

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Karen McKay

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: August 10, 2015

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is August 10, and my name is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the home of Karen McKay in Leicester, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina of Greensboro. Karen, would you like to state your name the way you'd like it to be on your collection?

KM: Karen McKay.

TS: Karen McKay, okay. Well, Karen, thanks for having me in your home. It was a lovely lunch too. I appreciate that.

KM: You're welcome.

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

KM: I was born in Nebraska, June [8,] 1941, six months before the War [World War II]—capitalized—that changed all of our lives. My mother says I sat up for the first time when the day Pearl Harbor was bombed [December 7, 1941].

TS: Is that right? Yeah. Do you have any siblings?

KM: No, I've got—she remarried after the war, and I have two half-brothers and half-sisters who I consider brothers and sisters. They're the only family I've got.

TS: I know we talked a little bit about where you grew up. You only lived in Nebraska until you were six years old.

KM: Yes.

TS: Do you remember anything from your time in Nebraska?

KM: Very little, except that my grandparents were really warm people. My mother was very Teu—My mother—My grandmother, I thought she [unclear] mother. She was—My grandmother was Teutonic, but I knew that she loved me. She was a little more of a distant person. But my first memory in my life was when she was rocking me when I was an infant, because I just have that image burned in my mind of that old black rocking chair that she used, and the lamp that always hung over her left shoulder because that's where she did her quilting, and looking up into her face, and that's the earliest memory I have.

TS: Yeah. That's pretty early. [both chuckle]

KM: It is, it is.

TS: Not many people have that early of a memory.

KM: But when my kids were little, when my youngest daughter was still in a backpack—when I was still packing her around Germany—I took them to Neuschwanstein Castle, I took them to Linderhof Castle [Palace]; all of Mad Ludwig's [Ludwig II] castles. And they were, at the time, I think two years old and six months old, and years and years later when they were in high school I bought a book of Mad King Ludwig's castles and sat down with them and Shawnie said, "I've been there. There was a swan there in a cave, and she hadn't even turned the page yet to see the swan boat in the grotto of Linderhof.

TS: She remembered it.

KM: She was six months old.

TS: Oh, wow, that's amazing.

KM: And she remembered having been to a place where there was a swan boat in a cave; that was the grotto. And the memories she has at Neuschwanstein were amazing, because it had the first central heating in the world; the engineering was phenomenal. The kitchen fires lit underfloor pipe—water pipes through all those stories of that historic castle. That castle, of course, was the model for the Disneyland castles.

TS: Pretty neat; pretty neat.

KM: So yeah, we have—we are capable of retaining very, very early memories.

TS: I guess so. Well, then, you moved from Nebraska after your father died? Is that right?

KM: Well, my father was wounded in the Northern France campaign.

TS: Okay.

KM: And—

TS: During World War II?

[Recording Paused]

KM: Okay.

TS: Alright, you ready? Okay, so where did you end up after you were in Nebraska?

KM: Well, my mother was in California after my father died and—pursuing a marine whose family was friends with my mother's family, and my grandparents, when I was six years old, for reasons I have never fathomed, sent me to live with her, which wasn't exactly what she wanted [chuckles] in her life at that time. But anyway, that's when I went to California, was when I was six years old.

TS: Okay. Where did you live?

KM: Well, we lived first in East Oakland, then in Oakland, then in Berkeley, and she married my stepfather when they were living—we were living in Oakland, and moved to Berkeley.

TS: Okay.

KM: He was a Marine vet, World War II, fought also in the South Pacific with the 2nd Marines [Regiment], and was going to University of California on the GI Bill, and then got an MBA [Master of Business Administration].

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: That was an interesting time for post war, with a lot happening in that area—

KM: Yeah.

TS: —for different types of contracting work and lots of education.

KM: Well, he went to work the U.S. Forest Service.

TS: Okay.

KM: And he was on the administrative side, but more than once he came home from a fire with his eyebrows burned off, because the fires got that close. But he was there to pay the firefighters, to do the paperwork, and all of that.

TS: Did your mom work outside the home, too, or was she—

KM: Very little. Her goal in life was not to have to work outside the home.

TS: Okay.

KM: She was a secretary up until—at the VA [Veterans Administration] till she married him, and then after that she did not work a job until he retired from the Forest Service, and he read an article that "women that did not work outside the home became alcoholics," or something like that. [chuckles] So he insisted that she go out and get a job. I think it was because he wanted her out of the house so that he could—He took up watch making in his retirement, because he had a—when he was called up for Korea they discovered that he had a very badly damaged heart from the South Pacific experience; yellow fever and malaria and all the jungle diseases that these men were subject to in the South Pacific. And his heart was so badly damaged that his unit went to Korea without him, and he was a DI [drill instructor] at [Marine Corps Base] Camp Pendleton for the duration of Korea.

TS: Do you remember anything about the Korean War, as a young girl?

KM: Very little. I remember once—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: You would have been about nine or ten, I guess.

KM: —we were sitting in the living room and the radio was turned on and tuned, and we were all sitting there waiting, because the President of the United States was going to speak, and I remember ask—saying, "Why are we—Why are we assembled here?" [chuckles] "Why are we gathered here?"

And my stepfather said—[let's call?] him Charles—because for all intents and purposes he was the only father I knew—he said, "Because the president's about to make an address."

And I said, "Oh, him. He took [General Douglas] MacArthur out of Korea."

Now, I was ten years old. I had to have heard that from somebody else.

[On 11 April 1951, U.S. President Harry S. Truman relieved General of the Army Douglas MacArthur of his command, after MacArthur made public statements which contradicted the Truman administration's policies.]

TS: Sure.

KM: Because I couldn't possible have known anything about it. But I learned a valuable lesson from that because my stepfather about—remember he was a marine drill instructor—he about took my head off. He raised me like a Marine boot recruit; I wasn't raised like a girl. He about took my head off, and he said, "He's still the president and you owe him that respect." And I never forgot that, and to this day, no matter how much I despise the government we've got or the president we've got, I have always respected the office of the presidency; not necessarily the man in the office.

TS: The position.

KM: But I revere the office of the presidency, and I've been in the Oval Office, when Ronald Reagan was president. I've been in the Oval Office and I saw what reverence Ronald Reagan treated that office. He didn't even take off his suit jacket. And the current president sits on the [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt desk—on the Resolute desk. The desk in the Oval Office in from the ship the [HMS] *Resolute*, and he sits on it in his short sleeves, and without shoes with his feet on a priceless antique coffee table. But I saw how Reagan treated that office and that was how my stepfather taught me to treat that office. Not the Oval Office but the office of the presidency.

TS: Right. I understand. How was it for you—

KM: That's one of the few good memories I have of my childhood. We won't delve into the other ones.

TS: Did you want to talk at all about school? Did you like school at all?

KM: I loved school. I think probably because it got me out of my house.

TS: Yeah?

KM: I did not have, what you would call a happy, stable childhood. I spent a lot of time when I was home hiding in the tops of trees because they couldn't find me. I'd go up the highest tree in the neighborhood with a book and sit there until I had to come down.

TS: [chuckles]

KM: But—

TS: You were a big reader?

KM: Look around you.

TS: Yeah.

KM: [chuckles]

TS: Well, still, I see, but even as a young girl?

KM: Oh, yeah.

TS: What was it that you liked; what kind of books?

KM: I wore out the libraries. I absolutely exhausted every town's library where we lived, and I'm still a big reader. I don't have one of those e-reader things because I like the feel of a book. When the EMP hits and all electronics are wiped out I'll still have my books.

TS: What the EMP?

KM: Electromagnetic pulse.

TS: Okay. [chuckles] Sorry. Got you.

KM: If a nuclear bomb of a certain type is set off at a certain altitude over the United States it will fry every computer chip in its area of effectiveness. You don't know about EMPs?

TS: Well, I wasn't placing it in that context. I'll be good because I have lots of books too.

KM: [chuckles]

TS: Was there anything in particular you like reading as a child?

KM: Horse books. I was—I was—

TS: Oh, okay. Is that where you got your love for horses?

KM: —an absolute horse nut when I was a little kid, and I still am. I still have a lot of horse books. But I grew up on Walter Farley [American author] and *Misty* [*of Chincoteague*, by Marguerite Henry], and all those books. I went to school once—one childhood memory I have is when I was in the fourth grade—third or fourth grade—my grandparents gave me

a Hopalong Cassidy outfit. You know who Hopalong Cassidy [fictional cowboy created by author Clarence E. Mulford]—

TS: I do.

KM: —with his pearl handle—pearl budded—

TS: Pistols?

KM: —pistols. So I got to school in my Hopalong Cassidy outfit, with my pearl handled pistols, cross draw, like Hopalong Cassidy wore them, and I got sent home. Not because of the guns, but because girls weren't allowed to wear pants in school in those days. [chuckling] The guns were okay. If I wore a skirt with my Hopalong Cassidy outfit I would have been fine.

TS: Was there a particular subject that you enjoyed above others?

KM: You mean besides horses?

TS: Besides horses.

KM: I mean, I even read Xenophon [of Athens] when I was about nine or ten years old. Do you know what Xenophon is?

TS: I do not.

KM: He was an ancient Greek general back in the classical days who wrote the first book on horsemanship [*On Horsemanship*] in history, and it's still a classic. I still have it. I have it in English, but—because I would not be able to read the Greek of his time; I'd have to read it translated to modern Greek.

TS: A translation. Yeah. Did you have teachers that perhaps were mentors at all?

KM: I had one good teacher in elementary school, her name was Mrs. Dunlap, and she was kind, she was generous, she was sweet. I had one teacher that I had twice, in the fourth grade and the fifth grade, I think, or fourth grade and sixth grades, something like that, who was just a nightmare, and I think she scarred me for life. Her name was Miss Uncle; U-N-C-L-E. But—And then in high school—we moved so often that I never got to be part of a clique because I never started at a new school in the beginning of the school year, and you know how kids are. I always—And I never started at the beginning of a quarter or semester; it was always right in the middle of everything, and it's really hard to make friends that way, and it's even harder to catch up with the curriculum because there wasn't a uniform curriculum. I completely missed driver training and poetry in high school, for instance.

TS: Yeah.

KM: And I went from one school where I was doing algebra, and the next school I was put in advanced geometry and I'd never had basic geometry, and I was completely lost the whole year; I could not begin to fathom or grasp what was going on, and I nearly failed that class.

TS: I can see it would be tough to do that.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

KM: I don't know how I passed it. [chuckles]

TS: It would be tough to get through that.

KM: Yeah.

TS: Well, did you—

KM: And I really missed the poetry education because I liked to appreciate poetry. If it's not [Henry Wadsworth] Longfellow—"Listen my children and you shall hear, the midnight ride of Paul—" It's got to have a beat like a galloping horse for me to retain it.

TS: To go along with it, yeah. Well, you are a child, then, of the fifties and sixties, really, so do you have any memories of growing up in the fifties? Did you go to any dances or—

KM: No, I wasn't allowed to date in high school.

TS: No?

KM: My first date was my high school prom.

TS: Okay.

KM: I had no social skills. I wasn't allowed to go to school games or school dances, or the movies or anything. My stepfather was very strict. And so, my very first date, which apparently, my grandmother and my mother insisted I be allowed to go to, was my high school prom, and I just—I didn't know how to dance, I didn't know how to behave. I could square dance, but that's not the type of dancing you do at your high school prom.

TS: Right.

KM: And I ran away from home that night.

TS: Oh, you did?

KM: I—

TS: Where'd you run to?

KM: I left my poor date sitting at a table, excused myself to go to the girls' room, I never came back. I had my cowboy hat and boots in my locker, and I went and got them, and out back there was a pickup truck loaded with runaway kids waiting for me—kids from all over California—and an old cowboy named Smoky was driving, and off we went on the rodeo circuit for the summer. That was all we did. There was no sex, there was no drinking, there was no anything. Well, Smoky was a beer alcoholic and—but other than that we kids weren't allowed to touch booze or each other.

TS: How old were you when this was going on?

KM: High school; eighteen, seventeen years old. So, I spent the summer on the rodeo circuit.

TS: Did your folks know where you were?

KM: No.

TS: No?

KM: No. I had been told that I was forbidden to go to college; that I was to go to the local community college to learn secretarial skills. They wouldn't allow—The only—Only twice in high school did I get to take an elective I wanted to take, and that was Biology and Art. Otherwise I had to take typing and other secretarial classes, and I took four years of typing, which has kept me in good stead as a writer, but I learned everything I needed to learn in the first year of typing, and I probably could have learned it in the first week of typing. But I had four years of typing, because their goal for me was to be a GSE [government-sponsored enterprise] government clerk typist. Although my mother thought because I was so creative that maybe I could be a nurse—occupational therapist aide. Not the occupational therapist, but the aide to one.

TS: The aide, I see.

KM: I secretly enrolled in Fresno State [California State University, Fresno].

TS: Oh, you did?

KM: I was accepted on my father's GI Bill, and I did all that secretly, and started school on time and graduated.

TS: Yeah.

KM: But I didn't—I had no contact with my family for about two years.

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

KM: Rodeo.

TS: What'd you do in the rodeo?

KM: I—Well, on the college circuit I could only calf tie [roping] and barrel race. On the amateur circuit there were no rules; I rode bulls and bare backs. And I bull dogged one time just to prove to myself I could do it, or see if I could do it.

TS: What's that?

KM: Bull dogging?

TS: Yes.

KM: You don't know rodeo?

TS: Well, you're telling the whole audience.

KM: [chuckles] Okay. Well, bull dogging is when they let a big steer with big horns out of the chute, there's a cowboy on the right side of it to keep it going straight, you ride along on the left side of the steer, lean down, grab the horns, and you let him drag you off your horse, and then you're—you've got to stop that steer and then flip him upside down. And I did it by God, and in reasonable time. But his horn went through the belt loop on my belt, and when you bull dog you've got—your left leg it turned way back and your right leg is being a break and your left leg is your lever for flipping a bull.

TS: Okay.

KM: And his horn went right into the soft side of my left foot; ruptured every bone, blood vessel, muscle, ligament, tissue. They had to cut my cowboy boot off me.

TS: Were your rodeo days over then or did you keep going?

KM: No, no, just wrapped it up and kept going.

TS: Kept going. You did that about two years?

KM: Four years.

TS: Four years?

KM: Yeah, it was—I sort of majored in agriculture and minored in rodeo. [chuckles]

TS: What kind of places did you go for the rodeo around there?

KM: I showed cattle, and I worked my way through school partially—well, I had the GI Bill but that didn't cover everything, so I worked my way through working bull sales, showing cattle; working the bull sales all over the west coast getting—

TS: Were there any other women doing—

KM: Oh, yeah.

TS: There were?

KM: Well, there were only three of us in the ag [agricultural] program, and my counselor told me the only reason a girl should study agriculture is so she can be a good farmer's wife, or a good rancher's wife.

TS: Is that why you were studying it?

KM: Nope.

TS: What were you studying it to do?

KM: Because that's what I wanted to do with my life.

TS: Yeah.

KM: And then I found when I graduated that, sure enough, I couldn't get a job because they didn't hire girls to do that stuff.

TS: What about on the rodeo, were there other girls doing that kind of stuff too?

KM: No, I didn't know any others who were stupid enough to get on a bull. [both chuckle]

TS: But the other—

KM: Not very much, no, because it was very much a sex identity thing back there; I guess they call it gender identity now; it's improper English. So there weren't very many. Barrel racing, yes. Barrel racing was exclusively a girl's sport, and calf—

TS: So that was, like, the most popular—

KM: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

KM: And calf tying was exclusively a girl's sport. We weren't allowed to rope calves, we were only allowed to tie a calf that was already roped, and that was on the college circuit. But there were no limitations on the amateur circuit, and on the professional circuit women couldn't do these things. Now they can, and there's actually a women's rodeo circuit now.

TS: When did you graduate from college?

KM: I graduated in '64.

TS: Sixty-four.

KM: And went and taught school for a couple of years before I joined the army.

TS: You had been in college when John F. [Fitzpatrick] Kennedy was shot, and the whole Bay of Pigs, and all that.

[President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on Friday, 22 November 1963, while riding in a motorcade in Dallas' Dealey Plaza]

[The Bay of Pigs was a failed military invasion of Cuba undertaken by the CIA-sponsored paramilitary group Brigade 2506 on 17 April 1961]

KM: I was.

TS: What do you remember about that time?

KM: I remember nothing about the Bay of Pigs. I've written about it a lot since then as a writer, but at the time I had no knowledge of it. I was majoring in rodeo. But I sure remember when he was—everybody remembers when he was assassinated.

TS: What do you remember, for yourself?

KM: Only the shock that everybody felt, and then going out in the street and waiting six hours for my husband to show up with the truck, [chuckles] because it didn't bother him, so when he was let out of class he went off and did his own thing. But no, it was—yeah, it was a very dismaying time for the whole country.

TS: Had you been a supporter of President Kennedy?

KM: I had no political interest what so ever.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: No? You were doing your rodeo.

KM: I was doing rodeo.

TS: I got you. Then you worked for a little bit.

KM: I was a patriotic American, but I had—

TS: But your worldview wasn't there yet.

KM: I was totally oblivious to everything to do with politics.

TS: Right. You graduated in '64, and then you said you worked as a teacher? Is that what you said?

KM: Yeah, I taught school for a couple of years. Well, I worked as a reporter for year; \$67.50 a week, and no expenses. I had to drive all over the county to cover my stories and they didn't cover my car expenses.

TS: What kind of stories did they let you cover?

KM: Oh, PTA [parent-teacher association] meetings and youth club picnics and [chuckles] stuff like that.

TS: Women's stuff, women's issues?

KM: I guess so, they probably were, looking back. Although, I did get to write a really great story on a hundred and two year old Indian who drove a twelve horse stagecoach in Columbia [California].

TS: Oh, really?

KM: In Columbia; it's an old gold-mining town. They didn't allow cars in Columbia, and so people would fly in there in their private planes, and then he would pick them up at the airport in this big stagecoach and drive them into town. And so, I got to sit up there on the seat with him, interviewing him for this story for the *Tuolumne Gazette* [*Union Democrat*?].

TS: *Tuolumne Gazette*?

KM: Yes.

TS: That's who you worked for?

KM: And he let me have the reins.

TS: Oh, nice.

KM: I was freshly graduated from college, I think I was twenty years old, and I got to drive this twelve horse team. That was one of the big experiences of my whole life.

TS: That would be quite an experience.

KM: But this old Indian was a hundred and two years old and still driving a twelve horse team.

TS: Yeah.

KM: That was an inspiration that has turned me—because I'm seventy-four now, and I keep thinking of that old boy. [both chuckle]

TS: "I've got to keep up with him."

KM: Absolutely.

TS: Well, you had started to say you were driving a particular type of vehicle—I cut you off; I didn't mean to—when you went to these interviews.

KM: I had a very ancient VW Bug [Volkswagen Beetle] convertible, with a ragged, ragged ragtop; ran on one cylinder; [chuckles] it'd go "putt putt." And I lived in New Walk Village, which was at almost fifteen thousand feet [altitude], and so—I was working down in Sonora, and I'd go home in these snow storms, with snow piling up, and the windshield wipers didn't work very well, and I had to keep getting out and [unclear].

TS: They iced over pretty good, didn't they?

KM: [chuckling]

TS: Those VWs. I remember that.

KM: Yeah.

TS: Well, you're working there, and then how did you end up getting a commission in the army? How did that happen?

KM: Well, I started substitute teaching because I couldn't get a full teaching job at the time.

TS: Where were you teaching at?

KM: I was actually a full time substitute. I almost never had a day off. The whole county—The whole Tuolumne County.

TS: Through the county system?

KM: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

KM: Two—A lot of them were two-room schools. There was one where the—they'd lost a teacher and—

[Extraneous conversation about rain redacted]

TS: Well, how did you enjoy teaching?

KM: It was okay. When I got this six month gig in this one school—Actually, I think it was eight months because they'd lost a teacher, and it was a two-room schoolhouse, so they gave me the kindergarten through fourth grade. It was the worst possible match. I couldn't relate, I couldn't connect, I couldn't—So I traded with the teacher who had the fourth through the eighth grade because she liked the younger kids, and I had a ball with the fourth through the eighth grade because they had minds now that were connecting with things, and they were interested in learning, and it was—

TS: More comfortable with that level of teaching.

KM: Yeah. And then I—whenever I taught in high schools it was another challenge, but because I'd been a bull rider I could handle those kids. [both chuckle] But I can't imagine

what it would be like to teach today, with the rules that they have. The rules of engagement for teachers today are worse than the rules of engagement for soldiers; the things they cannot do; and the things that they must do; and the stuff that they must teach; and the stuff they must not teach. I couldn't do it today. Maybe in a private school, because I—one way or another I've been a teacher most of my life, and in the army I was an instructor, I've taught Sunday schools, I've taught firearms classes. I taught cooking and sewing, believe it or not, during my divorce.

TS: You got the whole range, from firearms to cooking.

KM: Yeah. [chuckling]

TS: You can't really do better than that, right? Well, so you were teaching, and then what happened to put you on a different course?

KM: Well, I had always wanted to join the army, and when I was a little girl people would ask me, "What do you want to do when you grow up, little girl?"

And this is from the time I could talk, and I'd say, "I want to be in the army."

"Oh, nice girls don't join the army."

So I got conditioned into this, that nice girls don't join the army. That was always the response, "Nice girls don't join the army." And as I got older it became, "Well, you know what kind of girls join the army." And so, instead I ended up getting married. First big mistake of my life.

And one day when I was teaching up there in the High Sierras [mountain range]—for some reason I wasn't teaching that day, and I remembered later it was because it was the middle of a holiday, because I found that out when I got to San Francisco—but anyway, the announcer on the radio, at 4:00 in the morning—I was making bread—the announcer said, "The U.S. Army has just announced it will accept married women as commissioned officers."

I stuck that bread dough in a snowbank, dug my car out from under the snow, and headed down to the [Central] Valley.

TS: Right then?

KM: Right then. Well, I had to run upstairs and put on my—I had two suits that I wore for teaching, and I traded them back and forth; both of them I made. And I had a couple of summer dresses I made.

So I put on my suit and I drive to the valley, and I get to the valley at 6:00 in the morning and everything's closed. And of course, there's that mattress-like fog you drive through in the San Joaquin Valley. You come down out of the pristine clear mountains and you see down there and it looks like you're just about to drive into a mattress, and you get down there and you have to drive along with your car door open and your fingers dragging on the blacktop to make sure that you're still on hard surface. It's that—

TS: As thick as pea soup, I think, right?

KM: Worse.

TS: Worse.

KM: It was like driving through a mattress. Have you ever driven through San Joaquin Valley in fog?

TS: I have not.

KM: It's an experience you'll never forget.

TS: I probably won't have that [chuckles] opportunity.

KM: So anyway, I get to the recruiting office in the San—in the valley—I think it was Modesto or Merced I went to—and it was closed, of course. And I said I've got a couple of hours before everything opens so I'll drive on to San Francisco. I found the recruiting station in San Francisco, and it was in a little strip mall—one of the early strip malls, it was actually in Alameda—and went up to the first door. I'd always seen myself as wearing blue, so I went first to the air force—they wore blue—and the air force office was closed. Rattled the doorknob, a sign on the door said: Closed due to a federal holiday. I wasn't even aware there was a federal holiday. At least I—Now, I—in retrospect.

So I go to the next blue uniform and that's the navy, and they're closed. Well, I was raised by a marine, so the marine office was the next office in the row, and I went there and they were closed. And so, I said, well, my father was in the army, and I knew very little about him still at that time, so I went and rattled the door of the army office and it was closed, the blinds were closed and everything, so I said, "Oh, hell." I never heard that radio newscast ever again—that news item on the news—never again did I ever hear that again, and I've always listened to the news religiously. That was back when it was only on three times a day.

TS: Right.

KM: And I started walking across the parking lot, back to my car, very—my dream was crushed. I would never have gone back again, but I heard a voice behind me calling, "Miss! Miss! Can I help you?" And here was this man in a uniform chasing me across the parking lot. And he took me back in the office, thirty minutes later I was in the United States Army. [chuckles]

TS: Well, what was it—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

KM: He was a sergeant doing—catching up on some paperwork after—

TS: Yeah, just happened to be there.

KM: —on a day off, being a good sergeant, and he just happened to be in there, he saw me through the blinds rattling the doorknob, and—

TS: Do you remember what kind of conversation you had with him?

KM: Nope, just, "I want to join the army."

TS: That's it? It's kind of a blur? [chuckles]

KM: Yeah. Yeah. It really did, because this was in December. It was probably the Thanksgiving holiday, come to think of it, because all through December I was going through all the interviews and testing, because they had to really hurry because the next WAC [Women's Army Corps] class—officer class started in January, and if I missed that I would have to wait until July, I think, and they didn't want to lose this pigeon [opportunity].

TS: So they were getting you all—

KM: So I had about three weeks' time to prepare my family and to pack up and get ready to leave.

TS: What did your family think about this?

KM: My mother—I phoned my mother and told her and she said, "Karen, do you really think you know what you're doing?" [chuckles]

I told my husband, whom I was trying to leave anyway. He was a—As I said, that marriage was a terrible mistake, and he was only home when he ran out of money and came home—He'd take a three or four day job so he'd get enough money to go off on another three day drunk. I told him that I had joined the army and I was leaving him, and he said, "Well, you know what that makes you?"

I said, "What does it make me?"

He says, "You're a whore and you're a lesbian."

I said—Well, I didn't know what a lesbian was at that time; I'd led a very sheltered life. He said, "It makes you a whore."

I went off and within a few weeks I was—within three weeks I was at Fort Benning—Fort John McClellan, Alabama. And the rest is history. [both chuckle]

TS: Well, tell me a little bit about those first few days and getting to McClellan.

KM: I don't even remember how I got there.

TS: You just were there.

KM: It was just such a blur.

TS: Right.

KM: We couldn't—They—We were told we could not have POVs—personally owned vehicles—although some of the gals did bring their own cars. So I know I flew.

TS: It would have been '67?

KM: Nineteen sixty-seven.

TS: Nineteen sixty-seven.

KM: January of 1967.

TS: Now, were you aware of Vietnam [War] at all?

KM: Oh yeah, that was why I joined.

TS: Okay.

KM: Because I was so disgusted by all of the anti-war demonstrations, all the draft dodgers. My husband was one. He had managed to manipulate the system to where he went as a reserve—army reservist, went to helicopter school, got a pilot—got his helicopter license, because he said, "While all of these other assholes are going to Vietnam and getting themselves killed, I'm going to be sucking up all the good civilian jobs as a pilot."

Well, when I left him he had nobody to support him anymore, so he went active duty too. And I thought I was rid of the bastard and he shows up at Fort McClellan shortly before I graduate. And they called me from the CQ—the Charge of Quarters called me and said there was a man downstairs wanting to see me and that his name was "blank."

I said, "Oh, no." I was putting on nail polish at the time and so I waited for it to dry, hoping that he would be gone by the time I came down.

TS: He would leave by—

KM: But, no. And then when I graduated they—we were allowed to fill out our requests. We were allowed to make three requests for where we—our dream assignments were.

TS: Right.

KM: I put down "anywhere but the South," because I'd followed him to Fort Wolters [Texas] and to Fort Miserable—I followed him to Miserable Wells, Texas, [joking reference to Mineral Wells, Texas] and then to Wolters and other places, and I didn't like the South at all. That was back when there were two drinking fountains, one for "colored" and one for "white"—

TS: Segregated.

KM: —and there were three restrooms: men, women, and colored; when grocery stores had doors for "whites" and doors for "colored." I did not like anything that I saw about the South in those days. In fact, I had—When I got down there—and he didn't want me following him there and I found out why when I got to Miserable Wells, he had a girlfriend, and he had to drop her when I showed up on the scene. I learned about that from his buddies.

But anyway, when we got to Alabama I volunteered to teach school, and I went down to meet with the school superintendent, because we were going to be there for six months, and I—he was thrilled. He didn't have a single college graduate among his teachers in the school system; not a single college graduate; [chuckles] not one. And everything was going great until I said, "I'd like to teach in the black school."

Well, he leaned back and he started to pick his teeth with a toothpick, and he put his feet up on the desk, and he says, "Well, Missy, I think there might be a problem with that."

Well, I had a cross burned on my lawn that night, I had fire crackers set off under my bedroom window.

TS: Where were you at this time?

KM: Alabama, and I can't think of the name of the town now. I just—

TS: You're at Fort McClellan?

KM: No, that was the WAC center, this was another post in Alabama. It was the helicopter school. [Fort Rucker?]

TS: Was this before you joined or after you joined?

KM: Before.

TS: Before. Oh, when you were with your husband?

KM: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

KM: And the name of the town has just gone out—it's my head injury.

TS: It's okay.

KM: I told you I'm running[?] amnesia [chuckles], and I forget sometimes key words. But anyway, my husband came to my apartment that night, because he was living on post and I was living in an apartment in town, and he said, "Look, I got called in by the commandant today and they told me that if you didn't knock off this nigger shit I'm going to get kicked out of flight school." Just like that; so many words. They had threatened him—to expel him from flight school right before he was to graduate if I didn't stop messing around with the blacks in town; wanting to teach school.

There was another classmate of his who was black who had a lovely wife with three darling little boys—so well behaved, twins and another one—and she'd followed him to Alabama, and I tried to help her find an apartment. Well, actually I was living in these little, tiny townhouses. [unclear] townhouses, they were one story little apartments with—each with its own outside door. And there was an empty one—

TS: Like a condo?

KM: That sort of thing, yeah; a garden condo type thing. And there was an empty one next to me, and so I rented it for her, and when she showed up, this very nice black lady with her three little black boys, they said, "I'm sorry, but that apartment's suddenly not available," and that was when I got the word that if I didn't stop messing around like this in Alabama, that he would be kicked out of flight school.

TS: Did you stop?

KM: I did.

TS: Yeah?

KM: Yeah.

TS: So years later then, you're at Fort McClellan, you're going through the officer training, what was that like?

KM: Well, unfortunately I have a rebellious spirit and a very highly [unclear] sensitive common sense justice [chuckles]—I have a very low tolerance level for chicken-shit [worthless or contemptible]. So if somebody had just told me that this was all part of the plan, that they're trying to frustrate you, they're trying to make you mad, they're trying to throw all kinds of crap at you that doesn't make any sense whatsoever, just roll with it

and smile, I'd have done a whole lot better. And instead I was—I was the one who was saying, "That makes no sense whatsoever."

TS: Right.

KM: "Why do we have to do this? It doesn't—"

TS: You're pushing back against everything, sort of?

KM: Yeah. I'd come off the rodeo circuit. You know what our PT [physical training] was? We wore these little blue bloomers, white anklets—ankle socks, and white tennis shoes, and our PT was standing in a circle doing finger exercises, like this. [demonstrates] That was our PT. When we should have been out on obstacle courses, [chuckles] doing something really physical, and—

TS: It wasn't challenging physically, then, is that what you're saying?

KM: No, it was insulting.

TS: Insulting?

KM: Yeah. So I got boarded three times. I survived three boards in officer's basic.

TS: What happens?

KM: That has to be—That has to be a record.

TS: When you're boarded, what happens?

KM: They're trying to throw you out of the service. They ask you—You have to stand there and face all of these people in uniform, all these senior officers who are glaring at you like you're filth, you're a worm, you're—they don't even want to be in your presence, and you have to justify your existence, and why the army needs you, and why you want to stay in the army. And somehow I talked my way through all three boards, and there were a lot of women who weren't there when we came back in the afternoon from our day of training. I'd come back and there'd be an empty cubicle, an empty bed.

TS: Was there anything about the training, besides having to follow Mickey Mouse [slang for "having little value, senseless] rules, that was challenging for you?

KM: No.

TS: No. Not physically, not emotionally?

KM: Not physically, not intellectually.

TS: Emotionally?

KM: No. Well, emotionally, yes, because there was so much crap. [both chuckle]

TS: Well, that part, yeah.

KM: The food was all very fattening, and they—one of our assignments was to inspect the kitchen, you'll play kitchen officer, because that's something second lieutenants end up doing. Well, I actually did, and I found all these violations of sanitation and hygiene, and I wrote up my report and that didn't go over very well at all. They said, "That's not what you were there for."

I said, "Well, that's what they told us to do, was to inspect the kitchen."

"You weren't supposed to find anything wrong." [chuckles]

TS: It's just, like, another thing to check off, really.

KM: Yeah. And I had a science background in college, I was an ag major.

TS: You made it through the training, barely apparently.

KM: Barely. I was the honor graduate in academics, and I was at the bottom of the [chuckling] [unclear].

TS: Of the other scale.

KM: Yes.

TS: That's an interesting mix.

KM: Well, academics is objective.

TS: Yes.

KM: The rest of it is subjective.

TS: Right.

KM: Yeah, we had to fill out bayonet sheets on each other. You know what a bayonet sheet is?

TS: Go ahead and explain it.

KM: It must have been about halfway or two-thirds of the way through our training, we had to fill out a report on our classmates—what we thought of them—and this is when women get really vicious and catty and nasty, and my God, when they read the bayonet sheets on me I didn't recognize me.

TS: What kind of things were they saying?

KM: Oh, I can't even remember. It was just—they were nasty, they were petty, they were mean, and at best untrue. When I filled out my bayonet sheet I tried to be so objective and so careful and so—I think I did bayonet one woman who was the class stool pigeon. She was the one who was likely to spy on all the rest of us and report all the transgressions and anything any of us said wrong or did wrong. That woman was unbelievable flatulent. [both chuckle]

TS: Well, were you quest—

KM: And her name was Willow.

TS: Willow, there you go.

KM: Willow Swan, I think, was what—or Grace Swan, or something like that. It was some— And she was the most ungainly, unkempt person. If you can imagine somebody who could wear a uniform and look like a slob in it, and it—and you always knew when she was around.

TS: Were you questioning your decision to join at all?

KM: Never, never.

TS: No?

KM: Never. Never. Never ever ever, because this is what I wanted.

TS: Right.

KM: But it—what I wanted, I didn't know it meant being a WAC. I joined the army to fight in Vietnam, because I was so disgusted by all these draft dodgers, and the—

TS: Did you think you'd ever have a chance to fight?

KM: Oh, I thought so. The sergeant who recruited—signed my recruiting papers didn't tell me that I had to be a WAC and I couldn't do any of those fun things. Recruiters lie to everybody; that's what recruiters do. They want a body in uniform to fill their quotas. So they'll tell you anything.

TS: Where did you end up going after your—

KM: Fort Benning [Georgia].

TS: Fort Benning. And what kind of job did they put you in there to start?

KM: Well, initially I didn't even have a job for about three months; I sat at home waiting for an assignment. I had all these interviews. They interviewed me to be a general's aide. Well, there'd never been a WAC general's aide, ever, but they interviewed me for it, and they decided it would be—I didn't know I was pretty. My mother always told me I was ugly and nobody'd ever want me and that's what I believed. And so, I was just absolutely dumbfounded when they told me that I was turned down as a general's aide because I was too pretty and people would talk, because I'd have to travel with him.

And then they considered me for the protocol office; same problem. They couldn't have a pretty WAC in that job. And I could not understand it because I'd look in the mirror and I'd see what my mother had always told me I was; ugly and undesirable and clumsy and stupid and [chuckles] all these things.

I finally wound up at Central Troop Command in one of those catchall kind of jobs. I don't even remember what my first job title was, but I do remember ninety-two additional duties, including athletic officer.

TS: Oh, is that right? Had you had any experience with any kind of—well, the rodeo is pretty athletic.

KM: Yeah, but not—I've never had any experience with formal athletics.

TS: Okay.

KM: I did play softball in high school and college, and I played basketball. I played all the sports that were included in our sports program, and I was good at all of them, I was very athletic.

TS: But now you're in charge of putting together programs and things, or something like that?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

KM: And I was on the swimming team. Yeah, and that was—So anyway, by the second day in the command, after I got all my paperwork filled out and I report on the second day, and the commanding officer called me in—Colonel Davis, God rest him—I'm sure he's dead now—he wore only one ribbon and it was the Medal of Honor, and he was a baseball

fanatic—so he calls me in and he says, "Lieutenant? I understand you're our new baseball officer."

I said, "Yes, Sir, I think I am, Sir."

He said—gave me one order—"I want a winning team and I want a winning team by the next game. And I want the dependents out there watching and rooting for our team." He'd been the—He'd only been there a week before I had and he'd already gone to a game and we lost badly, and no dependents had ever come out to see it; just the staff officers who dutifully follow the boss wherever they go.

So I was taken downstairs to meet my athletics NCO [non-commissioned officer], who was an old World War II veteran, Korean [War] veteran, and he's down in the supply room, and here are these rows and rows and rows of football helmets and stuff. But the army had just outlawed playing touch—tackle football because of people getting hurt. Can you imagine the army saying, "We're not going to do it anymore because people get hurt"? I mean, the whole purpose of the army is to get tough, break things, and kill people, and you've got to be prepared to do it [unclear].

But anyway, the army had just banned football, but here's all this football gear in there. And so, the—my boss who had taken me down there to meet my new NCO left, and I turned around and the old man had dropped his trousers and was exposing himself, and he said, "I ain't never took no orders from no woman and I ain't going to start now." [chuckles] That was my very first experience of authority.

TS: What'd you do?

KM: I walked out. I couldn't do anything. Back then a woman officer had no authority over any male whatsoever. Not administrative authority, not command authority, not supervisory authority. Men might work for her but that's only a technicality. If a man didn't—If an enlisted man did not salute an officer—a female officer, she couldn't do a thing about it. I couldn't do a thing about this little sergeant exposing himself. They told us if nobody sees it, if you're on a troop ship or a plane full of brigade prisoners and you wreck on a desert island and you are the only officer surviving and the only other survivors are all these brigade prisoners, all of whom have be busted and ranked back to buck private, you have no authority over them. The senior enlisted man among those brigade prisoners will take command of you as well as of the other men. It was—Talk about a catch-22.

[A catch-22 is a paradoxical situation from which an individual cannot escape because of contradictory rules. The term was coined by Joseph Heller, who used it in his 1961 novel *Catch-22*.]

TS: Right.

KM: [chuckles] So there wasn't anything I could do about it. So anyway, the next game comes up and I'm wondering, "How am I supposed to get the dependents out there? How am I supposed to coach this team?" Oh, the other thing about Colonel Davis was that he was a

real baseball nut, and in talking with me and interviewing me—I mean, he—I'm standing at attention in front of his desk looking four inches over his head at the wall, and answering questions like a robot. Well, he got out of me that my grandfather was a professional player.

"What's his name?"

I said, "Benjamin Harrison Sholl." He started quoting my grandfather's statistics to me.

TS: Oh, is that right?

KM: He knew them. He'd come—Colonel Davis had come from the Midwest and knew my grandfather's playing career. [chuckles] Can you imagine?

TS: That's a small world.

KM: So that really raised the stakes with me because now, genetically, I had to produce a winning team. Well, the funny thing was, the word got around very quickly that the new baseball coach and athletics officer was a pretty girl, and the women poured out in force to watch their husbands. [chuckles] I didn't have to do a thing. Thereafter every single game our command played was attended by almost every woman and child dependent of every player, and then some. And the—Hallelujah, we're getting more rain.

TS: Yeah.

KM: And our guys started winning. The morale went up and everything, and I was out there for every game, and rooting and—[chuckling]

TS: Now, did you have another job besides that? I mean, for like other duty?

KM: Yeah, they had a lot of fun with another of my ninety-two secondary duties, and that was reproduction officer.

TS: How did that go?

KM: I was in charge of the mimeograph [duplicating] machine, but the title was reproduction officer.

TS: That's an interesting title.

KM: Yeah.

TS: [chuckles]

KM: It was—That was the title when a man held it, but it was different when I held it. So I— They had a lot of fun with that one too. And I don't even remember what all my other duties were; probably paper clip officer. [chuckles]

TS: So you're the low woman on the totem pole [lowest ranking]?

KM: I was the only woman.

TS: Oh, you were?

KM: The only other woman in the entire command. The center group command was the housekeeping unit of the entire post, and Fort Benning was one of the biggest posts in the world at the time during the Vietnam War. The only other woman in the whole place—no, I guess there were three other civilian secretaries. But the colonel had a civilian secretary, and I think there were three other civilian secretaries in the building.

Now, one interesting thing that happened was that our restroom—the female designated restroom—well, this was an old troop barracks, and so our restroom was on one floor and the men's restrooms were on the other three floors, and it had this wall of urinals and it had this wall of open commodes; no stalls, just commodes, [chuckles] without toilet seats.

TS: Right.

KM: And no stalls. No doors. No privacy whatsoever. And so, I went down and had a talk with the S-3 [Operations]—or no, the quartermaster, I guess it was, the S-4 [Logistics]—and I said, "We need to do something about the ladies' room." He did. He locked it, because women were putting their sanitary napkins down the toilet because there were no trash cans. And there were no paper towels, and there were no little baggies.

So I went back to him, I said, "Captain, we need to do something about this.

And he says, "You can go in the next building over. They've got a proper ladies' latrine." Well, the next building over was, like, a hundred yards.

TS: Sure.

KM: And then you've got to go back up and all this stuff. The time wasted away from your job doing all of that.

TS: Just to go to the bathroom.

KM: Yeah. So finally he cooperated with me—Look at that rain. Hallelujah. Thank the Lord.

TS: It's coming down pretty hard.

KM: My truck will be wet when it's coming down this hard. Anyway, he finally built stalls around each commode.

TS: Oh, okay.

KM: He put seats—toilet seats on the commodes. He put in—He covered up the urinals with a long shelf so that when we—he put up a big long mirror where the urinals were. He didn't take the urinals out, he just covered them up with a—

TS: A shelf.

KM: —like a completely covered shelf—

TS: I see. Just over the top of them.

KM: —so we didn't have to look at the urinals.

TS: Okay.

KM: And so, now we had a place to set make-up and stuff that women like to do, and by this time there were a few more women assigned to the building. I think by the time I was transferred there were probably ten women in that building, out of maybe three hundred men.

TS: Okay.

KM: But when I went there I was the first one with a civilian secretary to the colonel. But we got—I got him to get these little bags to put these little holders in the stalls so the sanitary things didn't go down the toilet.

TS: Right.

KM: I mean, he'd taken away the toilet paper. [chuckles] He did this gradually. First, the toilet seats were gone, the toilet paper was gone, the paper towels were gone.

TS: Right.

KM: And then he locks the restroom, and that's his solution to the problem.

TS: Right, go somewhere else.

KM: And this guy's married. You think his wife would have—living with a woman would have clued him in on a few things, but it didn't. So that was another of my great achievements as a young officer.

TS: That's a great one. What else did you get to do at Fort Benning?

KM: Well, when I was still in the same command, I was now PIO, a public information officer—they call them PAOs now, public affairs officers—but I was the PIO, and, God bless him, Colonel [Charles] Reidenbaugh had taken command, and I loved that man. He looked like his face had been carved with a hatchet. I mean, he looked like Hollywood's Sitting Bull carved with a hatchet.

TS: What did you say his name was again?

KM: Charles Reidenbaugh. God rest him. He one of the greatest men I've ever known in my life. But anyway, he was a real creative guy. He was an infantry officer, and we heard that our new commander was arriving today so we're all standing at the windows upstairs looking down on the lawn to see who this guy was, and up pulls this staff car, and out of the backseat get this very tall, very lean—I mean, lean like a whip—man wearing Bermuda shorts, knee socks—because back then that was permitted in uniform, and he's carrying a swagger stick. [chuckles] A swagger stick. I think that was probably the last year that the Bermuda socks and the Bermuda shorts and the swagger stick were permitted.

[A swagger stick is a short stick or riding crop usually carried by a uniformed person as a symbol of authority]

TS: Could have been.

KM: But he came striding up the walk—marching up the walk—to the front door and I was—I was shaking in my boots, and most of us were—all of us were, because his reputation had preceded him, that he was one hard-ass colonel.

So for about a week or two every time I heard that he was on my floor, or I might glimpse him coming, I'd hide behind a door, because I didn't want to meet this man. I was scared to death of him. I was still a butter bar lieutenant [slang term for a second lieutenant, based on the insignia - a single gold bar.]. Then one day he came through the door I was hiding behind and slammed it.

TS: [chuckles]

KM: And he says, "Lieutenant, I've been looking for you." [chuckles]

"Yes, sir."

"Report to my office."

So I reported to his office, and we became—he became my mentor. He would invite me to their home and his wife would teach me the refinements of being a lady,

which they tried to teach me in OCS [Officer Candidate School] too. In OCS you learn about—women wore white gloves, how to put your card in the silver [unclear] at the door, and all these niceties. They teach you to dance, they teach you you're supposed to be an officer and a gentleman, and an officer and a lady, and so many of us came up rough. I came up very rough, and I didn't know any—I didn't have any refinements. It's kept me in good stead because over the years I've had to dine with kings and wine with princes, and work with presidents and ki—secretaries of states and prime ministers and all that. And I'm comfortable now in any [unclear] from the foxhole to the White House to a king's palace. And it's all thanks to the army.

TS: Why do you think that they took you under their wing?

KM: I don't know. I don't know. Colonel Reidenbaugh saw something in me that I didn't see, but I was frequently a guest at their home. Mrs. Reidenbaugh—Penny Reidenbaugh—was just wonderful. She taught me so much about social graces. Colonel Reidenbaugh taught me about leadership, about stoicism, about thinking strategically, thinking tactically. If I'd have been a—If I had been a male I would have been his aide and would have—I would have risen far in the army.

Being a female, back in those days there was one full colonel in the WAC corps; she sat in the Pentagon. There were five lieutenant colonels. There were—I forget how many majors, but, like, a dozen or two majors. Up through the rank of captain promotion for women and men was equal. After the rank of captain it really changed radically, until 1974 when they abolished the WAC branch; may it roast in hell. But, anyway—

TS: Before you go on from that—

KM: Okay.

TS: —when you say "roast in hell," you're talking about the WAC. Could you explain to someone who hasn't had your experience why you feel that way about WAC? Because there's many women who were in WAC who really—

KM: Who really appreciate it; really enjoyed it and were thankful they didn't have to go to combat and thankful they didn't have to do men's things—

TS: Sure.

KM: —and so forth.

TS: Yeah.

KM: And I can respect that, it was just that that wasn't how I grew up, and that wasn't what I wanted to be in life, and that wasn't where I wanted to be stuck. My parents wanted me to be a secretary. I was tough enough to take anything because of the way I was raised. My

stepfather was brutal when I was young, and he never showed me any respect as a human until I came home in uniform the first time. When I came home in uniform, all of a sudden—he'd been a master sergeant—I came home a butter bars lieutenant and all of a sudden I was a human. Not only a human, but somebody to look up to, somebody to respect. He began to tell me his war stories. We became best friends; we became really, really close. But not until I came home in uniform.

But anyway, back to the WAC, I just—I didn't join the army to be a WAC, and I didn't join to be a nurse because I wasn't a nurse. I joined the army to be a soldier. And I was offered one opportunity to escape the whole WAC thing: to be on the marksmanship team. They'd never had a woman on the marksmanship team, but I was a good shot. And I was out shooting all the time when it was forbidden; it was a court-martial offense for me to be doing what I was doing. I qualified with every weapon the infantry used, including the long range anti-tank weapon, mortars, everything, I qualified in all of them, and I was invited to join the marksmanship team, and stupidly—

TS: Who invited you?

KM: The marksmanship team—

TS: Was it at Fort Benning?

KM: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

KM: The team leader. And stupidly I said, "No, that's not why I joined the army. I want to go to Vietnam." I didn't—Because I knew that those guys were really protected prima donnas on the marksmanship team. They didn't have to put up with any of the crap the army handed out. It was a whole different world. They were very, very special. And like an idiot—probably John McCain once in a while said, "I was really an idiot not take the early out from prison camp." Remember, he opted to stay with his men rather than take the easy way out?

TS: Yes.

KM: Because it would have been a propaganda coup for the North Vietnamese. And he probably once in a while said, "Damn." [chuckles] I should have taken that.

TS: So you wanted to go to Vietnam. Did you get to Vietnam?

KM: No. Never. I put in for it every month at the first of the month, and they rejected me every month on the thirtieth of the month, until they quit answering me at all. And I kept applying for flight school, and I kept applying for [The United States Army] Airborne School, because I knew I could do it.

TS: They didn't let you go to those things at that time.

KM: They were all closed away for women at that time.

TS: Yeah.

KM: But it was a black mark on my record every time I applied because I was not—I was—I was not going with the program. I wasn't a credit to the corps. I was being rebellious, and that's never accepted. Look at what happened to Billy Mitchell in the air force. He was court-martialed for not—for bucking the system, and a lot of other good men have been court-martialed for bucking the system. And I was boarded, which is similar to a court-martial in Officer Candidate School.

[William "Billy" Mitchell was a United States Army general who is regarded as the father of the United States Air Force. Mitchell served in France during World War I, and by the conflict's end commanded all American air combat units in that country. He later antagonized many administrative leaders of the Army with his arguments and criticism, and was eventually court-martialed for insubordination.]

TS: What happened then at Fort Benning? Did you continue working—

KM: Yeah, I continued and eventually—oh, I had one really fun thing that really got me in trouble with the WAC branch. Colonel Reidenbaugh said, "How'd you like to go on an E&E—Escape and evasion exercise. The army had banned—it's the same reason they had banned football; men were getting hurt and killed in escape and evasion training. Well, then it finally dawned on somebody—somebody finally got smart enough to say, "Our men are getting killed in Vietnam because they don't have this training." It's now called SEREs [Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape] training.

So Fort Benning put on its first big E&E and Center Troop Command was very much a part of it because we were the housekeeping unit of the post. So Colonel Reidenbaugh said, "I think you ought to go on that and write about it as a PIO." He said, "I'm going to send a ranger lieutenant with you and take care of you and keep you from getting hurt." He brings in this huge ranger lieutenant, brand new graduate of ranger school, fit to be tied because he hadn't gone to Vietnam yet, and now he's going to have to babysit a damn woman on an E&E. [chuckles].

So we're—we get out there and we infiltrate the people who are supposed to be trying to "evade and escape", and all these guys are getting captured. Nobody got through on that E&E. So I said, "Lieutenant, we've got to do something different." I forget what his first name was. Let's call him Scott. I said, "Scott, we've got to do something different or we're going to get arrested, and my job is to get all the way through this thing so I can write about it, but they don't know we're out here, and they certainly don't know there's a

woman out here. They don't know we're out here, so we're going to go through the swamp because there's no guards out there, no sentries in the swamp."

He says, "There's snakes in the swamp."

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "There's snakes in the swamp."

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "They're cottonmouth snakes in the swamp."

I said, "Yeah." [chuckles]

So we wade in, and we're up to our chins in this filthy, stinking, dirty, nasty water, and sure enough, a cottonmouth comes right up to him and opens its mouth, and I don't know how he escaped being bitten, I don't know why the snake went away, but the snake went away. So we're going through the swamp and we come right up—oh, we had one incident where a sentry did catch us, said, "Halt. Password."

And we halted, and a sentry came walking right up, and this lieutenant was smart; I wouldn't have thought of doing this. He took out his flashlight and shined it right in the guy's eyes and we didn't say a word, we just stood there. He just stood there with that light shining in the sentry's eyes until the sentry panicked and ran away, and I thought, "Boy, there's a lesson in that."

TS: Sure.

KM: Just that silent treatment and the light—bright light shining in this guy's eyes and the sentry broke and ran. And I—We should have gotten his name and reported it but there was no way to get his name without squeaking and identifying ourselves and so forth.

So anyway, we go through this swamp and we get—we come out right under the edge of the prison camp lights; they've got flood lights everywhere. We're right under the edge of the floodlights. They don't have them shining into the swamp because nobody's going to be stupid enough to come through a swamp full of cottonmouth snakes. [chuckles] They're deadly poison you know.

TS: Right.

KM: And we're crouched under the buses at the edge of the fence, watching the camp, and there—the fence—I don't think there was even a fence along the swamp because nobody was stupid enough to go through a swamp.

TS: Right.

KM: Or to run into the swamp to escape the camp.

TS: Right.

KM: And we're—And a man comes walking straight toward us, and we're crouched down under this bush. This guy comes walking straight at us, stops about that far in front of my

ranger, and pees on his helmet. [chuckling] He takes a leak, and it's dripping—I could see in the reflected lights of the camp and the guy who came toward us was blinded by the lights.

TS: Right, couldn't see.

KM: He couldn't see us; he was looking out at a pitch blackness because he'd just come from this bright lighted area. But I'm watching this drip, drip, drip. And the lieutenant was just absolutely mortified. [chuckling]

TS: Sure.

KM: So we got all the way through and got around the prison camp because they weren't watching for the swamp, and on the outer—on the other side there's sentry within eyesight of each other with dogs, so that nobody can escape from the prison camp. I said, "We've got to steal a truck." So we stole a deuce and a half [M35 2½-ton cargo truck] and just drove right out. So we're out safe. We're the only people who—that night who made it through that thing. I said, "Okay, now I've got to go back because I've got to be captured."

TS: [chuckles]

KM: And the ranger says, "Are you insane?" [both chuckle]

I said, "No, I've got to go back. Colonel Reidenbaugh wants me to have the whole experience.

So we drive the truck back in, and we get out, and I pick up a big pinecone on my way in. Actually, I stuffed my pocket with pinecones. And we get inside the camp and everyone's staring at us because we've just walked in and we're not wearing the armbands of the friendlies.

TS: Right.

KM: Of the Op4 [opposing force]; friendlies or Op4. I think we were the friendlies and they were the Op4. And so, we're not wearing the identifying armbands, so people start to crowd around us wanting to know what was going on; what we were doing here; who did we think we are; all the questions.

One guy ripped my helmet off, and I had hair down to my butt at the time and it all falls out from under the helmet, and he says, "God damn, it's a female."

And I pull the pinecones out of my pocket and went [makes click noise], like I was pulling the pin, and I started throwing pinecones at their feet. [chuckles] And they scattered and hit the ground. The pinecones didn't go off.

TS: Right.

KM: We—The ranger and I were already sprinting for the machine gun towers, and we didn't make it [chuckles] because the pinecones didn't go off.

TS: Right.

KM: So I ended up—I don't know what happened to the ranger after that; they separated us. First I was chained up by my wrists, where my toes were barely touching the ground, and I was left hanging like that and I—so I know why John McCain—why he can't lift his arms like this because he was chained like that for a very long time.

And—Well, before they did that even, they—I was standing there by myself, surrounded by men, and I'm just glaring at them. I'm saying, "Come on, come on. Come get me."

And they were all afraid to because they start, "Oh, I'm heard about her. She's got black belts in this, and she's got black belts in that. Oh, she'll kill us."

So for several minutes we had this Mexican standoff [slang term for a confrontation between two or more parties in which no participant can proceed or retreat without being exposed to danger.], and then finally two guys seized me from behind, and that's when they strung me up in chains. And then after that they put me in a footlocker and fired a full magazine of M-16 ammo right next to my right ear, and I'm almost completely deaf in that ear still; ear drum burst and everything. They kept me in that foot locker for the longest time, and then when they opened it they were expecting me to be a quivering mass of jelly—which they had expected me to be after I was chained by my wrists—and I'm smiling at them and eating a candy bar. Psychological warfare works two ways.

So finally I was released. I was told that my release had been negotiated [chuckles], and I was—I never saw the ranger again.

TS: Yeah.

KM: So I have no idea what ever happened to him. He—I don't think he wanted to even talk to me. [chuckles]

TS: Maybe not. Maybe not.

KM: So that was—But that really landed me in big hot water with the WAC branch; more for my dossier. And then I used to fly with my husband, who followed me to Fort Benning, and he—

TS: This is—

KM: He flew Hueys [Bell UH-1 Iroquois] initially. When he found out Hueys were going to be shot at he switched to the [Boeing CH-47] Chinook. Flew Chinooks until he found out those were going to be shot at and he switched to the [Sikorsky CH-54 Tarhe] Flying Crane. But on his first deployment to Nam [Vietnam] he was flying Hueys.

But anyway, I flew with him a lot, which means I wore fatigues—I wore his fatigues—and then when I was at the 197th Infantry Brigade I often wore fatigues, because I felt silly; I was the only woman in this brigade.

TS: When did you get to the 197th?

KM: When I was promoted to captain.

TS: Is that while you were in the reserve?

KM: No, no, no, on active duty.

TS: Fort Benning still?

KM: Yeah, Colonel Reidenbaugh and Colonel Stieger[?] pinned my wings on—my captain's bars on me.

TS: You were at Fort Benning '68 to '70?

KM: Almost four years.

TS: Okay. How would you describe your relationships, in general, with the people that you worked with?

KM: Marvelous.

TS: Yeah. They were mostly men?

KM: My CO, my boss—not my CO, but my boss, when I was in the AG Shop [Adjutant General's Corps] at Fort Benning at the 197th, there became an issue there. He kept propositioning me. His name was Major [name redacted]. I don't mind tell his name because he was a son of a bitch. He kept propositioning me, and I kept adroitly turning him down everywhere I could without making my boss mad at me because he wrote my efficiency report. And he finally accused me of refusing to sleep with him because he was black. And I said, "You're black?" I grew up in the mountains of California. The only black I had ever seen, before I joined the army, was a guy from the Congo [Central Africa] who was my classmate in ag school, and he was blue black. I mean, he was black, black, black, black, black. I mean, even—Most blacks will have pink on their lips and stuff, and this guy, if you had to do an EMS [emergency medical services] evaluation on him, there wasn't anything pink anywhere that you could look at for signs and symptoms of shock or any other medical emergency.

TS: So he's accusing you of racism?

KM: Yeah. And Colonel—Major [name redacted] was a very light-skinned black and his hair was not kinky. He wasn't anything of the stereotype that I had in mind from newspapers and magazines and the few blacks that I had—there were two black women in my OCS class who were clearly black—my OBC class. I keep saying OCS because it was combination OCS for women coming up through the ranks and OBC, Officer Basic Course, for those of us who were direct commission, and I was direct commission.

So I—Well, after I got over that shock I'm saying—because I had asked him—I had met his wife and she was just beautiful, and I'd asked him after I met her the first time, "Is she from Samoa [Polynesia], is she Hawaiian, because she's just beautiful." She had lovely smooth wavy black hair down to her shoulders and this lovely, lovely brown skin tone, and I'd never meant anyone from Samoa or Hawaii either, but I'd seen—I read *National Geographic*. [chuckles]

And he kept looking at me funny, and he finally said, "No, she's black."

And I said, "Oh, your wife is black? That's interesting," because I thought he was His—I thought he was Spanish or Mexican or something like that.

TS: Right.

KM: Because he looked like he was from Puerto Rico or someplace. I had a Puerto Rican classmate, too, and I read *National Geographic*. [chuckles]

TS: Well, how did that turn out with that?

KM: It didn't turn out well at all because he never quit.

TS: No?

KM: He never quit propositioning me and harassing me. And then there was the issue of the—And he said it was going to go down in my OER, my Officers Efficiency Report, that I wasn't a team player, if I didn't sleep with him.

And then there was the matter of the happy hour. The army has made a lot of alcoholics, because if you're an officer, happy hour is mandatory. At least in my unit; in the 197th. And I never went to happy hour because I was the only woman in the brigade, and I didn't drink, and I wasn't interested in hanging around in a bar with a bunch of guys. I had books to read, paintings to paint, a dog to walk, horses to ride. I rode down at the post stable every day—not every day, every week. And he finally said, "If you don't come to happy hour it's going to go down in for efficiency report that you're not a team player."

So I started showing up for happy hour after work on Fridays, and I would sit there and sip a Coke. Well, that went on for a while, and he said, "It's going to go down in your OER you're not a team player if you keep drinking Cokes. You've got to drink beer like the rest of us." And they bring beer in big pitchers with big bowls of popcorn and stuff.

So I sat there week after week after week with a full glass of beer in front of me, and the foam would melt down, and I never even sipped it; I never touched it. And Major [name redacted], again, "It's going to go down in your OER that you're not a team player if you don't start drinking that stuff."

So I started sipping it little by little by little, and eventually I developed a taste for beer, and I am a beer snob today. [both chuckle] I wouldn't touch that kind of beer we drank back then.

TS: Yeah.

KM: It was probably Bud Lite or Miller's High Life or something like that.

TS: Did he ever write you up on your OER in a negative way?

KM: Oh yeah, it went down that I was not a team player and it—my OERs were always saying that I was ambitious. It was a good thing for a male officer to be ambitious, a very bad thing for a woman to be ambitious.

TS: Did you have any other WACs that you had any association with?

KM: Very few.

TS: Yeah?

KM: Very few. There was one, [unclear], who came a year behind me or—yeah, she was a year behind me. We're still in touch. She didn't stay in the military, she just stayed for her one tour and then got out. And there was another gal that—when I was a young captain and she was a senior captain. She'd been a captain for two years before I was promoted, and I really admired her. She was petite, she was ladylike; she was everything I wasn't. I was five foot nine [inches] and I had shoulders like a Green Bay Packer [football team]. Because I grew up—I worked my way through college bucking hundred pound alfalfa bales—three wire bales—up on a truck, and I've still got good shoulders and muscles. But she was everything that I wasn't. She was petite, she was ladylike, she was this and that, and I so admired her. Well, they sent her out for the 197th also, and she was in charge of the shop in the basement doing—I forget what kind of paperwork they were doing, record keeping or something.

Then one day she came in and she said, "Karen, I'm getting out of the army."

And I said, "Why?" Because I assumed she was a lifer, I was. I figured anybody was who joined the army.

She said, "I'm pregnant."

I was so shocked. I felt betrayed. For the army, I felt she'd betrayed the army, she betrayed the corps, she—and then she told me who it was, and it was this private in her shop who worked for her. He was, like, six foot six [inches], he was blond, he was blue-eyed, he came from a very wealthy Boston family, money—he drove a Corvette, as a

private, and he was on his way to Nam [Vietnam] and she said, "I'm going to go and live with his family until he gets back from Nam. And we're getting married next week, and then I'm out." I was just so angry with her. I just—To me—Getting pregnant when you're not married, to me, was just an unspeakable offense.

So anyway, she left. But when I got out of the army about a year later—it's a long story and I don't want to put it on record of how all of that happened, it's too complicated. But anyway, I got riffed, basically—Reduction in Force—because they were kicking everybody out of the army at that time.

TS: What year was this?

KM: Nineteen seventy.

TS: Okay.

KM: Nam was winding down, and we were hemorrhaging people on purpose, just dumping everybody we could out of the service, because they knew they were withdrawing from Vietnam. And so, anyway, when I went to fill out my discharge papers, and I'm looking them over and it says "reason for discharge: pregnancy." I said, "Where did you get that? Was it that? I'm not pregnant."

He said, "Well, that's what we put on all the WAC officers who want to get out early."

I said, "You change that. It's not true."

TS: Right.

KM: I was just speechless. I was spitting, I was stuttering, I was—So anyway, they said, "Well, okay, if you're not pregnant, do you want a reserve commission?"

I said, "What's that?" I knew nothing about reservists. I knew nothing about the army reserve whatsoever.

TS: Right.

KM: He says, "Well," he said, "you can—It's sort of like staying in the army but it's not. You get to have a rank and you can—you're still somehow part of the army."

TS: Did you have to do something once a month still?

KM: He didn't know anything about it. He just said, "Well, do you want a reserve commission," because that was the next block for him to fill out.

TS: Oh, right.

KM: So I say, "Of course, yes, do that. I'll take that." So I lost my rank of captain, I was back to first lieutenant. And so, I was out and I went to stay with a friend who had just gotten back from Nam, and went to Virginia, because I didn't know what I was going to do. It all happened so quickly. I didn't have a job lined up, I—

TS: Were you still married?

KM: No, that was long—history long gone, gone, gone.

TS: Okay.

KM: No, I was very much single by then, and I was taking care of my fourteen year old sister, which is the real reason why I was kicked out, because in those days a WAC could not have anybody under the age of twenty-one under her roof for more than two weeks. You could have your parents living with you. If you had a child you had to give it up for adoption, because you could not have anybody under twenty-one living with you more than two weeks. And my mother had sent—My parents had bailed my sister out of the LA [Los Angeles] County jail at fourteen, put her on a plane, sent her east, and then called me. And my mother said, "Nancy's having some problems. I—We're just having some problems, she's having some challenges," and somebody said, "Well why don't you send her to me in the summer for two weeks and just give her a different environment? She's landing in Atlanta airport in two hours."

Well, Fort Benning is about two hours from Atlanta. I flew up—They were lucky I was home, because I was often TDY [temporary duty] and on weekends I'd catch a military hop and go somewhere and then come back on Sunday night. I wasn't home very often on a weekend, and thank God I was that time because when I got to Atlanta she was already off the plane and wandering down the concourse, and I hadn't seen her in two or three years but I did recognize my sister. So I took her home with me and I—very first night she got on the police blotter. Very first night at Fort Benning she got—she snuck out of my house. I was living in, what they call, [unclear] housing; they're duplexes on post for women whose husbands are in Nam and single officers like me. And she'd snuck out that night, she'd found some other bad kids, they'd gotten drunk, they'd gotten in trouble, and they'd shoplifted some beer or something in a convenience store, whatever. She wound up on the MP [military police] blotter that night; very first night. I was going to try and keep her secret.

TS: Sure.

KM: While I tried to figure out what was I going to do about this situation.

TS: Right.

KM: Because my parents sent her with a one-way plane ticket, and I felt this family obligation. Even though my family had never really wanted anything to with me, I felt I had this responsibility to try to save this kid, who was in really deep doo-doo.

Well, she ended up being expelled from every school I put her in. She got in all kinds of trouble; truancy trouble, expulsion, arrests, what have you, and she's fourteen years old. And this all happened—After I got kicked out—They found out right away that I had her and they used—I was already a marked woman because of all the stuff that I'd done that was illegal and—Let me let the cat in.

TS: Okay.

KM: [extraneous cat comment redacted] So anyway, the WAC branch had been gunning for me for a long time, looking for an excuse to get rid of me. There was more to it than that, but having Nancy under my roof was what they were looking for.

And so, we were out and I went up to Virginia to stay for a few weeks with a buddy that had just gotten back from Nam while I tried to figure out, "What am I going to do with my life? What am I going to do about my sister?" And by the time we'd been in Virginia for a month she'd been kicked out of school, she'd been arrested, she'd been doing so many things. And then she got caught by the Feds [Federal Bureau of Investigation agents] for mailing drugs by U.S. mail to a buddy, or receiving drugs by mail, I forget which it was. And so, she was in trouble now with the Feds.

I was at my wit's end. I had no job, I had no place to live, I'd just been kicked out of the army; riffed, politely. And so, I called my folks and I talked to Charles, my stepfather, and I said, "This is the situation. I can't deal with it anymore. I don't have the tools to deal with it. I don't have the money to deal with it. I don't have a job. I don't have a place to live, and I don't know what I'm going to do."

He says, "Send her back." He says, "I'll deal with it." And apparently my mother had shipped her off without consulting her husband. So Nancy had a very checkered [life] growing up; in lots of trouble. She straightened out. She was a career firefighter with the California Division of Forestry [CAL FIRE], and when she retired from that she went to Hawaii. And she married a guy and they bought a coffee farm—Kona coffee farm on Kona.

TS: Nice.

KM: And she got drunk one night and stole a bulldozer and bulldozed the entire coffee plantation into the ground. [chuckles] So she—I don't know where she is today; I don't hear from her very often. My mother told me that—told her that all of Nancy's problems were my fault, and she told me that all of Nancy's problems were my fault because Nancy couldn't live up to my [being a] role model.

TS: That's a lot of burden to carry.

KM: So Nancy believes that.

TS: Yeah.

KM: To this day. And Nancy—she runs marathons now. She's retired from the fire service. Let's see, I'm seventy-four, she's—so that makes her about sixty, and she still doesn't want anything to do with me, after all these years.

TS: Well, when you got riffed out of the army, and you went into the reserve—you talked a little bit about the transition, but was it difficult to transition into civilian life?

KM: Oh, yeah.

TS: Just beyond the difficulties of the family situation.

KM: Oh, yeah.

TS: What was most difficult about it?

KM: Well, when you're in the army, it's like a womb; it's family. It gives you an anchor. It gives you a base in life. It gives you a—This was during the antiwar stuff and everything, and you have, kind of, a safe feeling in the military. You're part of something much bigger than yourself. You're defending America; you're serving America. You're not the center of the universe. And so, yeah, I had a really hard—I still have a hard time with it. I also miss being a firefighter. I can't do anything anymore that produces adrenaline. [chuckles] Except the last time I rode that mare was only the second time I'd been on her and she's enough horse to give me adrenaline.

TS: Yeah.

KM: A real adrenaline fix, and I can't afford to get hurt anymore, because I'm so busted up now that doctors warn me one more head injury and I'll be a cabbage [in a coma], and I said, "No, I'll be a rutabaga."

TS: Well, how did you end up working in the reserve?

KM: Well, the first thing that happened was my friend and I went to the county fair and there was a Special Forces unit with a booth, and there were reservists; the C Company, 11th Group had a booth at the county fair. So I—And my friend—

TS: This was in Virginia?

KM: Yeah, near Fort Lee. My friend was with Special Forces—quartermaster officer with Special Forces—and that was why he was at Lee, was because it's quartermaster headquarters. So we walked up to the booth and I started asking questions, because I

didn't know what reservists were; had no clue, still, because I'd only been out for about a month. And they said, "Hey, you want to join us? All you have to do is volunteer for airborne school."

And my buddy, the Special Forces officer, says, "Do it. Do it."

So I did. I became the adjutant [military officer who acts as an administrative assistant to a senior officer] of the 11th—C Company 11th Group, and—Let's see. What happened? I guess it was after that that I got—Yeah, I got a tour of the Pentagon.

TS: Well, did you go to airborne school?

KM: Yeah, after it was open to women. [chuckles]

TS: So it was—

KM: That wasn't until after 1974, and this was—we're still—

TS: But you were able to get into the Special Forces even though you didn't have—

KM: Because I volunteered for it.

TS: Oh, you only had to volunteer to have to go through the training.

KM: Yeah, that was a loophole.

TS: Oh, okay. I see.

KM: Because they never expected a woman to—

TS: Volunteer.

KM: Yeah. And—

TS: So that got you in.

KM: —Colonel Cox, the company commander, was really a bold guy like Colonel Reidenbaugh, and he needed an adjutant.

TS: So that's what you did for them for a little bit?

KM: Yeah. Then I got an assignment to the Pentagon for a three month tour to write—to work on a manual revision. During that time I met the Greek, who was an American citizen—an American army officer—

TS: Your second husband?

KM: Yeah, and stupidly that was my second big mistake in life, I married him, because the allure of going to Greece, living on the Aegean [Sea], and he had a son who needed a mother, he said, because his wife had kicked their son out of the house and he was living with friends and getting into trouble and that sort of thing.

TS: And he was in the army also?

KM: My husband then? Yeah. He was a reserve officer on a tour in the Pentagon. And the magic words were, "My sons needs a mother," because my biological tick—clock was banging away and I wanted children. I had lost four babies when I was married before; I had one miscarriage after another. And so, the doctors had told me I could never have children. So here's a child who needs a mother, and man who's going to go live in Greece. So the whole thing just—

TS: Sounded pretty idyllic?

KM: Well, it was enticing, because I had nothing else. I had no other job prospects. The man I had waited for to come back from Vietnam said, "Thanks for waiting for me. I knew I'd survive if I had somebody waiting for me. Sayonara [Japanese, meaning goodbye]." [chuckles] And I just had that crushing blow of the man that I loved so much saying that he'd only used me to—as a talisman to make sure he came back from his third tour in Vietnam.

So anyway, I married the Greek and went to Greece, where he became more Greek than the Greeks. I knew nothing about Greece, post-Solon [Athenian statesman, lawmaker, and poet] and Pericles [Greek statesman, orator, and general of Athens], the classical era. I knew nothing of modern Greece whatsoever. And I had this romantic image of Greece; Homer [author of the epic poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey] and all of the Greek classics that I had studied.

TS: How was it different from all that?

KM: The old Greece is dead. [both chuckles]

TS: What surprised you—

KM: You've been seeing Greece in the news recently haven't you?

TS: What surprised you the most?

KM: About Greece?

TS: Yeah.

KM: Well, besides the fact that Greeks born in the diaspora, foreign born Greeks, have this mental thing that they've got to become more Greek than the Greeks; they've got to out-Greek the native Greeks.

And women in Greece, at that time—I don't know if it's changed now—but at that time women in Greece could not own anything, not even clothes on her back. She went from her father's house to her father's roof to her husband's roof. And if she never married, or her husband died, her nearest male relative took over. She could not have a bank account, she could not sign a check, she could not—women could hold jobs but very low secretarial positions, and nursing positions, and that sort of thing; nothing really high level. And a foreign born wife cannot leave Greece without her husband's permission if she has children. She cannot take the children with her on a vacation out of Greece unless she has a permit signed by her husband, applied to the—her husband has to fill out the paperwork, apply to the government for an exit visa so she can take her children with her.

TS: So it's a real patriarchal society, then.

KM: Oh, yeah. And a man could kill his wife without any penalty whatsoever, because a wife in Greece, back then at least, and I don't know if there's any change. But a man could kill his wife without penalty, not even a slap on the wrist, because women were somewhere between cattle and dogs; between useful beast and unclean beast. The only step up in women's position in Greece in all these years was during World War. II. It used to be that a woman had to walk behind her husband on the donkey. When they mined the roads and mined the fields the woman got to walk in front of her husband on the donkey.

TS: Well, did you—

KM: [chuckles]

TS: Did you do any reserve work when you were in?

KM: Oh, yeah.

TS: What did you do in Athens?

KM: I went to Germany most of the time for my reserve tours, and I did a lot of REFORGER [REturn of FORces to GERmany] exercises; I think did nine REFORGER exercises. I was the first woman allowed to stay in the reserve with a child—after having a baby—because up until then you got kicked out if you had a baby, and I fought that and fought it and fought it, and I was the first woman allowed to remain in the reserve as a mother.

TS: What year was that?

KM: Nineteen seventy-two.

TS: Nineteen seventy-two.

KM: And so, the one year when my reserve tour came up that I was nursing, I was allowed to do my two week tour with the defense attaché in the American Embassy in Athens, and the nanny would bring the baby in twice a day to be nursed; there were no breast pumps back then.

TS: Now, this wasn't the stepson, this was your daughter that you had?

KM: This was my first daughter.

TS: You first daughter. Okay. Because I was thinking you were saying when you went to Greece—did the stepson come with you?

KM: He did.

TS: Was he considered part of your household, then, or not?

KM: Well, it was a real peculiar thing, looking back on it. I married the Greek and he took off right away—as soon as his three month tour in the Pentagon ended he took off for Greece. He didn't leave me any money. [chuckles] He left me to pack up my household goods, and to find my own way to Greece, and he left me no money at all and I had very, very little, and I had the boy now, who was this sullen, scruffy kid, whose mouth hung slack all the time, had a drug problem. His hair was hanging all over—this was back when long hair wasn't fashionable on males. And he had this really sullen attitude. I mean, poor kid. He's dumped on me and the next day his father leaves for Greece, and here he is with this strange woman. I'm packing up the house, I'm trying to keep him out of trouble. I found a charter flight to Germany that cost very little. We left Dulles airport [in Washington D.C.] at two 'clock in the morning on this charter aircraft that rattled and banged, and I thought it was going to fall out of the sky. I swear that thing dated from World War I.

We got to Frankfurt [Germany], and in Frankfurt I rented a WV Bug [Volkswagen Beetle], a convertible, and we drove from Frankfurt to Brindisi [Italy]; all through Germany, through Switzerland, down through Italy. So I used the opportunity to make friends with this kid; see if I couldn't get him to clean up a little bit; to actually close his mouth instead of letting the jaw hang slack. I bought him some new clothes. And we did get to be friends. He began to talk to me, and he actually got a haircut in Switzerland somewhere. We had—We camped out all the way because I had no money for hotels. We stayed in a hotel maybe one time and that was in Switzerland when there was a ferocious lightning storm. I didn't have a tent. We literally slept in this WV or on the ground with a blanket wrapped around us. And only one night in this ferocious lightning storm did we stay in a hotel.

We get to Brindisi and we're—we take the ferry from Brindisi to—where did we live?— [unclear]—no, Corinth [Peloponnese, Greece], and there's my new husband waiting for me on the dock with a chauffeured limousine, and a colleague of his from the office. And we had—we had slept on the ground, I'd taken this rental trap charter that could have fallen out of the sky, used every last dime I had to get us there and he pulls up on the dock in a chauffeured limousine. We slept on a deck on the ferry boat; I couldn't afford the little cabins that they offered; we slept on the deck chairs, two nights.
[chuckles]

And so, by this time little Jimmy and I are good buds, he's gotten a haircut, he's got lederhosen, he's got Dolomite hiking boots; he's become a human. And that lasted about a week, after contact with his father again.

TS: Yeah.

KM: Eventually we had—Jim was given—he had—the Greek government told him, "You have until sundown to get that kid out of the country or he's going to jail for life." I've got to cough.

TS: Okay.

KM: My allergies have caught up with me.

TS: Okay. Alright, Karen, why don't we talk a little bit about the kind of work that you did while you were in the reserve when you were overseas? You said you went to Germany and you participated in the REFORGER?

KM: Yeah. In Germany I did mostly civil affairs stuff, because I was now a civil affairs officer.

TS: How did you become a civil affairs officer?

KM: I took the correspondence course. When the WAC branch was abolished—thank God—When the WAC branch was abolished they gave me four choices that were open to women: finance, AG [Adjutant General's Corps]—what was the third one?—quartermaster I think, and civil affairs, and civil affairs existed only in the reserve; it's not an active duty branch.

TS: Okay.

KM: And I looked into all of them, and I certainly didn't want anything to do with AG; I hated paper pushing.

TS: You had already been doing that, right?

KM: I was a—I was born to be a troop officer. Here it comes again.

TS: A third wave of rain, yeah.

KM: And finance, I don't like dealing with money things, I never liked numbers, and since my brain injury I can't do numbers. Although, I did get through a physics course once as a firefighter. I took—I had to take pumper operations and that was all physics, fluid dynamics, and all that stuff; trigonometry and calculus.

TS: Nice. Very good.

KM: And I got through it because the instructors were very, very good.

TS: That always helps.

KM: That was just before my big crash where I got the TBI [traumatic brain injury].

TS: So when you went in—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

KM: But I did mostly civil affairs—

TS: What kind of things did you do in civil affairs, then?

KM: Well, in Germany the civil affairs office is called the G5 or the S5. S1 is personnel, S2 is intelligence, S3 is operations, S4 is quartermaster, S5 is—or G5—is civil affairs, and it's basically a civil military liaison in peacetime.

TS: Okay.

KM: In Germany. And I didn't do anything very exciting at all, but on REFORGERS it was more interesting because in REFORGERS I had several—I did a different job with each REFORGER. I was PAO on a couple of them; I had a helicopter assigned to me and my job was to take journalists out to where the action was. On others I was in the civil military liaison. If a tank ran into a house or something we dealt with those issues.

TS: The consequences of it.

KM: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

KM: Or if a helicopter crashed and killed a cow we dealt with that sort of thing. That was slightly more interesting, but basically boring because the safety standards were so high on a REFORGER that there are very few incidents. I think we did have a tank knock a corner off a house in a narrow—in a little village going through those narrow streets.

TS: You were living in Greece—

KM: Greece and Israel.

TS: And Israel. Oh, right, for this period between '70 and '79.

KM: Yeah.

TS: And so, during the summers when the REFORGER is, right, [unclear] three weeks.

KM: Well, I did a one winter REFORGER in Russia.

TS: Oh, you did?

KM: Yeah, that was interesting.

TS: What did you do for that one?

KM: Again civil military liaison.

TS: So that was—

KM: But yeah, that was—

TS: Well, let me ask you what kind of things were different. When you joined in '67 commissioned as a second lieutenant, into—now in this in the late seventies, a decade later, how had the army changed, or has it?

KM: Oh my God.

TS: For women.

KM: From my time till now?

TS: No, from 1967, when you were first commissioned, to this time that you're working—

KM: Not a lot.

TS: You don't think so? Not a lot?

KM: It started to change after the WAC branch was abolished.

TS: Okay.

KM: That was when things got more interesting, and where women had more opportunities.

TS: Tell me about you. How did it change for you?

KM: Well, I was in—I was in Greece at the time when it was abolished, and so it really didn't affect me at all, except I was given my choice of four branches to join.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: To go into that civil affairs?

KM: And that changed the correspondence courses I was allowed to take and so forth, and I did almost all of my army education, up until the time I returned to the States in '80, by correspondence, because they would not allow you to come back to the States to go to a school, even if you paid for it yourself.

TS: So you had to do the correspondence.

KM: I could only do correspondence.

TS: That'd be like, for young people today, doing something online.

KM: Yeah.

TS: And instead you're doing it by the mail.

KM: Yeah.

TS: Back and forth. That's [unclear].

KM: When airborne school was opened up to women I was [unclear] —

TS: Overseas.

KM: —and they wouldn't let me even pay my own way to come back to the States.

TS: But you wanted to do that?

KM: So it wasn't until I was forty-three years old [chuckles] —

TS: Yeah?

KM: —and the 352nd Civil Affairs [Command] back in the United States that I got to go to airborne school.

TS: Where were you at for that? Oh, this is when you went back to Riverside, Maryland?

KM: Yeah.

TS: And that was in 1980ish?

KM: Well, no, I was in—I stayed with my parents in San Diego for several months while I was looking for a job, and I got a job with *Army Times* in Washington [D.C.], and moved to Washington.

TS: What did you do for *Army Times*?

KM: I was a reporter.

TS: Okay. Was that, like, your reserve job or your regular job?

KM: No, that was my regular job.

TS: Regular job.

KM: Yeah. The *Army Times* is a civilian newspaper—

TS: Okay.

KM: —written for—they have an *Army Times*, *Air Force Times*, *Marine [Corps] Times*, and so forth. That only lasted about six months. There were some real issues there because I had done real world war correspondence stuff; I covered the war in Lebanon, I'd covered Sinai [Peninsula], and other places like this.

TS: Who were you working for when you did that?

KM: I was freelancing.

TS: Freelancing?

KM: And so, here I am at the *Army Times*, and you go to the morgue and my byline is in all these file folders in the morgue. Newspapers have morgues; not bodies. And some of the guys I was working with were really jealous because I had done real world combat—war correspondence stuff. And then I was asked by the *Army Times* magazine to write a special feature on rape and sexual harassment in the military, and I was very unhappy with getting that assignment because I didn't want to be pigeonholed as writing about female issues, and I'd always resisted it. With everything I had, I've always resisted being pigeonholed as the female designee for this, that, or the other thing.

TS: Like, women's stories or something?

KM: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

KM: But—And those were all stories the *Army Times* was assigning me to, and then I—when the magazine asked me to do a story, I got—I heard—behind my back I heard all these stories about, "Oh, yeah, they're having McKay do that." I don't know if you can even imagine the garbage that goes on; the backbiting and stuff.

So I did that story and my editor acted like I had gone AWOL [absent without leave], because it was a major story—I think it was two or three parts—and I had to do a lot of traveling for it, I had to do a lot of interviews like this for it, and then write the story. So it took me out of my regular reporting job for about a month, and he acted like I'd gone AWOL; like I'd solicited this to get out doing my real job and I hadn't solicited. But eventually we parted ways, and I think mainly it was because my byline was on the war stories in the morgue, and these guys that I worked with had never gotten to go anywhere near a place where guns were going bang.

So anyway, from there I was recruited to work on the [Ronald] Reagan transition team. I had come back to the States initially in 1980; it was actually late December 1979 that I got back to the States, so 1980 for all practical purposes. I had been recruited in Israel. Well, I was trying to find a job. My GI Bill had run out and I'm covering wars to make ends meet and support my kids. I had two small children and no child support because my husband had skipped and I didn't know where he was. And so, this man from the Reagan campaign was in Jerusalem and said, "We need you on the campaign."

So I packed everything up and came back to the States at my own expense to work with the Reagan campaign, and found out that the full-time job that they'd offered me was a volunteer job. Well, no child support, I've got two kids to support, so I had to go find a regular job. And—But I did end up working on the Reagan transition team for Dr. Joe [Joesph] Churba, who was Reagan's Middle East and defense advisor.

TS: What'd you do for him?

KM: Mostly secretarial stuff, but I was around the campaign and meeting all these important people and learning a lot. And then from there—Well, I was supposed to—[Richard V.]

Dick Allen had picked me to be his spokesman when he took over as Secretary of Defense, and I don't know if you remember the Japanese watch incident, but the Japanese—a Japanese official of some sort had handed him a watch to give to President Reagan during this hullabaloo of the transition, and Dick Allen absentmindedly put it in the safe and forgot about it. Well, the media got a hold of that and accused him of taking graft from the Japanese, and so he ended up not being appointed Secretary of Defense, and so therefore I was not the spokesman for the Secretary of Defense.

So I went to work for Accuracy in the Media, which was founded by Reed Irvine; a brilliant man, God rest him. I worked for them for a few months when I was asked by several prominent generals to establish an organization to support the Afghan freedom fighters against the Soviets who had invaded their country. And so, that's what I did for the next six years. I got a one year leave of absence from Reed to set this up and I was supposed to come back to Ang[?] [chuckles], and I never did.

TS: No? What was the organization called?

KM: Committee for a Free Afghanistan.

[The Committee for a Free Afghanistan (CFA) was established to support the mujahideen in Afghanistan in their struggle against the Soviet Union. Ostensibly, it was meant to support the Afghans by non-violent means, such as by providing medicine and seeds, as well as arranging publicity. However, it will be alleged that the CFA was 'widely known as cover for the CIA.']

TS: Okay.

KM: And I ran that for six years, and then had a palace coup. I had hired two generals to work for me, one of them was the former director of Army Reserve Affairs [Army Manpower and Reserve Affairs?] in the Pentagon, whom I'd served under when I was at the Pentagon, and his wife wanted to retire to a golfing community and I knew that would kill him so I hired him to work for me. And then I hired another general, General [unclear], who had been the deputy commander of the 82nd Airborne. The two of them conspired, and a lot of us at the JFK Center for Special Warfare [John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School] for a week of active duty. I got a phone call—well, yeah, I got a phone call at Fort Benning—Fort Bragg saying—from General Roberts saying, "Don't come to the office; don't come to the White House tomorrow; don't come to the press conference; I've taken over."

And I rushed back to Washington and they'd changed the locks on my door—my office doors. They really had taken over. I tried to go to the White House and I was told that I wasn't on the guest list. I didn't bother with the press conference. And I had worked for this event for years, to get all six mujahideen [plural form of mujahid, the term for one engaged in Jihad] group leaders together to meet with the President of the United

States and have a press conference with him, and it finally was happening. And I had a coup and I couldn't even be there to relish the occasion. I could have fought it, because I couldn't be fired, the way our organization was structured; he could not fire me. So it was a coup but I didn't want to harm the cause by fighting it.

TS: Right.

KM: So I figured, "Well, God's telling me something. It's time to walk away." Know when to hold them, know when to fold them. [chuckles]

TS: You're still in the reserve at this time?

KM: Yeah.

TS: Okay. When did you do the jump school—airborne?

KM: I did that in 1984.

TS: How was that?

KM: I was forty-three years old.

TS: You want to talk about that a little; describe your experience for that?

KM: Yeah, it was a special jump school at Fort Lee [Virginia]. People like to say it's a ladies' school because it's only two weeks, unlike the school at Fort Benning which is three weeks. Because the thing is, the first week at Fort Benning is to get yourself in shape before you start the hard weeks, and with the Fort Lee school you come ready for the second week; you've already done it before you get there. We started out with, I think there was, two hundred and sixty people, or two hundred and thirty people, the first day.

TS: They were all women, or men and women?

KM: No, almost all men. There were six of us women and two hundred—I think it was two hundred and sixty total, and by the second day there were thirteen of us.

TS: Just total?

KM: Yeah. One of—Two women and—

TS: The rest men?

KM: —the rest men. It was a very, very hard course. Well, what I didn't realize until much, much later was that the school's commandant, or lieutenant colonel, and the sergeant—

training sergeant who ran it, had received orders to make sure I didn't graduate, because I had been given a real hard time back in my unit about going to jump school.

TS: What unit were you in at that time?

KM: 352nd Civil Affairs Command.

TS: Okay.

KM: And all of these geriatric boy scouts, who were there for the [unclear], for a paycheck—to wear a uniform, play soldier once a month, and get paid to do nothing—it was—there was a big issue with my going to jump school. And part of that was that I had been singled out my General [Robert Charles] Kingston, the founder of the Rapid Deployment [Joint Task] Force, to bring our unit up from being a geriatric boy scout [unclear] cure for aging playboy—play soldiers. I mean, these guys were coming wearing white socks with their uniforms, and blue ties, and brown shoes. It was—To them it was—the reserves were a joke. It was a place to make some money, play soldier, sit around doing nothing.

We had one full colonel who spent the first morning reading *The Washington Post*, page by page. He was a GS-15 [general schedule payscale, used to determine the salaries of most civilian government employees] EEO [equal employment opportunity] officer in some government agency; a black guy. And he would sit there with a newspaper spread out before him with a sergeant standing at his right shoulder, and he would read and read and read, then he'd nod, and the sergeant would reach over and turn the page, and he'd read and he'd read and he'd read, he'd nod, and the sergeant would turn the page. The sergeant's name was Sergeant Steptow[?]. And this officer was really a nasty fellow.

He—We were having a staff meeting once—I worked for him, he was my boss—and he started—this was during the killings in Atlanta, when all those black children were being killed—all boys—and he started in on that. He said that the white establishment doesn't want the Atlanta killings to be solved, because they're all white and they want all these black kids killed.

I said, "But Colonel, the mayor of Atlanta is black. The chief of police is black. The city council is almost 100% black." And I went down this list.

And he said, "You racist honky. Get out of my sight!" [chuckles]

I didn't get very good OERs from him either.

[The Atlanta murders of 1979–1981, sometimes called the Atlanta Child Murders, was a series of murders committed over a two-year period, in which at least twenty-eight African-American children, adolescents, and adults were killed in Atlanta, Georgia.]

TS: How'd you manage to make lieutenant colonel?

KM: It wasn't easy. They sabotaged my 201 file over and over and over when I went before the board, and then they did the same when I was up for O6 [rank of colonel], and I finally just got fed up with it.

[A 201 file is a set of documents maintained by the U.S. government for members of the United States armed forces. It usually contains documents describing the member's military and civilian education history, as well as personal information such as promotion orders and awards documents.]

TS: Yeah?

KM: Because I was doing in Afghanistan what these guys could only fantasize about doing; I was doing real world stuff. And then later I was doing real world stuff in Central American and—

TS: For your regular job or for your reserves?

KM: My regular job.

TS: Yeah.

KM: And anyway, one day General [Robert] Kingston came to visit our unit. General Kingston was a legend in the army at the time. I mean, the guy walked on water. He had been tapped by President Reagan to establish the Rapid Deployment Force, which is today SOCOM [Special Operations Command].

And so, he comes to the unit during this. His aide takes me aside and says, "Come over here and have lunch with me by myself."

So I did, not having any clue as what's going on, but I wasn't invited to sit at the table with the big boys; the big dogs. I was happy to sit with this guy, and he told me that the general had selected me to make—to bring that unit around to being airborne and twenty-four hour deployable. I said, "Why me?"

And he says, "Look around you." [chuckles]

So General Kingston was the one who arranged for me to have airborne orders, and because of the reserve structure I couldn't have a three week school, I had to go to a two week school because the reserves are structured to two week tours.

TS: Only two weeks for the active duty.

KM: Yeah. And so—

TS: But they wouldn't let you through it?

KM: Well, they did everything they could to hurt me in ground week, and they kept doing forced stretching. I would—We did all these stretching exercises and then the sergeant would come and physically force me to stretch even further than my body wanted to go. The pain was excruciating. And sometimes I'd be lying there on the ground after he worked me over—you read the *Beetle Bailey* comic strips, and when Beetle Bailey is on the ground all messed up with his—

[*Beetle Bailey* is an American comic strip created by cartoonist Mort Walker. It is set in a fictional United States Army military post. In the strip Beetle Bailey is frequently beat up by his platoon sergeant.]

TS: Sure.

KM: Well, I'd be lying there like that trying to get my breath and the colonel would come over and squat down beside me; he said, "Doing okay, McKay?"

And I said, "Yes, sir."

He says, "You sure you can take this?" He says, "Are you hurting?"

I said, "Colonel, if I tell you I am, I'm out, right?"

He says, "Right."

And I said, "I'm not hurting. I can take it. I can take anything you dish out."

Because I figured they wouldn't injure me. They're hurting me, but I figured they wouldn't injure me or kill me because they'd have so much paperwork to fill out.

Well, on my third jump—third or fourth jump—my pelvis came all apart. I landed on the—We were jumping on a day when the winds were high enough that they should have scrubbed the—a training jump. We were jumping from a helicopter into a field that had an active road running through it with traffic on it. It had a prison farm on one side; maximum security prison farm. It had a swamp with snaggletooth trees sticking up like punji stakes on one side. A dairy farm with a dairy bull in it in a field on the other side.

[A punji stake is a type of booby trapped stake. It is a simple spike, made out of wood or bamboo, generally placed upright in the ground.]

TS: All that activity going on on the ground.

KM: And dairy bulls are very dangerous. Beef bulls won't hurt you for the most part. Dairy bulls are the grizzly bears of the beef cat—of the cattle world. And then I forget what was on the fourth side of the place, but it was a very dangerous drop zone. And there was a creek running through it too. It was a deep creek with real steep muddy sides, and it was March so everything was half frozen.

I came down—We were testing a T-10 [parachute]—We were jumping for the first time with a T-10 chute—or [unclear] chute rather. Now, I came down like an elevator shaft. They had told us, "If you make a mistake you're going to auger [a drill for boring holes] through the ground and you're going to meet up with Satan himself." But I came down like I was in an elevator shoot; it was under perfect control. And then when I hit the ground it was right on the lip of that creek. My right foot slid one way, my left foot slid down the bank, and I was doing the splits, and I was being dragged by my chute because I was so covered in mud I couldn't pop my emergency releases, because the mud was so thick. And I'm being dragged and I'm being drawn and quartered because my feet are stuck in the mud and I'm being pulled along the edge of this creek.

When I finally got released from my parachute, and got it wadded up and tried to—stuffed in my bag, I couldn't lift it. I could lift it but I couldn't get it over—because you're supposed to lift it, flip it over your head, so you could carry it like a backpack. And a trooper was running past me, I said, "Give me a hand here. I think I just had the wind knocked out of me."

And at that moment I heard the bullhorn, "Stay where you are, Alpha 1! Sit down on your parachute bag! Do not move!"

So they came out and got me in an ambulance, and I laid there in the ambulance for about three hours while they did another jump, and then they took me to the base hospital and I found out that I had a—my pelvis was smashed into five clean pieces. Your pelvis is a dish; mine was completely flattened. And the doctor said, "This didn't happen on this jump." He says, "You've got greenstick fractures all through your lower body." He said, "What have you been doing?"

[A greenstick fracture occurs when a bone bends and cracks, instead of breaking completely into separate pieces.]

I said, "Nothing, sir."

He says, "You were hurt before you made your first jump." It was that forced stretching the sergeant was doing to me.

And then on the last day of ground week, they had this thing where they had this pit where they dump the porta-potties, and it's a pretty stinky pit, and they had this bright idea that they would drag us behind the jeeps by our shoul—by our harnesses, and that we were supposed to flip—while being dragged—flip to our feet—throw your feet over your head and do a backflip and land on your feet—and release your harness. I'm forty-three years old already; I'm not—I never was a gymnast. And a little bit of arthritis is setting in and everything. They made me the last person to be dragged, so by this time my entire class has gone back to the barracks, and they ran me through that pit so fast that there was no way, even if I had been a gymnast, that I could have gotten to my feet. They were really moving out. The other guys they were dragging real slow. They dragged me right through that pit and I thought I was going to drown in it because they slowed down once I was under the shit, completely covered, and I somehow pulled myself out of it, or

they pulled me out of it; I don't know how I got out of it. But at Walter Reed [Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C.] weeks later they were still digging it out of my ears. I was almost deaf for several weeks afterwards, and I had earaches and everything, and I started digging all this crap, literally, out of my ears.

So the injuries were deliberate, to try to—they were just upping the ante every day, trying to force me to quit. And then after I got out of Walter Reed, where I was a guest for nearly sixteen months being repaired—First thing that happened while I was at Walter Reed, I was—it was about a year into my treatment and guys from my unit showed up and said, "You're being discharged from the army."

I had eighteen and a half years in the army now. If you're discharged before your twenty years you lose everything. After your nineteenth year I think you're good to stay for another year. They were trying to kick me out before I was completely vested, or whatever the term is.

TS: Right, vested.

KM: And they made me do squat thrusts, jog in place, jumping jacks, low crawl, all kinds of things that just put enormous stress on my still unhealed pelvis. Set back my healing by months. But they said, "If you can't do this, you're out," and they had the paperwork with them. Now, they'd brought a doctor that I'd never seen before with them, and by God, I did it. Pain was awful; it set back my healing; it reopened a lot of the healing bones that were starting to knit; but I wasn't going to let them do that to me. So I managed to stay in.

Then when I was called back to active duty by the 82nd—not activated as a reservist on active duty but I was returned to active duty as a full-time soldier by the 82nd—

TS: When was that?

KM: That was in '84 or '85.

TS: Okay.

KM: But anyway, my unit did everything they could to tell the 82nd I could never jump out of an airplane again. And it dragged out and dragged out and dragged out because the CG [commanding general] and the 82nd's trying to figure out, "Do these people have the authority to tell me what to do with my troops?"

And finally the 82nd JAG [Judge Advocate General] officer said, "No, she belongs to the 82nd and not to these reservists. She's not part of their unit anymore." And they did everything they could to try to prevent me from doing my final two jumps to get my wings. And so, I jumped with the 82nd. They put me through Jumpmaster School as a refresher, but I couldn't get the Jumpmaster wings because you have to have so many jumps under your belt before you can get the Jumpmaster—the Master blaster wings, but I took the school. I'm so proud I did my last two jumps with the 82nd.

And then I had to go back to my reserve unit, because my children were with my new husband, and that wasn't working out so well. I was at Fort Bragg and they wanted me to stay permanently at Fort Bragg with that—that meant either ending my marriage or something.

TS: But you did get your wings, then?

KM: I did.

TS: Oh.

KM: From the 82nd.

TS: Very good.

KM: Yeah.

TS: Very good.

KM: But there was another thing that they did, too, that's typical of what this unit did. I got called into the Pentagon one day and I showed up not having any idea why I was called to the Pentagon, because I was on my way to do my civilian job. So I report in and I come into this room and here are three men from my unit, and they present me with court martial papers; they're going to court-martial me for impersonating an active duty officer. I said, "What are you talking about?"

And they presented this letter that was—with my signature that said "Major, U.S. Army," not "Major, U.S. Army Reserve." And I was just dumbfounded, and I looked at that letter and I looked at it, and I finally realized I didn't write that letter, it was written for me by the G-1 [Deputy Chief of Staff] of the command for my signature, and am I going to question the G-1—

TS: Right.

KM: —the colonel, as to how he put my signature block on it?

TS: Right.

KM: So I got out of that one again, but my God, my whole career was squeakers like that. I mean, they were actually going to court martial me for impersonating an active duty officer because of the way—

TS: Right, technical.

KM: —because of the way the G-1 had written my signature block.

TS: Well, do you feel that you were treated unfairly?

KM: Oh yeah. I filed an eighty-two page IG [inspector general] complaint against my CO when I was at the 450th Civil Affairs Company [Battalion].

TS: Where was that at?

KM: Same place, Riverside [correction: Riverdale, Maryland]

TS: Riverside.

KM: Actually, the 352nd was at Fort Meade [Maryland] and the 450th was at—wait a minute. No, the 352nd and Fort Meade were collocated at Riverside, and then the higher command was at Fort Meade. I filed an eighty-two page complaint against my CO, and they delayed it and delayed it and delayed and—because—yeah, the harassment was unbelievable. They were even saying that I was impersonating a man by lowering my voice and trying to sound like a man; that my low voice—

TS: Why do you think that they were treating you so poorly and harassing you?

KM: I was a woman. I was a woman and I wasn't keeping my place.

TS: Yeah.

KM: I was doing stuff in Afghanistan. I'd been called up by the 82nd for an active duty—to be returned to active duty. I didn't know my place as a woman, that's all. I mean, they even accused me, in writing, of deliberately deepening my voice to try to sound like a man. [chuckles]

TS: Well, can I ask you about a couple of events that happened?

KM: Sure.

TS: You talked a little bit about the Afghanistan war. What about the Iran Hostage Crisis in 1979?

[The Iran Hostage Crisis was a diplomatic crisis between Iran and the United States. Fifty-two American diplomats and citizens were held hostage for 444 days, from 4 November 1979 to 20 January 1981, after a group of Iranian students belonging to the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line took over the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.]

KM: What about it?

TS: You were still in the service then.

KM: Yeah.

TS: And then the Iranians took the American hostages.

KM: It had no—It had no effect on my career or what I did.

TS: Right, I was just saying, what were your thoughts at that time?

KM: Oh, I was outraged.

TS: Yeah.

KM: I was still in Israel when that happened.

TS: Okay. Right.

KM: Because I came back to the States to campaign for Ronald Reagan, and then ended up instead working for the *Army Times*—no—yeah, I ended up instead working for the *Army Times*. I came back for the campaign, found out it was an unpaid job, went to work for the *Army Times*, and then everything else.

TS: What about the Beirut barracks bombing in 1983; the marines?

[The 23 October 1983 Beirut barracks bombing were terrorist attacks that took place in Beirut, Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War. Two bombs simultaneously struck separate buildings that were housing Multinational Force in Lebanon peacekeepers. The attack specifically targeted American and French service workers, and resulted in the deaths of two hundred and forty-one American and fifty-eight French peacekeepers, six civilians, and the two suicide bombers]

KM: Oh, terrible; just absolute fury and outrage. I felt, at the time, that Reagan had blundered by pulling us out of Lebanon, and it wasn't until much later when I actually got involved in this stuff that I realized that he had no choice to do that, because the Marines were there to keep the peace and there was no peace to be kept.

TS: Right. Well, right at—

KM: And they were sitting ducks, and I don't think that Reagan was the one who sent them there. I don't remember—I don't—I was thinking about that the other day and thinking about writing an article about it. I have written about the Iran hostage thing.

TS: Well, how about right after the Beirut bombing was when we invaded Grenada.

KM: Yeah, and I was called up for that, and then they decided to keep me in the tank at the Pentagon instead of letting me go down to Grenada. And so, I'm sitting there and all of a sudden somebody realizes my top secret clearance is expired.

TS: Oh.

KM: [chuckles] So I ended up missing Grenada; Grenada [with a long "a"], that's the way it's pronounced—I ended up missing Grenada and not getting to work in the tank either. I ended up spending that whole [time] writing my Christmas cards. [chuckles]

TS: Well, that was one of the first times they had women going as part of regular army units, and then Panama—

KM: Yeah, I missed Panama too.

TS: Do you recall, in Panama, with Linda Bray leading the MPs in that one incident with—where she—it was, like, an offensive firing? Do you remember that?

KM: I don't know anything about it at all.

TS: No? Okay.

KM: For some reason—

TS: That's okay.

KM: [cat comment redacted]

TS: Now, had you retired by the time the first Gulf War happened?

KM: No.

TS: No? You were still in.

KM: I had left—I had just left my unit because another little stunt they were trying to pull was to use the discretionary/arbitrary removal from service that commanders had if you were a member of an active unit—an active reserve unit, and they could terminate your career for no reason at all; it's like right-to-work, you get fired for no reason at all.

TS: Right.

KM: And I got wind of that, and so I resigned from the unit and went into the inactive reserve, and about that time—it almost happened within two or three weeks of each other—I got a call from the Pentagon saying, "Stand in the door, you're going to the Gulf." So I told my husband and kids that I was going to be deployed within a day or two, and nothing happened. And a couple weeks passed and I got a call from the Pentagon again, saying, "Colonel, what are you still doing here? You're supposed to be in the Gulf."

"I haven't gotten any orders yet."

Well, what had happened, when I resigned from unit my 201 jacket was sent to St. Louis [Missouri] and it was in transit somewhere and nobody knew where it was, and you can't write orders without your 201 file. You're—

TS: Sounds like a bureaucratic snafu.

KM: You're an unperson.

TS: Right.

KM: And I got half a dozen calls from the Pentagon saying, "You've got to be in the Gulf."

And I said, "I can't go unless you give me orders."

And, "We can't write you orders because we don't know where your file is."

The war was over before they got it all sorted out.

TS: Right. Well, what—

KM: Probably it's a blessing because the guys I would have been there with—I mean, my own—the unit that was trying to kick me out called me up on a Thursday night and told me to report on Friday; this is the unit that was trying to kick me out of the army.

TS: Right.

KM: Now they needed me.

TS: Now they want you.

KM: Because I had expertise in that part of the world; I was a Southwest Asian FAO, foreign area operations officer.

TS: Did you consider yourself a trailblazer at all at this time, during your course of your career.

KM: It's pretty obvious, yeah. It wasn't on my—It wasn't why I doing things, it wasn't on my mind, but enough people have told me, and my own daughter told me that if it wasn't for women like me who laid their bodies across the concertina wire women like her would never have gotten to do what they did in the war, and she received a bronze star for action with Special Forces in Afghanistan.

TS: Who was that?

KM: My daughter; my youngest.

TS: Oh, okay.

KM: She was with the Stryker brigade in Northern Iraq, assigned to a remote outpost seventy miles north of Mosul.

TS: Where does she live?

KM: She's deployed right now.

TS: Yeah.

KM: She's home-based at Fort Bragg.

TS: Fort Bragg. Well, what—

KM: But I—So it really meant a lot to me, because when she was in high school I wanted her to go to one of the [service] academies, because I knew my marriage wasn't doing real well, and I knew money was going to be a big issue. And she stood in the kitchen and she—when she was a junior in high school, and she said, "I don't want to be like you, mom. I don't want to be in the army.

TS: But she ended up—

KM: Master Sergeant with a bronze star and multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan as a combat medic, and a paratrooper, and she was a member of the Black Daggers for a year; that's the special operations exhibition skydiving team. [chuckles] "I don't want to be like you, mom."

TS: Well, with a lot of the experiences that you've had, and some of the things we didn't talk about early on was—were you influenced at all by the Equal Rights Amendment movement, to pass that, or the feminist movement, women's movement?

KM: When I was living overseas—

TS: Well, this was before you were overseas though.

KM: No, but when I was living overseas I thought that I was one of these women that NOW [National Organization for Women] was all about; N-O-W.

TS: Right; National Organization of Women.

KM: It wasn't until I returned to the States and was working for AIM[?] and for the Reagan transition team that I found out what they were really all about. Because I am not a feminist; not by any stretch of the imagination.

TS: What do you think about—

KM: But just don't you tell me I can't do something because I'm a girl. [chuckles]

TS: Right, but when you say you don't think you're a feminist, you don't identify as a feminist.

KM: Absolutely not.

TS: What do you think feminists identify as?

KM: Feminists today—I don't know what they were back then—but feminists today hate men, they don't see any need for men, they—abortions are sacrament. They demand equal rights without equal responsibility, which is why I advocate—if women want equal rights they've got to have equal responsibility, they've got to accept the draft. They've got to do everything expected of a man if they want to have full equal rights.

TS: Do you think there's anything that women can't do in the military?

KM: No.

TS: Even the, like, infantry?

KM: Pee. It's really hard when you're in a parachute, sitting on a tarmac, and you're all hunched over, and you're sitting there for hours and hours and hours waiting to board your plane and you got to pee.

TS: I think that—

KM: Especially when you're forty-three years old.

TS: I think they have things for that now; to take care of that.

KM: Well, they do. My daughter had me send her a female urinal while she was in Iraq because she was riding around with Stryker brigade units. But—

TS: Would you recommend military service for any woman?

KM: Absolutely. It was—

TS: Any man?

KM: It was the best thing that I ever did with my life, was to join the military, and the second smartest thing I ever did was stay to retire.

TS: And that's in spite of all the harassment that you received?

KM: I love the army. It's—The army is like the Bible, it's perfect; it's the people who practice it that are flawed. [chuckles]

TS: Well, do you think your life would have been different if you hadn't joined the army?

KM: Oh, God, I don't even—I shudder to think. I probably would have been a GS-3 clerk—government clerk typist, I'd have married some guy wearing the hair off the back of his head, and in a La-Z-Boy [armchair] watching football, and had three snotty-nosed teenagers. [chuckles] I can't imagine what—I simply cannot imagine what my life would have been without the army.

TS: It's influenced it greatly, then?

KM: It is my life. I just simply cannot imagine where I would be. Because remember, when I was coming out of college I had a degree in agriculture, but they didn't hire girls to be ag teachers.

TS: Right.

KM: And there were so many limitations, and I just—I cannot even begin to conceive of what my life would have been, because all the stuff I did as a civilian in Afghanistan and Central America, and supporting the Miskito Indians in the [unclear] Catholics all during the Contra War. Going to Africa and meeting with Jonas Savimbi in Jamba [southeastern Angola]; going in in a DC-3—an old "Gooney Bird"—at treetop levels so that if the Soviets—

[The Contra War took place in Nicaragua from 1981 to 1988. It began as a series of rebellions against the Sandinista government which had overthrown the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, and was an ongoing struggle between the government of Nicaragua

and counter-revolutionary forces who had the moral and financial backing of the U.S. government]

[Jonas Malheiro Savimbi was an Angolan political and military leader who founded and led the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola.]

TS: Was that part of your—

KM: That was my civilian job.

TS: Civilian job, right. So—

KM: Which is what got me in so much hot water with my—with the guys in my military unit—

TS: With your army job.

KM: —because they couldn't even fantasize—and they wouldn't have gone to airborne school—they could have but they wouldn't have, but they didn't want me to because then somehow that was a reflection on their manhood.

TS: Right. What about the issue of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] that we read about today?

KM: Obviously it's for—it's for very real. I've been told that I have it, and I don't know how—I've been asked to undergo testing for it, but I recognize symptoms of it myself; loud noises, I almost hit the deck every time. I don't like to sit where I don't have the wall to my back; the gunfighter's seat.

TS: Right. Have you used the VA at all?

KM: I'm always very aware of everything in my surroundings, and I understand that's also characteristic of—well, maybe not just PTSD but having been in the military. I'm aware of everything within—as far as I can see or hear.

TS: Have you used the Veterans' Administration?

KM: No, not yet.

TS: Not yet? Have you thought about using it?

KM: I have because my—I'm having lots and lots of physical problems as a result of my parachute—my airborne injury.

TS: Right.

KM: We learned—I think I mentioned that we learned—I learned by accident last year that I have a possible Agent Orange exposure, and other chemical weapons.

TS: From Fort McClellan?

[During the Vietnam Era, the U.S. Army had their only stateside factory producing Agent Orange, and supposedly stored the canisters of chemical near the barracks of the WACs in basic training.]

KM: From Fort McClellan. And the two diseases that are killing me slowly, slowly, and will kill me, are both Agent Orange issues. Because the peripheral neuropathy [damage to or disease affecting nerves] is normally only a hereditary disease, but exposure to chem—to Agent Orange has also been proven to cause it and I have no family history of neuromuscular disease. It's also called wasting disease. My right leg has atrophied to where it's not much more than just the bone. My left leg right now is swollen up like a blimp because the Achilles tendon is infected, or inflamed, or something, and I wear a brace when I go outside. I can hobble around the house but—

TS: You get around pretty good, I have to say, Karen; you do.

KM: Well, up until a month ago I was getting around without the brace, but now I have to have it. Whatever this is, it's moving fast, so it's probably a good thing you got here now. I just want to finish my books, get them written, get them published. [chuckles]

TS: Well, you've got to keep up with that hundred and three year old fellow driving all those horses, right?

KM: Driving the stagecoach, yeah.

TS: That's right. Well, is there anything in particular that you would want a civilian to know or understand about the military that you think that maybe they may not understand or appreciate?

KM: Well, 99% of Americans today don't even know anybody who has somebody in the military. It's a tragic, tragic situation. Almost 70% of our young people are unfit for military service; because of obesity; because of hearing loss from listening to rock and roll; because of drug issues; from discipline issues. I don't know where all of the autism

has come from but there's got to be something to explain this huge, huge increase in it. It might be that these were just normal kids that people used to think just had issues and moved on.

TS: Right.

KM: I don't know. But the fact that so few Americans have served or know—no, I had my figures wrong. Ninety-nine percent of Americans have not served. Ninety-five percent don't even know somebody who has served or has somebody in the military. And every time the government wants to cut money, they want to cut veterans' programs, they want to cut the military. The only purpose for a federal government—the only purpose for our federal government—is to defend this country. Foreign Affairs, the State Department stuff and everything, is all part of defending this country, and the only thing that we could justify spending big bucks on is our military. Yes, there's a whole lot of waste. Eisenhower warned about the industrial-military complex, which I did not understand at the time.

[The military-industrial complex is an informal alliance between a nation's military and the arms industry which supplies it, seen together as a vested interest which influences public policy]

I kept saying, "How can a general officer—a soldier—say, 'Beware—'" because I was naïve. Now I understand. Now I understand. But people have got to understand that if we don't keep this country safe and secure, they're not going to have the luxury of worrying about transgenders and homosexual rights, and all this other crap that they get wrapped around the axle over [to be extremely upset].

TS: Well, what do you think about that issue of—especially with "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" that was repealed, and—

["Don't Ask, Don't Tell" is 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 people from military service. Don't Ask, Don't Tell was repealed 20 September 2011]

KM: I am totally opposed to homosexuals in the military. It's too disruptive. I wouldn't have wanted to be showering with one. I would—Whether male or female, because you're standing in a line of open showerheads with a bunch of naked people. I don't want to think that the guy—that the gal next to me is sizing me up or something. I don't want to

think—I don't want a guy next to me who says he's really a female in his own mind so therefore he gets to shower with me.

TS: Well, what about those that say that they serve honorably during times of war?

KM: I don't know if they have. They keep saying that, but only about 2% of the American population is homosexual.

TS: Yes.

KM: So how does that make that significant in the military? When they started—first started talking about this—about accepting homosexuals in the military—I said, "What are they going to do? Give them their own barracks and own battalions and everything? Are male homosexuals going to be exempt from combat because they're not really men, because women are exempt from combat?" Or—Well, now, even still, they're volunteers; everybody's a volunteer.

But I have worked for homosexuals, I've had friends who are homosexuals. The guy that I get all of my dogs and sheep and other animals that I've had is a flaming open homosexual. He's also politically conservative [chuckles], and he makes light of it. One day he is having a big dispute with a woman who co-owned a dog with him—in fact it was this dog—and he said to me, "Thank God I'm a homosexual; I'd hate to be married to a bitch like that." [chuckles] And I've worked with them and they've been my friends, I've been to parties at their homes. I wouldn't go to their weddings. But that wasn't an issue back then, because it's only now an issue. But they do not belong in the military.

There was some guy who called in the G. [George] Gordon [Battle] Liddy Show one time, and was taking G. Gordon on about the whole issue of homosexuals in the military, and he said, "I'm gay and I flew off of a carrier in the Gulf War. I'm this big hero. I've got all these decorations."

And G. Gordon says, "Well, yeah? What'd you fly?"

And the guy says, "I flew a Tomahawk."

Do you know what a Tomahawk is? It's a [long-range, all-weather, subsonic cruise] missile. [chuckling]

TS: A missile. Sure.

KM: Ooops, cover blown.

TS: Right.

KM: And G. Gordon could have—I was so upset with him. I met him years ago at—with my buddy Arcade Brown, the editor of *Soldier of Fortune* [magazine]—publisher—and G. Gordon taught me how to exercise in confined quarters. [chuckling]

TS: Oh, really?

KM: You know G. Gordon's background?

TS: Yes.

[G. Gordon Liddy is best known as the chief operative in the White House Plumbers unit that existed from July-September 1971, during Richard Nixon's presidency. He was convicted of conspiracy, burglary, and illegal wiretapping for his role in the Watergate scandal. He also was a radio talk show host from 1992-2012.]

KM: And anyway, I was really upset with him for hanging up on this Tomahawk pilot because he could have had so much fun with him. [unclear] he just slammed the phone down, and I thought, "God, what a lost opportunity."

TS: Well, how about the idea of patriotism? What does patriotism mean to you?

KM: Oh, God, that's undefinable. It's so much—It's part of the marrow of my bones; it's my flesh; it's my blood. My father died for this country; my grandfather was a machine-gunner in World War I; my daughter is a combat vet. I—Probably my great-grandfather fought in the Civil War and I don't—but I don't know it. But I do know that I do come from a long line of warriors on both sides of my family. To me, America is everything, and I would—I have an impulse to kill anybody who burns the flag, or defiles the flag; walks on it, pees on it. I can't define patriotism. It's love of country. It's love of God and country. And I'm an Israeli patriot as well as an American patriot because I lived there, I'm a Zionist, but my first loyalty is to America because this is my country.

TS: Well, I don't have any more formal questions, but is there anything that we haven't covered that you wanted to talk about?

KM: Nothing that I want to talk about. [both chuckle] A lot that we haven't covered.

TS: Yeah. Can you think of anything particular?

KM: Not offhand, but if I do I can email it to you?

TS: Okay, sure.

KM: Except you can't have that on your tape, and that tape's going to be scandalous; if there are any old WAC senior officers, if Major Foote is still around. Major Foote, she went on to be a general, but I remember meeting with her in the Pentagon when I was in a whole lot of hot water and they were trying to kick me out of the army, and I drove up to Washington and got a meeting with Major Foote, who had been one of my instructors in

OBC, and she lectured me about what an officer should be and what a good officer is, and she said, "I polish my shoes every night, and I align them perfectly next to my bed." That was her definition of what being a good officer was. [chuckles] I mean, she really made that big point of it, and I almost burst out laughing.

TS: Yeah.

KM: I probably would have if I hadn't had pneumonia when I was there; I was so sick when I went to the Pentagon.

TS: This is—Are you talking about [Evelyn] Pat Foote? Yeah.

KM: Major Foote? I don't know what—I never knew what her first name was, just Major Foote.

TS: Major Foote. Because there's a Major Foote that became a general.

KM: That's her.

TS: Okay, that's Pat.

KM: I never knew what her first name was.

TS: I think so.

KM: Just Major Foote. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah, there you go. Well, if there's nothing else—

KM: Or General Foote.

TS: —I'll go ahead and turn it off, but I really appreciate you letting me come here and sharing a meal with me and—

KM: My pleasure. I always like to cook for people.

TS: —thank you so much. Alright, well, thank you, Karen. I appreciate it very much.

[End of Interview]