WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Sally Ann Weeks Benson

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: March 31, 2015

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is March 31, 2015. This is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the home of Sally Benson in Coats, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina of Greensboro. Sally, could you state your name and say it the way that maybe you'd like to have it the collection?

SB: Sally Ann Weeks Benson.

TS: Okay, great. [dog barks] And I'm going to introduce Ginger in the background there because she's chatting with us a little bit today.

SB: Yeah.

TS: Well, Sally, why don't you go ahead and start out by telling me a little bit about when and where you were born?

SB: I was born [26 January 1947] in Aiken, South Carolina, right after World War II, but moved up here to Coats when I was about two years old, and then a year or so later moved over to Dunn, about twelve, fourteen miles away on Highway 95. Highway 95 wasn't there then.

TS: At that time, but yeah. But in that general area.

SB: Yes.

TS: So you were born a little bit after the war. What was it like growing up, and was it always a rural area that you were in, or outside the little towns, or where'd you grow up?

SB: This has always been a rural area. The closest big towns were Raleigh and Fayetteville. Dunn has always been a small town. I don't think the population ever crossed ten thousand when I was growing up there.

TS: Yeah.

SB: And we didn't have internet.

TS: Right. [both chuckle] No, there's no internet back then. Well, what did your folks do for a living?

SB: My father was manager of a furniture and appliance store—the credit manager for a furniture and appliance store, and my mother had several jobs over the years. She did work most of the time we were in school; manager of a Sherwin Williams [paint store], manager of a hotel. And then later on she was the accountant for an oil company.

TS: Okay. Now, did you have any brothers and sisters?

SB: I've got two sisters and a brother, all three younger and all three live in this local area; within twelve, fourteen miles of me.

TS: Oh, that's pretty nice. Were you close in age?

SB: Pretty close. The brother's the youngest and he was born just before I turned seven years old.

TS: Okay. So that was pretty close together.

SB: Yes.

TS: So there's four of you, then?

SB: Yes.

TS: What kind of things did you guys do growing up as kids in this area?

SB: Well, we played out in the yard, and we played games.

TS: What kind of games do you remember playing?

SB: Oh, board games. I loved Scrabble, Monopoly, checkers, you name it; all the popular board games back then.

TS: What kind of school did you go to? Was it a tiny, small school or—

SB: Yeah, very small school in Dunn. Always the public schools, so I was in Dunn first through twelfth grade.

TS: Oh, all the grades were—

SB: Yes.

TS: —in the same building?

SB: No, I was in three different buildings.

TS: Okay.

SB: Because when I was in the fourth grade they had opened a new fourth through sixth grade and we moved into the building when I was in fourth grade, and when I was in seventh grade moved into the building that was seventh through twelfth grades at that time.

TS: Okay. So you're in, like, the post-war timeframe, for growing up.

SB: Yeah.

TS: And in the fifties. Did you do any sock hops or anything like that?

SB: There were sock hops. You couldn't wear high heels on the gym floors back then. [chuckles]

TS: That's right.

SB: So since we—Didn't—Every family didn't have two or three cars and so you were very local; you went to the local swimming pool, the local park. More kids in neighborhoods. I think the neighborhoods were closer back then.

TS: Close together.

SB: And so, you played out in your yard with friends. Vacations for us were down to either White Lake in Bladen County [North Carolina], or to Tennessee to see a grandmother.

TS: Okay.

SB: There was no Disney World on this coast and—

TS: Right. Now, was it segregated at that time, then?

SB: Yeah. It's interesting. Yes, it was segregated. When I was in the eighth grade we made national news because the local Indians [Native Americans] were integrated with us. There's several tribes of Indians between here and down Lumberton, and so on this one day when they were going to integrate us, TV cameras and news reporters were all over the school grounds, and nothing happened.

TS: [chuckles]

SB: It was like who cared? And we're still friends. In fact, my high school class, out of a hundred and twenty of us that graduated, eighty or more of us are in touch right now.

TS: Is that right?

SB: Yes.

TS: Wow, that's pretty nice.

SB: Including the Indians. [both chuckle]

TS: Well, that's neat. So that was just, like, normal growing up, and they'd been your friends and—

SB: Yeah. And the—Also when we were in, I think, the twelfth grade, maybe the eleventh grade, is when they integrated blacks into the schools, but they did it just sending two or three, which was wrong; we should have just integrated.

TS: Right.

SB: And unfortunately, the one black woman who was in my class died last year.

TS: Oh, that's too bad. Was there any tension during that time, for that kind of integration?

SB: Not really, but around here most of us liked rock and roll music, and there was a place called Williams' Lake [Williams' Lake Dance Club] down in Sampson County where bands would come. All the good bands included black people. The good sports included black people. So all of us, of my age, it was like, "Who cares?" And I think that the music and sports brought us all together.

TS: Kind of a uniting factor, maybe?

SB: Yes. So we didn't have a problem.

TS: Yeah.

SB: At least most. I'm sure there are those—In fact, I've seen some grow up and grow up with attitudes, but most of my classmates now say—it's like, "We didn't care."

TS: Yeah.

SB: Yeah.

TS: Well, so what kind of music did you like listening to then?

SB: Oh, back then, let's see, the rock and roll, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles. But locally, Billy Stewart, The Tams, The Occasions; a lot of the local groups. And we had one, Jean Barbour and the Cavaliers, that developed out of our high school; started out as, I think, The Black Notes. Later they became The Men of Distinction. And they still now get together occasionally, and they became Harry's Band, named after their manager who died.

TS: Oh, that's pretty neat. So you had lots of music going on.

SB: Oh, we had lots of music, knew lots of people in bands, and just—

TS: Yeah.

SB: Had to have a record player. [both chuckle]

TS: That's right. And the 45s [45 rpm singles].

SB: Oh, and I had a little transistor radio. I was one of the first to get a nice transistor radio.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh, to get one?

SB: Yeah.

TS: How big was it?

SB: Oh, gosh, the size of a brick, maybe.

TS: [chuckles] Yeah, pretty good—

SB: Not quite as long as a brick but—

TS: Yeah, good size though.

SB: Yeah.

TS: A little heavy.

SB: Not that heavy.

TS: Not too bad?

SB: It wasn't; I had good one; I had a Motorola one.

TS: Oh, nice.

SB: It came from the store where my daddy worked.

TS: So he spotted it and said—

SB: I got it for Christmas, I think, so.

TS: Very neat. Now, did you have to walk to school or take a bus?

SB: Well, we lived in town, and at that time school buses didn't pick you up if you were in town, so you either had to be in carpools or you had to walk, and most of the time I was driven. However, even when I was in the fourth to sixth grade I did walk the couple of miles home sometimes. So it was a combination of walking or being driven.

TS: Getting a ride. Okay. Now, did you enjoy school?

SB: Oh, I loved school. And I wish—Knowing what I know now, I wish we'd had Internet back then. I would have been an absolute fanatic. But I spent much time in the libraries and just loved school; loved everything.

TS: Were you a big reader?

SB: Have always been a big reader. I've been reading since—I started reading when I was about two years old.

TS: Oh, really?

SB: Books, and by four years old—four and five years old I'd already read all the elementary school books and they wanted me to skip first grade and go—I didn't go to Kindergarten; very few did back then.

TS: Right.

SB: And we didn't have the kind of money to send me to Kindergarten. They wanted me to skip first grade and my parents said no because I'd be in the wrong age group. Well, as it turned out in the years that wouldn't have mattered and—whatever.

TS: That's how you [unclear] thinking about it; keep in the same peer group.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SB: But I didn't—Yeah. I did read. In fact, they had to bring books into the local library for me—had to find some—because I had read everything. I still read a lot.

TS: Yeah. What was it about reading, do you remember, that you enjoyed so much?

SB: I just think learning about things, and learning about the rest of the world. And my father having been in World War II and was a general's driver—he was just on active duty a short time in Europe—I was fascinated by his stories of the places in Europe, and wanted to go.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: That he had been in?

SB: And so, reading, I was learning about the rest of the world and I wanted to see the whole world. And then I also liked fiction.

TS: Yeah, so you just were a voracious reader.

SB: Right.

TS: Yeah. Did you have any favorite teacher growing up?

SB: Oh, I liked so many of them. I don't think there were any I didn't like, so they all had—there's special memories for all of them.

TS: Was there a particular subject that you enjoyed more than another? Or disliked more than another even?

SB: Well, I loved languages.

TS: Languages.

SB: Yeah, as far—I had a wonderful language teacher. We were fortunate in this area to have a woman—I think her husband had been sent here, she wasn't from here originally—but she taught Latin and French.

TS: Oh, okay.

SB: And she taught it so—you know, like French, you don't memorize, you learn it, and so you think in the language, and it made a big difference in my life having that background.

TS: I bet, yeah. I bet it did. Well, as a young girl growing up, then, in—let's see— [born in] '47. So you're in the mid-sixties when you're getting into high school?

SB: Right, because I graduated from high school in '65.

TS: Sixty-five. So you would have been in high school when John F. [Fitzgerald] Kennedy was President.

SB: Absolutely. I remember the day he was assassinated; it gives me chills to this day.

TS: What do you remember about it?

SB: We were sitting—We had a big auditorium and we had the weekly meeting in the auditorium of all classes, and one of my classmates ran the sound system and you ran it from a room that was separated from the auditorium. And he was in there, and we were in the auditorium, and I don't even remember what was going on in the auditorium. I remember where I was sitting. And all of a sudden, breaking in on whatever was going on in the auditorium, over the PA system was the sound of, like, a radio. We're going, "What's happening?" And he had been listening to the radio while he was in there and heard about the assassination and just turned it on with no warning to anybody.

[President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas on November 22, 1963, by Lee Harvey Oswald]

TS: Oh, my goodness.

SB: And so, we heard the initial coverage as it was going on.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: The breaking news?

SB: And it was —it was very scary, because back then you respected the president, regardless of your political leanings, really, and we all loved JFK anyhow; fascinated with him and with Jacqueline Kennedy.

TS: Right.

SB: I had my pillbox [hat] and my little suit that looked like her.

TS: Did you? That's neat.

SB: Yes, I did. But—So that was a very frightening day in this country.

TS: Yeah. What'd you do?

SB: I don't know. I remember going back into class and that it just—the day was done with then. We were still in class but a lot of us were really upset. And I remember going home and watching TV and just being glued to it and trying to understand what was going on in the world.

TS: Yeah. Well, can you explain to people who maybe didn't grow up in that era, about, like, that Cold War fears and things that were going on? Did you have any of that? I mean, did you experience it? Maybe you didn't. The duck and cover. Any of that?

SB: We knew about it, and I knew, yeah, there were bomb shelters. We didn't have a bomb shelter at my house. We knew there was this fear of Russia; they would get us. But again, if I'd had the internet and could Google [internet search engine] more I may have understood more, so I don't feel like I was scared on a day to day basis.

TS: Right.

SB: I mean, it was there. I was more excited about the space issue, of sending the satellites out into space.

TS: Sputnik and—

SB: Sputnik. Laughing at my younger sister one night, when we were talking about they radioed back from space. She says, "How do they get a drop cord that long?" [both chuckle]

So that was more exciting to me. I thought I might want to be an astronaut but girls couldn't be astronauts, so.

TS: Right, not at that time.

SB: No, that's changed.

TS: Yes, it has.

SB: So.

TS: Okay.

SB: But yeah, I don't remember a fear. We were just happy kids, and I think maybe not knowing everything helped. I also read the newspaper though.

TS: Yeah?

SB: We did current events. I remember fourth grade, reading things about Cuba and [Fulgencio] Batista [Zaldívar] and [Fidel] Castro, and doing my current event reporting on them. So I was quite aware of the news, and my father was an avid newspaper reader and so—

TS: That kind of rubbed off on you?

SB: Right. So talking to him about things, that made it easy. The other thing is, he did the cryptogram, and so I've always done that.

TS: What's that?

SB: The cryptoquote in the newspaper. I enjoyed doing that.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh, really? Okay.

SB: So he taught me know to do it and think it through early on, and then he had to fight me for it. [both chuckle]

TS: You wanted to do it first?

SB: I've always been a newspaper person.

TS: Okay. So as you're growing up, as a young girl, and you are thinking about, maybe, your future past high school. What kind of ideas did you have for what you might want to do, besides being an astronaut?

SB: Well, it's interesting because after doing so well in languages—which I did well in everything in high school, and I loved everything. I loved math, I liked everything, but knowing that girls couldn't do this, or girls couldn't do that, and especially growing up in a small town and not having older people who could say, "Yes, you can do this." So I was missing out on that, and my parents, neither one had a college education, and so there were things they didn't know about either. I knew I didn't want to be a nurse. I thought about I wanted to be a doctor at times, but then I thought I can't afford to do that.

TS: Go to medical to school?

SB: But I thought with the languages, I had been reading about the air force, and the fact that you didn't have to be a nurse to go in the air force, that maybe women could go—and in fact, I took the air force—not the air force—the military entrance exam [ASVAB; Armed Services Aptitude Battery]—they gave them in schools back then—and then they started calling me, and the air force, especially, wanted to offer me a ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] scholarship, but my mother said no daughter of hers was going in the military. So that cut it off, because at that time, not having any other knowledge of how to do things, I pretty much had to do what parents said.

But I had just felt that, "Well, my father was in the military, and men go, and we're starting Vietnam and hearing about this, why can't girls?" I did have a cousin who became a navy nurse, but it just seemed like it wasn't the place for me, and where I thought I could get in my mother was fighting, so I didn't do it.

TS: That would have been right after high school, to go—

SB: This was high school—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: —on the ROTC scholarship?

SB: —when I was in high school—

TS: Okay.

SB: —when I—my mother said no to the air force calling. And when I was in college they kept calling. But I thought, "Well, I like clothing;" I was doing a lot of sewing and I liked to design. Little did I know, that actually my expertise was in management and leadership. Even the retail stores I've worked in, when I think back, I should have known that, because that's what I did. But I liked fashion design, and that's when I went to UNCG and got the BS [Bachelor of Science] in clothing.

TS: Okay.

SB: Which if back in that time we had had what we have now, with internships and more involvement in, "What's a person going to do with their degree"—which we had none of that then, nothing—I wonder what would have happened. Because my thought had been, "Oh, I'd love to be a designer," and wedding designs, and what I wanted to do is exactly what's being done today. I wanted to do weddings that were more themed weddings and more gowns based on historical events.

TS: That's neat.

SB: But I didn't do any of that. [both chuckle]

TS: But you decided to go to UNCG, which was—Was it still Women's College at that time?

SB: It was [UNCG]—Men started there I think—I know when I was in high school, so there were some men there.

TS: Okay.

SB: And I went to UNCG—I wanted to go to a public school. Money was an issue, too, because then—it turns out there were probably scholarships I could have gotten and didn't know about because the school counselor didn't know. My parents thought that if they were there the school counselor would tell me.

TS: Right.

SB: It didn't happen. I did get offered a scholarship at Duke [University] but it was so small I never even told my parents about it. I couldn't afford the difference.

TS: Right.

SB: And I actually wanted to go to NC State [University] but I didn't know that there would be a job for me if I went in any of the engineering things.

TS: I see.

SB: So I said, "Okay, UNCG, I can do that." So I was accepted at UNCG in October of my senior year in high school under the early admission program.

TS: Was it '65 that you—

SB: Sixty-five I started.

TS: You started.

SB: Yeah. UNCG's the only place I applied.

TS: Okay.

SB: Yeah. Now everybody applies to all different schools. I just applied to one and that's it.

TS: So that's what you got. What was it like going to school there? Where did you stay? What was your—

SB: I remember my first dorm was Coit [Residence Hall]. I don't even know if it's still there.

TS: Coit?

SB: Yeah, it was an old—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Might be, I don't know.

SB: —old dorm. And then I went into one of the high rise—Grogan, I believe—yes, and I think I was there for three years.

TS: So you were on campus the whole time?

SB: Yes, I was on campus the whole time.

TS: Okay.

SB: And it was interesting, and I think what I loved is meeting people from all different backgrounds, and being exposed to more of the world than I had grown up in. I wished I'd had a little more personal money that I could have done more things than I did, but I did a lot. I enjoyed the classes. I did not like the grading system at the time; didn't feel it was fair.

TS: Why didn't you think it was fair?

SB: When you're in a class and you're told that it has to be graded on this—the curve, and that in a class of, like, twelve only one can get an A, and even if you've got a ninety-eight average you can't get an A. Or if you're in a class that you're told since nobody's a major in my subject the highest grade I'm going to get is a C, I'll give you a C+. Well, a C+ didn't matter. So there were—It was difficult I thought. But I didn't shy away from the hard courses.

And I took chemistry. It's interesting. My junior year—summer after junior year I took chemistry, kind of as an elective I think. I just liked chemistry in high school so I took it. Well, and that's when I did really well in chemistry. So the chemistry department asked if I would be a chemistry lab assistant my senior year. Well, I needed a job and that was perfect. So I was an assistant to instructors, and I had two or three labs a week, and I had the non-majors labs, and that year the non-majors had higher grades on their labs than the majors did. And I loved it; absolutely loved it.

TS: You enjoyed it?

SB: And my senior year is when you finally—they came out with calculators—handheld calculators.

TS: [chuckles]

SB: I remember that because of the chemistry lab instructor getting one and being amazed with how it worked.

TS: What you can do with it, yeah.

SB: I could use a slide rule.

TS: Yeah. You still use one?

SB: I probably could.

TS: Probably. Now, do you remember any of the professors you had in particular?

SB: I cannot remember names.

TS: That's okay.

SB: But I remember—Like, my chemistry professor that summer I remember absolutely loving. I loved chemistry, and I thought, "Why didn't I major in this?"

TS: [chuckles] But what were you majoring in?

SB: I had a BS in clothing, and I enjoyed those classes, I learned a lot from them, and I think that if we had had internships, or anything like that back then, that I might have stayed in that field until I got the chance to go in the military.

TS: Right.

SB: But I also—one thing I loved, in PE [physical education] I wound up taking modern dance my freshman year. Maybe they put me in something I didn't like and then switched me over, and I loved it so much that I took advanced modern dance, and I took another dance thing, and just really enjoyed the exercise, and I designed costumes for one of the performances and made them.

TS: Oh, I see. That's pretty meat. Yeah. Now, did you go down to Yum Yums [Yum Yum Better Ice Cream and Hot Dogs], did you do any off time fun stuff?

SB: There were a lot of things at the corner. There was a corner drugstore. It's totally different from the way it looks now; totally. But there was the corner down there, and yes, we went and got ice cream. I remember buying some earrings down there. And we went

downtown occasionally. My problem was, on weekends when I didn't have Saturday classes, or if I did, my parents—my mother especially—thought I should come home and work. I had a job where I could work on Saturday. Well, that hurt my grades, too, in a way because I was—I had to get a ride—there were others from the area—come back, work on Saturday, drive back on Sunday. That didn't help. So I stayed in contact with a lot of people in this area, but I'd missed out on doing some things on the weekends up there.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Some of the other things on the weekends, yeah. Well, the counterculture was kind of starting up too. Was that happening at UNCG as well?

SB: Yeah, we were in, like, the hippy era and we were starting to wear the wild things, the slave bracelets, the flower children. Going down to one of the stores and buying plastic flowers to put in our dorm room. There were demonstrations on campus at times.

TS: Demonstrations for the—

SB: For the—Against the Vietnam War.

TS: Anti-war, okay.

SB: And there was one time there was something about—to do with the black issue but I can't remember what it was.

TS: Like black power, or that might come later though.

SB: I don't remember exactly but it didn't go over well with most of us. Because one of my best friends in the dorm, she and I both liked tuna sandwiches I remember, Jennifer, and we had this ongoing bridge game that somebody had to go to class and some came out, some played all night, and I remember at 2:00 a.m. being awakened by Jennifer saying, "We need a fourth. We're still playing. I'll make you a tuna sandwich." [both chuckle] And Jennifer was a very light-skinned black woman, and her fiancé was very dark, so Jennifer would lie out in the sun with us to get a suntan so she could be darker. None of my friends participated in anything to do with the black issue. And then with Vietnam I saw more of that when I'd go over to Chapel Hill. Which I did get to go to some ballgames at Chapel Hill, Wake Forest, Durham, so.

TS: Yeah.

SB: And I loved doing that; that was fun.

TS: When you talk about the issues going on, it might have been civil rights related then.

SB: Right.

TS: At that time.

SB: I can remember [Robert Frnacis] "Bobby" Kennedy was assassinated. Martin Luther King [Jr.].

TS: That was '68.

SB: Yes.

TS: Were you still in school then?

SB: Yeah, I was there '65 to '69.

TS: Oh, '69. Oh, okay, so what was that like; that experience? That year was a pretty volatile year.

SB: It's hard to remember exactly the feelings. I know that there were feelings of not understanding all that's going on, and some things of understand—why is this a problem, and why do people care if somebody's black or white, and why can't they—Sometimes I think we're shielded growing up back then in a small community, without the Internet, without people—with—most of my teachers lived in the area the whole time. Most people I knew lived there. They didn't move around like people do today. So you're shielded from the total reality. And even in college, understanding what it meant. I think I didn't have family members who were directly involved maybe, or —

TS: Well, like, the issues of discrimination and voting rights and things like that, that wasn't something that you really had a lot of knowledge or information about?

SB: I didn't have a lot of know—I didn't understand why—to find out they can't vote. Why not? And so, not understanding, as well as looking at it now, if it were today's time and I were in college I'd know a whole lot more about it.

TS: Right, because access to information is a lot easier.

SB: Yeah. I mean, because I didn't understand—

TS: And misinformation, too, though, right?

SB: Right, misinformation. But I remember growing up when I was little and my mother was working as a—maybe when I was in first or second grade, and there's me and three siblings, in the afternoons after school there were two black women who came. My dad

or somebody'd bring them over to the house, and they would take care of us, and fix dinner—I helped fix dinner—until my parents got home.

And we called them Aunt Bessie and Aunt something, and it never crossed my mind to be concerned that they were a different color skin. So I just—I think it was later on that I realized, "Maybe I should have had a stronger voice." Just because things didn't bother me, or didn't affect me, I needed to speak up for those whose voice wasn't being heard.

TS: Interesting.

SB: Yes.

TS: Well, you said how you were interested in the space race and stuff. So you had the moon landing—'69.

SB: Yes.

TS: It might have been the summer that you graduated.

SB: Oh, that was fascinating.

TS: Yeah.

SB: Oh, Woodstock was—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Woodstock too.

SB: Woodstock was the summer of '69. I graduated from UNCG and I went to NC State for both summer sessions and then the next fall, with the intent of getting a second degree in textile technology. Well, it was at that point in time, though, that textiles in this area was falling apart, and I realized, "Okay, I need to go make money and think about what I really want to do. That maybe going for the textile industry, because it's local, isn't going to work"

But in summer of '69, taking calculus at NC State, I made quite a few friends, and some of the friends—this is a combination male and female, we're just friends—they were—we had heard about this thing that was going on and it turned out to be Woodstock. Well, one of the guys had a van, and so several of them said, "Yeah, let's go up there. This sounds like fun on a weekend."

Well, I didn't have much money, I'm still trying to go to school and work, and I had work that I could do, I had—somebody had, in a retail store somewhere here. I said, "No, I've got to work. I told them I would work." So I didn't go. And I'm at my parents'

house, I'm watching TV, and it showed Woodstock, and I went, "I'm supposed to be there."

TS: [chuckles]

SB: So I hate I missed that, because my friends who were not drug users had a blast. They came back—They had had a wonderful time. So.

TS: You missed out on that.

SB: I missed out on it but—

TS: Well, who knows what would have happened?

SB: Who knew? And I got a paycheck so that was okay.

TS: [chuckles] That's right. So you were aware of the drug culture that was going around?

SB: Yes.

TS: And so, what about the anti-war sentiment? Did you have any thoughts about what was going on with Vietnam?

SB: I didn't understand it enough then, and I think if it were like today I would have known more. I would have had more ways to research it, but I was so tied up in taking full course loads and trying to work to support myself, and borrowing money, that I didn't give the time to the current events that I wish I could have. So my information was from those that had strong opinions, one way or the other, so I never participated in the demonstrations because I wasn't sure what was right. And I don't know that today I even know what was right. I knew that it wasn't a clear cut issue, I can tell that.

TS: Right.

SB: But my effort was spent on getting through school.

TS: Right.

SB: Getting that degree. Back then getting the college degree was the goal.

TS: Right. And so, you expected you were going to do what with that after you graduated?

SB: With my BS in clothing or tex—With the clothing, when I realized that I didn't have the money to take off for New York—and there was no help at all from UNCG on what do you do with your degree.

TS: Okay.

SB: There was nothing.

TS: Okay.

SB: Today, it's totally changed. And that's why I thought, 'Well, with the textile industry in North Carolina, if I get the second degree in textiles and I've got both, then I can get into something in the Research Triangle area." And that's when textiles fell apart, and I was well aware it was falling apart, and so I couldn't do the things I wanted to do because I didn't have the money, or I didn't have someone to help me find out the answers.

TS: Right.

SB: And so, when I left State I went to work at Hudson Belk [Department Store] in downtown Raleigh.

TS: How long did you work for them?

SB: About eleven years.

TS: Okay.

SB: Because I started out as a department manager, and back then women weren't in management positions in retailing.

TS: Right.

SB: I became an area manager. The Hudson Belk in downtown Raleigh was one of the largest department stores in the state, only second to, and sometimes led, the Belks in Charlotte. And back then they were not franchise—not a chain store like it is now; it was partnership groups.

But when I became a section manager that was—I had more volume under me than some of the store managers for Belks in other areas. In fact, most of them. And this Belks paid for me to be a member of the American Management Association. In the early seventies I went to one of their big, weeklong meetings held down in Myrtle Beach [South Carolina], and it was, like, four hundred people. I think seven of us were female.

TS: Really?

SB: Because you did not have women in management positions.

TS: How were you being treated at that time as a women in that kind of position?

SB: I was treated fairly well. I found out after I got in there that they were paying the men managers more than they were me, and when I asked about it they said, "Well, you're not married and they have a family to support."

I went, "That's not fair." And I did get a raise; it took a while. I eventually became one of the assistant store managers, and was treated very well. I was even offered—"If you'd rather be a buyer," but by that time I had really realized that my real expertise was in management and leadership, not in the sit down and do the desk work.

TS: Right.

SB: The nitty-gritty details. And plus, there's more opportunity in management than there was in being a buyer, so I stuck with it.

TS: Stayed with it. Well, so you spent, really, all the seventies in this position, with this company, right?

SB: Right.

TS: And this is when the women's movement is going on, too.

SB: Yes.

TS: Did that have any influence on you?

SB: Not as much as it probably should have, because I had a job, I was getting paid better than a lot of my friends. I was making more than my school teacher friends, even though it didn't seem like that much. I was being treated very well by the men with whom I worked, so I was not having a problem. And I really—If there were problems with the other women, other than not having the opportunities to move into management as much as the men did, I may not have been as aware as I should have been. However, there were women that did get management jobs. I think they were limited. But I didn't—I wasn't seeing mistreatment with Hudson Belk.

TS: Okay.

SB: I think they treated their employees very well. And so, I don't—I don't think it was much of an issue for me because it wasn't in the company with whom I was working.

TS: Did you have any kind of sexism or sexual harassment, or anything like that, that you saw or experienced?

SB: No. And that's interesting, because I didn't at work. I saw that with other people and how they were treated, but at work there I wasn't seeing it. I made good friends, I knew the spouses of the men and women with whom I worked; got along very well with them. So no complaints there.

TS: So you weren't having the kind of obstacles, maybe, that some other women might have been having during this era of, like, change, and getting into—

SB: Right. In fact, it's funny. When I first started working for Hudson Belk my hair was long and straight like most everybody else of that age back then, and I remember one time with my long straight hair, and a Maxi Coat I had on, meeting Mr. Hensdale, of Belk-Hensdale in Fayetteville; and this was old Mr. Hensdale. And I can't remember where I met him—in one of the meetings or however—but had, like, a full day with him. Well, his son-in-law—I think son or son-in-law—called later and—or and came up, because I met him. He says, "I had to meet you because with my father, father-in-law." He says, "He is so anti-young people and hiring females," and all that. He said, "After meeting you he came back, he says, 'We need to be sure and hire some young women.' He says, 'I thought if they had long hair they weren't smart.' He says, 'I'd like to hire her.'" But he wouldn't take me from Hudson Belk.

TS: Yeah.

SB: But I was just—that made me feel better.

TS: Sure.

SB: But then I had to start thinking about, "How do I come across as a professional?"

TS: How did you think you did?

SB: Well, I cut the hair some because I thought, "Yeah, I want to look more professional," but at the same time, if you're in a business that supports fashion, I was allowed to wear—I could wear things, the shorter skirts, but not too short.

TS: Right.

SB: And back then women did not wear pants to work; you wore skirts. You could not wear sleeveless stuff. You wore stockings. After—That changed in a few years because we were selling pantsuits.

TS: Right. Then you start wearing them.

SB: Right.

TS: Well, what made you decide to get out of that and change careers?

SB: Well, early on I had told some people with whom I worked, I said, "I always wanted to go in the military." I just felt like we all have a certain obligation in this country to do some kind of community service, or service back to the country. And right now—Back

then the military was the big option. Now there are other options we could use, but—And the other thing was, I'm never not going to do anything again because somebody else doesn't want me to.

And so, regardless of how my mother felt when I was the age I was, I should have done what I felt was right for me.

So when I was twenty-seven, I went to the air force recruiter in what used to be the post office in downtown Raleigh, and was told I was too old, because twenty-seven was the cutoff so I was too old. And after that point I said—I reiterated, never again. If there's something I want to do it does not matter what someone else thinks, I'm going to do what I feel is right.

Well, when I was thirty-four, and this would have been in early May of 1980, I guess—'81, '81, yes—an avid newspaper reader, I was sitting on the deck at my townhouse in Cary reading the paper from cover to cover, including the want ads. I'd scan them, because Raleigh was growing so fa—rapidly then that there was a lot going on, and I learned a lot just reading through the want ads. And I wasn't even look—I wasn't looking for a job, I'm just looking at what's going on, and I saw this big ad that said: Managers Wanted. Ages 18-34—or something like that—or 35. And I go, "They can't do that. They can't put an age on it." And then I kept reading, and it was an ad from the navy recruiter, and I thought, "Whoa, what happened to twenty-seven?"

So that Wednesday, my day off, I went to see the recruiter and said, "What is this all about?" And it turns out that by law you had to be commissioned before you were thirty-five, that the twenty-seven was policy; had been all along. Now, it's different—nurse are thirty-nine, doctors are dead, I think; whatever. [both chuckle] So the ages are different, but for a regular officer, by law, it's thirty-five.

So they gave me a test and said, "You did well on that. Let's do this, that, and the other, and let's get you a physical. This is to go to Officer Candidate School to become an officer, probably surface warfare. Would you go to sea?"

"Sure, why not?"

And so, the next Wednesday when I had my physical and then went in to see the recruiter, he says, "We've got a problem." He said, "The next OCS [Officer Candidate School] class in July is filled and the one that starts in September finishes three days after your thirty-fifth birthday. So you—Yeah, that's a problem." He said, "What I'd like to do is, if we can really push this through I will see if I can get you in that July class that's filled."

So I had to get referrals so I—within a week I had gotten it from Karl Hudson, owner of Hudson Belk.

TS: That's a pretty good referral. [chuckles]

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SB: The local district attorney I knew, and there's several other people who wrote referrals. And even Mr. Hudson says, "I don't want to do this." He says, "But—And I don't want to let you go. If you go I want you to take leave and—come back anytime."

TS: Right.

SB: And I said, "This will work." So [I] got all the referrals in, and the recruiter happened to be an aviator and at that time had an aircraft at Raleigh-Durham [International Airport] that he could use for taking potential aviators up. He flew my records to [Washington] D.C., to the recruiting command, got me in the class, and on June fifth I was swore into the navy, and in July I was in Newport, Rhode Island.

TS: That's 1981.

SB: In 1981, because, like I'd said, what I wanted to do nobody else was going to make the decision for me. My mother said at that time, she said, "I still don't like it."

I said, "It does not matter."

TS: [chuckles] Yeah. Was your father still alive then too?

SB: Yes.

TS: Yeah.

SB: My father was thrilled.

TS: I was going to say, did he—he was—

SB: He was fine with it.

TS: Now, he was in the army?

SB: He was Army National Guard, and he had been called to active duty. He's originally from Sampson County.

TS: Okay.

SB: And he had been down in South Carolina working at a—I want to say, like an Ace Hardware but not Ace, it was something similar; hardware store maybe. And was Army National Guard, picked up some extra money, and they called him to active duty, so he was all over Europe and loved it. If he had not developed foot problems, like so many did back then with the poor boots and all, he might have stayed in, but he had to get out.

TS: Yeah. Do you need to take a break or anything?

SB: No, I'm fine right now.

TS: Okay. So your mom's not so crazy about it, you're dad's pretty happy. What about your siblings? Did they have any thoughts about it?

SB: I don't know. They really didn't—They weren't—They kind of thought it was exciting I think, and after I got in—and even my mother after years realized, okay, she's not infantry, going crawling in ditches or whatever. She was—She was okay with it. But they got to come visit wherever I was.

TS: Oh, that's nice. Well, how about your friends? What did they think about this whole change in your career?

SB: Exciting.

TS: Yeah.

SB: I think most of them were just excited about it and happy for me.

TS: Well, so tell me a little bit about, then, your officer training class. This was in Newport, right?

SB: Newport, Rhode Island.

TS: Okay.

SB: What a beautiful area to be confined to officer training.

TS: No kidding.

SB: And it was different because, yes, I was one of the oldest. There was several others who were maybe in their early thirties; some of the prior enlisted that went to Officer Candidate School. But yes, I was at the top end, because most often it's somebody twenty-two years old.

TS: Right.

SB: And it was very regimented. However, it's like going to college. There—You were taking college level courses; you could get college credit for them. So you went to class every day for, like, five classes a day, and I believe it was set up in, like, two semesters. It was from July to November but it was very concentrated. And then you had your physical part of it. We had to go run a mile and a half. I went to the gym. I was not a strong swimmer and you had to go off a twelve foot tower. Even though I couldn't swim I went off the twelve foot tower, and somebody—I couldn't tread water. I mean, I could swim some but

I couldn't tread water. But—So they got me and then I took swim—extra instruction, which was fun.

TS: Was it?

SB: So I had to go over there and float around in the pool everyday looking up at the skylights. And finally I could tread water fine. But I had to go off the twelve foot tower again. Not my idea of fun but I did it.

TS: Was that the most challenging part for you, the water issue?

SB: Probably.

TS: Yeah.

SB: Because the classes, even celestial navigation, I did fine in; I had a wonderful instructor for that.

TS: And the other physical activity was okay?

SB: Yeah, it was fine.

TS: Had you been very fit at that time?

SB: I wasn't unfit. I wasn't a runner back then. I did walk a lot, and I was in good physical shape, good health, so it really wasn't a—wasn't a problem. The big problem was trying to do push-ups. I have a problem with that.

TS: Yeah.

SB: But somehow I could eke out the minimum to pass the PT [physical training] test. Sit-ups were no problem. Back when I was in high school we had President Kennedy's physical fitness—test, whatever it was, and so I had started with that, and then taking the dance classes at UNCG helped.

TS: Oh, right. So there you go.

SB: So the physical part was never a problem; it's not that tough. One thing I did like initially when we went after a week—because it was very intense. You were paraded around, you were paraded around at dinner, this, that, and the other. They did introduce us to the chaplain. They took us—They said, "It doesn't matter what your beliefs, this is just a time that you're away from everything else and it's—" stress. And it indeed was. And the chaplain we went to was a Jewish Chaplain. I had grown up going to Methodist church primarily. It was a Jewish chaplain and he was so wonderful, and we were just—you never felt like anybody wanted you in any particular religion, you were just—you could

interact with a chaplain, it didn't matter who he or she was. So that was good knowing that there was somewhere to go.

TS: Right.

SB: And that you could go.

TS: So you had a little escape somewhere.

SB: Right.

TS: Okay.

SB: And then you're in Newport, Rhode Island, you can't complain so much. [both chuckle]

TS: Did you get to have some off time then, when you were there?

SB: Toward the end we had some off time, like on weekends, and we could go downtown Newport. Downtown Newport in the summertime is wonderful.

TS: Yeah. Probably a little better then than maybe in the wintertime.

SB: Oh yes, since I lived there the next three years.

TS: Oh, that's right. Tell us about that. You got through your OCS okay, and then you ended up getting assigned at the same place.

SB: Well, yes. What happens when you go through OCS, you—they have a night when you select where you're going, and then maybe places you can select from. Well, I had thought I'd be going to sea but I find out that only six women a year, I think then, were being sent to sea from OCS, and most of those were going to, like—it was tenders [boats or larger ships used to service or support other boats or ships, generally by transporting people and/or supplies to and from shore or another ship] back then; they weren't on all the ships. Well, since I was at the end of the physical year there was no surface slots for me, so I was not going to sea. There were several places I could select from. I remember Whidbey Island was on there.

TS: Oh, nice.

SB: But—

TS: It's in Washington, right?

SB: In Washington state. And there were some others, I don't remember what they were. They were all admin [administrative] type jobs. But this Surface Warfare Officers School

Command, right there in Newport, which was a big deal—they trained everything from the basic—the ones going—we call them "Baby SWOS" or—the CO [Commanding Officer] didn't like that, he said, "No, kinder SWOS." From the very basic surface warfare class on up to classes for those going to command at sea. There were other levels; executive officer, department head. And we had international students.

["SWOS" is an acronym for Surface Warfare Officers School].

TS: It was like a training center?

SB: As a training [for officers going to surface ships—SB clarified later]—

TS: Okay.

SB: And—But the billet I selected said "Curriculum and Instructional Standards Office." Okay? So I go over there and they tell us—in fact, they tell us before we're even sent to our commands that, "You probably won't be in this billet because they're trying to get admin officers and you'll probably be an admin officer." Well, I wasn't really thrilled with that but what do you do? You do what you're told, Ensign. But I did keep that job for three years, and it was supposed to be for someone who was a lieutenant commander, so three paygrades senior to me, post-executive officer at sea, and here I was none of that.

TS: Pretty green.

SB: Pretty green.

TS: Yeah.

SB: And some of the others had been moved and some similar positions had been moved out of them into new admin billets that somebody had more money to spend than they had sense actually. Unneeded billets in my opinion. But I stayed in my job, and under two different department heads, so.

TS: Do you think that was because you had a level of maturity from previous management experience, and things like that?

SB: Yeah, absolutely. I think that the level of maturity—experiencing doing anything, and in fact they went from a very small office to adding—even adding another big office space. I went from being just a person working in the office for the commander and his civilian deputy to having two people working directly for me, and having another person added—another officer added with two people working for him. Because I did testing and evaluation primarily and they were doing curriculum development; we split it out. And were very successful. One of the things we were successful in, which again age and maturity helped with, was at every course they did course evaluations, and they were done at the end of the course when the officers were leaving their course, then six months

later they were sent a course evaluation that came back to see what they thought; if they'd put it to use.

Well, the return rate was—it was minimal, like less than five percent. It was nothing. And I thought, "Well, that ridiculous." So I started talked to the officers in the class, because the senior officers were my age. [chuckles] And I said, "When you get out of there you better remember I'm here and you better send this back." We started getting them back. We went—I mean, pretty soon we were up to getting fifteen percent of them back, then we were getting twenty-five percent of them back, and even every now and then there'd be a note on it, "She's still there." [both chuckle]

So we were able to make significant changes in courses, and some needed changes, and sometimes—and I would sit in on courses. This helped me in my growth and education. Even though I wasn't going to be a surface warfare officer, the navy is about surface warfare, submarine warfare, and learning and knowing what went on made me more marketable to the different communities. But I sat in on the classes and I would look at what prior students had said about it, and then I could write up, evaluate an opinion for my commanding officer—my department [to the] head commanding officer, on why I agreed or disagreed. And on testing, we would evaluate the test. If eighteen of thirty people got the same wrong answer on the multiple choice question, something's wrong.

TS: Right.

SB: And I remember there was one on valves—butterfly valves and something, that once I had read their evals and sat in on the course and looked at the course materials I saw what was wrong with the question, and it was misleading and we could correct that.

TS: Right.

SB: And two wonderful enlisted people working for me most of the time. I had [unclear] two. One of them, who was a petty officer—a first class petty officer—retired as a lieutenant commander, so he grew [from a machinist's mate to a senior enlisted to officer—SB clarified later].

TS: That's pretty neat.

SB: But—So I learned a whole lot about surface warfare, plus because of my age and maturity, every time an admiral came to visit, which was frequently, because they came to speak to the courses, and they came for things—at least one of them a week—they had me as the escort officer. Well, that was okay. It wasn't like we're just sending a female out to greet him, it was someone they knew who was going to have the admiral's ear, and that can be good or bad.

TS: Right.

SB: I met a lot of the senior officers, so that my name was known everywhere, and it paid off later.

TS: Since maybe a younger person, male or female, might have been more intimidated by—

SB: They could have been intimidated, plus there were things they would miss out on. In fact, a—someone who is still a friend, that became an officer and is younger than I am, and I met her when she was assigned to this command right before I left, and she was going to take over doing the admiral duty and there was a lot—and she has told me to this day that I saved her life because of some things I told her that she would not have thought about.

TS: Like what?

SB: For instance, where the admiral was going to stay in the flag quarters that were designated for admirals. I said, "I don't care if it's designated for that. You never know who's been there and what's going on. It doesn't matter if somebody tells you it's ready, you go look at it."

And sure enough she went one time to check it out, she said, "I was running tight but I thought you told me that for a reason," and she checked and there was, like, somebody had left some dirty clothes or something. So whoever told her it was ready had not been up there to check, and she said—

TS: Right.

SB: —"You saved my life."

TS: Double-checking it.

SB: Right.

TS: Crossing your T's and dotting your I's, sort of thing. That's neat. Well, now, at the Surface Warfare School, were they all men that were being trained? Were there any women?

SB: At that time I think it was all men. I'm trying to—No, there were a few women. Like I said, there were six a year that went to the basic course, but I really didn't—the basic course was in a different building from us, and even though I had worked some of their things—

TS: You were more in the advanced.

SB: —I was more in the advanced. I did work—One of the big things, I worked for the basic course—not to get away from the women—was in looking at some of their test scores and helping them out, and looking at some problems. I made the comment one day, "I think they're having a problem reading." And we started doing a reading—I researched and found a reading test. Most of them are geared for high school. I wanted to find a

college level and I found one through McGraw-Hill [Education] or somebody, that when students came on board, gave them this test; it was three part and I can't remember what the three parts were. Lo and behold, test scores at basic SWOS correlated to the reading scores; direct correlation. So it started helping, giving some remedial help.

TS: Like reading comprehension?

SB: Reading comprehension.

TS: Okay.

SB: Which is interesting. When I went to the [U.S.] Army Command and General Staff College [Kansas] later they gave a test to incoming students. But—

TS: To kind of assess where they're at?

SB: Well, for the Army Command and General Staff College, at that level it was because how heavy duty the curriculum was and how—when you've got to read six hundred pages a night, and I'm not exaggerating, they had to know that you were a fast reader and could comprehend what you were reading. And if you had any problems with that they were going to give some extra help.

TS: I see.

SB: But with the basic SWOS, it was a matter of—there were quite a few of them that somehow made it through college—because they had to be college graduates—that still had a problem with some reading and it was a matter of understanding that and seeing if we could help.

TS: That's really interesting.

SB: There were women in basic SWOS but at that time the women had been there so—not long enough that they were in the department head or the senior officer courses, so it was men.

TS: Okay. So you were there till about '84?

SB: Yes.

TS: And then you headed to Groton.

SB: Groton, Connecticut.

TS: Connecticut. That was a nuclear submarine?

SB: Nuclear submarine [repair facility—SB clarified later].

TS: Now, did you sign up for that or was that an assignment that you just—

SB: Oh, that was not available to a woman at all.

TS: Well, tell me about that.

SB: I—When I was in Newport I—we all had detailers who we worked with us—for our next assignment, and at that time the general unrestricted line—[those without a warfare qualification—SB clarified later]—those detailers were under the surface warfare captain who. They were later separated out because it didn't make sense to have us under them, but where else do you put us?

Well, I had a really good detailer that a lot of people didn't like. I remember her name was Tracy and she could be very harsh and—I don't know. I had no problem with her. And she called me one time, after I had jaw surgery and my mouth was wired shut and I couldn't talk—

TS: [chuckles]

SB: —and she says, "I know you can't talk."

I said, "Yes, I can."

And she says, "But I have this opportunity that you're the only person that comes to mind." She says, "I would love for you to do. You're going to hate me if you do it but let me tell you about it." She had had lunch with a detailer for the submarine repair facility. Nuclear submarine, all men; women weren't even allowed near them. There were some enlisted females that worked there, but not on submarines, on shore.

TS: An administrative kind of thing.

SB: Ri—Well, no, they worked in the repair shops.

TS: Oh, they did, okay.

SB: So they were electronics technicians, or this, that, and the other, but not to go to sea—not to go on submarines.

TS: Okay.

SB: And she said she had had lunch with the detailer who was trying to fill a job that's called the assistant repair officer for the Nuclear Repair Facility, but it was also—it was assistant repair officer and repair admin officer. Well, this command had twelve hundred people, nine hundred of which were in the repair department. There was a command admin officer run by two warrant officers, but because the repair office was so large they

had their own assistant repair officer, repair admin officer, a master chief who worked in admin, and two yeomen, because of the volume of work.

Well, the position required a lieutenant commander. It needed to be someone senior because it'd be working with senior people, and it needed somebody—and they had it as a limited duty officer; somebody that'd been prior was enlisted then became an officer. So somebody with enormous amount of experience, and had to be nuclear qualified. Well, I met none of that.

TS: I was going to say.

SB: I was a lieutenant, junior grade.

TS: Okay.

SB: So two years junior, not submarine qualified, female for God's sake. And she said—she said, "I told him about you and he said that he would try—he said he doesn't see why you couldn't do the job. He said he would try—If you would agree to it, he would try but he doesn't think he can get you in there, but he would try. He said especially with the current commanding officer." She said, "You will be working long hours. He said it's supposed to be a three year tour. I will write it for two years and see if I can get by with it, if nobody notices." And she said, "It will be hard." She said, "You will be under a microscope."

So I said, "Okay."

TS: What was appealing about it to you?

SB: I think it was appealing because somebody had the faith in me to do something that they couldn't get anybody—somebody else—they couldn't get another female in, or—and that it was hard but that they said, "You can do the job."

And I'm going, "Okay." Along to my feeling, one thing that helped me is I knew that if I didn't make it in the military I was marketable outside. I could go back to Hudson Belk. But it never crossed my mind that I wouldn't make it. So I thought—

TS: You had a lot of confidence in yourself and your abilities?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SB: I had the confidence. At times it was scary because there are so many brilliant people around, and I thought, "Okay." And I wonder, too—I don't know if I thought this will never happen, but it did.

And so, I get there and it turns out the commanding officer that was there was anti-female and was really bad. I mean—

TS: Pretty hostile in a way?

SB: In a way. He had no choice but to get along with me I think, in a way. His executive officer was wonderful, so that helped. My—The repair officer, my department head was absolutely wonderful. It turned out to be someone that—my current husband who I met when I was there happened to know him. All the other men with whom I worked were wonderful. In fact—Now, the radiation controls officer, who was an O-4 maybe, and he was in a career where—no women and he was kind of snooty for a while. We tolerated each other—he tolerated me, I didn't care. But he had a warrant officer working for him that—the crusty warrant officer you hear about. The second day I was there he came by my desk, introduced himself, and said, "We are really glad to have you here."

And I'm like, "Really?"

He said, "And I would love for you to meet my wife sometime. Come to dinner with us." And I did, and I had a wonderful relationship with him, so that helped.

The master chief in my office was great. And with the repair officer over these nine hundred people we had the O-5, the commander repair officer, and kind of an equivalent to him, working with him, was a production officer, who was still part of the same department, and another O-5—crusty old O-5—that I got along great with.

Then the cream of the crop of senior enlisted were the ship superintendents who managed the submarine repair, and they were senior chiefs and master chiefs; E-8s and E-9s. Well, I was their division officer, and people couldn't imagine that a female could be division officer for them. We got along great. And again, I think my age and previous experience just in life helped there.

TS: Do you think it was something to the particular men that were there? I mean, the commander was not quite—

SB: No, the commanding officer was not.

TS: But it sounds like most everybody else was.

SB: Most everybody was. I think there were those that might have been hesitant, but the thing is I had to learn so fast and furious because with nuclear repair there are always inspections, always people come and checking on you, and so I had to qualify as the daytime repair duty officer, because if the repair officer wasn't there by definition I was the repair officer. Well, I didn't have the background that he did. He was an engineer duty officer. But we had a production officer there, we had the ship's superintendents. I wasn't going to do the work anyhow but I was going to be responsible. I had to qualify as command duty officer. It was only eleven officers there. I stood duty for the commanding officer every eleven days. I had to qualify as repair duty chief, however that was something I would never do. It was just knowing what they would do. And they were the ones that were the senior enlisted that were always—there's one on duty, the command you had a duty officer and you had a repair duty chief, who actually was there at all the repairs going on, because it was twenty-four hours a day. I had to know what they were doing. Ship superintendent. I even went through the qualification for that.

One of the big things that happened there—Well, there were several big things here. I was the first female officer assigned to a nuclear repair facility. Now, we had a hundred and thirty, I think it was, enlisted females. And in fact, one—

TS: How many males?

SB: Well, that was out of the twelve hundred we had a hundred and thirty, so yeah.

TS: Okay.

SB: Eleven hundred. One of our first class petty officers, her name was Christy something. Why I remember her first name and not her last name after never calling her by her first name—

TS: [chuckles]

SB: —I don't know. While I was there she was selected for chief right before I left. So she was, like, the first nuclear qualified female chief in the navy, and she went to the—as an instructor at nuclear training.

TS: What kind of experience did they get? I mean, did they come to you with any problems on the job; kind of, issues with the guys?

SB: The women?

TS: Yeah.

SB: It was very interesting because most of the women were in the repair department. A few of those women were either—were in operations because we had tugboats to go out when the submarines were coming in. We also got females who were coming off the tenders that came in—the ships—If they were pregnant at that time they couldn't be on the ships; they were sent ashore. Well, they were sent to us because we were—I mean, there was a base there, some could have gone to the base, but we got most of them, and we could use them in different places. And we ran into some problems at times because people wanted to use the women as their slaves. We had a command master chief working for the bad commanding officer. The good news is when the bad commanding officer left he was replaced by a wonderful commanding officer. The bad command master chief left and was replaced by a wonderful command master chief. But the bad command master chief would get several of the women assigned to him and would just use them as nothing but slaves.

[A submarine tender is a type of ship that supplies and supports submarines.]

TS: What would he have them do?

SB: I—"Go dust the conference room. Go get this for me. Go do—" And they didn't know to say no. Well, they weren't working for me but I knew what was going on with some. I can't remember what the proverbial straw was one day but something had happened—and this was long into it and some other good things had happened before where some of the women had gone crying to somebody else about the way he'd been treating them, and I went in his small office and I said something to him. And he says, "You can't tell me what to do, I'm the command master chief," and whatever. And I wonder if that office is still there, if the door is still there, if it still has my footprint where my foot almost went through the door when I kicked it closed. I can't believe I did that but I was so furious.

The good thing was—and whatever it was—got straightened out. The good thing was the ship superintendents, the group of senior enlisted, which there must have been five or six of them. I was their division officer. Here was this cream of crop. I got along so well with them. They taught me so much. I got along with the other officers who were division officers; one lieutenant commander in particular, Kurt Murphy from West Virginia; grew up barefooted with twenty siblings or something. At least that's his story.

TS: Right.

SB: Taught me so much, and so every time somebody came to—and I'll get back to the ship superintendents. Every time a group came to test us on our radiological controls practices evaluation, or something else, of course I was included in who they were going to give the written test to, the oral test; they always did but I always passed. So it was like, "Okay, she passes, she knows what she's talking about," and they didn't.

But the ship superintendents and working with them and seeing I couldn't do their job but I could manage, I could work with them. If they had a personnel problem I could call the personnel officer who was living at the BOQ [bachelor officers' quarters] with me—not in the room with me but at the same BOQ—

TS: No, right, I understand.

SB: And I would go, "Chief So-and-so says his service record's not there, that someone took it home."

"Well, yeah, they take it home and work with it."

I said, "No, they don't. You better go to her house and get it right now."

"Oh, I'll buy you a beer tonight."

I said, "You can buy me a beer tonight but you're going to go get it." And I could do things that they, as enlisted, weren't able to get done for themselves, whatever—

TS: Because you had the rank.

SB: I could do that. I could—When one of my senior chiefs—Right before I'd gotten there, his eighteen year old daughter had opened the front door to be shot in the face and killed, so he went through a lot. And one night during—halfway during the time I was there he

was—I knew his wife too—he would be having bad dreams; he'd wake up and he couldn't sleep and we were getting him help. But when he woke up and lashed out he hit her in the face. Well, he was scared so he took her to the hospital, of course. Well, the police came and picked him up for assault on her. And she says, "He woke up because of—" what was happening. So I went to court with them and told them what I knew and it was okay. And it was just that I could give them support, I could do things for them. They did their job. And it became funny because they would ask me to go with them to see a ship's commanding officer or something because they liked to have me, having the exposure, and to be able to tell some snippy lieutenant who was snipping at a master chief.

TS: Right.

SB: Well, this is my boss and lieutenant—Lieutenant Brown at the time.

TS: Yeah.

SB: Dah, dah, dah, dah. It worked well. And the other thing that this group did, at the submarine repair facility you've got all these people coming off ships and you've got the typical sailor language. There was not—When I got there every sentence includes some form of the work "fuck," at least two or three times; every sentence from everybody. It was like "This is crazy." Well, the command master chief—not command master chiefs, the group of ship superintendents, one time we were talking and they said, "We need to change this. We're better than this." And we did; the whole command changed. It was after the bad commanding officer left.

TS: So to change the culture it takes leadership.

SB: Yes, it does, and it takes not having people afraid. People are afraid to go to somebody. With the bad commanding officer two things happened that I remember specifically. His office was down the hall from mine and we were on the third floor of a building—one of the buildings. We were having a urinalysis one time in the building next to us, and I can't even remember, I think my number may have come up, but somebody had come to me and said, "Ma'am, the women over there are really upset. They're making them use a restroom that the men have used and it's filthy. They said there's pee all over the floor and there's paper all over the floor and that they have to go in there."

So I went over there and they said, "Well, you don't need to go in there."

I said, "I want to check it out."

They were right. They—No one, male or female, had any business going in there. And I'm pretty sure now that it was being left intentionally nasty for the women. And this is one thing I'd learned, that even though I may not have a problem, I was responsible for others who did not have a voice, so this was a big turning point I think. And when I saw what it was I said, "You can't do a urinalysis on any more women until we find a clean place."

"Well, you can't stop us."

I said, "Yes, I can. I just did." And I told the women, "You can leave until somebody notifies you that you have to come back."

Well, as I was leaving, here comes the commanding officer. He says, "They called me and told me what you did."

I said, "Well, see for yourself, captain." And again, I was of the attitude, "What are you going to do to me? You kick me out; I can make more money than I make here." And I'd never really feared being kicked out for what I was doing. But—So that got taken care of.

Well, then the next thing that happened under this commanding officer—one of the last things that happened before he transferred—we had weekly Monday meetings with all department heads and the divis—most of the division officers. There were probably twenty people in the room and I was the only female. I'm the only female in any position around there that fit in. And the captain sat at the end of this long conference table and I was probably four or five people down from him and right in the middle of the table, and he was smoking cigars under the No Smoking sign. And his answer was, "I'm the commanding officer. It's my conference room, I'll smoke if I damn well please, but no, you can't." He put his feet up on the desk and he was just very arrogant.

At this particular meeting we were talking about the effect of chemicals on pregnant women. That women that were sent to us pregnant, or ours, could not be around certain chemicals, and we had a safety department that always checked this out. And one of the comments that was made on a certain one that—"We're not sure on so we're not going to put them there yet."

Well, this commanding officer says to this group—he doesn't realize that most of them liked me—in my presence says, "Oh, well, I know what we can do. We can get Lieutenant j.g. [junior grade] Brown pregnant and have her as a test case."

So I looked at him and said, "Up your ass, captain," and got up and walked out. Nothing ever came of it.

Every other person in the room came to me and said, "We can't believe he did that. We are so sorry." But he went away, a good CO came.

TS: Right.

SB: But some of the most important things there were changes with people; seeing how people were treated and treating others.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Well, you wonder, too, though, if he's going to say that to you when you're an officer and had some level of authority, how are some of the women enlisted treated?

SB: They're treated very badly. Some of the—We had uniform inspections. Every week he would take a different division or something and the captain would go with his command master chief, and the master chief of whatever division, and go inspect the division. Well,

he always said the women had to wear skirts. You did not work in skirts at that command at all. The only time you wore a skirt might be for a change of command or something. It was a repair facility, you wore khakis and submarine sweaters. But he always insisted on the women wearing skirts, and I had been told that he would get down and inspect the hem of the skirts.

So it comes time he's going to do my division and he requires skirts. Well, I get to walk along with him and master chief and my mas—senior master chief—I had several master chiefs—who happened to be the new ship superintendent and a wonderful man. So we're walking along, the commanding officer goes behind the women, gets down on his knees behind the first woman, reaches up to handle her skirt, so I reach down and take him by the collar and pull him—I said, "Captain, you can't do that." Well, he didn't want to make much of a scene there because he knew that I would not stop.

My master chief was like, "Oh my God. What's this captain doing?"

TS: Right.

SB: He never did it again, and I don't think we ever had an inspection that required just—yeah, unless it was something coming up where you'd wear skirts.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Skirts? So you didn't tolerate his misbehavior.

SB: I did not—I could not put up that. I don't—I wouldn't have cared what it cost me.

TS: Yeah.

SB: I could not let myself do that. And there were many men who knew about it, and it turns out the admiral on the base there—I can't remember what the squadron was—his flag secretary interacted with me a lot for our command, and his flag secretary had the admiral's ear, and I think that captain retired.

TS: But he never called you out; he never tried to reprimand you?

SB: No, it wouldn't have worked.

TS: No? Well, that doesn't mean not that ones haven't tried.

SB: No, he—There were comments sometimes but he never threatened me and he didn't give me a bad fit rep [fitness report] either.

TS: He didn't?

SB: No, because his XO [executive officer] wouldn't tolerate it, and his XO told me he wouldn't. He said he would not let it go to him.

TS: You had good mentors around you, too, then, that were men.

SB: Yeah, I had excellent people with whom I worked, and most of them I was close in age to. But just absolutely wonderful people. I think the funniest thing that happened with my senior enlisted group—The other thing we had there—because there's another chief that's coming into play here—had a chief petty officer who helped coordinate the five reserve units that reported to command. All five reserve units reporting to the command were headed by commanders who—whose active duty job would be repair officer. So the repair officer had five different men, all qualified—one had been training director at Three Mile Island but—to be his—to have his job. Well, before I got there they were treating reserves like, "Whatever. Just come in. Count your time."

And I went, "Look at the qualifications of these people. Why aren't we using them to do this, that, and the other?"

And so, I was the reserve coordinator, but I had the chief who was the coordinator. Early on I went to a meeting somewhere—Virginia, whatever—where my—where the five reserve commanders were, and I'm a lieutenant JG [junior grade] at the time, and two of them came to me and said, "We've all five talked," he said, "but we want you to know that we know we're O-5s and you're an O-2—" at the time— "but we work for you. You are our boss. We will do what you say."

And it was like, "Okay." And that worked so well and we turned out using these units for unbelievable things. Got recognized by COMSUBLANT [Commander, Submarine Force Atlantic] for what we were doing. They even had projects—They were willing to work nights instead of days on their weekends and did that.

TS: Do you think part of that had to do with the level of respect that you're showing them for the type of qualifications they had?

SB: Yes.

TS: And so, then the respect come back in that way.

SB: Oh, absolutely. But they had such qualifications. They had a petty officer—a first class petty officer electronics technician who had a master's degree in oceanography with a 4.0 [grade point] average, and he was vice president of a bank. So these people not only had qualifications for their job, they had other qualifications we could use. They had qualified electricians for instance. They had all kinds of people, so finding this out we were able to use them in so many ways that helped our workload.

TS: Why wouldn't they have done that before, right?

SB: Oh, they would have gladly done it.

TS: Yeah.

SB: But they were—there was just incredible talent there. The submarine USS *Nautilus*, the first nuclear [powered] sub[marine]—do I have the name right? We redid that to make it a museum there at Groton, and one of the repa7ir units asked if they could have charge of the entire conversion, which that was unprecedented. So what we did, and we had started before then, the senior enlisted of the reserve units were given the opportunity to actually qualify as a ship superintendent, not just a reserve unit ship superintendent to work with somebody else. They paid their own transportation, sometimes came clear across country, because we were the only place they could get the qualifications. They had to work, it was not an easy qualification, but once they did they were certified to manage the submarine repair. And we had this one unit that said, "We will work whatever it takes. We have people, instead of working Saturday and Sunday, if you want them Wednesday night and Thursday night they will work, and we did it.

So we had—in addition to the twelve hundred regular people we had five reserve units that were absolutely incredible talent not being used properly, but then they were.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: [unclear]

SB: But then the funniest thing that happened when I was there, my ship superintendents were all in a big office; big spread out office. Across the hall from them was a little office with the chief who managed the reserve units. Well, one day I walked downstairs, they were on the second floor, and went to go in this chief's office, and he's sitting there at his desk and he's got a magazine held with a foldout—centerfold looking out. At the split second I look at it I see the cover of the magazine, but he's turning red, he says, "Oh! Ma'am—"

I said, "It's okay." I said, "What kind of centerfold is in Bass Fisherman?" And it was a big bass.

TS: [chuckles]

SB: So I laughed. A few days later I go down to the ship superintendent's office. I mean, these people worked nights Saturdays, Sundays forever. Navy's—Naval Submarine Support Facility, NSSF, [worked] nights, Saturdays, Sundays forever, and they did. And I go in and there's four or five of them around a desk with one of them holding a magazine with a centerfold out, and as I walk in I go, "Are you guys looking at that bass?" [both chuckle] And they were. None of them would have ever had anything else in there.

TS: That's cute.

SB: But that was an incredible experience where I stood duty—full duty every eleven days in addition to being there every morning around six o'clock, and not leaving before 6:30 or

7:00 at night. And being called all night during the night, whether I had duty or not, because the repair end of it. I worked every Saturday except for—I think it was a couple of times I had leave or something.

TS: Now, were you married at this time?

SB: Yes, but trying not to be.

TS: Okay.

SB: And so, I had a whole—Yeah.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So is that why you were working so much too?

SB: Well, no, that had nothing—I would have had to work but he was up in Massachusetts and I did try to go up there some weekends on Saturday afternoon and Sunday, but after a while I was not even doing that, so. No, the job required that—my detailer had been right, that I could have hated her. But it was such a fascinating thing to be involved with, and I got to go out on submarines during the daytime. I—[unclear]. I got to transfer from submarines coming in to tugboats with a safety line. I went out [unclear] tugboats. I just—I tried to—

TS: It's a pretty unique experience for sure.

SB: Yeah, absolutely, and I found out I was capable of learning so much more than I could imagine. I had—I mentioned the lieutenant commander from West Virginia, he'd been prior enlisted. When I would—And I reviewed all command instructions; got rid of a lot of local instructions that were redundant and sometime—and that's dangerous because sometimes you've got a local one and there's a change in a higher-up one and it doesn't—change doesn't get made. But I went through—And with the help of reserve units is where I got great help on not only reviewing every instruction but seeing it firsthand; oxygen charging on a submarine, how is it really done? Let's see what it looks like and then make sure the instruction does say the right things. And this lieutenant commander, Kurt Murphy, was a wonderful help. I get to something and then I call him, I'd go, "What is this about. What does this mean?"

TS: So they were all willing to pitch in and help you learn.

SB: Oh—

TS: Because you were willing to do the work, right?

SB: Yeah, right. So I feel I don't know of anyone I didn't get along with. The radiation controls officer wanted be a little arrogant but after a while he saw how I was making his life easier, because even he didn't think a reserve could work there. Well, when SUBLANT sent people down and said, "Yeah, they filled all the qualifications, there's no reason why not. And if something happens and they're called to active duty tomorrow they're ready to work. You don't have to start all over training them."

TS: Right.

SB: So that—We had the dive locker, too, so they were not part of the repair department but as command duty officer I had to understand dive locker qualifications there and the chamber there and all that. So I learned a lot there, which helped when I went to the surface ship repair facility San Francisco when we had our own divers.

TS: Well, I know you had said you wanted to join the military, even at an earlier age, but when you signed up you had this background where you can go back to what you were doing, make more money, but had you wanted to make this a new career and go do the twenty years, or when you originally signed up when you were thirty-four?

SB: Yes, I had thought if I'm going to do it I'm going to do it right, and I had no idea when I did what I'd be doing. I had—I think I thought they'd send me to sea, and I don't know what I'm getting into, but I'll do it whatever it is. I had no idea it would be as diverse as it turned out to be, or as educational.

TS: What are you thinking about the navy, like, as a sailor at this time? Like, what are you thinking about the whole culture?

SB: I was really impressed with the people I was meeting, and I had gone from the first job where I was with officers primarily to where it's primarily enlisted working there—

TS: That's true, different.

SB: —and learning how different the interaction is, that contrary to what a lot of people think about you give orders and people say, "Yes, ma'am. Yes, sir," you don't feel like that. Yes, you know who is senior and who's in charge, and it is rare that you say, "I order you to do something." I remember doing that one time in my whole career. It may have been more than one but I only remember one time that—it was farther down the road than this. It was you worked together. People had their jobs and there were places where it overlapped and—

TS: More of a team effort you would say?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SB: It was a team effort. I mean, we had civilian employees also, so it is a big team effort. And then you learn more—that the navy is more than just a ship or a submarine or an airplane; that there's a whole lot more to it than that.

TS: A whole lot more?

SB: And the culture was changing when I was there to the joint and combined operations, joint being working with other U.S. services, military.

TS: Not just the navy?

SB: Combined meaning work with foreign militaries also.

TS: When you're done at Groton, then you headed out to California, right?

SB: Yes.

TS: Now, did you put in for that assignment or was this another one that was—

SB: Yes, what was interesting here—

TS: Okay.

SB: [chuckles] Interesting to go from one coast to the other at a time when budgets said no, keep them on the same coast.

TS: Okay. Oh yeah, because it was '86. We were doing that reduction in services that—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SB: Yeah, I think I had—Yeah, I think—

TS: Gramm-Rudman [Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Deficit Reduction Act of 1985] bill was going on then.

SB: Right. What happened is I had met my current husband when I was at Groton and he had been a detailer for the engineering duty officers, but he had come up and decided to qualify as a basic submarine officer, so he—pretty much writing his own orders, go to Marin Island, California. So we were thinking about things, he said, "We'll see if we can get you to California and we'll see what goes from there."

So I'm talking to my detailer and she says, "There's no way they're going to let me send anybody to California because I've got plenty of jobs in D.C.," whatever.

Well, Eric says, "I'm a detailer. I was a detailer. Go see your detailer in person. Go talk to her."

So I go down to D.C. and the detailer at the time was still under the surface warfare group. So when I'm talking to my detailer a captain walks by and stops beside me and goes, "Hi. What are you doing here?"

And I go, "Captain Tolbert, what are you doing here?"

He says, "I'm in charge of this place."

I said, "Oh, really?" So he was head of the detailers that included my detailer.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Was he one of the ones you had met at the first place?

SB: I had met him in Newport.

TS: Oh, okay.

SB: So I knew him quite well.

TS: Right. Okay.

SB: He had been on the staff there. He says, "Well, come to my office and let's talk about it." So we go to his office, cubicle, and he points to his desk and he said, "You sit over there. I'm tired." So I sat in his chair, he sat across the desk, and beside him was a divider. It turns out on the other side was a lieutenant commander who took care of orders and stuff. And he asked what I was doing there so I explained about wanting to go to California and having met Eric, and blah, blah, blah, this, that, and the other. And he said—He yells over the partition, he says, "Phil—" I remember his name—he says, "What kind of jobs have we got out in California? Look at [Rear] Admiral [Robert L.] Toney's staff."

Well, Phil was the surface warfare detailer, not my detailer; he was surface warfare. And he comes around and he says—he says, "But she doesn't have surface warfare."

And the captain said, "It doesn't matter. She knows surface warfare enough to fill any of those jobs we've got that you'll be filling for the staff."

And he had a couple. One was, like, operations at the naval base but the timing wasn't quite right, and I could have done that based on previous experience. But the other that they found was at—it turned to be commander of combat logistics group one. They used to be the—it had a different name. It was under the mobile logistics force. It was the group that handled all the ships that did the—the oilers, the supply ships, that type, and it was for flag secretary for this admiral who was over that group and over Naval Base San Francisco, which means that whole San Francisco Bay area. And Captain Tolbert says, "Admiral Toney and I are friends, I'll call him." He says, "She can have the job." Just that easy.

My detailer goes, "We don't have money to send out—"

TS: [chuckles]

SB: He says, "We'll send her out there." So—

TS: Who you know makes a difference, right?

SB: It does. Who you know and how they knew you makes a difference.

TS: Right.

SB: So that's how I got the job to go to [Combat Logistics Group One] Alameda—

TS: That's pretty sweet.

SB: —as flag secretary, and the flag secretary, you're also head of not only the admin office that reports to you, which was the chief, but in my division was the doctors, the lawyers, and the chaplains. The chaplain—I was an O-3, a lieutenant, the chaplain was an O-6, a captain. I think the doctor was the same paygrade I was, maybe a senior. The lawyer was senior to me, but I was their division officer, by definition. Because again, I was put in a job that was meant for a paygrade senior to me. And I get out there and the admiral—Admiral Toney—is one of the toughest admirals around. Interesting. My mother asked me after I'd been working for him two years—she says—she looked at a picture and she says, "You never told me he was a black man."

I said, "Well, that had nothing to do with anything."

But it did with his personality, knowing where he came from at that point in time, to have been a young black man that became an officer, became an admiral. Not because he was black but because he was damn good. He was surface warfare.

TS: Right.

SB: But he was very—He was tough, and he wanted you to listen. And so many people tried to answer his questions before letting him finish and he didn't like that. So I'd kick them under the table.

TS: [chuckles]

SB: But he and I got—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Who were you kicking, the admiral or the person that's trying—

SB: Not the admiral, I was kicking the commanders—the seniors to me—This is really in department head meetings and we had a small table and if they would start to talk to quickly I would kick them.

TS: [chuckles]

SB: It got to be a joke but it helped. But the admiral liked the way I wrote. I wrote his speeches, I wrote letters that some of them said, "Oh, you don't want to say that."

I said, "The admiral wants to say that." And so, we got along well. Again, I'm working long hours because he liked me. I was going to the naval base where—I really didn't work for the naval base, I was under his Alameda [Oakland—SB corrected later] hat, but I was going there every morning, Monday through Saturday, to go through things and messages they had pulled out for him there to—certain issues, and then going over to my regular job. I was going to functions with him all the time. I had the private phone numbers for Dianne [Goldman Berman] Feinstein [senior U.S. Senator from California], [Edmund Gerald] "Jerry" Brown [39th Governor of California, lawyer], you name it; I had their private numbers and used them. It was—It was one heck of an experience.

TS: Sure. What was the best part about the job?

SB: I think the diversity, again, of the types of things I was doing and the people I was working with, because I liked to have a lot going on and I can handle a lot going on I just don't want to do the details. Yes, I did have to write fit reps for the ships' commanding officers, and I think we had—I don't remember how many ships we had but there were a bunch of them, and the ships' commanding officers were about the same age I was, so that kind of helped, and I got along fine with them and—because they realized that I was a good conduit for them and that I would listen. I could go to the ship, they'd come and say, "Come have lunch with us." And I helped ease things out for them.

Some of the most interesting things were how the captain used me—not the captain, the admiral used me over at the naval base, because that was not my job. But with my background, he would want me to double check instructions they wrote on some of the operations things [operational issues—SB corrected later]. And there would be things that I had experience with, like at the submarine repair facility, that whoever doing the instruction really hadn't. They may have been on a surface ship but they had never had the shore station experience. So I got used there a lot on operational type things.

TS: Was there anything in particular that wasn't the greatest about that assignment?

SB: Earthquakes? [both chuckle] during one, my chair went everywhere. I can't think of anything that wasn't good there because I had such a good working relationship with the people with whom I worked, and with the ships' commanding officers, and even with the naval base staff. Although I wasn't on their staff they accepted that Admiral Toney wanted me put in there.

TS: So you're really protected by him, too, from any kind of—

SB: Yes.

TS: —harassment that anybody might have wanted to—

SB: But there never was any.

TS: Right.

SB: And even the—He had a flag secretary on that staff, but that flag secretary didn't have any interaction with the ships' COs; didn't have any reason to really because that was my job, but that was the naval base.

I think one of the funniest things that happened at that time, my husband Eric and I had gotten married and he was at Mare Island Naval Shipyard [in Vallejo, California] where they had submarines coming in. Well, there was a conversion going on with a submarine that at that time was beyond top secret. As you probably know there are classifications above top secret, split—you can know this sentence, [or] you can know that one, but you can't know both. And because of his—Eric's job and having to know about things they also did extra background on me, and I knew about it, and for [*USS*] *Parche* which was being converted to the dive platform now, it's not just reading it—books—other submarines have been done this way. It was very limited, who knew about it and who could go onboard. The admiral didn't even know. Now, I'm not so sure I agree with the admiral not being able to know that but it kind of helped protect him too. But that was not under his purview. And there came a time when someone was visiting that did have access—one of the submarine higher ups—to go onboard [*USS*] *Parche*, and Admiral Toney is accompanying them to Mare Island. His aide at the naval base knew he was going to the naval base side—this is where immaturity didn't help—didn't always check on things. He assumed the admiral could go anywhere because he was the admiral.

TS: Right.

SB: Well, the admiral didn't have access to go onboard this submarine and the aide goes ballistic. And he even calls me in, he goes, "Your husband's up there. What's going on with this?"

I said, "The admiral does not have clearance to go onboard." And I talked to the admiral, I told him, basically, why he didn't have clearance. He understood. But the aide is just making an idiot of himself and I—But that was the funny thing, to have an admiral over the area that didn't have clearance for something there.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Right, true. That's interesting. The compartmentalized information to—

SB: But the admiral and I got along so well and the others knew it, that—In fact, I'm still friends with so many of them, and one of the maintenance officers on staff had been someone Eric knew at the [United States] Naval Academy, and we're still friends with him and his wife. But it was to the point that if anything happened at night the duty officer—if it was something related to the command, instead of calling the admiral they would call me—I was the most junior officer on staff—and say, "Should we tell the admiral?"

And there were some times when I'd say, "This will wait. He will not see a newspaper before 5:30 a.m. I will call him at 5:30."

There was one time there was an accident down in Southern California on a ship and some deaths.

TS: Right.

SB: But he didn't need to know about it at 2:30 a.m., 5:30 a.m.—worked and it was okay.

TS: Right, there wasn't anything he could do.

SB: But they were always scared. They'd call me, "Should we tell the admiral this? Should we tell that?"

So the hardest thing about the job was the long hours. That the only way to get a weekend off was to take leave, and then I didn't really take much leave. When Eric and I got married the admiral—We'd gotten married when I could get off. There was something I had to do and we got off Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday I think.

TS: Oh, honeymoon?

SB: That was it. We went down to Carmel[-by-the-Sea, California] or whatever.

TS: Yeah? [chuckles]

SB: But no, I—

TS: You were married before but now you're married to somebody new, so getting joint assignments, how was that?

SB: Oh, this was—

TS: I mean, you got kind of in pretty good with this one, and after that how did it go?

SB: Oh, it went well again, because we're leaving California, and we wanted to try to time it that we'd both leave about the same time, and they're meaning to send me back to the D.C. area, and Eric's job in—at that time everything for him was pretty much back in

D.C. and we were trying to get jobs there. In fact, we're finding—we found jobs, and again it was a funding issue where my detailer was saying, "We don't have the funds to do this. We can send you to PG School down in Monterey." And yes, I would have loved to have gone there but Eric would have been going back to D.C. and I thought, "Well, I'll get my masters on my own. [Comment redacted].

Well, long story made short, what happened is the detailers for Eric—the engineering duty detailers—talked to my detailers and—because we had said, "Hey, we're both moving one set of household goods, not two, so you're not having to pay—" and I told my detailers, "The EDs [engineering duty officers] will pay for the household goods. You don't have to pay for it, so all you're doing is paying—"

TS: Saving a lot of money.

SB: "You're saving a lot of money."

TS: Right.

SB: And we're going to drive in the same car together—

TS: Right.

SB: —so you can pay for one move. And it turns out my orders were only—long story—only cost them a little over eight hundred dollars instead of the several thousand they thought they were going to spend. And the engineering duty officers paid for my orders. They went over to my detailer's and said, "Okay, write her orders for Ju—to leave in July and we will pay for it." So they couldn't turn it down.

TS: Right, no kidding.

SB: So we actually left California the same day in the same car. One car; we didn't have to drive two because we went the same day. The only—The way we got to leave on the same day is this was, like, July 5. The fitness reports for the captains—some of the ship's commanding officers were due July 31, and the chief staff officer and admiral said, "We have—You have to do those fitreps before you go." That, "If you can get them done early, fine, you can go early. If not you're going—" because Eric had to go July 5—"you'll have to wait till the end of July, first of August."

So I contacted all my little commanding officers and said, "Please guys, give me your input." And I had been—The year before I had written their fitreps. They didn't do the thing where they normally write your own and—I said, "Give me the input, I'll write them." So I wrote their fit reps and got them to the admiral a month early. I said, "Barring anything happening—"

So he had them in hand, he said, "Fine, what can I do?"

TS: Right.

SB: "Have a nice trip." So that worked.

TS: [chuckles] And so, this is in '89, then?

SB: Eighty-nine.

TS: Okay, so then you're heading back to the D.C. area and you're in Arlington [Virginia]?

SB: Arlington, at the navy—Military Personnel Command was just down the hill and up the hill from the Pentagon; a short shuttle ride.

TS: What was your main duties here at this station?

SB: This was interesting. I was heading up the section to process officers, O-1 through—turns out—admiral select—it was O-1 through O-6—for separation—for administrative separation based on misconduct and substandard performance.

TS: Oh, goodness.

SB: A lot of people go through their careers and never even know that section exists. There were senior officers—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: That had to have been interesting.

SB: A lot of senior officers knew nothing about it. Because the big picture of thing—there—we may have had two hundred cases going on but that also included reserve officers.

TS: Right.

SB: So even though you may do a hundred officers out of thousands.

TS: What kind of things were they getting kicked out for?

SB: Well, the substandard performance had several things in it, but the misconduct could be arson, murder, drug use, drug dealing, you name it; anything a civilian does the officers had done. The officer whose wife disappears and they find her car in the desert and think she's been killed or whatever, and a year later or so has hired an ensign to come babysit while he's out of town for the weekend, and the ensign checks to see what the dog's digging up in the backyard and it's the wife's body.

TS: That happened?

SB: That happened.

TS: Now, when those kind of things happen is it just handled through the military or do local police get involved too or—

SB: Sometime both, sometimes one or the other, it depends. If it's not on a military base it really should be handled by the local authorities. And what happens with administrative separations is, yes, something will be handled by local authorities—they could go to court and whatever, go to jail—it could be court-martialed. If they're not separated from the military by court-martial then you look at it administratively: does this court-martial warrant administrative—and it's processing for administrative separation. There is nothing where an officer is automatically separated without a process; nothing. So drug use is not automatic separation. Even back then under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"—or before "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"—being homosexual was not automatic separation, and people thought it was but it wasn't; there's always been a process.

So with court-martial you're going to look at every one for an officer and I can't imagine an officer being found guilty at court-martial—not even found guilty necessarily—but having a court-martial and not looking at administrative processing, because sometimes they don't separate them for drug use and then administratively you do. Sometime—And it is not double jeopardy to have someone go to court in the civilian sector and convicted for drugs and then to administratively process; that is not double jeopardy; it's not what that means. So we—

TS: This is, I would say, probably a more stressful job, in one way, than the others.

SB: Yes.

TS: I mean, it's challenging in a different way.

SB: It was—The challenging part is, yeah, you're doing a lot of desk work.

TS: Yeah.

SB: A lot of detail, and you have to work with the lawyers to make sure what you're doing is correct. You're learning the process, and my job, ensuring that the process was handled. For instance, with most officer cases it depends on your status. If you're a reserve—got a reserve commission you may only have one level of process, but most officers there's a three level process: the notification, and you can resign sometimes, or the first board, which is a board at the military personnel command. If they retain based on what they know it goes no further, it doesn't matter what it is. And I'll give you an example in a minute. But if somebody recommends separation at that board it has to go to another board that is where the officer can attend it in a local area, and I say "local" because it's the nearest court martial convening authority—

TS: Right.

SB: —even though it's an administrative process. But the final say so, if somebody recommends a separation for an officer it's the assistant secretary of the navy for manpower and reserve affairs. There is one place where it has to go to the president, and that's removal from the rolls, where you're erased as if you never existed.

TS: Oh, really?

SB: And that can happen if somebody commits a felony or whatever.

TS: Did that happen very often?

SB: No. I think I did two, and sometimes you have to know how to do it and get it done, and it's a long process, so.

TS: And I'm sure it could be a challenge all along the way.

SB: Yes, they want to fight it, and some people retain. For example, we had someone who was being separated for being gay and there was no real misconduct. Misconduct is one thing, just somebody saying, "I know you're gay because you've got a boyfriend," or whatever. And I think this person was a medical officer of some kind and somehow they had found out he was gay, so he's notified, "You're being processed based on this." So he gets to the first board of officers, which has to be three O-6s. No exceptions.

TS: What's three O-6; what does that mean?

SB: That's a captain—three captains, so nobody junior to them.

TS: Oh, three O-6s. [chuckles]

SB: Three navy captains, O-6; Officer 6.

TS: The number three.

SB: We had the board at BUPERS, Bureau of Personnel. I had another officer working for me and I had him—him, one time it was another female—they would brief the board on what they were supposed to do and I was always there, that if they had questions I could answer the questions. And we had a lawyer available if they wanted to ask a legal question.

I remember this one time, and it was the first time we had one retained, it wasn't the only time, the captains didn't believe my officer and said, "He says that we can retain this officer, and you're saying if we say retain it doesn't go any further—they retain."

I said, "That's exactly correct."

And the lawyers said, "That's what the law says. If you say that there's no reason to separate him, that you want to retain, that's it." And they did, they retained him, and they were just totally blown away. They thought, "We thought it was automatic separation. We didn't even know they got a board."

TS: Right.

SB: And that tends to be the thought.

TS: Is it different for officers than enlisted for those kind of things?

SB: The enlisted process is different but there is a process.

TS: Yeah.

SB: It's not as long a process. It's as fair a process. In fact, the same lawyer I used at the Military Personnel Command also worked with the enlisted side of it.

TS: Well, with before "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"—and then "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"—but just the issue of homosexuality in the military, what were your thoughts at that time?

SB: Oh, my thoughts, I didn't care. I thought—I have had—My first gay friend may—I think a high school friend, from a different high school, was—I'm pretty sure he was—and we were friends.

TS: Just not openly.

SB: Not openly. When I went to UNCG I had my first openly gay friend, a guy that I had met that was friends with one of us, and it's like, "So? Who cares?" And then two of the females were found out.

TS: At UNCG?

SB: At UNCG in 1965, '66. Nobody cared. Or we didn't care. So in the military it never mattered to me.

TS: But they were getting kicked out.

SB: But they were getting kicked out, and not as many as you think, because when you read the stories in the newspapers sometimes it was the same story over and over again. That, and conscientious objectors, there weren't as many as people think, because they were just seeing the same story and honing in on that same story so many times. So yes, there were some separated. Some wanted to be.

One of the problems we had is if people had had a military scholarship of any kind, whether it was ROTC or medical or whatever, the medical ones were big bucks, or naval academy.

TS: Yes.

SB: One of the ways out is saying, "I'm a homosexual." Well, then, if that's not misconduct—if they're not—if there's homosexual misconduct that's different, like having sex on base, sex in public; there's a whole five or six list of things. If it was misconduct that's one thing, they have to pay back money. If it was substandard performance they might not have to. So there were some, and I even questioned two that said they were homosexuals and I'm not sure they were. And I don't remember if they were separated or not. But I think it's changed a lot, and nobody I worked with cared. I mean, we told them, "If you want to retain here's the information, you can retain."

TS: When they lifted the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," whatever year that was, recently, that was, you think, a positive?

SB: Oh, absolutely. When—At my last duty station, which we'll eventually get to, where I spoke to sailors coming into the command—they were coming in for—it was an eight week—eight week courses, their first training after boot camp, and I made a point of always speaking to the groups, and the few times I wasn't there the XO did; the master chief. But I would always tell the groups—they'd be such diverse groups—black, white, female, male, non-citizens that were in—and we'd talk about how you grow up in different places and now you're all shipmates. The master chief kept saying, "You're shipmates, it doesn't matter."

And when I got to this training center in Meridian, Mississippi, a couple of months later in October 2000, the ship the USS Cole had the terrorist attack and some people killed, I'd say, "Look at each other, you're all shipmates. It does not matter. It does not matter what color your skin is. It does not matter if you're male or female. It doesn't matter if you're Methodist, Catholic, Muslim." I said, "None of it matters. You're shipmates." I said, "But I'll tell you what I feel." I said, "You know we're under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." It doesn't matter if you're gay, straight, bi[-sexual], transgender." I said, "I don't care." I said, "I've got friends of all of those classes."

And they're going, "Really?"

I said, "Yeah. It does not matter." I said, "Think about it. You're shipmates."

And it was amazing how many would come to me, because I was very accessible, and the student would say, "Ma'am, you made me think things I've never thought before."

We even had a—an instructor on staff that we knew was lesbian. That—Everybody knew it even though she couldn't say. She was one of the favorites. So it did not matter. And then I've got other friends—a transgender friend that graduated from the naval academy as a male. She's a she now.

TS: Well, I guess the only thing that would really matter the most would be for those people who are maybe not under a command that is as friendly.

SB: Right.

TS: Right. And since you're always moving around you never know what you're going to get.

SB: Yes. So there was—there were places that we'd be scared for people to be—

TS: Yeah.

SB: —because of the attitude of some people. I'm just glad that I saw it changing, and hopefully those are going away or aging out, and yet it wasn't just the older ones. I found out most of the ones my age were, like, fine, and the very young were fine. It was somewhere in between, the people that had grown up with—

TS: Right, it's your backgrounds.

SB: —backgrounds. But—Because we didn't really—like I said, we didn't process that many in my opinion, based on how many people were around. And it was just like conscientious objectors when we had the first Gulf War, and the newspapers were full of stories about conscientious objectors. Well, I kept reading the same story over and over again just rewritten. And after—The instructions were very clear, I thought, on the couple of types of conscientious objector. I mean, we had conscientious objectors who could continue serving but not in certain capacities, and some who couldn't serve at all. And I can't remember how many the navy processed; it was a single digit number. But there was a Department of Defense level meeting after the war to discuss having to redo the instruction and the problem with conscientious objectors, and I was included in many since I was the one that had handled it for the navy, and we had other DOD [Department of Defense] officials, civilian military, and somebody from each service, and there was a general heading it up. So we start going over about what we need to change and all that, and I go, "Excuse me, but I've got the statistics that I think are correct for every service. General, are you aware of the number that we separate?"

He says, "No, they must have been a lot."

Well, it wasn't. I mean, the total number for all services were either twelve or fifteen.

TS: Okay.

SB: Total.

TS: Pretty low.

SB: So I said, "That's trivial." I said, "That story, there was one—" I said, —"that's these—they're all talking about one; that was the same person."

And he goes, "Are you serious?"

And every service says, "Yeah, that's all we did. This is it. These are all we processed and here's how many were approved."

And he says, "Oh."

I said—And I told him—I said, "The instruction is pretty short and I don't know there's really anything you can do." I mean, there may have been a word or two.

And he says, "We don't have a problem, do we?"

I'm going, "No."

He says, "Okay, that's it. Nice seeing you."

TS: So, like, a meeting without a problem. You kind of ended that.

SB: But you had to address it.

TS: Right.

SB: You had to know and see.

TS: Have the knowledge of what was going on.

SB: Right.

TS: That's interesting. Well, do you want to take a break now for a little bit?

SB: Sure, let's take a break.

TS: Let's do that.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Well, Sally, thanks for breaking; a nice little snack, appreciate that very much.

SB: You're welcome.

TS: So we're back talking again. And now you're at Arlington and you're kind of in that period that Gulf War started. Did you have any association with working the Gulf War? Did you deploy or anything?

SB: No, and I don't think I had many cases to handle on misconduct, sub-standard performance; there may have been a few. But I did have to stand duty in the Military Personnel Command Center, which any reports of death will come in there.

TS: Okay.

SB: Injuries. Anything—Any—the people issues came through that command center that were navy related. I mean, I stood duty officer, which we had to continue, too. But this command center, there were probably two rooms with maybe twenty of us in each room answering phones. The phones were ringing constantly, and we'd get calls either from military units calling to report—they had other avenues but this was one way in—but mainly you were getting family calling; "I'm scared to death about my son."

TS: "What's going on with him?" or something like that?

SB: The most interesting call I had—Unfortunately, we did all get a call at some time asking about someone that we knew was on the list and we had to pass the phone to the person that had the information. But I got a call one time, and if you can picture how someone looks on the other end of the phone, this man who sounds like—and he was out in the Midwest—I'm picturing him in coveralls and dusty and dirty, he said he was a farmer and that he'd just come in out of the fields, and he said he was really worried about his son. He said, "I thought my son—" He said, "I know he went up to Michigan—" and he was a young sailor—he said, "But I thought he was on a ship going over there and I'm worried about him and I don't know—" he said, "but I'm got his address and it says Detroit, but I thought he was on a ship."

I said, "Are you looking at that now?"

He says, "Yes."

I said, "Does it say 'USS *Detroit* (AOE-4)?'"

He says, "Yes. How did you know that?"

I said, "That is a ship. It's an ammunition ship. It's a support ship that he's on." I said, "And that ship is okay right now." I said, "But I can tell you what. If it will make you feel better the commanding officer's name—" and I gave him Mike Edwards—I said, "I know Captain Edwards personally." I said, "He was my chief staff officer of where I just was a few years ago." I said, "He is a wonderful man. He takes care of people." I said, "Why don't you write him a letter?" I said, "And he will write you back," because I knew he would.

TS: Right.

SB: I wouldn't say that if I didn't know that. So I could just feel the burden lift off this man—

TS: Sure.

SB: —because his son's name wasn't on the list so I'm safe there, and I knew the ship—

TS: On the list would have been—

SB: A list that we knew of those who had been killed or injured.

TS: Okay.

SB: We had those names if anybody called.

TS: Right.

SB: We didn't refer them to—not refer them, we'd put a phone in the other person's hand. It was—There was never a—"You call this," or, "I'll transfer you to this."

TS: Right, you just gave them the phone.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SB: It was immediate. That second room of people was really the people that handled those.

TS: That handled those calls, got it.

SB: So that was the most rewarding part of standing duty there.

TS: Pretty neat.

SB: Yes.

TS: That's pretty neat. I'm sure you did put his mind at ease because he probably didn't expect that.

SB: I hope so. I was just thinking, like, "Thank God I got that call."

TS: Yeah. No kidding.

SB: And I talked to Captain Edwards later—a couple years later and he was laughing about it, because he did get a letter from the man.

TS: Oh, nice. That's neat. So now, after the Gulf War you and your husband, did you go to your next station together or nearby?

SB: No. In fact, my husband had been preparing for the inevitable. He was a naval academy graduate and his—reached his twenty years in 1991 so he was eligible for retirement. And so, he had thought instead of going and being one of the beltway bandits, we call them, or making the big bucks as a contractor. He really wanted to teach school; like high school.

TS: Okay.

SB: And he loves math. So he started taking education classes through Marymount University, a local university there, to get his teaching certificate—teaching degree, in preparation for the inevitable. However, we were still going to try to transfer together. Well, they came up with a job for me, and we thought we were going, like, to, Newport, Rhode Island again to a ship repair facility. And then there was one in Charleston. And why the ship repair facility is because of my submarine repair experience they thought, "Oh, you'd be a good XO for this."

Well, then it came up that they had an opening in Alameda, California because someone was being pulled out of a job there, and the chief staff off—not the chief staff officer at that time—but someone at a higher level had said, "If you can get Sally Benson we will gap the billet." Well, the person that said that was the captain, Mike Edwards, I was just talking about.

["Gap the billet" means filling in for a personnel position or assignment until a suitable replacement can be found"]

TS: Oh, okay, right.

SB: He said, "We will hold that billet open. We will gap it two months," which is unusual, "if you can get her." Well, the only problem with finding Eric a job is the closest they could get him was San Diego. And somebody said, "Oh you can boat in, commute on weekends." Well, that didn't work.

TS: That's not so close.

SB: So he turned in his retirement papers.

TS: Okay.

SB: And so, we did go to California, and in fact, I left in, I guess, April because I had to go to school and report in May and he couldn't leave until the end of May, so we had a month gap. And then he had to finish his—I think he had one other course—health course or something—he had to take out in California and do his student teaching, which Marymount University arranged with someone from California, so it all worked out.

TS: Oh, good.

SB: So I go to California and he retires.

TS: What was your job out in California?

SB: I was the executive officer, which is second in command, at a surface ship repair facility. It's called SIMA, Shore Intermediate Maintenance Activity, which basically is things that you can do either on board a ship in port or take something off a ship and—like a

motor—and bring it into our facility to fix; it didn't require going in dry dock, repairs at the next level.

TS: Oh, okay. So it's something you can pull out of it to—

SB: Yeah, you pull out or you can do on the ship right there.

TS: What rank are you at now?

SB: I was a lieutenant commander. In fact, when—in the previous job I had selected, "deep selected" they call it, early for lieutenant commander, so I'm finally a lieutenant commander, which was what the billet needed, was a lieutenant commander.

TS: Okay, you filled [unclear]?

SB: Yeah, I was right at the bottom level of it. The interesting thing on this command is it should never have had, like, four hundred people, and the previous CO who had stayed in the office and worked on trying to justify having more [billets—SB clarified later] had built it up some, but then when the Gulf War had happened—with the billet for the Gulf War—after that a lot of people got sent there, and for a command that needed four hundred people, we had seven hundred. And so, we had a large number of people that we farmed out to other local commands, finding jobs for them, because we didn't need that many people; really didn't have the work for it. So that was a challenge in itself, but it worked, and we could also do a lot of community work, so the sailors learned the importance of working with the community and—even if it was helping the local schools do things. We had a big association with schools in the area.

Which one of my most interesting experiences when I was there was I had gone to a school—this actually happened before I think. We'd go into a school for the Adopt-A-School thing, and then running into an ambush on a Hell's Angels—police arresting Hell's Angels.

TS: [chuckles]

SB: [unclear]

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Right in the middle of it?

SB: Right in the middle of it, but I didn't get hurt.

TS: Well, that's good.

SB: But, no, this command was interesting because of all the work they did. We had welders, we had machine shop people. Had a wonderful command master chief; he was like a big friendly bear—big guy.

TS: How was your experience here different from the other places?

SB: With the passage of time we had more and more women, so women were not uncommon at all. So that really wasn't an issue, even though we did have one incident one time where we finally got rid of an officer because of the way he treated not just the women but men too; exposing himself in front of a woman.

TS: Oh, okay.

SB: That didn't help.

TS: Oh.

SB: That was just one thing he did.

TS: As more and more women came in were the incidents of—The tension in the office with sexism or harassment, were there more incidents of it because the volume was increasing overall? Did you notice that?

SB: I don't think so, but again, at another command there would be, because there are incidents, but anything we had we addressed. We had a commanding officer who was wonderful. In fact, I had one but only a few weeks before we got to the new one, and the new one and I just got along, like, really great. We had civilians working, both male and female. We had officers both male and female. In fact, I'm trying to think of the other female—we had a female admin officer who, in fact, had been sent to the command—she was sent there after I got there, she happened to be a black female, and they sent her there because she had been under a command where she had been mistreated, and they had tried to make it look like it was her fault and that she was wrong about it. And so, they wanted to give her another chance because the detailers believed in her, even though this senior officer was saying, "No, no, she'd bad." She was a great officer, and she got along well with the others.

One thing that happened that helped working relations there, is I had the local—in fact, it was a civilian personnel office that did it—they came in and did the Myers-Brigg[s Type Indicator] test for us; for officers, senior enlisted, anybody they could do. I had had it before and I understand how to use it, and so I had all kinds of people from this college graduate, goes to OCS, admin officer, black female been mistreated before, to the repair officer who had been prior enlisted, got his degree—got a masters degree, a brilliant man, was really good; just all levels. And I participated also.

[The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is an introspective self-report questionnaire designed to indicate psychological preferences in how people perceive the world and make decisions]

So we did the exercises, and people come up with their ISTJ [introversion, sensing, thinking, judgement] or EFNP [extraversion, feeling, intuition, perception], or whatever, and I'm getting people to work together. Well, one time the repair officer walks in my office to talk about the admin officer. He said, "Lieutenant Johnson said—" And then he looked at me, he says, "You know what? She's a—" whatever it was, I don't remember what her code was for Myers-Brigg.

TS: Her personality type.

SB: Her personality thing. He says, "That's why she's thinking like that. I understand, never mind."

TS: Oh, right. [chuckles]

SB: And they would talk about it with each other, and these are people that before would have said, "Oh, that's just touchy-feely stuff," and they saw the purpose of it, and saw how they could interact. It made a big difference.

I had this same female when she was not understanding things going on. For instance, I told the welders, I said, "Get Lieutenant Johnson, go put her in the welding booth and let her see how it is to have to learn to be a welder."

She had a blast. She was scared of it at first but—I think—but she got in there and then she goes, "I have a new understanding of what they have to do."

TS: It sounds like you did a good job of helping people relate, not only to other people, but to the perception of the work that they were doing too.

SB: Right, and that is what I can do. I can't do their work. [both chuckle] I'm not qualified to do that. But we had our share of problems. With seven hundred sailors in the San Francisco area you're going to have the one that backs his pickup truck up to an ATM [automatic teller machine] and tries to pull it out of the wall. You're going to have someone that is a rapist, and you recognize the picture when they [the NCIS (Naval Criminal Investigative Service—SB clarified later] bring the drawing to you. So, yeah, you have some problems, but that wasn't the whole command. And it got to be a joke.

In the military we have—for administrative punishment there's a—called NJP, non-judicial punishment, and you have Captain's Mast, where the person comes to mast and the captain can award certain punishments, or a slap on the wrist, or let it go, fine them money, whatever. Well, before they go to Captain's Mast they come to XOI, Executive Officer's Inquiry, which is like holding Captain's Mast on them but you can't punish them. However, you've got the choice of referring it to Captain's Mast, dismissing

it—so the captain never sees it—or you can award—have someone award extra military instruction to take care of a specific problem; depends on what it is.

Well, I'm a firm believer in handling things at the lowest level possible, and reasonable, and so it was not unusual that I would use the extra military instruction, or something where it didn't have to go to Captain's Mast. And it got to be a joke on some of them, but they would request to skip XOI and go to Captain's Mast [both chuckling] because it would be easier.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Because it easier on them.

SB: They'd rather give up money than have to—But no.

TS: Interesting.

SB: Most of them were good, that wanted to—People want to do a good job, it's just finding out what that job is, and working with them, and helping people work together, because it's easier to work together than it is to work separately.

TS: So you're more than halfway through, I think, right now.

SB: Yes.

TS: When did you retire? You retired—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SB: Yeah, this was in '92, '94, so yes, I was more than halfway.

TS: Yeah, a little bit—you're just past that.

SB: Yes.

TS: Are you thinking at all about, like, wanting to make a particular rank or, like they say, checking your things off on your career list of things that you need to do to get promoted? I know you're not supposed to talk about that openly, but in the back of your mind are you like—

SB: But people do, and it's like getting the fit reps. I think I was more interested in the jobs and knowing that if you get to O-4, lieutenant commander, you can retire—you can stay

till retirement—and sometimes the law changes, it says, "Okay, you're an O-4, we're going to let you go at eighteen years," but call it retirement. But no.

So O-4 I had—I was eligible for retirement when I hit twenty years, so I didn't have that worry, and in the back of my mind I'm thinking, "Making O-5 if I do twenty. If I keep doing what I'm doing that's what I'm going to do. And if I plan to stay longer, yes, I can make captain, make O-6, if I stayed longer." I went in when I was older, not knowing how long I was going to stay.

TS: Did you have to retire at a certain age?

SB: I don't know. I don't think so. I could have done longer. I didn't know—It wasn't anything I was near so—

TS: Yeah.

SB: —that wasn't an issue.

TS: Okay. Did you start planning for, like, going to any other schools or anything like that?

SB: Well, I knew I wanted—if I was staying in, which I was, if I wanted—I could either just hang around, do another tour and finally retire, or I wanted to go to one of the—there's two levels—and some people just say [United States Army] War College but war college is the upper level—I wanted to go to a Command and Staff College. Either. The navy has one in Newport. All services have one and my detailer, again—a different detailer—said, "Hmm, maybe you want to go to a Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth [Kansas]; the army's."

It turns out another friend had told me—had gone and said, "This is something people don't know about. They just assume they want to go to their own service." She said, "But the army has got a wonderful school, and only forty navy get to go a year out of the thousand students."

And so, I said, "Sure. Why not?"

TS: Was this the one after Alameda?

SB: After Ala—Well, Alameda, I first went to Japan. Oh, we've got to go to Japan first.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh, we're skipping over Japan. Okay.

SB: Yeah, so I'm thinking—I know—

TS: But you're thinking about it.

SB: Well, I had, because I had thought I'd probably go after that, but then the Japan thing kind of fell in my lap.

TS: Okay.

SB: Because Japan, the base in—and we don't call them base overseas, only in the United States are they base, but we don't own the land overseas so it's [United States] Fleet Activities Sasebo.

TS: Okay.

SB: It is a navy base. At that time it was under an admiral in San Diego. It, couple of years later, moved to be under the Admiral in Yokosuka, an admiral in Japan, but because it's really a surface warfare ship-type thing without an air base it was under the surface guidance of San Diego.

TS: Okay.

SB: So it seems like I get a call that he has requested they put me in the chief staff officer billet, and they go, "It's supposed to be a commander and you're not even in zone yet for commander, but he wants you over there."

And I thought, "Okay, why not?"

["in zone" means eligible for selection to the next paygrade].

TS: Was this somebody you had worked with before?

SB: I—Not directly.

TS: Okay.

SB: He knew I was through—He was also over the commanders in the San Francisco area and—or had been at times, and so he knew me, and someone else working with him also knew me, and it was like, "Okay, she can do it, and getting a woman over there is good." There was a woman over there but they—he wanted me. I'd never even—It never even crossed my mind to think about going over there.

TS: Right.

SB: I don't know where I thought I was going from there; I had no idea to be honest. I thought I was going back to D.C. actually.

TS: Okay.

SB: And so, I thought, "Well, why not?" And I talked to someone—an admiral who was—I had known for some years and respected—and she thought it would be a great job for me.

Then I found out—someone else tells me, "You're going over there and they're bringing in a new commanding officer over there, and even though I know him, he thinks I'm a friend, I'm not; he is not a good person and I don't—you don't want to work for him."

And I asked somebody else, they—and I'm going, "Well, I can work for anybody. I can work with anybody, work around it."

Little did I know, I go to Japan—First thing, I get there in June and it's not raining like it's supposed to be—I'll get into the nine months of water rationing later—and there is a commanding officer that is leaving. I had met him briefly—and he wasn't supposed to leave that early—I'd met him in D.C. when he knew I was coming, and then he finds out that I'm a lieutenant commander, and to make a long story short, he and his admin officer were having an affair; her husband had left. They finally—He finally divorced his wife about the time of change of command when I got there—left her—and he and she eventually got married.

TS: Okay.

SB: So there was solid evidence. Everybody knew they were having an affair; it was blatant. And she was the same rank I was so she would have been ranked with me, and he would have had a hard time ranking a fit rep with the two of us and showing why she would be ranked ahead of me.

TS: Right.

SB: If that makes sense. So anyhow, she wasn't supposed to leave for, like, six or nine months; she left before I got there. He came and worked her orders, they didn't know what was going on, and got her out. Then he left a week after I got there, so. And then they put in an interim commanding officer who was really a good person. He was off of one of the ships, really had not had shore management experience, but I had. He was great with the local community, with the Japanese, a nice person, but fortunately I had dealt—I had—when I was in Groton, Connecticut, the other thing—you know I was in the repair department as command duty officer—I became a certified ordnance manager because of the ordnance facility in Groton. So I had been through that—

TS: You just got a lot of things filled out when you were in Groton. [chuckles]

SB: Yeah, I did. And we had a big ordnance facility in Japan so I had to recertify—go through another course and do that—even though I wasn't the direct manager over it I still had to—I was still responsible. So there were a lot of things I knew and that was okay, but he was only there a short time, and I can't remember when he left, probably right after the water rationing, but the other CO comes.

TS: Now this is the one that you haven't heard all the greatest things about?

SB: Right.

TS: Okay.

SB: He was awful. He was one of the worst naval officers I have ever met, short of those that committed crimes. He was hateful to people, to the point of—I mean, he would yell and scream at people. He even told me ahead of time, before I even saw him with anybody else, he says, "I want people to know I'm in charge and they will do what I say;" many other ugly things. I would hear him screaming at people. The building we were in, it was mainly our offices plus an admin office, and then the weather people were in the tower we had.

TS: Now, was he the one that recommended that you go? Who was it that had wanted you in this position?

SB: It was an admiral.

TS: An admiral.

SB: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

SB: No, this was a captain who had orders there already, I guess.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: I see.

SB: And I don't know if the admiral that wanted me to go there knew anything about him or not, because with people tending to write their own fitness reports and their senior officer just signing off on it, a lot of officers had fitness reports they shouldn't have, to be honest.

TS: Right.

SB: Because the senior officer just lets it go. It's like out of sight, out of mind. But this man was so cruel to people. I heard him yelling one day and I thought, "Who's he yelling at?" And my office was across the hall from his but before you could get to my office you had to go through our secretary's large office. Heard him screaming, he comes in my office jerking by the arm our admin officer, a female. I mean, pulling her in the office and she's in tears and he's screaming at her, and he's telling me to, "Get that worthless piece of shit out of there," and words—other words.

I'm going, "What's going on?" But I knew that I would help her get away because—just fighting him.

TS: Right.

SB: And he would find people who were so worried about their career, like when one of our junior—junior lawyers that he would get to do things that were wrong, and this lawyer told me, "Ma'am, you're too ethical." That's a quote.

TS: How is that possible, too ethical?

SB: But there were—people were scared of him.

TS: Okay.

SB: He would mishandle classified information. I've got, I think it's, a ten or fourteen page letter that was written up on him. He finally was forced to retire administratively. By not going to court-martial he keeps his retirement pay. He was so bad that the Japanese people in the area did not want him around. He would get drunk at functions. He was an embarrassment. He would take classified information and mishandle it. He would cut things out so that you couldn't read the classification and put it under the glass on his desk.

Now, we had people without clearances, we had Japanese civilians working for us, and if you took anything off his desk he says, "I want it there. I'm the commanding officer." He says, "It goes there."

And I can't even begin to tell you all the evil things he did to people; how he mistreated them. And even at one point he—my last fitness report under him, even though it wasn't a bad one technically, it marked me down a level. Instead of being the highest marks all across the board, which it takes once you're senior—either you get that or—it's so competitive, you don't get command, and he said "I'll show you. You won't get command." And I petitioned to have that removed from my record and it was readily removed from the record, with a note to the record that, "You cannot consider anything about this." And I later selected for command, even after that was pulled from the record. I can't even begin to tell you how bad and how evil he was.

TS: This is really your first time that you've had someone so terrible.

SB: Yes. He was worse than the commanding officer at the submarine repair facility, because this man actually put his hands on people, which would be an assault, but you've got a lawyer saying, "Oh, he's okay, he's okay."

And at one point I talked to the admiral—and at this time we'd been put under the admiral—Yokusuka, Japan—and I talked to him, he was down there, and I said, "This is going on."

He says, "Oh, I don't want you telling me this because I'd have to take him to court-martial."

And I said, "That's kind of the point."

TS: Right.

SB: "I've got the evidence."

He said, "Well, talk to my chief staff officer."

Well, the chief staff officer was either doing a dance around me or not available and I transferred without ever being able to talk to him. And my thoughts were I'm writing all this up because I know how the administrative process—I can write it up, at least he'll be forced to retire. He was already a captain.

TS: Oh, because you had that one position, right?

SB: Yes.

TS: Okay.

SB: So I knew about that, and I just needed it done, and I had enlisted names—people had told me, "Ma'am, if anything can be done you can always use my name." Because I couldn't—It was hard—dealing with junior people I couldn't go around badmouthing him.

TS: Right.

SB: But I didn't have to; he did it all to himself.

TS: Right.

SB: So I had a list of names. I had for instance, I had many pages that I wrote up, and I was also going to go talk to Admiral [Jeremy Michael] Boorda when I got back to the States, because we were coming back to the States after that. But when I got to San Francisco, in an interim stop seeing family, before we went to Kansas and then a trip to D.C. first, Admiral Boorda committed suicide.

TS: Oh, that's right.

SB: So I never got to talk to him. And that was one that always bothered me, because some of the things they said about him couldn't have been true—

TS: Right.

SB: —based on my personal knowledge.

TS: Was that just something about a medal?

SB: Exactly. One of the things they said about Admiral Boorda who had been chief of naval personnel when I was doing the officer separation—so anything I did went from me to him to the assistant secretary of the navy. We had several cases where we had officers wearing awards to which they were not entitled. One was wearing quite a few and somebody spotted it because he'd always cover up when he was around them. We had another who falsified a record. And Admiral Boorda was aware of every one of these, so he knew. I honestly don't think—I think he thought he was entitled to what he was wearing, and I think back from the era they were talking about—Vietnam Era—that there was a lot of misunderstanding, and a different processing in giving the awards, so there was no way that he was wearing—he didn't need to; he had a chest full of medals.

TS: Right.

SB: That one little medal made no difference.

TS: Right.

SB: Now, I think that could have hurt him terribly that he had done something that he was processing others for, but there had to be something else.

TS: Yeah.

SB: I just don't know. He was a wonderful man.

TS: That was pretty sad to hear about that.

SB: He was a wonderful officer. So—But—Let's see, back to where we were, back to Japan. But this one captain—to go forward in time—was processed administratively, and while he was undergoing his process to which he's entitled—now, he could have retired in lieu of processing but he didn't; he was going to fight it because he just knew he was right but we had the evidence. It was funny that where he was put to work was under a female admiral, and she happened to know me. She was head of the detailers for me and she knew me, so she couldn't tell me specific things, but once he was gone she called and said, "He's gone."

TS: So you knew.

SB: So he was forced to retire, but he did so much damage before then, and so many good people were lost along the way that—you just cannot let that happen; too many people do.

But Japan, other than him, was pretty great.

TS: Well, tell me the highlights.

SB: It was a highlight, it was quite an experience. I could live in Sasebo, Japan, Nagasaki, and be happy, other than being so far away from family members.

TS: Now, did your husband go with you?

SB: Yes, he did.

TS: Okay.

SB: And he—While he was over there he taught at a Japanese junior college for women. He taught English, and U.S. educational methods and that, plus he taught course for the University of Maryland. And then he was busy following me around, because Sasebo at that time had about a quarter of a million people, so it was a big city, plus we were less than an hour from Nagasaki, and we were in Nagasaki Prefecture. That's kind of like the state and Sasebo's a city.

So it was important to keep a good relationship in the community, and some of the people I had to see early on—and in fact I was told—before I went to Japan I had to go to a couple weeks course for just—in general people went to that kind of position, and then I had a briefing with the State Department on some of the things going over there—going on over there, and a couple of the things that were interesting that turned around later, is they told me, "No, you'll never see the ambassador"—and it was [Walter Frederick] Mondale—that, "He'll never come down to Sasebo;" that "There's a consulate in Fukuoka, you'll deal with them."

TS: The American ambassador?

SB: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

SB: You'll never see Ambassador Mondale.

TS: Oh, Mondale, okay.

SB: Yeah.

TS: Vice President Mondale.

SB: That was one of the first things I checked off the list when Ambassador Mondale came to see me; to talk to me about things later. Then they talked about, "You will have to, when you get over there, call on the mayor. You'll call the police chief. You will call on this doctor—medical doctor who happens to be the political leader for the area. You will be involved with the—" I want to say—"the Secretary of Labor in Nagasaki, because of the Japanese labor contract. And they will all give you gifts. Or you'll call on the Japanese admiral across the street from you there, and they will give you gifts that really exceed

the twenty dollars we tell you, and in most cases the only—you're going to have to give them a gift, too, and you cannot get reimbursed for it, and you're going to have to spend the twenty dollars a gift because it's hard to find anything else." They said, "Try to do something—keep it within that, you've got to, but as far as the gifts you get, since you're having to spend this money, you can keep most of them. If there is anything that is too much and is appropriate to give to the command you can do that, but they know what the rules are but they're going to give you something a little bit nicer than that, because nothing's twenty dollars." So, okay, I did that. And I think the surprise was how important that part of the job was. No knowing—

TS: You really enjoyed it too?

SB: Right. Well, to go call on the mayor, and he's in a huge office, and there are TV cameras everywhere, and there's other important people that want to meet the new chief staff officer—*san bucho* [bucho is Japanese for "big boss"], is what they call it. Or to call in the police chief and they entertain you with some nice cantaloupe or tea or whatever. And the police chief of a city of a quarter million reports to the Nagasaki Prefecture police chief, and they're the ones that work directly with you on base. The political leader, the doctor—I started to say the wrong name—they're a very professional, wonderful person that just set the tone for the community. And knowing that the fishermen's union—a lot of the fishermen did not speak English well. But even though people in Japan at that time took English when they—about twelve years old, unless you use it, it's like any other foreign language, you don't know it.

TS: Right.

SB: Well, and the fishermen, most of them did not speak it but they had—We were on a beautiful bay; fishing was the industry for the area. [We had some] big problems, especially with navy ships going in and out, and the LCACS [Landing Craft Air Cushion]; the landing craft that has the big noisy turbines. That was an issue.

So I'm calling on them, and then the secretary of labor comes up to take me and my husband and somebody out to dinner. So it's a position, like—you pinch yourself and go, "I'm in this position? How did I get here? What am I doing?" Interacting with the colonel who headed up—there was a Japanese ar—even though it's self-defense force in Japan they have navy/army subsets. The colonel who was in charge of the army base for their basic training, including women, he was so proud of that. Our interaction there was wonderful. Just everything worked out well. It was like, "What a wonderful community."

Then the other thing, one of the most important groups—and I've got the find the video tape for the collection. I just remembered a videotape I didn't find.

TS: Okay.

SB: At the time I was there, there was a group of men who called themselves the Taisho Samurai. I believe there were seven of them left, and six had been navy and one army in World War II, and previously there had been a few more members. These were men

that—some had been friends—like, two or three had been friends before the war. They'd all been college students and they'd been called to be in the war. And then after it was all over, and the navy base there, they started volunteering their time to work with the navy base. And they would entertain the senior officers. One of them, their leader, Tominaga Sensei, who's English is better than mine—and I doubt he's still living—he taught English out in the community, I think he taught Japanese on base some. But they—And all of the men spoke English. Some of their wives didn't speak it that well. But they would work with us on base. If we needed volunteers, they could volunteer, they'd get help. They were a good interaction with the community. And every couple of months they would hold a party for whatever ship's commanding officer, or any visiting dignitaries were there, and for me, my husband, commanding officer. And we would usually eat at a restaurant somewhere in town that had a big room for us. Then afterwards the fun began.

TS: Yeah?

SB: They had bingo; we'd play bingo and everybody brought a—basically a ten dollar prize. Then we would do Japanese folk dances and sing and—just a wonderful group of people. So they had a fantastic community there that worked with us on, "how can we better serve the American community?", and we tried to work back. How can we be nice? Even to the point of making sure the signs were English. If there were ever any problems we worked them out. If you had a problem in the community—If a sailor or officer or anybody, or civilian was with you, misbehaved, committed a crime in the community, how did you work that out? Because they can put you in Japanese jail. You're not going anywhere.

And sometimes—There was one case I wish they had handled because it shows how you get caught on things. A civilian on base commits murder—and it happened before I was there—off the base. The Japanese could have handled that, and by letting the base handle it there's nothing you can do, because they're not military, you can't court-martial; there is no jurisdiction over them.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: No civilian court.

SB: The only thing you have is administrative actions; there's no U.S. civilian court there. So you can send them back to the States but nobody has jurisdiction over them.

TS: But they're not going to be charged with anything.

SB: That's right; they get by with murder. So—But we all worked together on that.

TS: Was there any cultural issue with you being a woman and working with all these men?

SB: That was fun, because I worked with some Japanese men at very high levels, even the city administrative officer. This one in particular comes to mind. They—The fact that I was a woman made them really respectful. You've really got to be somebody to be in that position. You're a woman and they put you in that position—chief staff officer, *san bucho*; one who knows all and can do everything. It was like, "Okay, maybe not."

And they would talk about how women weren't in positions but they were coming into positions, and this chief admin officer for the city of Sasebo—I guess he was like a city manager—came to me one day and he was so excited, he says, "I have someone I want you to meet. She'll be here next week and I want to get her on your calendar if that's possible."

It was a woman they had hired to be in some high position in the city. Well, she had a couple of PhDs, and this, that, and—It was like, "Oh, she is brilliant beyond belief," but they considered her like an equal to me, and I am like—So the Japanese men that I dealt with were very receptive to women being in positions. I don't know how some of them felt like their wife or their daughter being—I think their daughters they wanted to but—

TS: Not so much their wife?

SB: —but maybe not the wife.

TS: Right.

SB: And yet, I knew many where I knew husband and wife and they were treated very well. Because we made a lot of personal friends in Japan, and they came about because of the base connection, but we had a big personal group that we did things with. And I was very impressed with the women being business owners. One owned a computer business, her husband was a doctor. Another was a jewelry designer at a town an hour away. Her husband's an international photographer; does books and—So things are changing and I was fortunate to see some of the change, and yet I know everything wasn't changing.

And I was talking about earlier—I have to think—say this while I'm thinking about it. I'm trying to remember if I ever told somebody I was ordering them to do something.

TS: Oh, right.

SB: Because you just didn't do that; you worked together; you said "please" and "thank you;" you had your jobs and you did it. One of our detachments on the base—The base in Japan had ships there, we had—we had the dining halls; we had the TV station; we had the Seabees [A member of the United States Naval Construction Forces (NCF)]; the navy exchange; the security department. It's a full base.

TS: City into itself, right?

SB: Yes. And we had a Marine security detachment. Now, they reported not only to us on base, but they also had a Marine chain of command—the Iwakuni [Marine Base] whatever—and there were—it was headed by two officers—a commanding officer and an executive officer—who were junior to me. It may have been a major who was equivalent there, because I didn't make commander until after I left there. I mean, the job was for somebody clearly a pay grade senior than I was.

Well, this Marine security detachment, which they did all kinds of things with the—we had the ordnance, we had fuel supply, just whatever. Well, at one point I had a report that Marines were running through downtown Sasebo and not getting off the sidewalks; forcing the Japanese off their own sidewalks. And I go, "What?!" And it turns out it was the executive officer there—I mean, the CO wasn't there—and I called him and said, "I am told this."

He said, "Yes, ma'am. We're Marines, we don't move out of anybody's way."

I said, "Excuse me?"

Now, his office was the equivalent of, like, a city block away from me, whatever, and—he may have been a—he was a captain, an O-3. I said, "So you're telling me that you are running Marines on the sidewalk, in Sasebo, or anywhere, and you're running people off their own sidewalk? You're not moving out of their way?"

"Yes, ma'am."

I said, "No, that is wrong."

He said, "Well, we're Marines."

I said, "Listen to me." And he went on. I said, "Okay, Marine, come up to my office right now."

"Well, I've got—"

I said, "I am ordering you to come to my office now. Do not stop—Do not slow down. I want you here right now." And when he came in my office it was the first time I said, "No, you may not stand at ease. You stand at attention until I'm through." I was so furious that he would do that, but I can tell you it never happened again. Yeah, it just—I hated having to do that, it gave me such a bad feeling, but that couldn't happen.

TS: But that's where the hierarchy makes sense, right?

SB: Yes, because somebody is in charge. Somebody is responsible. And if I had let it go then I would have been no better than what he did. Somebody has to say no.

TS: Interesting.

SB: I couldn't believe it. And then his—the higher up Marine they reported to came and talked to me later and he was not aware it was going on. So.

TS: So he was probably glad you took care of it.

SB: Yeah. Yes. The other thing that—critical that happened in Japan—and many things that did that made me aware of responsibility—I can't remember exactly where we fit in the

world on the ordnance supplies there—we were either number one or number two in the world on what we had there—because it's prepositioned for faster access—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: You mean, like, a number or volume or types or—

SB: The things, the types, and the amount we had, because where the ships from the United States, or somewhere, would come there to load ordnance.

TS: I see, okay.

SB: Or load for fuel. We had one of the largest fuel—either the first or second fuel supplies in the world at the time, and our ordnance wasn't on the main base—we had the most beautiful setting there, just gorgeous—but you could see across the bay. I mean, you'd have to drive around to it, and the ordnance was in an area where there were old caves and things. The fuel supply was across the bay; you had quite a drive over there to get to it. But—And we also had the field hospital type stuff that was in the old caves and warehouses and whatever, but is the kind of thing in case of emergency where you'd draw from. There's the Jeeps and the water purification unit, which came in handy during the drought.

But the ordnance—When I got there the ordnance officer was same paygrade I was, he was lieutenant commander, and he was used to the chief staff officer being a paygrade senior, so not competitive with him, because by being an unrestricted line officer, even though he was—he was surface warfare, we were still rate ranked together, even though I didn't have a warfare qualification. Well, when he gave me the tour of ordnance, and we're driving around, the first thing I see are two men operating two separate forklifts, both holding the same Mark 48 torpedo [American heavyweight submarine-launched torpedo]. I almost died. If one of them had sneezed I would have died. You don't do that. You don't use two. I said, "What are they doing?"

He says, "We have to move it like that."

And I said, "No—You can't. You have to have one forklift for that."

He says, "We don't have one that will handle it."

And I don't remember what a Mark 48 weighs—probably, like, sixty-eight hundred pounds or something—and they were using two four thousand pound forklifts. And I went, "You can't do that. They have to stop now. You need to put that away the safest way and stop."

He says, "Ma'am, we've tried." He said, "They won't—They told us we have to get this job done and we can't—"

I said, "No. I'm telling you."

He says, "Thank you."

I said, "I know for a fact, I've dealt with this before."

So he stopped, and I go back to the interim CO, who really hadn't thought about it and had never—and he never would have even noticed it probably, and I drafted the message to CINCPACFLT—Commander-in-Chief, [U.S.] Pacific fleet—and it said Sasebo cannot handle any Mark 48s; we're the Mark 48 facility.

They said, "You can't say that."

I said, "Yes, I can, because you sent me to training to be a certified ordnance manager and I'm telling you we cannot do that. You're risking lives, you're risking wiping out this whole community. You'd be dead."

Well, after all the years they've been told they couldn't get a forklift, it was there a week later.

TS: [chuckles]

SB: Why is it so hard—So one thing that—I think that may have been the turning point, where I said, "I never want to hear the term "can-do" again." I said, "Can-do attitude is fine, but not when it's harmful to anybody or anything. If you can't do something safely then you cannot do it, and don't tell me you can. Tell me if you can't." So we got that taken care of. And this same ordnance officer came to me later—[unclear]—he said, "I know that you and I are the same pay grade." He said, "I want to make sure that the captain knows that I want—that I understand the ranking and that I fully understand you being ranked above me."

But it just always bothered me that people do things, they say, "Find a way to get it done." Well, that's not the right answer, and it's just not the right—people have gotten hurt doing that.

TS: Interesting. You don't hear that a lot. The way that you're describing it is from the military perspective, really. I mean, it's usually the can-do attitude. I see what you're saying.

SB: And that's wrong, because with that forklift, seriously, if somebody had sneezed, moved the foot off the brake, or hit something wrong, it would have blown up that facility. If they'd blown up that facility, knowing what else was there, that could have blown across to the fuel thing, even across the bay. It would have obliterated Sasebo.

TS: Interesting.

SB: The interesting thing about 1994 is that summer, that's when we had the heightened tensions in North Korea. And so, I was told about that, and knowing that I was going over there, and knowing that if they launched their Rodong missile [Rodong-1 is a single stage, mobile liquid propellant medium range ballistic missile developed by North Korea], or whatever it was, I was told Sasebo would not even be notified because you won't have time to do anything. What am I getting myself into?

TS: Right.

SB: Yeah. Sure enough, things finally worked out, but during that time I have a niece who—oh gosh, in '94 she was eight or nine years old—nine years old I guess—and she wrote a note in a card, she was with another sister or something, and it was—watching the news and saw the news about North Korea and Japan, and she asked my sister, said, "Aunt Margie, isn't that where Aunt Sally and Uncle Eric are?

"Yes."

She said, "Well, that's so close to that. Are they going to get hurt?" And she wrote a note that just was a tearjerker.

TS: Oh.

SB: So I had to write back, "No, I'm fine. [chuckles] Things will be fine."

TS: Now, you said there was a drought there during this time too?

SB: Yes, it should have been rainy season when I got there in June; it wasn't raining. And it didn't rain. So by July we're knowing there's going to be a drought. And it was only in that part of Japan. Over the mountains and down in Nagasaki it was fine. The other side of the mountains they're fine. But just our area, no rain, so no water. And starting—I think it was the end of July, first of August we went on water rationing where we had water only a couple hours a day. Where I lived, it was not the housing right there on base, but twelve miles away in navy housing. So that was good because we were offset when we had the two hours, but it was really a problem because sanitation, washing dishes, educating people—you can't do laundry here—whatever. And trying to get more bottled water into the commissary, we did that. What can we do to ease it? And everybody just had to work together and know there's certain things you can't do that you're used to.

TS: Right.

SB: And they had to deal with it. And fortunately, the water rationing came right after a big carrier group visit, which was another story we handled, with all the ships out. Because that could have been disastrous, but we handled it. The whole town of Sasebo was on water rationing. They even went to the point of—in Sasebo they physically had to come out and turn off the water at the streets; that was very manpower intensive.

Two things we did though—And I mentioned the water purification unit, ROWPUs; Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Unit. Had one of those in the preposition[ing] stores [storage of equipment and supplies near potential conflict areas] that were there. There were Marines down in Okinawa—[unclear] southern Japan—who knew how to operate them, so the Marines sent some Marines up, we pulled out the ROWPUs—there was more than one of them—stationed them near the housing twelve miles off base because we were the only—there was an nice bay there too; you couldn't see it from most of the housing—

TS: You want me to pause it right now or do you want to finish that?

SB: I think it's Eric.

TS: Okay. I'll go ahead and pause.

[Recording Paused]

SB: —Marines?

TS: Yes, so you got the Marines to work the ROWPUs and do the filtration? This was still in '94?

SB: This was in '94. The ROWPUs were one thing we did.

TS: That's something. Now, you were telling me before we even turned the tape on about the anniversary of the Nagasaki [atomic bombing] and how you got to participate in that. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

SB: Sure. I was just trying to think if there was anything we needed to finish up on the—

TS: Oh, the ROWPUs? Did you not—

SB: Yeah, I think I said we got—I was going to say how much water we did actually, because I started talking about all that.

TS: Okay.

SB: And then we did a well. Okay, so I finished the ROWPUs.

TS: [chuckles]

SB: And then go to, I guess—yeah. Yeah, then we can go to that because that was the following tour, I guess.

TS: Okay, we're on, you can go ahead and talk about it.

SB: Okay. Well, the ROWPUs, we put near the housing that was off base, and they were converting about twenty—eighty thousand gallons a day, which is a drop in the bucket but it was showing that we were trying to do something too. And they were taking the water out of this nasty looking bay, running it through the ROWPU, and then you drink—and I did it; you could drink the glass of water.

Then one other we did is—even though it wouldn't help immediately—is started drilling a well on—at the base housing, that would take care of the base housing in case of future droughts.

TS: They hadn't had one before?

SB: No.

TS: Okay.

SB: So that was done. Every little thing helped; the fact that we were cooperating; that we didn't say, "No, we're going to just have water," so we didn't. And that lasted eight or nine months. It was the end of March before—

TS: That's a long time.

SB: It was a very long time.

TS: Yeah, that was even well before—water bottles are so prolific now. [chuckles]

SB: Yeah, even so. It was a tough time for us.

TS: How was it that you ended up in the fiftieth anniversary of the commemoration of the Nagasaki bombings?

[On 9 August 1945, the United States military dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki, which resulted in Japan's unconditional surrender during World War II.]

SB: There was—In Sasebo there's a beautiful navy cemetery [maritime defenders memorial in Higashiyama Park] that is set into a hillside, I had been out there and seen it before, and about the time of the fiftieth anniversary I received an invitation—our commanding officer was not there fortunately—to attend a commemoration ceremony.

Now, many of the Japanese didn't get involved in that. The Otasha[?] Samurai I mentioned earlier, they made no effort to get involved in things; they were ready to move on.

But the ceremony I went to, and when I got there—it's at this cemetery and they had set up two long tents with probably a couple hundred of widows and family members of the Japanese men who had died in World War II were on one side. On the other side of the aisle were the dignitaries; [Naruhito] The Crown Prince [of Japan] was there; members of the Diet [Japan's bicameral legislature]; a Japanese admiral I knew. I was the only non-Japanese person there, and my Japanese protocol officer/translator did go with me, but I was seated next to the Japanese admiral who spoke English so it was not a problem.

They had both Buddhist and Shinto priests doing things. They had several things going on. And there was a narration which I didn't—all of it wasn't translated for me; it didn't need to be; it's kind of obvious what was going on. And during the ceremony at one

point they read a letter from President [William "Bill"] Clinton, and one of the sentences in it was: Commander Sally Benson is representing the president and the people of the United States. So that tells you the kind of responsibility; the position you're put in.

At the end of the ceremony there were two young Japanese women with a basket of, I think it was, flow—roses, maybe, at the entrance to the approach to the shrine that was in the hillside. And the dignitaries went first. I would have said family members first but dignitaries went, and I'm not even sure the family members went until after we left. But we go over there, they gave us a flower, and we go up to the shrine. I was told about the bowing—I believe three times—and what you do. And then as we came back all these older Japanese family members wanted to meet *san bucho*, chief staff officer.

So I think—And again, maybe being a woman there was different. And they would bow down to me, and one thing I learned in Japan is when you do the polite bow, the one who is of lesser stature bows lower. So if you ever bow lower and they think they should bow lower to you, they will keep bowing until there's nowhere else to go; they'll hit their head on the ground. So I had been told don't let it get that far, just accept the fact that they are going to bow lower to you.

TS: Right.

SB: In many cases. And so, we had to have their words translated because they didn't speak English. A couple of them did say something like, "Thank you," or whatever. But they were telling me they were so honored that I would be there, and it was just—it was—I was in tears**.**

TS: Yeah. I can see why.

SB: Well, as I left, like in everything you do in Japan—if you go to a wedding you buy the gift for the bride and groom, you also get a gift when you leave. Everything you do, you get a gift. Well, they gave me a shopping bag with several things in it when I left, and I only remember one thing that was in that bag right now; there were several things. One was this blue and white and some red bandana that was—in the center was a logo of the city of Sasebo—where we were—and beneath it in kanji [a system of Japanese writing using Chinese characters] told that it was the fiftieth commemoration and it gave the date. So I'm the only non-Japanese who got that, and probably only the dignitaries did.

Well, my husband is a quilter, and he has made this beautiful quilt that uses not only this—the center of this as a focal point on the quilt, but the rest of the quilt are, like, bandanas from Japanese festivals, and a couple of pieces of fabric I bought in Tokyo. But it is a one-of-a-kind quilt. It has been seen by one Japanese admiral I knew. He did not see it, he saw a picture of it when he came to visit the United States years later, and an admiral I knew took the picture and showed it to him. At that time he was chief of maritime operations. [unclear]

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: It's a beautiful quilt, for sure. It's beautiful. It's sitting on the wall here.

SB: That is very—That is a very special, one-of-a-kind piece.

TS: Yeah, it's gorgeous.

SB: That was quite an honor.

TS: To be able to attend that and represent the United States?

SB: Yes.

TS: Sure. How many people get to do that?

SB: That won't—That only happened once in our lifetime, so—

TS: Yeah.

SB: —that was it. But I attended many Japanese functions. The—There was a private school in the city that I knew their administrative officer and he'd have us come to functions. The fire department had me come to one of their promotion ceremonies and sit on stage. The Japanese army base for the new basic trainees—Colonel Fuji at the time—and would invite me over and I'd be on stage when they had their ceremonies, or he'd invite me to festivals; a rice festival or a wisteria viewing festival.

TS: Did you get to do any traveling in Japan?

SB: Well, I went to Tokyo several times, and that's just another big city. We did go to—Eric and I went on—took several days and went to Sapporo, Japan, and went to a big snow ice festival [The Sapporo Snow Festival] I would highly recommend. They had all kinds of ice sculptures in three different parts of town, including huge ones on the outskirts of town.

TS: That's neat.

SB: And that's another wonderful city. Hiked up Mt. Fuji; Eric and I did.

TS: Oh, you did? That's neat.

SB: Only a couple of weekends of the year you can do that and Eric and I did that, so that was fun. And when we hiked Mt. Fuji we did a—it was a bus ride from Sasebo up, so we saw a lot of the country then. We traveled around Kyushu, went to one of the volcanoes that erupted recently, saw that. Spent quite a bit of time down in Nagasaki, which brings me

back to a comment I won't forget: I said the State Department said Admiral Mondale would never come visit Sasebo.

TS: Right.

SB: Well, on Kyushu, when there were ship visits, even if they were in Nagasaki, we handled them from Sasebo.

TS: Yes.

SB: And we even brought in nuclear powered ships. They had a problem—We had no problems wherever we brought them in Kyushu. Up in the Tokyo area, or in other parts of Japan, where it was handled by somebody else, they had problems. Demonstrations, or they couldn't handle this. So the ambassador's office had asked how does that happen, and somebody told them, "Well, the chief staff officer down there is the one to talk to because for some reason they're handling them okay."

So his office called and said, "Hey, can he come visit?"

"He wants to come visit me?"

"Yes, he would like to talk with you and maybe have lunch," and whatever.

And so, he did.

TS: [chuckles] Pretty neat.

SB: I mean, the simple answer was—is that my impression of what they were doing in talking to them in the northern part of Japan—well, not northern, Tokyo—was everything was being handled at too high a level. It was only the admirals or generals or whatever and talking to this. I said, "Here in Sasebo, yes, I'm aware of it; yes, I'm overseeing it. My lieutenant JG security officer works with the police chief here and works with the Nagasaki Prefecture head of security. They work on level so we're getting more community involvement, and it's not a problem.

And he goes, "Oh, it's that simple?"

"It's that simple."

TS: Interesting.

SB: It was just that when you try to dictate everything down and tell people what to do it doesn't work, but if they're the ones doing it and you're making them a part of it, it's like let's do it.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Right, building a partnership at the local level. Interesting.

SB: And it was funny, this lieutenant JG security officer, which the bad commanding officer didn't like, had such a wonderful relationship with the police chief in town that a lot of things were just worked out so easily. And the police chief in town, while we were there, was selected to go be head of the Nagasaki Prefecture. Well, when he left and had—there were big events in town for him, big dinners, he invited the lieutenant JG to attend them. And at one of them he gave him a full set of his uniform.

TS: Oh, how neat.

SB: So just—

TS: Yeah.

SB: Just a really good relationship.

TS: Well, that's really great. Is there anything else that you took away from your time in Japan?

SB: I—Just people are the same everywhere. Be nice to each other and—

TS: Treat each other with respect?

SB: I mean, granted, I got to do a lot of things that the average sailor wouldn't get to do.

TS: Right.

SB: But the average sailor or Marine did get the opportunity to go out in town and to be welcome in town, and to travel around, so that was good. And to get an appreciation of the area.

TS: Yeah. Neat. Interesting time to be there too.

SB: Oh, it was a great time.

TS: After this, is that when you went to the—Let's see what I've got here—Army Command and General—

SB: Staff College.

TS: —Staff College.

SB: Yes.

TS: This is June of '96.

SB: Yes. And I thought—Again, I had thought I'd be going, like, to the navy's. I didn't even think about that until it was suggested, "Go to a different one." Because the idea to—I wanted to become a joint specialty officer. I liked working with the other services. When you become a junior—a joint specialty officer you also get education on combined operations—working with other countries—and you get officers from other countries in those courses.

So when I got the opportunity to go to the army's, it was the best thing that ever happened. They have got one of the best libraries there.

TS: Yeah?

SB: And it was just an amazing course. It was a lot of work. You—It's divided into two semesters, the first one—and you're in staff groups of sixteen, however many. I was a section leader, so I had four staff groups reporting to me, and I was in the one staff group. And there are some reservists that come—Marine reservists only come for the first semester. Everybody else from all the services—there were forty of us from navy; that may have included the Marines. But you had all services, and we had international students.

TS: Men and women? I mean, obviously you're a woman, too, but were there very many women?

SB: In the international I don't remember any women but there may have been.

TS: Were there also for the other services?

SB: Oh, there were plenty of females. Yeah, there were a lot of females there, so that wasn't a problem.

But the first semester we all took the same courses, so we took it as a staff group. The second part you were taking courses you chose to take.

TS: You're specializing[?]—

SB: And you could get a master's degree. I decided not to get one because I already had a masters, and by not spending that time on getting the masters and what it took I was able to take three other top secret level courses—one in communications, one in operations, and I can't remember the other one—that were excellent. So.

TS: So that's, like, a year?

SB: It actually—The course—Actually the course ran, I want to say, August through first of June. If you weren't army you had to get there earlier because you had three or six weeks—I can't remember how many—you had a time where you got a quick course on army.

TS: Oh. [both chuckle] Okay.

SB: You really—

TS: I never thought of that. Yeah, I guess you—

SB: Yeah, because you have to know the army organization, army operation, army this, [unclear]—

TS: How was it different? Did you—

SB: There was a lot of difference. The army—

TS: What really stood out?

SB: Oh, I think, for me, the fact that the army has every single thing they do written down, down to the exact minute.

TS: [chuckles]

SB: They are a logistics—they're good. And one thing I learned, maybe not in that pre-course, but the army at that time had more ships than the navy does. People don't know that but they do, because the logistic ships. And I mentioned earlier—maybe not on tape—is the Marine friend I had who spoke at one of these UNCG lunches.

TS: Right.

SB: [Marine Colonel] Adele Hodges.

TS: Oh, right.

SB: A female Marine, and I—When I was in this pre-course, I was sitting, talking to—it was, like, on the first day—to a navy F-18 pilot, Jim—I can't remember his name. Well, decorated Marine pilot, really a super guy, and my impression, just talking to him, was, this is a good guy. Well, it—he looks at me, I don't see who's come to the door; it happens or be Adele Hodges—and for those that don't know, she was a black female officer—and Jim says to me—he says, "Oh, there's someone I want you to meet."

I said, "Who?" Not looking around.

He says, "One of the finest damn Marines you'll ever meet." He didn't say "women Marine," he said "one of the finest damn Marines." So that's how I met Adele Hodges.

[Colonel Adele Hodges is the first woman to command Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, NC. She took over as base Commander 23 January 2006, overseeing more than forty-seven thousand Marines and sailors.]

TS: That's pretty neat.

SB: Yeah, so that was good. But no, we had—

TS: It was a good experience?

SB: It was a good experience. The army sends their cream of the crop there. That's one of the reason they don't just let anybody go; they were really picky. It was a lot of work. More reading than I've done, and I'm a reader. A lot of work. A lot of good working together. In fact, in one of my operations project I worked with two other navy officers; guys that—we did very well on our project.

TS: What's the whole goal of the course?

SB: It's the first step in getting you certified as joint specialty officer, really. It's the professional training at—education at that level—not more training—because the next level I did while I was at the joint staff, and that is the joint warfare college Joint Forces Staff College; I can't remember the correct name of it. You learn more than you can imagine learning in less than a year, about warfare and operations and the legal end of it and—

TS: So is it—

SB: —history.

TS: Is it something that you are learning in order to fill a certain slot at a certain leve;, like, the next career move?

SB: It's more gen—I want to say generic, in that it's taking people at a level for those that are expected—you don't go unless they expect you to be very promotable. Those that are going to have to really broaden their scope, and to understand joint and combined operations; that you can't understand just your own—

TS: Your own service.

SB: —your own tactical look or whatever.

TS: I see.

SB: You've got to get up to the strategic level.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Looking at the big picture.

SB: And looking at very big picture. And even where we weren't [unclear] with military—including foreign military, but non-governmental organizations and that. And that came even more into play in the next level, the Joint Staff College.

TS: Interesting. Because I do wonder about that.

SB: Yes.

TS: We hear that people do those courses and you wonder, "Well, what's the purpose?" But when you talk about it being a big picture and looking, that makes a lot more sense.

SB: You've got to get in the big picture, and there's so many things that any of us in career paths, and especially those that are in specific warfare paths, you see that part of it, and you may know a little bit about how you fit in, but to get the picture of how everything works in together: where we came from, how we got here, what's the current events.

I think of seeing one briefing—this was years ago—a former CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] agent did a top secret briefing on Afghanistan, with pictures and all this stuff, and I'm going, "Holy cow. How could anyone survive fighting in that—those conditions?" Or seeing actual stuff out of, like, Rwanda [East Africa], whatever. Having to face seeing things you don't want to see.

TS: Right.

SB: And knowing, yes, this can happen. I mean, it's the ultimate in knowledge, the ultimate in understand responsibility and what you're responsible for. And in working with others and making things work together, using the best of everybody. When you're doing joint combined operations, you may have several who are at top level qualified to lead this big area. Well, you have to look at, okay, both of these could do it, but this—he can do—and this one gives us the opportunity to also use him or her here. It just makes you think of so many things at once that your head hurts.

TS: [chuckles] Well, it's like you're not just a cog in the puzzle pieces. You have all the pieces and can lay them out, right, and you kind of get a better idea of what—

SB: And then sometimes you realize everything's not in a single layer piece.

TS: [chuckles] That's really true.

SB: There's too many branches and sequels; you learn that.

[A branch is a contingency plan or "options built into the base plan," whereas a sequel refers to "subsequent operations based on the possible outcomes of the current operation]

TS: Right. Well, where did you end up going after you finished?

SB: The Joint Staff.

TS: Oh, okay, that's the Pentagon, then, right?

SB: Right. So by doing that—the three year tour there—I became a joint—and then you have to go to selection board. I did become a joint specialty officer.

TS: Yeah. Now, when did you make commander?

SB: I made commander while I was at the school and—

TS: Okay.

SB: —so I must have selected—I put it on when I was there, [but had been selected before arriving there—SB clarified later]. Yeah.

TS: So by the time you go to the Pentagon you were—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SB: Yeah, I was commander when I got to the Pentagon.

TS: And so, what was your role at the Pentagon?

SB: I was in the J1, which is the Personnel Manpower Division [Manpower and Personnel], and I handled all the issues on imminent danger pay, or some of the special pays; dependents in combat zones or danger areas was a big issue. But anything to do with pay and people, and having to move people out of areas.

TS: What kind of things did you have to deal with at that time? So this is '97 to 2000.

SB: The Middle East. There was quite a lot going on where we had dependents that—how can we pay them the danger pay if we're allowing dependents in the area?

TS: Interesting.

SB: Yeah.

TS: Sure.

SB: You've got to think, does that make sense? And how we pay the pays.

TS: This is before 9/11 and before the Gulf War [also known as Operation Desert Shield].

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SB: Yes, it was before 9/11, yeah. But there was still a lot of stuff going on because we had Kosovo [War].

[The September 11 attacks, or 9/11, were a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda on the United States on 11 September 2001. The attacks killed 2,996 people and injured over six thousand others.]

TS: Oh, right.

SB: In fact, I got—I had to work the National [Military] Command Center; is where we stood duty there, and I worked in—for it, the personnel issues, getting them imminent danger pay, if somebody else was sent into an area; getting that through fast enough. And for any big things that took a long time, it was not uncommon that many, if not most, of those that worked in the National Command Center—even though you never even saw each other because it's such a huge place—might get the basic navy achievement medal or something.

Well, one guy and I got a next level up, and the general that came in that presented it had not been there at the time and he said, "Oh, I didn't know you two had gone over there," because the way the awards were written he would have thought we had been on site, because of the things we did. But it was interesting when you've got, like, the NCIS [Naval Criminal Investigative Service] video-teleconferencing.

TS: Right.

SB: And remember the military leads the way. That you're sitting there, it was in the Command Center, looking at people same size you are, and it looks like they're at the same table but they're on the video screen. And so, we did a lot of that.

TS: Amazing what technology—how it's changed, right? Even just, I mean, over the course of the time that you were in.

SB: Yes. And it was amazing to me the technology that was available right there.

TS: Yes.

SB: But—And on the Joint Staff working the pay issues, at the Joint Staff level, I had to coordinate with all the heads of the services that were—the ones that were designated to respond, because we had to get on—anything we did had to have input from all services. Then I had to get it through General [Henry Hugh] Shelton and the DOD or wherever.

So you stayed quite busy. I mean, there were a bunch of us that we worked together and you had to know not only your job but you really had to know somebody else's because you didn't know when they weren't going to be there, or when you weren't going to be there and they had to do it. And any job in the Joint Staff, the detailers are required to give two nominations for any one job, and only one gets chosen. So you've been chosen over someone else for whatever reason, you get there—and one friend of mine was already there—you find all these brilliant people and you wonder how they made the mistake of sending you there [both chuckle], because there are all these absolutely wonderful people, and civilians who are specialists, and just—

TS: Was it a different kind of atmosphere to work in?

SB: Totally different, because you're working with primarily officers and—or senior enlisted—not senior enlisted, senior civilians. Yes, we did have a petty officer running the admin for us—

TS: But hardly any enlisted?

SB: No, not in the area where I was.

TS: Okay.

SB: There was some but not many. And at this point in time you're doing all your own work on the computer, thank goodness, instead of all this wasted time. So you're doing it. And we went—for a time when I got there a lot of things had to be printed out and then taken around in the Pentagon to where you were going to get it left and approved, to being able to do it online—

TS: Right, to just send a file or something, you mean?

SB: —and I was part of setting it up. Yeah, because everything was scanned when it came in. But we worked with Department of Defense civilians, really. I mean, we—And there was an officer in charge of one section. But there was an economist—I guess that's what he is—on the staff where we worked with the pay issues, who would—could educate us on what we needed to know, and he was wonderful, because so many people can't convey to you what you need to know without getting off track and all that.

TS: Right.

SB: He was wonderful. And a woman who worked some of the issues. So we all had to work together to understand where we were coming from and how to make it work and what made sense and getting it through the right places. The [United States] Embassy in—was it Kenya that was bombed then? Yeah. President Clinton sent—this was one of the times I made connections with him—sent his speech writer over to see me to work on a letter, and was not something I would normally have been the one to do.

[The 1998 United States embassy bombings were attacks that occurred 7 August 1998, in which over 200 people were killed in nearly simultaneous truck bomb attacks against the United States Embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and the United States Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya.]

TS: Right. Why were you picked for that?

SB: I think it was because of something else I worked with [General] Shelton on, on issues, and I remember President Clinton was on the phone with him when we were talking about something, and he would say, "Commander Benson wrote this and did that," and whatever.

Somehow he already knew and they wanted—Because this captain—it was a navy captain—shows up and says, "I don't know why they sent me to—want me to work with you but they said that that was the orders."

TS: You were the one to do it, right?

SB: So I helped write the letter, but it was just a—

TS: Was it pretty rewarding to work there?

SB: Yeah, personally, and knowing—it's the kind of thing somebody asked me one time, "Didn't you feel a real power there?" No, what you feel is one hell of a responsibility, because whatever you do, you have to balance what you think and—with everything else you know, and knowing that if you've really thought it out then you're on the right track, that you're not just pulling it out of the blue. Knowing that what you do and what you present up is what you know, has been worked out, and what is the best, and all the information is there and true and that you're not covering anything up.

Because there are those who say—I had one issue, the dependents in combat zone—part of that issue—where there was—technically I had a colonel that I worked for in my office, and then a general, and then General Shelton. But on the Joint Staff, the chairman will tell you everybody—the twelve or fourteen hundred people who work for the chairman—everybody has direct access. If somebody between him and you says, "No, this is not right," or, "I don't want this," if you disagree you can take it to the

chairman. Kind of different. And this was one where this colonel kept saying, "Take it back. Study it some more."

I said, "There is no more studying." So I got to take it directly to General Shelton, and it was fine, yeah.

TS: I guess part of the reason, maybe, that is, is every decision has consequences, but the magnitude of the consequences of a decision at that level are pretty magnified.

SB: Yes. And even as colonel, it's like he could put it off till he was gone, and I just don't see putting things off till you're gone; you've got to take care of them. It's not fair to people—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Have some accountability?

SB: Right. It's not fair to people not to take care of things.

TS: That's interesting.

SB: So that was okay. I mean, there's no consequences to it.

TS: [chuckles] Yeah.

SB: It doesn't matter.

TS: Your next assignment, did you get selected or is this something that you sought after?

SB: Well, I had hoped early on to get selected for command, but then commands were few and far between, especially since they were taking people like me without a warfare qualification and moving us into other areas. They were deciding, "Well, we're not going to have this General Shore Station Management thing. You've got to do this, that, or the other." I was caught right in the middle of that. However, I did select for command, even with the missing fit rep, and it turns out that someone on the board knew—because they knew where I was—said, "I know the fit rep that was pull—"

TS: Right.

SB: "I know this person that signed the fit rep was pulled. I don't even have to know her to tell you that she was on the right end of it and he was on the wrong end," or something.

TS: Right.

SB: But yeah, I got selected for command, but at that time just—you have to do three years on the Joint Staff. I was going to hit my twenty year point shortly thereafter.

TS: Okay.

SB: And so, I wanted to put in for retirement; we were going to retire and travel the world. I mean, I joined the navy and I saw the U.S. and Japan. But they said they wouldn't let me retire because I'd have to extend there and they weren't going to extend me. And then they wanted to send me to command, and they even offered a command that I had wanted, but I said, "No, we're going to retire. It's not fair to send me when there's others that are going to stay in that need it." [phone rings]

TS: Right.

SB: Well, they—

TS: Do you want me to pause it for a sec?

SB: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay, we're rolling again. Go ahead. So the other people could—

SB: Yeah.

TS: —have the command that were going to stay in longer?

SB: Right, and it wasn't fair that—

TS: Okay.

SB: —it was a balance thing of like—and there were things I still wanted to do but I had to look at my age, that to do the things we wanted to do and my age, it was just time to go and to let somebody else do it. They did write me orders to command, down to [Naval Technical Training Center] Meridian, [Mississippi], even though they had tried to give me the command in [Naval Support Activity] La Maddelena, Italy that I had wanted, and I said, "No, that's not fair."

TS: Right.

SB: "I know I'm going to retire."

They said, "Well, we don't think you'll retire. We want you to go to command."

So I go to Meridian, and sure enough, after I turn in my retirement papers I know I'm in zone for captain but I have no intention of staying, and since I had a successful command tour it was given—I was going to select for captain. I had to officially withdraw my name because I—they said, "No, we think you'll stay in after you're selected."

I said, "That is not fair," because that would have left an empty slot for a year for someone.

I have no regrets. As much as I would have loved to have gone on and done the job for which I was qualified as a joint specialty officer, it was time. And we travel, so—

TS: Right.

SB: —that's okay.

TS: Well, how was your last assignment, then, at Navy Technical Training Center.

SB: Yes. That is—It's a training center for sailors, and we also had a Marine unit attached. After their first—After basic camp where they go to their first in-rate training—and the training we provided was for those that were going to admin, computer, religious specialists, ship servicemen—the ones that do the barber shop and the drink machines; logistics types. We had all that for the sailors. And we had this Marine unit that was attached to me that had a CO and XO; had the same logistics type things for Marines. And we did about five thousand sailors a year. It's down—It's located—co-located with the jet pilot training down in Meridian, so there's a small navy station there.

TS: That must have been where I heard of it before.

SB: Yeah.

TS: For that part of it, okay.

SB: Yeah. The naval air station there, and the reason that station is there is for the two commands, the jet training—

TS: Okay.

SB: —and the NTTC [Naval Technical Training Center]. I had a gorgeous office there; a nice big office. And the first thing that bothered me when I walked in, get my first tour around by the command master chief—Now, I had visited down there for a couple of days—or a few days—before I took command, but it was just a quick in and out, whatever. But when I came back, and off the lobby to where it went to my secretary's office and my office and the executive's [officer] office—there was another big conference room across the hall,

even though you could have held a conference in my office; we had sofas and chairs and everything.

There was one conference room that was fine. But there was another room—another big room—and on the door it said "Mast Room," like captain's mast, and I'm going, "You have enough mast cases to warrant a mast room?" I said, "You have mast in the CO's office, and that office is big."

[In naval tradition, a mast is a non-judicial punishment disciplinary hearing, overseen by a commanding officer]

TS: Right.

SB: And command master chief says, "Well, maybe not."

I said, "I do not like—" I said, "The first thing you walk in and hear and you see is mast." I said, "I don't like it." Well, that sign was gone before the day was over.

TS: [chuckles]

SB: And never reappeared. And—

TS: Pretty negative to have that.

SB: Pretty negative, and for the two years I was there, looking at previous records, the sailors who got into any kind of trouble—I'm talking about a slap on the wrist—we did have a sexual assault case or some—we had a couple of things—but the number of sailors that got into any kind of trouble at all, whether it was just, "Don't do this again," was less than one half of 1%. So don't tell me you need a room—

TS: Right.

SB: —to handle less than one half of 1%.

TS: Right.

SB: So the chiefs had a good idea, they needed a goat locker [lounge area]. In other words, a room where all the chief petty officers could meet. That was fine.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So that's what it turned into?

SB: That's what it turned into.

TS: That's good.

SB: That's fine.

TS: What was the best part about this command for you, then, personally?

SB: Oh, gosh. I think it was dealing with the young sailors. Here I am, at retirement's door, and I've got the sailors that are coming straight out of boot camp, and I'd never really had that before.

TS: Right.

SB: Other than—you'd have a few of the junior ones. I had all levels. So here was the opportunity to deal with those that are brand new, they've been through boot camp, which, yeah, you do what you're told and it's pretty hard but you make friends. This was the first time to let them see how it's going to be to be accepted as an adult, even if you're only eighteen, and can't drink. And how they can see that everything wasn't an order and you had to stand at attention all the time, but how to understand how to do that. How—And to work—See them working with civilians. And to see how far they had come from where they had been. I read every evaluation. We had them evaluate—At the end of the courses they would write up—there was an evaluation on the course specifically, what they felt about it, even not knowing what it was going to be like when they got out to the fleet.

TS: Right.

SB: And they had an evaluation on facilities, because for us, we had our own barracks that were dedicated strictly to our sailors, not the base sailors at all. After I got there we had a building where—it was temperature controlled, where it had computers and telephones. When I first got there the only telephone available, for the however-many hundreds we had at one time, was a pay phone out in the parking lot, where they had several hundred—a couple hundred young sailors standing at one hundred degree temperature waiting for the phone. That didn't last long. And the evaluation included base things and local command stuff.

That—I read every one of those, and a lot of them were just so-so, but it was so often something jumped out. The sailor that—The ones who score the lowest on test usually are put into ship servicemen, and I don't know if that's how it still is or what it's still called; the ones that do the ship's laundry, become barbers, take care of the drink machines, they go into that to begin with. It doesn't mean that later they won't do something else, because the chief petty officer—and it happened to be a black man, and I use this because for him to be a chief he was in his late thirties or forty at the time, so he'd been in a while—the chief ship's serviceman had a master's degree in math, and yet

when he came in the navy he had barely gotten out of high school. So this was such a wonderful role model for them.

TS: Right.

SB: And to know where he had come in that time. But one of the sailors in that had written an eval, he says, "I cannot believe how well I've learned to press a shirt and put a [crease in—SB added later]—" just little things.

TS: Right. Having some sort of pride in self and—

SB: Right, they had pride. These courses weren't necessarily difficult. They might be if you were in the shoes of the one taking it, but they were a start, and I think it eased them into the beginnings of what they were going to do and what they could do. And I had a wonderful staff. Like, the chiefs, on their own, had come up with this Friday night fireside chat thing, they called it—I don't know if we had it fireside—but they were available for any sailors who wanted—if they weren't standing duty or if they were off duty, whatever—because some of them [unclear]—to a—just come and sit around and let's talk about things; anything you want to talk about we'll talk about. So they were using their own time—off time—doing this. I didn't suggest it; they did it.

So when the base CO, who runs this support stuff, says to me one day, "I saw Chief So-and-so out playing golf yesterday afternoon."

I said, "Oh, great. I'm glad he got out there."

He says, "It's okay in the afternoon?"

I said, "Well, if you came in and volunteered Friday nights like he did maybe you could play in the afternoon too."

TS: Right.

SB: Or when they're teaching both civilians and the military they can't run to the [Navy] Exchange. Well, they can't go get their hair cut because they're in class. So it's like, "Oh, okay." He said, "Yeah, maybe I'll go play with him next time."

TS: [chuckles]

SB: People just rode too hard.

TS: That's right.

SB: So again, the young sailors—I had the opportunity to speak to them when they first came in. My husband did something funny to one of the classes.

TS: Oh yeah? What did he do?

SB: They had a little airport at Meridian; a very small airport. The closest regular airport was Jackson, which was an hour or so away, so most flights we brought them in on the big puddle jumper [a small plane used for flight connections] to Meridian. Well, the second year we were there my husband moved to North Carolina to build our house, but he'd come down every now and then on a weekend. Well, one weekend he was coming down and, I guess in Atlanta, gets on the puddle jumper, and obviously with a bunch of them coming from Great Lakes, and one young lady apparently in charge. They weren't in uniform; didn't have to be.

And they were talking on the plane getting down there, and what they were going to do, and Eric said, "Well, I can tell you how it works. About—If the command knows the flights coming in and whatever they'll send vans, but if not all you do is you get a taxi, and the taxi can only charge that rate on the side, and it's for four people, so don't let them charge you individually, and they won't. And this is what you pay them, and this—"

And I guess they were in the airport or on the plane or something and—I don't know—Eric didn't tell them who he was; that he was my husband.

TS: Right.

SB: Well, the next day when I'm addressing this young class of all these young people, and I said—I didn't even mention Eric had said that he saw them coming in—and I said, "Anything anybody else wants to ask me, now's a good chance. Ask me anything you want to. If I can't answer it I'll tell you. If I don't want to answer it I'll—" whatever.

And one of them—In fact, it must have been the young lady who was kind of in charge of the group. She says, "Ma'am?" She says, "It was so nice. When we were on the airplane this really nice man—" [chuckling] And I was trying to keep myself from laughing. "It was really nice to have someone welcome us and tell us that."

I said, "Oh, he sounds familiar."

She says, "Oh, he was really nice."

I says, "Yeah, you know? I think I slept with him last night." [both laughing] Whoops. "Oh, that's my husband."

TS: That's pretty neat. That's pretty neat.

SB: So that was fun. I had two wonderful executive officers, totally different; one-eighty [180 degrees is the opposite] out in their opinions and things.

TS: One what?

SB: One-eighty out, just—they're so—

TS: Oh, one-eighty out.

SB: Yeah, they're so different, and both wonderful in how they got along with people or how they did, but that's what you need with command; you need people who are different coming in and out.

TS: Right.

SB: So you're not always the same. So that was good. And then in the—I don't think I'd want to live in Mississippi. Mississippi was more backwards than anyplace I had been in the military, as far as non-whites and women were. I was treated well but—and some really good people down there, so I don't mean that as across the board.

TS: Right.

SB: But there was a lot of backwards things that bothered me. The best thing that came out of Mississippi, down there they have dumpsters out at crossroads in the countryside, and people dump dogs there. That's bad. One of the ones they dumped was Ninja, our dog who died a couple of weeks ago, so we had a Mississippi dumpster dog who turned out to be a wonderful dog.

TS: Yeah. And so, you just lost here a couple of weeks ago.

SB: Yes.

TS: You had her for twelve, thirteen years.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SB: Yeah, we got her when she was about five year—five weeks old and had her almost fourteen and a half years.

TS: Well, how was your transition out of the navy back into civilian life, because you'd been in civilian life for a long time before you went in?

SB: Not a problem.

TS: No?

SB: One day you're in the navy and one day you're not. You just have to accept that and make that adjustment, and I think—it probably helps that I'm not living next door to a navy base, where everything is navy around you.

TS: Right.

SB: But I've known many people that are the same way, you just—

TS: Anything you miss though?

SB: Every day.

TS: What do you miss?

SB: The people.

TS: The people.

SB: Yeah. I miss the people. And yeah, I miss the responsibility but, gosh, what a relief. [both chuckle]

TS: Yeah, you took on a lot.

SB: You meet so many wonderful people, and I'm in touch with many people from the whole career. That's nice being—

TS: You were talking—

SB: —where you can reach out and touch them.

TS: You were talking about Facebook [social networking site] and the—

SB: Facebook.

TS: —different technology that we have today that you didn't have back then.

SB: Yes, or even seeing people and Eric with the Naval Academy, he's still close to his company mates, and some people who will visit or we will visit or we'll go meet friends in Ireland. Or one friend that I met on the Joint Staff, she [Colonel Kathleen Grabowski Borland, USAF, Retired—SB added later] and I, we're just good friends and the kind that you can pick up in the middle of a conversation. She lives in San Antonio [Texas], and she goes—she drives to New Jersey to visit family every year now, and she takes a scattered way around so she can stop and see friends, and her husband doesn't come with her.

Well, a couple years ago—three years ago maybe—she came by here and spent three or four days, and Ninja, the dog who's gone, who would not come to anybody else, loved her from the start, and when we were in the car together, she reaches over and kisses for Aunt Kat—is her name. Well, this past year in September, my friend Kat wanted to come by for some more days but it didn't work with our being out of the country, and yet, because of Ninja's medical conditions and age, she says, "What if I could—" and she said, "If I detour like this I could—on the way there I could come by for one night but it'd be there in the afternoon, leaving the next morning, because I really want to see Ninja." So she did.

TS: Oh, that's sweet.

SB: Yeah. So that's the kind of friends you make.

TS: Yeah, that's really nice. Well, since you went in at age thirty-four you had a different perspective that you were coming in from.

SB: Yes.

TS: Do you think that you were independent before you went in, and you clearly were—

SB: Yes.

TS: —independent when you went in, in many ways. But do you think that being in the navy changed your life in a significant way?

SB: I think so, because I wonder if I hadn't done that where I would have stayed—I don't think I would have stayed put necessarily in Raleigh or the same job. I think I would have changed and done different things. But I think it broadens your view of the world.

TS: In what way?

SB: That you're more aware of how things all over the world affect you, and your—also you become aware of other people and how different they are, are still the same; that you can work together with so many different people; and that you can learn quickly that there's not much you can do if you want to do it.

TS: I think that's one thing that I have recognized from a lot of these interviews, is that when you're in the service, no matter what your rank, whether you are an ensign or a private or a commander, you are put in positions where you're challenged to your max [maximum].

SB: Yes.

TS: Did you feel that way too? That you were pretty challenged in every position that you had?

SB: Yes, in one way or another, and because you can't just assume that what you think you know is right; you have to check. And I think a big challenge is letting people make mistakes, or letting people do things that may not be exactly like you want or would do it, but it works and it helps them grow. I remember that very first thing with the Curriculum and Instructional Standards Office, the petty officer who later retired as a lieutenant commander, and his wanting to do things—I used to do a memo—based on what they did I'd do a memo to the captain on the test and how I would recommend doing all this and that. One day he puts the memo on my desk and he says, "I thought I would draft this for you and see what you think."

Well, I might have worded things a little differently or that, and I said—So if I made any changes it was very minor. I did not believe in nickel, diming [small or petty] changes on people, so from then on he did them. [both chuckle] "Okay, you do that, I'll do something else."

TS: That's kind of neat. Well, those were changes in the responsibility. You had said you had a couple experiences of commanders over you that were not, like, nice, I think is how you worded it.

SB: Yes.

TS: But overall, did you feel like you were treated pretty fairly, in promotions, in medals, things like that?

SB: Yes, I think so. I mean, there's always this thing that was said that women—and it probably is close to true—in order to be treated the same in any position women had to be better. But I am not sure that that's true. I just think there were a lot of things that may not have been done fairly. The fact of ranking officers without a warfare specialty with those with it. You're not talking about the same thing, so a lot of the rankings really needed work. They needed more input from human resources specialists on how you can better do this, and I know we were looking at that, and so I'm sure there are some changes there. Again, nothing's perfect; they have to keep chipping away at it. And it is so competitive, because there's only so much money and only so many spots, that even people who are really great at what they do, if there's only fifty spots to select somebody to commander, there's only fifty spots, you can't make up any more.

TS: Yes. I forgot to ask you about 9/11. What—

SB: Oh, 9/11. I was down in Meridian, and it was interesting, Eric was back up here at the time, and a former neighbor in Virginia who was living in Florida happened to be staying with me, because she was an independent contractor at the time doing training classes and she had come up to Meridian to do a "Who Moved My Cheese" [motivational business program], or whatever, and saving costs she just stayed with me; Eric wasn't there.

And the morning of 9/11, I was in my office and the command master comes in, says, "Ma'am, you need to come across and look at this," and we go into the conference room, he's got the TV on, it's showing the replay. So it was like this is happening all of a sudden, and there's not somebody tell me what do, but the decision is until we hear further there's no liberty [authorized time off base or station]; not letting anybody go until I know what we were going to do. So that was not a problem, but letting people know, and there wasn't much we could do down there, other than being aware.

And security on the base did the implementation of checking every car, and that was another big thing. I had—I lived thirteen miles off base, so I drove in every morning. In the morning I drove in and I'm waiting in line to get my car checked and all that; no weapons. A bread truck goes around the side and goes up and they wave him through.

TS: That was the morning before?

SB: No, it was after 9/11, so it was after—we were doing the security thing so this was a day or two after. So I call the base—I walk into my office, call the base commander; I didn't have a cell phone.

TS: Right.

SB: That's another thing that's changed, cell phones. And I go, "What is going on?"

He said, "Oh, well, they—"

In fact, at the gate they had told me, "Oh, they call in ahead and tell us they're coming."

I said, "If I was a terrorist that's how I'd do it."

TS: Right.

SB: So I call up the base CO, captain, senior to me, and he says, "Oh, well, they call—"

I said, "Are you crazy?"

Anyhow, some other words were said that some people overheard but it didn't happen again. It was the stupidest thing I've ever seen in my life. And what happened then is half a dozen of the sailors or Marines in our command had direct ties to somebody who could have been killed. In fact, one uncle I know was in the hospital and survived. I don't remember anybody of theirs being killed. The pilot of the airplane that went into the Pentagon was a classmate of Eric's.

TS: Is that right?

SB: Yeah, and this was on 9/11. Two weeks later we were going to a class reunion in Annapolis [Maryland, United States Naval Academy], and we did go; we flew. He flew from here and I flew from Meridian. And where it went in to the Pentagon, the office it hit—the army office—was an office that I frequently—I dealt with the people, and I cannot find the emails I thought I had for years. A civilian that worked there, had emailed me back and forth afterwards, talking about what had happened, and about crawling out and all that.

And then one woman who had been in the same directorate I was in but not in the same office—she was in a different office space and so I didn't know her well; I just knew her when she'd come by and things—she had moved to that army office and she was killed.

Then another man that I met at the Pentagon—I don't know if you've ever been in there, but up on one level where you went for Metro [Pentagon stop on the transit system serving the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area], and I think they changed that—there's a big mall area, then you had a huge dining area that actually had several dining facilities and one seating area. It had—One of the five Starbucks [chain of coffeehouses] at the Pentagon at that time was there. And I had gone one day and gotten coffee and sat at a

table with somebody beside a little wall. When I got back to the office I realized I had dropped my wallet; my billfold. And so, I had—I'm about ready to go up there and check and find it and the phone rings and it's the Pentagon Federal Credit Union calling, and this man had found my wallet, and since he saw the Pentagon Federal card, taken it over to the credit union and said please open it. He said, "I saw that much," and so they called me.

Well, I go and—his name was Mr. [Karl—SB added later] Teepe, I think—and I said, "Let me buy you some coffee, I can't believe—"

"Oh, no."

And I saw him several times after that. He was killed.

So there were several I knew, but over the next couple of weeks in there with the sailors we knew that was missing somebody that did show up or whatever, the Marine who worked for me—Major French—and I would sit down with these [them]. We would give them the hugs they need.

TS: Right.

SB: We would help in calling, trying to find where the person was and take care of that, because they were scared to death.

TS: Sure.

SB: But—So they gave people a lot to think about and—

TS: It's a shock.

SB: Yeah, that it was. But we went to the reunion and—

TS: That was only a couple weeks later?

SB: Yes.

TS: And that was in Annapolis?

SB: Right. People said, "Aren't you scared to fly?"

I said, "Flying has nothing to do with it. It just happened that the terrorists used an airplane that time."

TS: Right.

SB: But one other thing. The Marine unit that reported to me, there was a separate unit but the Marine CO reported to me, and his office was in the same building I was in; just kind of—it was separate, it was not, like, right there with me. And the Marines had separate classes from the sailors, but we'd use some of the—every time a class graduated he and I would speak to the classes, because we had Marines and sailors graduating at the same

time; it would be not just the one class. And instead of giving long speeches it was, like, five minute speeches or whatever.

And there had been one CO when I got there and left a short time—the second one that came in was just a wonderful Marine. He was married and had three kids himself, but he—he was a great officer and a human being too, and he was a major; so yeah, I was an O-5, he was an O-4. When it came time to do his fitness report, he's got the things for me, and I told him, "I will write it," because he's used to everybody writing [their own—SB clarified later]—I said, "I'll gladly write it but I want you to see what I write before I sign it and make sure I don't get anything wrong, because I haven't written a Marine fit rep—" that I could remember—"before." And he brought me things.

Well, in the meantime, the Marine on the admiral's staff to whom I reported, went to the admiral and said, "She shouldn't write his fit rep. He won't get promoted if she writes it. I want to write it, the colonel down there."

And he said, "I don't think so. She's his reporting senior."

And in fact, he told Chris French, the Marine, and Chris said to him, "She's my reporting senior, she's the one that's supposed to write it."

And then he told me he had been called, and I told my admiral, I said, "I'm his reporting senior."

He said, "Okay."

And the colonel says, "Well, he won't get promoted. He can just kiss that promotion goodbye."

Well, Lieutenant Commander French became Lieutenant Colonel French, and when he was at Camp Lejeune I went to his assumption of command [Change of Command] and when he left command. And then he left and went somewhere else, and Lieutenant Colonel French became Colonel French; he retired as a colonel recently.

TS: [chuckles] There you go.

SB: With my signature on his fit rep.

TS: How did that happen? [chuckles]

SB: Yeah. Just don't know but he deserved it.

TS: The other Marine, was he concerned because you were in the navy or because you were a woman, or what?

SB: That's a good question. A good question. I don't know.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Didn't ask that specifically, or he didn't really say, he just insinuated?

SB: I don't know that he did. I think he said not having a Marine sign it, but I don't know what he really meant.

TS: Yeah.

SB: Whatever. Anyway.

TS: I wanted to ask you some specifically related to women. We talked about "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." We talked about the women's movement, Equal Rights Amendment.

SB: Yes.

TS: We didn't actually talk about the amendment itself. But is there any particular job that you think that women should not be allowed to do; in any of the services, not just the navy?

SB: No, not across the board. I think it depends whether you qualify for it, whether—if you've got to qualify physically; if there's something you've got to do physically. There are some men who can't do it, and I think men are realizing that, yeah, not every man can lift a two hundred pound person. The woman firefighter in Groton, Connecticut who happened to be a civilian when I was there—they had no problem with her because she could lift the two hundred pound guy over her shoulders and take him out. So no, the only restriction, and that's not against the woman, that's if you can't lift what you're required to lift you can't do it.

TS: Because right now they're going through some of the infantry training and ranger training and things like that.

SB: I've seen that in the Special Forces, and yeah, some of that is so intense that it would be few women who probably could have the body strength, but that doesn't mean that some won't, because so more many young women are working on body strength.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: We're a lot more athletic than we've ever been.

SB: Right, but there are—I mean, not every man makes it through Special Forces, or even gets to be considered. So not just because—I can't think of anything that just because someone's a woman. Long gone is the thought, "Well, we can't let our mothers and daughters and sisters go to war." Well, we let our brothers and fathers and uncles.

TS: Yes. And we were at war for over ten years, a dozen years really, so more than that.

SB: Yes. And it's funny to me, the first women that were put on ships were put on the supply type ships, or the tender—the medical ships. Well, guess what's going to be the first target? So that didn't even make sense.

TS: Did you consider yourself a trailblazer at all, for the time period that you—You had some "firsts" that you did?

SB: Yeah, because by getting the foot in the door at the nuclear repair facility they saw that I wasn't an alien with three heads. But I don't know. I think there's a lot out there; a lot of women; I wasn't—we were all there at the same time. There's some very—

TS: But somebody had to be the first in every little thing that women went in. What about—Would you recommend, or even have you recommended, the service to young men and women today?

SB: Oh, absolutely. And see, I personally feel like everybody should do some kind of service, whether it's military, or whether there's some kind of national service, and whatever it may be, and it doesn't have to be as physically demanding or require the education and training, just some commitment to say, "I've done something to help my country be better." And there is a trend toward more volunteer work and whatever, but there's still a resistance of, "I don't owe anybody anything." And I just feel that people aren't as committed to their country as a whole if they're not a part of it. Yeah.

TS: Have you had any dealings with the VA [Veterans Administration] at all?

SB: VA, I—they've got enough on them. I didn't really need it. At one point I was going to let them review my record but didn't, and from here to the nearest VA hospital in Fayetteville—We didn't want to be where we had to go to VA or to Fort Bragg [Womack Army Medical Center], because if we had an emergency, or getting there at night if we had to drive ourselves, is kind of tough, through backwoods and getting there. We wanted healthcare closer so we chose to do that, and fortunately it was approved, because at one time they said, "Well, if you're not an hour away you have to go.

I said, "By the time you drive thirty-five miles an hour it is an hour to get on base down where it is."

TS: So you haven't had to do anything?

SB: No, I think there's enough medical support, and I'm not so sure how—personally how important the VA as a separate entity is anymore. Way back when, yes, but now we could probably do a lot more with government paying for it but done in local hospitals.

Same with commissaries and exchanges. I don't think there should be stateside commissaries unless there's nothing else available.

TS: Because the different, kind of, commerce environment now, do you think?

SB: Yeah, you've got things available, where they used to—the army post or navy bases or whatever were away from other things, and the other things couldn't support a changing population; like, if all of a sudden half of Fort Bragg is deployed, they couldn't sustain operations based on losing their customer base.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: That's interesting. I hadn't really thought about that.

SB: Because the commissary, overseas I can see having them, so that you can have the kind of things that you're used to, because you can't get them elsewhere or whatever, but here, I—

TS: Not so much?

SB: We don't need them. And the prices, you're not saving that much. I tried to shop in the commissary the first few years we were here, and making a trip once every three months, taking the local ads with me, but I wound up—I was buying things locally because it was cheaper. So—And the problem with, like, commissaries—it has always been, I thought this when I was on active duty—is they—the pricing things can be misleading; where you think you're buying economical size, if you look at the per ounce cost or whatever, you're not. Or the same thing on the shelf could be different prices. And so, there are quite a few problems there, and it's misleading to the—especially if you get the lesser-educated person who doesn't think— who thinks that the military is taking care of them, and, "Oh, yeah, I can buy the larger size detergent or larger this and I'm saving money," and when you're not I don't like that.

TS: Right. It's misleading.

SB: So there's a lot of things that can be improved, but so many people are afraid to deal with it because, "Oh, it's always been that way", and, "Oh, we've always provided this." Some things have to change.

TS: Do you think that your life is any different because you joined the navy? You kind of answered this a little bit earlier, I'm just asking it differently.

SB: Oh, I think absolutely so.

TS: In what ways?

SB: I just think it's been greatly enriched in many ways; the things I was able to do. You couldn't work in one job and get that kind of experience and education. You couldn't stay

in one place and deal with as many different people. And just an appreciation for the whole that's greater than you are.

TS: Did you feel that your navy career fulfilled what you wanted to do, even as a young girl, to join the air force back in—

SB: Yes.

TS: Yeah?

SB: Yeah, even more so, because I think I didn't expect as much as I got.

TS: Yeah, interesting. Well, is there anything in particular that you would want a civilian to know or understand about the military, or the navy, that you think that they don't, or maybe it's misrepresented to the public?

SB: Well, I think there's still the old thing about the hierarchy and the "yes, ma'am," "yes, sir," and I give orders, and they don't realize what a wonderful working relationship—what a team it is, regardless of pay grade. And that if you hear about one bad person, that's only one; that the rest are okay. And that it is a very caring for another person type thing. You learn to care about your shipmate. This thing I mentioned to you earlier about telling the sailors—And when I first got to Mississippi right after the attack on the ship—the terrorist attack [in Yemen—SB clarified later]—which one of the sailors killed in that, his brother came to Meridian while I was there—

TS: Oh.

SB: —with his parents.

TS: Okay.

SB: I mean, he went through the course. He wanted—He didn't have to because of his brother being killed, but he wanted to serve. But in telling the sailors, "You're all shipmates," if you happen to be on the ship and something happens to you, there's a fire or you're drowning or something and someone reaches out a hand to save you, you're not going to look up and go, "Oh, is that a woman?" You're not going to go, "Are you Catholic, Muslim," whatever. "Are you—" I said, "You're not even going to go, 'Are you gay or straight?'" I said, "It doesn't matter. It's the person that's going to save you, and you're shipmates, you work together." And people come to see that; they realize it.

TS: What does patriotism mean to you?

SB: Patriotism means supporting your country; being part of what makes your country, not what tears it apart; respecting the will of the whole and the power of the country; not disrespecting your leadership; doing what you can to change things that you don't like.

But you have to be part of the solution, not a part of a problem. If you're a part of the problem, you're in the wrong place.

TS: I don't have any more formal questions. If there anything that we haven't talked about that you wanted to discuss at all?

SB: I don't know but I'll think about it in five minutes. [both chuckle]

TS: Well, there's always something; we can't catch everything.

SB: I think that there's so many things and so many memories and so much that happened.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Would you do it again?

SB: And I can tell you how good people are. Peop—In Meridian one day—Let me give you an example of how people go out of their way to do something nice for you. We had a—I told you about my two good executive officers, and one of them loved banana pudding.

TS: [chuckles] Okay.

SB: I like banana pudding but I'm not a fanatic; it's good. And at a couple of the cookout things one of chief's wife made homemade banana pudding, like my Aunt Lula used to make, from scratch; the basic stuff. It was really good. Well, one day this woman, who is moving that day, walks into the office and says, "I wanted to say goodbye."

I said, "You are having—We thought you were leaving today."

"Well, yeah, the trucks just left the house."

She had gotten two of the eight inch square foil pans, made banana pudding, one for Stephanie and one for me, on her last day there.

TS: [chuckles] Sweet. That's like a family, right?

SB: Yeah, and it is family.

TS: Yeah.

SB: Yeah.

TS: Would you do it again?

SB: Oh, absolutely.

TS: Would you do anything differently?

SB: I would like to have been able to go in earlier and do the same thing. As it is right now, looking back, I wouldn't have had the same opportunities if I'd gone in earlier. But I would like to have been younger when I went in so I could have stayed longer.

TS: Yeah.

SB: Yeah.

TS: That's interesting. You might have had the same great experience, too, though, right?

SB: Yes.

TS: It might have been a totally different experience.

SB: Yeah, I don't know, I think if I had been a little bit younger, just a few years, so to give me the few more years to get some more overseas things.

TS: Oh, right.

SB: That would have been pretty good.

TS: Because you just had the one trip to Japan.

SB: Yeah, I just had the one.

TS: Yeah.

SB: Which there was so—countless things there I could tell you about.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh, yeah, wow. Incredible.

SB: It was just one after the other. One other story that brings in teachers and things. My sister—One of my sisters was a school counselor and for most of her years she was down at Spring Lake near Fort Bragg, and was still there when I was in Meridian, Mississippi, with all these young sailors. Well, she called me one day and said, "I've got a student that's really upset about her sister who's going in the navy and she's scared about her." She said, "And I was talking to her and trying to find out where her sister is." She says, "I think she's in Meridian in one your classes."

TS: [chuckles]

SB: As I got the information and all, and it turns out she was; a brand new sailor out of boot camp. So I told one of her instructors about it. I said, "I'm coming over there." So I go over to the class, and every now and then I'd walk in a class in the back; I didn't like disrupting classes but I'd just check on them. So I go in the class and they all stand at attention. "Please sit down." And I said, "I just want to talk to you." I said, "How many of you have younger brothers and sisters?" I said, "I've got two younger sisters and a younger brother. They're older than yours, but they're still younger." I said, "And I've got this sister who's a school counselor." I said, "She was talking to a young girl—" or however old she was, twelve years old—"yesterday who's really worried about her sister." And I was in tears, got the sister up there, I said, "I'm supposed to give you this big hug."

TS: That's so sweet.

SB: I think that helped all of them, not just the one.

TS: Sure. Well, you had a real personal touch, it sounds like.

SB: Yeah. So yeah, lots of good things, and those few bad things.

TS: Yeah.

SB: They don't have the good memories. [both chuckle]

TS: That's right. We'll keep the good ones to the forefront, right?

SB: Yeah.

TS: Well, I'm going to go ahead and end it then it that's alright with you.

SB: Okay.

TS: But thank you so much, Sally. It's been really great talking with you.

SB: Yeah, you're quite welcome.

TS: I really appreciate it.

[End of Interview]