difficult, and prepared—mentally prepared for the difficulty of it. We—I went in and the first day, when we're going to get uniforms, they pulled—they—this person came over and said, "Who here has any musical talent or musical experience?" And I raised my hand and he—there was five or six of us—he pulled us all over and was telling us about band flight [Band of Flight], and basically we had just volunteered for band flight. Five days later we were told, "Pack your gear. You're going." And so, we packed up and they formed a new flight that day and—of six—fifty-five people, and it was—

TS: Was it men and women?

SW: It was men and women.

TS: Okay.

SW: Whereas, the flight I was in previously was strictly women.

TS: Okay. I was wondering when you—because when you showed me your book, it was gender—

SW: Yes.

TS: —mixed gender.

SW: We—

TS: That surprised me.

SW: Band flight was the only mixed gender in basic training, and—but the boys lived—we lived on the third floor of the building and the guys lived on the second floor, and then the first floor was the pad; the training pad. So we'd go—And actually, in that dormitory, instead of having one flight of women there were actually three flights because each—or half—it was half and half. I think it was half and half, where it was half our flight and half another flight of band—there were actually two—two or three bands going every[?] time—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Because of the time frame that you were going through?

SW: —because of the time frame.

TS: Okay.

SW: And they—they cycled a new—I think it was every fifteen days they'd start a new band flight. So we had one when we started and then there was a sec—another one when we ended.

TS: I didn't even know there was a band flight.

SW: Oh, yeah. And instead of doing KP [kitchen patrol] and going out and picking up cigarette butts or walking trash lines or whatever—whatever other details they had, we were in rehearsal. So it was kind of a—a win-win situation. [both chuckle]

TS: What—Now, what—

SW: I thought.

TS: What instrument did you play?

SW: I played bass drum—

TS: Is that right?

SW: —because I have—Well, it's a brass—it's mostly brass band, and I—when I was growing up I played flute and guitar, so I had no brass band—and—and basically the ones that were put on the brass instruments were the people who had experience—

TS: Right.

SW: —as brass players. And those of us who didn't necessarily have the experience to—and knowledge to play the instruments, we got put in the percussion section, and I got to play the bass drum.

TS: How was that? Did you enjoy it?

SW: It was fun; I thought it was a trip.

TS: So you had your regular, like, classroom work during the day—

SW: We had our regular classroom work—

TS: So like—So tell me just a typical day, I guess, in basic training.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SW: We get up at five, you had two minutes to get dressed and get down two flights of stairs in formation. Then after we were formed up and they took a head count and made sure everybody was there and there was nobody left in their bed, we'd go back upstairs and clean the dorm; makes the beds, clean the dorms, straighten up; all that kind of stuff, and then reform and go to breakfast, and then go—After breakfast we would usually go to class in the morning, and spend the morning in class for the air force, and then in the afternoon we would do PT [physical training], and we would have rehearsal, and by the end of it we were doing parades at five o'clock. Then we would have dinner and then be in the dorm, and that's usually when we got mail and packages.

And being there over Christmas was kind of interesting because you could not have food in the dorm overnight, so if you got a package at six o'clock at night and it's—I—My aunt sent me a box of apples, and so everybody who wanted one took one, and then I took them downstairs and gave them to the guys and they finished them, because we could not have them overnight; they could not be in the dorm; could not have food. My hardest—The hardest thing for me was the P—the PT. Running that mile and a half was a tough thing, and we—but—but I did it.

TS: But you ran with men and women?

SW: Men and women ran together.

TS: Together.

SW: And of course, the men would charge off and—

TS: Now, did you have your boots when you ran, at this time?

SW: No, we wore sneakers.

TS: Did you?

SW: We—We had—We wore sneakers. I did not have a pair of combat boots until I was in—at Seymour Johnson and I was put on a deployment unit; a group that if needed would deploy.

TS: Why didn't you have any combat boots?

SW: Women did not get combat boots.

TS: You didn't get the black shiny boots?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SW: Nineteen—Nineteen eighty-two, we did not get the black shiny boots. The guys didn't get the black shiny boots. They were basically just black boots and you had to shine them yourself. The women got, basically, tie-up, black—ugly black, tie-up—

TS: Shoes?

SW: Cor—Not Corfams[?], but just black, ugly loafer kind of shoes that were quite ugly, [chuckles] and we had to polish them, and I never did learn the right way to put polish on a pair of shoes.

TS: You didn't?

SW: No.

TS: Did you get dinged for that quite a lot or did you have somebody else polish them for you?

SW: Somebody else polished them for me. I don't remember what I gave her, but somebody else polished—

TS: But you'd trade off.

SW: I think I—I think I traded her cookies for—

TS: [chuckling]

SW: —polishing. She tried to teach me. I just never did learn, and when I finally got the boots—when I got to Seymour Johnson—I found that the shoe repair guy down the—down the street knew how to shine them real good, and so I took them to him and paid him, like, three dollars to shine my shoes; shine my boots.

TS: So you just never worried about it.

SW: I never worried about it. I worked around it.

TS: So—So physically, the—the PT run was the hardest?

SW: For me physically, the PT run was the hardest. It was very interesting because I—I never would expect—In San Antonio, Texas, we missed two days of PT; one because it was too hot, at ninety degrees in the middle of the afternoon, and the other day it was too cold, at thirty-two [degrees]. It was amazing we all didn't get deathly ill, but we made it.

TS: [chuckles] You had—You did the—the obstacle course?

SW: Did the obstacle course and barely made it through, but did get through it. Crawling under the chicken wire fence was very difficult for me in the sand. We spent four hours with guns, and that was a—I spent four hours in basic training and four hours when I got to Seymour Johnson and had to be—had to be on this readiness group, and that was my experience with guns.

TS: That was it; that was the only experience? How'd you—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SW: That was—

TS: So—

SW: That was the end of my experience.

TS: So that—Was that [an] okay experience?

SW: Fine with me.

TS: Yeah?

SW: I was not a gun person. My father had guns and occasionally we'd go out hunting, but I was never really exposed to them. Again, I grew up in a scholarly, academic environment, and Penn State is called "Happy Valley." There's not a lot—There used to not be a lot of stuff going on. [chuckles]

TS: Did you—Your expectations were set by your recruiters?

SW: Yes.

TS: Did you feel like he was pretty much right on?

SW: He was—He was—told me exactly what was going to happen and it was really—he really did spot-on, and his biggest advice was, "Keep your eyes open—eyes and ears open and your mouth shut."

TS: Yes.

SW: "And just—Because you don't know anything. Until they tell you, you don't know anything." And I—Except for volunteering for band flight, that's what I did. I did not volunteer unless I had—

TS: Right.

SW: —was chosen—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Were you glad that you did the band flight?

SW: I did—I was. I—I really liked it.

TS: Yeah.

SW: It was kind of a—a level above basic training. It was, kind of, an elite kind of thing, and when you tell people you were in band flight, they went, "Oh, wow!" It—Yeah.

TS: Well, it's interesting to me, too, that you did—So you did everything with the guys?

SW: Yes.

TS: Your PT?

SW: PT was guy—with the guys.

TS: Your obstacle course.

SW: Obstacle course.

TS: All your train—

SW: Everything was done with the guys.

TS: How did that go? I mean, was there—were there any, like, problems?

SW: Not that I remember. There—The guys were very protective of us, and if we, like, got an evening off and we could go to the rec [recreational] center, the guys—we were playing pool with the guys, we were dancing with the guys, the—if somebody else from another sch—flight came and said something to us, the guys were stepping in and stopping things before everything got started. And—Although, we basically were insulated from the rest of the training—trainees because we were band flight, and we didn't mix it up with a lot of other people. And—But it was very interesting—In 1980 it was—they were still having a lot of women issues and trying to find places for us. And so, to have this integrated—sexually integrated unit was kind of a beginning of something.

TS: That's inter—I was unaware that they were doing it at that time; that's interesting, yeah. You—Did you—Were you aware that because you were in that other flight for a brief—

SW: Yes.

TS: —amount of time, that this was different?

SW: Yes, I did recognize that it was different. In the first flight, we had a brother—

TS: Flight?

SW: —male flight, but we—they—

TS: They trained separately.

SW: They trained over there and we trained over here.

TS: Right.

SW: They formed up over there, we formed up over here. With the band flight, the guys were in with the girls.

TS: So just your separate housing quarters were different?

SW: Yeah, the only—the only thing—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Even though you're in the same building, just different floors.

SW: Yeah, the only—the only difference was they were down one flight.

TS: Yes. But when you had the Reveille—

SW: Yes.

TS: —you all went down to the same—

SW: Yeah.

TS: —place for formation. That's quite interesting. Did you—So—Okay, let's go to Seymour Johnson, then. You get there, you have taken this test, you are a medical ad—

SW: Medical administration, three level.

TS: And so, what did you think about that—you think, "Okay, this is something I can use in the future"?

SW: My—My feeling was it was building on my business school training, and it was something that I could eventually take out into the real world and become a medical secretary or use it in a hospital or—

TS: Okay.

SW: You know?

TS: So you had, like, career planning ideas?

SW: There—It was—It was not necessarily overt but it was a—kind of, a career path, and when I got out of bas—Well, when I got my orders at Lackland [Air Force Base], I looked at the—and I said, "Seymour who? North what?"

TS: [chuckles]

SW: Because I'd never heard of this place. And I went home for ten days of leave, and went in—like, the second day, I went in to my recruiter's office and I threw the orders on his desk and I said, "Tell me about this place."

He picked them up, and he looked at them and went, "Seymour who? North what?" Then he turns around and he has books on all of the bases—

TS: Okay.

SW: —except Seymour Johnson.

TS: Oh no. There wasn't one on that one?

SW: [chuckling] He didn't have one on that one. So he picks up the phone and he calls down there; they do not know I'm coming. This is Monday, I'm supposed to be there Thursday; I'm flying in—into there Thursday; they don't know I'm coming. So he—he tells them, "Yes, she's coming. This is Da-da-da-da-da," and ended up—

TS: "I have her orders right in front of me."

SW: Yeah, "I have her orders," and I don't even know if we had a fax machine in 1982; I don't think we did. So he couldn't even, like, fax them a copy of my orders. All he could do is read them and say, "This is who she is and—" So he, kind of, gave them a heads up of, "This woman is coming."

TS: Right.

SW: "Get her a room." And so, I flew down on Thursday and got picked up at the airport in Kinston. No, I did not get—I had to take a taxi from Kinston to Seymour Johnson. Get to the officer—basic officer's quart—or the—the bachelor officers' quarters, or check in or some—I don't even remember where I went. I get to Seymour Johnson and I sit, and they don't know what to do with me because there's been no—there—they have no paperwork on me except what I'm holding in my hand.

TS: Right.

SW: So they call—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So they weren't even—Just—In spite of the phone call, they weren't prepared for you still.

SW: Yeah. Well, I'm not sure who he called because he didn't call them. He didn't—

TS: You had a place to stay.

SW: He didn't call the main—

TS: Oh, okay.

SW: —the main check-in place. So they call over to the hospital and say, "Yeah, we got one of your girls here. Come get her;" is pretty much what they did. So the—A young man—and I don't remember his last name—his first name was Daniel—in a little green VW [Volkswagen]—1965 VW Bug, came over and picked me up and took me back over to—took me back to the hospital, and it's, like, three o'clock in the afternoon and it's looking like rain and it's forty-five degrees and it's February. I walked in and the sergeant looked at me and went, "You've just ruined my day."

TS: Male or female?

SW: Male; he was a tech sergeant; "You've just ruined my day."

And I went, "Excuse me, sir?"

"Don't call me sir!"

"Okay. Why did I—How did I ruin your day?"

"I was hoping you wouldn't show up."

And I'm like, "Where was I supposed to go?" But he was hoping I would have shown up earlier in the day or the next day, so that he could have—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Gone home.

SW: —left at 4:30 instead of hung around until 5:30, six o'clock. But they found me a room—they found me a—found me a bed, and—and it was like it was the only bed on the floor and it was with a woman who was in the honor guard—the base honor guard, and she was supposed to have a private room.

TS: So she wasn't happy.

SW: And so, she really wasn't happy, and I was just kind of going, "I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing." But they got me settled in, and ended up starting my—my job in the Records Department.

TS: Records?

SW: Medical Records Department, filing paperwork in the medical file—medical records and lab slips and whatever other paperwork came in, and pulling records for appointments, and putting them after the appoint—putting them away after the appointments and all that kind of thing. And I had been told, "Expect to be here at least a year, because everybody who comes starts here, and it takes forever to get out."

And I went, "Okay."

Well, I was there for four weeks, and then I get called into the 906—which is the career field num—number—into the lieutenants office, and he goes, "So you've came [sic] with a stripe."

"Yes, sir."

"How'd you do that?"

"I had a year of college."

"You passed the End of Course without going to the class. How did you do that?"

"Took the bypass test, sir. I spent a year in business school."

"And—And what does that ribbon on your chest mean?"

"It's an [Basic Training] Honor Grad [Graduate Ribbon], basic training."

"How—What kind of a score did you finish the final exam—"

"Ninety-six percent, sir."

"You think you're smart, don't you?"

I'm like, "No, sir." [both chuckle]

TS: This was a first lieutenant?

SW: First lieutenant. I went, "No, sir, I'm not smart right now. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm just following the gr—following the crowd; just trying to figure out what's going on."

And he went, "Okay. Well, go back to work."

"Okay."

TS: That was your meeting.

SW: That was my meeting, and I went back to work. And two days later I got a call that said, "We're pulling you out of Medical Records and putting you in an office, and you will—" I was in an office doing—actually started as a—it was a civilian position.

TS: Okay.

SW: It was a GS-12 position, or GS-8 or something, who was the secretary to the NCOIC [Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge] of the hospital squadron, and she had gotten in a car accident or something—

TS: The civilian?

SW: —and needed—needed—they needed—they needed a body in the chair.

TS: Okay.

SW: And I went, "Okay."

So I went down and he—he looked at my paperwork and he goes, "Well, you don't have your typing test yet."

"No, sir, not yet."

So they sat me down at a com—at a typewriter and said, "Practice."

And I went, "Okay."

So I practiced for a while and then they called across base to the testing center, and that afternoon I had a typing test, and you had to have thirty-five words a minute with five errors. I did fifty-three words a minute with three errors, and at that point they kind of dubbed me "Queen of Typing," and they put me in different job—I never really had one job for more than a year, year and a half. I worked as a civilian; I worked as a mental health technician. Basically I was a receptionist in a mental health office, and got highly acclaimed by the Inspector General's office who came and was doing an inspection, and I pulled files and helped and answered questions. But they mentioned how awesome I was doing outside of my career field.

And I was like, "All I'm doing is trying to help." [chuckling]

I ended up going back into Medical Records for about three weeks at one point, and then I ended—I moved to the Patient Affairs Office where I made appointments off base for—medical appointments off base for people; like, if they had to go to Jacksonville or they had to go Walter Reed [National Military Medical Center] or they had to go to Fayetteville, I would call and make the appointment and do the orders for them. And that—When I got that job it was six months behind, and the paperwork on the desk was at least six inches thick, and it was just papers thrown. Within a month, the desk was cleared, the appointments were caught up, and I had a book—I had a notebook with procedures and policies and "If they have to go to this base, this is what you do, and this is how you make the appointment. They have to—" And—

TS: So you wrote that all out?

SW: I wrote it out myself because there was nothing, and—and I—I am so—I learned to be very highly organized, to deal with what I now recognize as being ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder], and my mother just taught me to be highly organized; write everything down; set up procedures; and it really does help.

And so, when I got this job—I had this job right before my son was born, and I looked at my boss on Friday night, I was a week overdue, and I said, "I don't care if he comes or not; I'm not coming to work on Monday." Saturday morning I woke up in labor, [both chuckle] with three and a half minute contractions. So it was—So I didn't come to work on Monday.

TS: You organized that plan [unclear]?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SW: But I had it—I had it so organized—I had the job so organized that the guy who stepped in for the four weeks I was out was able to keep up. He nev—Well, kind of. I went back and it was still a mess but it was much easier to get him trained in this position by having this notebook and saying, "Look, you've got this patient going to this place. This is what you look at—"

TS: Right.

SW: "—on how to get the appointment." Eventually they moved me over to the dental clinic and I was typing entries into dental records. The doctors would scribble on a piece of paper, shove it in a file, and—and it would come to my office and I would type up whatever it was they wrote into the dental record. And again, there was—it was not covered by my career field and there—I did not—it was kind of a dead end job and I'm kind of going, "How am I going to advance—If I'm going to—If they want me to stay in, how am I going to advance if I'm in this dead end job?"

But at that point, when it came time to decide whether or not I was going to stay in the service, I had an eighteen month old son and I had been told, "If you—" not "If—" Well, at that point they were kind of assuming I was going to, but they said, "When you reenlist, you will immediately be cut orders to go remote for one year."

And I just went, "No," and I realized that I'm actually—I was—I was smarter than my fellow bean counters, and just decided there's more out there than the air force.

And at that point, my husband had sixteen—my—husband at the time had sixteen years in towards his twenty year retire—his twenty years, and I just went, "Somebody has to stay home and be mama, and be a parent to this child, and it's me." At that point I said, "Okay."

And I got called into the office with the first sergeant and these—his boss and they both tried to talk me into staying. I just went, "My son needs a mama."

TS: Was it because of the remote assignment only, or were there other reasons?

SW: There were other reasons. There were some personality issues with other people in my career field, and there were some—I had come to the realization that I was smarter than this, and that—

TS: Could you have cross-trained into a different field?

SW: I could have, but again, to go to—go away to school would have meant leaving my son and I do not know what I would have cross-trained into. Being a 906, you're basically a high level push—paper-pusher for the hospital, but—and at that time we had, like, one computer in the entire hospital and it was not [chuckling] fun to put stuff in the computer.

TS: Right.

SW: It's not like it is today where everything is on the computer.

TS: Well, how did you feel about just being in—in the air force? How was the—How—How were you feeling? I mean, your—it sounds like job wise you're actually frustrated.

SW: I grew frustrated towards the end.

TS: Okay.

SW: I really liked being in the service, being a member of the military. My favorite thing was not having to worry about what I was going to wear when I got up, because the biggest decision was, "Do I wear pants or do I wear a skirt today?" because every day we wore—unless we were in an exercise situation, we wore blues. It wasn't like down on the flight line where you were wearing your greens—your utilities. We were dealing with the public so we had to wear dress—dress uniform basically every day, but we wore our blues every day and it was—I enjoyed it. It was a very interesting time. I would have—kind of wish I would have gotten to go somewhere else but—

TS: Well, you were there—So you were there the full four years?

SW: I was there for the full four years.

TS: And normally you get an assignment around the third year or so.

SW: At that time, during Reaganomics, they basically had decided unless you reenlist you're staying where you got—where you are, and towards—after I got out there were people that were going remote and then coming back to Seymour Johnson.

TS: So that was the Gramm-Rudman—

SW: Yeah.

TS: —bill, right; where you had to reenlist by a certain date or you were—or get out?

[The Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985 was, according to U.S. Senator Phil Gramm of Texas, "the first binding constraint imposed on federal spending…"]

SW: Yeah.

TS: And a lot of people were pushed out early.

SW: They kept me; they didn't want me to get out. I was willing to—I wanted to—Yeah, they—they tried to put me out early. They were going to put me out about—I think it was about three months early. Or was it six? No, it was three months early. They were going to put me out in September instead of December, and my—the NCOIC of the dental clinic wrote this very big, long letter and got it signed off by the colonel, who was the commander of the dental clinic, saying, "We can't lose her. She's vital to our mission. Therefore, you can't—you can't kick her out early."

And when it came time—the end of my days, and I'm like, "I'd really like to take my vacation time because I've got three—two weeks or three weeks of vacation."

They're like, "No, you can't it. We'll cut—You're going to get a check after you leave."

TS: They wouldn't let you take your—

SW: They would not let me take my vacation time, because I was "vital."

"We fought to keep you in. We're not letting you out early."

And I'm like, "But I have—"

And I had a bunch of vacation time because I was not—Every time I tried to get vacation we were coming into an exercise so they wouldn't give it to me; they wouldn't let me have a vacation. And I—I learned that we always closed down—Basically, over Christmas and New Year's, half the hos—they'd go to half staff, and you could be with—if you had—you had—you could go away but you had to be within 350 miles. My parents at that point were living 315, or something, miles away, so we could go to my parents' house, [chuckles] because my parents lived in DC, and—and we could—we could go to DC without getting—taking leave.

TS: I see.

SW: So the week of Christmas we'd—and my ex-hus—my—my husband and I would—would plan which week we were going to go, and then we'd take off and not have to take any vacation time.

TS: Did you travel much other than that?

SW: No.

TS: Because you didn't get any time off?

SW: I—I have not traveled a lot.

TS: So when they were putting you in all these different positions, like, how did that come about? I mean, they'd just say, "Hey, Susan, we're going to put you in a new job next week"?

SW: Pretty much.

TS: Really?

SW: Or they would say, "Come to me on Monday morning," and go, "Okay, we're—we're—you're going to a new office." And then I'd go in and I may get some training; like, a half day or a couple of hours or maybe a whole day, but don't bet on it. But they would just, kind of, throw me into a new job and say, "Here. This is what you're doing this week." Some places I was there for three or four weeks, some places I was there five—four or five months, and it just kind of—it was really kind of interesting because I was the only one they were doing that to. Everybody else—Like, the admissions clerk, came out of medical records to admissions and he was there for the rest of his time, and they didn't move him around. And they kept saying it was to give me more experience, and I'm like—

TS: What did you do in the promotion test? I mean, because that's supposed to be in your MOS [military occupation specialty] and you take that and—

SW: All of the promotions, up to—All of my promotions were just time and grade.

TS: Okay.

SW: Just general—

TS: Oh, because you didn't go for staff sergeant—

SW: Because I didn't go for staff sergeant. That was—That was coming about this—about the time—It was basically I reenlisted and then two weeks later I'd take the test for staff sergeant, and I decided not to reenlist, therefore I didn't even have a chance to take the test. I would have probably aced it without a problem, but—

TS: How did you feel like you were treated by your sup—superiors?

SW: I think it was another one of these, they really didn't know what to do with me. They didn't know where to put me because I was—everything they threw at me I could handle, and I handled well, and I—there were—I had several jobs where I was putting these books—procedural books together and they thought that was amazing, that I would take it upon myself to do this. And I'm like, "It makes it a lot easier to go train somebody;" I said, "Just common sense," but nobody had thought of it. In however many years the hospital had been in play with this office, nobody had thought to put procedural books together showing how to do something, which was kind of scary.

TS: Well, did you—So did you feel that you were—How did you feel you were treated? I mean, a little unfairly, then, maybe?

SW: No. My coworkers, like the other airmen and senior airmen, would try to—they treated me a little bit unfairly. They would—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: In what way?

SW: They would try to shove their job onto me.

TS: Because you're new and—

SW: Because I was done with my work, or I was so much better at whatever it was they were doing; "Here, Susan, why don't you do this too?" And they would, kind of—When schedules came out, they would rearrange things so I was pulling duty when they should be.

TS: Did you have a supervisor that—

SW: We had a supervisor, and she's a very sweet lady and she's a tech sergeant, and I'm—I hate to think that I was a victim of reverse discrimination, but I think I might have been.

TS: In what—In what way?

SW: Because the three other people in my office were black and so was the tech sergeant, and she let them get away with a lot of stuff; of dumping things on me or asking me to ex—do extra duties and not them, and if—if I earned a day off, "Well, you can't take it because So-and-so's taking their day off." And I—When I left her off—When I left that office and went to the dental clinic I think she owed me about six days, and I—

TS: But you never got to take them?

SW: I could never get them. And when I got over to the dental clinic they're like, "We don't owe you anything." So—

TS: So it's not something you got paid for either, for that.

SW: It's not—Yeah, I didn't get extra pay for it or anything. I just lost, kind of, it. It wasn't a big deal, it was just—just another thing that I kind of went, "Yeah, maybe I don't want to stay here for twenty years."

TS: Right. Well, how about with other peers in other offices that you worked in? Did you have the same—Was it just that one office where you had that experience of—

SW: Pretty much it was just that one office. A lot of the places I worked, I worked alone. I—The dental clinic, I was the only person in the office. I was the only person in that little office, and then I'd go up front and help make appointments and answer the phones and stuff, and they all treated me really well.

A lot—Different offices—Like when I worked in the mental health clinic, I had two doctors I was working for—two psychologists I was working for, and they treated me—they—they wanted to keep me. Unfortunately, it was out of my career field, and when they finally did get a mental health tech I then trained her in how to run—how the office was running, because they had not had a mental health tech in that office in over a year. I'd been there—I think I was there for eight weeks, and while I was there I did all of the education and testing for my five level because I didn't have a lot of busy work to do because I had everything organized. And I would sit—And I could sit and within two, three days I have one of the class—one of the books done. I think there was, like, six books in the five level career field, and I did—I think I did the whole five level career book and took the final test in, like, a three or four week period, just because—

TS: Pretty quickly.

SW: Well, I read things and I remember them, and—and then you just go and take this—this quick test, and then you go and get the next book and—

TS: Right. So you had—Did ever notice, or were you ever subject to any sort of sexual harassment; or did you witness it?

SW: No, we didn't—The guys, again, were very conscious, but I was in a hospital setting versus being down on the flight line, where I'm sure they probably did have some problems. But I was in the hospital setting and the guys were treated just as—the girls and guys were treated very much alike.

TS: Were there a lot of women that you worked with? Compared to the men, I mean.

SW: I'm trying to think. I think it was about half and half.

TS: Yeah?

SW: And a lot of the women were looking for Mr.—Mr. Mr. They were there to get their husband and not necessarily be a part of the air force, and I—I just had this different mindset of, "I'm here to serve my country."

TS: When did you meet your husband? You were there—You were there '82—

SW: I was there in '82, I met my husband in February of '84—

TS: Okay.

SW: —about three weeks before my birthday, and by Oct—and we married in October of that year.

TS: Of that same year. How was that, being a dual military couple?

SW: It was kind of interesting because when we got married he worked—he was a air traffic controller and he worked two days, two swings, two off. So he only had one Saturday, Sunday weekend every six weeks, which was kind of cool because I could go and do my thing and he had his days off to do his thing, and he worked evenings so I'd be able to do whatever it was I wanted to do and read or watch TV or watch the TV shows I wanted to watch and not necessarily the ones he wanted to watch. He had his thing and I had my thing, and our son was probably—was probably six to eight months old before he got transferred to dayshift—straight dayshift, and that was a—that was an adjustment to have him home all the time.

TS: Sure, after how—how long of you having separate—

SW: Yeah. After—After a year, almost two years of—of living these lives that occasionally would come together. And he—he thought it was great because if he worked swing shift I'd go home, and if I was bored I'd make cook—make cookies or brownies or something and pack them up and take them—and he had a bunch of young males working under him, where he was the supervisor, and I would take a paid—plan—pan of brownies in and ten minutes later the pan would be empty because these guys didn't get home cooking very much.

TS: Well, what did—So you experienced the air force as both a single, young person and as a married person, and then as a mother.

SW: Yes.

TS: Can you talk just a little bit about the similarities and differences in your—what was the same and what was a little bit different about those?

SW: It was—Being a single person and living in the dorms, I had a lot more friends than—and—and people to go and do things with. And being a married person, I kind of lost track—got out of it and I didn't go up and hang out at the dorms with my single friends anymore, and then they would get transferred out or they'd get out of the service. So by the time I got out, there weren't that many—very many people left to say goodbye because they were all—had all changed. There were very few that were there when I got there that were still there when I left.

TS: What was it like—

SW: And the responsibilities—

TS: Go ahead.

SW: —of being a single person, I could go out four nights a week to a bar. We—We knew where the—there was a—there was a bar in town that had Ladies Night Tuesday, Thursday, and then if you got there before nine o'clock Friday and Saturday you didn't have to pay cover. So that's where we spent our time. It was long before—Yes, they did have DWIs [driving while intoxicated] but it isn't like it is now where you have to have a designated driver. I drove home more than once, onto base, with more than—more alcohol in my system than I should have. But as a young person—young single person, there wasn't a lot in Goldsboro to do. I don't think there is now, but—

TS: Well, the culture of drinking in the military at that time was—

SW: Yeah, and at that point the culture was you go to the bar, you go to the NCO club, and I didn't go to the NCO club. I don't know why, I just never really visited—

TS: Did you have commander's calls?

SW: Not where—It would not be, like, a formal dinner or anything. There were a couple of—

TS: I just was wondering, like, when they had informal get-togethers you weren't mandatory—

SW: There—There—

TS: But was the alcohol free flowing then?

SW: There were a few parties where the alcohol flowed—flowed free. I think if I was in the military now the—the hospital commander would have been brought up on—If—If the man was in now he probably would have brought—been brought up on sexual harassment charges because he was a hugger, and he saw—he would see me in the hall and hug me, and he was in his late fifties and I'm twenty-something, and to me, he reminded me of my grandfather. I didn't ever think anything about it until years and years later when all of a sudden they're bringing these men up on charge—on sexual harassment charges, and I'm like, "That colonel could have gotten serious trouble."

I remember one time there was an inspec—it was during this inspection where there was a colonel with him in the hall, and he called my name—called me over to him and gave—put his arm around me, gave me a big hug, and said, "I want you to meet this girl. She is a wonderful troop—da da da," and he brags on me like I'm his daughter.

And I was just like, "Okay," [chuckles] and I didn't know what to say.

TS: You were kind of embarrassed by it or—

SW: Yeah, and it kind of embarrassed me because I was wondering if he was doing this with everybody, but it—I was one of—I had filled in for his secretary occasionally. Again, I

was good, I knew what I was—I picked things up quick, and I fill—would—would fill in for his secretary, and he had—had noticed me and he had made note of me and I had been mentioned in reports, and so on and so forth, and it was all good stuff.

TS: Did anybody ever take you aside and say, "We really like what you're doing. Let's talk about your future"?

SW: No.

TS: Nothing? You didn't have a supervisor like that, or—

SW: No. My supervisor—

TS: —commander?

SW: By the time it came time to look at further career opportunities, I was over in the dental clinic. Again, completely out of my career field, and there was everybody over there—everybody else over there was a dental tech, and there was nobody over there to talk to me about possible career advancement as a medical tran—medical administration specialist.

TS: Yes.

SW: And the one or two times I did see somebody in my career field, they didn't talk about future and—and what was—what could happen and where you could go. And I just—By the—By the time four years was over I kind of just went, "Yeah, I don't think I'm—this is for me and I think it's time to move on," and I had reached, kind of, a plateau—

TS: Right.

SW: —where unless I—I went and reenlisted and went remote and got my—and passed my staff sergeant testing, I was stuck, and I was stuck in a career where I could not—I would not be supervising anyone and I would just flounder there, and did not see myself doing that for twenty more years.

TS: I'm going to change—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SW: Or sixteen more years.

TS: —gears just a little bit—

SW: Yes.

TS: —and ask you some of the things that went on during the years you were in. So—let's see—you went in in '82. Do you remember anything about the Beirut—Beirut barracks bombing?

SW: Yes. We watched the news and were following it closely, and not really understanding politically why. I—I grew up such a sheltered existence that I didn't really understand why; I still don't. And—

TS: How about when they had the Grenada invasion right after that?

SW: Grenada and Panama. I almost ended up in Panama.

TS: How—How was that?

SW: We were about—My—The—The readiness unit that I was part of was about two hours from being—We were in—We—They actually called an exercise. It was a surprise exercise during Panama, and we were about two hours from getting on an airplane and going to Panama.

TS: Why didn't you go?

SW: I guess they decided the navy could handle the mil—the—the hospital stuff and they didn't need us.

TS: I see.

SW: Which I was real thankful for because I did not—I was not anywhere, what I felt as, prepared and trained properly to do that job. I could not be radar.

TS: What—What'd you think about when—Well, this would have happened before you got in, but [President Ronald Wilson] Reagan was shot. Do you remember that?

SW: I do remember that. I still do not understand how anybody could do that to another person; not just being President, but just to go up and shoot anybody, the President especially. I—We've been having a lot of shootings here in New Bern lately and it's been—

TS: In New Bern?

SW: In New Bern, and it's been—and Craven County. It's been kind of terrifying to me that there are people—I know up in Greenville there's guys that are just, like, going up and shooting people for no reason that you can tell except they're probably high on drugs or whatever, and that—

TS: One thing you mentioned was that when you were—you were in the room in basic training with all the other general admittents—

SW: Yes.

TS: —and there was a couple career fields that you wanted to do but you couldn't do because they were only available to men. Did you see much of that during the time you were in? I mean, did—were there things that you had hoped you could do?

SW: There were a number of career fields that were closed to women at that time; paramedic—pararescue, fireman, pilots were only men; fighter pilots especially, and I was at Seymour Johnson where we had fight—we had three squadrons of fighter pilots—fighter squadrons. But it's just—It—

TS: I'm going to stop for a second.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Good. Okay, I'm sorry. Okay, go ahead, I'm sorry.

SW: But the eighties—seventies and eighties were a time of transition, and I—I think a lot of people don't understand that it used to be that women didn't always work; not everybody worked. And I came—I was growing up in that transitional period where I was expecting to grow up and meet a man and get married and be my mother, who was a housewife; did a lot of volunteer work; did a lot of charity work; did a lot of church work. I did not—It didn't hit me until I was in college that I was going to have to have a career; I'm going to have to have a job. But the military helped me do that transition of, okay, men and women are working and it's okay, and when I got out it was like, "Okay, I have to have a job because we cannot afford to live on a master sergeant's paycheck."

TS: Well, what do you think about the roles that women are doing today in the air force and in the military, overall?

SW: I think it's an amazing transition; I love it. I love seeing those commercials where they're firemen and they're pilots and they're doctors and lawyers and they're doing every job they can, and being, basically, treated equally.

TS: What do you mean by "basically"? Where's the not "basically" part?

SW: I'm thinking there's still—there's still some discrimination against women in the military overall. Not one service over another, but I think more—it's the last male-only bastion and we're still fighting our way in the door.

TS: Well, the combat jobs are going to open up.

SW: Combat jobs are now starting to open up, and I think that—I think men are not going to—I think that's going to cause problems.

TS: Why?

SW: Because men are going to want to protect the women. It is engrained in their DNA to protect the women, and they're going to have a hard time overcoming that. I personally, to end a war you take a bunch of women who are PMSing [premenstrual syndrome], send them out there, let them shoot them down. They'll take care of [them] in no time. Tell them chocolate's on the other side of the enemy; not a problem. [both chuckle] I am not necessarily politically correct in that assumption, but— [laughing]

TS: Well, there have been women in combat situations, in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the men—the guys are not protecting the women because the women have been trained alongside them, and so they're going along and—

SW: Hopefully.

TS: Yeah, yeah.

SW: I still think that if the little five foot tall sergeant is saying—that the six foot two guy is going to step in front of her anyway.

TS: Yeah.

SW: And I—They may—They may be saying, "Yes, we trained with them," but they're still going to be protecting them, and they're still going to be keeping an eye on them, and making sure that things are okay with them and—because that is engrained in a male's DNA.

TS: Do you think there's anything that a woman should not be able to do, as far as the job goes?

SW: No. Women should—Women—The world right now is open to us in all capacities and I think the military should be too.

TS: What—What do you think about—When you were in they didn't even have "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

SW: No, we didn't. That—That was a completely—not even discussed. There was no—There was no—I don't know. I mean, it's only been thirty years but it seems like a lifetime ago

that—there was no discussions of homosexuality, there was no discussions—I mean, AIDS [Acquired Immune Deficiency Symdrome] was just making it's—

TS: That's right.

SW: —beginning appearances as I was getting out of the service, and there was no concept. We didn't under—We didn't know what was going on and, yes, San Francisco was where everybody hung out but it certainly wasn't anywhere—or in Goldsboro, North Carolina, and it certainly wasn't in the air force. There were probab—I—

TS: You mean that was the perception?

SW: That was the percep—That was my perception.

TS: That there—So what are you talking about; AIDS or homosexuality or both?

SW: Both.

TS: Both.

SW: The—My—My perception was I was working—there were no homosexuals in the air force.

TS: Did you—So you don't remember working with anybody who you potentially thought might have been gay or lesbian?

SW: Looking back I think there was a couple that—that were—could have been but they—but they dated girls just like everybody else. They were—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So it was a couple men?

SW: They were going out to the bars and—and they were—if they were homosexual, they were hidden in the closet very deeply.

TS: What do you think about now with—So then they had the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," were you could be but you couldn't be—let any—

SW: Couldn't advertise it.

TS: —let anybody know. And then now, it's—Just this week they—they—Well, a couple years ago they got rid of it and you could be openly gay or lesbian, and—and then now, just this week, they talked about giving benefits to the dependents.

SW: The sp—dependents.

TS: Yes.

SW: I don't know what I think about it. I'm not—

TS: Well, if you were in the military today and you—you're working with somebody who's openly a gay man or whatever and he's married and has a spouse and they're getting—they have a child and they're getting the same benefits as you. What would you—How would you feel about it?

SW: I would think that if they are married and they—they deserve it. They deserve those benefits. I—If they're supporting that military member and raising the kid at home while the military member is overseas or in Afghanistan or Iraq or wherever—

TS: Yes.

SW: —they deserve those ben—and—and they have a commitment and they are married, they deserve those benefits. My—My problem was—with the benefit system is how they treat divorcees, but—

TS: What's the problem with that?

SW: If you are married during the entire—I don't know if it's changed, but when I was getting my divorce I was not eligible for any of my ex-husband's retirement benefits because we had only been married for five years of his military service and not twenty, and you had to be married at least—I'm thinking it was fifteen, to get anything; to be able to have his—have health insurance; have the military health coverage. And—So basically, when I divorced my husband I got nothing from the military, which—

TS: So when you got out in '86 you—how much longer did your husband stay in? You said he was at about sixteen years then?

SW: He had sixteen years when we got married in '84, and he stayed till '90, so he had another four year—five years.

TS: So that's up here[?] at a time they're counting for—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SW: Five, six years. Yeah, and that's—and that was one of the reasons that it took me so long to finalize the divorce, because it took me two years after we finalize—after we separated to finalize—or a year and a half after we separated to finalize the divorce, was because I didn't want to have to pay for health insurance and we had—with him we had his military health insurance—military coverage, plus we had a supplement, so we paid three hundred dollars a year for health insurance for three people; that was it, and then whatever we were paying for the cov—the supplement. But for services, we only paid three hundred dollars, and now I'm paying a lot more. [both chuckle]

TS: I—That's something I wasn't aware of. I—I didn't know—I actually hadn't even thought about that.

SW: I—I was not allowed—Once I—Once we finalized the divorce I could not—I cannot go on a military base to go shopping, I—It's—I—Because I—Even though I'm a veteran, I still don't have—Because I'm not retired, I don't have those benefits—

TS: Right.

SW: —of health insurance or shopping or—

TS: Base privileges and things.

SW: —base privileges at all, so.

TS: Interesting. Well, how was your transition to civilian life after you did get out?

SW: I went from being a military person with a forty hour a week job to being a mother and a housewife, and it was a very difficult transition because I had been working for four years. I got four weeks off when my son was born, and I had basically been working since he was born and I—it was a difficult transition and I was home alone with this child, with no real support system around me for nine months. I got out in December and I went—I finally got a job in September, and when—and building on what I had went through in the military with the medical tran—medical administration, I became a medical transcriptionist, and once again, built on the experience and the knowledge that I had. But it was a very—To me, it was a difficult—it was a difficult transition.

TS: Did you feel, like, isolated?

SW: I was very isolated. All of the friends that I had through the military were working and I couldn't call them, and my husband was on day shift so he was working, and at night—I didn't go out a lot at night, and I just—I was—I felt very isolated and very alone and I did not know how to deal with it, and I got depressed. And somehow I got through it.

TS: Yeah? Did—Did you feel like you didn't really have any access to resources to help you through the transition?

SW: I didn't know what resources were out there—

TS: Okay.

SW: —to take advantage of, and probably in 1986 there may not have been—there were not any of the groups and things that we have today. The internet has been amazing for opening up fields and support groups and information-wise, because in 1986 I didn't know what was out there. I didn't know if there was a group of mothers who met once a week just to get out of the house. I didn't know how to find out about it, and we were not really taught—We bought a house downtown and we're not really tied into the military housing—

TS: The network there.

SW: —networks and that kind of thing. I—We, kind of, were very isolated because we were not townies but we were not really military, either.

TS: Would you recommend the—the service to young women today?

SW: I do recommend the service.

TS: Yeah? Why? Why do you recommend it?

SW: If nothing else it's a great first job, and it gives you—you do a lot of growing up in that first six weeks, and then it carries through and you learn to live on your own, you learn to live away from mom and dad, you learn how to take care of yourself and how to pay the bills and all of those things that at eighteen you don't know. And I look back—But I look at the young people today and I'm going, "They're not ready. There is no way these people, who are coming out of high school now, are ready to go and conquer the world."

TS: When we first started talking and you were talking about what tuned you in to the military, you talked about seeing a program—

SW: Yes.

TS: —about Israel and the two years of service. Do you think that would be something that would be useful—

SW: Oh, I think—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: —in the United States?

SW: I think every person coming out of high school should put two years into some kind of public service, whether it's volunteering at your local library forty hours a week or going in the military or whatever. I think two years of public service would really help today's young people figure out where they want to go, because they come out and they don't know what they want to be. They have spent the last twelve years of their life playing video games and watching *Jackass* and *Real World* [Television series that aired on MTV beginning in the 1990s] and whatever on television, and they don't have a realistic view of the world. Watching television is the worst thing that any per—young person could do, because you do not get a realistic view of life. And I think going out and working in Appalachia or the backwoods of wherever would be good, and be a growth experience for anybody.

TS: Do you think that—Is there anything that you think a civilian—that you could—that you would want a civilian person to understand about what it was like to be in the military that they may not understand or appreciate? Like, are there—

SW: I don't—

TS: —any misconceptions?

SW: Well, when I was in they used to call the air force "Air Force Inc.," and it was a big corporation; it wasn't military. But it is. They're—People need to understand that being in the military is a commitment, not just to the uniform and to your coworkers but to your country, and the most patriotic people that I know have been military. They're the ones that still stand up when the American—when the—the—

TS: Flag goes by in a parade?

SW: When the flag goes by. When—When the anthem—national anthem is played, they're the ones that are standing up; they're the ones that are taking their hats off and standing quietly until it is finished. I worked with a baseball team and as the last chord is being played they're putting their hats on and going—and—and I'm standing there still and silent and they just don't understand. They don't understand what it means to give that kind of commitment to your country. Whether or not you end up in the middle of the desert somewhere or the middle of Afghanistan, or you're in a fire fight, there is a commitment that is written in blood, and it started in 1776.

TS: Well, that's a good segue to the question I usually ask after that which is, what does patriotism mean to you? You kind of have been describing it but would you want to put it in any other kind of words?

SW: Patriotism, to me, is giving to others for the betterment of the community, betterment of the country, and you don't see a lot of that these days, and yet you do. It's not played—They're not talking about it a lot in the—the news. The news is so full of everything bad but they're not talking about—and if they do talk about somebody who is pat—did a patriotic act, they're somehow going to end up in court because their neighbors didn't like how they flowed their—flew their flag and—But patriotism is something that is not taught in school and it is not necessarily talked about, but it is something that is felt, and those in uniform feel it very deeply.

TS: Do you think your life has been different because you were in the military?

SW: Oh, yeah. I don't know where I would have been. I learned a lot about direction while I was in the service, and focusing, and working towards goals. It, again, added on to what I had learned as a child, but it helped to bring me to where I am now, and being able to follow the career field that I am in, and kind of tripped into. [both chuckle]

TS: Would you consider yourself—Like, do you think you were an independent-type person before you joined the air force?

SW: Yes, and I learned to be more of a team player while I was in the service.

TS: That's interesting.

SW: Because I might not be able to do all of what this task entailed, but somebody else would have the knowledge and could help me, or they knew who to call, and it was a matter of having to—learning how to be a team player and not trying to do it all on myself—on my own. Of course, I've reverted but—

TS: Now, have you had to deal with the Veterans Administration at all?

SW: I have not had to deal with the Veterans Administration. I came out healthy and whole. I had the GI bene—I had the GI Bill for school—no. I had the GI Bill for a mortgage; was not able to use it for schooling because it was—when I was in you had to put in so—

TS: The VEAP; you had VEAP?

SW: Yeah, it—we had VEAP.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: You didn't have the GI Bill.

SW: Yeah, we had VEAP—

TS: Veterans Education Assistance Program.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SW: —and we'd put in so much money and then they'd give you back three times or whatever, and I just decided I wasn't going to put in money. I used it to buy a car.

TS: There you go. Well, I don't have any more formal questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't covered, or any way you'd like to sum up your experience?

SW: I don't know what to say.

TS: You pretty much [unclear] that you have.

SW: I think I said it all. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah, you have. Well, Susan, thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

SW: Thank you.

TS: Okay.

[End of Interview]