WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: "BJ" A. Kramer

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: 22 April 2015

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is April 22, [2015]. My name is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the home of BJ Kramer in Lillington, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina of Greensboro. BJ, would you like to state your name the way you'd like it to read on the collection?

BJ: BJ Kramer.

TS: You want—You don't want it as [Robertajo]—

BJ: No, no, no, no. Nobody would know that anyhow.

TS: Just BJ? Okay, we'll put it that way then. Well, let's start out then, BJ. Why don't you tell me a little bit about when and where you were born?

BJ: I was born [13 November 1942] in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, and I was second child to Joseph and Mary Kramer. We lived on a farm for first couple of years, and then had another girl named Fran, and we moved to Allentown, which we might as well have stayed on the farm because we lived at the edge of town and there was all farmer's fields around us so we were still farmers at heart. Then my younger brother Joe was born. And I went to Catholic grade school at St. Francis [of Assisi School]. I went to Catholic high school at Central Catholic of Allentown and—

TS: What did your folks do for a living?

BJ: My mom—My mom had many jobs. [chuckles] My mom was—she was the coolest lady in the whole world. She was just a mother when Mary and I and Frannie were born, and then when Joey was born she had to get a job, so she worked at Kay Jewelers for many years, and then she worked at Hess's, which was a department store, for many years. And then they begged her at St. Francis

Grade School, if she would start a kindergarten because she was so good with the kids. And she stayed at the kindergarten.

My brother Joe was in her first class, and she had a little graduation thing for them with white caps and gowns. I was still in high school, and I used to go down—I was still in grade school; I was in the eighth grade when Mom started teaching. Anyhow, she taught there for many, many, many years. Most of the kids, when she got done, were already married and had kids. And the only reason why my mom stopped teaching was the rule came out, in order to be a kindergarten teacher you had to have a bachelor's degree. And Father Walters, the principal, tried so hard to figure out a way not to do that, because Catholic schools are private, and they wouldn't do it. So Mom said, "Well, I'm too old to go back to school, so I'm done teaching."

So she stopped kindergarten and she went back to being a retail person at Hess, which was a big department store at that time in Allentown. It was the only department store at that time in Allentown, and she stayed there until she came down here.

TS: Okay. How about your dad?

BJ: My dad went to transportation school. He wanted to go in the army so bad, back in—what was it?—World War II in '41 or '42? I slept through it, inside Mom. Anyhow, he wanted to go in the army so bad, but he had flat feet so they 4-F'ed him [classification used by military draft board to indicate registrant not acceptable for military service.]. He became a Civil Defense worker, he stayed in Civil Defense for about fifteen years, and he decided that he needed to get into a little bit something more. And he always loved trucks, so he and a friend of his got a pickup truck and started to do garbage pickup around the neighborhood. And about ten, fifteen years later, he and my dad owned Follmer Trucking Company, which is one of the biggest trucking companies in—on the east coast, up and down the east coast. And that's how I learned to drive tractor-trailers. And I wasn't even sixteen. But—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Well, what was that like—Go ahead.

BJ: When—When they retired, neither one of them ever stopped working, except they never got money. My mom and dad got more pleasure out of volunteering and taking care—my mom used to—my mom did [American] Red Cross and Meals on Wheels down here and she was eighty-six at the time. She would go around on Meals on Wheels to these people who were disabled, but they were in their sixties or seventies, and my mom would say to me—because I'd drive her, she didn't drive—and she'd say, "I feel so wonderful taking care of these older people." [chuckles] I'd just laugh at her. My mom and dad were givers all their life; they

just loved to give, never to get. I think that's one of the most beautiful things they gave to us, was to have more enjoyment in giving than in getting. And it's true. It's very true.

TS: Yeah. What kind of things did you do as a kid, like, for play?

BJ: Well, we made our own play stuff. [chuckles] My favorite thing was taking my daddy's pocket watches apart and putting them back together. And taking the washer—the wringer washer and dryer apart and trying to put it back together, stuff like that. My brother Joe and I were the best of friends growing up, got in the most trouble that you could ever think of. Mary and Frannie were sort of ladies and they did the knitting and sewing. And Joey and I played the stickball. It has to be in the archives because you can see me—they won't be able to see me, but that's okay. I'm a very skinny, flat-chested individual, and my favorite pastime was in the back alley with the boys playing stickball. And I was fifteen years old at the time. It's not like I was a young little nothing.

Anyhow, the boys all took their shirts off, so I did too, because it was hot playing stickball in the sun and running around. And my mom would come out and she'd holler, "Robertajo, get in the house now!" And she'd give me a lecture about why do I have my shirt off. And I'd say, "Because it's hot and all the boys have theirs off."

She says, "You are not a boy. You are a young lady. Put your shirt back on." And this would go on and—days and days, forever and ever, until I don't know. I still take my shirt off once in a while, don't make a darn bit of difference[?]. [both chuckle]

My daddy always said that as I was growing up and he would watch me walk down the street he never knew whether I was coming or going. So one night when I was sleeping, and I was back from Korea at that time, he wrote "Front" on my chest and "Back" on my back. So that people could tell whether I was coming or going.

TS: [chuckles]

BJ: Anyhow, we made our own toys. I loved woodwork. I built a lot of our kid's toys. I could make—Nowadays you can buy them at the store and it doesn't mean that much to me, but I would be able to make fire trucks, and little—you'd have to say "fire truck" on it. We played in the woods. We played jokes on neighbors. We played—My mom was the most beautiful but naïve person we ever met, and so obviously the four of us picked on her an awful lot—

TS: What kinds of things—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

BJ: —out of real love. Out of love.

TS: What kind of jokes did you play?

BJ: Well, my mom—I [chuckles] wouldn't even be able to start to tell you some of them, it would take us all afternoon, especially the one that's priceless.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Just one, BJ. One story.

BJ: One story?

TS: One story.

BJ: Okay. My mom and dad are very, very Catholic. Very, very German, religious, okay? Us kids were born Catholic and we sort of knew what it was about, but didn't understand that. Okay. They were always friends of Father [Francis] Walters, who was the parish priest from the time we moved to Allentown he was still the priest at ninety-six years of age. Anyhow, my dad worked in the church, he took care of everything that he could for Father Walters. And of the nuns everywhere; taught all the nuns how to drive, which was very spooky; I went on a couple of them.

Anyhow, the most—most terrible thing that we did to my mom was, Father Walters always came over for holidays, and sometimes just during the week if he had a hard time. He would come over and he'd knock on the door and he'd walk in and he'd say, "Mary, Joe, are you there?"

And Mom would say, "I'm in the kitchen," or whatever. And Father Walters would come in and they'd sit there with their coffee cups filled with a little bit of beer, or a little bit of wine, or whatever. We knew it. They didn't have to use coffee cups.

Anyhow, it was Christmastime. We always, always, had a Christmas tree on the left hand side of the house that we'd gone and cut—the left side of the living room—that we'd cut down. We had a fake fireplace on the right side. Always had the nativity scene with Jesus on the little black sled, and just beautiful little greenery all around it. And Daddy would bring in his big old spotlight from the trucks and he would put the spotlight right on Baby Jesus.

Anyhow, to make it short, Father Walters—Oh, my mom had a problem with her bladder. She couldn't help it, so what we got for her birthday that year was a little potty that she could carry around with her all the time. And we had done something [funny—BJ added later]—And my mom had to go to the bathroom real bad, and we had two bathrooms, because there was six of us, and when Mom had to go she had to go. And she started to run upstairs and Frannie said, "Beat ya! I'm in the bathroom."

And then Joe went downstairs and said, "I beat ya! I'm in the bathroom." Mom didn't know what to do so Bobby says, "Go ahead and use the—use your potty." And she was on the landing. Well, what she didn't know was that Mary Beth was in the other end of the room taking Polaroid pictures.

TS: Oh no.

BJ: The first time we had Polaroid pictures. Anyhow, that was the end of it. We all laughed and thought that was the funniest thing in the whole world. Anyhow, Christmas Eve came, and Mom knew that Father Walters was coming over for wine. So did the kids. And in front of the manger with Baby Jesus laying there, we had put Mommy's Polaroid picture sitting on the landing, with the spotlight on it. And Father Walters knocked on the door and he said, "Mary, are you home?"

And she said, "Father, I'm in the kitchen. I'll be with you in a minute."

And he hollered, "Oh my God, Mary," he said, "this manger, it's really pretty. It's a little different from what I usually see."

And Mom said, "Well, the kids had a lot to do with it." Now, Mom has no idea what Father Walters is talking about because she didn't know we'd put the picture there.

And Father Walters said, "This is a pretty good picture of you from the shoulders up," he said, "but the bottom I'm not sure about."

And my mom's in the kitchen, she says, "Father, I'll be in in a minute. All I've got to do is dry my hands. I have no idea what you're talking about."

And when she came in, Father Walters was—he was eighty-two at the time—he was laughing his butt off and he says, "Mary, that is gorgeous with you and Baby Jesus and you're doing something that things only happen in nature." And that was the end of us kids for Christmas with my mother.

TS: Oh no. [chuckles]

BJ: Yes.

TS: I bet.

BJ: Yes. But he still had his wine, and after we got done hiding for two hours she forgave us, and stuff like that. Okay?

TS: [chuckles] Alright.

BJ: We did a number on my mom. But she loved us. And I danced with my mom. My mom and dad loved to waltz. They loved to dance. They went every Saturday night to the mountains where the oldies, Benny Goodman and them, used to come and play. And all of us kids had chores, and I loved to dance, and I knew my mom loved to dance, and what I would do was turn on waltzes real loud when it came time for me to do the dishes. And I'd say to my mom, "Would you please dance with me?"

And my mom and I are waltzing all around and she'd say to the other ones, forgetting whose turn it was, "Better get them dishes done."

TS: [chuckles]

BJ: I never did dishes. I danced with my mom.

TS: Well, tell me a little bit about school. How was school for you?

BJ: All school? Or nursing school?

TS: Well, before we get there, like elementary and going through high school, things like that.

BJ: It was great. I carried straight A's. They had a thing called detention, which you would—if you were bad in school you had to do little division tables and multiplying tables, and then you had to erase the boards and clean off the erasers before you could go home. I usually got home at night by suppertime, if that means anything.

TS: [chuckles] So you got in detention. What kind of stuff are you getting in trouble about?

BJ: Putting garter snakes in Sister Rose Theresa's pencil drawer that she was so proud of, and when she never—she never looked. She just put her hand in and she pulled out the first garter snake and that was detention for three weeks. I thought it was a little unfair. For fighting with the boys and making them cry, which I thought was sort of stupid; I wasn't crying, they were, and they were supposed to be boys. For breaking from class and going in a farmer's field. For hitting Sister Edward Elizabeth with a fast pitch on her head and knocking her out during recess.

TS: Was that on purpose?

BJ: Well, it slipped out of my hands because the night before she'd really hurt my knuckles at piano practice with her knitting needle. And I kept telling her, "My little finger don't go all the way down there," and she'd keep hitting it, because in those days nuns hit your knuckles with knitting needles to get your attention. They were not disciplinary.

TS: So you were getting her attention with the—

BJ: I just wanted to make sure she really knew how to play baseball, and she didn't because she was knocked out.

TS: [chuckles]

BJ: Broke the windows in the eighth grade throwing ice balls instead of snowballs. Stuff like that. Just little stuff.

TS: [chuckles] Yeah. But you got straight A's. Did you—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

BJ: Yes ma'am.

TS: Did you enjoy learning? Did you like—

BJ: No.

TS: Not really?

BJ: No. I never did homework.

TS: No?

BJ: I just listened.

TS: Yeah.

BJ: And homework to me was stupid because it was just what I'd heard that day. And whenever—before we had supper and could go to bed we had to do our homework, so I would design.

TS: What kinds of things would you design?

BJ: I would build buildings and build watches and cars and stuff like that. I'd just sort of doodle around.

TS: Right.

BJ: And—

TS: Well, did you have—

BJ: My mom would get very angry at me, and she said, "If you don't get anywhere in this life it is not my fault, it's yours," because they believed in choices.

TS: Right.

BJ: You have two choices in life and that's do the right thing and be proud of it, or do the wrong thing and be a big enough person to take whatever consequences you had, and follow through with them. And they also were [hard and learning experiences—BJ added later]—They were not pushy parents. My mom and dad weren't pushy. My mom and dad, when we were in high school—because all four of us were in high school about the same time—they sat us—we always had family talks, and they sat us down one night and my mom and dad both said that no matter what we chose in life, even if all of us chose to be garbage collectors, it was fine with them as long as we were happy doing it and we did it the best that we could. And that would make them very, very proud.

TS: Well, what kind of choices did you think that you had as a young girl growing up in the—let's see—in the fifties and sixties, really? What did you think you could do after you were done with high school?

BJ: Well, I wanted to be a brain surgeon, because I loved—I loved drawing. I could draw a brain when I was six years old, with a cerebell[um]—I mean, the whole thing, with the little knuckles and everything. I loved—The brain fascinated me. And taking things apart and putting them back together just fascinated me. When I took my SATs [Scholastic Aptitude Test], I maxed my SATs as a mechanic, which did not really impress Mom and Dad too much. [chuckles]

TS: No.

BJ: I sort of—I sort of looked around at a little bit of everything, and I'm vertically disabled, which means I'm the runt of the family, very short, and the jobs that I wanted, which was to be a mechanic and work on my dad's trucks and stuff, they'd laugh at me instead of letting me try something. And I can really change a tire on a tractor-trailer. I can drive a tractor-trailer. I knew how to separate a tractor-trailer. But back then you had to be a girl. That was not a place for a girl. And so, the only thing left where you could take things apart and put them back together was being a doctor. And my dad said, "I've seen the watches. I've seen everything that you have taken back and put back together, and none of them ever worked again. Do you really want to be a doctor?"

I said, "No. I'll be a nurse and tell the doctors what to do."

TS: [chuckles]

BJ: And so, I went to nursing school. It was a three-year program down at St. Agnes [Hospital School of Nursing] in Philadelphia, which was a gorgeous place. It was run by the nuns. It was a little hospital in South Philadelphia.

TS: When did you start that, BJ?

BJ: I started that in 1960, right after I graduated. And it was not a hospital like anybody knows today, because back in those days Philadelphia was not big as a

city. And it was in the Italian section, and it was an es—like an estate castle that this very, very rich man in Philadelphia donated to the nuns to have a place to teach the nurses and have the patients stay there. The floors were made out of marble. The stairwells, when you go upstairs, were all—the stairs were all marble. There were marble pillars every—I mean, it was phenomenal.

TS: Was it all in one building or was there several?

BJ: It was all in one building, was the hospital, and then the—I don't know how anybody's going to take this, but the man was very rich, he was an Italian, and he had workers. They weren't slaves, but they were workers. And so—

TS: Like servant quarters?

BJ: Servant quarters, okay. Thank you very much. That's a really nice way of putting it. In the servant's quarters is where we had the nursing school.

TS: Okay.

BJ: And I tell you, if you want to learn how to be cheap, get taught by the nuns.

TS: [chuckles] Why is that?

BJ: If they told you you had to bandage something and you'd cut off a half an inch of tape when you really only needed a quarter of an inch, that was worth a detention after school. We called it "campusing" at the time.

TS: You had to be very frugal?

BJ: Very frugal, but very precise.

TS: Okay.

BJ: They—The most wonderful things about the school that I went to, that I really feel that the nurses nowadays don't have, the learning, and therefore can't say—to say to a patient sometimes, "I know how you feel." And that is—We had a class called Nursing Fundamentals, and that's exactly what it was; fundamentals. We learned how to put in a Foley catheter; how to put in an IV [intravenous; within vein], how to do an EKG [electrocardiogram], how to put a tube down your throat, how to shave somebody for prepping, on each other, so that every procedure that we would potentially have to do to a patient, one of our classmates did to us. And believe me, you didn't want the one that you called "pinhead" two weeks ago, or something like that, to be the one doing it on you.

TS: [chuckles] Right.

BJ: And the nuns used to tell us, "Unless you really feel what you're going to tell that patient how they're going to feel, you are not being truthful." And I will nev—I've remembered that all my life. And it was very easy to say to somebody who was very apprehensive about having an NG [nasogastric] tube put down, which is very uncomfortable—That means you're getting a tube down your nose, down into your stomach, okay? And they did a lot of that in the old days.

Anyhow, it was a very good feeling to say to this person before you even started, "This is what I'm going to do. I know how it feels because I have had it done to me, and I will tell you a secret. As soon as I say 'Now' you take a deep breath, you swallow, and you'll never know what happened." And that's what I learned from the nuns teaching us the goodies about these different tests, and how you—

TS: Right. Really hands-on kind of training.

BJ: Yes, totally. Everything was hands on, because we didn't have EKG techs, and IV techs, and all this. We did our own stuff.

TS: Right. So tell me—

BJ: And we were notified that we were mechanics of nurses, once they decided to get the degree nurses in, who saw movies of the things we used to do. We were mechanics, the diploma nurses. Anyhow, go ahead, I'm sorry.

TS: No, it's okay, BJ. Do you want to tell me the story of how you ended up getting recruited?

BJ: Well, that's very interesting. I really enjoyed being a nurse. I have to—I'll tell you how I got recruited and then I'll tell you what happened to me. Anyhow, I became—There was five of us from Allentown that went to Philadelphia, and my dad would drive us down every Sunday night and take us all home every Friday night so we could spend the weekends at home. It was only fifty miles, even though it was an eternity back then because you couldn't go faster with what you had.

TS: So you're all from the same area?

BJ: Yeah, we were all from the same area, and their parents would go to my house and pick them up and take them home. Anyhow, after about ten weeks in school—if you remember I mentioned "campusing," which was when you did something wrong, and so therefore you had to stay? Well, ten weeks into nursing school—because my dad always came up to say hi—he'd say, "Are you ever going to get a weekend off, or are you working that hard?"

And I said, "Pop, they really need somebody to cover the weekends here because they don't have a whole bunch of nurses and they've got a whole lot of

patients." And of course the girls told him on the way home what I did wrong and why I was staying there. It was because I was being punished.

TS: [chuckles] Right.

BJ: And punishment it was. That was not a lie about taking care of the patients, because "campusing" meant you didn't get your days off, so therefore you spent your weekends working on the wards in the hospital. Anyhow, one Saturday four or five of us got "campused" from Allentown, and my dad was called and—said, "Don't even bother coming down because nobody's going home." And we sort of went to the little Italian restaurant that we knew, and they treated us like their kids, and it wasn't such a big deal in those times. We had some pizza and lots and lots and lots of beer. And as we were walking up Broad Street to Mifflin [Street], we saw this handsome, beautiful, adorable, in a uniform, phenomenally-looking army man. I mean, he was gorgeous. We were drunk. He was gorgeous.

Anyhow, we decided to talk to him, Brenda figuring she could get a date, the other ones were figuring, well, maybe they can date him afterwards or whatever. Anyhow, we started talking to him, and he started telling us all about the Army Nurse Corps and how phenomenal, and how great it was, and the experiences. And us five drunks were just shaking our heads going, "Yes, Yes, Yes." And before we left him we signed our pieces of paper that said, "Yes, at the end of school we did want to go in the Army Nurse Corps for two years," because the army would pay for our schooling. We would be juniors and seniors and yet the army would pay for that and we would be E1 [private]s.

When we sobered up and saw what happened, we went down to him and told him we wanted to take it back. And he said, "Ladies, as far as I know, I thought you all were in for it." So we decided it was kicky[?] and yeah, we were in for it, so what did we do next? And he said, "Well, you're all under age, so therefore I won't tell your parents you were drunk if you figure out how to tell your parents that they've got to sign that you all can go in the army."

That was a trip because we were so drunk and we had no idea what the Army Nurse Corps was. We didn't even know it existed. All we knew was that this good-looking man existed. Anyhow, Mom and Dad signed for it.

TS: After he had talked to you and you had sobered up, did you start thinking about it and—

BJ: No.

TS: You're just like, "Oh."

BJ: No. We just knew that the army might call us. We figured maybe. Well, the army called us all right. As soon as we graduated, we had to do our state boards, and I missed a year because state boards are—were extremely hard in those days, and I was heartsick because I had maxed my entire state board except I—pediatrics was

my favorite. I loved kid; loved kids. And I missed my pediatrics score by one point. And it would be another year before I could —

TS: Take them again?

BJ: Take my state boards again. So I still got my E1 pay, and I was still an enlisted person, but I couldn't be considered commissioned in the Army Nurse Corps yet. Anyhow, so I worked for a year, and my mom and dad were so proud of me, because at the end of nine months I got fired for improper behavior, disrespect, and just sort of out of line.

TS: Where were you working?

BJ: I was working at Allentown hospital at the time. I was working on the ward that nobody wanted. I was working evenings and nights and I met this really nice nurse who was also okay for evenings and nights. Our patients were up on the eighth floor—seventh floor—because they were from the nursing homes, okay? They were not paid—paying patients, and they were very sick. A lot of them were diabetics, a lot of them were not really with us. And me and my friend felt so bad about the way these ladies—the ladies were on the one side and the men were on another ward, okay? And we were really depressed at seeing how the other shifts treated these people like they weren't anything. And so, we started calling them—rather than their last name, it was Lady So—and Lady Diane. I'll never forget Sarah[?] Brown. Sarah Brown was—she was a little black lady, she was ninety-two years old, and I just loved her to death. But anyhow, that's Sarah. But they did a lot of things against Sarah.

Anyhow, we started football games at bedtime. And football games at bedtime meant that they had to either be in a wheelchair, or if they could stand, stand at the bottom of their bed and their nightgowns would be the football, and they had to catch it in order to say that they were ready for bed. They loved the football games. And then we would—back then they had the old canvas carts with the wheels on them, for the old dirty laundry. We would take the dirty laundry out of them, put the old ladies into them and run them all over the hospital, up and down. Oh my God, they were so happy. They were so happy.

Anyhow, we had a little young doctor there named Doctor Rader[?], and Sarah Brown and I had had this relationship. She was more evil than I was. And we had this—there was this little doctor, I'll never forget him, Dr. Rader. He was a baby-faced, brand new doctor. And I said to Sarah, I said, "This guy's going to come in here," I said—and Sarah was a very dark black, skinny, teeth hanging out, gorgeous woman. I loved how her eyes sparkled. Anyhow, I said, "He's going to come in and examine you."

And she said, "When BJ?"

I said, "Probably around visiting hours."

She said, "Am I going to be okay?"

I said, "Depends on how okay you want to be."

She said, "You going to be here?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "I'll be okay," and she just winked her eye.

Dr. Rader comes in. Visiting hours was no big deal on that ward because we very rarely had maybe one or two visitors. But anyhow, it just so happened that this one lady's children, who really didn't care about her, came in to visit her, and she was at the end of the hall. Dr. Rader went behind—through the curtain, went behind the curtain and he said—you could hear him, there's no partition or anything, just curtains. It was a long, open ward. And he said, "Mrs. Brown, I have got to do a little physical on you, and I'm not going to hurt you or anything."

And we heard, "Oh Doctor, that's okay." And the next thing you hear is, "Oh, oh, ooh, that feels so good! Over here, over here. No down there, now. Oh, oh my good—oh, you're—oh, you're so good! Oh, BJ. You ought to meet this doctor. Oh he—touch me right there. Right there, right there, right there."

And out from this curtain comes this baby-faced, tomato beet red—I walked up to him and I said, "What did you do to Mrs. Brown?"

And he said, "Honest to God, all I did was put my stethoscope on her back. I'll be back later for rounds," [laughs] and he ran—I mean, sort of stuff like that.

TS: [chuckles]

BJ: And on Saturday nights when Ellie[?] and I were both on—because Ellie would be on the men's ward and I would be on the women's ward—we had parties. The supervisors never came up to us because we weren't anything. And so, we would bring the men over, introduce them to the ladies, and we had ward parties for our entire shift. And then—

TS: I'm going to have to get you into the Army Nurse Corps. [chuckles]

BJ: I'll be in the Army Nurse Corps in one minute. I've just got to tell you that we conned one of the doctors—because everybody before us were giving these old folks sleeping pills.

TS: Right.

BJ: They didn't need sleeping pills. So we got orders for every one of them, even the diabetics ,because we took off the tray what we had to, in order for them to—every night we had "shot night," and every one of our patients, male and female, had a shot of bourbon, and went sound asleep until the morning. I won't say anything more.

TS: Did that have anything to do with maybe you not being able to stay there?

BJ: My mom and dad got a copy of the letter as to why—I told you I was fired because I was not professional, number one. I was disorderly, disruptive, I had no feelings for the patients and their care because I did not follow the hospital rules,

blah blah blah blah blah. And they put it all in the letter. My mom framed it. I still have it. She carried it with her forever for God's sake. She kept—She said, "That was the best firing letter I've ever read in my whole life. I'm so proud of you." That was my mom and dad.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So you took your boards—

BJ: And the most horrible thing was—the reason why I was fired was because Sarah Brown had never seen a white baby born, and I knew some of the kids in the nursery and I took her down to the delivery room so that little Sarah Brown, before she died, could see a white baby being born. And she just thought that was phenomenal. And I put her back in the linen thing, put the sheet back on, and got caught in the elevator with her in the sheet and the basket going back up to the ward, and where were we, and stuff like that.

TS: You didn't hide her good enough.

BJ: No. That was my—that was the hot spot of my firing. But Sarah Brown never forgot till the day she died that she saw a baby—white baby being born.

TS: Yeah.

BJ: And what more could you ask for in life?

TS: Right. No, there you go.

BJ: Okay, I'm done. Where do we go next?

TS: You took your boards, and you passed.

BJ: Yes ma'am, I passed. I surmounted all of them.

TS: And you owed the army how many years?

BJ: Two years.

TS: Two years.

BJ: Yes.

TS: Let's talk a little bit about that. Now, you're—you went to Fort Sam Houston [Texas]?

BJ: I went to Fort Sam Houston—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: What was that like?

BJ: —for basic training. It was the most wonderful, exciting time in my life because back then they really did basic training. We had to walk for twelve miles every morning. We truly were—Yeah, we had some classes but we spent most of the time out in the field. We had triage-type stuff where people would teach us—they made fake patients and we had to triage them and get them ready. We learned how to operate with the DUSTOFF [military call sign for emergency patient evacuation of casualties; also a backronym for Dedicated Unhesitating Service to Our Fighting Forces]—at that time they called them DUSTOFF — the helicopters and the patients and stuff. We learned how to fly with a patient. We learned the military way, which—I mean, they had a whole bunch of rules and regulations, which I thought it was very great, I love discipline, but I also feel that for every rule there's a way a rule can be broken. But we learned. We learned. And—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Well, I've been around you—

BJ: —we did a lot of marching.

TS: A lot of marching.

BJ: A lot of marching on the quad. We marched everywhere on the quadrangle.

TS: Was there anything that was particularly difficult for you to do in the training at the beginning?

BJ: Be good.

TS: To be good. [chuckles] To follow the rules?

BJ: Yes ma'am. Yes.

TS: That was the hardest thing?

BJ: That was about the hardest thing.

TS: Was there anything that you really enjoyed?

BJ: Everything. Everything. Everything. Especially when we were out in the field, because we never—when we were out in the field for weeks, I mean, we were in the field; we were in tents, we were—just like camping.

TS: That's what you liked to do.

BJ: I love the out-of-doors, and we had to build—find stuff to build our own fires. We had—We would—When the sun went down they gave us our compass, our flashlight, drove us someplace blindfolded [sound of alarm clock ringing] and said, "Find your way home." Let me—just a minute.

TS: [unclear] wake you up. Okay. So you liked everything.

BJ: I loved everything.

TS: And now, when you were going through did you get to fill out, like, a dream sheet that said, "Here's the places I'd like to go," or anything like that?

BJ: Not back then, man.

TS: No?

BJ: No. You do now, but back then it was, "You are going here, you are going here, you are going here."

TS: Where did you end up going the first time?

BJ: My first time I went to—

TS: I've got your list here.

BJ: —Fitzsimons [Army Hospital] in Denver, Colorado. Worked in the emergency room, found out that was the love of my life, but I wanted to find—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: The emergency room?

BJ: —other things also, but the emergency room was—that was it, man. All that trauma and stuff, and patching them up, and seeing them smile and laugh and be all cleaned up instead of—whatever.

TS: So it was, like, exciting?

BJ: It was exciting. And it kept your mind going, because every patient that came in was different. One was medical, one was surgical, one was having a baby, one was this, so you had to really think in your head all the time, what you learned in school and bring it in, bring it in, bring it in.

TS: Do you feel like your schooling prepared you for what you were doing in the army?

BJ: Oh my God, yes.

TS: Did it?

BJ: Yes. Those nuns prepared you for everything.

TS: Did they?

BJ: And my dream before I got out of the army, which I hoped would never come, would be the taking care of soldiers. I mean, soldiers at war, because that's why I wanted to be an army nurse. I wanted to take care of soldiers. And a lot of what we had at the time was just automobile accidents, and gunshot wounds, and dependents having babies. And I would never go in labor and delivery, I'll tell you that. Blechhh [makes vomiting sound]

TS: You didn't want to do that.

BJ: Oh my God, no. OB [obstetrics]? Man, I'd pass that on to the next nurse who came in before you ever thought about it.

TS: [chuckles] Gunshot wounds, yes. Babies, no.

BJ: That's right. You've got it, man.

TS: Well now, did you volunteer for your next assignment in Korea?

BJ: Yes, I did, because at that time Korea was the most remote, in my mind, because everybody was going to Germany, and Italy, and that's another big city, man. I ain't no city girl. Anyhow, so Korea came up, and I said, "That's where I want to go," so I went to Incheon, Korea at the 121st Evac [Evacuation] Hospital. That was an experience in itself, and anybody who is listening to this in the 2000s will never understand why it was an experience, because back in the sixties there was no Seoul, Korea. Seoul, Korea—Yes there was a capital, but Seoul, Korea consisted of one American restaurant that served spaghetti, a couple of Japan—Korean restaurants, and a little building that had all these markings on it, and that

was the mayor. They still had honey wagons, and I know—a honey wagon; nobody's even going to know what I'm talking about. A honey wagon is that the Koreans used cow dung pads to heat their buildings, and believe it or not, it does not stink. Anyhow, they'd pick up the circular pads, they'd stick them in their wagons when they're dry—which has a long—it's a square little box, big high wheels taller than me, and little handles in the front—and they'd stand in the middle of the handles and they'd just truck down the road picking up cow pads

Anyhow, it was an exciting experience that—it was people living off the land. We watched rice paddies grow. We were able to do anything. We were able to get off the compound, until the Gary Powers incident—the spy plane.

[Francis Gary Powers was a U-2 reconnaissance pilot for the CIA. His plane was shot down over Soviet airspace on 1 May 1960. Powers ejected, was captured by the Soviet military, and held prisoner for two years]

Then we were confined, even though I was supposed to go home the next day, we were confined for four more months. But anyhow, I loved the way of life. I loved their way of faith, even though it was Buddha. But it was a connection with the afterworld. They had no concept whatsoever of this life because it did not really exist. The afterlife is what they lived for.

My saddest situation was their treatment of the boys. We had a boy-san ["san" is a polite honorific attached to a person's name or title, coined by U.S. soldiers in Japan after World War II] who—a truck had run over his leg. It was smushed [smashed] so bad that we had to cut it off. The father would not take him home. We found a way of making—back then the only prosthesis we had in Korea was the type where—the pirate guy, you put something around the stump and you put a peg on it so he can walk and work and do whatever he wanted to. He was so proud of it. He was about thirteen years old, he was so proud of it. We had worked with him for, oh, I guess about three or four months and we got word that—from one of our mama-sans, because mama-sans took care of our washing and our uniforms and stuff like that. And they used to call me "skoshi" because "skosh" means little, and they'd never seen anybody so small, or a girl who cut her hair so short, because I couldn't stand putting them up in rollers and all that crap. I just wanted to wash it, dry it.

Anyhow, we got word through the mama-sans that they would like us to go to the funeral of a little thirteen-year-old boy. And I asked what his name was and they said it was Toshan[?]. And I said, "What happened to Toshan?" He went out in the rice paddies. Daddy had kept the stump away from him and said "Work." And he couldn't work in the rice paddy with one leg so Daddy killed him. So that is another culture.

The learning from the military and the experiences are phenomenal. How they believe in one thing so hard, and yet, to me—which to them is not cruel because you have to have a boy child. Boy child has to work, right? Or he's no good. And to believe one way so strong in the afterlife, and the other way so

strong in this life, about where you stand, and where you are, and where your worth is. Obviously women were always worthy, but they were forty-seven thousand floors down below the men because they were worthy for cleaning, cooking, making babies. The men were the breadwinners.

TS: Let me have you back up just a little bit. You talked about Gary Powers, and the timeframe on that for me—Gary Powers—what incident are you talking about? What happened, actually, to keep you—

BJ: He flew—They thought he was a spy plane—It did not affect Korea, it affected the world, because who did he fly over? China, Russia?

TS: Well, because Gary Powers, actually, I thought, was in '60, 1960.

BJ: No, no, no.

TS: So this was something later.

BJ: No, this was a later incident where—

TS: Somebody flew over.

BJ: It was somebody that flew over. All the forts and bases in the United States at that time, and it had to be—

TS: Well, who was president at that time?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

BJ: Sixty-three, '64.

TS: Okay. So that was—

BJ: I don't know. I don't even know who's president now. Who was president then?

TS: Well, you might have remembered [President John Fitzgerald] Kennedy.

BJ: Well, I know Kennedy; I know Kennedy's time. Kennedy was when I was in nursing school.

TS: Yes. Do you remember when he was assassinated? Where were you at?

BJ: Probably Kennedy was the one that was president at the time.

TS: Yeah.

BJ: John F. Yeah.

TS: But do you remember when he was assassinated?

BJ: Yes, I do. I was driving my '53 Ford home from work. I had a flat tire. I had my music blasting on the radio as I changed my flat tire, and they broke in to say that John F. Kennedy had been shot. At that time they didn't say he was dead. And I sat beside the road and cried my eyes out before I could go back to changing my tire, because I admired that man. He was the best president we ever had. And many people will probably disagree with me, but I think [William "Bill" Jefferson] Clinton was second, and other than that I don't think we've had a good president since Eisenhower and the rest of them way behind, because they were people-oriented, not—

TS: Right.

BJ: I think that if Kennedy—I think Kennedy was destined to die because I feel strongly that Kennedy was before his time. We weren't ready for a Catholic president. We were still into Catholic, Protestant, Baptist, Jewish, this type of thing. Same thing we're going back to, which is the worst thing we could be into. Anyhow.

TS: Well, you described some things that happened while you were in Korea. What were your living conditions like?

BJ: In Korea we lived in tents.

TS: You did?

BJ: Yes ma'am. And that's how I learned that cow dung don't stink because the summers were very, very hot. Now, the Koreans had not figured out how to air condition us. Obviously, the army didn't care. So you were sweating all the time. But in wintertime, and during monsoon season, you could freeze to death in those tents. And we had a mama—a papa-san that would come in, and we had four silver—they were like a silver base, and then like a funnel of tin that would come up and go across to the middle section of our tent—there was, I think, forty of us that were—thirty or forty of us that stayed in the tent. We had cots on both sides, okay? And this thing went down the middle. There was another pot in the middle and another pot at the other end.

They would come in and put these cow dung pods in there, and of course the first thing us American females did was run out the other end of the tent because when he lit that, we don't want to be there when he lights a cow dung. We stayed outside. He was laughing and laughing and laughing, and he kept coming out and saying, "No smell, no smell, no smell." And it was so damn cold we went

back in. He was right. There was no smell from that cow dung. Those three things kept that huge GP [general purpose] tent warm all night and all day. One cow dung patty, which is probably about two inches thick and about six and a half inches wide, will last almost twenty-four hours. It does not give off flame; it only gives off heat. They put a little bit of straw on the top for a flame to start it, and then it's just heat. There's no flame; it's just heat.

TS: Kind of like a charcoal?

BJ: Yeah, I guess so.

TS: Something like that.

BJ: Anyhow, it was so cold in Korea that in the wintertime you wore every bit of clothing you had, to include your field jackets and everything, at nighttime in bed with your army blanket covering you.

TS: Did you enjoy your time in Korea?

BJ: I loved Korea. I loved every place. I loved Korea because—I never got—I'm not good with languages so I learned to say "yeoboseyo" which means hi or goodbye, and I learned to say 'kamsahamnida,' which means thank you very much, and "skosh," which means very small. That's it. That's the end of my—

TS: [chuckles] Did you eat any of the Korean food? Did you enjoy—

BJ: I ate bulgogi and I loved it, which was rice—cooked rice with an egg on top with steak on top—until somebody opened their mouth and told me that that was not steak, it was dog. That was the end of bulgogi. I never got kimchi [fermented vegetables] past my nose, whether it be summer kimchi or winter kimchi. And if you went to—We didn't have bathrooms over there, you had slit trenches, and if you followed anybody into a slit trench that had just got done eating this stuff—or had a patient who had it for lunch—because they ate their own food as patients, and oh my God—

TS: It's not pleasant?

BJ: It's not pleasant. Matter of fact, the first time I emptied a bedpan on a beautiful—I loved those people. I loved everybody I met. There's always something neat about somebody that you remember, and I can't believe that I remember some of their names forty-some years ago—no, that was fifty, sixty years. Anyhow, she—I was a nail biter, all the way down to my knuckles. I bit my nails like you wouldn't believe. My mom tried everything. She put pepper on my fing—ever since I was a kid, I bit them all the way down to my knuckles. I emptied a bedpan one time after Kim Ho was done. When I took it to the slit trench I got something on my fingers as I swung it down, and my first, first thing was to put that finger in my

mouth to bite my nail and I've never bitten my nails since, because every time I think of biting my nails I think of Kim Ho.

TS: [chuckles] Well, it kind of took that habit away from you.

BJ: Yes, it did. It was a very good habit to take away.

TS: Well, after Korea, from what we talked about earlier, you went back to Fitzsimons. So that was like around '67.

BJ: That was—yeah.

TS: Sixty-seven. I didn't stay long at Fitzsimons. I worked on the amputee ward, and I loved it. Most of it though, again, was civilians at that time. We were starting to get some people in from Vietnam, but those people really weren't from Vietnam because we didn't have any military in there at that time; those secrets everybody keeps.

Anyhow, it amazed me to watch what the doctors, the ortho—it was considered, Fitzsimons at that time was considered an orthopedic GU[?] facility, and the way that they retrained the amputees—especially the legs, but they also did the arms—the legs, was to take them up on ski slopes and let them learn the extensor/flexor type thing. And taking them up on ski slopes was so safe because what are you going to do? Fall on a pound—powdered snow? You're not going to hurt yourself like you would a parking lot or gymnasium. And those guys, just to get the feel—you could tell every time a first-timer walked into the hospital after a day on the slopes. He was no longer an amputee, he was a ski individual. And I had a doctor that I really loved at that time, and I wanted to try out the operating room but I really didn't know much about the operating room except that—I have to go back to my school days. Can I do that real quick?

TS: Yeah, of course.

BJ: I could never in nursing school understand anatomy and physiol—anatomy, okay? I could never put stomach, gall bladder, spleen, intestines, bowels, and all this stuff into into—picture it in my body. I could not do that. It made no sense to me. And one of the nuns said to me, "If you want to learn anatomy, you either give up your lunch or you take your lunch with you, and I'll take you for the first time." And you know where I went? I went to the morgue. I watched autopsy after [sound of clock chiming]—There it goes. It's okay. It's my house; it's my clock. It can ring.

TS: It's okay. We can keep talking.

BJ: It was phenomenal how God put all that stuff just where it was supposed to be. And I learned every part of where everything was. I didn't throw up, not even the first day. I didn't eat my sandwich the first day, but I didn't throw up. But after

that I got to know the pathologist and I got to feel the organs and stuff like this. It just amazed me more than taking a watch apart and putting it back together again. Anyhow, that's how I learned anatomy. Had I not had Sister Philomena take me down and have me go to the morgue for my lunch to watch autopsies and to learn—and it took me quite a few lunches before I could still really get that into my body and know where it's at—I probably would have flunked out of school and I probably would have never been a nurse, because anything that doesn't make sense to me, until I can make sense of it, either drives me nuts or I have to get it away, and I would never have been a nurse.

TS: So you're pretty hands on [unclear].

BJ: I'm very hands on. Everything I do is hand—I'm not a—I'm not—My friend Pat who lives up the road is a nurse. That lady knows the heart as if she was God and made the heart. And every part of everything. She loves it. She understands it. Me? No. But she reads and reads and reads. I don't. I didn't read in school. I learned—Even today, everything I learn is by imagining in my brain, putting it on a paper at least thirty, forty, fifty times. It will take me two months to do one project because I change my mind too many times because the first one don't look right. Same—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So you just, kind of, have to organize it.

BJ: Same thing with learning. I learn by touch, by feel. I learn to put—If you gave me a bicycle and said, "Here's your instructions, written down. Put it together." I could not do it. If you said, "This is a bicycle. This one's together—or this is a picture of it together," I'd have it put together in five minutes.

TS: Right.

BJ: I have to visualize it.

TS: So then you're at Fitzsimons, but you said you didn't stay there long.

BJ: No.

TS: Why's that?

BJ: I volunteered to go to Vietnam.

TS: Why'd you want to go to Vietnam?

BJ: I wanted to take care of the soldiers. That's what I went in the Army Nurse Corps for—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh, like you said earlier.

BJ: —to take care of those soldiers. I told my mom and dad—my granddaddy at that time—my dad's dad—was the only one that knew that I volunteered to go to Vietnam and he was very proud of me. Everybody else felt so bad because I was "sent" to Vietnam. And I kept on saying, "I can handle it. No big deal."

TS: You didn't want them to know that you volunteered?

BJ: I did not want them to know at that time that I'd volunteered to go to Vietnam, only my granddaddy.

TS: How did they all feel about you being in the Army Nurse Corps?

BJ: They were proud of me. Every assignment I went to my mom and dad would pack up and come visit. Either moving in or moving out, they were always there. I have a picture that if you can take of it I'll—I never got rid of it. It's the picture of my mom and dad, and me in the middle with my little case, heading for basic training at the airport—at the Allentown airport going to San Antonio, Texas in a two-propeller job airplane. They're proud people. They're proud of all their kids. My mom and dad are sitting up there right now saying, "We love you all. We're proud of all of you."

TS: Well, tell me a little bit about Vietnam, maybe even getting over there. What was that like?

BJ: Well, getting over there was a trip and a half.

TS: Yeah, usually is. I have a lot of stories about getting there.

BJ: I don't have that many stories about getting over there as I could fill all of the today and all of tomorrow and the next day telling you verbatim about Vietnam, because it was—and I know this sounds very stupid—very cold, I guess, but it was the most rewarding, loving, learning, life-blowing experience that I've ever had in my life. And if anybody would say to me right now, "We know you're forty-two years old now" —which is what I am right—I'm forty-two—

TS: Always forty-two.

BJ: Always forty-two. That they would say, "We need somebody to go to Russia, or to go to Ukraine, and help those people," I'd be the first one on the airplane. As soon as I had somebody that I know would love and care for my dogs till I came back, if I came back. That's where it's at in the Army Nurse Corps. That's where I would be today.

TS: Taking care of soldiers.

BJ: Taking care of soldiers. Because one of the things that I learned very, very early on in the army—and a lot of my nurse—those that knew me in the nurse corps when I was in the army, knew my feelings, okay? And that was—My greatest professional respect was for the enlisted people. The officers, quote, "had the brains." That's a fallacy. The officers could direct you and tell you what to do. That's a fallacy. The nurses do all of this and they do that; that's a fallacy.

The workers in the United States Army, whether it be medical, tank, armor, or anywhere, is E-1 Joe Schmuck all the way up to E-9 John Smith—who I love to death and I have a picture of me and my rocket that did not go off, in front of our hospital in Vietnam. He was our first sergeant. I admire every enlisted person in the army. I can't—I'm not going to tell you I don't admire my nurses and the ANC [Army Nurse Corps] officers.

Back then, them ANC officers worked just as hard as their enlisted people did. We didn't have desks and computers and books. If you didn't—We didn't have the machinery that they have now. You could—You could listen to somebody say, "I took his EKG two hours ago and it really looked okay, but I have a feeling. Look at him in twenty minutes." and in twenty minutes you could look at this guy and say, "Boy, he's going down. We need a doctor now. We're doing something wrong," because you didn't rely on the machine. You had to rely on the touch, the feel, and the look of the patient, okay? And that's what us nurses did. We touched. We felt. We could tell long before a machine could that this one's going to get better, or not get better; he's hurting here, he's not hurting here.

And your corpsmen back in them times—we had 91A's, 91B's, and 91C's. The 91A is a 91 Alpha ["A" in the military phonetic alphabet], equivalent to—not even an aide in a hospital today. He would be less than that. A 91B would be equivalent to the LPN [licensed practical nurse] that you have today. The 91C—the aide that you have today. The 91 Charlie ["C" in the military phonetic alphabet] was the LPN of the Army Nurse Corps—of the army corps. Those were the guys that were out in the fields, the medics during the wars and the ambushes, and risking their lives, and going on the DUSTOFFs, and going with all the teams. And it—They were the ones that earned all our respect. I mean, we did a lot. Yes, we took care of our patients. Yeah, we had a hard job too, in that if you ever talk to an individual who has been in the field—I did. He told me. He was on my ward—or in my ER, and I did not know it when I was in Vietnam. But I met him years afterwards when I had retired. How these people remember you I don't know. But this guy did, and he wasn't the only one.

He said to me, "Yes, we go into firefights. We put our lives on the line. We see awful things as our buddies get shot up, yes." He said, "But then we go

back to base camp. We take a break, we take a shower, sit around shooting the bull. And then you go out again." He said, "We go out in spurts." He said, "You girls don't do that. You sit in the ER and on those wards, 24/7." He said, "When I came in that one day, "he said, "you were up to seventy-two hours because it was Tet [Offensive]—" And during Tet I turned twenty one and I figured Tet was—I thought the Viet Cong were having a birthday party for me, see, with all the rockets going off, which is my personal, private joke. But during Tet the DUSTOFFs never stopped. They never stopped, they never stopped. They just kept coming in and we didn't have that many people, and those in the OR [operating room] had to sleep. Us in the ER, between a little lull, could sleep in our chair. And I loved the enlisted people. Do you know what they did to me on my 70th hour? I'm an open mouth sleeper. They had a lottery going as to how many coffee stirrers—or tongue depressors they could put in my mouth before I woke up. And the guy that had twenty-eight was the closest because they had thirty.

[The Tet Offensive was launched on 30 January 1968 by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese People's Army of Vietnam against the forces of the South Vietnamese Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the United States, and their allies. The offensive lasted several months and inflicted heavy casualties on U.S. and South Vietnamese forces.]

TS: [chuckles]

BJ: I was about to choke to death but—

TS: Well, let me ask you—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

BJ: A lot of it is good and a lot of it is bad but you had to have the good; you had to have the humor in order to put up with the bad.

TS: Can you describe a little bit about when Tet started? What was that like?

BJ: Well, normally every morning we got woken up at six o'clock with three rockets.

TS: Where were you at?

BJ: I was in Chu Lai, which was right below Da Nang. It sat right on the top of the South China Sea, and my dream was to come back, buy that property, and put a casino up there and make millions of dollars. I'm sure somebody beat me to it.

TS: Probably. When did you get to Vietnam?

BJ: I got to Vietnam in '68. I can't tell you the month. I'm sure it's in my records someplace.

TS: That's really the beginning of the year then?

BJ: Yeah, because it was before Tet started.

TS: Okay, so probably the very beginning of the year.

BJ: We—

TS: So you're woke up by rockets—

BJ: We were located—

TS: Okay.

BJ: I've got to give you a little bit of—

TS: Okay.

BJ: —of location, okay? Because it pertains to Vietnam and my life and a lot of others. We were located right on the sea, okay? We were located—Right to our left was MAG-12 [Marine Air Group 12], which was a Marine jet bomber base. To our right was Marine Corps MAG-13, okay? To our front was the South China Sea. To our rear was Americal headquarters [the U.S. Army's 23rd Infantry Division, known as the Americal Division], okay?

I did not go over with an active army group. I went over with the 312th Evac Hospital, which is a reserve unit out of Winston-Salem [North Carolina], and I have never served with a better—better group in all my twenty-four years of being in the army life. They were phenomenal. It broke my heart when they had to take their colors down, because they were only allowed there the year. I deployed when they deployed. And there was only four of us that were active duty, and we were sort of there so that somebody could say the active duty are helping them. We were there. We worked.

They were a reserve outfit. They had not been deployed before; it was their first deployment. I could tell you every name of every one of them. The chief nurse, Doris Cobb [Sue Walker—BJ corrected later], was probably in her seventies at the time, okay? She was a grey-haired, skinny lady, and more than a manager she was a grandma, okay? Didn't mean shit to us. We had two sisters that were in the supervisor—assistant chief and head supervisor slot and they were our disciplinarians, okay? I mean, it was a family that went to war. It was not—And I guess that's what even sadder in a way, is that I went to war with this family, not with a just a group of people that I didn't know and had to meet later on,

someplace else. And it was a family institution. And maybe that's why we can—we can shed our tears. I've met with them since. Most of them are gone. The last one that I read about in the army retired nurses thing was our OR nurse. They were just all fantastic. They were all fantastic. Their skills were out of sight. Their people, patient-mindedness was something like you've never seen in the world. They were just phenomenal.

Anyhow, we were in our world is what we were, because as soon as you stepped off that plane—and you would hear that from many, many people that were over there—as soon as you stepped off the plane in Saigon, there was no memories, no nothing whatsoever, of the United States. It was like you obliterated an entire sphere of your life. This was your life. And the most horrible aspect of your life was your last two weeks before going home, because most of the soldiers, all they thought about was going home. Their guard was down and that was when they got hurt or killed. It's amazing. And—Because you started thinking about stateside. Now, we got letters and stuff like that. It took them months to come over and stuff, but it was—it was like we were in another world. And you totally were in a-whole-nother world.

TS: When Tet started, how was it different from a typical day? I'm sure there was no real typical day.

BJ: I mean, there—there was no typical day in Vietnam.

TS: Right.

BJ: I can't tell you how Tet started. They say, "Tet, here to here." That's bull hockey. I mean, you just wound up having more DUSTOFFs coming in faster than what you did—

TS: The day before?

BJ: —normally, the day before. And then when Tet was going down, it was just the opposite way around. But you always had a full ER.

TS: But you didn't know what it—really until, I mean, looking back. You just dealt with it, and it was only in reflection where you really think, "Well, this was—"

BJ: That was Tet.

TS: Yeah.

BJ: Yeah. We didn't have a word for it.

TS: What kind of hours did you work in Vietnam? How long were you there?

BJ: I was there for two years.

TS: Two years. What kind of schedule were you on?

BJ: [chuckles] When you were awake you either took your helmet and your flak jacket [a sleeveless jacket made of heavy fabric reinforced with metal or Kevlar, worn as protection against bullets and shrapnel]—we always—since we were at [chuckles] China Sea we had a nice little beach there, and we learned very early on that in the summertime the first thing you do is you don't wear underwear. You wear your bathing suit over your fa—underneath your fatigues, so that if you can get a break for maybe an hour or two, somebody can cover for you, you run down to the beach, you jump in the water. And too many of them forgot to take the flak jackets and helmets off, and it was deep water, so you always had to go down in twos or threes so somebody could remind somebody else, "Get that off of you." And—

TS: Was this China Beach?

BJ: Yeah, the China Sea; South China Sea.

TS: So this is like the movie they made about China Beach?

BJ: No, no, no.

TS: No, I just mean it was like—

BJ: No, that was down in Saigon.

TS: Oh, okay. That was something different.

BJ: We were way up north.

TS: You were?

BJ: We were almost—We were right near the—Da Nang and Phu Bai were our next two hospitals. Phu Bai was on the DMZ [demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam running south of the 17th Parallel] and that was a "MUST" [Medical Unit, Self-contained, Transportable] hospital.

TS: So what kind of—

BJ: We had wooden billets. We had no running water. We had outhouses. We—My—In 1970 we got water and we had a big party when the outhouse was done. The Seabees [naval construction battalion] had built the two-story billets for us. The room was about as big as this dining room. Two people, one cot, one cot. We shared a bookcase just that size for our clothing, and we had one locker for our gear. They tried to keep two people in at all times. First thing they had out in front

of our billets was these humongous—and I'll be able to show you pictures of it—humongous bunkers made out of sandbags. And whenever the siren went off, the name of the game was—we had what we called sappers. A sapper is a suicide guy with the dynamite or whatever attached to his belly. And then he would find out where everybody is and he'd land in front of them, and blow himself up, and the rest of you with him. We had a lot of sappers.

The name of the game was, you—somebody—If the sirens don't get a chance to go off, somebody would run to your door, knock on it and say, "Sapper, sapper, sapper." You ran out with your helmet and your flak jacket, you go in the bunker, you sit in the dark, and you have no concept what's going on, okay? I didn't even do it one time. I—My philosophy—I was on the second floor. I wanted to see that rocket come in, and if I saw it go by I had another day. If I didn't, God or whoever down there had me. I wanted to see it coming. That's the kind of person I am. And most of us nurses were like that.

TS: You didn't go down in the bunkers?

BJ: We didn't go in the bunkers. And the 23rd Med Group, who was medics, who used to walk the fields, were next to us, okay? As far—Compounds were like next door neighbor to this next door neighbor, okay?

TS: Not necessarily right next to each other.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

BJ: Not—Well, yeah—

TS: Kind of—

BJ: We're kind of next to each other, and we talk to each other, but—

TS: But there's some space.

BJ: You had a little bit of space between you.

TS: I understand.

BJ: They weren't in our compound.

TS: Got you.

BJ: Okay. Anyhow, 23rd Med Group, they hollered for incoming. All the nurses either went to the ward if the—we went to the ER because incoming meant you were going to have casualties, incoming meant we were getting hit, and they went

to the bunker because they were told, "You will protect yourself, and you will go to the bunker." Twenty-seven went in the bunker, and in that bunker waiting for them at two o'clock in the morning was a sapper. And every one of them died.

TS: That happened while you were there?

BJ: Certainly it was while I was there [chuckles]. How else would I know about it?

TS: Oh. I don't know.

BJ: No, I won't tell you anything I don't—I don't tell you anything that I hear from somebody else. I'm telling you this is me, I was there, I saw it, which ingrained more in my mind that I will never go in a bunker. I will never hide. And the all clear was when somebody came by and knocked on all the doors and said "All clear." Well, we sort of laughed at that one, too, because how many Vietnamese speak English? A lot more than the English can speak Vietnamese. So how do you know it's not one of them coming down saying all clear—bam, bam, bam, bam. You're all dead.

TS: Were you afraid then?

BJ: No.

TS: No? Even though you had these things in the back of your mind?

BJ: What was there to be afraid of? I was there to do what I wanted to do. If I got killed there I would have been the happiest dead person in the world. Just like Sharon.

TS: Just like who?

BJ: Sharon. We were hit four times. That's why I told you, you need to know the layout of—to understand what I'm telling you. It's almost quarter after four [4:15 p.m.], and when you get bored—we're never going to get out of Vietnam, I tell you that because that's my happiest time in my life—most rewarding time in my life. This is a ward. Oh, you're doing that wrong. This goes this way. This is a ward—

TS: So for the transcriber, BJ is drawing me a picture—

BJ: I am drawing a picture of a large H, okay?

TS: Okay. I see the H.

BJ: The two big spheres of the H are where the patients slept and where the nurses had a little desk.

TS: Okay.

BJ: The inside middle bar of the H is where your dirty linen, your medicines, your supplies and all of that was kept.

TS: Okay.

BJ: And I will give you a picture in my archive that you will see what the inside of a ward looks like, okay? And what—what would happen, you would have these lined up, all the way up a long row.

TS: Lots of H's next to each other.

BJ: Lots of H's, okay? And then, on the end of the H's was a big square here and a little rectangular there, okay? Obviously, I'm going to give you the rotation. This is the ER. The ER is located five feet off the helo [helicopter] pad, okay? So they came in over the water, landed right here. We had nothing but open bays here, open bays here. We got blown away from the propellers and everything but you didn't care about that, okay?

They brought the patients in here. We triaged them as best we can, and triaged them as best they can. First place were the most serious, they went right to the OR, which is right here. Second place would be surgical ward, so the surgical nurses could bandage them up more than—all we did was stop the bleeding, triage them, and do our thing, okay? The next ward down would be the medical ward. That was those that came in on a DUSTOFF but they weren't in a firefight, they were sick; they had pneumonia; they had rotten feet; they had rotten skin. Because I mean, you live out in the jungle, you're going to get jungle rot, okay? Or a heart attack for some of the older guys. They went to the medical ward.

This ward right here on the end was what we called the Vietnamese ward, not because we were—what do you call it?—we're not conspirators or whatever, but there had been an incident in two of the other hospitals where they were mixing them. The problem with mixing them is you don't know who is VC, which is Viet Cong, or who is VN—which is—or RVN, which is Republic of Vietnam, who we were fighting for, okay?

They had incidents where they came in with a group of RVNs, they were really VCs, and they killed the Vietnamese patients. They never killed or maimed an American. We never figured this out, but they always knew where the Vietnamese were, okay? So we—this was to save our guys. That was our job. But we still took care of the Vietnamese or the Viet Cong.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: They had their own wing?

BJ: They had their own ward.

TS: Ward.

BJ: Ward, okay?

TS: Gotcha.

BJ: The first time that we were hit by a rocket, it landed out here [chuckles], which is—our doctors when they got bored or had some time off wanted to build a boat. And when they built the boat it floated for two hours. Well, we didn't tell the Americal general how long it floated; we just said it floated. There was a huge fight about our doctors being under the command of Americal and therefore the Americal commander owned that boat, okay? So there was a big fight—long fight—over whose boat it was.

Anyhow, the first rocket—where the boat, all put together was, which was also the—part of the dental clinic, went right in there and we put the boat into a cigar box, taped it shut, had a party, presented it to the general of Americal and said, "You're right. It's your boat." We just lost half of our dental clinic that time. That was our first hit.

TS: That was by the ward for the Vietnamese, too, then?

BJ: Yes, but it was—huh?

TS: Right outside that? Okay.

BJ: Okay. Yes, that's down at the back end. Anyhow, after we were there for three weeks and we already, I mean, had the rockets coming in every morning. And if they hit short for Americal, we got hit. If they hit long for MAG-12, we got hit. Not always on the hospital, but in the compound, or in the dirt, or in the water, or whatever. And if they hit long for MAG-13, then we got hit. So the first thing we did was take off that stupid target zero from the roof, which was this big red cross. We took that thing off the roof and we never put it back up again.

Second hit we had was our pride and joy. We, as a family, got together and built this. What do you have to have if you have your own little base? We had the 312th base. You have to have an officers' club, right? Right. So we had built an officers/enlisted get-together club. And we built this little building right—overlooking the sea, and that was our officers' club. Those dirty rottens hit our officers club four times. Four times we had to rebuild that. And the funniest joke about the whole thing at the time was somebody from the States sent us what was a famous movie at that time, *Dr. Zhivago*. Every time we turned on *Dr. Zhivago*, the rockets would come in and they'd hit the officers club or near it. So we decided we do not finish *Dr. Zhivago* until we came back to the States. And we did, we finished it up in Winston-Salem and we all saw *Dr. Zhivago.*

Anyhow, that's where we had our parties, and our farewells, and this type of thing, because you have to have—you have to have it. And ours, of course, was not an officers' club. It was an officers/enlisted club, because there was very few officers, a lot of enlisted. They did the work.

Our third time—Now, you have to look at this. Maybe you can draw it when we go in the archives. This is the last H, okay?

TS: Right.

BJ: The Vietnamese ward, all right? This is close to the end of Tet, all right?

TS: Okay.

BJ: And her name was [First Lieutenant] Sharon [Ann] Lane. She was the first army nurse to be killed in Vietnam. She is on the Wall [Vietnam Memorial] in Washington [D.C.]. She is from Ohio, and she came with a very strong feeling—I don't think I—we may have to—I have to tell you this, but restrict it, okay because—

[On the morning of 8 June 1969, the 312th Evacuation Hospital at Chu Lai was hit with rockets fired by the Viet Cong. First Lieutenant Sharon Ann Lane was struck and died instantly of fragmentation wounds to the chest. She was the only American nurse killed in Vietnam as a direct result of hostile fire]

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: What are—

BJ: I don't know what her family thinks of this.

TS: Let me pause, okay?

BJ: Yes.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay, you want me to start it again?

BJ: Yeah, because this is very curious. We're back at the H. This is the ward here. This is an empty ward because we—this ward was full, we had just had a

medevac [medical evacuation]. We medevac'd to Japan so that we can keep our beds empty for the incoming, you know what I mean?

TS: Okay. Sure.

BJ: So whoever can get shipped overseas goes.

TS: Somebody else has to do the care for them.

BJ: Right. Right. That's why we're called an evac hospital.

TS: I see.

BJ: We get them after the medics get them in the field, and then we ship them home to—usually to Japan. Anyhow, the rocket came—this is where the corpsmen were at the desk. We had thirty-eight patients on this ward; they're all Vietnamese. We had four corpsmen and Sharon on duty that night. At five o'clock in the morning it's quiet time for us, because we don't have breakfast till the rockets go off at 6:00 [a.m.] to make sure that the cooks are up and make us breakfast. So we always have an hour's reprieve[?] unless we have a chopper coming in.

So they were playing poker at the desk. They asked Sharon if she wanted to play, because she always played. And she loved the Vietnamese ward, okay? She said, "This morning I don't feel like it." So she left this area, came across the H, came right here—

TS: Your corner on one of the wards—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

BJ: —on an empty bed to sit and pray, because she was going to do her morning prayers early, okay? The rocket came in—

TS: Oops. You're on your—

BJ: —hit in the middle—Huh?

TS: You were just on this thing here.

BJ: Oh, that's my [unclear]—God, don't ruin that.

TS: There you go.

BJ: The rocket came in this way—I'm sorry, it came in this way. It took out the H. It hit right in front of where—right in front of where the guys were playing poker, okay?

TS: Okay.

BJ: They had a little bit of shrapnel but they weren't hurt. The Vietnamese patients we had—like I said, had about thirty of them—we had no deaths, but we had a lot of amputees. We had a lot of major injuries, okay?

TS: After the rocket?

BJ: After the rocket, okay? And we had all run, because we knew the ward was hit, and everybody is in here doing their thing, doing their thing.

TS: Helping out the—

BJ: Helping out the guys because they were hurt, and the patients. And all of a sudden, I said to [Corpsman—BJ added later] Jimmy Johns, "Where's Sharon?" Of course, we don't call each other lieutenant, captain, all that crap over there, it's first name. He said, "As far as I know she went to pray." I came over and I looked this way and I saw nothing. I came over this way and she was sitting here. Sharon Lane, on an empty ward, where everybody was injured here—the rocket went here—

TS: Right, it went in the opposite side.

BJ: Came over here, where that rocket went that way so nothing should have come—nothing was in this ward. No shrapnel, no nothing. Sitting here, right side of her jugular had a two and a half inch piece of shrapnel. She died immediately. Now, you tell me that—that that doesn't wake you up and say to you, "When it's your time, you're going to go." You can't make it. You can't break it, when it's your time.

TS: Was there a lot of other shrapnel in the room or just—

BJ: That's what I said, there was no shrapnel anywhere.

TS: That was it.

BJ: One piece of shrapnel in that whole twenty-five bed ward with white sheets on top of them. The only piece of shrapnel was two inches in her right side of her jugular vein.

TS: That must have been really hard.

BJ: Yeah. Those things, all of them are hard, whether they're Vietnamese, whether they're American, whether they're us. The hardest part that I will never be able to get out of my mind, probably for as long as I live, for as much as I love the ER—I knew right after I'd been there why a soldier will always tell you, "I would rather be captured by a GI from another army than a female." Female are the most vicious, destructive of the body, torturers that you will ever meet in your life. It doesn't matter what army, whether American, Russian, whatever. And that's a true story—The hardest part was those that you knew we could do something, we could get surgery done, and we can send them back to Japan and they'll be okay. The hardest ones are the ones that you talk to. And I mean, after all, these guys are gone. And those are the guys that we have already put our knuckles into their chests. If you put your knuckles into somebody's chest—they're unconscious—or if they're conscious—and they do this.

TS: With their hands, like a jerk motion?

BJ: No. They do this.

TS: With their fingers?

BJ: They just—stiff. They just stiffen up. It's called decerebrate [posture], which means there's no brain left. Which means we're not going to do anything for you. Which means we will lay them on a litter in the ER, a little corner here. We're going to take care of all these guys and in the meantime we're going to tell them, "You're going to be okay. Everything's fine. No problem." And then maybe an hour or so later, say a little prayer, put the sheet over their head, and they go to the morgue. But it—That to me was the hardest thing because I had learned from guys that had come back a second time that we had shipped out the first time—they had come back to visit or they were coming around for a second tour around—what the military medicine could do to put a body back together again. The only time they can't is if there is no brain, because there's nothing to bring back.

And you had their names and so you called them by name. "Joey, you're going to be okay. It's all right, Joey. I'm here. I'm not going to leave you." And you touch them, and you feel them, and make sure they know somebody's with them. They were the hardest. The hardest, and happiest, moment in my ER was I had a body bag come in and they threw it over to the side and said, "Four dead." It was from one of the villages that got hit, so we knew they were Vietnamese. And I don't mean they threw it like a bag of garbage.

TS: Right.

BJ: I mean, they put it to the side of the room. They had already done the body count. They already knew they were dead. They said, "Four dead." "Put it over there." That means we take care of what we have to take care of and then when we're done we'll go back and tag, mark, and check the bodies.

Well, my turn to go over and check the bodies and tag and mark them. I took out the first one. I marked the tag, "Female. Middle-aged." I did not have a name so it would be "unknown." And I rolled her, the body bag—just like a regular body bag—I could roll her over and put her on the floor until we were ready to put them back in the body bags and ship them back to wherever they came from.

The second one was a male. Rolled him over. Third one was a female. Fourth one was a little baby. And when I went to check her and mark her, she cried. That was the bo—birth of Mona.

TS: Girl[?]?

BJ: Mona.

TS: I'll put it back. Okay. Mona. Oh, you've got a picture! Is this you?

BJ: I've got a whole—Yeah, that's me.

TS: Oh my goodness.

BJ: I got a whole pictures, I got a whole story of Mona.

TS: Oh, how adorable.

BJ: Mona—Now, any time we find somebody Vietnamese alive we have got to send them back, okay, to the Vietnamese government.

TS: Okay, keep talking.

BJ: Mona was the first—I mean, the fact that there was this baby crying in front of me. My roommate's name was Jane Carson[?] and she was working. She was head nurse down on—supervisor of the medical ward. And she [Mona] had little pajamas on, had no—skinny, scrawny—I mean, she had three huge, big bodies laying on top of her. And she cried.

Anyhow, I picked her up out of—I know, darling, I know. She's going to pause in just a minute. It's her suppertime.

TS: Okay.

BJ: I pulled her out and I said to Tim—I said—to Tim Phillipps[?], I said, "Am I imagining?" I said, "Get a stethoscope. I swear to God I heard this infant cry."

And he said, "You aren't hearing things." He said, "I heard her cry too." And he got the stethoscope and her belly was about this big. She was—That's after we had her for a year.

TS: Okay.

BJ: Anyhow, we in the ER wanted to know what in the hell we were going to do with her, because we ain't giving her back to the Vietnamese. We already knew that. And I'm still with this family of the 312th. And we were not giving her back to the Vietnamese. So I went to the chief nurse—no, I didn't. I went to the medical ward and I said to Jane, "Jane, look what I found in a body bag under three—" blah blah blah.

TS: Right.

BJ: She said, "My God. She's beautiful." And she was beautiful.

TS: She's a beautiful little girl.

BJ: She had a beautiful face. Anyhow, Mona became ours. And Jane is the one that named her Mona. I'll show you her story and pictures or whatever. Anyhow, Jane was ready—we kept her for the first year and Jane was ready to go back home. I was going to have Mona stay with me, and then I was going to re-up [extend time in service] even more, because we haven't told anybody in the government yet that we've got Mona.

TS: Right.

BJ: And we couldn't figure out—because nobody in the 312th was in a situation where we could adopt Mona to the United States. Well, Jane's sister—Jane's brother and sister-in-law said that if we can find a way to get her back to the United States, they would adopt her.

TS: Okay.

BJ: Okay? Process took six months. Jane was ready to leave. She had curtailed one week—She got a curtailment on her orders. 312th was getting ready to leave. We're still here with Mona, and—who was the South Carolina governor? Very, very famous. He'd been in office for a thousand years.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Governor or the—

BJ: No. Thurman—

TS: Strom Thurmond?

BJ: Strom Thurmond.

[Strom Thurmond was governor of South Carolina from 1947 to 1951 and senator from 1954 to 2003.]

If it wasn't for Strom Thurmond working with Jane's family the only—he was working with the Vietnamese government for us. And the Vietnamese guy came over and he said, "Healthy girl. Healthy girl. No go. No go," because she'd make a good mama-san.

Anyhow, we were panicking. One of the doctors came up and [chuckles]—I love him to death—he looked at her, he looked at her big belly, and he said, "She's not a healthy girl. Oh my God. She's not healthy. She's got cancer of the spleen." Okay? He said—He talked to this Vietnamese doctor and he brought him over, he said, "Look, feel, touch. Look, feel, touch." He said, "Cancer spleen. Cancer spleen. Spleen go. Spleen go."

And he said, "No sicky here. No sicky here."

And so, we took the spleen out. Immediately when we took her spleen out—lowers voice to whisper] It was a very healthy spleen—As soon as we took her spleen out she was no longer allowed in Vietnam because of malaria and all this good stuff, and our government would be able to say that their government tortured her by letting her stay there.

Mona came back to the United States. Mona is still in the United States. Mona is still "skoshi" like BJ. She's got a daughter, Sunflower, and she's doing very well.

TS: Where does she live?

BJ: She lives in South Carolina.

TS: Is that right?

BJ: Still. Yes. Beautiful.

TS: How old is she now, then?

BJ: She is now—Oh my God, I think she's forty-something. Forty five?

TS: Yeah? Maybe almost fifty?

BJ: Well, I found her in—I found her in the bags in '68.

TS: She was just a baby.

BJ: She—We took—The only way we got a potential age on her was we took X-rays of a normal American, which is not right, and matched them up with her bone

structure and the closest they could get was she was probably about three years old when we got her.

TS: That's an amazing—

BJ: And that's how she got—The day that she was pulled out of the body bag, and the X-rays, is what determined her birthday and her age.

TS: That's an amazing story, BJ. That's an amazing story.

BJ: That was the story I told and I took this picture with me and I passed it around at Methodist [University in Fayetteville, North Carolina].

TS: That's a great story.

BJ: That's my—That's our Mona. They asked us—We were giving her—The nurses would take turns so that Mona would never be alone when she first got there until she got to know everybody. And she was funny. One day they had her at the chapel. The priest used to come on Sundays for a chapel. And he walks over to Mona and he says, "I haven't met you. You must be Mona." And he puts his—and she says, "Oh, shit!" [chuckles]

Jane was with him and she said, "I'm sorry, Father, but BJ's been around."

That was her first American words: "Oh, shit!" Because that's what I used to always say when something went wrong: "Oh, shit!"

TS: [chuckles]

BJ: And then the other thing—she walked up and she had—brilliant little girl. Still is a brilliant lady. The first thing that she learned about another thing was "Black power," when she saw a black man.

TS: Black power? [laughs]

BJ: Black power. [laughs] I have got to take a pause.

TS: Okay, we are going to pause—I'll pause it right here.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay. We took a little break there and we're back here with BJ. We're still in Vietnam. You've been talking about Mona. Now, about the time that Mona—after Mona, about how much longer did you have left in Vietnam after that?

BJ: Jane took her home in '69 and I left in '70. I stayed another year. I was going to stay in Vietnam, but—I told you about—the 312th was a family, okay? When the 312th left—and this is nothing at all against a regular army unit—they had no concept of what we had been through because in '70 the war was going down.

TS: Right.

BJ: It was—It was stopping, alright? We got the unit from the 91st [Evacuation Hospital]. They were all from the States. There was no reservists in that unit. My hospital was the—My hospital, the 24th Evac, were the only reserve full complement, with four or five regular army nurses with them, okay? And we went through what we'd considered the war, okay? Worst of the war. The worst of the worst. I didn't even tell you that, but there will be another day, another time. Anyhow—

TS: Well, what do you mean? Why don't you want to tell me the worst of the worst?

BJ: Well, the worst of the worst, and the hardest thing—you know I told you the hardest thing was the guys that were decerebrate and we knew they had no brain power left, they were going to die, but we still talked to them and waited until they did die. Well, if you remember during the Vietnam War—see I don't know what the heck—I missed all the hippie stuff and everything. It's awful. I missed all that hippie rock and roll. I would have loved that!

TS: You would have. I'm sure. [chuckles]

BJ: Anyway, I don't know whether they talked in the States about the napalm bombs?

TS: Yes.

BJ: Napalm was a form of fire, okay? A burn. It's a chemical. Napalm is a chemical that does not—if you get a burn here, okay, you clean it up. It will scab, you heal it up, and it's gone. You have a scar, but it's gone. Napalm does not burn up. Napalm burns down into the body, okay?

The only thing that will slow the burn and be able to assist—not quit or decease, but slow down the pain is potassium chloride. Potassium chloride works—I think napalm has a—I don't want to say sodium. I want to say whatever is in the v—magnesium. It has a sort of magnesium and that's why it burns down. If you put water on it, it just gets hotter and burns quicker and faster. The only thing you can put on it is this purple potassium manangum—manganite.

Anyhow, the worst of the worst was when they started putting the napalm bombs down. And at that time it was—I think it was sort of late into '69, because those were the things that were starting to help the war to go down a little bit. It was the Vietnamese, the civilians, that we were getting in. Mostly children with eighty and ninety percent burns, okay? I don't know whether you've ever been on a burn unit, or ever smelt somebody that has been on fire, or has had a major burn

to a part of their body. Small burns don't smell. Whole body burns are God-awful. They are God-awful.

You know that once it's gone through the dermis and the epidermis it is now on your third layer, which is where every one of your nerves are. Every nerve. Which means pain. Nerves are what causes the pain, not the skin, not anything else. Nerves are what gives you the pain. And these little bitty babies, or kids like her, or anybody. Women. Children. Very few men, because the women and children had to stay out to maintain the food and the goods for their soldiers, or their men, okay?

The Vietnamese—the RVN—the reason why we didn't really win the war was because these people had tunnels. They were phenomenal in those mountains. Our napalm, our bombs, they would probably be so far down in a level, they'd be, "I think somebody's walking on top tippy-toe." You couldn't find them. They could have been a hundred miles away and you're just now dropping bombs.

Anyhow, with the napalm burns, it is a very, very—have you smelled rotten eggs?

TS: Yeah.

BJ: Okay, napalm smells like rotten eggs. And the body is literally not burning, but it's smoking. The patient is in total, total, total agony. You don't know where to touch them. You don't know where to feel them. Somebody her size, if she was burnt on her back and I just went like this because I wanted to pick her up, she would stay there but her skin would be in my hands.

TS: I just want to say to the transcriber, you're talking about Mona and the picture. That's what you're pointing to.

BJ: Well, because Mona came during that time. And thank God she was not in a napalm village. She was in a lower village. She came from Phai Toa[?] because that was the vi—we figured she came from Phai Toa because that was the village nearest to us that was just hit. And that's when we got our bodies and stuff.

Anyhow, you have to stay there. You put gloves on and then you start smearing this potassium manganite, which is even worse in smelling, and even worse in pain. And the only thing you can hear is, "Dau, dau, dau, dau, dau, dau, dau, dau," which means "die, die, die, die." They want to die.

["đau" is an abbreviation of the Vietnamese "đau đớn" which means "pain".]

TS: Right.

BJ: You want so much to help them.

TS: Yeah.

BJ: Essentially, you know. They're not going to make it.

TS: They're not? No.

BJ: A small napalm burn, it burns in. It does not burn out. So therefore they will suffer until they have been burned to their heart, their liver, their abdomen or whatever. That kills them—or to their respiratory system—that kills them. And to watch them, to talk to them, to try to be sympathetic when they don't understand you and you don't understand them. They know you're their enemy. We know that maybe you're my enemy, maybe you're not. You find a way to talk to them, and comfort them.

And I guess—I keep coming back to most rewarding, most growing, most—most everything that my life revolves around has been Vietnam. And yet the one thing that I will never talk to anybody about—I told you that today—is Vietnam, because I came home and—when we got off the plane in San Francisco we had our uniforms on, we got off the plane, and the people just came up and the men just peed all over us. They called us names, they called us—I mean, it was awful. It's a beautiful welcome home. It was wonderful. And if you went anywhere, even to a military base, and they said, "Where was your last assignment?" you learned real fast you don't say "Vietnam."

And that's why it's thirty years a little late, but have you ever seen—until recently—have you ever seen a welcome home party for the Vietnam soldier? Have you seen so much outpouring to those guys that were coming home in '68, '69, and '70? No. No. No. Have you seen the heroes? No. No. No. Have you seen the homeless? The PTSD? The stress? The drunks on the street who have nowhere to go, nothing to do? Up until this past year or two, they finally said, "Welcome home, Vietnam."

First plane back from Afghanistan was a hero's welcome. Hero's welcome. And I do not degrade—I don't want this wrong—I do not degrade them. I—They are just as good as we are, if not better. They've got better equipment. They can take care of soldiers better than we can. But I think of all the guys in Vietnam, who also lost their minds, lost their brains, lost their hands, lost their legs, lost their—their everything. And all they did was—I mean, a man walked up and literally peed on me from my belly all the way down, calling us names: pigs and slobs and traitors.

TS: What'd you—

BJ: I had—I brought up to my family. I'd come home and I figured, "Mom and Dad will understand." We didn't talk for a long time. It was just, "I'm glad you're home, glad you're home. Alive. Safe." That's all we talked about.

TS: Right.

BJ: One day, Mom sat down and she said, "Tell me a little bit about Vietnam."

And I said, "Well, let me tell you a little bit about the people, and about the nurses." And I got out my scrapbook.

And my mom said, "Oh, you're lucky. You're in a nice place, because that is really quaint."

I said, "Mom, I don't want to talk about Vietnam, because nobody will ever, ever, ever understand Vietnam except somebody who was there." And I believe that Vietnam is the most different, different story in all of history.

The Civil War was black and white in the States. World War I was a country against another country. World War II, all the women were into taking care of the soldiers and flying food over, and they knew what they were doing. They came back, the birth of the SEALS [U.S. Navy's Sea, Air, and Land Teams], they were heroes. [General George Smith, Jr.] Patton, [Dwight David "Ike"] Eisenhower. It was a hero's welcome, right? Korean War. We won the Korean War. And we got peace between the north and the south and we took over them. Our soldiers come back heroes from the Korean War. Vietnam. Although they call it the Vietnam War, was never, ever, ever, ever declared a war, okay? Never declared a war. It was not ran like a war. The politicians ran Vietnam, not the generals, not the—anybody else. And they were never even there, so they don't know what the frick they were talking about even at the time of it.

Anyhow, we came back as nonexistent human beings, and that's why you find that people will come back from Afghanistan, Iraq, and they'll sit around and have a beer and they'll talk to you about it. I'll bet you, you don't find a lot of Vietnam people that come back and say, "Let's have a party and talk about Vietnam." Not even those of us who were there together, who have partied since, talk about Vietnam.

TS: You don't talk about it with them? No?

BJ: No, because wherever they were was their place, where we were was our place, and we almost have turned to the point that nobody would ever believe us anyhow, because *China Beach* [American T.V. series set at an evacuation hospital during Vietnam] came out, it was a sex movie. You didn't have time for sex in Vietnam. I've got news for those bastards. You didn't have time for sex. You didn't screw around with the doctors, the patients, or anything else. The patients didn't have anything to screw around with most of the time.

TS: Right.

BJ: Drink a little bit over at the club? Yeah, but you knew damn well you didn't get drunk, because you had to be over there as soon as you hear a DUSTOFF coming across the water. Run down and take a swim for an hour? Yeah, felt good getting out of the smell. But nobody talks about Vietnam. Nobody understands it. Nobody ever will. And the only thing that people remember of Vietnam is the front cover of—I guess it was *Time* or *Look* [American magazines]—of the little girl being shot in Mỹ Lai, right? That was the epitome. We were killing kids, right? And women and children.

You know what the kids were used for? I had one offered to me. I took it, but I didn't open it. I thanked him. I gave him a penny. It was a Coca-Cola. I walked away and I threw it and the son-of-a-bitch blew up, because that's what the kids and the women were for. They were your enemies, not the ones with the guns. You could see the ones with the guns. Most of our casualties were from women and children. Most of our—And I'll tell you about them because I see them often—not often—I can still see them periodically. A woman had him—She had—

TS: A woman had who?

BJ: A Viet Cong woman had captured this guy. He was hurt.

TS: Okay.

BJ: She had captured him and she figured—he figured the way she was talking, she was going to take care of him. He was nineteen years old. He had one month to turn twenty. When he got to us—and he was mine because I had the first litter in, which is always the most serious—he had no eyes. He had no tongue. He had no genitalia. He had "VN" sliced across his chest. He had needle and thread slipping[?] his voice, right behind his trachea. He had no fingers. He had no toes. And you know damn well he wasn't out at the time that any one of these injuries were done, because not one of them is life-threatening at the point. And he was alive when he came there and said, "Will I make it?"

And the answer was, "Yes."

Sadly, yes, he did make it. He will be blind all his life. He will never be able to have sex, if he were to get married or whatever. He will live with that for the rest of his life. So I often wonder, what kind of a life does he have? We weren't in a safe area. Not anywhere in hell. But who is going to believe what we say.

Anyhow, we had a get-together of some friends of ours and the guy was a lawyer—a JAG lawyer [Judge Advocate General]—and he said to me, "I heard you were sent to Vietnam,"

And I said, "Yeah."

He said, "How long were you there?"

I said, "Two years."

He said, "You're the stupidest goddam idiot I have ever met in my life." He said, "Don't you realize you didn't have to be there."

I said, "Yes, I did." I said "Number one, I had orders. Number two, I'm an army nurse and I'm here to take care of the soldiers."

He said, "You're a stupid-ass idiot. It was never declared a war. Nobody had to go there. All you had to do is say no." And he said, "Nobody could have forced you to go."

I said, "Thank you very much. I volunteered, and I stayed." I said, "And I have more class than you've got shit." And I walked out. That was the end of my partying with that group, obviously. So I didn't party too much with many—

But do you, not being there, really understand any of these stories, or any of the feelings that we have when we come back there, if you've ever heard anybody else discuss it? Seriously? Honestly?

TS: Depending on the circumstances of their tours, they have different stories. But it's not always the same. Nurses, I think, saw different things that some of the other people I've interviewed, like some of the WACs—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

BJ: Yeah, well the WACs were—

TS: —and some of the women that were in the air force that were in the headquarters. So I think that maybe the experiences differ depending on—and the times that people were in Vietnam too.

BJ: Oh, yeah.

TS: So it's different, but certainly—

BJ: But does it sound realistic in your mind? Can you even picture anything I'm talking to in your mind? Seriously. I mean, I'm not—turn that damn thing off because I don't want to put you on the spot. Turn it off. Yeah?

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay, we turned it back on. Okay, thanks for letting me pause that, BJ. [chuckles]

BJ: Okay.

TS: Let me ask you a question about—

BJ: I think you better go to questions. You're going to have to come back another day, because we ain't even got out of Vietnam yet and I was only in my twenties.

TS: Well, you've talked—We can sum some things up, though. But you've talked about a lot of things. How about if we talk a little bit about your relationship with—you have talked about this being a family and you were trying—you were starting to get to the next unit that came in, how it was a little bit different.

BJ: Yes. And that was when I was ready to go home, okay? I told you—Now, the ER—and I'll show you. I've got pictures. You can take pictures back with you.

Anyhow, the ER and our buildings were all just wooden buildings with—they didn't have windows or anything. They had big openings and then they had slats in them, okay? Open slats so that we could ventilate. Every time—I told you, the hospital was here and the helipad was here, and you know what a helicopter does—

TS: I have my picture.

BJ: Okay. The helicopter, when it goes around and around and around and around before they can stop the blades—and most times they'd never stop the blades; they landed, dumped, and took off—that is dust and dirt coming into our ER, okay? It's dirt. Our ER was dirty. We tried to be as sterile as we could, in order to not hurt the guys, but we knew it was dirty, and we knew the next plane coming in is going to be dirty as well.

TS: Right. It wasn't going to be a sterile environment, right?

BJ: No. And it was going to be a dirty environment, okay? When the 312th—and I have the picture of the 312th ceremony—and our theme song every time somebody went home was "I'm Leaving on a Jet Plane" [song written by John Denver in 1966 and recorded by folk group Peter, Paul, and Mary in 1969]. When the 312th had their retirement ceremony, where the entire hospital goes out on the helipad, and they diverted to the Da Nang hospital if anything came in so we could have our change of command ceremony.

They were all out there in uniform—fatigues was our uniform, obviously, no dresses or dress blues or anything. That's what killed me, man, when we went to ship. They had silverware and real plates, the navy did. And white uniforms. We looked like pigs, but anyhow. They were out there. They were standing at dead, dead attention, and we—as—they were the unit, we were their compadres—part of their family—but we were not part of the 312th. I belonged to Americal; to the medical thing, alright?

So they're standing there, looking at us. The flags would be swapped back and forth between us. And we were standing here. There was about ten of us left—enlisted and I think two or three officers—and we were all standing at attention. They did the change of command, and it was beautiful. Nobody said anything except the two commanders. They swapped their flags. The 312th had—They put the canvas on the 312th's because it gets closed until it goes home, because it's a closed—it goes back to a reserve outfit, not a war outfit, okay?

TS: Right.

BJ: So they closed the casing of the flag and they opened the casing of the 91st because they were going to take over. And as they were closing the flag, which is the most solemn part of a change of command ceremony, the 312th en masse started singing, "We're leaving on a jet plane, don't know—" That—

TS: Right.

BJ: And we sang the whole song. And—

TS: Pretty moving.

BJ: Yeah, it—yeah, it really was, because we knew we were going to get drunk that night and the next morning they were going to puke all the way home on the airplane back to North Carolina.

TS: [chuckles] Yeah.

BJ: But it was like you were saying goodbye to your entire world, because as I told you in the beginning, when you get off the plane in a war zone there is no other world. And I knew I wasn't going home, but they were all going—my family was going home. Jane and Mona had already gone home. But I'm still there. And it's cool, because I wanted to be there. I wanted to make sure—

TS: Right. Well, how was that second year different?

BJ: Second year was different because they were from the Stateside. They were regular army. They had never been to war. They had never seen war. They were not a field unit; they were a hospital unit. Our first morning they got up and the commander had those of us that were left go to our duty assignments, which mine was the emergency room. And he did a white glove inspection and flunked me because I had dirt on my window[?] slats, and dirt in my ER. "What kind of a nurse would nurse in these conditions?" And I said, "BJ, it's time to go home soon."

TS: Right.

BJ: And then we went to rules and regulations. Meals would be at this time. Showers would be at this time, because now we had running water, and we already had the huge party when the toilets went out. And stuff that we had fun with and that we had lived with was going down. It was now an American takeover-run hospital. I might as well have been back in the States.

TS: Yeah.

BJ: Because that's what we did back in the States. We did inspections and time—we never had time when the 312th was there because the only time that you thought of was the time you were there taking care of somebody. Or having a beer and trying to watch *Dr. Zhivago*, or getting dumped in the creek, or talking about the guy that you met.

TS: Right.

BJ: We had a wedding over there, by the way.

TS: Oh, you did?

BJ: Two members of the 312th got married; one of our doctors and an enlisted. We paid Vietnamese—I guess you would call him a smuggler—what you call a con man, okay?—into bringing into our compound an old Chevy convertible. We had the marriage at our little chapel. The priest married them, and we were all there. We gave them presents. Our presents consisted of an extra sandbag, because we were sending them to the Saigon hotel for two nights and three days, because that's all the time off the two of them can have. And the DUSTOFF flew them there. They only got to ride around in the convertible because we only had it for an hour and a half. And the DUSTOFF flew them down there and they had their honeymoon after we had our big party in the—God, I've got pictures in there of that party—

TS: You've talked about this some, but if you're trying to sum it up, how do you think your experience in Vietnam shaped the person that you are today?

BJ: I think—I guess I would have to say I had—my parents—you're not going to—My parents started shaping us a long time ago. They never hit us. They never hollered at us, except when my dad would say, "Robertajo Ann, down here!" You knew something was very, very bad if you were hollered at as Robertajo Ann, because other than that I was never called that. It was either BJ or Bobby, or Bob by my brother or my dad. But I was shaped from Mom and Dad, through elementary school with the nuns who taught you grace, faith, and many, many counts of responsibility and endurance.

I went to high school at a Catholic high school. We were taught by the Franciscan nuns and the Jesuit priests. The Jesuit priests are set aside from any priest, the Franciscans or anybody you want to know, because they are extremely stern. They are extremely—They're full of faith. I mean, they all were, everybody I met. They were very disciplined, but they were not—they were whole, because this part was here when it had to be. The other part was funnier—I mean they had a sense of humor. They could bring God into a sense of humor space. They could bring us in. When Father John—I mean, that man was that big. And the Jesuits had their little things. And he taught us religion, and every time he turned around to the blackboard—and I was in the eleventh grade at the time—the name of the game was, "When will he find out, what will he do when he finds out, and what's he going to do when he catches whoever is doing it?" And that was from your seat in the classroom to get a spitball right into that little hood that was behind his back.

And many a times we knew when we missed that hood and hit his head, he knew what was going on. He would wait till that sucker was all full up. He'd turn around and he'd say, "By God, this class is totally undisciplined. You need to be punished. You do not mock my hood." And he would stand there, flip his hood

over his desk and he'd say, "Unroll them spitballs you sinners!" [both chuckle] He was human, you know what I mean? But okay, anyhow—

TS: Okay. So you're shaped—

BJ: —high school. Nurse—real quick. Nursing school, again, nuns.

TS: Right.

BJ: Nuns believed—and that's where I learned very, very, quickly—nuns believed that you never talk about, say a thing about, or do a thing to anybody unless you have walked in their shoes fully, okay? No matter what you're doing, no matter what you're saying, no matter where you are.

TS: You explained that earlier.

BJ: And from them I learned that we are all one being. We're just different colors, different—different whatever—different beliefs. I may hate the way you act, but I will never hate you. I love you. You are a wonderful person. But I don't like the way you sit there and pick your nose in front of me, you know what I mean?

TS: [chuckles]

BJ: You dislike the action.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Just so everyone knows, I'm not actually doing that.

BJ: No, she's not picking her nose, for anybody who's listening to this. That was a—

TS: An analogy.

BJ: Analogy. Thank you. But you know what I'm saying, okay? You—You don't—You become a much more forgiving person, okay? How forgiving? We had Vietnamese and Viet Cong mixed together war. They were all, in essence, our enemies. The women and the children would hand the guys Cokes, you flip the top and it's a grenade, and the guy's blown away. Does the kid really know why he did that, or what he was doing? No. But you don't like that action, but you don't hate that kid. We were at war with the Viet—with the Viet Cong and yet here we were nursing them back to life so that they could go back home.

TS: When you came back to the United States, did you have any bitterness from your experience in Vietnam?

BJ: The only bitterness I had—and it was—it was very—it—it's still very comical in my head, and that is, if I ever find the guy that peed on me when I got off that plane, I would cold-cock him to the floor, even if he was seven—six foot six [inches].

TS: What did you do at the time, when it happened?

BJ: You don't want to put that on tape, because it was all verbal, okay?

TS: You mouthed back to him or something?

BJ: Yes, I did. I told him to grow up, act like a man, and find out what the f-ing [fucking] world is like. And when was the last time you were at war, you dumb SOB [son of a bitch]. And he walked away. I—I do—I have a temper. I am not vicious most times, but I have a terrible, terrible tongue, like my daddy's tongue. And I have a very strong right arm, because I put my hands through the walls many times. And I blasted—there are a lot of walls at home my—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Well, that's something you—

BJ: You know—

TS: Well, let me ask you this, because we talked about this a little bit before. You were saying how during your time in the Army Nurse Corps you had experiences where you struggled in different ways.

BJ: That was just while we were eating.

TS: While you were eating?

BJ: Yes.

TS: What do you mean?

BJ: That was struggling with my inner self.

TS: Right. And so, you said there were certain people throughout your career that helped lift you up and get you through these moments.

BJ: Oh, those were—that wasn't a struggle, man; that was consequences.

TS: Well, let's talk about—

BJ: That was when BJ screwed up and didn't care.

TS: Let's talk about those a little.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

BJ: That was because BJ was ready to get rid of some of them rules. Okay. In Vietnam is when I became a member of the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] Wanted List, okay?

TS: What happened there?

BJ: In Vietnam, when we went up to Da Nang—they have—and I've got one in my truck, one in my car, and I've got two in my closet now. And if you guys want to come and arrest me, do it. Anyhow, the navy nurses—Now, the army didn't know that we were given poncho liners. They are the most beautiful piece of material. It's like a silk parachute, okay, and it's a blanket, alright? And it's a big—it's a big sucker. It's very lightweight. You can wrap it up, roll it up, and you can tie it in a little bitty bag and tuck it in your shirt, okay?

TS: Okay.

BJ: It's phenomenal. And we all had them. They were issued to us—army issue. Some of us lied and got issued two or three because somebody had stole mine, ripped mine, and really they were locked in my locker. Anyhow, when we went up to the navy nurses in Da Nang, who were in their whites, and they—they were not a hos—Da Nang was not a hospital per se. The ship [USS] *Hope* would bring their patients to the navy nurses in Da Nang. And they were always in full uniform. Us, we never got out of our fatigues. Sometimes we didn't get out of our fatigues for days and days and days. Boy, did we smell good.

But they were issued poncho liners. And I said to them, "How come you guys got them?"

She said, "It's easy. The Seabees come in all the time and they have all this stuff. And they ask 'What do you want?' and we'll say, 'We want poncho liners.'" And she said, "All we have to do is give them a six-pack of beer and they give us the poncho liners." And they take out the magnetic strip on the bottom and send them home to their families.

And before—I had three months before I was ready to go home and it was time to ship my stuff home. So I put two poncho liners into my shipment home, with my whites that—why one white uniform was mandatory to take over there is beyond me.

TS: You never wore it?

BJ: Hell, I used it to polish my damn shoes—my combat boots. I hated those uniforms, those stupid hats. Anyway, all my photo albums, most of them—that's why I only have very few of Vietnam—most of my pictures and everything—the things that I cherished—and I put them all in the box. I put my blue jeans and my t-shirt that I never got to put on, in my box. Everything. My box was about this big. I addressed it to my mom and dad, and I told them, "Be looking for a box from Vietnam. You don't have to open it because, number one, there's a lot of mold"—because of where it was coming from and going to, okay? "There's a lot of mold, a lot of smell, and you're not going to really understand what's in it until I get home. I'll be home in a couple of months. Throw it in the basement and let it rot and I'll open it up when I come home."

I got a message from the Red Cross about a month and a half later, from my dad, and he said, "When is the box coming?"

And I sent him back, through the Red Cross, "Box should have been there a month ago." Okay? And I didn't think anything of it. I just figured lost in shipment or it will take a while. Daddy sends me another Red Cross message four days later. Two MPs [military police] came to the front door, asked my dad if he had received a box from me. By that time, he had gotten the box.

They said, "Is she in the Republic of Vietnam, in the Army Nurse Corps?"

My dad said, "Yes, she is." He was very proud.

He said, "Sir, we will take that box." No ifs, ands, or buts. No questions.

And my dad says "Is something wrong with my daughter?"

And he said, "No. Not that we know of yet." Yet [unclear] my daddy's quick on the tongue, man. And he said, "You'll be hearing from us."

Well, they never heard anything again. My dad sent—and my dad had sent back another TWX [teletypewriter exchange] through the Red Cross. "MPs came, took box, don't know where it went. I hope you're okay. We all love you." End of story. I thought.

Well, a week later I get called into the commander's office. And he says to me, "Captain Kramer"—it wasn't BJ anymore, it was Captain Kramer.

I said, "Yes, Sir?"

He said, "You are at attention, aren't you?"

I'm like, "Yes, Sir. I am." And I think, "Oh my God."

He said, "This is not a social visit. This is a formal appearance." He said, "I must tell you right now that you are being put up on charges for stealing from the Unites States Government and—" because I've got tears coming down my eyes. I mean, I was—I couldn't cry out loud but I'm crying, man. I'm going to hell right now. He said, "I have the authority and the responsibility to relieve you of all of your duties effective immediately." He said, "You will be placed on a plane to the United States, to Fort Bragg, North Carolina." And he said, "There you will go before the Judge Advocate in a court."

And I couldn't take it anymore and I said, "What the hell is going on, Sir?"

TS: Right.

BJ: He said, "BJ, what in God's name was in the box?"

I said, "My clothing. My stuff. That's it, Sir."

He said, "What else was in the box that it's this darn big that I have to say this to you and tell you what I have to do with you?" He said, "I'm taking your rank. I'm taking your pay. I'm taking you out of the army."

I said, "Sir, I sent two poncho liners home."

He said, "You did what?"

I said, "Sir, I sent two poncho liners home. I thought my mom and dad would really enjoy them."

He said, "BJ, you didn't take out the goddam magnetic strips, did you?"

I said, "I forgot. I said, "It was so long ago since they said that."

He said, "BJ, they've got you up on federal charges for stealing from the United States Government in a time of war." He said, "You're going back to Fort Bragg, not to the hospital. You're going back to the brig to be put in court to find out how much time you're going to get."

I said, "Oh." And I mean, I just sat down in the chair and I just cried my eyes out for about—maybe about two minutes. He was still standing there looking at me. Finally I stood straight up, I stood at attention and I said, "Sir, if you feel that this is what you have to do, I understand." I said, "I hold nothing against you. That was a stupid mistake and I deserve whatever I get."

He said, "Dammit. Why did I know that is what you were going to say?"

I said, "Sir?"

He said, "BJ, BJ, BJ." He always said, "BJ, BJ, BJ." He said, "You are the best leader. The best teacher. The best nurse. The best coordinator. The best person I've ever met in my life. The finest officer I've ever met. And you're saying to me, 'Yes, Sir. I screwed up and I will take whatever'?"

I said, "Yes, Sir. That's part of consequences, is it not? If you do something wrong, you do whatever comes up."

He said, "Who in the hell ever told you—"

I said, "My mom and dad, Sir. That's how I grew up.

He said, "This is not going to happen. Trust me. This is not going to happen." He said, "You're excused."

Well, I already know I'm going to jail. I'm already getting ready to pack up for my flight for the next day. He comes over to the BOQ [bachelor officer quarters] that night and he says, "We have to have a meeting." Where does he take me for the meeting? The officers club. What do we do? We sit and suck beer.

I said, "This is my farewell party, huh?"

He said, "No." He said, "I want to let you know all of the local government poli—charges have been dropped." He said, "They believed exactly what I told them."

I said, "You liar. How can you lie like that and they believe you?"

He said, "Because I'm a good 'Kramerism' person." That's where Pat gets the Kramerism, because Kramer can tell a story. He said, "But I do have to tell you one thing, honey. The one thing that I cannot ever, ever get rid of," he says, "Number one, you will never get the box back. Number two, I cannot take your

name off the federal law books." So he said, "If you drive and you're drinking you better know that it better not go before federal authorities, because they'll be looking for you."

I said, "I don't drink and drive anyhow."

He said, "Okay. Try to be good. That's the end of the conversation." He said, "You've got four more months here so why don't you get your ass back to work?"

I said, "I'm drunker than a skunk now."

He said, "Well, we might as well finish up drinking." And we drank till the next morning. But I was still on the FBI list. But it's people like him.

My other one—a couple of them—I did a couple of AWOLs [absent without leave] maybe for a day or two, and I would call back to the chief nurse, and I'm a captain or a major. I even done one in Fort Jackson as a lieutenant colonel, and that's the one I'm going to tell you about. Anyhow, where I would take on leave books for a weekend, enjoy myself up in the ski slopes—especially in Colorado—and it wound up being two or three days. So I would call back and give this crying story about the car trouble I was having, and "I'm hoping that it will be fixed by tomorrow. I didn't bring enough money for plane fare, and I don't know anybody up here, so please can you just forgive me one day?"

"Okay, BJ. Get back here as soon as you can."

"Yes, Ma'am. I will." Second day, "You know the mechanic that was in there yesterday wasn't in here—" You know what? I'm up on the damn ski slopes doing this. So I came back and had a good time but that one they didn't know about.

Now, the one that is very life-changing is Colonel Bloxom. I showed you her house on the corner. She's gone now, God rest her soul. She was—She and Penny were my mentors—and Chick Bloxom taught me a lesson like you would never, ever, believe. I went from Colorado—no, from Fort Riley [Kansas]. I was going from there to Fort Jackson [South Carolina], okay? I left as the chief of the clinical outlying buildings at Fort Jackson. And I was riding the jeeps for the color guard and stuff like this and inspecting the troops—

TS: You were a lieutenant colonel then, right?

BJ: No, I was a major then.

TS: Oh, major then.

BJ: And I loved it. Man, I had a ball. I loved it. Anyway, I figured I'm going to visit my friend in Wyoming. I had a friend who lived in Wyoming; Baggs, Wyoming. And she delivered the mail. She would get up at three o'clock in the morning—and of course this was back in the seventies, ranchlands wide open. And the bags for the letters from the people would be hanging on a nail on a tree. And it was snowing, I mean no matter the weather, whatever. We'd get up at 4:00 [a.m.], we'd deliver the ba—the stuff from bags to Rawlins to the post office, and then we were off from 12:00 [p.m.] till 3:00, where we'd go back and deliver the mail

and then go home and be home about—to her place—till about 10:00. And that was every day. And then our lunches would be laying under the trees looking at the Wyoming sky; drag racing with the elks and the deer. I mean, it was—it was God's country. I was in heaven.

Well, thirty days was up. BJ was still in heaven. Thirty-five days came up. BJ was still in heaven in Wyoming. And finally on the thirty-ninth day my father called me, and he said, "Robertajo, are you still in Wyoming?"

I said, "Yeah, I'm having a great time."

He said, "Does the army know that you're still in Wyoming?"

I said, "I don't know, Pop." I said, "I don't think I owe any more time, so I'm just going to get out of the army."

He said, "You get out in Wyoming, it's called desertion." He said, "You buck up that damn body, brain, and soul of yours and you go to your next duty assignment and have the balls to tell that chief nurse that you would like to be processed out of the army because you don't want to be in there anymore." He said, "Own up. What the hell have I taught you all your life?"

I said, "Yes, Sir."

The next day I'm on an airplane going to Fort Jackson, wore my uniform very sloppy. It was my greens, and I figured I don't belong to anybody anyhow and I'm just going over there to tell them I quit. So I went in to the chief nurse, who was Caroline A. Bloxom, full bird [military slang for a colonel, O-6], the most beautiful person I'd ever seen, even at her age her eyes would sparkle. I walked into her office. I had flat shoes on, no heels. I had my green skirt, my—uniform. Now, this kid's strac [military slang meaning "a well organized, well turned-out soldier]. I spit shined my shoes. I spit shine every—I strac my room, too.

I had my blouse open. I had the top button of my tie—you know when you had those little flip[?] ties, I hated them. I opened it up, had the top button off; had my jacket—which they call a blouse—wide open; had my hat in my hand. I walked up to her desk and I said, "Hi." And I'm sober, not drunk. I'm sober. "I said, "Hi. I'm BJ Kramer, and I just came here to let you know I'm four days AWOL because I had a little problem with a car, and then I couldn't catch a plane, but I'm here. But I'm not going to be here for long because I want to get out of the army."

She sat back in her chair and never said a word. Never said a word. Sat back in her chair and she said, "Hmmm. BJ Kramer. Are you related to Major Robertajo Ann Kramer?"

I said, "Yes, Ma'am. That's me. But everybody calls me BJ. You can call me BJ too."

And she sat back on her chair and she said, "Are you supposed to be assigned here as supervisor in the hospital?"

"No, it's not in the hospital."

"You're supposed to be the chief of the clinics." That's what the chief nurse called me and said; you were going to be the chief of the clinics here; that you did such a fine job from Fort Riley; and all that stuff in New Mexico."

I said, "Yes, Ma'am," I said, "but that's all past now because I'm going to get out of the army." And I'm just so damn relaxed. I'm so cool with myself.

And she said, "Well, I'll tell you what." She said, "You're just what I sort of expected, just a little bit different." She said, "Would you like to take a walk down the hall with me?"

I said, "Sure."

We walked down the hall, and where we walked to was the personnel office, okay? She says to the nice little E-6 sitting there, "Could I have Captain [Major—BJ corrected later] Kramer's records? She's just reporting in. She's only four days late after a thirty day leave, so if that—don't worry about that." She said, "But could I have her personnel file please, to take back to my office?"

And he said, "We're not supposed to really—" he said—

And she said, "That's right. We're not allowed to take their personnel files away from your office. "And she says, "Could I read it? This is Captain [Major—BJ corrected later] Kramer here. She's a little tired from her trip." And she said, "Can I read her file?"

He says, "Certainly, Ma'am."

She said, "Nah nah nah nah nah," and she's smiling. I mean that lady—her blue eyes were sparkling, her face—she is smiling all over the place, and she says, "Oh, God. This is wonderful. Wonderful!"

I'm thinking, "That lady's nuts. I don't want to work here."

She closes the file up, she gives it nice to the E-6 and she says, "That was very informative. Thank you very much, young man." And we walked outside of the door, stood in the hallway—there could have been a thousand people there, I wouldn't have known it—stood in the hallway and she said to me, "Captain [Major—BJ corrected later] Kramer, it was very nice to know this side of you," she said, "but unless you are unaware of this, you still owe the army two years from your education from the master's, even though you didn't complete it." She said, "Therefore, you belong to me." And she said, "I would like you to take the time—" She says, "Right down the hall there is a lady's room." She said, "I expect you back in my office in five minutes, and you better look and act like the soldier I was expecting before you walked in my door." I said, "Yes, Ma'am."

I ran down to that lady's room. I was spitting on my shoes and I was polishing them with toilet paper. I was polishing my brass. I was getting them set. I mean, I was strac, man; I was strac. I strutted into her office. I gave her the best straight-up salute and I said, "Colonel Bloxom, Major Kramer reporting for duty, Ma'am. I am at your command."

She said, "At ease. I'm glad." She said, "Now, that's the one I expected to come into my office." She said, "No hard feelings are there?"

And I said, "No, Ma'am."

She said, "I don't have any hard feelings either." She said, "You come in here from Fort Riley, Kansas. You took that whole unit, without the okay of [Lieutenant] Colonel [Madelyn N.] Parks, the chief of the Army Nurse Corps, and you did a phenomenal job with the Indian health center." She said, "I expected somebody like you in my hospital. I'm so proud to have you here. And what job would you like to have?"

I said, "Well, Ma'am, I would love—" I said, "I know there's an empty space, I would love to be chief of the outlying clinics."

She said, "I would love to have you be chief of the outlying clinics. But before you do that, we're having a little problem in the nursing—in the hospital." She said, "For six months we do not have an evening and night rotating shift supervisor. You know that that means you will not have two days off together for an entire six months. You will not have a weekend off for the entire six months." She said, "And I know it's not like being chief of the clinic, working five days and away you go, 8:00 [a.m.] to 5:00 [p.m.]," she said, "but I was wondering how would you like to be my interim evening and night rotating supervisor?"

I said, "Ma'am, there's nothing more that my little heart would want to do than to be the evening and night rotating supervisor."

She said, "That's where you'll start tomorrow evening at three o'clock. I will orient you to policies and procedures of this hospital. Be in my office at 2:30 [p.m.]."

I said, "Yes, Ma'am."

I walked out of that building, got on my motorcycle—I forgot to tell you I rode a motorcycle the entire time I was in the army, to include when I was chief nurse at Fort Bragg and the commander came out to me and said, "I hate to tell you, colonel, but somebody's got your damn parking space."

I said, "You're kidding!"

He said, "No, look out there. It's a damn yellow trail bike."

I went over to my desk, opened up my drawer, and said, "Helmet goes with it, Sir." [both chuckle]

He says, "Oh my God."

Anyway, I worked evening and nights supervisor for six and one half months. I never had a day together. One of my days off always followed an evening coming off, and by the time I get home—two o'clock in the morning—I slept till about noon, had to get dressed and go to work. Or I was coming off of nights, so I slept all day. My social life was so great.

Anyhow, she called me back into her office at the end of six and a half months and she said to me, "Do you believe in consequences?"

I said, "My God, have you talked to my father, or everybody that I've ever met?"

She said, "I talked to Colonel Penell. You know her, don't you?"

And I said, "Yeah."

She said, "She is one of my best friends." Well, I've known Colonel Penell since I bought the land in North Carolina in the sixties, okay? She talked to me about consequences, and she said, "Rather than something really harsh happening, like me hollering at you or taking money out of your pay, which doesn't really mean a damn thing to you, does it?"

And I said, "No, Ma'am."

She said, "I know, because Colonel Penell already told me that you're not a materialistic person. Would you like to continue with the job that you're having now, or would you like to go be head of the clinic?"

I said, "Ma'am, I am at your—whatever you want. If you feel that this slot still needs to be held I can do it. I don't care." I said, "I love the people. I love the patients. I don't mind. If you've got somebody else in mind for the clinic head, that's fine."

She said, "Penny was right," under her breath. And she said, "Well, I could use you for another six months on rotation."

I said, "That's fine. I'll do it."

She said, "I expected that from you. As of tomorrow morning, you are the chief of the clinics outside." And she said, "If you're AWOL, you better come in to me strict, strac, and up tight, and say, 'I was AWOL for two days because I just wanted to go the hell home.' You got my message?"

I said, "Yes, Ma'am." Been my best friend ever since, just like Penny was my best friend. And it's people like that.

TS: Yeah.

BJ: And that was—Like I said, my—the people I enjoyed and took care of the most while I was in the army was my enlisted. And that's how I taught my enlisted. And I always told them, "You will always have a warning. You never get cremated for the first one. Second one, you get a half a cremation. Third one you're dead in the water, because then you're really stupid and you're trying my patience too much. But I will never try to teach you anything I do not know myself."

I mean, I read books on mechanics, on airplanes, on everything, so I could teach my guys. Everything on the unit [had to be fixed—BJ clarified later]. Anyhow. And that's how I treated them. I never, ever—Pat told me—Pat only knew me for three years as the assistant chief at Bragg—she was the head nurse—and she only knew me for three years. And when we got out of the army she said, "I have never met such a rigid, strict individual that can make people love her and say 'Thank you for chewing my ass.' How do you do it?"

I said, "I don't know, that's me."

TS: [chuckles] Well, you had quite a mentor to help—

BJ: I had a lot of mentors.

TS: Yeah? And then you became one to others.

BJ: Yes, Ma'am, because that is what life is all about: helping each other. I learned a long time ago that life is not—and I learned it in the army. Like I said, the army is my world. Always will be, and a lot of people still think I'm in the army because I'm a strac piece of garbage in a t-shirt and nice-looking blue jeans. Anyhow, I was always taught that you do not teach somebody to learn how to do their job. You teach somebody so that they can take your job, and you can progress and they can progress even further than you, if that's where you think they ought to be.

TS: Did you ever face any kind of discrimination, did you think, while you were in the Army Nurse Corps?

BJ: Can't think of a time. I don't think so.

TS: Do you think you were treated fairly for promotions and things like that?

BJ: Oh yeah. The only time I got mad—and that wasn't because of the Army Nurse Corps—and that is that I should have, in my calculations—and it's long gone so it ain't no big hairy deal; at the time I was upset. And that was when I was going from captain to major, okay? I was on the major list, but that was the time that the army—that's the big boys in the sky, it's not the Army Nurse Corps, okay?

TS: Right.

BJ: So it's nothing against them. They put a hold on all promotions for four years. So for four extra years I was a captain, when I should have been a major at that time, if I was doing my job right, okay, and being promotable. And I should have been a lieutenant colonel by the time I was major, and I should have retired as a colonel, because I was number one on the list when I retired. And if you track that back four years, I would have been four years as a colonel. That was not—That was a—I mean, I wasn't angry. I wasn't ticked off. I just—It was one of those things that I never brought it up to anybody else, okay? Why do you pull all this crap out of me?

TS: [chuckles]

BJ: It was something that said to me, "You're working your heart out. You're being honest. Everybody a month ahead of you, to include Jane, have gotten major. You're next on the list, but you've got a long time you're still a captain. And at that time back in the old army that was company grade versus field grade.

TS: Big difference.

BJ: Which was a big step, okay? Had I been held back major to lieutenant colonel it wouldn't have meant a damn thing to me because that was field to field. But to go from company grade to field grade—

TS: Big difference.

BJ: A big difference.

TS: So it did gnaw at you.

BJ: Oh, what? For two beers?

TS: At the time.

BJ: At the time for two beers. But after that—

TS: Two beers? [chuckles]

BJ: I could do the job of a major standing on my toes. So what difference did it make in rank as to whether I was a captain or whether I was a major? I was always holding a major's slot, plus that. Like I told you before, when I got out of the army the first thing I dropped from my name—except for my personal banking and stuff—was "Lieutenant Colonel." Half the people I have lived with for forty years don't even know I was a colonel, or that I was in the army, or that I was even in Vietnam.

TS: Right.

BJ: All they know is I'm BJ. And obviously, at that time that's the way I felt. I don't care whether I was a captain. I can be a full bull [military slang for the rank of colonel, O-6] but I'll still me. I'm still doing the best I can. I'm still doing the best I can to help somebody. My thing is to help somebody to grow. I believe that we're here on earth to help each other to grow. People have helped me to grow. They're still helping me grow, okay?

TS: [chuckles] I need a video on you, BJ, because this whole thing should—

BJ: I still need to—That's our jobs. It's not to hate, put down, judge; it's to help each other grow.

TS: In the Army Nurse Corps, you know it's mostly a women's corps.

BJ: At the time I was in, yes.

TS: Right. But you had, like, male doctors and things that you worked with.

BJ: Oh, well, doctors—they're—hey, you're talking apples and lemons.

TS: Well, what I had—

BJ: We were the apples, shiny and new. They were the lemons, [BJ makes a flatulence sound] on you. [both chuckle]

TS: Tell me how you really feel, BJ.

BJ: About what?

TS: We hear a lot today about women in the military facing sexual harassment, sexual assault, trauma of that sort. Was that anything that you knew about, or had heard of, or experienced in any way while you were in the Army Nurse Corps?

BJ: I'd have to answer that as a no. I really—I have to answer that as a no. And once again, it—I told you that I would never say, "In my day…," but I think, truly and sincerely, we were a different breed of women. Young women, old women, whatever. Mostly young women, middle-aged women, whatever. We were a different breed than the breed of women now. And the reason why I'm going to say that is because I think we were the beginning of the middle of the change, and I think that's why a lot of us got out of the army, okay? My mom and dad had their period, okay? And every time my dad said, "I walked for six thousand miles— in my day." I will never grow up saying, "In my day..."

TS: Is that why you were looking over to their picture when you said that?

BJ: To mom and dad, yeah. That's my mom and dad up there. Anyhow, I have always said to myself—Pat will echo the same thing, she'll sit there and say, "I always said I will never be like my mom and dad," because you would hear, "In my day it was like this and like this." Well, we were sort of like this and like this. But we were in a change, okay? Dirty dancing to my mom and dad was putting an arm around each other and slow dancing with a boy who's at school—after we're getting older—or the jitterbug [dance popularized in the 1930s and 1940s, associated with jazz and swing music]. A jitterbug was a dirty, dirty dance, you know, to them. And the music. Oh my God. Kiss me once, kiss me twice, I love you. [probably referring to "It's Been A Long, Long Time," written by Jule Styne and Sammy Cahn] How can you do that?

Well, now, I sit here and I say, how in God's name can these kids exist in a world that has—even the army—has very little or no discipline; very little or no ethics; very little or no morals; very little or no sense of camaraderie; because like that—She and I were down at Best Buy [electronics store]; Pat and I were down at Best Buy. We've both got grey hair, okay? At forty-two I'm—or you're—early forty-two grey-haired, white on top woman. Anyhow, we were early, okay? There was eight people standing there, and Pat and I. They were all doing this thing, while we didn't know at the time—

TS: On their cell phones.

BJ: They were on their cell phones and little boxes and stuff like that. And Pat and I were over here talking to each other. Honest to God, this man and woman came across the parking lot with a teenaged boy. And she said, "Ladies, I don't mean to embarrass you, but I would like to show my son Jason what it's like to enjoy just talking to another person." Honest to God. And she was serious as a heart attack. She said, "All they do is—" I've seen kids sit from where I'm sitting and you're sitting, texting each other.

TS: Right. Right [unclear].

BJ: They're starting computers in kindergarten right now—or next year.

TS: So there's a lot of cultural changes—

BJ: Yes, and I think that that's why—When I was in the army, if a female got pregnant she was discharged, okay? Now they're married. They've got four or five kids. It's no big deal. You know what I mean? When I was in the army you were inspected every morning, even if you were a nurse, by the chief nurse [for starched uniform, polished shoes, clean shoe strings—BJ clarified later] all the way back to nursing school with the nuns. Are your shoes really white? Are your shoestrings white? Or do you have to buy another pair? Are the creases right in your white uniform? Is your cap on right? Is it secure? Do you know what your duties are for the day?

Every Friday afternoon at every post I was at we had to do PT [physical training]. Not in the mornings; in the afternoon we had to do PT. We had to bring extra clothes. You run around, and once a month you had to do the twelve mile run, okay? You saluted somebody just out of common respect for rank or whatever. It was "Sir, Ma'am," but I was brought up with "Sir and Ma'am." There is none of that anymore.

TS: Well, what do you think about some of those changes, though? Should women who are pregnant and have children be able to stay in?

BJ: See, I can't answer that, because—

TS: Well, what do you think about it?

BJ: Well, it depends on how they're doing their job. Can they be a full-time mother and a full-time nurse? If so, more power to them. Congratulations. If they're like some of them that I've seen—I have not been to Womack [Army Medical Center at Fort Bragg] since I got out of the army. I do not go near the military because in a way it says to me, "I have left that world and it's become another world." And it has, to me. Okay?

And I can say to myself—Back then we had short hair, mainly because—it had to be neat and everything, but you had to have short hair because you were going to different places and doing different things and you had to look sharp. The men had to have hair just right. No mustache, no beard, no tattoos, no nothing. And they had to be as strac as we are. Their cam—Our fatigues had to be starched. Our—If we were in combat boots they had to be spit-shined. We were not allowed—even when I was assistant chief here at Bragg in '83—we were not allowed to go off post in our uniforms. Not allowed. Not because we were different, ugly, or whatever. It's because you do not take your military uniform and go to a bar and get drunk and picked up for DWI [driving while intoxicated], or take your military uniform that you've been slopping through the mechanics

and stuff, and go into Food Lion [grocery store]. You didn't do that. You were a civilian out here, basically, but—I mean, you got in trouble you were still military, okay?

TS: Right.

BJ: Now there is more green [wearing uniforms off base] in every post town than I've seen on most posts at all times of day and night, and anywhere day or night. There is no—And the army [helps that?] too. The army has gotten away with why wear starchy stuff when they've really got to take care of it. Why wear combat boots that you've got to polish—

TS: Well, I'm going to take you back now.

BJ: Go ahead.

TS: So you briefly touched on this when you said you missed the counterculture, right? The drugs and the rock and roll and all that.

BJ: Oh, I had my counterculture, so as it was.

TS: Did you?

BJ: I—In Korea, I could have become—followed up and become the biggest alcoholic before the age twenty in a heartbeat, because we were drinkers. I was usually a beer drinker because I didn't like the taste of the alcohol. But that's not what I drank in Korea. But when I came into the army we used to have OERs. They don't have OERs anymore, which is officer efficiency rating, okay? And it went through every job trait, and it went through every personality trait. I had two that I got zeros in every time: socialism [social skill]—and that's on the right finger—tact. I had neither one of them, okay? The others were 100%, 100%, 100%, promote, promote, promote. No socialism, no tact.

Because every Friday night you had to go to the officers club. You had to get out of your work uniform, into your greens, or your dress blues—whatever was going on—and you had to go to the club. And while you were in the club on your Friday night—I forget what they called it—happy hour. On your Friday night happy hour people would watch and they'd say, "Oh. That one's drinking coke. That one's drinking water." And believe it or not, that was a biggie. Let me tell you another biggie. "Well, damn. That one's too good to smoke a cigar, or cigarette, around the rest of the people." I mean, that was our culture, okay? Now nobody smokes and I'm the only one who smokes. Anyhow, I smoked all my life.

But I had an awakening when I was in Korea, because I grew up drinking beer in my family. My family is a very, very German family. And believe it or not, out of all us kids, I'm the only one that drinks beer. I'm the only one that smokes. The other kids are saints, obviously; the fourth man out.

TS: [chuckles]

BJ: Anyhow, I like it. I like my beer. I liked going to the country bars with a group of kids, where you could buy a mug of beer for a nickel. And hell, you'd dance with anybody you want to; you'd dance with the bartender; you'd dance with his wife; you'd dance with some stranger you don't even know. It's just a matter of going there, dancing, drinking beer, and having fun. And that's what I was doing right before I went to Korea, okay? Off duty, obviously. But yeah, Korea is a different story. Korea was not off duty. It was on duty. We would drink at night like you wouldn't believe. For me it was an experience, because this was my first time overseas. I ain't twenty yet because, like I said, I was in there very early, but I wasn't twenty-one yet, okay? And I wanted to keep up with the others, because I was the last one to arrive in that group. You sort of get sort of fixated.

TS: So drinking was part of that bond being—

BJ: Drinking was part of the scene, okay? It's sort of like, when you're around a bunch of alcoholics you get to know who everybody is and all of you have a party. Anyhow—

TS: Was this—Go ahead. Jim Beam [bourbon whiskey]?

BJ: I had Jim Beam. And I liked it. That was my first liquor drink that I got when I was in Korea; it was Jim Beam. It was smooth. It was nice, and I didn't feel anything. I found that I always kept a fifth of Jim Beam on my dresser in my hooch. And pretty soon we were having a slug before we went to work, for breakfast. We would come out for lunch and have a slug. And then we partied all evening. And what I didn't realize was how hooked I had become of liking the Jim Beam and liking the wild, wild feeling with no consequences—no consequences, okay, because I was drunk. And it felt good, until one night, the last thing I remember—it was a farewell party for somebody that was going home and I had quite a bit of Jim Beam—and we were having what we called a toga party—that means anything—all of it—everybody wears it. And you can wear something under it if you want to, but it's your bed sheet, and it's called a toga party. And the last thing I remember is standing on the top of the commander's hooch, and swinging around the flagpole with the United States flag flying, singing "Glory, glory, hallelujah" ["The Battle Hymn of the Republic"] Okay?

The next thing I remember, I am laying in the bed of the neurosurgeon of the hospital. And I asked him where I was, what day, what time, et cetera. I found out that from midnight one night through the next day, through the next evening—nobody had really missed me because I wasn't supposed to be on duty anyhow—until he noticed I wasn't around. And he came out looking for me. And he found me miles away from the compound. I was not even near the army compound that we were supposed to stay on at nighttime. I was out on the boonies someplace. I mean, in Korea, out in the boonies. And I was just laying there, I guess, taking a nap. He picked me up. He put me in his bed. The only thing he

took off is my shoes. He said he saw me drinking the night—two nights before. He was worried about me, and he has no—he had no idea as to where I went, what happened, or anything, until he found me. And he said, "I'm just glad that I found you and you're alive."

And it didn't take more than five minutes to say to myself, "Was I raped? Was I accosted? Was I this? Was I that? What if he wasn't the one to pick me up?" I had—I still, to this day—God, I probably never will—I have no idea—

TS: What happened.

BJ: —where that day went. And from that day forth, I walked up to that bottle on my cabinet—on my bookcase—and I said, "Jim, we are done." And I've never had a bottle—a glass of liquor again. I still drink beer. I've done counseling at one of the universities, with kids with drug and addict problems, because I've known a lot. And, quote, I've been there. Okay? And I didn't know where I was going to. And I never tell—I never say to anybody, "You have to." And that's why I feel good about all my bad and my good experiences in life, because I would never say to you, "Because I was a drunk, don't you ever drink again." I say to them, "This is what happened to me. It's your choice; you can go this way, you can go that way, you can do what you want to do. I'm just saying, these are some of the risks that you take along the way. And what do you want to be when you grow up?"

TS: Right.

BJ: That's what my dad said to me. Even when I was sixty years old, my dad said, "And BJ, what would you like to be when you grow up?"

TS: [chuckles] Well, when did you decide that you wanted to make the Army Nurse Corps a career?

BJ: Never.

TS: Oh, that's right, because you wanted to get out as a major.

BJ: I never did. I—When I had ten years in I had—When I went to college for my degree, the army paid for my degree, okay? It was mandatory that I take—at that time—which was a stupid law, and thank God they reneged that and gave you more—but at that time, the only courses you could take was what went with nursing. That's all. Well, this kid said, "Pfffttt. I can't stand this nursing, nursing, nursing. I do it all the time." So I did all my extras—and I paid for my own extras—was all in criminal justice and law. And I was fascinated—I still am fascinated by the law. And I probably always will be.

Anyhow, my tenth year, already got my degree, I already said no for the finishing up of my B—my MS—and I thought I needed a change. I'd been stateside for a while, hadn't had anything exciting except going to work, and I love excitement, obviously. Anyhow, I said, "I want to go be an MP. I have ten

years as a nurse, ten years as an MP with a medical background, I'll be a big help. I'll be a dual situation." I went through all my paperwork and everything. I told my chief what I was doing; I never go behind somebody's back on anything. And I told her what I was going to do.

She wished me well and she said, "I hope you don't because we're going to miss you, but if that's what you want and that makes you happy you go for it."

Well, I didn't get it. I was qualified in shooting, I was qualified in all my tests, I was qualified everywhere, except I didn't have a liberal arts BS [Bachelor of Science]. I had a nursing BS. And a nursing BS at that time was only qualified for nursing.

TS: So you couldn't—

BJ: So therefore, unless I went back to school for another four—two to four years—and then be an MP in four years, well hell, by that time it's fourteen years in the army plus I still owe two more over here, that's sixteen years. I said, "I'll go be a cop when I get out." Well, instead I went to be a fireman. [both chuckle]

TS: That's right. Well, what was one of your favorite assignments outside of Vietnam?

BJ: Gallup, New Mexico!

TS: What happened there?

BJ: Gallup, New Mex-i-co! When I was in Fort Riley, Kansas—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: I have to just say, to whoever is reading this transcript, you really must listen to this tape. [laughs] Okay?

BJ: Nobody's going to listen to that.

TS: You won't get the full effect of BJ Kramer—

BJ: I can tell—That thing is going to sit in archives until a time machine is opened.

TS: I'm just letting somebody know they should listen.

BJ: Anyhow, I went to Fort Riley, Kansas, and I was assigned to the 41st—the 16th Combat Support Unit.

TS: Okay.

BJ: The 16th Combat Support Unit was one of the first to have—we had a MUST [Medical Unit, Self-contained, Transportable] unit but it was in experimental [trial] at Phu Bai [Combat Base] in Da Nang—Phu Bai, Vietnam. And we knew the head chief nurse up there, and we used to go up there. Well, they were having big time problems with it. For some reason or other—I can't tell you why—I went to Phu Bai more than I probably went sightseeing with the other nurses. There was something that kept drawing me to Phu Bai and that hospital.

And it was Colonel Becky Glissom who was the chief nurse there. She was a remarkable lady; remarkable. And she said, "You keep coming up here. What's the matter with you?"

I said, "There's something wrong with this hospital."

And she said, "What? Because every time we get shot—" because they were further north than we were by about sixty clicks [military slang for kilometers], okay?

And I said to her, "You get shot—" I said, "and the thing goes down—just one line goes down," I said, "you've got to hold what you're doing in that area until you patch it back up. What do you do with your patients?"

She said, "We either move them over here, or we slide them out here," she said, "the doors get stuck."

And I said, "And you've got a U-PACK [Utility Power Plant] over there.

TS: What's a U-PACK?

BJ: A U-PACK is what powers the MUST—she was in a MUST unit, okay? Tube—MUST unit. I'll show you a MUST unit.

TS: Okay, alright. I'll pause.

[Recording Paused]

TS: I'm going to turn it back on, you can describe it. Okay, so you've brought me a picture.

BJ: This is a MUST unit. You take—

TS: Who's this? That's you?

BJ: That's me. That's Gallup, New Mexico.

TS: Alright.

BJ: The *Albuquerque Journal.* Anyhow, this is a MUST unit. It's all tubes, okay? The tubes are blown up like a balloon, okay? And they make an arch—like the McDonald's arch; I hate McDonalds—and then inside is all open space. And I'll

show you all the pictures of the 16th. I've got them. Anyhow, and inside you set a panel on the floor, you have doors and windows that you can put in, and you build a hospital inside this MUST unit.

TS: Okay.

BJ: The JP-4 is the power pack that—it is a generator—have you ever seen—

TS: MUST: Medical Unit, Self-contained, Transportable unit. I see, okay. Alright.

BJ: Okay, that—the one in Phu Bai was the first one they put in action, okay? And there was a lot of problems with it.

TS: So you thought there was something wrong with it?

BJ: There was nothing wrong—it was functional, okay?

TS: Could be improved.

BJ: But it could really be better than what it was.

TS: And did you figure out a way that it could be better?

BJ: Yes. [chuckles]

TS: Okay, well, tell me what that was, BJ.

BJ: Well, number one, they should have waited another year to get—everybody puts the cart before the horse. You wait until you get the kinks out—the big kinks out—then you ship it out, then you get the little kinks out. Well, I can't tell the army what to do. I'm not telling the army what to do now either. Anyway, I just kept getting pulled back there and pulled back there, not because she wanted me. My innards would say, "Go get[?] that thing." Anyhow, the JP-4 pack—JP-4 is jet fuel, okay? The generators—JP-4 pack—was from that doorway to that wall, to that wall, to that wall. That's how big they are.

TS: Okay.

BJ: They're run on tubes about this big and you have JP-4 moving that generator, that slips the power through here, gives you electricity, and helps you to blow the balloons up—the ribs up, okay?

TS: Alright. Okay.

BJ: Because every rib is separated. And that's why they went from the tents to the MUST. When you blew up a tent, the whole tent went. On the MUST unit you put

a shrapnel hole or a bullet hole or whatever you want to in it, and only the ribs that are hit—

TS: That section.

BJ: —will deflate. The rest of the hospital, or ward, will stand.

TS: Okay. I got it. Okay.

BJ: And you patch them up and then you blow them up and you're back in a hospital again. Okay? It's a very feasible, functional idea.

Anyhow, when I left—When I left I got assigned to Fort Riley, Kansas, the 16th Combat Support. I asked for it because I wanted to go to a field unit and stay in the field, because I loved working with my hands and making different things, and changes and stuff like that.

TS: This is around '78.

BJ: I can tell you right now—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: That's '79, that newspaper's from.

BJ: This is—What month? I don't have my glasses on. Where are my glasses?

TS: This is December of 1979—or November of 1979.

BJ: Alright. And we set up, so go back six months and that is when we started traveling. Go back to '78 and we had a year's worth of training.

TS: Yes. Okay.

BJ: Me and the guys that I picked.

TS: You got to pick them.

BJ: We trained for a year. Well, see, when I was there—

TS: Talk about where you're setting this up. You hadn't mentioned that yet.

BJ: Well, I can't tell you yet, because I have to let you know—

TS: [chuckles]

BJ: —that I was in charge of the 16th Combat Support. It was not supposed to go anywhere unless we had a war, okay? I was just the chief nurse of that unit, teaching people how to work in that unit. That was my job, okay? I had a wonderful group of people. All enlisted. BJ was the only officer, the only nurse, and there was only two females and that was the first sergeant and me, okay? And that's it. Anyhow, we were working on this unit. Colonel Slyman[?] was our—these units come under MSC, which is Medical Services Corps, okay? Which is sort of equal, but a little bit above the Army Nurse Corps, okay? And—

TS: Different branch of the army.

BJ: Yeah, different branches but worked very close together. But when it comes to the last say so, he's got it, okay?

TS: Okay.

BJ: He got a call from the Indian Affairs, and Colonel Slyman and I had worked together before. Not in a MUST unit, but in a field situation. He worked with me in REFORGER [Return of Forces to Germany]. I went to REFORGER in New York, and my after-action report is in—I don't—why do you keep shit like that? My after-action report is this big. And I guess the reason why he kept it was because on the top it says, "Best one I've ever read. I love you, Col S." Love is friends—with my group of people we love everybody, everything, pot and all. Anyhow—

TS: Pot and all? [chuckles]

BJ: I don't smoke pot or anything like that, just drink my beer once in a while. He got a call from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. There was the hospital, which is their main hospital for the Suni—not Suni—the—yeah, Zuni Arapaho, and Navajo nation. They have the whole desert, basically, around the outskirts of Albuquerque [New Mexico], all the way west, north, and east is—goes to this hospital.

TS: Okay.

BJ: It would be like Durham [North Carolina] VA [Veterans Administration] takes care of the whole east coast, okay? That's what this Indian hospital—it was their regional hospital.

TS: Got it.

BJ: They had—They were so old that all of their electricity had to be taken out and redone, okay? And he called Colonel Slyman and he says, "I have a major problem." He said, "We are going to have to shut down the Indian hospital in

order to get the electrical stuff done." And he said, "It's going to take us maybe six months." He says, "Can't send the patients to the U.S. government because they come under Indian Affairs, not U.S. affairs." Okay. Anyhow, it's a big political pile of crap. Anyhow, Colonel Slyman said, "I know somebody working in a field unit. How much of a hospital do you need?"

He said, "If you can give me four wards and a labor—three wards and a labor and delivery I'll be satisfied."

TS: Okay.

BJ: He said, "We can put it in a parking lot, if you come out and survey it and everything. God, if you could do that for me I'll be forever grateful." Colonel Slyman's one that he'll walk across coals just to find you on the other end and get you out of the water. Anyhow, they went through all this rigmarole—for three years they had worked on this job. Now, I'm ignorant of it until after I've met Colonel Slyman again. I didn't know—I didn't know there was such—

TS: You didn't know it was in the works or anything.

BJ: No. I didn't know, number one, that it was in the works, but I also did not know the amount of bureaucracy in the United States against—within our own government.

TS: Right.

BJ: Like this was the worst thing in the world that we could have done. Okay? Even to the chief of the Army Nurse Corps. Anyhow, he lines up and he says, "I know where there is a fantastic MUST unit." He said, "I have a supply officer at—" that was Bill Montgomery; all of us still send Christmas cards to each other. We know all about the grandchildren and—anyhow. "Bill Motley [BJ corrected later]," he said, "I've got an outstanding chief nurse of the unit and that would be BJ Kramer." And he said, "If you would like to meet in New Mexico, we'll take a look at it."

So Colonel Slyman calls me and he says nothing about the job, okay? He says, "Me and Bill down in supply want to take leave and we want to go to Gallup. I've never been there."

I said, "Where the hell is Gallup?"

He says, "In New Mexico."

I said, "Well, I've never been there."

He says, "Why don't you take leave with us for a week?"

I said, "This is weird, but I love you both. I'll go. I'm always up for anything."

We went down and we got a motel, sat and talked to this guy from Washington, and they excused me and Bill, which was no big deal. We just went to a bar and enjoyed a beer, and dancing, and stuff like that.

[Extraneous conversation about dog redacted]

BJ: Anyhow, then they called us back in. And Colonel Slyman—That's the first night that we knew what they were thinking about. And he said, "This is going to be very, very tricky." And this is when he explained—explained bureaucracy to me, okay? And I also learned it from the chief. Anyway, if we—United States Army—did this with the Indian government, and something happened—say our JP-4 blew up, okay—our army, our government, will not be responsible, because basically we are working with the Indian public health service, and since we are not with them, basically they are not responsible. Now, this is how we get to these points, I—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: It comes up political as to how this can or cannot go.

BJ: I don't understand and I don't care. It's a political thing, alright? And I am apolitical, and I never get in that mishmash. Anyway, he explained the dangers to Bill and I, because we were the only officers that would be involved in this trip. And at that time I was a major and Bill was a captain. He was supply, so we needed him. I was the nurse—medical—so they needed us two to be the principal people. We were the only officers besides Colonel Slyman the whole time. Anyhow, Colonel Slyman said, "I will take care of you, and Bill has no problem because being supply he comes under the MSC, because he's medical supply, okay? So Slyman already covered him.

I said, "Hey. That sounds neat to me. When are we going?"

He says, "Well, number one, you have got to get your permission from Colonel Parks," who was the chief of the Corps at that time. We didn't have generals, and major generals, and brigadier generals. He said, "And she has to bless you on it. And then you have to have a trained staff, all enlisted. You have to pick the minimum amount that you can use, because it's coming out of Indian money, not government money. The government will be lending us the MUST unit, but the Indians will be paying our expenses and our travel and our put up."

TS: Okay.

BJ: Anyhow, he said that—how long would I need to be thoroughly, thoroughly engaged with my men and women, and to be very thorough in putting up, setting down, all the mistakes, everything that you got, take the mistakes, make them better, blah blah blah blah blah. And I said, "At least nine months," is what I told him.

He said, "I'll give you ten." He said, "Do you have any personnel requirements?"

I said, "Yes, Sir. I want the unit that I have right now, minus—" and I minussed the very young ones, only because there's no reason to put them in danger. So only—Sergeant Naydicksberg was a [E-]7, which was a high NCO rank at that time, and Jonesy was a [E-]6. And they were my favorite. He could play the guitar and lull me to sleep any time. Anyhow. And then there was, I think eight more of us, total; that's all. But they were all from the rank of 5, 6, 6, 6, 7, Captain, Major.

And he said, "Why—Have you talked to them?"

I said, "Yes, Sir, because you're telling me all of this crap. I'm letting them know 'Hey man, this is volunteer. You don't want to go, you don't have to go.'" I said, "You've never seen me train for an assignment, but you've seen me in training with this unit. If you don't want to put up with—" and I told them flat out, "If you don't want to put up with my shit, you don't have to go, but we are going to work from dusk till dawn. Put it up, take it down. Unwrap it. Pack it. JP-4. And I mean, we're working dusk till dawn—after dark, because it's got to be so routine that we can catch everything." And I said, "I will be showing, telling, when any bigwig comes," I said, "but I ain't going to tell them what your jobs are. You will introduce yourself. You will tell them what your job is—" because everyone would have a specific job. In other words, we all know the job, okay, but this was his primary, and his primary—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So everybody has a piece of the puzzle, right?

BJ: —so that everybody could take over, but one person was in charge of it, okay? Anyhow, we worked sometimes from—and you have to remember now, this thing—this unit is out of—on a base; on Fort Riley. We had to load it every morning just like we were going to do in New Mexico. We had to load it on the trucks; just us, because we didn't have nobody else. Load this whole damn unit—box, box, box, box, check. Make sure the boxes are tied down. Tractor-trailer out in the fields—go out in the fields. Take it off. Take it apart. Set it down. Check the U-PACKs. Blow it up. Set it up. It took us—The first day it took us three days, okay? [chuckles] The first day it took us three days. Does that tell you something? We got down to a half a day, okay? And the people I went with were phen [phenomenal]—they were fantastic.

TS: So was this like a temporary duty assignment out of Fort Riley?

BJ: No. This was—

TS: Okay. It was—

BJ: Anyhow—Well, I told you—

TS: Well, did everybody get orders. I mean—No? Okay.

BJ: Nope. I've got to tell you—I got ahead of myself, but you asked me what we're doing.

TS: Alright. We've got to move it up though, a little bit.

BJ: Why? You running out of time?

TS: A little bit.

BJ: You want to throw it away?

TS: No. [chuckles]

BJ: Okay.

TS: No, just explain like—

BJ: I have to explain the proprieties of this thing.

TS: Okay. Alright.

BJ: Colonel Slyman could not get the approval of Colonel [Madelyn N.] Parks—

TS: Of the Army Nurse Corps?

BJ: —Chief of the Army Nurse Corps—to allow me and my medics to go to an Indian hospital, because there was no military control, there was no way of saving our butts if we ripped it up, blew it up, had an accident on the way out there, because we transported it in tractor-trailers from Fort Riley to Gallup, New Mexico. Days on the ground.

TS: So she wouldn't give permission.

BJ: No.

TS: So then what happened?

BJ: She would not. She called me—I've never had a chief nurse of the Army Nurse Corps call me in my life—chief nurse said to me, "BJ, Colonel What's-her-face is on the phone and she wants to talk to you."

I said, "Okay. Colonel Parks."

And she said, "This is Colonel Parks."

I said, "Yes, Ma'am. This is Major Kramer. What can I do?"

She said, "I understand you and Colonel Slyman want to play some games in New Mexico?"

And I said, "Ma'am, we don't want to play games. We want to help out the Indian hospital and let them not have to shut down. "And I said, "I think the MUST unit at the 16th Combat Support Hospital is very, very ready, willing, and capable to do it."

She said, "I'm telling you no."

I said, "What will happen if I go anyhow?"—being me; honest, forthright, tactful person that I am.

TS: Right.

BJ: And she said, "For the period of time that you are gone I will have to tell you point blank you do not belong to the Army Nurse Corps." She said, "You're an army nurse. You're a major in the army, but you do—I have no responsibility over you." She said, "In other words, you are out in the woods fighting for yourself, even though your home base would be me. But if anything happens, I can't help you." She said, "Can you understand that?"

And I said, "Yes."

She said, "If anything would happen to you, your parents, your family, would have no benefits. You realize that?"

I said, "No, I didn't, but nice of you—I'm glad to know that." And she told me all the negative, negative, negative things.

And she said, "Now how do you feel?"

And I said, "I'm ready to go tomorrow."

She said, "Did you hear anything I said?"

I said, "Yes, Ma'am."

She said, "You're an arrogant young lady."

I said, No, Ma'am. I'm an honest young lady. I think this is very beneficial. When it's over with—if it went right—believe me, the Army Nurse Corps and the Army Medical Department will have a bee in their bonnet." I said, "If it blows up in faces, it'll be my face and Colonel Slyman's face that are degraded. I swear to you, that's the way it will be." And Colonel Slyman had already said that to her.

And she said, "I will give you leave time. You send me the names of your people and I will give leave. I'm not authorized—authorized, non-administrative leave time." That meant, you ain't on the books, but you're not kicked out of the army. You know what I'm saying? It's a back door thing. Anyhow, she said, "How long are you going to be doing this?"

I said, "It's going to take us nine months to train. We're going to be taking three days of solid driving—tractor-trailer." I said, "It's going to take us a minimum of four days to set it up and connect it to the hospital correctly." I said, "We're going to be there for a couple months, then we will be done and on our way back home."

She said, "I will authorize you leave and you tell me the day that you're coming back home and from that day forth, when you leave Gallup, New Mexico, you will be back under my command."

I said, "Yes Ma'am."

She said, "Do you understand all the ins and outs of this, honey?" And I mean, she switched to "honey." I ain't never been called "honey" by a chief of the Corps.

I said, "Yes, Ma'am, I do."

She said, "You're really intent on doing this?"

I said, "Yes, Ma'am."

She said, "How do your troops feel about it?"

I said, "I told them from the get-go. This is all voluntary. It's very, very hard work training. It's going to be very, very—people are going to be looking at us from the Indian side of the house, and how we act, how we react, what we do." I said, "They understand it. Everybody had a chance with absolutely nothing against their records, because it was in a closed room, to say 'Absolutely not. I don't want to be a part of this.'" And I said, "These are the ones that agreed. Nobody's below an E-5, and Colonel Slyman, Captain Motley and myself will be the only officers there."

And she said, "Okay, but you're on non-administrative leave. I will not call you during that time. I will talk with Colonel Slyman. He will be your commander. That's it."

I said, "Thank you, Ma'am," she hung up; that was the end of it.

Anyhow, we went out there. We had one potential man that really, really would have ripped us in the butt, and that is—I've got to put my glasses on so I can show you. If I can see where I am on this picture.

TS: Okay.

BJ: Okay. See, this is a bad picture. Okay. This is the parking lot going out this way. These are our wards. These are our entrances. These are our supply areas. This is a JP-4 pack, okay? This is the beginning of the administration of a hospital. I'm on the roof of the hospital. We are hooked in to their systems outside. What we did was, they had the hospital prepared. They knew how big a hole they had to put in the hospital; where they were going to replace it with a window.

TS: Right.

BJ: So that our tubes could connect in there, okay?

TS: [unclear]?

BJ: Well, fit to there, okay?

TS: Okay.

BJ: Well, anyhow, this JP-4 pack here was here. Okay? That's the administrative building, okay?

TS: Right next to the hospital.

BJ: Right next to the hospital. Right next to ours. We were set up. Sprung a leak. We were all smoking and joking.

TS: Oh no.

BJ: That's JP-4 and I told you JP-4 is jet fuel. You know how quick that blows up? Blows up, whatever.

TS: I don't know. Pretty fast.

BJ: Fast, man. You ever seen a jet crash? Boom! Okay, that's what we would have done. Sergeant Naydicksberg for Linda. Honest to God, God love her. She had a bad back which you wouldn't believe. But she was a hard worker. She was shorter than I am. And that girl saw the leak and she hollered, "Sand! Sand! Sand! Sand! Sand! Sand!" And the next thing you know everybody's running with buckets and pails, because the only thing that will stop JP-4 is to mound sand forever. Just like you have a leak on a truck on the highway, you throw sand and sand and sand and wait until the guy—

TS: It absorbs?

BJ: No, until they can cut down the generator, which will cut down this part of the tube, because that's what's keeping the tube inflated.

TS: Right.

BJ: And by hollering "Sand! Sand! Sand!,"—which was our code—we all knew what was going on. We had a leak. We had to get as much sand—nobody knew why we kept sand traps, okay, with our unit. We told them it was because sometimes these got very slippery on the bottom and we had to throw sand underneath so it wouldn't slide. What it was for was for JP-4 leaks. Got it out. We were shoveling fools, man. We dumped that truck—I mean, a dump truck of sand—I bet you within twenty minutes. There were four of us there, just shoveling like hell. And got it patched up. Got it fixed up. The only one we told was Colonel Slyman; what had happened. And he knew what had happened. He saw the sand piled up there. He knew that we had a leak.

That was the only incident—negative—that we had. It was the most phenomenal—once again—earth-shaking experiences. We lived with the Indians. We traveled the Navajo areas. Honest to God, I wish you could drive in the dark. Since you can't, you may want to come back some day just for shits and giggles—

TS: [laughs]

BJ: —and see the pictures of New Mexico.

TS: I'll have to check that out. Okay, BJ.

BJ: Anyhow, this—It was—Before we could have a patient come into this unit, the medicine man had to come in, do his dance, do his circle drawings with sand and everything, bless the unit, make sure that no evil spirits could come in to our area. He went over to where—now we'd moved that—I showed you where we moved the generator from here down to there, away from the hospital, and we just put more tubing in. Anyhow, he said, "Evil spirit became of that box." Nobody knew we had a damn leak. He went over there and he spent an hour and a half dancing around that generator, picking up the sand, sifting it through his fingers. I mean, ["learn, kid!"?].

I said, "Hell. He's really a medicine man." He got away the evil spirit so that it would never come back to our place again. And we never had a problem in that hospital. Never had a problem with the unit. Never had a flick of a switch. But he blessed every room, every bed, everything. And then he blessed every one of us who were non-native, that our spirits would learn of the true spirit of life.

Let me tell you, we all came back changed from that one, because like I said, we lived with the Indians. We lived with the Navajos—who are not well-liked; who almost killed all of us because we did not know if you see a fence you don't climb it, because a fence means Navajo. Navajos are allowed to shoot you if you are on their land, whether you be white, black, or Indian. We almost got it. We almost crashed two of the cars coming down the side of a mountain and we got in a little bit of trouble. But anyhow, we learned a lot of their spiritual things that even if you go to one of these Indian museums or whatever, they'll say, "We have secret meetings in here, and secret blessings." We were in those meetings, and in those blessings because he made us of mind and spirit of the Indian.

TS: Pretty neat.

BJ: And I mean, talk about growing. I mean—ask me why—why I said I loved the Army Nurse Corps—I loved the army. How many bad words have I said about it? You been here since—what?—ten o'clock this morning? It's seven o'clock at night.

TS: [chuckles]

BJ: I learned from everything I did.

TS: Well, let me ask you a couple of things about—

BJ: Go ahead. I hear you. You talk.

TS: Well, you were around during the Equal Rights Amendment, women's movement—

BJ: What year was that?

TS: You're too far away, BJ. I've got to pause.

BJ: I'll be right there.

TS: Alright.

[Recording Paused]

TS: I'm going to turn you back on. Well, what I'm talking about—the Equal Rights Amendment, National Organization of Women, the feminist movement, things like that, doesn't—

BJ: I wasn't interested.

TS: Wasn't interested?

BJ: I was already—

TS: Doing your thing?

BJ: —equal, as far as I was concerned. And I agreed on the fact that—equal rights for equal pay and all that good stuff, but like I said, I'm not a movements person. I'm not a political person. A lot of the stuff, I think it's—it gets blown away or shoved away or gets turned into something ugly. I—It—They lose—It sort of loses where it's going to.

TS: Well, there is often a backlash to what people are trying to do too.

BJ: Well, a lot of it—and—I'm sor—I watch news all the time. I'm sort of anti-press now. I used to be—I'm a Walter Cronkite [American broadcast journalist] fan, okay? "This is the news today." Now they don't tell you the news, they tell you how the news should be, and what it should be.

TS: But I'm just asking about your personal feelings about this time when women were really striving to do things different, rather than having to be just a secretary or a nurse or a teacher; the limited kind of jobs; the roles that women could play at that time.

BJ: I probably sat in my living room with my dogs and said, "Go girls."

TS: [chuckles] Okay. You've long been out. So you got out in 1983. Well, about a decade after you got out the military implemented "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and then just in recent years, they've repealed that. So what do you think about how the rules have changed about homosexuality and things like that?

["Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was the official U.S. policy on military service by gays, bisexuals, and lesbians. The policy prohibited military personnel from discriminating against or harassing closeted homosexual or bisexual service members, while barring openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual person from military service. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was repealed September 20, 2011]

BJ: I think they have changed to the public, but I do not believe that they have totally changed to the individual themselves.

TS: What does that mean? Well, do you think it was a good thing, or not, or what do you think?

BJ: I think it was—I think it was not a good thing.

TS: Which part?

BJ: I think the way that it was brought up was not good.

TS: Which part though? Which part wasn't good? The "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" or the—

BJ: Well, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," you're still living a secret all your life, okay?

TS: Right.

BJ: So what the hell is "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"?

TS: What about the repeal of that? Was that okay then?

BJ: No.

TS: No?

BJ: No, because you already had a dirty taste in your mouth of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." And I'm sorry, but our society is not ready for any change yet, that is not politically going to get politicians what they want, okay? And we are not a society—we preach it, we teach it, we don't act it, we don't do it. Okay? And what I'm going to say is, football players, they're coming out now, right? How many are

staying on the teams? You've got four football players right now that have been playing on national football leagues for ten and fifteen years of their life. And gays are starting to come out.

I think gays have every right in the world to be gay. I am a firm believer that society, how you were brought up, does not make you gay. You were born that way. You were born with those kinds of feelings, just like somebody is born with epilepsy; somebody is born with one leg shorter than the other; somebody's born white; somebody's born yellow; somebody's born black; somebody's born Oriental; somebody's born gay. I believe that. And I believe—I've looked at this a long time, because it bothers me what they do to the gays. It really, really does, because I've known a lot of gay people in my life—in my lifetime, because they were in pain and agony, living in their secret world, which is part of them, that we were not allowed to be whole people, okay. Because homosexuality—if you grew up in the time I grew up in—was either mental institution for the rest of your life or you were put in jail for the rest of your life or you were basically banned from society. People who hung and stoned the gay people back in the fifties and the sixties—and I was alive, well, and of an age to understand all that at that time—did not get any punishment. Nor did the white man who hung his slave, okay? We speak good terms. We do nothing.

You are anti-gay, okay, and we're on a navy submarine ship, and we're going to be on that little hot dog for ten months in the seas, okay? And I finally said, "We have been best friends since we came in the navy. I have got to at least let one person know who I really, wholly, am." And I say to you, "I'm gay."

And he says, "Get the hell out of my room."

That poor bastard has the most horrible trip on that submarine until he gets off, because he has now become non-existent, because he is, quote, "a pansy," he's a "queen," he's a "girl." He doesn't know what he is. If he thinks he's going to play with me he's crazy. If he thinks I'm going to play with him he's crazy. He better not put his arm around my shoulder, even though he's done it seventeen years before—"Hey buddy, hey pal." I wonder what he's doing that for.

And that's where our society still is. People are so homophobic it's pitiful. And I'll tell you my opinion. I believe that the gays were doing it the right way when they started to come out. And they were getting more equality, more equality, more equality. And instead of fighting for a little more equality, which was becoming acceptable—I've lived with you for thirty-five years. My grandmother knows you. She loves you. It doesn't make a difference for her anymore, because she knows you, okay?

And yeah, the laws are starting to change just a little bit. So what did they do? They screwed themselves to the wall, because just as they're getting to become truly human beings, acceptable—gay marriage! Now, what do you think that started in the United States? That's dumb. It's stupid. Why does gay marriage make a difference? What does heterosexual marriage make a difference of your love, of your caring, of your sharing, than a piece of paper? When I was growing up, if you lived with the same person, heterosexually, for seven years, you were automatically considered married and had all the rights to that individual. Do you remember that?

TS: Do you think that they should have all the same rights?

BJ: I believe that they should have all the rights. And that's almost where they were. The people were accepting it, but when they dropped that big A-bomb [atomic bomb] and said, "Well, I want to make sure we get our rights. We want marriage. That piece of paper will say you belong in my will. You belong to be my beneficiary. You belong to be this, you belong—and you get all this and that. And that's the only reason why that came up, was to get the benefits. They were already going to get it. It was like dropping an A-bomb on the United States. And now the biggest political bull crap is gay marriage. And gay marriage doesn't mean just because you have been together for thirty years that you ain't going to separate. That marriage paper don't mean that any heterosexual is going to stay together. If it did there would be no divorces in the world.

TS: Right.

BJ: So why go there and really crack the whole God-durn world wide open again into a negative atmosphere when you were totally coming close to a positive situation. Am I wrong? I mean, I'm wrong, but that's my opinion.

TS: That's how you feel.

BJ: That is how I feel. I was for them. I was for them. I was gung-ho. I went on rallies. I went on marches. I discussed this with different people. I discussed it when I was talking to my students who were gay, okay, because in college there are gay students whether we want to know it or not, okay, and the fears that they had, and the choices that they had to make. And I would talk to them as a human being, and help them. I even helped one couple get together. I mean I'm probably—they could have fired me if I wasn't a volunteer, but my boss knew what I was doing, because they had to be them, okay?

TS: Okay.

BJ: And I agreed with everything. The day I saw on TV the march for gay marriage I said, "You stupid assholes. You just blew it for at least another forty years." And they have. Now they have states fighting with states, laws fighting with laws. You're married in this state but you ain't—you're married in North Carolina but you can't live together in Virginia because we don't believe in it. And you can do this in here. It's like the pot thing. Go to Denver [Colorado], man. As long as you stay in Denver, drink the pot—or eat the pot, smoke the pot, whatever you do with the pot, and it's great.

TS: Let me bring it back to the military.

BJ: Okay, the military is the same thing.

TS: Well no, I mean a different issue. I've got it.

BJ: No, I want to go back to that issue.

TS: Okay. Go ahead.

BJ: The reason why I want to go back to that issue is that if all the gays—men, women, children, whatever—in the army, from every war, from the Civil War, World War I, World War II, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Korea—if every gay person was taken out of that war, do you know how many people would be there? Not many. And you can turn that thing off right now or you can leave it on. You can leave it on, because I'm going to voice my opinion right now.

TS: [chuckles] Okay.

BJ: If you took the entire Army Nurse Corps, okay—and I hope I'm dead before it comes out of the archives—anyhow, if from the time I went in the army in 1960 till the time I got out of the army—no, I can't say out—I will say till around the 1970s, okay—early seventies. If you took every ANC officer that was gay out of the Army Nurse Corps because they were gay, do you know how many nurses you would have standing in front of you? Five, maybe. Maybe. Some that were happy with it and found their friends, went post to post to be with their friends or whatever. But you took them people out and they were the most—I really believe that being gay is a blessing, because it teaches you how people suffer. It teaches you compassion for others.

You will not find compassion in eighty per—sixty percent of the Army Nurse Corps right now, as you found in the Army Nurse Corps from the nineteen—Bataan [Death] March, or when it started, all the way up to the seventies. And you know why? Because they were women who cared, who knew what it was like to be different, to suffer—not all of them, but I'm going to tell you, at least eighty-five to ninety percent, because they were people who knew what it was like. And now we don't have that Army Nurse Corps any—They were a group. I could tell you just about—if I go from post to post in my mind, I can tell you—just about the name of everyone that I met. I still correspond—I've been out of the army forty years. I still correspond with them, I still correspond with their nieces and their nephews, because we had a commonness. You didn't blab about it. You didn't talk about it. You were not out there exploiting it. But you were being you, and you were able to be you, and so you were whole, and you were able to do that. Now this is no longer—and I hate to say it—This is no longer a gay Army Nurse Corps. This is now a societal nurse corps, okay?

We've also changed in other ways. We had to work by hand, by feel, by whatever, in order to treat our patients, okay? And if you tell me that you can go into a hospital—and I'll say army hospitals too—and find the nurses on the wards looking at the patients, knowing everyone by name, everyone's diagnosis, how long they've been there, how much they suffer, what their family is like, I'll tell

you, if you find 25%, you're a liar, because they're behind the desk, they got the computer, and they have to have everything on that damn computer. Am I not right? Have you been in a hospital lately? Have you?

TS: As a matter of fact, I have.

BJ: I have been in an army hospital—not here, but out in California. Do you know that those army nurses have fingernails up to here. They're allowed to wear earrings. They're allowed to have necklaces. They don't wear whites all the time, okay? They have their hair down. Have you ever had an army nurse who comes over to you with her hair down to here and says, "Oh honey, I'm bringing your lunch over to you," and her hair is all over it, or, "I'm going to take your blood now," and her hair is all up your arm, huh? Have you seen them with nails take and put a Foley catheter up your thingy? Huh? Don't ask me how I feel. Go ahead and turn it off. Turn it off.

[Recording Paused]

TS: We'll find a way. I'm going to help you. Ready? Alright, okay, so we're back here a little bit, BJ. We got that—

BJ: Okay.

TS: We got that settled about the nursing—

BJ: Yes, Ma'am.

TS: But now, we're getting towards the end of your career, and now you end up in Fort Irwin [California] and that was in 1980.

BJ: I was assigned as the chief nurse of Irwin Army Hospital, which basically, it was open for World War II. It was closed after World War II. It was in the middle of the Mohave Desert. It was the only—wide open spaces. Nobody had been in that hospital since World War II. I was amazed when I first went in there, because they literally had that thing in plastic or whatever, and I watched them uncover everything. When I walked in that building it was pristine. Absolutely pristine. But the first thing that hit my eyes was the iron lung in the lobby. And how long ago had iron lungs not been a treatment?

Anyhow, a bunch of us set it up and I was there for a little over a year and a half. All of my army nurses and all of my enlisted and our chief nurse—who was me—all had dirt bikes and we went to the desert every evening and every weekend, with dried bread and beer. And it was a wonderful experience. And it is now the largest training post in the United States of America.

TS: Now, why do you think you got selected to open that up?

BJ: They probably flipped a coin up in the air, or threw names in the hats. I don't know.

TS: You don't think it had to do with the work that you did at Fort Riley?

BJ: I don't know. I don't know why I got any of these assignments. I just said yes.

TS: Did you ever feel like they gave you assignments that you were like, "How am I going to do this?"

BJ: Could have been.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: No, I'm—

BJ: I—I do not want to be—oh God, I hate—How can I say this? I don't want—I don't want to—What do you call it? I don't want a big head.

TS: Big ego?

BJ: I don't want a big—I don't have a big ego—

TS: No, I know.

BJ: —but I feel that if I watch—if you look at the progression of where I went and I—when I turn backwards, I never thought about it at the time, but you just said something, and if I look at my progression, it said to me, "You completed this. You were good at it, so they think you need a challenge." And everything that I went to—like I said, I only stayed at a post usually two years, and it was a fixer-upper type thing, whether it be the nursing or hospital or whatever, I always went to a fixer-upper, and when it was done fixing, I was moved again. I did not ask for—The only assignment that I asked for in my twenty-four years, was I wanted to go to Vietnam. I never, ever, ever said, "I want to go to Colorado. I want to go here." I never said that.

TS: But you enjoyed the moving around, right?

BJ: Oh, I enjoyed everything. I don't know whether the gods were looking on me, whether the old biddy Chick Bloxoms and Penny Pennells and the rest of them were looking at me and saying, "She's an asshole, and she'll tell it like it is, but she's going to get your job done."

TS: Right.

BJ: Like I said, on my OERs I was 100%, 100%, totally promotable—even if I'd just made a promotion it said "promote immediately" to the next thing. And I've got them all in there. But when it went to tact—T-A-C-T, tact—that means be nice—BJ always got a zero. Socialism, BJ got a zero. Not because I wasn't social, but I told you like it was. And every assignment I went to, my first thing was a meeting with every one of my staff. And I said to them, "You don't know me. I don't know you. But I will tell you who I am, what I expect, how I work. Work hard, play hard, trustworthy. Don't lie. If you tell me you screwed up we'll fix it up. If you try to hide it and I find it, you're dead meat."

TS: Your last assignment was Fort Bragg. How'd you like that assignment?

BJ: I loved it.

TS: What did you love about it?

BJ: Well, I wanted to stay in the army for thirty years. I was the thirty year. I loved—Once again, I was an enlisted nurse. I sort of gave up on the officers, if you want to know the truth, because the officers thought their stuff didn't stink. And I believed that the young nurses had a chance, and I believed strongly that the enlisted always had a chance to go someplace. I was always honest with my nurses and—I don't know. The reason why I got out when I did—like I said, I wanted to go for thirty. The army was changing—especially the Army Nurse Corps—was changing so much around me that I no longer could keep up. And by that I mean, I could no longer teach somebody because I knew how to do it. I didn't know how to do it.

I had turned to an evolution where, they didn't know it, but my head nurses and my supervisors were teaching me. And that's because I came up in the dark ages. I have no concept of a computer. I honest to God don't. I have—I have seen nurses—and it—a lot—I'm sorry, a lot of it is not their fault. A lot of it is societal, technological. You have to progress. You have to progress thought at [fault?]. Not that poor kid that's in there. But I came up with a little cardex [file card system] doctors' notes, nurses' notes, patients' notes. Everything was on this cardex—this big—with a flap for each patient. And you had to literally touch, feel and see that patient, okay?

Now you do not have—as a head nurse, as supervisor, as an administrator in a lot of respects—you do no—you are not allowed the time to truly know your staff, one on one. You are not given the time, truly, to get to see and know the patients that are in the hospital, even though I knew them all at Fort Bragg, and it was—what?—four hundred bed hospital, and a lot of them coming back from overseas. But I was still old school. I—I can't say I truly lied. I sort of faked my way through. And I knew I was doing it, and that's why I knew it was time for me

to get out. Contrary to what happened, I told you I was already deciding I had to go, okay?

TS: Right.

BJ: MICU [medical intensive care unit]. My best friend for forty years, she was the head nurse on MICU. That lady was brilliant. And so many times—even off duty—she tried to teach me about the heart. I knew about the heart. It was a muscle and it done this and it did that, and you breathe—but these people know that if you have a T4, T5, T3, whatever, your right ventricle is doing this and your left, Pat knows that by looking at her patient and saying, "Well, you're in right heart block." Pat diagnosed me when I went into right heart block. She said, "Girl, you are in right heart block and you are going to Rivers, my family doctor, now." And I was, because I had clots on the lungs. Anyhow, that's not the story. The thing is, she was [half the patient or she watched them?]; she was half with the computer because she loves computers. But you no longer had the time to talk to Mary and say, "Oh no, Mary don't look like she did this morning. She's a little more pale. She looks like she's got a little blue." You look at your computer, and you wait for your computer—who's got all its leads on it—to tell you what that patient's doing. And I got angry a couple of times because I knew what was going on with that patient before that damn computer told them.

TS: Right. Right.

BJ: Okay? Because I saw them. But I wasn't paid attention to, because the computer didn't tell the nurse that had the patient, and the nurse hadn't told the doctor what the computer said, and the patient already was dead when the doctor got there. I knew this is time for BJ to leave, because I can't—no one—I can't compete with technology. I am technologically ignorant. I am stupid. I'm below the ground when it comes to technology. Pat will tell you that. I had a computer for six months—gave it away to the church; it drove me crazy.

TS: Would you recommend the military, or the Army Nurse Corps, or any service, for young women or young men today?

BJ: Yes.

TS: Why would you do that?

BJ: I would do that because the Army Nurse Corps, or any medical part of the United States Army, far supersedes the research and abil—capabilities of any civilian hospital, number one, because you do not have to have the expertise that the military has to have and be ready for in the civilian life for as many people as the military do. Examples is the prosthetics and stuff. They're not coming out of civilians. They're coming out of the military that we have run so we can get our guys back; this type of thing.

Socially, I'm right now pretty much ashamed to say I'm a nurse. [chuckling] I'd rather say I'm a fire—I'm more proud of being a fireman or working on my lawn, but I also know that my generation had to make its way in. And they were good. They were super. But it's time, man. We've got to let go. And this generation has to work their way in. We screwed—We killed patients—we didn't kill them, but patients died; nurses screwed up; we had bad nurses; we had nurse druggies; we had everything. Just like these kids have all of that. It's a lie if somebody says that we were all angels because we were back then. That's bullshit. They're not all angels now, but our generation right now has a few good leaders left. Mary Messerschmidt [Army Nurse Corps veteran]. I don't mean it that way, please don't take it—and Carol Rakowitz—I love you too. But I think that we need to slow down just a little bit—Army Nurse Corps—and why I say that is that we've hurt a lot of nurses. We hurt a lot of nurses when we grabbed Pat's kind of people in. You're a captain, we'll accept you in the army, you get three weeks of basic and now you're head of the ward. But when you reach age such-and-such you have to get out of the army, because you can't be here anymore. Or another friend of mine, Linda Freeman, she came in as a lieutenant colonel because she had a Ph.D. She was in the Army Nurse Corps for fifteen years as a lieutenant colonel. Where's her progress? Where's her sense of building; second lieutenant, first lieutenant, captain, major, colonel. And when she got to this point they told her, finally, there is no promotion available for you and therefore you must be RIF'd [reduction in force]. That's—That's destructive. That is not positive, okay?

TS: Right.

BJ: If you want to bring them in, whether they have bachelor's, master's, whatever, you still got to start from the beginning, because you may know every medical aspect, you may be a genius, but you don't know the military. And the problem is the people are changing the military to civilian. And I see that we have two ways to go, once again. Either our "up aboves" have to grab onto where are we going, what is our goal, what do we want the Army Nurse Corps to be, okay—Do we want the greatest thing—which is our chief of corps is now not a colonel, but a major general. And she now takes care of all of these departments, okay? Or do we want this much of the old Army Nurse Corps, this much of the new Army Nurse Corps, because their knowledge is phenomenal. Their feelings are what I want to bring back, okay? And I feel that if there were enough of us that stayed—there's a few that stayed, but they're in the education aspect, but not in the hands-on aspect, okay? And I guess what I'm saying is, these kids have to find their way, but it's not going to be my—I'm going to be dead and gone in forty years. I know God's only going to give me forty more years, because he said, "The people on Earth can't put up with you and I know that pretty soon at a hundred and thirty I'm stuck with you." So I got a good forty years—

TS: Forty-two probably.

BJ: Yeah, probably forty-two. But we have to decide, where do we want to be? Do we really want an Army Nurse Corps? We're going towards maroon right now. We're working on it. We are—It's called the maroon army, which means the [U.S.] Navy, the [U.S.] Air Force, the [U.S] Army, and the Marines. Well, the Marines don't have—the Marines got the [U.S.] Navy. Anyhow, navy, air force, and army. If you go down to Fort Sam [Fort Sam Houston, Texas] they're all one, and they're called the maroon forces. So that you're not Army Nurse Corps anymore, and yet you are, but you're all maroon nurses under one chief. And it took ten years to do that because nobody could figure out who would be chief: air force, army, or—the same way as the big boys. Anyhow.

TS: Interesting.

BJ: So what is this concept drawing us towards? If we put all the services together, does that mean—and you're going to call me stupid, probably—but I thought the stupidest thing in the whole world was to put BRAC [Base Realignment and Closure process, which repositioned the Army Reserve Command and Army Forces Command from Fort MacPherson, Georgia to Fort Bragg, North Carolina] at Fort Bragg. Why put all of your troops—all of your high mucky-mucks—on one post when you had all those other posts out there. I was against it from the day I saw it in the paper. One shot and they're all gone. That's the end. You know what they're doing now? They're going back to putting the damn buildings outside—opened up.

Anyhow, I've got to go back to the Army Nurse Corps, because this is important, because nursing is going the same way. Nursing is leaving. Nursing is leaving. If you look at the hospitals today you can pick out who the nurse is. She's the one behind the desk with the computer. The LPN is giving out the meds, the aide is taking care of the patient, right? Am I not right?

TS: That's correct.

BJ: But who's getting the highest pay? And who's fighting for more pay? The nurses who are sitting at the desk because of their knowledge. And they have no knowledge, those other people do. Anyhow, the PAs [physician's assistant] that were supposed to be between the doctor and the nurse, is now taken away a lot of the nurses that got out of just being a hospital nurse to be a clinical nurse to be a nurse practitioner. These guys are moving right in on them. Where is nursing going? I want you to know why I got out of my master's course.

TS: Okay.

BJ: Because I got an F in my dissertation—the beginning of my dissertation. My dissertation—and that was back in '70—was called "The Death of Nursing." And they were so appalled that I could thoroughly and truly and honestly write a two hundred and fifty page essay on why nursing was dying. I got an F. I said [implies expletive] and I called the chief and said I quit. I'm done.

TS: But you feel like that's the way it's been going so—

BJ: Oh, yeah. You can see it going that way.

TS: Interesting.

BJ: I mean, if you, as a non-medical person, can listen to your mom and know that she needs to have somebody while she's in the hospital, I'll bet you if I had a—if you've got a best friend, I'll bet you if she goes in the hospital you're going to be right with her. I'll bet you any money. You may not be able to do anything for him or for her, but by God, you're there as the person that can watch and say, "He was not delusional. They really did let him lay in that crap for hours," you know what I mean?

TS: Right.

BJ: Go ahead. I'm sorry.

TS: No, it's—

BJ: Well, I told you, I—

TS: No, no, I have—

BJ: You're not—I'm not going to—

TS: Three or four questions left for you. Let's see if we can get that—

BJ: If they're easy; if you ask me my name, my address, and my phone number.

TS: We'll try and get them done within the hour. Let's see.

BJ: Go ahead.

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

BJ: If you would have asked me that even ten, fifteen years ago, I would have said yes. I can't tell you that now because number one, except for the oldies, I don't know any military nurses. Number two, I walked away from the military hospitals when I saw what I saw and could not accept what I saw. If I were to—I worked as a volunteer in the ER at Bragg just for shits and giggles—I didn't have anything else to do—in the ER taking blood pressures, okay? I lasted two and a half months and I had to get out of there. I could not tolerate the atmosphere, because

the last one anybody saw or cared about was the patient in that ER bed. They had to get the report from the ambulance driver; they had to give the report to the nurse who was in charge; they had—she had to give the report to the nurse who was going to take care of the patient but she couldn't do that until after she talked to the doctor; till after she did this. I thought, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph he's going to be dead before somebody even—and all he's got is a splinter in his foot, you know what I mean? There's too much protocol. And protocol, if you've got twenty-four hours of protocol that you must follow, where do you do anything?

TS: What does patriotism mean to you?

BJ: Patriotism means that I love this world, that I love the United States, that I have a tear in my eye that flows down to my chest every time I go to a veterans get-together by the public and the only ones there are four or five of us with a Vietnam Veteran hat on, a World War II hat on, a couple of them in wheelchairs, and ten public. And I say to myself as I walk out—I stay—but I say to myself as I walk out, "You bastards. They look and hurt the way they do so that you could walk the way you walk and get in that fancy car and keep on trucking."

I feel that the greatest people in the United States start with the enlisted men, move up the ranks, and everybody in the military. I go no further than active duty military. I feel that—go ahead, turn me in—I feel strongly that the military—And my old man next door, we don't know a lot but when we burn my burn pile and we sit out there and suck our beers and he tells me about World War II and being a SEAL and I tell him about Vietnam, and the rest of the world goes away. But I talk about the military; the guys, the girls, everybody that is doing the work. I am not talking about the chiefs. I am not talking about the assistant chiefs anymore, who I used to think made the military. I am not talking about governors, senators, congressmen, presidents, or anybody else, because I don't think they give a big damn about our veterans. Even—Every time the president or the Speaker of the House says, "My fellow Americans," I feel, "You lying slob. You don't even know who us Americans are, especially those that have saved your ass so that you can be a rich millionaire, and they have no arms, no legs, half of a brain, and trauma in their heads." Whether they've been at war or not at war. Some people can't even take the trauma of basic training. Now I could—Tramp [a dog?] could probably do basic training right now, but it's leaders trying to teach something that they know absolutely nothing about.

And that's what happened in Vietnam. When there was called in a secure zone, it was not the commander on the field calling in a secure zone. Believe it or not, it was somebody from Washington saying, "That zone has been secured." And then our guys went in and got blown to bits, because we picked up the pieces. They want to run it, but they have no concept of what is going on.

TS: How do you think that your life has been different because of your time that you went in the military, after you had a few beers that day in Philadelphia?

BJ: I wouldn't give it away for all the tea in China.

TS: But how do you think it's been different, if you hadn't have done that?

BJ: If I hadn't have done that? I probably would have been a crotchety old lady in the same house, in the same stinking town, in the same stinking house, bitching about everything that was going on around me. And talking about the neighbors, and kicking my dogs, and probably saucing it up.

TS: I'm pretty sure you wouldn't have been kicking your dogs.

BJ: [Shouting to her dogs] No, I would not kick you guys. I take that one back.

TS: [chuckles]

BJ: But without the army—I went in for two; that was it, two years. I swore it to my mom and dad. Two. How twenty-four got in there I will never know, because I turned around and there it was.

TS: Would you do it again?

BJ: I would do it in a heartbeat. Yeah, I already told you that.

TS: I know. I wanted to hear you say it again. [chuckles]

BJ: I would do it all over again. The good, the bad, the heartaches, the sad. I—Happy everything. What?

TS: Look at this. I'm on the last question.

BJ: Oh my God.

TS: I don't have—

BJ: It's going to be dark when you get home.

TS: Yes.

BJ: Do you have somebody to take care of your dog? I have an extra room in there. You can stay there. We can finish this at breakfast tomorrow.

TS: [chuckling] No, I'm okay, BJ.

BJ: Go ahead.

TS: Well, actually, the last question is—I don't have any more formal questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add that I haven't talked about?

BJ: Yes, but number one, you would need a hundred and fifty tapes—

TS: [chuckles] Yeah, probably.

BJ: —because most of my peers are nowhere near here, okay? Most of them are either in Texas or whatever. Most of my peers, even though I talk to them on the phone and stuff, and we keep in touch at Christmas, believe it or not, they all—they all went for—I don't want to say they all went for big stuff. I am—

TS: You just chose a different path.

BJ: Yeah. I have never been on a Joneses path. I have never been on a Sam's path. I've been on BJ's path all my life. What you see is what you get; that's all you're going to ever have. But to live and to have to work to sustain myself for the rest of my life, if I had to do it I would go back to work today. I would. My philosophy when I got out of the army and I put on my blue jeans and my t-shirt was—and I've stuck to it. Even though I told you what I did, I didn't have to because basically I worked up until three or four years ago. I mean, I just didn't collect any money. I worked all my life, okay? My thing was, in all my time in the army I never lived on post. I never lived where the officers lived. So obviously I was not living high on the hog, and yet I have met some of the most fantastic people in this world. And I love to find and accept the beauty even in the worst person. And it's there. And it's not me that has to find it, it's them that has to find it. And they'll find it, and it's there.

But anyhow, I wouldn't give up this experience. Never. Never, never, never, never. There's been a lot of tears. There's been heartbreaks. I've lost a lot of friends. A lot of my guys are gone. It's very sad when you look at the army nurse—we get a newsletter *[The Connection]*. It used to be every month, now it's every quarter. And it's very sad because you don't know most of these people, so you skim through the front as to who might still be mentioned as retired but they did something, and you go to the back, to Parade Rest [obituary section] and find out who you know.

TS: Right.

BJ: And then you go to Parade Rest for the Special, and the ages are getting a little less now, but those are the women who are still alive, who are a hundred, a hundred and one, ninety-nine, ninety-eight, have served in Bataan, have served with the French—they all—for them, they always have. Because it will say Lieutenant So-and-So. Well, you figure, "Well, there's a young buck." And then you see: Ninety-eight years old, died in such-and-such a place, served as—with—whatever. And I say to myself, "We were a proud, proud people." And I guess I'm still waiting—not just for the Army Nurse Corps—you asked me what I feel about patriotism and the like—I'm waiting for the Americans and those that are leading the military now to find that pride again. I still have it. I know that everybody in

my VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] and everybody that I have served with that I still keep in touch with, and even most of those that are serving now, have it. But when they come home, they're forgotten. They really are. I started giving to Wounded Warrior because I figured, man, that's fantastic—until I found out how much goes to the wounded warrior, how much goes to the advertisement, how much goes to those who do the advertising, and how much goes to the soldiers.

[Wounded Warrior Project is a charity and veterans organization that offers a variety of programs and services for wounded veterans of the military actions following 11 September 2001. In January 2016, it was reported that only 60% of revenue was spent on programs to help veterans]

TS: So there's just a small portion of it.

BJ: Yes.

TS: We need some last words from you. What's the last thing you want to say, BJ?

BJ: You are not going to get home before dark.

TS: [chuckles]

BJ: I hope you have good lights—

TS: I'm pretty sure that's true but that's alright.

BJ: —and good high beams.

TS: Alright. Well, let's go look at some pictures. What do you say?

BJ: Oh, I'll be glad to show you some pictures.

TS: Well, thank you for the interview.

BJ: Well, thank you for—I swear to God, don't let them open them archives for at least fifty years, because I don't know if God will play a joke on me, but as long as I'm walking, talking, standing, I want to be His, down here doing whatever it is I'm supposed because I figure He's got something for me to do.

TS: [chuckles] Okay.

[End of Interview]