WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Theressa Jeanne Fillmore

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: 10 November, 2015

[Begin Interview]

TS: Well, today is November 10, 2015. This is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the home of Theressa Fillmore in Raeford, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veteran's Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina of Greensboro. Theressa, would you like to state your name the way you would like it to be on your collection?

TF: Theressa Jeanne Fillmore.

TS: Alright. Well, Theressa, why don't you start out a little bit by telling me when and where you were born?

TF: I was born 13 November [1956] in Fort Worth, Texas.

TS: How long did you stay in Fort Worth?

TF: I have no idea because I was a child.

TS: Yeah.

TF: But I know that my mother moved us to New Mexico—Lovington, New Mexico when we were little, and by "we" I mean me and four of my six sisters. We stayed in Lovington until I was about in the fifth or sixth grade, and then we moved to Hobbs, New Mexico which was a little further north, and we stayed there for a while, and then we moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico right at the start of me going to junior high, which would have been what they call middle school now, but I would have been starting the seventh grade. We stayed in Albuquerque and I lived in Albuquerque until I joined the army and left.

TS: Is that right? Okay.

TF: Well, now, you grew up in a family of all girls.

TS: Yes.

TF: Even the dog was a girl.

TS: [chuckles] Where do you fit in that hierarchy of sisters?

TF: I have four sisters over me and two sisters under me.

TS: Okay, so you're kind of in the middle; a little bit.

TF: Kind of, sort of.

TS: A little bit in the middle.

TF: And I am the only one who has entered the military.

TS: You are? Oh, how about that. How did you like growing up? What was it like? What kind of things did you guys do for fun?

TF: We pretty much hung around each other, played outside; not kind of like today when they're all in to the video game. We were outside kids playing at the park, playing with our friends, stuff like that.

TS: What kind of games did you play?

TF: We were poor, so it was kind of the games you could play that don't require anything, like tag and jump—just the basic stuff kids did back in the sixties.

TS: Now, was your mom raising you by herself?

TF: Yes.

TS: What did she do for a living?

TF: I remember for a while, when we were living in Lovington, that she was a waitress, but after that when we lived in Hobbs and in Albuquerque—I know in Albuquerque she did housekeeping work for the rich families, but when we lived in Hobbs, I have no idea what she did for a living.

TS: Not sure?

TF: No.

TS: What did you enjoy as a young girl?

TF: I was a bookworm. I would read anything I could get my hands on.

TS: Is that right?

TF: Yes.

TS: What kind of stuff did you like to read?

TF: Well, like I said, anything I can get my hands on, and pretty much what I would get my hands on would be like the romance stories, which now I can't stand, but back then I read them all the time.

TS: Yeah. Did you enjoy school, then?

TF: Yes, I loved school. I was an honor's student even when I was in the fourth grade—and keep in mind with Veteran's Day coming up—they had a contest at our school for all the kids to write a poem for Veteran's Day, and the one I wrote was good, and so they had me actually read it to the disabled veterans association there in town on Veteran's Day.

TS: Oh, that's a nice honor.

TF: Yeah, and just to clarify a point, yes, our mother raised us, but our dad was not a deadbeat dad. Our father was murdered when I was ten-years-old, so we had the year prior—spent one year with him, and when we came back to New Mexico—because he lived in Texas—when we came back to New Mexico—we were notified not shortly after we returned to New Mexico that he had been killed.

TS: Oh, my goodness. How old were you when that happened?

TF: I believe I was ten.

TS: That had to be pretty traumatic.

TF: It was.

TS: Probably still is.

TF: Well, no.

TS: No? Yeah. So you enjoyed school.

TF: Yes.

TS: You were a bookworm.

TF: I was. I was a bookworm. I was an honor student. It was just my niche.

TS: Well, did you have any ideas as a young girl what you wanted to do when you were done with school?

TF: Didn't have a clue.

TS: No?

TF: Didn't even think about college because with our—with us being in poverty that wasn't something I even thought about, and pretty much everybody around us was in poverty so it wasn't like we had a bunch of role models saying, "Well, all my kids went to college," or whatever, so I never really gave a thought about college, even when I got to high school. Still had a lot of people that had—didn't even go on after high school, so I didn't have those examples to say what—maybe I want to follow in that person's footsteps or that person's footsteps. And back then we wasn't really into the glorifying of the entertainers like now, so I really didn't have anyone to look up to for something like that.

TS: Now, you grew up in an environment of the late sixties, like the counterculture and all that stuff. Did you ever know that was going on?

TF: Oh, yes, because the church I attended in Albuquerque was across the street from the University of New Mexico, and so we would see that. What they call the hippies now, we would see them out and about all the time. So they'd be spreading their little "make love, not war" message. When they had their little protests we'd see them with their signs and stuff. So yes, I was very much aware of it.

TS: What did you think of them?

TF: It just didn't matter to me.

TS: It didn't matter?

TF: No.

TS: Well, you grew up in a real interesting social time, too, because we had the Civil Rights Movement pretty much going on then too. Did that effect you at all or did you have any thoughts on it at the time as a young girl?

[The American Civil Rights Movement took place from 1954-1968. It was a reaction to the Jim Crow segregated South and racist beliefs/attitudes throughout the entire country. Landmark Supreme Court Cases Brown v. Board of education and Loving v. Virginia overturned the separate but equal doctrine and legalized interracial marriage, respectfully. Congress ratified the 23rd amendment in 1961 and the 24th amendment in 1964, effectively ending many Jim Crow Era laws. During this time, Congress also passed the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, 1964, 1965, and 1968]

TF: Well, I remember being impressed that Shirley Chisholm, a black woman, was running for president. I was very impressed about that. I mean, we didn't think she had a chance in hell, but it was very impressive to me.

[Shirley Chisholm was the first African-American woman elected to Congress in 1968. In 1972, she became the first African-American woman to run for president when she ran for Democratic Party's presidential nomination]

TS: Now, was it—

TF: At our high school, we had, like, the Black Student Union, which I was the secretary of that club. And we were pretty active. Our high school was being shut down because they were building a new Albuquerque High, so we were the last graduating class from that period. So our graduating class had to come up with a gift for the new school, and after much study we came up with giving them a big old mosaic portrait of Angela Davis who was very prominent during that time.

[Angela Davis was an African American woman who was a political activist, academic scholar, and author. She was also the leader of the United States Communist Party in the 1960s]

So I had, like—was very impressed with Shirley Chisholm. Being involved with the Black Student Union, it wasn't like you hear some of the things these days about black clubs or Black Lives Matter, and all that stuff where people associate it with violence. Our Black Student Union was primarily so that the black kids would know something about what black people had done, and who our heroes might—should have been.

[Black Lives Matter is an international activist movement, originating in the African-American community, that campaigns against violence and systematic racism towards black people]

TS: Like a heritage, right?

TF: Right.

TS: The history.

TF: Exactly.

TS: Because it wasn't really talked about at all really.

TF: Not—

TS: Especially not at schools.

TF: And it sure wasn't taught.

TS: No. Well, that's pretty neat. Well, how was it that you came about deciding to go in the army?

TF: I had met a recruiter, and we kind of, sort of, dated, and I just kind of—from being associated with him, I liked what was going on with his life, so that's when I decided to go into the military. I did not inform my mother or anybody, I just joined, and then later on she found out I had joined the military—joined the army—the day that I was to leave for basic training, because I was in the Delayed Entry Program.

[The Delayed Entry Program (DEP) is designed to give potential recruits time to put their affairs in order, finish school, etc. before shipping out for basic training]

TS: Now, how old were you when you joined?

TF: I was eighteen.

TS: Oh, you were young. You were young. So you didn't tell her? You didn't need her to sign because you were eighteen.

TF: Right.

TS: What'd she think about it?

TF: I don't even know. I never thought about it. I mean, I know in later years she was proud of me.

TS: Yeah.

TF: But initially, I don't know what she thought of it.

TS: What about your sisters? What did they think?

TF: I don't think they gave it a lot of thought at first. It wasn't until later, as I was being so successful in the military, that my sisters would hold me up as an example to their children, and talk to them about possibly going into the military. But when they were

young—when they were around the age I was—eighteen, nineteen, twenty—I don't think they gave it any thought at all.

TS: Well, when you first decided to join, this is back in '75, right?

TF: Right.

TS: Seventy-five. It started to get more women in the military, but it was quite a minority—

TF: Yes.

TS: —and it was still the WAC [Women's Army Corps], right?

TF: Sure was.

TS: Did you even think about how long you were going to stay in or what you were going to use the military for, or anything like that?

TF: Didn't give any thought at all. My first assignment at Fort Hood [Texas] was with the 227th Aviation Battalion—I mean, Company—because it was a separate company at that time, which later became a battalion. But it was pretty male oriented being an aviation—

TS: Right. I'm just going to set this down here.

TF: So there were times I caught some flak from our first sergeant. But I remember my commander, Captain Mumby [Lieutenant Colonel Roger Mumby]—I still remember his name—he was pretty great, and most of the people I worked with was pretty great. The first sergeant, he had some issues, but as I showed my proficiency in my area, even he came around.

TS: Well, let's go back and talk about when you first went into basic training, then.

TF: Attention hog [referring to her pet dog].

TS: We got the puppies joining us.

TF: Oh, I liked basic training because I—

TS: You don't have turn that way. You can just talk to me like this. It's alright, it'll pick it up.

TF: Okay. I did track and field—

TS: Oh, okay.

TF: —for the city of Albuquerque. I didn't do any sports for school, but the city had a team so I did track and field for the city, and I played softball for the city. So I was pretty physical

already, and when I went to basic training, basically what I really liked was the discipline that was being instilled. I liked how not only was there a set time for this, that, and the other, but I liked the teaching from the drill sergeants, and that if you didn't know how to do something, they readily showed you. You wasn't ridiculed for not knowing how to do something. They would just show you, and they would show you, and if you still wasn't getting it, if one of your fellow soldiers was getting it better, they would have that soldier show you. We had good camaraderie in basic training with all our women. Our drill sergeants were female.

TS: Because it was all women then, right?

TF: Yes. So we didn't have a lot of contact with the male soldiers. In fact, the first contact we had, that I recall, was when they had taken us—I'm trying to remember. We were on some kind of a pass, and they had taken us somewhere on Fort McClellan [Alabama], and that was the first time we had contact with the guys.

TS: What kind of training did they have for the guys there? I forget. But they had other things on Fort McClellan besides just the WAC base, right?

TF: Yes, I believe at that time Fort McClellan was also the MP; the military police base.

TS: That's right. The MP, that's right.

TF: So that was our first time having actual face to face contact with the guys.

TS: So you were liking the discipline, then, really?

TF: Yes.

TS: And the structure of the military.

TF: Yes.

TS: Was there anything that was particularly difficult for you to do?

TF: Not particularly.

TS: No?

TF: I mean, I didn't care for the push-ups back then. That's when the females did the modified push-ups; the ones on your knees.

TS: Right.

TF: So I didn't care for the push-ups. I mean, even our sit-ups were the modified kind. So I didn't like too much of that. But when it came to the running, that was just fine. I was like, "We can run all day."

TS: [chuckles] You were good at the running, right?

TF: Yes.

TS: You had that experience.

TF: And didn't mind doing it.

TS: Now, when you first signed up, did you sign up for a particular job or did that come later when you were—

TF: No, I signed up for AG [Adjunct General].

TS: You did?

TF: I remember when I took my ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] the guys at the recruiting station were teasing. Once I had finished they were like, "Oh, look, we got a real dummy here." So I actually had thought I'd scored lower, to find out they were just teasing me because I had scored fairly high. I think my score was like a 125 or 130.

TS: Did you have, like, a pick of what you wanted to do, then?

TF: No, they asked me, "Would you like to be a AG soldier?"
And I was like, "Sure." I didn't know what it was.

TS: And what was it? What was AG?

TF: It was an adjunct general. It was admin [administration], personnel.

TS: Right.

TF: I was like, "Okay, sure." I didn't know. They could have said, "Do you want to be a plumber?" I mean, at least I had clue of what that was.

TS: Yeah.

TF: But they're like, "You want to be AG?"
And I was like, "Okay." So I didn't know.

TS: You were just going along with it, right?

TF: Yes.

TS: Ready for the ride. Alright, so you enjoyed basic training, except for the push-ups and the sit-ups.

TF: Right.

TS: And then you got sent for your training for the AG, right?

TF: Right.

TS: And that was in Fort Benjamin Harrison [Indiana]?

TF: That's right.

TS: How was that training?

TF: The training was good. I didn't like Fort Ben Harrison because it was so cold. I mean, I went to basic training in January. By the time we got to Fort Ben Harrison it was March and it was cold, and I did not like that at all.

TS: [chuckles] You weren't there that long, though, I wouldn't imagine.

TF: No, the AIT was only—it was eight—it was supposed to be eight weeks, but they cut it; by then it was only six weeks.

TS: And then did you get to pick where you wanted to go? Did you have a "dream sheet" [list of preferences for first duty station] like they talk about?

TF: If we did I don't recall it.

TS: Yeah. Where'd you get sent?

TF: But I knew I was going to Fort Hood because I had enlisted for Fort Hood.

TS: Oh, you did?

TF: Because back then when you enlisted you could pick where you wanted to go, so I knew I was going to Fort Hood.

TS: That's where you wanted to go?

TF: Yes.

TS: You got there sometime in '75, and then you were there for about three years, right?

TF: Yes.

TS: Now, this is your first assignment. How were you enjoying the army at this time? The WAC actually—it's still the WAC—and it's going to not be the WAC pretty soon.

TF: Yes, but my assignment at Hood was great. When I got there, initially my first sergeant had reservations about me being able to do the job. But what I found was they didn't think I could do it because they had an aviation soldier in there doing it, and that soldier was just doing it however, so when I came in straight out the school I was doing it the way I had been taught to do it, and they were thinking I was doing all this stuff wrong. I had to actually pull out the correspondence regulation and show them that I was doing their letters properly, because they were used to just seeing it done a different way.

TS: And then you showed them that it was done the right way, and they were all—

TF: Yes.

TS: Oh, okay.

TF: And I became the mailroom clerk, so I was also taking care of that. So as I was showing my proficiency at being an AG soldier, they were giving me more additional duties.

TS: [chuckles] Isn't that the way it worked your whole career?

TF: Pretty much.

TS: Yeah, the better you are the more they give you, and the more they give you, right? Well now, so were you enjoying the army?

TF: I was enjoying the army. I had even got into liking the push-ups a little bit.

TS: [chuckles] Now, you had—

TF: At least, I was better at them.

TS: You had your first daughter before you went in, right?

TF: Right.

TS: And so, was she with you at Fort Hood?

TF: No, because I'd given her up for adoption at birth.

TS: Yeah. So you went in, and then you are at Fort Hood. And how are things? Like, are you in barracks, are you off—

TF: Yes, I was in the barracks, and then I had my son and moved off post. Then continued to be okay. This was back when a female got pregnant in the military, then you went into civilian maternity attire. So the only thing that didn't change for me—initially I was still going to PT [physical training], and then the first sergeant finally told me, he said, "You are not coming to my PT formation in civilian clothes." And that was the only reason I stopped going to PT, because I still do the PT, but he didn't want me out in the formation so I stopped going.

TS: So you didn't even have a uniform to wear, though, or you would have probably, right?

TF: No, they didn't have—we didn't have maternity uniforms back then.

TS: Now, how were you treated as a pregnant woman in the army at that time?

TF: I was treated no different, probably because I was the company clerk. So I'm sitting behind a desk all day, and back then that's when they gave you eight weeks off prior to preg—prior to delivery and eight weeks after. So with all that time off, by the time I—when I had my son I was ready to go back to work, because I—that other eight weeks I wasn't doing—I mean, I was looking for a place to live, but basically I was bored half to death.

TS: You were ready to go back?

TF: Yeah.

TS: What do they give you now?

TF: Now you don't get nothing before, you get six weeks after.

TS: Oh, okay, so it's a lot shorter.

TF: So unless it's a problem pregnancy, basically there's no reason to get the time before.

TS: So you're just working up until you have the baby.

TF: Right. Now you just work until you have the child.

TS: Okay.

TF: Which made better sense to me because that [unclear], "Well, what am I supposed to be doing?" I'm just sitting around men. I'm only pregnant. It ain't like I'm hurt or something.

TS: Right. You still can do the job.

TF: Yes, especially as a company clerk; you're just sitting behind a desk.

TS: Now, are you enjoying the job part?

TF: Oh, yes. I always—throughout my whole career—I enjoyed my duties.

TS: Yeah. Now, when you initially signed up, did you sign up for three years?

TF: Yes.

TS: So it's coming up towards the end of your time at Fort Hood, and you decided to re-enlist obviously—

TF: Yeah, I decided to re-enlist and re-classify.

TS: Okay, so tell us about that.

TF: I re-classified to 72 Golf [72G], which at that time was called a Data Communications Switching Center Specialist, but actually you worked with computers. I went to Fort Gordon [Georgia] for my training. I enjoyed that. Graduated Distinguished Honor Graduate from that course, and went on to Fort Huachuca [Sierra Vista, Arizona] to do that job.

TS: Okay. And so, that's around '78 or so?

TF: Yeah.

TS: Although the WAC had started transitioning out of—integrated into the regular army before '78, now you're—tell me about wearing the insignia of WAC, and how that changed when you couldn't wear it anymore.

TF: Oh, yes. I remember when I was at—I was still at Fort Hood when they told us—I believe it was late '77—when they told us that we would no longer be wearing the Pallas Athene [insignia of the Women's Army Corps] and we had to wear the branch of—not of our branch, which was AG[?], but the branch of the type of unit we were assigned to. I was in the aviation unit so basically we had to wear that branch and take off our Pallas Athene. And I remember some of the women were crying about it, and I just felt like, okay, I liked the Pallas Athena. I liked being a WAC. But you know what? It don't really matter what we wear on our collar. We are all still going to be doing the same job. So we just moved on from that. Or at least I did.

TS: Yeah. Well, did the culture of women in the army change, do you think, because of that?

TF: I think quite a bit of it changed, because before we had, like, what they would call the WAC shack where all the women were put in one building, but later on they were put in the same building with the guys. But basically, you still had a WAC shack because they would take a certain part of the building that only the females could be in. You'd have, like, a three-story building, and the first floor was dedicated to all the women, or the third

floor or the second floor, but either way some part of that building was just for the women. Unlike now where you can have a guy in one room and across the hall might be a female.

TS: So it's all integrated except for in the room, right?

TF: Right.

TS: Not co-ed in the room.

TF: Right.

TS: And before, with the WAC, your housing was all with WAC, and then after that it became with your unit, right?

TF: Right.

TS: Do you think that was better or different, or how do you think that—

TF: I never even thought about stuff like that.

TS: No?

TF: I was kind of like go with the flow. The army say this how we doing it, then you just adapt and that's how you do it.

TS: That's probably how you stayed in thirty-one years. [chuckles] What do you think?

TF: It might be.

TS: Yeah.

TF: But I was like—I didn't see these things as controversy. I just saw it as change that was happening, and if you can't stop the change, then you just make the best of it.

TS: So you did you're training as a 72 Golf, and then you went to Fort Huachuca. How was your tour there? Did you enjoy it?

TF: It was good. When I got to Fort Huachuca I was placed on the new equipment training team, where I was supposed to go out with the team and train people on how to use the new equipment; the new signal equipment that was coming out.

TS: Was that one of the reasons that you cross-trained, to get into that kind of unit or?

TF: No, that's just what I was assigned when I got to Fort Huachuca, because when I left training I didn't know what—I mean, I knew I was going to Fort Huachuca, but I didn't know what type of unit I would be going to there.

TS: Why did you want to cross-train?

TF: I just wanted to do something different.

TS: Yeah. How come?

TF: I was just wanting to do something different.

TS: Have a change.

TF: I mean, I had been AG for three years, and I had been dealing with all these other different MOSs [Military Occupational Specialty] and helping other soldiers reclassify. And talking with the retention NCO [non-commissioned officer], and listening to him talk about other soldiers reclassify, and I just decided that my next three years, I'd like to try something different.

TS: Oh, that's good. So having the advantage of knowing what other people are going into, did you kind of look at what kind of other MOSs were available?

TF: Yes, but they just didn't appeal to me.

TS: Yeah. Well, that's interesting that you got to do that. Now, where you living off base there too?

TF: Yes; me and my husband and our children, we were living in Sierra Vista.

TS: How was the living conditions there?

TF: They were good.

TS: The housing?

TF: I didn't live in government housing, we lived in a trailer, but they were nice.

TS: It was good?

TF: Yeah.

TS: Everything was working for you?

TF: Yeah.

TS: And so, did you have kind of, like, a 9:00 [a.m.] to 5:00 [p.m.] job or did you work different shifts? What was like a typical day for you?

TF: Oh, no. I pretty much had a 7:30 to 4:30 position.

TS: Yeah.

TF: Because that's the way our team was. If you were not out training on the new equipment, which basically was taking people—you'd go out to where the new equipment was deployed and you would train the people on how to use it. So if you weren't doing that then you were in the office learning something else. It was at that point that I went to the Basic Instructor Training Course to be an instructor, because I was assigned to the new equipment training team so they said I needed to be classified as an instructor. So I went to the training to become that during that time period.

TS: Where'd you go for that training?

TF: It was held at Fort Huachuca.

TS: Yeah. Did you enjoy that?

TF: Yes, it was good.

TS: Doing the instruction?

TF: Yeah.

TS: And so, you weren't very long at Fort Huachuca that first time, right?

TF: No, not at all.

TS: What happened? Did you want to transfer to go somewhere or what? Did you get orders that came down?

TF: Yeah, I just got orders. And actually, I was kind of surprised because I thought that it came down kind of quickly, but my first sergeant told me it wasn't unusual that you would only be there a couple years once—if you did a CONUS [Continental United States] move. And it was really funny because my sergeant major was the same guy that was my first sergeant at Fort Hood the first time around.

TS: Yeah. Where did you get your orders to?

TF: To Germany.

TS: And where did you end up in Germany?

TF: I wound up in the Signal Battalion in Heilbronn.

TS: Where about in Germany is that at; Heilbronn?

TF: Shoot.

TS: Is it northern—

TF: I don't remember exactly where it was, but I know it wasn't that far from Mannheim because we used to go up there to party a lot.

TS: Did you? [chuckles] Okay.

TF: At the Coleman Barracks [Coleman Army Airfield].

TS: Did you move your whole family over? Did your husband go over too?

TF: No, we had gotten divorced so only the children came over. They were very little at that time so I had a babysitter for the younger children, and my oldest son at that time was in elementary school so he went to a school.

TS: Did he go to the on-base school?

TF: Yes, he did.

TS: Okay.

TF: And we lived in the government quarters at that time, which were pretty nice.

TS: Were they pretty nice? Was it tough to get in them or not to—

TF: No, it was not.

TS: Now, are you getting promoted during this time?

TF: Let's see. When I got to Germany I was a sergeant E-5. When I left Germany I was a staff sergeant.

TS: Did you enjoy your tour in Germany?

TF: Yes, it was a good tour. The Signal Battalion was very busy, because one thing about signal is they go to the field a lot.

TS: And you went with them?

TF: Yes.

TS: Did you enjoy that?

TF: Not really, because sometimes I had difficulty with finding childcare for the children, because we would be in the field thirty to sixty days sometimes.

TS: Who did you end up finding?

TF: I had a neighbor who said that she would be more than glad to watch them for a set fee. So I didn't have to pay her like—oh, we're going to be in the field thirty days so I got to pay you four hundred dollars, and if we're going to be in the field sixty days, I got to pay you six hundred. No, she said for a set fee. I think it was, like, two hundred and fifty dollars, which even back then was a lot of money to me; I was just an E-5.

TS: Right.

TF: But she would watch them no matter how long we were in the field for; whenever I had to go.

TS: Was she in the service too?

TF: No, her husband was.

TS: She's dependent?

TF: Yes.

TS: So you didn't necessarily like being in the field too much, but what kind of things did you do when you were out there?

TF: Same thing I did in garrison.

TS: Yeah.

TF: Process awards, process leaves, deliver the mail, because I was still the mail clerk.

TS: But you're in your tents, and your—

TF: Right.

TS: How were the conditions of living different, for somebody who doesn't know, who hasn't been out in the field?

TF: That was pretty much—The only difference is instead of being in a building you were out there in tents. You don't have access to the showers and stuff, but we would do shower runs back to garrison, like, every three days. They'd load up one of the deuce and a

halfs—one of the big trucks—and they'd just take us back to garrison and we could do a shower, because we did not have the shower facilities in the field like we do now.

TS: Right. Did you participate in the Reforger at all?

[The Reforger (Return of Forces to Germany) was an annual military exercise conducted by NATO during the Cold War. The purpose of the exercise was to make sure that NATO could quickly deploy forces into West Germany in the event of a conflict with the Warsaw Pact]

TF: Yes, we would always participate in Reforger.

TS: Yeah. How was that?

TF: It was just a bigger field exercise.

TS: Just bigger? It didn't last as long as some of your exercises, it sounds like.

TF: Shoot, Reforger was long.

TS: Was it long?

TF: Mostly because we were a signal unit, and so signal, they have to go out and lay the cable for the communications before the units go out in the field, and then they have to go back and retrieve that cable. So they would be, like, first out, last back in, because you had to stay out there until the cable folks retrieved all the cable.

TS: That's why you didn't know exactly how long you were going to be out there, then, right?

TF: Right.

TS: Oh, I see, okay. Well, what were your main responsibilities for your job?

TF: It's primarily just doing the paperwork for whatever needed to be done, whether it was preparing letters for the commander's signature, preparing awards that the soldiers were submitted for, processing leave requests, processing allotments for people to send money here, there, and wherever; just whatever. Processing disciplinary actions, because back then you didn't necessarily have the JAG [Judge Advocate General] doing these things, the company clerk would do them. So I would be the one preparing the Article 15s [non-judicial punishment for minor offenses], and all that stuff, to be processed by JAG, but they were prepared at the company level instead of by JAG, NCO, or a specialist or anything.

TS: Sounds like you learned a lot about the army just because of the job that you did.

TF: Yeah, because back then the company clerk did everything. They would always tell the soldiers, "You don't mess with the company clerk or the finance clerk."

TS: [chuckles] Did people follow that rule?

TF: Well, some of them learned the hard way.

TS: Yeah.

TF: Just to give you an example, since it's too far back to actually incriminate—for them to actually do anything to me. But back when I was at Fort Hood, I had a NCO who really did not care for me, and he would always come in the orderly room and just give me a hard time for no reason whatsoever. Well, at one point, he had to send an allotment of support to his spouse who he was estranged from. He had came in and made the allotment out for a hundred and fifty [dollars] a month, and when he left I told him I'd give it to finance, but before I did I changed the one to a seven, so it was seven [hundred] fifty a month.

TS: [chuckles] You caused him a little trouble, I'm sure.

TF: And that was back when the original went to finance, a copy went in the company files. So anyway, I sent it to finance, the next month when that seven fifty came out of his paperwork, he came in the orderly room calling me all kinds of names, having a fit, and I said, "Hold on a minute," went to the files, pulled out the copy, I say, "See here, it's your copy where you put seven fifty and you signed it."

He was like, "Well, I need to change that."

I said, "Well, you can do that, and then you explain to your wife why she's six hundred short next month."

TS: [chuckling]

TS: And I didn't have no more problems with him.

TS: I bet you didn't. Now, did you travel at all while you were in Germany?

TF: The first time, no, because I had my children with me and they were very small.

TS: Yeah. Tough to take time to do that.

TF: I mean, we did things within Heilbronn; like, took them around Christmastime to see Kris Kringle [German Santa Clause] and participate in those things; the fest that was going on on the Kaserne [German, meaning "barracks"]. But if we was off the Kaserne, I didn't necessarily go unless one of my friends would come and get us. Like, we would have the river race down there on the Rhine river, and one of my friends would come and get us, so we would always take—so we would go to that and they would enjoy that.

TS: Did you get to do any of the Volksmarches [German, meaning "people's march;" a form of non-competitive fitness walking], or anything along those lines?

TF: No, I didn't do any of the Volksmarches.

TS: Nope. How did you like the culture of Germany?

TF: Oh, I loved Germany. I thought it was just a wonderful place to be.

TS: What did you like about it?

TF: I liked how the cities were, I liked how the towns were, because they were all kind of close, and they were beautiful. You had all that greenery. You had the castles and stuff. Everything wasn't torn down to build something newer. You had history there.

TS: Yeah.

TF: It was just a beautiful place to be. I mean, even our installation, we would—for our PT, we would run through the vineyards for PT. And that would be some run because it was all uphill through the vineyards, but you could see a lot once you were in those vineyards. So when we were off duty, sometimes we would just go walking through those vineyards.

TS: Real pretty.

TF: It was just a beautiful country.

TS: Yeah. Now, was it here that you said you cross-trained back to the admin, while you were in Germany?

TF: Yes. Yes. It was during that first tour in Germany where my unit, the Second TAS[?] [Technical and Administrative Services Brigade] was deactivating, and they were going to be moving everyone. I had just brought my children to Germany after being divorced, and so I wasn't trying to be moved with them because they couldn't guarantee that we would get in housing wherever we were moving. And so, I decided to reclassify back to 75 Bravo [Personnel Administration Specialist] because there was a need for one right there in Heilbronn. So I reclassified and we were able to stay right there. And it was as the 75 Bravo that I got promoted to staff sergeant before we left Germany.

TS: Oh, good. So you didn't really have to go and do new training, you already knew—

TF: Yes. The only reason I could reclassify that quickly was because I was school trained and I didn't have to undergo any training; just produce my certificate from when I was first trained and that was it. It was real simple and easy.

TS: Oh, that's good. When you left Germany, then, where'd you get your orders to next? You went to St. Louis recruiting?

TF: I went to the St. Louis [United States Army] Recruiting Command (USAREC). I had gotten married while I was in Germany. My husband was an engineer and he was being stationed at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and they did not have any positions for me. Back then it was still considered a joint domicile if you were within at least a certain radius, so they told me that they would station me at St. Louis. Of course, later I found out—once I got to St. Louis I realized that that was outside the radius, but it was too late to do anything about it so I [switched to?] St. Louis Recruiting Command as their admin support.

TS: For how long did you have to do that?

TF: I did that about—a little under two years, and the strange thing about that was, the recruiters, they got all this extra money for being recruiters, but the support, we're in that same situation where we're in a major city without benefit of PX (Post Exchange), commissary, and all that. We also, if the recruiters worked weekends, we had to work weekends, but we didn't get the benefit of any of the extra money. We didn't get extra pay for being assigned to those commands.

TS: Oh, just the actual recruiters did.

TF: Right.

TS: Yeah, that seems a little unfair.

TF: We thought it was unfair. We was like, "Come on, we working the same hours they working. We're under the same situation. We don't have benefit of commissary and PX either. But you're giving them extra money, but the support people get nothing."

TS: Right. Apparently your voice didn't get heard.

TF: Not at that time. I mean, I don't know if things have changed, but I know then nothing changed.

TS: Yeah. Now, did you eventually get over to Fort Leonard Wood?

TF: Yes, a position became available and I was sent to 34[?] Training Battalion then. It was a OSUT battalion—One Station Unit Training—where they did basic training and AIT [Advanced Individual Training]. My husband was in a BCT [Basic Combat Training], just a strictly basic training battalion, so we worked really different hours. I mean, I would work basic hours—7:30 to 4:30—but because he was a drill sergeant and was in a basic training battalion, he could be working from, like, 5:00 in the morning to 9:00 at night.

TS: Right, pretty rough hours for the drill sergeants.

TF: Yeah, but it worked out. We did okay with that. And then it was at Fort Leonard Wood that I got selected for sergeant first class.

TS: Yeah? What'd you think about that?

TF: Well, I wasn't really surprised at that because I knew I had been doing pretty much above and beyond at that point.

TS: Well, now you're about ten years in, right?

TF: Right. So there was a lot of people that were shocked. They said, "There ain't no way you made sergeant first class in ten years."

I said, "Well, evidently I did."

TS: [chuckles] When you originally went in, when you're eighteen, you said you didn't really have an idea how long you were going to stay or what you were going to make of it.

TF: Right.

TS: Now you're ten years in, what are you thinking?

TF: Now I'm thinking twenty.

TS: You're thinking twenty?

TF: Yeah, I'm thinking I'm going to retire at twenty, because I had a supervisor at that time that told me that I would never make sergeant first class. And I was like, "Well, not with you hanging around."

Because he was a sergeant first class, and at that time sergeant first class was twenty-seven years. And I was like, "You've been in twenty-four years, you haven't made E-8 [Master Sergeant/ First Sergeant]. You're standing in my way. You need to go on and retire." And it's really funny because the year he retired was the year I got picked up for sergeant first class.

TS: Is that right?

TF: And I had—My battalion command sergeant major had told me I would never make sergeant first class because I didn't have a pumpkin on my pocket, basically, because I wasn't drill sergeant qualified. And I had told him, "Well, there's not one on your pocket and you made it command sergeant major.

[The U.S. military issues instructor badges to specially trained military personnel who are charged with teaching military recruits the skills they need to perform as members of the

U.S. Armed Forces. The Drill Sergeant Identification Badge, nicknamed the "pumpkin" patch due to it's jack-o'-lantern-like appearance, is presented to any NCO who has completed the Drill Sergeant Course and has been assigned as a drill sergeant at a U.S. Army training command]

TS: So you didn't necessarily have to have that.

TF: No. Just people being discouraging.

TS: Yeah. How was it different to be a first sergeant?

TF: Oh, I was sergeant first class not first sergeant.

TS: Oh, sergeant first class, sorry.

TF: For me it wasn't really different because in the AG we had transitioned to the PAC—Personnel Administration Center—where all of the personnels were located in one place, whereas before we were company clerks, and each company had their own clerk. Well, under the PAC, all those clerks were pulled together into one building—

TS: So it's really centralized.

TF: —and everybody just worked for all—every company in the battalion. So I started out as the PS NCO—Personnel Services NCO—the staff sergeant, and the sergeant first class is the NCO over all of it. Well, since I was doing so much of his job already, getting promoted just meant I was now getting paid for doing his job.

TS: So now you've got the pay with the responsibility that you'd already had.

TF: Right, so there was really no major change for me. I just continued doing what I had been doing in the first place.

TS: Did you enjoy it at Fort Leonard Wood?

TF: Yes, it was good.

TS: Yeah. What was the best part about being there?

TF: That was when I went to my first course for my MOS; my first NCO course; I went to my basic—not basic training, but my basic technical course there. I mean, now they call it BNOC [Basic Non-Commissioned Officer Course], but back then it was called a BTC—Basic Technical Course—where staff sergeants went to learn more about how to do their job better. So I had went to that while I was stationed at Fort Leonard Wood, and there was another course that I graduated as the honors graduate, and came back and just applied that knowledge to what I already knew, so it was just better and better.

TS: As far as your knowledge of the job, and the skills that you had, it sounds like you were pretty good at all that.

TF: Oh, I loved my job itself, and I loved knowing how to do my job. I would—Wherever I would go, I would learn—I would learn my job, and I would learn the job of the next person over me, so that if that person was out things didn't just come to a standstill; the job would still be done. And I tried to pass that same thing on to my soldiers. I said, "You need to know what I know so that if I'm out you can do my job. Nothing needs to come to a standstill because one soldier is out of the office. That should never happen."

TS: You're all a team, right?

TF: Yeah.

TS: You're all a team. Well, then you got sent to, oh, Hawaii, right?

TF: Yes. That's because when I got selected for sergeant first class, I knew I had been in the area about three years so I was probably going to be getting reassigned, so I had called my branch to ask what was available, and they told me the only things available for a sergeant first class was Germany and Alaska. And I was like, "Well, I've already been to Germany." So I put in my paperwork to go to Alaska, and for my preference I listed every installation in Alaska, and when the assignment came down it said Hawaii. I was like, "Well, I ain't going to cry. Works for me."

TS: [chuckles] Might as well go to Hawaii instead.

TF: Yeah, and that was how I wound up in Hawaii, I put in for Alaska.

TS: That probably didn't happen that often, I would think.

TF: Probably not.

TS: Probably not.

TF: It was just luck.

TS: Now, your kids are getting a little bit older. They all go to Hawaii with you?

TF: Oh, most definitely.

TS: Yeah.

TF: Yeah.

TS: How was that assignment?

TF: That was good. I was with Field Station Kunia, which was a MI—military intelligence installation organization—so that's where I got my first clearance, because I was required to have a Top-Secret clearance in order to be in that installation—I mean that organization. I got my Top-Secret clearance, and just again, same type of work—AG work—just doing that over and over, and that—and just moving on with that.

TS: How was Hawaii itself? Did you enjoy being there?

TF: Well, I liked Hawaii particularly because it was cheap entertainment for my kids. You didn't have to spend a lot of money. All they wanted to do was go to the beach. So we did that a lot, and they were very active. All three of my children were in sports. They all played baseball of some type; like, my oldest son played baseball, my daughter played softball, and my youngest son played t-ball. And then my oldest son and my daughter were also—and myself—were also in a karate group at that time. So they were pretty busy, making friends and being busy in school.

TS: Yeah. How was it to be in Hawaii? Because I know the cost of living there is a little bit higher.

TF: It's more than a little bit higher, but we lived on post so we didn't really have to deal with that, and like I said, didn't have to deal with the more expensive entertainment because all they wanted to do was go to the beach, which only costs gas.

TS: Yeah. Did you ever feel a little bit isolated being on an island?

TF: I hated that part.

TS: Yeah. Didn't like that as much?

TF: Nope, I was like, "I want to go somewhere. I want to cross some state lines. I don't like this; being on this island." I mean, they used to do the run over there where you just run around the whole perimeter of the island, and I'm like anytime you're somewhere where you can run around the whole doggone thing, it's too small.

TS: Yeah, that's right.

TF: The [Kaiser Permanente Great] Aloha Run, that's what it was called.

TS: The Aloha Run, there you go. Well, what was the highlight of being in Hawaii for you personally?

TF: I don't even remember. I think my biggest highlight was leaving.

TS: [chuckles] Yeah. Well, so then where did you end up next?

TF: Oh, wait, I take that back.

TS: Okay.

TF: My biggest highlight was being selected to be the first sergeant of the headquarters company as a sergeant first class, because there were master sergeants who should have been given that position. But instead, as a sergeant first class, the command—the battalion command sergeant major selected me to be the first sergeant.

TS: Now, why'd you get selected?

TF: I don't know. Don't make me lie. He would know why he selected me.

TS: What do you think?

TF: I mean, I know I was good at my job as a AG soldier. And I know I was good physically because I would always be above and beyond on the PT test.

TS: Let me pause for a second.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay, wait a second. Okay, we had to pause just for a second, so.

TF: Okay.

TS: So you're talking about being a first sergeant.

TF: Yes, I think that he chose me because he had a really healthy respect for me, not just in how I did my job as a AG soldier but as a NCO, because when soldiers were put in the remedial PT program from failing their PT tests, because of my physical fitness I was often called on to run that remedial program to get them back up in shape.

TS: Did you enjoy doing that?

TF: Yeah, because basically there was no really good reason for not being in shape; it was basically just lack of effort.

TS: Yes.

TF: Yes, and I think he liked—like what you saw—that I was very organized.

TS: Yes.

TF: And so, when the companies need to do stuff, there was times before he selected me to be the first sergeant that he would ask me if I would take charge in getting this, that, or that done, and I would get it done.

TS: You'd just do it, right?

TF: Yes, and he saw me work with other brigades and battalions on the installation, because the MI brigade that I belonged to, they were very TVA[?]. They didn't go to the field. They didn't do things like you would see the infantry soldiers doing on Schofield Barracks, so when it came time for us to do our Common Task Training a lot of these soldiers just didn't have any experience, but I knew several infantry first sergeants, and I would ask them, "Could our soldiers come over and test with them?" And we would—And I would actually make those arrangements, and I would take our whole battalion of soldiers—I would have coordinated with the G3 [Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans]—we'd get some buses, take all of our soldiers over to these other units, and they would let our soldiers test with them. I mean, I remember at one point, one infantry first sergeant was like, "Are you all a reserve unit?"

I was like, "No, they ain't reserve. They just haven't done this. We just need your assistance. We don't need your comments. We just need your assistance to make sure they understand how to do the combat task." So I think he was just very impressed with all that sort of stuff.

TS: Right, that you were able to just basically cross all these t's and get everything—

TF: Yes. Yes.

TS: All the ducks in a row.

TF: And work with other people that were outside of—in my crowd.

TS: Yes. It's interesting that you served in a lot of different types of units. You've got the signal, you had the military intelligence. I forget where you started.

TF: Aviation.

TS: Aviation, right. Did you see within these different units—obviously, there's many similarities, but are there differences when you go to a different branch?

TF: Basically just different attitudes.

TS: Okay.

TF: When you looked at the MI, they were pretty much like the prima donnas; "Nobody's as smart as us."

We like, "Yeah, you might be book smart, but you're kind of stupid when it comes to military laid[?] stuff. You don't put your effort into it. You don't know how to fire a

weapon that good. You don't know how to pass a PT test." Not all of them, evidently, but they had this prima donna attitude that, "I don't need to know that because I'm so smart."

TS: How was it in some of the other branches that you were assigned to?

TF: Well, when I worked with the signal folks, they were more task oriented. And the same with the aviation. Aviation, they were more detail oriented because those helicopters, that was primarily what they had. They didn't have any fixed aircraft. They had the helicopters, and so they had to be really on point because—not just because they were detailed oriented but because our company was the company that was responsible for providing the helicopter for the commanding general of the installation to fly around in. So they didn't want to be called on to go pick him up if the helicopter was down. So those crew chiefs, and those pilots, they were very detail oriented in doing their jobs.

TS: Yeah, that's interesting how you see those different kind of sub-cultures, when everybody is still trying to do a team job of—

TF: Yeah.

TS: That's interesting the way that you described them. So you're leaving Hawaii. You said that was one of your happy moments to get off the island.

TF: Yeah.

TS: And you're going to PERSCOM [Personnel Command] in Alexandria, Virginia?

TF: Yeah, my tour in Hawaii was curtailed to bring me to PERSCOM. They just cut it short, said, "We need you to come out here."

TS: Why did they need you?

TF: Primarily because I had a Top-Secret clearance, and the position that was available required one and not that many AG soldiers had top-secret clearances, so I was going there to work with the units—to work with placing people in the units that—actually were called the dark units; the units that regular soldiers don't even know exist. And so, when we would place people in those units, they were called DASR—D-A-S-R—Department of the Army Special Roster. So when we would place soldiers in these units, they'd be cut orders for places that really—that look like they're going to a place that soldiers know about, but that wasn't actually where we were putting them. We were putting them in these dark units that people didn't know about. And they needed someone with a Top-Secret clearance already so they didn't have to go through that process. So that's just how I wound up in that position.

TS: You had learned some things there, too, then, about—

TF: Not—I mean, I had to learn just basically how to put soldiers on assignment and things like that; just the stuff that PERSCOM does that regular units don't do. But other than the administrative stuff, they didn't have no, like, terminology I wasn't familiar with, and once I learned how to do stuff how they needed to do it, it was really just following procedures.

TS: Once you got it down, you got it down, right?

TF: Yes.

TS: Did you enjoy that tour there?

TF: I did, because we would go out and we'd actually visit these units. But it was really strange. Like, when me and my officer counterpart would go out, we'd go to—we'd have to land at some other place, and then rent a car and drive out to the location so that nobody would know exactly where we were going. I remember one time we were in Utah, and we were getting ready to go to one of our dark units, and we were flown into Salt Lake City, and we were waiting for our rental vehicle, and he turned to me, and he said—because he was a white man—he going to tell me, "Look around you. You realize you're the only black person in this airport."

And I hadn't noticed it, so I looked just around and I was like, "Oh, no, I hadn't noticed it."

So we get to our hotel, and now he want to play games, so he going to throw his arm around me and asked the clerk, "Is our room ready?"

And this guy looking at us all crazy, and before he could say something that he maybe shouldn't say, like, "We don't do interracial couples" or whatever, I just said "Oh, no. We have separate rooms." But he had—

TS: Was he just messing around?

TF: Yeah, he was just funny like that. Captain Matthew Boison[?].

TS: Yeah.

TF: All he wanted was to get back to Fort Bragg [North Carolina]. He was a signal officer, and all he wanted was to be at Bragg. He hated being at PERSCOM. He said he didn't—that was not what he was supposed to be doing up there with pencil pushers. He wanted to be at Bragg doing what a signal officer does. And when he finally left to go to Bragg, you couldn't find anybody that was happier. He was so happy.

TS: And you hadn't even been to Bragg by that point, right?

TF: No. Except for TDY [temporary duty].

TS: Yeah? You'd done some TDYs there.

TF: Yes.

TS: It sounds like you enjoyed the job at PERSCOM, then.

TF: I did.

TS: Yeah. And so, your kids are still following you around?

TF: Yes.

TS: How are they enjoying the army life?

TF: I didn't really think about it. I mean, I know a lot of people that go, "I ain't moving to here or there because my kids might not like it." I was more of the "Got orders, this is where we're going, this when we need to be there, so you need to be ready." There was none of this, "I'm concerned about you whooping and hollering and crying because you don't want to leave your friends. Your friends are military brats too. They going to be moving, too, eventually. So you're going to get over it, just like they will. And you will make new friends wherever you're going," which they did.

TS: Did they handle it pretty good, then?

TF: They always handled it well.

TS: Yeah.

TF: Even when they were in high school and had to move, which is usually the hardest time because now they really have made solid friends. But they handled it very well.

TS: You did move quite a bit.

TF: I did, and they moved with me, and they got over it, and they made new friends just like I told them they would.

TS: Now, you were at PERSCOM when the First Gulf War started, right?

[The First Gulf War occurred from 2 August 1990 to 29 February 1991. Codenamed Operation Desert Shield for operations leading to the buildup of troops and defense of Saudi Arabia, and Operation Desert Storm in its combat phase, it was a war waged by coalition forces from 35 nations led by the US against Iraq in response to Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait]

TF: Yes.

TS: How was that? How did that affect your job?

TF: We were at work when the planes hit the towers—

TS: Not yet, the First Gulf War—

TF: Oh.

TS: The First Gulf War.

TF: Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, I was there, and—

TS: You were there for both of them, then, a bit later, weren't you?

TF: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

TF: But the first one, that was when I went to Air Assault training, because we were at a point where we could not make any assignments because all these units being deployed to the First Gulf War. So we couldn't make any assignments because they didn't want units winding up short, so we were leaving soldiers in place. We had a stop-loss in place when nobody could be moved anyway. So we were pretty much coming to work just twiddling our thumbs because there was nothing we could do.

[In the United States military, stop-loss is the involuntary extension of a service member's active duty service under the enlistment contract in order to retain them beyond their initial end of term service date and up to their contractually agreed end of active obligated service]

TS: Couldn't move anybody.

TF: Right. So anyway, one day our sergeant major came in and said he had twenty Air Assault slots, so our whole branch volunteered to go. We were like, "We'll go to that training. We ain't doing nothing else."

TS: Where'd you go for that? Is that when you went to Fort Bragg?

TF: No.

TS: Where'd you go?

TF: We went to Fort Belvoir [Virginia]. Bragg didn't have a Air Assault School.

TS: Oh, okay.

TF: But what happened is Fort Campbell [Kentucky] sent out a training team to Fort Belvoir, so we went to Fort Belvoir and did it. And in them twenty slots only myself and one other soldier made it through Zero day [first day of Air Assault School]. So we're the only two that actually went through the whole course.

TS: Is that right?

TF: Yes.

TS: How was that?

TF: Because they just didn't make it through Zero day, where the first thing was to go up the rope, and they just couldn't make it up the rope.

TS: The first day?

TF: Right, that's the first task, go up the rope.

TS: You didn't have any trouble with that?

TF: No, because when we were preparing to go a couple of guys that were already Airborne, they had taken us out and showed us how to do it. They were like—The guys had upper body strength so they could just hand over hand, pull themselves up. You ladies that don't have upper body strength you're going to have to use your feet. So they showed us how to take our feet and put them on the rope and then pull ourselves up.

TS: To brace yourself?

TF: Right.

TS: So you did it; you made it all the way through the training?

TF: Yes, and it was pretty good training.

TS: What other kinds of things did you do?

TF: It was hard, but it was good. We did the—Well, obviously, since it was Air Assault, we did the rappel training, and that was pretty good. I liked that. The part I liked most was when we rappelled off the helicopter, because that was different than when we had to do it on the wall.

TS: I would think so.

TF: Because on the wall, as you're coming down the rope you can bounce against the wall to brace yourself and stuff, but when you're coming out that helicopter, it's just you dangling on that rope. That's why they called us, for Air Assault, "dopes on a rope" instead of the Airborne.

TS: Was it scary?

TF: Not really.

TS: No?

TF: In fact, by that point it was just fun.

TS: [chuckles] It was?

TF: I mean, for me the hardest part was when we had to do the ruck march.

TS: Oh, carrying the pack?

TF: Yeah.

TS: How many pounds did they put in it? Do you remember?

TF: It was twenty-five pounds, and you had—I don't remember the exact amount of time, but I think it was three hours—to do that ruck march. One of the guys—The other guy that made it through Zero day, he told me, "I'm going to stay with you," he said, "to make sure that you make it on time." He said "We're going to run a mile, walk a mile, run a mile, walk a mile." And he made me do that, and it was one of the hardest thing I've ever done, but we sure got in there on time.

TS: Good job. That's something you probably are pretty proud of.

TF: I was. Even when I got to Bragg and they were like, "Oh, you're not Airborne, but your Air Assault."

I said "That's right."

Because when I went through Air Assault training there were quite a few guys there from Bragg, and at the end they were like, "You guys should go Airborne now because it is much easier than going Air Assault." They were like, "Shoot, this Air Assault training is much harder."

TS: Oh, that's interesting. During the war—the First Gulf War—then that's what you did. You did this training?

TF: Yeah, because we wasn't really doing anything else; just coming to work and occupying space.

TS: Then after Alexandria you went back to Fort Huachuca.

TF: Yes.

TS: And how did you enjoy that assignment the second time?

TF: It was much better. By then I had been selected for E-8, so when I arrived there I was a sergeant first class promotable, and I was made the section chief in the Strength Management Branch at the AG section, so that went pretty good.

TS: All along you're getting promoted, and you're getting more authority, and more stripes. Is the way that you're being treated by fellow soldiers changing at all because of your increased rank?

TF: No, nothing's changing because I didn't really change.

TS: No?

TF: I mean, like, I hear all these stories about sexual harassment and all this, but I will tell you, in my thirty-one years in the army I was never once sexually harassed. And I had other female soldiers who were saying, "Well, that's—I just don't believe you. That's not possible."

I said, "It's possible because the definition of sexual harassment is continued action." I said, "I didn't have continued action because if they got [unclear] eyeing me that first time, "I said, "trust me, I had a pretty sharp tongue. And after I gave them [unclear] that first time there was no second time." I said, "So I didn't have any continued harassment because it was a one-time shot, and that was it."

TS: So you established the boundaries pretty quickly.

TF: Pretty quickly.

TS: Yeah.

TF: And they knew, "That's it. Let me go mess with somebody else."

TS: Okay.

TF: Because I was not having it.

TS: While we're talking about that, you're in a pretty male environment at most of the places you were at.

TF: True.

TS: Was there anything different for you in how you were treated? I mean, obviously you're being promoted really quickly, and you're very good at your job.

TF: That was primarily why I was getting promoted so quickly, because I was good at my job.

TS: Yeah.

TF: I mean, I know one thing, I sure couldn't sleep my way to the top.

TS: [chuckles] Yeah.

TF: I wouldn't have tried anyway.

TS: Yeah.

TF: But I basically don't believe that any female in the military can sleep their way to the top, because after you make E-5, you're basically being looked at—I mean, after you make E-6 [staff sergeant], you're being looked at by boards that are not where you are, so who you going to sleep with? You don't even know who's going to sit them boards, so it's not like you can find all these different guys that are coming from all over the country to sit these boards so that you can sleep with them. Plus, it takes the vote of the board to get you promoted. One person voting for you is not going to get you promoted. They have to all vote, or at least have a majority.

TS: Did you think that sometimes there was a perception that as a woman went up in the ranks that other people—males maybe—thought that was happening, or even females?

TF: Oh, I know there were times when guys thought that, and other females thought that. Like I said, it was primarily the lower ranks; "You only made E-5 because you did such and such with the first sergeant," and that's a lie. At least, I felt like it was a lie for most of the females I knew. Most of the females I knew were very good at their jobs, and they got promoted based on their ability to do their job. I mean, I ain't going to say that there was never a female that didn't try to use her feminine wiles to get what she wanted, but you can only do that with the person that's there. Once that person is PCSed [permanent change of station] or moved on or retired, what you going to do? Find somebody else? Everybody ain't willing to sleep with you just because you're cute.

TS: [chuckles] That's right.

TF: Because so many of them are married and stuff. I was like, "They ain't willing to jeopardize their marriages and stuff just because some little private first class is cute."

TS: Yes. So Fort Huachuca, then. What's your rank again here?

TF: At that point I'm a sergeant first class promotable, and I am loving my job. I was in charge of the [unclear] section. I was getting soldiers ready to go on to their next assignment, taking care of other things; TDY's and things like that. One of things I did while I was there is, I trained up several teams for the Mule Mountain Marathon, which is a marathon that Fort Huachuca puts on on an annual basis. And like I said, I'd always been physically fit, so when they were looking to put together a team I volunteered to train them up, and I would take them out after-duty hours and I would train them up in different areas, because Fort Huachuca has some mountainous areas, and I'd take them in the mountains and have them running those mountains and stuff. And doing other exercises preparing for the marathon, like relay runs and stuff. And it was so successful that my teams placed first in the marathon, and they went to the first [sergeant after they just continued?] their after-duty PT instead of joining back with the unit PT, because they felt like they'd progressed beyond that.

TS: Did you run with them?

TF: No, because we were teams.

TS: Just helped train them.

TF: All I did was train them up.

TS: Yeah. Get them ready, get them all fit and everything. Well, that's a pretty neat thing to have done. Where did you end up next after that? You went back to Germany, is that right?

TF: Yes, went back to Germany, where I started out in the USAREUR [United States Army Europe] G3 [Assistant Chief of Staff Operations and Plans].

TS: Was that up in Heidelberg?

TF: Yes, that was in Heidelberg at USAEUR headquarters. So I was in the G3—

TS: How did you like that assignment?

TF: I liked that. I'm trying to remember what I actually—the title—oh, yeah, I was a documents NCO, where basically we would look at—the units in USAEUR would send to us their requests for changes to their MTOE [Modified Table of Organization and Equipment] or their TDA [Table of Distribution and Allowances] saying, "Well, my MTOE says I'm authorized X amount of this, and I think I should be authorized X amount," or less or more. Or they would ask for an MOS to be added to their MTOE. And our job was to look at it and see if they really needed this. One of the most things people would ask for would be to have a driver assigned to their command sergeant major, but that was never a valid authorization and we would always deny it.

TS: Why did they want a driver?

TF: Because all the sergeant majors, they have a driver anyway, but they're basically these—just some random soldiers the sergeant major would snatch, and say "You're going to be my driver." But since so many command sergeant majors did that they were like, "Why don't we just have a driver added to the MTOE, and then we can just get a solider assigned to be the driver." And we would always deny it.

We would be like "Nope, they can just keep on doing what they're doing. Detail a solider." That way they can pick who they want instead of us just—instead of the DA [United States Department of the Army] just assigning a guy and saying, "This is your driver whether you want him or not."

TS: Right. So they can hand pick who they want—

TF: Right.

TS: The other way.

TF: So we would just not even do it.

TS: But it takes away a soldier from other duties, right, then?

TF: True, but usually that's a non-issue because soldiers they took away was usually a solider that was authorized so we could get him a replacement.

TS: Oh, okay. So then you can help them do that. Now, while you're in Germany—you had told me before we turned the tape on—that you deployed—

TF: Yes, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Bosnia.

TS: Yeah, and—

TF: Where our headquarters was in Hungary.

TS: Okay. So you went to Hungary too?

TF: Yes. We were based in Hungary because we were the headquarters, and we would often go into Bosnia to take care of the needs of our subordinate units.

TS: Well, talk about that duty. Yeah.

TF: In fact, I was there when—when the Clintons came over. You remember that controversy they had when Mrs. [Hillary Rodham] Clinton said that they got fired upon and all that?

TS: Oh, yeah.

TF: Shoot, I knew personally that was a lie because we had went down there right before them—

TS: You were at the airport.

TF: —to get them—to get the units prepared for their visit.

TS: Yeah.

TF: So we knew that she had—they had not been fired upon.

TS: Well, how was that different from your regular work that you did, when you deployed to Bosnia and Hungary?

TF: The main difference was we had added stuff that I had—that we were not in charge of in garrison. Like, when we were there as the lead command, we were also in charge of the PX and all that stuff; making sure that the sol—what was needed by the soldiers was in the PX. Whereas in garrison, we're never in charge of the PX; has nothing to do with our duties.

TS: So your duties expand because of the nature of the type of—

TF: Yes.

TS: The mission that you're on.

TF: Yes.

TS: How long were you there?

TF: Well, not as long as I was supposed to be. I was supposed to have been deployed there for a year, but because of situations I was—my colonel had went back to Germany early, and after about thirty days he—because by then I had been promoted to sergeant major, so after about thirty days he said—he was sending messages to Hungary saying, "I need my sergeant major to come back here." So instead of doing the year, I was brought back to Germany because he was insisting I come back.

TS: Because your colonel made you come back, basically?

TF: Yeah.

TS: Now, is this where you got that phone call about your promotion or was that somewhere else?

TF: No, that was where.

TS: You want to talk about that; where they called you and said you got sergeant major?

TF: Yes, my G3 sergeant major had called and said I had been selected for sergeant major. I didn't believe him. He insisted I had been. I told him "I don't believe that's possible. This is my first look, so I'm very junior to a lot of other AG master sergeants. This is my first look. I don't have this, this, this, this, and this." I said "I just don't believe you," and I hung up on him. He called the G3 that was deployed and had the list, and he had the G3 sergeant major that was deployed show me the list that showed that I had actually been selected for sergeant major, and I had to call him back and grovel and apologize for hanging up on him.

TS: [chuckles]

TF: Which fortunately I was lucky he didn't actually do something to me because I was a junior—I mean, I was a master sergeant hanging up on a sergeant major, so he could have actually—probably—charged something on me. I don't know what, but something.

TS: Yeah. Doesn't sound like he was interested in doing that. He just wanted to let you know, right?

TF: Yes.

TS: About the promotion. Now, was there anything particularly challenging about being in Hungary and Bosnia for that deployment?

TF: The only challenge was I was on night shift. We were split into two shifts. I was on the night shift where I would work from 8:00 at night to 8:00 in the morning. The building that we were housed in, everybody—all the other—it was segregated, the males and the females, so the part of the building I was in all the other females worked day shift, so I was the only night shift worker. So when I would come in and try to get sleep they'd run in and out, in and out, in and out, slamming doors, trying to eat potato chips, stuff like that. And I would tell them "You know what, how would you guys like it if I came in at night doing this stuff?" And it had no impact. They would still just do the same things over and over and over and over, and I would be constantly tired when it was time for me to go on my shift. But the one—

TS: Couldn't really sleep as well, then.

TF: Couldn't sleep, but the one thing good about that was, that year that I was deployed my Dallas Cowboys [football team] won the Super Bowl. Our commanding general was rooting for the other team, and we told him "Nope, Cowboys are going to win," and they won that year. And that was the best part of that deployment.

TS: You do kind of have a Dallas Cowboys shirt on today, don't you? You got your star.

TF: Shoot, I'm a big Cowboys fan. I've got a whole room dedicated to the Dallas Cowboys.

TS: Is that, right? [chuckles] Okay. Well, I won't say anything against the Dallas Cowboys at all. Not at all.

TF: I appreciate it because we get enough grief.

TS: You're welcome.

TF: Especially when they don't win. Everybody want to dog them. I be like, "Y'all act like they the only team that lost." Especially recently, I'm like, "Shoot. There are only three teams that are undefeated, so the rest of y'all can shut up too."

TS: [chuckles] That's right. That's right. I won't talk to you about my team.

Let's see. After your deployment there, you went to the [U.S. Army] Sergeants Major Academy, you said—

TF: Yes.

TS: —as an instructor, is that right?

TF: Yes, I was an instructor for the—basically not really an instructor, but they called it a proctor.

TS: Okay.

TF: Because I was in charge of getting—because I was a graduate of the [U.S. Army] Sergeants Major Academy of the Nonresident [Sergeants Major] Course. So I was in charge of enrolling others in the nonres[ident] course and get them through that course. Because unlike the people in the resident course that have each other to learn on and instructors, and they have anything they need right there at the academy, when you're in the nonres. course—like when I was in it I was at Fort Huachuca. There was only me and one other master sergeant taking it. He was behind me in getting stuff done, so he was constantly coming to me saying, "Well, how do you do this? How do you do that?' Whereas if you're in the resident course, you have plenty of people to ask that. But when your nonres course you're kind of just out there, and sometimes—I mean, when I called the Sergeants Major Academy when I was having issues, they said, "Get with your command sergeant major."

I'd go to my command sergeant major and he'd tell me, "I went to the resident course. I can't help you."

So it was like you struggled through it on your own, or you don't get it done. So that proctor is very important because they help you get through that course.

TS: And so, that's where you were assigned? Is that at Fort Bliss [New Mexico] where you went for that?

TF: Yes. But I just did that for about a year, and then the sergeant—the AG sergeant major of the installation, he got arrested for something he did—something doing with drugs crossing into Mexico or something—so the installation sergeant major was looking for a AG sergeant major to replace him, and DA [Department of the Army] told him, "Well, you got a whole bunch of them at that academy. Go over there and get one." So he came over and interviewed a bunch of us, and he selected me to come over and be the installation AG sergeant major, and that was a position I really liked.

TS: Where was that at?

TF: That was at Fort Bliss.

TS: At Fort Bliss? Why did you like that position so much?

TF: Because I was able to do more for the soldiers.

TS: What kinds of things could you do?

TF: Well, I'd get more involved in what they needed done, as far as helping them get what they needed to get promoted, get what they needed to PCS when they wanted to; just making sure things were squared away for them.

TS: You enjoyed taking care of them, and helping them through their careers?

TF: Yes. And I had—I did a NCO ceremony for my soldiers that were just getting promoted to sergeant, because that's the first NCO rank. So to welcome them to the NCO ranks we do a big ceremony. None of the other sergeant majors had ever done one before, so I did one. Invited the installation command sergeant major over to that ceremony, of which he was very impressed that it was so good, but I had gotten to know how to do it from the Sergeants Major Academy. So I just followed their step by step instructions, and then we started doing it every year, so that we say, like, "Everybody that got promoted between January and June, you're going to be in this ceremony, between June and December you're going to be in this ceremony," and I just did it on an annual basis.

And one of the other things I did—kind of like I did in Hawaii with the common task testing—is prior to my arrival they would be going over to the company area, and they'd have little tables set up, and they would just go from table to table, basically answer questions about how to do the task, and I was like, "You're not learning anything. Y'all need to physically do this stuff."

So I got with the G3, and what we did is we went out in the field and we set up these sites, and they had to, like, take their compass, shoot an azimuth to get from point to point, so they could, one, show us that they knew how to use a compass, and then how to follow a compass to get to the next testing point, and then when they got to that point they had to actually do what was set up. Because we would have all the equipment just at each point, and they had to shoot their azimuth to each point, and then do that testing in order to pass their Common Task Test.

[An azimuth is the angle of an object in the sky along the horizon. Shooting an azimuth means using a compass to determine and/or follow an azimuth.]

TS: So is it like actual little exercise that they had to do for the actual—

TF: Right. Yeah, and we would set it up for three days. By the third day other units were asking could they join us and bring their soldiers out. We were like, "If you bring your equipment too, sure you can. We're not leaving all of our equipment out there to get all messed up.

TS: Right.

TF: "Bring your equipment and you can do it."

TS: And did they do it that way?

TF: Yes.

TS: They did? That sounds very innovative, the way that you worked on that. After Fort Bliss—I'm trying to see where you went here—you went back to PERSCOM.

TF: Yes.

TS: But now it's called HRC [The United States Army Human Resources Command]. Is that right?

TF: Right, and I was made the sergeant major of the engineering branch, of which quite often people were surprised because engineers were basically male, and they were, like, shocked when they'd see—"Oh, you're not an engineer?"

Well, basically none of the sergeant majors at the branches at HRC are what their branch is. You take the medical branch, that person is not medical. Every sergeant major is a AG sergeant major because they need people who know how to process the paperwork. They don't need people that know how to do what you do. They need us to understand what you do so that we can make the appropriate assignments for you, but we don't have to actually be able to do what you do. We just need to be able to make the appropriate assignments at the appropriate ranks; like when you're a private, you need this, this, and this assignment in order to get to sergeant. When you make sergeant, you need this, this, and this assignment in order to make the sergeant first class and master sergeant. And maybe even sergeant major. I said, "And our job is to make sure that you get the appropriate career development assignments and schools. Not to actually do what you do." I said, "That's why all the branch sergeant majors are AG; not of your branch."

TS: That's interesting that you say that because sometimes when I'm talking to other women who are enlisted—mostly enlisted—they really didn't understand how to line up a career for assignments or things like that. Or training.

TF: They should have been talking to their branch.

TS: Yeah.

TF: Because their branch would have told them, if you're a sergeant and you want to make staff sergeant, you need this, this, and this. If you're a staff sergeant and you want to make sergeant first class, you need this, this, and this. That's what the branches are there for; to help guide them to progressing in their careers. They're not there just to make assignments. They help them progress in their careers by making sure they have the right assignment; make sure they get to the right school at the right time in their career.

TS: Yeah.

TF: It don't do no good for somebody to make sergeant first class and you just now sent them to BNCOC [Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course]; they behind the curve. They should have went to BNCOC as a sergeant E-5 or a staff sergeant. If they're a staff sergeant promotable, how did they even make promotable without having that BNCOC already?

TS: Right. You want me to pause it for a second or just keep talking?

TF: No, I'm good.

TS: Okay.

TF: That's our daughter. She's going to call her [referring to dog] in there and tell her to be quiet for a minute.

TS: Okay. Well, we're getting through it. We're getting through it. Now, how did you like this assignment, then, at Alexandria, at the—

TF: I liked—I liked that assignment.

TS: Yeah.

TF: Yeah. Mostly because it just ties in with what I liked doing. I liked taking care of the soldiers.

TS: And you got to do that in great detail, then.

TF: Yeah, on a bigger scale. Yeah.

TS: So you're feeling pretty good about your career about now?

TF: Shoot, I'm loving my career.

TS: [chuckles] You've been in now over twenty years.

TF: Yes.

TS: When did you decide that you were going to stay over twenty?

TF: Probably when I was put on assignment from Germany, because at that point I was at nineteen, so it was like, if I go to Fort Bliss—since you're sending me to Fort Bliss, I'm probably going to be there two, three years, so that would already put me past twenty. And then when I got to Fort Bliss and they told me they were going to send me to HRC, I was like, "Okay, I'm definitely going to be past twenty now."

TS: But you were okay with that?

TF: Yeah. And I was sergeant major so I knew I could stay for thirty then, so I was like, "Well, I guess I'm going to be in for thirty now."

TS: [chuckles] Okay. Well, now, after this place that you enjoyed at Alexandria at the engineering branch, you went to—

TF: Fort Bragg.

TS: —Fort Bragg, that's right. And that was 1st COSCOM?

TF: First COSCOM; one of the few units that did not require soldiers at Fort Bragg to be Airborne to be assigned to. Because, of course, everyone has the misconception that to be assigned to Bragg you have to be Aircom—I mean Airborne, but there are several places on Bragg where you don't have to be Airborne to be assigned. And the 1st COSCOM, even though they had some Airborne subordinate units, everybody in the 1st COSCOM did not have to be Airborne in order to be assigned there.

TS: What does the COSCOM stand for?

TF: It stands for the Core Support Command. Basically they support—they provide support to the XVIII Airborne Corps, which was the headquarters at Fort Bragg.

TS: Was your job the same, then, there as it was anywhere else?

TF: I was the G1 sergeant major. Basically I was going over the administrative functions of the command. Not just my section of the G1, but the subordinate commands—the battalions, and companies—when they submitted their soldiers for awards and stuff it

would come up to the G1, and we would review them to see if it met all the qualifications for that award before sending it up to the general.

TS: So you were kind of a quality control?

TF: Pretty much, yes.

TS: Making sure everything's done right.

TF: Yes.

TS: Did you enjoy that tour?

TF: I sure did. I had a wonderful G1, Lieutenant Colonel Angela Cummings. She was absolutely wonderful; loved working for her. After her we had Colonel Hector Deal Dinette[?]; he was good too. And after him I had a Lieutenant Colonel Zane Chambers; he was wonderful. I had wonderful leadership throughout my command.

TS: That's excellent.

TF: I mean, throughout my time as the G1.

TS: Now we want to go back to HRC, and tell me about your experience when 9/11 happened.

[The September 11, 2001 attacks, or 9/11, was a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda on the United States on the morning of 11 September 2001. The attacks killed 2,996 people and injured over 6,000 others]

TF: Oh, yes. We were basically doing—at work doing our basic duties when we heard that the Twin Towers had been attacked, and my branch, we did not have a television in my branch, but the adjutant general branch had a television in their branch. I was on the fifth floor. They were on the seventh floor. So we all went running up there. And we were in Mr. Woodson's office, and we were watching it on the TV as they showed it over and over. The civilians, they were running out of the Hoffman Building—that's what it was called, where we worked—because they thought we were going to be next. But the military, we had to stand fast unless we were told to evacuate, which, basically, some of the civilians also should have been standing fast, but a lot of them just broke count. So the military, we were just standing fast to see if we were going to be evacuated, which eventually we were. Our building was never attacked, and we were told that there was never any possibility of it being attacked because whoever attacked the Twin Towers had no idea what our building was.

TS: But they did attack the Pentagon.

TF: Yes, they did.

TS: Okay, when the Pentagon got hit, is that when you guys had to get evacuated or were you evacuated before that?

TF: Yeah. We were evacuated after the Pentagon was hit, because they didn't know what was going to happen; what was going to be hit next. Because the Hoffman Buildings were pretty tall buildings, but like I said, whoever hit the—at that time, we didn't know who had hit it—but whoever did, did not realize what was housed within the Hoffman Building, so we were never in danger in the first place, was what we were told.

But after that happened, we did have teams that got pretty involved with the families, and I was one of those people, because as the families came in they had to have escorts to pick them up from the airport, escort them to all these memorials and funerals that were going on. So we would do that, and there was some resentment at some times because some families were coming back several times, and the government had said they could only pay for one trip. But some families came back several times. And of course, we only knew that because when we'd be in the vehicle with them picking them up from the airport and stuff, they'd be back there talking about it, and we had families saying, "Oh, this my fourth time back." The government was putting them up in four star hotels and stuff like that, that cost a nice little piece of money, and some families were just taking advantage of that just to come back. I mean, they had buried their loved ones, and they were still just coming back. I mean, I don't know why they were coming back, but that was above my pay grade, as the saying goes.

TS: Yeah. Well, did you know people in the Pentagon who were killed?

TF: Yes, the G1 sergeant major—Sergeant Major Strickland, who I had—not that long prior to I had been interviewed by a general, whose name I keep forgetting, which I'm really embarrassed because they now have an award with his name for AG soldiers. But anyway, he had interviewed me to replace Sergeant Major Strickland as the army G1 sergeant major, but prior to my interview, Sergeant Major Strickland had called me into his office and told me I probably didn't have a chance because the general wasn't too crazy about a female being the G1 sergeant major because of the different command sergeant majors that we would have to interact with, like the infantry, field artillery, all these male oriented—

TS: Combat support?

TF: —and combat arms command sergeant majors that the G1 sergeant would have to interact with. I remember I asked him, "Does he not realize I'm the sergeant major for the engineering branch, which is very male-oriented, and I deal with their command sergeant majors on a daily basis without issue?"

So anyway, I did the interview, and he did call me a couple of days later—a day or so later, telling me that I was not selected, which I wasn't that surprised after the conversation with Sergeant Major Strickland, so I was like, "Okay, that's fine. Let's just move on."

TS: Move on to the next thing, right?

TF: Yeah.

TS: Well, did you notice at all any change in the army after 9/11?

TF: Well, mostly with security. The bases were more—The posts were more locked down. You couldn't just go on bases like you used to. I mean, even in the Hoffman Building things had changed. Used to, we just had our badge clipped to our jacket or whatever and we'd just walk in the building. As long as they could see the badge it was all good. But then it was—we had to stop, if we had bags they were being searched, and you just didn't have the easy access you used to have. Buildings were having the concrete blockers put around them. Even though we had not been attacked, the Hoffman Building still had all these concrete blockers put around it. So it was just—just security differences more than anything.

TS: Yeah. Did you see the mentality at all change?

TF: The biggest mentality change I saw was when it came to promotions, because once they decided we were going to go to war—just like with [Operation] Desert Shield/[Operation] Desert Storm—the First Gulf War and stuff—it was like if you didn't go then you probably wasn't going to get promoted. So there were a lot of soldiers concerned about where they were being assigned, because they were wanting to be assigned to units they knew were going to deploy, because they felt like, "If I don't deploy, I'm not going to get promoted."

TS: Is that what a lot of the career soldiers kind of had in their head about how that works for when there's a war?

TF: Yeah. Because—Especially if it's not when—where the entire army is mobilized. It's like, okay, if everybody ain't going that means only those that went are going to get what's needed to progress in their career, because they're going to have that experience that the rest of us won't have.

TS: Now, when you're at Fort Bragg, and you're at PERSCOM, you did deploy to Iraq, right?

TF: Yes.

TS: Now, you had told me a little bit before we started, that you were getting ready to retire and you were training your replacement. You want to tell that story?

TF: Yes, I had—my thirty years was done. I had submitted my retirement for January of '05 because that would have been my thirty. My retirement was approved, my replacement was on board, I was expecting to retire, but when they got that replacement, my commanding general had said that they did not have confidence in the guy, and they did

not want to take him to Iraq with them, and would I retire past—and would I request to stay past thirty and retire—deploy to Iraq with them. So I said "Okay," but basically it was just calling myself being a good team player that I said, "Okay." I didn't really expect DA to approve it because I did have an approved retirement already. I had been told that at the sergeant major level the AG branch was over strength, and my replacement had been on board for more than ninety days.

So even though I said, "Yes, I will request an extension past thirty," I did not expect it to be approved. I was not preparing the G1 to deploy. I was sending my replacement to all of the training because I fully expected him to take the G1to Iraq. So when it came back approved, I was kind of caught flat footed because I had not went to any of the training. I was not prepared to go to Iraq. So I had to catch up training.

TS: But you did, right?

TF: Yes.

TS: You did. And then you went to Iraq in October of 2004?

TF: Yes.

TS: You were at the command headquarters in Iraq [United States Central Command?]?

TF: Yes.

TS: Where was that?

TF: We were at the command headquarters at LSA [Logistical Support Area] Anaconda in Balad, Iraq [Balad Air Base].

TS: Okay. How was that assignment?

TF: Shoot. Except for being in Iraq, it was damn near like still being on Bragg.

TS: Yeah.

TF: We had a full PX. I mean, I know people send all these care packages, but a lot of that stuff they could have just not sent because we had a full PX. We had these people sending deodorant, soap, all this stuff, and we could go to the PX and buy it.

TS: What kind of stuff would you have liked to have been sent in a care package?

TF: Shoot, I don't even—I don't even think about it.

TS: No?

TF: I didn't get no care packages while I was there.

TS: No? But if somebody had sent you one, what would you have wanted in it?

TF: I don't know, because, like I said, we pretty much had all the stuff that you thought you wouldn't have; we had it there, so there was no need. I mean, you could even go to the PX and buy DVD players, TVs. They had these little tents where the Iraqi's would come on and they'd sell you bootlegged DVDs. So we pretty much had everything we needed.

TS: What was it like to be in Iraq?

TF: It was good. I mean, we were busy. All our subordinate commands, they sent all their stuff up through us, and some of it would be all jacked up, and they'd be upset because we would send it back to them, say, "No, this isn't right. We're not sending this to the general." And one thing while I was there is I was appointed as the SARC, which is the Sexual Assault Response Coordinator.

TS: Okay.

TF: Which basically, if there was a sexual assault reported, then whatever command reported it, they had to eventually report it to me, and I would arrange the response for the young man or—for the man or the woman who was reportedly assaulted. And by response, that means I would arrange for them to meet with mental health, with the chaplain if needed, with the hospital if there was physical harm. So I was the response coordinator making sure that that man or woman that reported they were assaulted got all of the care that they needed.

TS: Did that happen very often?

TF: No, it didn't happen often, but it happened too often.

TS: Yeah; once is probably too much.

TF: Yeah. So anyway, I didn't enjoy that part of my deployment, and it kept me a little busier than I thought it would.

TS: Yeah. What was the climate like there?

TF: You mean, like, the heat?

TS: Yeah.

TF: It was hot. I mean, it would get up to like a hundred and thirty degrees, and you got on all this doggone equipment. I mean, there'd be days, like on Sundays, we were allowed to just wear our PT uniform, but we still had to have our web gear on with our weapons and stuff. But outside of that Sunday, on all the other days, you had your full battle rattle on.

You had that hot ass helmet, had all your web gear on and everything, and high boots, and it was just hot.

[Battle rattle is full combat gear worn by a soldier, including, but not limited to, helmet, flak jacket, and automated weapon]

TS: Somebody was telling me about how the sand was everywhere too.

TF: Yeah, we'd had some terrible sand storms, and then when it rained it's like you're walking in peanut butter that mud be so thick.

TS: Where you ever afraid?

TF: Not—Not really. I mean, the thing about it is that, Anaconda being such as it was, we wasn't like in the thick of things where we concerned about hand to hand combat or anything like that. I mean, they would put rockets over our walls all the time, but the good thing about that is since they didn't have a guidance system—or at least that's what we were told, they didn't have a guidance system—they basically would send those rockets over and just hope it hit something. So the siren would go off, and as long as we headed to a hard building we'd be okay.

TS: Did you have a bunker?

TF: Yeah. As long as we would head to some of those we would be fine.

TS: So you weren't nervous about that?

TF: I mean, they did hit our headquarters once.

TS: They did?

TF: Put a big hole in the building, but nobody was injured.

TS: Nobody was injured in that?

TF: Nope. And then the night before we were to leave, and the replacement unit would take over for us, they sent about twelve bombs over the wall. It was almost like somebody had told them, "Oh, they're leaving. You better get them while you can."

TS: That was near the time that you were leaving?

TF: Yes.

TS: Yeah. Oftentimes, I've been told, like, when people are deployed—soldiers are deployed—into a war zone, they don't always do the job that they're assigned.

TF: Well, that's true, because before we went to Iraq I was part of the PDSS, the pre-deployment site survey. So we went over there for a week to see what we could expect; to come back, and report to the general what to expect over there. One of the things we did find out is that for our E-6s and below, they probably wouldn't be in there doing their job because they would be detailed out. They'd be on guard duty, they'd be on duties in the DFACs—the dining facilities—they'd be on all kind of other duties. So what our commanding general did to alleviate that, so soldiers can still do the job they're supposed to be doing, is he took one of our companies that was not scheduled to deploy, and he deployed them anyway just to pick up those details.

TS: Oh, really? Okay.

TF: Yeah, and it worked out great.

TS: So then everybody got to do their jobs?

TF: Yes, and that was that company's primary job, to do those details.

TS: The extra one that got sent?

TF: Right.

TS: Well, how about your job there? What were you doing?

TF: I was doing the same job I did at Bragg; processing awards, processing leaves, taking care of what other administrative issues that I got assigned to me.

TS: What was the most challenging thing about being there?

TF: Shoot. Basically just being there.

TS: Yeah.

TF: I mean, I had good folks around me. I had really good battle buddies. We hung out together all the time. Basically did all our lunches and dinner together. During our off time we would hang out together. So we basically just looked out for each other, and everything was good.

TS: And what were your living conditions like there?

TF: We were in trailers.

TS: Were they air conditioned?

TF: Yes, but seniors like me, it would be two to a trailer. Say this was a trailer; it just had a wall down the middle, and one person would be on one side, I'd be on the other side, and in the middle they had a bathroom and we would just share a bathroom. Now, with the soldiers, they might be two on this side, and two on that side, with the one bathroom. So they might have four to a trailer. But the senior people, we had just two to a trailer.

TS: You had more privacy because of your rank?

TF: Right. Right.

TS: Yeah. Well, what was something that you were proud of in your time being deployed, no matter where that deployment was at?

TF: Well, that must be being able to take care of the soldiers, because there were many times when soldiers felt like—from conversations I had with them—that they wouldn't get this, that, or the other taken care of, primarily with their family members. And so, I could contact our rear detachment, and I could say, "Hey, Sergeant So-and-so has a concern about their family member. Can you check with the family support group and make sure that this, that, and the other is taken care of, and contact me back so I can let them know?"

TS: And so, you got real good gratification of being able to know you were helping out the soldiers?

TF: Yeah. Or if a soldier was—prior to deployment, if they thought they were going to be PCSing, but because they deployed now they couldn't PCS and they were supposed to, I could still talk with my contacts and see that, "Oh, when we return from deployment, can that soldier get this assignment back?"

TS: Did they often get it?

TF: Often. And the processing of awards, there were many awards that could be—that could have been had. And sometimes soldiers would not get those awards for some BS [bullshit] reason like, "Oh, that's a private; they don't deserve that award." Well, if they did the action maybe they deserve the award.

TS: Did that drive you a little bit crazy sometimes?

TF: Yeah, because basically they felt like—many of the soldiers felt like the only person that can get a Meritorious Service Medal or a Bronze Star is the E-7s and above. Whereas if a soldier that is an E-7 and below did the action, they should be able to get the award, is the way I felt about it. Of course, while we were there they came out with a new award—of which I can't remember the name of it—but I tell you the paperwork we were getting submitted to get those awards, there were so many of them I recommended disapproval to

the commanding general because they just clearly didn't fit the criteria, and the subordinate command was just trying to get as many of them awards as they could.

TS: So it would look good on their record?

TF: I started thinking, "That's nice that you want to give these to your soldiers but there is still a criteria that has to be met, and from what you sent to us that criteria clearly was not met, and I am not sending this up to the general for signature, or if I do, I'm sending it with a recommendation of disapproval."

With one command, they got so bad that the commanding general called that colonel and told him, "You know what? Don't send anything else up here. You are sending garbage up here." And that colonel sent a nastygram [a letter expressing displeasure about actions taken or lack thereof] to my colonel saying it was my fault.

I was like "No, all I do is look at it and make a recommendation. It's still up to the general of whether he wanted to approve it or not."

TS: Where they trying to pad their own—under their command if so many people got awards that made them look better? Was that what that was?

TF: I don't know. Most of those recommendations were so jacked up I think they just didn't understand what the requirement was—what the criteria was—that they just thought, "Well, I can just submit this."

"No. There's a criteria to get this award, and if your soldier didn't meet it, guess what? I'm recommending disapproval, and it's just your bad luck that the general values my opinion more than yours."

TS: [chuckles] There you go. Well, is there anything else you want to talk about with your deployment to Iraq?

TF: No, it was a good deployment. We went there, we came back. Right before we—right when we got back, the 1st COSCOM had been re-designated as the 1st Theater Sustainment Command, and given a duel command. They had the command at Bragg, but they also had a command in Kuwait. So we had the duel command. And so, when we got back I was immediately busy because since we had been re-designated we were no longer Airborne, so I had to make arrangements to get a bunch of soldiers reassigned to Airborne units on Bragg, or to make arrangements to get them assigned off of Bragg. So I was working with DA and with command sergeant majors on Bragg to get soldiers moved so they could still be in positions where they needed it to be. So that was pretty much my last official action before I retired.

TS: And what was that retirement date again?

TF: One September 2006

TS: Yeah. And so, you told me something unfortunate that happened to you after you retired.

TF: Yes. Twentieth September 2006; had a major stroke that left me disabled, or as I tell people, "I'm not disabled, I am differently able."

TS: That's right.

TF: I say, "I can do the same thing you can do, I just have to figure out a different way to do it, and it might take me longer." And I—Since I lost the use of my left arm and my left leg, I might have to figure out a way to do it with just one hand. But most stuff I can do, I just have to figure out a way to do it.

TS: And you said that you got to live on your own, although at first they were not—

TF: Yes, because I was very independent.

TS: Yeah.

TF: And I had been on my own for quite some years. But when I was in the hospital from 20 September until 31 October, and when they were discharging me they were telling me that they were going to put me in the local veterans home because they did not consider me capable of self-care. Of which I refused and told them that I was not going to no veterans home, so I called all my family members, of which I have six sisters, and one of my sisters, she put all of her—she lives in Fort Worth, Texas—Donna Ellis—she put all her stuff in storage and she came out here to North Carolina, and she took care of me until I was capable of self-care. She was out here from the end of October until February. Until I had had sufficient therapy that I was deemed capable of self-care.

TS: Well, how has your treatment been? You had to deal with the VA [Veterans Administration], then?

TF: Yeah, and I can say the Fayetteville VA [Medical Center] has been absolutely great. I have had physical therapy with them, I had occupational therapy with them, and they have been wonderful. When I was initially discharged, I was still in Cape Fear [Valley Medical Center], the local hospital, because when I had the stroke they couldn't take me to Womack [Army Medical Center] on Bragg because they said they did not have a neurologist on call. So I was taken to the local hospital, Cape Fear, and I was cared for there. So my initial therapy was under the Southeastern Regional Rehab Center at Cape Fear, but after I was discharged and got enrolled in the VA system, I then started getting my care under the VA—the Fayetteville VA—and they have been just wonderful.

TS: Well, that's good. Well, do you mind if I asked you some broader questions about the military itself, and the army and some things?

TF: Okay.

TS: Because you've had quite a career. I mean, the thirty years you were in the army transformed in a lot of different ways, I would think.

TF: It did.

TS: What ways do you think that it transformed?

TF: Well, I'll tell you one thing that stood out for when I was going through Air Assault and I was a sergeant first class, these private young men were standing next to me, and they were like, "I hope by the time I get your rank I have a lot of stuff on my uniform."

And I had to tell them, "You probably will." I say, "For one, because you are a private you're just starting out. For two, you're a guy, so you're able to this stuff." I say, "When I was a private starting out women couldn't go to Air Assault. We couldn't go to Airborne, so we couldn't do all the stuff that women are now doing." I said, "So if I was a private at this point where you are, yeah, I might have more stuff on my uniform. But when I came in, in 1975, women weren't even allowed to do that." I say, "Hell, when I came in, we weren't even firing weapons in basic training. It was optional."

I still remember, I was in Germany the first time, the first time I saw a female Airborne, and it was an officer; a captain.

TS: Yeah.

TF: I saw them wings on her chest and I was like, "Are we doing that now?"

TS: Yeah. And that was a little bit later, wasn't it?

TF: Yes. In fact, it was in Germany that first time that I saw the first female with a expert weapons badge, and I was like, "Wow, the females are doing some things now."

TS: What did you think about those kind of changes?

TF: I thought they were great because to me it was never a question of capability, it was a question of being allowed the opportunity to show that you could do it, because obviously it could be done because there are many female Airborne now. There are many female Air Assault. So it was just a mindset then that this is not something women can do, and so nobody questioned that for quite some time, and women weren't allowed to do it. It's kind of like now with the women going through [U.S. Army] Ranger [School]. And I just saw a recent announcement in the *Army Times* where they said they're now going to open it up to all women no matter what. If they can do it, they can do it. If they can't, they'll be weeded out just like the guys are.

TS: What do you think about that? Do you think there's any job that a woman shouldn't have in the army?

TF: Actually, since being retired, I had not given it any thought. When I was on active duty, yeah, I pretty much thought like the guys thought: women shouldn't be Rangers; women shouldn't be Special Forces. Yeah, because from what I saw it didn't look like something that we would be able to do.

TS: But you've changed your mind since then?

TF: Yeah, because I've seen that women can do it. And I've seen where we have been pushed to the limits and still able to go on.

TS: Well, as you've been talking about your time in the service, what did you retire at? What was your rank when you retired?

TF: I retired as a sergeant major.

TS: Sergeant major. And did you feel like throughout the course of your career you were treated fairly by your supervisors?

TF: I felt that way every step of my career. And I basically felt that way because I might have started out in situations where my supervisor did not have full confidence in me, but I felt like that was probably based on their own experiences. They didn't know me. And then as I would do my job, and they realized that I knew what I was doing, then I earned that confidence and that respect. And I didn't have to deal with a bunch of crap that people would tell me that I would have to deal with. I was like, "Well, I don't know where you came from with these people, but from where I'm coming from, they're treating me with respect and confidence. So I can't speak for what your experience was. I didn't have that experience."

TS: Well, some women have said that they felt like they had to prove themselves every time they went to a new unit, a new assignment, and they didn't feel like—

TF: And they might have.

TS: Yeah? Did you ever feel that way?

TF: Well, not—it depends on what they meant by "prove themselves." I mean, I feel like pretty much every soldier, male or female, has to prove themselves when they come in, because sometimes you might be replacing somebody that was a crackerjack at their job, and now here you come, and those first sergeants, commanders, command sergeant majors, they don't know you from Adam. They don't know if you're capable of doing that job. They just lost an outstanding soldier for some reason—whether it was PCS, ETS [expiration of term of service], death, injury, whatever—they just lost an outstanding soldier, and they just got this new soldier, and they don't know if you're going to be able to do the job or not. So yeah, I think pretty much every soldier has to prove themselves when they get to a new place. I don't think that's gender specific.

TS: Did you ever feel like you were under a magnifying glass because of your gender or your race?

TF: Never. No, I never did.

TS: Never?

TF: I never did.

TS: Neither one at all?

TF: Neither one, not because I was black, and not because I was a female. Because I would come in there, I would do my job. I would do it not just to the best of my ability, but I would try to go beyond that. And like I said earlier, I would learn the job of the person over me so that there would be no hesitation in service if something happened to my boss. Things could still keep going on. We didn't have to worry about it.

Because we did have that happen in Iraq. My colonel was relieved of his position because he had some mental issues going on while we were over there, and they had finally taken his weapon and relieved him of his position. But even so, we couldn't just stop the work; soldiers still had to have awards processed; we still had to get people out on R&R [rest and recuperation]. We couldn't stop action just because he was out of the picture, or was curtailed in his duties, so.

TS: You just have to keep the cogs going, right?

TF: Yeah. I just feel like if you do your job, and you do it well, you don't have to beg for respect.

TS: Right.

TF: That respect is going to come. That confidence is going to come. Because at any given time, a soldier could be gone, and a new soldier come in and, yeah, that person's going to have to prove themselves. That's just the nature of the beast. That's not even a military thing. That happens with a lot of jobs. They lose somebody that's outstanding, and they get a new hire. That new hire's going to have to prove they can do that job because they just lost somebody they had full confidence in.

TS: You know how there's Women's Month or Black History Month or Hispanic Month.

TF: Right.

TS: And I remember, sometimes when those first started, there was some tension about it, of the highlighting—like remember when you said when you were in school—

TF: Yes.

TS: —you're on a committee and you're trying to show the heritage and teach people about that.

TF: Yes.

TS: Did you see a change over time with the way those things were presented from back in the 70's? Although, it probably wasn't even done in the 70's; maybe in the 80's.

TF: No, I remember specifically when I was at Fort Hood—my very first assignment—where they were getting ready to do a Black History—back then it was a Black History Day, it wasn't a month—and they were getting ready to do a program, and this colonel was—we were sitting in a meeting, and this colonel was talking about it, and the other colonels were like, "Why do we need a Black History Day? Where is my White History Day? I'm Irish American; where is my Irish Day?"

And the black colonel told him, he said, "Because on any given day you can say you're Irish, you can say you're [of] German ancestry, you can say all that, and because you're a white male that's accepted." He said, "I am always a black man, and no matter how you want to paint it, we get treated differently based on the history of this country." He said, "You can say all day, 'I need to be celebrated because I have Irish heritage,' but you can claim Irish heritage." He said, "For all you know, I might have a Irish heritage, but you wouldn't know that because you just look at me and all you see is a black man. You don't know what my heritage is."

TS: Do you think that changed over time; the diversity in the services?

TF: I think it changed a great deal.

TS: Yeah.

TF: More positive.

TS: More positive? Yeah.

TF: A lot more positive.

TS: Yeah.

TF: I mean, there was a lot less of, "Oh, you got promoted because you're black and they just wanted to show diversity."

TS: Right.

TF: No, that don't happen anymore. They're realizing that just like women—just like black people, women are getting promoted based on the skills they have shown. It's not, "You got promoted because you're a woman. You got promoted because you slept your way to the top. You got promoted because you're black." They realize that black people, other ethnicities, women, we all bring something to the table, and what we bring to the table is good, sometimes it's great, and we're going to be recognized for that goodness and that greatness. And we're going to be promoted because of that goodness and that greatness. And they need to just get over it and get on with their own little lives.

TS: [chuckles] There you go. Well, one of the other controversial issues that was happening when you were in—well, even before you were in—but it was the issue of homosexuality, right? There was "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," but before that that wasn't even in place.

["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]

TF: No, I don't think it mattered, because just like almost anywhere else, you know who is what. I mean, even when I was in Germany the first time, and even when they had the WAC Shacks [barracks housing all women], we knew who was gay and who wasn't. We knew who the lesbians were. I mean, we didn't treat them no differently. They was all—

TS: Here, I'll pause it.

TF: Come to show me your paper?

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay.

TF: Now I forgot where I was.

TS: Oh, that's okay. We were interrupted. I was just asking what you thought about the change of time over, like, the issue of homosexuality.

TF: Oh, yeah. We knew who the gay soldiers were, whether they were male or female; we knew who they were. When I was in Germany the first time, this one particular gay soldier, people used to always ask him, "How come you always have a bunch of women around you at the club?" Well, we liked going out with him because we knew he was gay and we wouldn't have to be fighting him off at the end of the evening.

TS: No trouble with him, right?

TF: Right.

TS: But you probably processed a lot of them out, too, right?

TF: Yeah, but it wasn't for homosexuality, it was usually for something else.

TS: Yeah, something else? Did you think that it was a good thing that they got rid of that?

TF: Yes, because they were a lot of good soldiers.

TS: And did you see attitudes towards women change at all?

TF: Over the years? Oh, yes. I mean, because when I first came in there seemed to be the idea that women should only be clerks and nurses and things like that. But they came to be gradually more accepted as the truck driver, the mechanic, the crew chief; all these other different part—the engineer—all these different parts of the military that the women were now coming in. I mean, I see it going back and forth, like, even in engineering field. One time women could be electricians, another time they can't be electricians. One time they can be this in the engineer field, another time they can't be that. So it would go back and forth, and I don't know why that would be but it was sure happening; they'd go back and forth.

TS: They can enter change in the coding for the jobs, right?

TF: Yeah.

TS: Based on how close they were to combat or something?

TF: I don't know what it was. Because I'm like, "The gender didn't change, so if I'm okay to be that this year, how come I'm not okay to be it the next year?" Or not me necessarily, because that woman who made it that year, the next year, if she had a younger sister coming in wanting to do that, that sister now couldn't do it. And I'm like, "That don't make any sense."

TS: Did you have some mentors when you were in that you are especially grateful for?

TF: Not in my earlier years. In my early years in the military I primarily was doing the—teaching myself what I needed to know. I didn't have anybody saying, "Let me show you how to do that."

TS: Right.

TF: "Let me help you be a better soldier" blah, blah, blah. But after I'm—But in my later years, like as a sergeant first class, then I had more first sergeants and sergeant majors giving me guidance on how to be a better senior NCO. But I didn't have that when I was becoming a junior NCO, and to me it's more needed then because if you get it as a junior NCO you'll be a better senior NCO.

TS: So when you were in the position to help mentor other young soldiers, who did you—

TF: I was quite willing to do so.

TS: Yeah.

TF: They had a saying that females didn't like working for other female NCOs because we didn't give in to that—the tears, the "I'm on my cycles [menstrual cycle], so I can't—" this and that.

"I don't want to hear it. I'm a woman too. I get cycles too. I don't want to hear about you can't this and that. That's BS. Get your butt out there and do it."

So they had the thing that females didn't like working for the females, but to me that's BS. I have had many female soldiers under me, and female civilians, and I would train them all up the same way; teach them the same way. Teach them what they needed to know to do their job better, to get promoted, to do what they needed to do to the best of their abilities so that people didn't look at them, and say, "You can't because you're a woman."

I was like, "You ain't never going to have to hear that." Well, I guess I couldn't say never. "But if you hear it, it's because of a shortcoming on that person, not because you not—you don't know how to do your job, or because you can't pass a PT test, or because you can't fire your weapon. It's because they already have a preconceived notion of what they think women can and can't do." I'm saying, "All you need to do is put the light to that every day on your job. You ain't got to [unclear]. You ain't got to argue with them. Just show that light to them every day on your job by doing your job."

TS: That's a good way of putting that. Is there any particular award or decoration that you received that you're particularly proud of?

TF: My very first Meritorious Service Medal that I got out of Fort Leonard Wood.

TS: Yeah.

TF: Because I—When I left there I was a staff sergeant promotable, and they had a thing at that time where their discrimination was—basically their award was pretty much rank driven, and if you weren't a sergeant first class and above you could not be recommended for a Meritorious Service Medal. But my battalion commander had said that he was so impressed by how I did my job, he said, "You're going to get a Meritorious Service Medal."

So I had left—I had—I was getting ready to leave for Hawaii, and I did—and he came and he showed me that I did get approved by the brigade commander for the Meritorious Service Medal. And my mother had came out from Albuquerque to help me pack up and prepare to leave, so we brought her to the ceremony and let her pin it on me.

TS: Oh, that's very nice.

TF: That was her first actual participation in one of my military things.

TS: I'm looking at your DD214 [discharge papers] here, and it looks like you have a Legion of Merit and a Bronze Star.

TF: Yes, I received a Bronze Star out of Iraq. That was one of those instances where I was telling you where people thought only senior people get Bronze Stars, and they also thought Bronze Stars were only for valor, but you could get a Bronze Star for achievement also, which is what mine was. And the Legion of Merit was for my total service when I retired.

TS: When you retired? Yeah. Well, I think thirty-one years certainly—

TF: Most people that do thirty or thirty plus will be recommended for a Legion of Merit, unless they totally screwed up.

TS: Yeah. Well, they probably wouldn't be in that long if they did, right?

TF: Yeah.

TS: That's right. Well, do you have any particular heroes or heroines? Not necessarily in the military, but through your life, as you were going through the service, that you looked up to?

TF: I can say my—one of my G1's, Lieutenant Colonel Angela Cummings—she is now retired—and I looked up to her. Not just because she was a particularly good G1, but she was a beautiful woman, and I mean physically beautiful, and she didn't let that get in the way of doing what she needed to do. She would be out there doing PT with us, and sweating and getting her hair all sweaty just like everybody else. She'd be participating in the field exercises just like everybody else. Guys looking at her, licking their doggone lips and stuff, but she would just ignore them and do her job. She was a good person to everyone in the G1. She recognized everything. I mean, you would come in at the eve of a holiday, and, like, say if it was Fourth of July, you'd come in, on every desk she had a little flag with little candies or something. Easter, you'd come in, she'd have a little something on every desk. She always took care of the soldiers. They knew she cared about them, and that was someone I looked up to. I was so sad when she was transferred up to Virginia, and then retired.

TS: Yeah. You missed her, I'm sure.

TF: Yes.

TS: Yeah. Anybody else that you want to mention?

TF: Command Sergeant Major Joseph Allen. He was my last command sergeant major. I mean, him and I both butted heads a lot, but it was basically because we both had them strong personalities. I pretty much felt the same way he felt about a lot of things, but because of sometimes the way that he would put it, it would get my hair up, and then we'd have our little arguments and stuff. And there would be people saying, "That's the command sergeant, you can't argue with him."

I said, "No, you can't. I'm going to argue if I feel like I have a position that needs arguing." I said, "And I don't really care what rank you're wearing." I said, "I argue with general officers, colonels, command sergeant majors, if I felt like they were wrong. That's just as simple as it is. If you don't stand your ground, what you going to stand for?"

TS: But you had an admiration for him as well?

TF: I did because he was a strong command sergeant major. When we were over in Iraq, he was the one that recommended I be the SARC, even though we did butt heads quite often about that. Because one duty of the SARC is to believe the person that brought the accusation, and his concept was half these people be lying. I'm like "You know what—" or if they would withdraw, I say, "Sometimes they withdraw their complaint. It's not because they're lying, it's because there are different reasons. Look at you, you are very popular. I hang out with you a lot. If I were to accuse you of something people would more than likely—and if you denied it, they would take your side because of your popularity." I said, "The same thing happened with other soldiers. They accused the person that's very popular, and so nobody wants to believe them, or people start dogging them out, and they don't want to take the stress so they pull back their complaint." I said, "Because somebody pulled back a complaint does not mean that it didn't happen."

So we would go round, and round about these things. I felt very strongly that maybe there might have been a misinterpretation, but if the person believed it happened my job is to get them the help they need. So in order to get them the help they need, my job is to believe that it happened, and let Mental Health, and all these other people, figure out if it did or didn't, because if didn't, then you can go from there, and if it did, you go from there.

TS: You have to deal with it either way.

TF: Yes. But overall, I liked the way he pulled everybody together. Because we went to Iraq, we had all these other units under us that had not been under us at Fort Bragg, and some of those units, they had a resentment about that—"Why we under them?" And he, as the command sergeant major of the 1st COSCOM, he pulled all those people together to have them understand this is your command structure, and you need to fall in line. And he did it with authority, and with strength, and it was just good to see him doing that. And good to be under a command sergeant major that could do that. Because when people had heard we were from the 1st COSCOM, it was like they just fell in line. If I had to stop and correct a soldier and say "I'm the G1 sergeant major for the 1st COSCOM," it was like "Oh, 1st COSMCOM. Okay."

TS: A certain respect came with that.

TF: Yes. It did.

TS: Yeah.

TF: And he brought that respect for the 1st COSCOM. Because at Bragg, 1st COSCOM, we were on the opposite side of Bragg, so people didn't come over there unless they absolutely needed something. So we were kind of like the stepchild on Bragg.

TS: So he built it into something.

TF: Yeah.

TS: That's really neat. Well, would you consider yourself a trailblazer?

TF: No, I would not. I did not—in my thirty-one years of service, in my opinion, I did not do anything exceptionally unique. I did what was required of me. There were times when I was asked to something that might have been outside the norm, but the bottom line is a lot of soldiers are asked to do something that is outside the norm. You're going to—You're going to do it because generally the person that asks you to do that is somebody that is over you; that you are subordinate to. So either way you're going to do it. So it's a matter of are you're going to do it and do it well, or are you going to half-ass do it, and then have to answer for it?

TS: And yet, when you joined, there was a separate women's corps.

TF: Yes.

TS: And when you left, women were integrated into a war in a way that never would have been possible in 1975, right?

TF: Yes, but I never—in my—because I was thinking about this since getting your call—I had never in my thirty-one-year career had someone tell me that, "I'm shocked that you can do that as a woman."

TS: Nobody ever said that?

TF: No.

TS: No? Just talking to you today, your attitude is very much like, "I can do it," right? But were you ever given an assignment or a task where you were like, in the inside, "I don't know if I can do this"? Like, you're really challenged, and the person above you just had a lot of belief and trust in you to be able to do it.

TF: About the only time I really felt like that was when I was given that duty as the Sexual Assault Response Coordinator. Even though DA sent a team over and trained us, I still felt like, "Well, what am I supposed to do with this?"

TS: It felt like out of your comfort zone, sort of?

TF: Yes, I was like, "What do I know about sexual assault? I've never been sexually assaulted. I don't know how they feel."

TS: How do you feel like you ended up handling—

TF: After we got the training I had a better understanding of what my role in it was; that I'm just the response coordinator to make sure these victims get the care that they need, if indeed it's found they need it.

TS: Yeah. Did you feel like you did a good job with that?

TF: I felt like I did, because they didn't have any problems with coming to me. And while I was there, I trained at least eight other people to do that job.

TS: So there would be a lot more people who had those skills?

TF: Yes.

TS: Just a few more questions for you. You answered some of these already. You said you did use your veterans benefits—your GI Bill. Did you use more for education?

TF: Yes, bought this house with my veterans benefits. I attended Fayetteville State [University] using my education benefits; my post-9/11 benefits specifically.

TS: Yeah.

TF: Because I was pursuing a Master of Arts in Teaching, which I was—almost completed the class, but then when it was time to do my internship at Hoke [County] High [School], I ran into some physical issues because of my problems here, and so I did not complete the internship, so I did not actually graduate.

TS: Right.

TF: But if it had not been for that, I would have graduated. I had, like, a 3.8 GPA [grade point average] at the time. They actually told me I would have graduated at the top of the class, so I would have graduated with honors, and I'm still looking at taking what I did have completed, minus the internship, and seeing if there's some other degree I can go and put that into.

TS: Apply it to, yeah. That sounds like a great idea. Well, would you recommend the army or any service to young women and young men today?

TF: All the time.

TS: All the time. What do you tell them?

TF: Shoot, I even try to encourage my granddaughter to go. She's eighteen, she'll be graduating in a year, and I told her, I said, "If you don't have a plan, the military is a good place to start." I said, "It ain't got to be the army. It could be the [U.S.] Air Force, the Coast Guard, the Marines." I said, "It can be the reserves, active duty, it doesn't matter which." I said, "But at any rate, they would give you a skill. You have this child."—this is her little boy—I said, "They'll give you benefits to help him out." I said, "But the main thing is it will give you skills that you can use. You don't have to stay twenty/thirty years. You don't have to retire from the military." I said, "You can serve and still have benefits." I said, "The biggest benefit you will have is the training you will get. Some of the best training around is the training you get in the military. And I'm not talking about training to do push-ups, sit-ups, and run two miles. I'm talking about whatever field you decide to go in. They have some of the best training you can get. You talking about you want to go into medical? That's some good training you would get out of the military." I've encourage my nieces and nephews all to do that.

TS: Have any of them gone in?

TF: No. I had a couple of them try, but they didn't pass the—And then one of them had health issues with asthma and he couldn't come.

TS: I think I forgot to ask you this earlier, but had anyone in your family been in the military before you? You said none of your sisters.

TF: My dad was in the air force, but that was before I was born, so to my knowledge none of my family members have been in the military except me.

TS: Except you.

TF: And of course, my younger son went in.

TS: He did?

TF: While we were in Germany he joined.

TS: The army?

TF: Yes.

TS: Is he still in?

TF: No, he did three [or] four years and got out.

TS: Got out.

TF: I remember, I told him when he went to basic training, I said, "When you get to basic training, the most important thing you can do is not tell them your mother's a sergeant

major." First thing out of his mouth; he said they dogged him every day. I said, "I told you don't tell them because they think that you think now you got something over on them."

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

TF: I'd tell them, "Don't believe the hype." I'd say, "There's none of this crap about all the women in the military are either ugly or sluts. That's a lie." I'd say, "Don't believe all the guys are 'Mr. Gung Ho' and 'Mr. Physical Fitness.' It take time to get to that." I'd say, "The military is kind of like any other job. You go in there, if you don't know, somebody trains you. And they will train you and train you and have somebody teach you the job until it's clear that you're not going to learn it." I'd say, "Yeah, and then you might be removed from the military, just like you would be removed from any other job if you try and try, and no matter how hard you try you just don't get it. People's lives are at stake when you're in the military. You deploy, you're responsible for somebody else's life or their livelihood, whatever." I'd say, "So yeah, you might not be able to make it in the military, and yes, it might be because of your shortcoming, but I'm saying don't look at what you see on TV and think it's like *M*A*S*H*. No, don't look at what you see on TV and think it's like what happened with that female that time—" I forget that show.

[*M*A*S*H* is an American television series that ran from 1972-1983, about a team of doctors and support staff stationed at the "4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital" in Uijeongbu, South Korea during the Korean War]

TS: The one with the nurses?

TF: Where she was miss cutie little rich girl.

TS: Oh, *Private Benjamin*.

[*Private Benjamin* is a 1980 American comedy film starring Goldie Hawn, about a sheltered wealthy woman who joins the U.S. Army]

TF: Yeah, *Private Benjamin*. I say, "The women in the military are not like that. We don't have form fitting uniforms that show every curve you got. It's not like that. There are standards to how you can wear your hair, how long your nails can be, and how tight your uniform can be. It's not like you see on TV. Don't think you're going to go to every exotic place in the world." I say, "You're going to find that more in the air force than the army. You find the army in these little piece of towns. You're going to be mad because you thought you going to be in the doggone New York City or Atlanta, and you're in damn

Fayetteville or Killeen, Texas, or Sierra Vista, Arizona. You ain't based in no major city, and you're mad about it. Get over it. You want to go to those more exotic places, you need to look at the [U.S.] Air Force or the Marine Corps. If you just want to serve your country, any service will do that. See, but the army is land based so they're going to be where there's lots of land, so you're not going to find where all these places you find air force bases."

TS: Yeah.

TF: I say, "But for me the bottom line is that any service is good service." I hated when people dog out other services. "Oh, you wasn't a Marine? That mean you ain't shit." Wrong answer. Everybody's serving. Every service has something to offer that the other doesn't. We all complement each other in one way or another. The army can't move without the air force. The air force needs the army for something else. The [U.S.] Army needs the Marine Corps for something else. The Marine Corps need the Coast Guard for something else. Coast Guard needs the army for something else. Everybody is tied in to someone else somewhere. I tell them, I said, "That's why we call the Department of Defense. Yeah, we all had Department of the Army, Department of the Air Force, but it all ties in to Department of Defense. We are all one family."

TS: Well, what does patriotism mean to you?

TF: Never gave that a lot of thought either. I mean, I served my country because at the time that's what I wanted to do, and the longer I did it the more I wanted to do it. I mean, I don't know if that's because of patriotism or because I liked the pay and benefits, and the travel. I mean, it could be any number of things, because to me patriotism is not just serving your country. There are many good patriots out there that have never served a day in the military, and they still would fall down and die for their country on the corner of 12th and Broadway. So I guess I really don't have an answer to that question.

TS: No, you do. You did just gave it. That's good. Now, when you were a young eighteen-year-old joining the army, did you ever imagine that you'd be in for thirty-one years, and go all the places you went, and—

TF: Shoot, I never even thought I'd be in there for twenty years.

TS: Yeah.

TF: I didn't even give a thought to the longevity of service. I was just—At that point, I was just trying to get away from home. Me and my mother weren't getting along and I was just trying to get away. That's why she didn't even know I had joined the military.

TS: Would you do anything any different today? Would you do it all again today, I guess is what I mean.

TF: I would if I were physically able. Shoot, I'd do it again in a hot minute. I love my military service. That's what I've recommended it to other young people in my family.

TS: Yeah

TF: I mean, it kind of irritated me when I hear soldiers say, "I don't want my child going in the military." Oh, it was good enough for you, but not your child? I never—I mean, I understand that people have their preferences for their kids, but every kid ain't going to be an NBA [National Basketball Association] star, they ain't going to be an NFL [National Football League] star, they're not going to go to an Ivy League college, and you're going to eliminate something they might can do because you don't want them to do it? Let the child make the decision. You can give them the ups and downs of it, and if they've been your child during your whole service they have seen the ups and downs of it. Like I was telling you with my kids, there was no, "Do you want to go to Fort Huachuca?" Hell, no. "I got orders for Fort Huachuca, that's where we going."

TS: Twice. [chuckles]

TF: "And guess what? You're a minor, and that means your ass is going with me. It's that simple."

TS: Yeah.

TF: I mean, when I was at DA at the engineering branch and I had a soldier—a master sergeant at that—call me and say he couldn't move because he would have to pull his child out of school, and I asked him what grade the child was in, because if he'd been like a senior or something in high school I could have worked with him. He told me the child was in first grade. I was like, "Sergeant, that's on you, because how that child reacts to this move depends on how you react to this move, so you need to change your attitude because guess what, you're moving." I said, "I'll tell you what, you've got two choices."

And you could almost hear it in his voice, the hope. "What?"

I said, "Aisle [seat] or window [seat], because you're going. Smoking or non-smoking, because you're going."

TS: Well, is there anything that you'd like to add, because I don't have any more formal questions. Anything we haven't talked about?

TF: No, I'd just like to say—what I had said to you before the mic was on—that in all my thirty-one years in the army I was never sexually harassed. With all the emphasis that was placed on sexual harassment, and people telling me that they didn't believe that I was sexual harassment—I mean, sexually harassed—I told them the reason I was never sexually harassed was because part of the definition is repeated actions. I didn't have any repeated actions because the first time some guy said something to me out of line, or even some woman—because like I said earlier, we knew who was gay and who wasn't—I said, "The first time somebody said something to me that was out of line—" I say, "—trust me,

my sarcastic mouth cut them so deep. They didn't say nothing else to me." I said, "I never had a problem with the touching."

TS: Right.

TF: I say, "I don't know if that's because I wasn't attractive enough to them or what, but I never had that problem."

TS: But mostly verbal.

TF: Yes.

TS: Yeah.

TF: Mostly they'd say something that was out of line, I'd shred their ego, and they didn't say nothing else.

TS: [chuckles] Well, I really enjoyed, Theressa, the conversation we've had today. Thank you so much.

TF: You're welcome.

TS: Thank you for letting me come you your home and talk with you. Anything else you want to add?

TF: Do you know if you're going to want any at all?

TS: Well, I can shut this off, and we can take a look.

TF: Okay.

TS: Okay.

[End of Interview]