WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Cindy L. Kempkes

INTERVIEWER: Kimber Heinz

DATE: 18 August 2016

[Begin Interview]

KH: Alright, this is Kimber Heinz. Today is August 18, 2016. I'm here with Cindy Kempkes, in Raleigh, North Carolina, conducting a history interview with the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Cindy, would you mind saying how you'd like your name read on your collection, and then spelling it out for us?

CK: Well, it's actually Cindy Lou Kempkes, and Kempkes is K-E-M-P-K-E-S.

KH: You would like Cindy Lou Kempkes to be what's on your file?

CK: I would like the military term of Cindy L. Kempkes.

KH: Cindy L. Kempkes, okay. Cindy L. Kempkes for your file.

CK: After all these years you get used to L. Kempkes, so.

KH: Absolutely. Alright, thanks for letting us know. Alright, thanks for doing the interview. Let's start with just your early life before the military. Tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what that was like.

CK: Well, I grew up the south side of Yonkers, which is generally low income people, and in fact, I didn't realize there was much of a difference between one side of Yonkers to the other till we moved to the north side, and that's when I realized, "Wow, we got new books." But I do remember as a kid, there was a whole big argument of finding out how much Native American I was, which is a very small percentage, but there was—I don't know, I just remember there was a big argument over that.

I grew up listening to the words of John L. Lewis, who was a Union coal miner president.

[John Llewellyn Lewis was an American leader of organized labor who served as president of the United Mine Workers of America from 1920 to 1960]

KH: What kind of stuff did John Lewis say?

CK: Well, my grandfather was a coal miner union [member], and generally, if you worked you had to be union, otherwise you were a scab [derogatory term for a non-union person hired to work during an ongoing union strike], and my father was very strong union.

KH: Is your family all from New York?

CK: All from New York. Well, my mother's from Pennsylvania; most of her family, that's the Native American side. And I have researched the family's amazing—just the history alone of how things are down in Pennsylvania. My father was born in Manhattan, and his family—his parents came from Germany during—believe it or not, before World War II.

KH: Your family in New York came from coal mining background?

CK: My father's side is painters; they were from New York. My grandfather came here with a trade, and he had a respectable fear of [Adolf] Hitler, and he knew that things were getting bad and he wanted to leave, so he came to America. I've heard the stories of him painting boats, and how the people—because he was German—how they treated him; locking him up in rooms and stuff as the ships were going down the Hudson [River]. Or that he was on a swing-scaffold painting the George Washington Bridge.

KH: The coal miners was on your mom's side?

CK: My mom's side.

KH: And that's the Pennsylvania folks.

CK: The Pennsylvania, the Dutch-Irish Canuck of a Scotman[?] type thing. Generally, they—from what they told my mother, she was extremely poor, and they lived on my grandparents' farm—her grandparents; my great-grandparents—and I've heard stories where—summertime there were no shoes on their feet because they couldn't afford them. The big one was they couldn't afford a Christmas tree, so my grandfather would take coat hangers and make a Christmas tree for them. But generally, they just got the basics that they need.

[The term "Canuck" is first recorded in 1835 as an Americanism, originally referring to a Dutch Canadian or French Canadian]

When my grandfather had black lung, that's when he decided to move to New York, and he worked for Dellwood Dairy Company, to which I think he ended up as a truck driver, and he brought his family to New York.

[Coal workers' pneumoconiosis, also known as black lung, is caused by long term exposure to coal dust. It can lead to inflammation, fibrosis, and in worse cases, necrosis]

KH: What was the influence that your family had on you?

CK: [chuckles] What influence do I have? I really—I could tell you they cared about me and lived with me and all, but it was—I had to know where my place was, because back then a woman stays home with her husband, and all this other stuff, and we [unclear] [big gloves?], but my parents—I would say my mother is a big influence on me; of all of them. That woman had such a photographic memory, it was unbelievable. Me, I had a hard time learning things. Three minutes into a class and I'm already bored and I'm distracted.

My grandfather Kempkes—my father's father—I say he was the one that got me into exploring. As a kid, we had—we lived in the highest point of Yonkers, which was Bellevue[?] Avenue, and my grandfather was fixing the roof, so we had the scaffolds up, and I wanted to be up there. And my grandfather, he didn't care; I was his favorite; I knew it. And he would take me up in the scaffolds and he would put a safety belt around me, and then he nails me to the roof so I won't fall off. We would sit there and we would be having our sandwiches, and my grandfather says, "This is what it's like to be on top of the world." So that's the closest I can remember my grandfather. He passed in '74.

But growing up, it was kind of hard because I was in the poor section of Yonkers.

KH: What was that like?

CK: Besides being the only white [Caucasian] kid, class was kind of hard. Most of the kids didn't want to play with you because you were white. In fact, even when I went to high school I remember a girl bullying me for money and I wouldn't give it to her. I think that's where my stubborn streak came from, which is also my grandfather because I just—it was determination he just always showed me; if you want it, grab it. You work what you want. Good work ethics.

Schoolwise, I've always had problems. I later learned that I have dyslexia, and my father didn't want me to have this title, so he went to the school and had all the papers about my dyslexia removed so that I can go and do stuff, because he did not believe that kids should have titles. Which in a way was good, and which in a way I really wish they let me go on some of those places and learn how to adjust to—otherwise I struggle, and I still struggle today.

[Dyslexia is a general term for disorders that involve difficulty in learning to read and interpret words, letters, and other symbols, but that do not affect general intelligence]

I think the biggest shock was when I told my father I joined the army. He was pissed. He was furious.

KH: Why was he so mad?

CK: Because he's air force [chuckles], and how dare I join the army? But I took the exam and I didn't have the high enough score for air force, but I had a high enough score for army. I spent three years going to college, realized college is not my thing because I just don't have the talent for books. I used to say, "If I hold it, shaked it, manipulated it, I can understand it. But I can't read it from a book." In fact, they didn't know that I was able—I was not really able to read until the eleventh grade, and that's when they said they had to start getting me to understand how to read.

KH: How did the rest of your family react when you joined the army?

CK: My mother was afraid that something would happen to me, and unfortunately it did. I was assaulted in the military. But she was so worried because I'd—my family kind of hid me from the realities of the world. I mean, the military, there I met my first Klan member—from the Ku Klux Klan; I met my first gay person—male and female. I never knew how there was so much differences in society that I was just not prepared for.

[The Ku Klux Klan is the name of three distinct movements in the U.S. that have advocated extremist reactionary positions such as white supremacy, white nationalism, and anti-immigration]

KH: What made you want to join?

CK: Believe it or not, when I went to college. First of all, we've got *Star Trek*. When I was a kid growing up we watched *Star Trek*, you watched Lieutenant Uhura. She did amazing things on board and everything and it's like, "I could do that in the real world. I can go and I can explore and I can be part of something bigger than myself."

The other one was, I was in a debate group, and the question was women's equality, which I was always for women's—I told them I was born with my arm over my head, crying, "I demand equality."

And a guy said that, "If you want equality equal to a man, then you should serve in the military as equal as a man."

And I sat and I thought about it, and I go, "You're right. Women should serve their country, therefore—" especially because I wasn't doing well—"I should join he service and make something out of myself."

KH: And that was in the mid-seventies?

CK: That was 1978.

KH: Nineteen seventy-eight. That's when you decided to enlist?

CK: When I decided to enlist. I did my original signing in April. And I talked to my father a lot about it but I guess he didn't realize I was serious.

KH: Was there anything remarkable about your enlistment experience?

CK: First time I'd ever been on a train; it was very interesting. We got to Fort McClellan [Alabama]. I believe the train was actually on base when we got off, and the first thing they told me was, "You look to the left—" they lined us all up—"You look to the left, you look to the right, and for the rest of your life these are the people you're going to rely on." And that holds true even today. If I needed something, chances are I have to find a veteran that knows, because no one's going to help me; not even the government.

At Fort McClellan, the drill sergeants yelled at you. In fact, somewhere—they made sure we wrote letters to home, and my mother actually kept them.

KH: How often did you write letters home?

CK: I usually don't write letters home because no one can understand what I wrote [both chuckle]; until the drill sergeant comes and says, "You will write home."

KH: Right. You have some?

CK: My mother—I got—I really can't read my own handwriting at this point either.

When we went in, they gave us our uniforms. One of the biggest I had at Fort—when they first got me into uniforms is, they never have them long enough for me. Now, we're talking the Vietnam Era uniform, which is twenty cans of starch to make it look good. They tried to find me boots, okay? My feet are too big for women combat boots, so they had to give me a pair of men's combat boots.

KH: How was that? How did those boots work out?

CK: Actually, I liked the men's boots better than the women's. Women's were more for, like, style; I'm not into style. I got big wide feet. My arch on my one foot has collapsed and they had to give me arches while I was in the service, because I had high arches at the time. But it was much better with the men's boots. In fact, later on when we were starting to be allowed to wear men's boots or men's uniforms, we preferred wearing them over the women's uniforms. In fact, I don't think they make women's uniforms other than for the dress blues, dress greens. But fatigues, they were all fatigues.

KH: What was it like when you first arrived at McClellan?

CK: I was scared. I didn't know. I'd never been out of Yonkers. They lined us up, they gave us our barracks, they lined us for shots [vaccinations], they lined us up for this; it's hurry up, wait, hurry up and wait. Drill sergeants constantly yelling.

When we had to go to the mess hall, I remember I always went and I had the meal while everyone else had the hamburgers, and after a while the drill sergeant told me, "You know, you can go over there and eat a hamburger." And it's like, when I'm hungry, I'm hungry. I can wolf them down as good as the guys.

And you're supposed to run after you left the mess hall, and I can't run fast; never could. So I'm trying to run, trying to run, the drill sergeants would sneak up and yell at you and make you run faster. [unclear], I had to do sit-ups, push-ups and stuff. I cannot do a push-up—never could—and I was afraid that was going to kick me out of the military.

The buildings at Fort McClellan at the time were brand new. They just build the Chemical Corps building—the chem school. So everything was new, you could smell the fresh paint and everything. And we marched [unclear] [chuckles].

The classes, I mean, they'd put you—and you had to sit in classes. If you started feeling tired, don't you dare fall asleep. If you felt tired, you got up, you stood in the back of the room so it didn't insult the instructor, and drill sergeants don't get on you later on.

[unclear] on the wire on this Alabama clay is annoying, when you're going through barbed wire stuff.

If anything, the basic training got me to learn to focus, which I really couldn't do when I was a civilian. There was this one test where we had to let the guy in front of us move to one section, and then you would go to the next point when it was safe to cross. I can't remember what they actually called that. But all I knew was that if I failed this test they would have made me go through that course again, and it was all full of Alabama clay and I did not want to go through that, so I focused as hard as I could so I didn't have to go into the training and get full of mud. And when he said, "Pass," it was like the first pass I'd ever gotten in my life. It was like, "Yeah, I did it."

Cleaning weapons, they got me on cleaning weapons till it was literally sparkling. And when we had the inspections my boots was about the only problem; everything else was perfect and everything—I had my little rollers[?] and made sure the uniform was done right. But in the end, it was just—at the end that I can actually rely on myself to do stuff; that I could do things. And that's about all I can say about basic. It takes me a while to—

The gas chamber I say was the hardest, because after the gas chamber I had a cough that wouldn't go away. In fact, when I went home that Christmas I was so sick my father thought he may have to call an ambulance for me. But I got over it and—I had problems then when I started running; I would get an earache that was painful. Had tumors starting showing up in the side of my neck.

KH: From the gas chamber?

CK: That was my original thought. I thought whatever was in that gas chamber made me sick, something there happened. But I mean, I also did guard duty. I—They told me it was an ammo dump, but I think it's the Anniston Army Depot, is where we did guard duty. It's funny, if I could see the place, I'll recognize it. I mean, I can even tell you where my barracks were.

[Anniston Army Depot, located in Alabama, is a major U.S. Army facility for the production and repair of ground combat vehicles, overhaul of Small Arms Weapons Systems, and the storage of chemical weapons]

KH: Let's circle back to the actually base you were at, in terms of the toxic stuff. But first, [when] you were at basic, what was the ratio between men and women there, and what was it like for you as a young woman coming on to that base?

CK: When I joined the service, they had gotten rid of the Women's Army Corps [WAC], which is at Fort McClellan. So the majority of peo—women that served came from Fort McClellan. The unit I was in was a ratio—we had—the bottom floor and I think the top floor were men, and we were in the middle. So I guess the ratio would be two to one for us.

KH: What was the impact on the disbanding of the Women's Army Corps on you and the fellow women that were there?

CK: It was just that we did training—also at the time, because the Vietnam War has ended and they were having a hard time getting recruits so they lowered the standards, especially to allow women to join. Oh, God, it's hard for me to remember that far back. [chuckles]

I know we—they put us out in the parade field and we all did the march and had to sing the male cadence songs, which I found at times very insulting, but you had to sing them. Of course, when we—when it was just us girls doing it we converted it to the women's version. But otherwise, if we were in a whole group we had to say it the way the guys said it.

KH: As someone that believed in women's equality, how did that relate to your service? Did it conflict with it, did it feel like it wasn't a big thing? How did you interpret that?

CK: I actually liked the idea that I was being trained like the men were being trained. There were some variations of stuff because we are female. The guys can run so fast. I think it took—to do two miles, you had to do it under five [correction: in 1980 women were required to run two miles in at least 22:10 minutes] minutes, and I barely make that all the time. I never really got any faster than that. And the guys, I forgot what the guys were for two miles.

No, I liked the idea that I was going to be treated equally. Of course, I didn't get treated equally. Yeah. When I got to my permanent station [unclear]—in fact, my one commander said, "You're a female."

I go, "Yeah." And he did not like the idea.

In fact, when I went to AT [sic, AIT; Advanced Individual Training], the sergeant there was upset because a girl filed a complaint about his comments—that they were offensive—and his line was, "I don't give a—" dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. "I'm going to be the way I am. You don't like it? Too bad." Did that answer the question?

KH: Yes. Do you think those kinds of comments reflected the overall kind of situation for women in the military at the time?

CK: Yeah. I could tell you how many times I've been—well, I can't tell you how many—but I've been whistled at, the catcalling, the sexual harassments, that was all back then. When I got to my permanent station, I do remember every time I got the shit work was because I was a woman. But if I got an award or something—

[Recording Paused?] [Recording Malfunction?]

KH: Alright, we were talking a little bit about your experiences as a woman in the military, and the treatment of women in the military at the time that you were serving. Is there anything else you wanted to say about that?

CK: I think that's about it.

KH: Okay. To circle back, just to start to talk about some things that were happening at Fort McClellan, did you notice anything strange about your experience there since you said you has started getting sick a little bit [unclear] coming home?

CK: Didn't think of a thing.

KH: Okay.

CK: I mean, at that time they called it, I think, the Academy, and I thought, "Wow. I'm going to an academy." Not just a regular school; it's a big thing. But no, it never occurred to me that there would have been something there. I mean, when they used to give the classes, they used to say, "We're going to give you a little sample of the chemical," or the mustard gas or something. We're in our MOPP suits [Mission Oriented Protective Posture gear; protective gear used by U.S. military personnel while in a toxic environment] and all—"But we're just giving you just enough so there'll be signs of a positive." Of course, they didn't tell you that during that time when the Women's Army Corps was there that they were doing outside testing, and that the cloud of whatever of chemicals they were using actually moves from one area to another and it stays there.

In fact, at Fort McClellan I was so amazed at how the stuff they were using to kills the weeds was so efficient. I went to one of the gentlemen and I said, "What is this stuff that they're using to kills the weeds because I'm amazed."

And a guy goes, "Well, to be truthfully honest, it's something we used in Vietnam, we just diluted it."

Actually, if you look at the herbicides list that they have on record for Fort McClellan, they do have the one chemical that they used for Agent Orange, because it's a two [?] herbicide. And other one that was there was Tordon 101, which is called Agent White. And the best way I can explain that I know it's the same is because they have the same patent number. Back till 1986 is when the commercial use of that product—they

changed the chemical configuration. But that's the stuff we used, and in the military, we waste nothing.

[Agent Orange is an herbicide and defoliant chemical used by the U.S. military during the Vietnam war as part of its herbicidal warfare program Operation Ranch Hand. The Vietnamese people and the U.S. veterans of the Vietnam war who were exposed to Agent Orange suffer serious health issues as a result of the exposure.]

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

KH: Wow. What were the impacts of being exposed to some of those chemicals?

CK: Right now, my biggest problem that I have, is GERD, which is a bad case of acid reflux. The tumors, I have many tumors. Back when I was in the service they took a tumor out of the side of my neck, told me, "Don't worry about it, it will be fine." And later on in life they removed—in fact, they removed the whole gland—I think it was in '95—because the tumors came back. And then they said, "Well, we removed those tumors, we removed that gland, you'll never see it again." Yeah. [chuckles] They grew back.

KH: Have you been able to prove to the military that that was the result of those chemicals at Fort McClellan?

CK: Believe it or not, there is—In fact, if you go on the VA.gov website, they do have a thing on Fort McClellan and they'll show you the same records that they've kept through the years. The VA states it as that there is a possibility that we were exposed. Right now there is a H.R.2622—it used to be H.R.411—and that is the Fort McClellan [Health] Registry Act. Until we get the government to say, "Yes, you were exposed," they will not do anything.

KH: Have you been compensated in any way?

CK: No. Not for Fort McClellan's exposures.

KH: You have received care through the VA for your treatment?

CK: I get treatment for other things I've had in the service, but anything that you say is Fort McClellan—I mean, even with my jaw, I just said that it's service connected, "Here's the paperwork," and said nothing about Fort McClellan.

Then I got that, "Yes, there's a possibility you could be sick because of your military service," but if you say anything Fort McClellan it falls on closed ears.

KH: Why do you think that is?

CK: Fort McClellan was closed in 1999 under BRAC [Base Realignment and Closure]—B-R—B—Oh, God, I can't remember it; what the initials were. But they closed it to save money and stuff. And the barracks where I went for basic is now part of the Alabama National Guard. The other sections at Fort McClellan they're trying to sell.

Now, Fort McClellan also is next to Anniston, Alabama, to which you have a company called Monsanto [American multinational agrochemical and agricultural biotechnology corporation]. They dump PCBs [polychlorinated biphenyl] in the water. We drank the water. But I know that they have been trying to sell parts of Fort McClellan to people. In fact, when I was working for the post office, one of my friends told me that their—his parents had found out about a retirement community that was being set up on a military installation, and I said, "Great. Which one?"

He said, "Fort McClellan."

And I said, "Are you crazy? That's where the Chemical Corps was."

They had radioactive burial grounds that they forgot all about that they'd had since 1958. I mean, it's come to the point where Fort McClellan is about 80% of my life lately because the guys are sick. Some of us, I think we built up an immunity where we have problems but it's not as bad as others; probably due to the genetics; I don't know science that much to—

In fact, we did a film called *Toxic Service* [*: The Soldiers Story*] because of Fort McClellan, those[?] how they are. You go back there and it's the saddest place. When you see the National Guard sites, yeah, they changed the buildings a little and this and that, but it was still Fort McClellan. You go to the side where it's the civilians—the Chemical Corps building—only twenty years old, they abandoned it. It's asbestos, it's this, it's that. They've chained it up. Once in a while they'll kill all the weeds, the plants and all, to keep the foliage down. But it's—what did they call those buildings with the MP [military police]—the MP School was there also. I think they call it the Stargate or something like that.

See, I went there in 2014 when we did our documentary, and I cried. It was terrible. You remember when you were in basic and they made you cut the grass with a pair of scissors. Everything had to be neat, perfect and all, and now you see the same place in ruins twenty, thirty years later. And it just drives—it's just a waste. I mean, if you're going to close the place down, at least maintain the buildings.

KH: And so, since the Women's Army Corps—the WACs—was there—

CK: The WACs.

KH: —would you say that the chemical exposure impacted—

CK: Them, too.

KH: —disproportionately more women as a result of so many women being stationed there?

CK: I forgot when the Women's Army Corps was there. I think it was 1945 [correction: 1952], is when they were placed there. Anniston has been polluting the area with PCBs since—they started making PCBs there in 1937. Monsanto discovered that they were destroying the environment in 1966, and they kept it quiet. There's two books about those incidences. But yes, the Women's Army Corps, they are all exposed to toxins.

KH: All of them during that time period?

CK: All that time. I mean, back then they had a place called [unclear] Village, which I think was the chem school if I'm not—My history is not that great. But there was a gal I met, I think it was in 2003, her name was Irish, and she was a captain at Tiger Village [a mock Vietnamese village], and she was the one who was telling me that—if you have this problem, you have this problem—when do you realize that you went into menopause and stuff, and I'd go, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah."

And she says, "You were exposed to chemicals." Mustard gas, [unclear]; there was a list somewhere of the components.

KH: Okay. That's a lot of women exposed. Do you have a sense of how many people over the years?

CK: I really don't know how many. I mean, to find out that some women veterans actually live up to age one hundred surprises me if they were from the army, unless they didn't show up at Fort McClellan.

KH: Have you stayed in touch with other people that you were in basic with?

CK: None. None. I don't know if we went our separate ways, I just knew that when I got up to Fort Knox, they had me do a training thing, and I was supposed to be the augmentee and I didn't know how to do it because no one took the time to show me how to do it. They just kept me at the barracks to clean the weaponry, paint this, do that; do your mosquito[?] surveys. But they never actually had me go beyond a certain point of what I was able to do. [unclear] send you off and check to make sure the x-ray devices were working, but really not into—because I was an enlisted person—private first class, nothing—So when they sent me to Fort McCoy, these people are getting on me that I had to do this, this, this, and I didn't know what to do. And they were getting me for dereliction of duty, and at that point it was like, "Uh huh. I think it's time for me to leave." So when my enlistment ended, I left so damn fast I don't even think I had my paperwork in with me.

KH: To move us forward, then, because we're already in Fort Knox [Kentucky].

CK: [chuckles]

KH: Anything that you wanted to mention or talk about regarding your AIT time?

[note for BAK: is CK at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, now? The timeline is very confusing]

CK: AT was some—I'll have to say that's the most entertaining time I had. I mean, going out and looking for arthropods—bugs—it's—in fact, I caught a tarantula and I kept it as a pet; memory of that. Like I said, I do remember having good times with the guys and all. I knew there was some problems. I think it was more because I was from the north than anything else. I remember we all went out to—we went searching for the Alamo—down the Alamo—took a while. There is some kind of a boardwalk there, and I forgot what they called it, but you'd be—they were just building it, and you'd be able to go on these little paddle boats, and you could paddle up and down the river—I can't remember what they called it. That was great. Mexican food, outrageous down there.

But most of the time I was always studying; do stuff to pass the courses. I think I only passed the entomology [the study of insects] section because I had the hands-on first. I had a sergeant that realized I was having difficulties keeping up with what was going on, and after class he would call—have classes for us who weren't catching on because he wanted us to pass. I mean, of the group, I was the lowest score person, but I made it. While others quit. I think there was something like thirty of us that passed and I was at the bottom of my class. I just look and I go, "But I did it." [chuckles]

KH: And that was for the Bio Environmentalist Specialist training.

CK: Yes.

KH: Alright, so you passed, you got your training, and you went to Fort Knox. What was it like to be a Bio Environmental Specialist in practice?

CK: Actually, the first week was, "Oh, my God, we're doing stuff," because that's when the [Mariel] boatlift happened.

[The Mariel boatlift was a mass emigration of Cubans, who traveled from Cuba's Mariel Harbor to the U.S. between 15 April and 31 October 1980]

KH: This is starting when you were at Fort Knox? Okay.

CK: Once I was done, I was there one week and I was told [to] get my gear together, "You're going to [Fort] Indiantown Gap [Pennsylvania]." And I couldn't drive the military vehicles because we didn't go through training on how to drive the pickup trucks, but I had to sit with the guy who was driving, and because of my gift of gab I kept the guy awake. But we did a convoy driving all the way to Indiantown Gap. They said that I hope that my knowledge would be useful for them.

Indiantown Gap is an old World War II base. Everything is made out of wood. The hospital had separate buildings, which was individual wards, and then you had a tunnel to connect everything. And I biggest fear you had was fire, because if you caught one building on fire, by the time the ambulance and the fire department comes, three

more building were already been burnt down and two were in flames; it was that hazardous.

What I found interesting was they sent me to one building to get my equipment, to which the dental chair that I had to pick up was nothing more than a secretary chair with a headrest on it, and that was your dental chair. All the equipment was from World War II. They had all the beds made up and they put, like, a rubber tarp on top of it, so all you had to do was pull off the tarp and then you're ready for whatever crisis was going on.

I read the graffiti. There was one building that was full of graffiti from World War II and I—just—you're kind of like in a time tunnel—time machine; you're seeing what people thought back then and stuff. In one room I found a thermometer that was in a case, and I looked and go, "Uh huh. Mine." And I still have it.

KH: This was the Mariel boatlift from '83. What happened when people actually started showing up from Cuba?

CK: There was usually about seventy-five people that showed up a day, sometimes more, and they would have to go see the doctors, and then seeing the dentist; getting all the baseline physicals and stuff. And then they would find a place to let them stay in one of the old barracks, which was, again, the old World War II barracks. And it was my job to make sure that everything was clean. We had problems with the plumbing because the plumbing was outdated, so they had to redo some of the plumbing in the buildings. Trying to get a bunch of people to live in barracks is hard enough. I think the guys did have it halfway decent. They had one section that was for women and children.

I remember there was an argument between some ladies, and they were picking a fight with one of the girls, and I said, "Well, why don't you give her the spare room that has the separate bathroom and you guys can have the rest of the place, if this is a conflict."

In fact, the—I remember they told me that—"Be careful what you say because they may speak Cuban but they do speak English. So don't act like they don't know what you're saying because chances are they probably do know."

But it was seventy-five people a day. They were given clothes, because they generally didn't have anything. We had to find out if the children belonged to a couple or if the children are there by themselves and they just tagged along with a family, because then the family got extra because they had the kid. And then when you got to where we were the kid was an individual and they didn't want anything to do with them. I had one or two kids that were really sick. One kid had cancer; I know he didn't live long which was really—Another woman I met, she bit the scar—she had a tattoo on her hand that she said—that said—she said it said "Mom" and mom didn't come so she bit the tattoo off, and what I was told later, what really happened, was that they tattooed a number on her while she was in prison, and she didn't want us to know about it so she bit it off.

KH: How long did that go on for; seventy-five people a day?

CK: Seventy-five people a day, that went for about two months. And, like I said, just trying to explain the American culture, alone, was hard because I had to tell them that they're not supposed to dump toilet paper in the garbage can; you flush it down the toilet. And

somehow there was a confusion and they started stuffing the toilet paper in the urinals. So we had to fix that and had to get a translator to explain to them how toilet paper works.

They ate good meals, I'll tell you that. They had steak. Then we had problems because they weren't accustomed to eating rich food, so we had—they had to do changes on that. I remember was guy was hiring the Cubans to do the grunt work; taking the garbage out, doing the dishes and stuff. And I caught the guy with his tag—because everyone had to have their own tags—and I caught the guy and I said, "Wait a minute. That's one of the client's—" I forgot the word that we called them. [chuckles] But he was not an American citizen working here, he was one of the people trying to help to get—And I do remember there was one guy who came and all he had was his dental degree from a United States college. [unclear] coming here and his life's going to be good and stuff.

We had our riots. There was a bishop, I believe, that was supposed to come, and he was only allowed into one section, and everyone decided they wanted to have a riot because he was not going to be for everybody but only in this one area. And the commander then said, "You're going to have a riot? You have two hours, commence your riot."

And—Well, because there was a shortage of barracks, the women officers were in the same barracks as the enlisted, so. In a way it was good and in a way it was bad. And we were told we had to stay there. Two girls had weapons, the rest of us had brooms and sticks, and if anybody came in, God help them. But they didn't have—they had a riot but it wasn't as bad—well, they told us it wasn't that bad; I never checked on it. But there was a lot of rioting going on. And then I think once they got where things were settling down, then they sent us back to Fort Knox.

KH: And so, was else did your position—your MOS—at Fort Knox entail, in a regular way?

CK: Regularly it was—Well, the main one was I would go and inspect the dining halls. Fort Knox back then, the dining halls were old, so you had to take into consideration that some things can't be done because the buildings are old. Did mosquito surveys. That was—Entomology was my specialty, so. And just keeping up on records on what was in certain buildings. Believe it or not, Wite-Out [correction fluid] is a hazardous material and has to be identified and recorded.

KH: You did that for—what?—three years total?

CK: Three years total.

KH: How was that time for you? What was that like for you overall?

CK: I would say I felt—I knew there were problems, especially when it came with the guys. And yes, I was assaulted. I don't talk about that much. But that was the first time I felt like I had a purpose. I was alive. I was doing stuff. I understood the basics of how things ran; the chain of command and this and that. If I need this, if I need that, I knew how to do it. And it was—I would say it was the best time.

Like I said, back then there was problems with harassments and stuff, but that was all over the place too.

KH: Beyond the military, you're saying?

CK: Beyond the military back then, yeah. The stigmatism that a woman soldier was either a whore or a lesbian was very common back then.

KH: How did that play out?

CK: With me?

KH: With you, or with other people you knew in your unit.

CK: Most of us laugh about it. I do remember one time I was in the NCO [Non-commissioned Officer] Club and a guy wanted to date me—no, wanted me to hang out with him and stuff. I wanted nothing to do with him because he was an idiot. And he went and said, "Are you a lesbian?" And that was something you didn't want to bring out because just someone thinking that you could be a lesbian would mean a dishonorable discharge and kicked out of the service. Fortunately, a friend from my unit came to my rescue and got me out of the building. I never went to the NCO Club ever again, unless I was with a bunch of girls, and then we had the bouncer [type of security guard] make sure that no one came near us.

I did have one incident where an officer had asked me to—because I was one of the few people that had a car—I had a pickup truck—and he had me drive him home, and at that time I didn't realize that this problem existed about—And the guy told me to stay in the living room and wait, and he went in the back, and the next thing I know he's taking a shower. And I looked and I said, "New York instinct," beep, beep, beep, beep, beep. I got up, I went out the door, closed it, got in my car, and I drove like a bat out of hell back to barracks.

Then later on, the head female—which we called "Mom"—she was the one who had been there, she was the one who keeps track of us and stuff—she came and she says, "Nobody warned you about him, did they?"

I go, "What do you mean?"

She says, "Okay. These are the four guys you've got to watch out for. You don't want this person, this person, this person. You don't ever want to be with him alone because you will be assaulted. They'll manipulate you, they'll—" but generally, those were the ones to watch out for.

And when I became "Mom," I was the one that made sure that the gals knew who to watch out for.

KH: And there were always those people to watch out for?

CK: Yes. I mean, with one particular guy, if a girl got into trouble, she was supposed to call up the CQ and they would get someone to get her out of jail or whatever. Well, you

called "Mom" and "Mom" came and got you, because if we didn't you [unclear] with this guy. So it was just a way to watch your back.

KH: I've never heard of the idea of having a "Mom," in that sense, before.

CK: The "Mom" was the ones who—she knew everything that had to do with the barracks. She usually was, like, the highest ranked person in the building, or the longest person there.

KH: And that became you at some point?

CK: Yes.

KH: What was that like?

CK: I didn't like it at all. [chuckles] I mean, I was not very sociable, to start off with. I mean, we had a case where a gal was pregnant, and she asked everybody what do they think, and they told her, "Get an abortion. You know what's going to happen. Get an abortion. Get an abortion."

And then finally [unclear], "Well, she'll never ask me. I don't fit in her group of people."

And then finally she actually did show up at my door, and she asked me, "What should I do?"

And I said, "Well, you have a couple of choices. You can either have the abortion or you can go to the full term pregnancy and put the kid up for adoption, or you can have the kid and go home."

And from what I—When she had the child, I was leaving Fort Knox—that was the end of my enlistment—and I found out that she did keep the child. In fact, her mother was thrilled that she kept the child. And to be truthfully honest, the only reason why I told her that stuff was because she already had her answer. She knew she wasn't going to kill the baby; to put it point blank. She wanted that child more than anything else. But the military didn't want her to have that child, so. Unfortunately, there was [unclear] later, because now you've got to go through the problem she has a child, and women were not supposed to have children when you're in the lower ranks, unless you have the husband to take care of them and stuff. I'm quite curious to find out what happened—now it's thirty-seven years later—what happened to her son; what did he turn out to be? And I'll never know.

KH: And those were kind of your final days at Fort Knox.

CK: At Fort Knox.

KH: Do you want to talk about any of what came after?

CK: The 320th—

KH: Yeah, and that's when you left the army, right?

CK: When I left the army, I felt lost, because the civilian world is a different world, compared to what the military was. I did get suicidal. I did plan to jump off the Tappan Zee Bridge [New York] at one point, and the only reason why I didn't was because I had a German Shepard dog that I brought home with me from the service, and he wouldn't get out of the car. And that's the only reason, I think, why I'm still alive today.

KH: Why did you feel so lost?

CK: When I was in the military, I had rank, I had status. It wasn't much to others but it was a big thing to me. And when you get out, people look at you differently; the stigmatism of female soldier means gay, lesbian, whore. I didn't have a job. My plan was I was going to work in my father's business. Well, my father does not believe a woman should work in painting. So then what do I do, because no one told me what —what do you do once you get out. I could not get a job in my field because it required a degree; I didn't have a degree.

So I got a summer job working for the county, but—working for an ice cream store, Tom Carvel; I'll never do that again. But I would just—The rhythm was gone and I just was so, "What do I do? What do I do? And how do I do it?"

Then I thought maybe my problem is because I need the military, so I decided, "Let me go back part time."

The 320th was on Canal Street in New York. I can get there by subway. And generally, "Why do you have a field unit in the middle of a concrete city?"

So for, like, one year I was trying to find someplace where I fit, and it wasn't in the 320th. Then they told me the 320th is being transferred to [Newburgh] New York, up at Stewart [Air National Guard Base], and that the unit up there, because it's a garrison hospital, it's coming down to New York [City]. So I figured, "Well, I can try New York. I'll go up there and—I got a car now so I'll go up there."

At that point, I got a job working for the post office, and I had met a veteran in Connecticut that was helping me because the New York guys gave me the biggest runaround, to where I just realized I could never go back to New York [unclear]. But the guy—[Patrick Walton?]—helped me get my benefits and stuff in Connecticut. Anyway, back to—

KH: Well, I'll come back to that. In terms of the period of time, the transition out of the military—because you had an assault experience when you were back at Fort Knox, right?

CK: Yes.

KH: Did that have an impact in any of that?

CK: Does it impact my life, the assault, yes, it still does. I mean, I am not married. Why am I not married? Because I don't trust men. I still don't—I'll sit, I'll talk to you, but if you talk a date, forget it, move on, go away. And that's kind of sad, because now here I am all

alone. Plus, I'm always worried about what happened at Fort McClellan. Well, that would mean I would [unclear] kids, and I think that's—when I was twenty-six years old I realized that I am my own Prince Charming and I have to take care of myself.

But with the 320th, when it got—they went up to Stewart, New York, and I thought, "Oh, I have a better chance of learning their stuff and all," and it was about the same. I really didn't do much, couldn't find—And then I looked over across the street and I saw the 105th [Airlift Wing]. I go, "Hmmm. They're doing stuff over there. They're actually having patients. I may fit over there."

So when my enlistment ended, I switched over to Stewart. Met many friends. A lot of people tolerated me very well over there, and I just felt like I belonged.

KH: Was this the Air National Guard at this point?

CK: The Air National Guard, same base. And I stayed with them for eleven years. At one point, I had a problem with the 105th where a guy exposed himself, and I filed a complaint because my friends told me, "File a complaint. File a complaint."

And I looked at them and I go, "Are you freaking crazy?

"What do you mean? He exposed himself to you. You should do something about this."

And I said, "If I do that, my military career will end."

KH: Why would it have ended?

CK: There was just the harassment that I've seen in the army; if a woman filed a thing, first thing they'll do is they will have her arrested for having a non-marital affair. So it's the woman's fault no matter what. She could be drunk and passed out; if she was raped by a guy, it's her fault for being it; that was the mentality back then. Was it the clothes she was wearing? I mean, one gal, she was wearing fatigues. How it could be sexy in fatigues is beyond me, because it's always baggy.

But you would be harassed by the sergeant, you would be harassed by all his friends, and your career generally ends; they'll find something to get rid of you.

In my case, my commander found out that I was on antidepressants, and he had told me straight up the reason why I'm being kicked out of the National Guard was because I was on Prozac.

KH: You were discharged on a basis of the pill that you were on, so you got a medical discharge.

CK: I got a medical—My final one was a medical discharge, and he told me that it was based on the fact that I was on Prozac, and they found out about it because I was in a training and I was dehydrated, and when you're dehydrated you say stupid things.

KH: You did not mean to leave the military?

CK: I did not plan to leave. I had three more years, and I could have gotten a pension, and this and that, and I could have actually said that I finished something. But he just said, "You can't go to Iraq on Prozac."

KH: What year was that?

CK: I believe that was either '76 or—not '76, try again [chuckles]—'96 or '97.

KH: So this was the Gulf War?

CK: I was in the National Guard during Desert Storm. I don't consider myself a Desert Storm vet because I wasn't activated during that time period, and drill weekends don't count. [chuckles]

KH: The medical discharge, how did you feel about that designation?

CK: I didn't mind being kicked out for a medical problem. I was upset that they were kicking me out.

KH: Period.

CK: My friends were there, everybody I knew was there; I felt safe. It was like I had a life, I meant something; that adrenal of making a difference was there; and they took it away from me.

KH: Do you think that there was any other reason besides the medical one; that they had reason to want to discharge you?

CK: Well, to be truthfully honest, based on my commander at that time, I would have to say in his case, because he had a reputation of kicking—[unclear] if you're overweight, you either lose the weight or we'll kick you out. He had that type of mentality. And I do believe he kicked me out because I was on Prozac. [unclear] sexual harassment. I'm quite sure it was because I was on Prozac.

KH: What about the time that you were there made you feel like you belonged? What were the kinds of experiences that you had?

CK: I would say the one of Alaska, we went—there was fishing that we did. I don't fish too well.

KH: Right. You were in Alaska at the Elmendorf Air Force Base.

CK: Yes. Generally, they sent us there—oh, God, I wish I could remember all this stuff—but I do remember my commander had a thing for fishing; they loved to fish. I know we had to get a rental car, and a bunch of us got together to get a rental car, and we went—after we did our jobs in the hospital and clinic and stuff, then we went off exploring. It's

something to see a blue iceberg. Mt. McKinley [renamed Denali in August 2015] was foggy that time, August, so we didn't really get to see much. But it was just the idea of that—I'll never be in Alaska again.

The other place I think was more—was Honduras. First time I'd been to a place totally out of my element. In fact, I really got homesick.

KH: How long were you there?

CK: It was just the two weeks. Made a fool of myself. I said stuff that was offensive and all, because I didn't realize that it was offensive.

KH: What do you mean?

CK: Oh, I made a comment that eating a certain meal tasted like dog [chuckles], which some found it offensive; I was trying to make a joke but I didn't realize that that was really poor taste. And I do—To this day, I do feel sorry that I actually offended people. I didn't realize I was being offensive to people.

But we went and we did inspections of the facilities. They took us—They picked three of us to go to the hospital, which was a four, five hour drive by bus, and they were talking about doing eye transplants, and we were there to pay attention and stuff. And it was fun because we got there and it was like, "Man, I've got to use a bathroom real bad. Where's the bathroom?" And we knew that if we flushed the toilet the whole hospital could hear it. Yeah, [I'm talking really—?] But once I went[?], then the gals followed.

I was there talking to people, finding out that for our little cli—our little hospital area, a certain child that needed medical care, they had to walk two days. Then they got on the bus and took the bus for a long period of time, to finally get to where we were, only to have worms removed out of his feet. And then you're done and it's like, "But he doesn't have shoes."

They dropped us off at certain villages, by helicopter, and it was just to do a baseline inventory of who was there—how many houses are there, how many people per hut—I guess it would be—what's the plumbing situation, how are the animals—we inoculated the animals, children were to be inoculated. And as I'm looking at how these—how the people were, it's like I can actually see when my grandfather says that America has gold in the streets, you just got to bend down and pick it up. Because I looked at these villages, I mean, they have one bedroom buildings and there's, like, eight, nine, ten people living in there. There may be an outhouse. School; for these kids to go to school, you must supply with paper, pen, and a piece of chalk for the teacher. These kids can't afford it.

I asked them one time, "How can you tell the wealthy kids from the poor kids?" Well, the kids that are wealthy have socks on their feet as well as shoes. Well, the poor kids, if they're lucky they have shoes. And it was an eye-opener.

KH: Sounds like it really affected your perspective on things.

CK: It woke me up. But the artisan work. They took me to—I think it was [Montana Verge?], was the village, and we walked past the chapel and I saw—it was a statue of the Virgin

Mary holding Christ at the Crucifixion, and I could swear, you look at that statue and you could see her looking right at you; it was so realistic, I couldn't believe it. Beautiful artwork, amazed at the people.

The only thing that I was shocked to find out, because there was a young girl that was following me around, and when they were showing the guys the helicopter I asked her if she wanted to come along, and the translation was, it's not my place to be there, it's the men's world, and that kind of bothered me. But yeah, Honduras was my first real awakening of how the real world works.

KH: How did that affect the rest of your time in the Guard?

CK: In the Guard? I wanted to go back, because I just—again, it was just I went somewhere, we did something; it was purposeful. I knew they were planning another trip to Honduras. Unfortunately, that's when they found out that I was on Prozac, and they decided that I can't go.

KH: Did you retain your MOS throughout your reserve time?

CK: Same job.

KH: Okay.

CK: I had to take—I think I took an exam to catch up with the air force side of it. I don't even know what they call it in the air force. But it was the same job. And when I wasn't being a health inspector, I was the general—I think the one gal used to call me a mule because I could lift heavy things at the time, and all you need is to call me; I can lift; I can move; I can fill in whatever spot there was. I don't know what I'm doing, but I could fill a spot for you.

KH: Did you maintain your rank after you left the first time?

CK: I maintained my rank, and when I left the National Guard I was a staff sergeant. In fact, I remember I actually took the officer's exam.

KH: Oh, really?

CK: Just to see if I could do it. And I failed it by two points. I remember the gal that—I was waiting in line for the meal—chow line—and a girl came up and she blared it right out for everybody, "You failed the test by two points." And I was so beside myself, because you humiliated me in front of people that I really respect and liked and all.

My commander actually called me in to the office and he apologized; he goes, "It's my place to have told you that you didn't pass." He goes, "But look how high your score was."

I said, "Sir, this was the only time that I'm going to be able to take this test because I'm—the age limit's coming up."

KH: Oh, I see.

CK: "And two points is still two points. I failed." Besides, could I see myself as an officer? I would have—I think I would have liked it.

KH: So you wouldn't have been able to retest even if you had wanted to?

CK: I probably could have retested it. I could have tried to squeeze it in, but at that point is when they found out that I was on antidepressants, and they were pushing me; they were giving me the choice of either—you can stay in the service or you leave or—in fact, they were telling me that I could transfer back into the army at one point, and I couldn't see myself back in the army. Like I said, the 105th was the best place to be in, and I just couldn't—I knew everybody, I knew where to go. I knew there were issues outside. I can tell you, they had a thing for sexual harassment—

KH: [unclear]

CK: Yeah, why not? The commander of the base decided that he was going to have the women come in groups based on rank, and tell these people that are representatives of something to speak out about any problems that they had with sexual harassment. So officers went in first, they started talking and stuff. When they got to my group, I kind of didn't want to say anything, and noticed it was quiet and everything so that kind of like tells me, "Well, I should say something, because once I open my big mouth everyone else will talk." And I told them a story where the barracks—I came back from the barracks and I went in the women's room and there were two guys sitting in the women's bathroom. And I said—And there was a girl in the shower, she was wrapped in a towel, and she was trying to get them to leave. And I said to the gentlemen, "Would you please leave before I call the MPs?"

And the girl told me, "They are the MPs."

And I said, "Well, I think you guys should leave."

And they got up and they left, and she got out and she says, "Don't tell anyone. Don't tell anyone. You know what happens. Don't say anything."

So I told anyway. And then once I opened my mouth, everyone else spoke about what problems they had, and that's when the commander found out how bad the sexual harassment was really going on. Because no one talks about it.

KH: This was in the nineties?

CK: This was in the nineties. The other one that we had was—well, different type of incident but—I used to inspect the dining hall, and when I first started there we were using an old World War II building for chow hall, and I noticed that there was something wrong with the arch, where the one beam was, was cracked, and I noticed that the crack was getting bigger on the ceiling. And I was thinking, I'm going, "Either there's a problem with the roof or there's something wrong with the foundation, I don't know what." So I put a little note on the bottom to recommend that the Army Corps of Engineers inspect the building for structural—and at that time they—

KH: [unclear]

CK: Yeah, why not. No one cared about what I said. I mean, I wrote, like, four or five—more than four or five reports with the same hint of, "Please check the building." And then one day an army guy fell through the floor.

KH: Was he okay?

CK: I never knew what happened with him. But I heard they fell, and I got upset because it's like I'd been telling them and telling them, and all they see me as Crazy Cindy, Crazy Cindy. And so, I sent up to the command—commander, I sent up two inspections that stated that I recommended about them checking for the foundation structure. Next thing I know, all my records were removed for that particular building. Then they all came back, and I never knew what happened afterwards.

KH: You said they called you "Crazy Cindy?"

CK: I was known as "Crazy Cindy." It slipped out a few times among my friends.

KH: Was it more a term of endearment or kind of a mix?

CK: I would say more that I was crazy to them. I do talk a lot; I don't shut up. I would say more of my learning disabilities and stuff is the basis of me being the way I am. Of course, at that time I didn't know it. Matter of fact, a lot of stuff I didn't find out until, I'd say, right before I got kicked out of the National Guard.

KH: But you still felt they were your friends and they accepted you?

CK: They were my friends, even though—and they usually won't say it to my face. They would say in a meeting, "Well, Crazy Cindy's able to do that." I overheard them say it, so.

KH: Are you still in touch with those folks?

CK: With the 105th, there are about four that I stay in contact with; three officers, and two enlisted people. Thank God for Facebook [social networking website].

KH: Yeah. When you left the military, this is basically the second time that you've have to go through a transition out, back into civilian life.

CK: Yeah.

KH: What was that like for you?

CK: I really didn't want to leave the 105th, but that was—I was upset and everything. Of course, the first winter storm that we had I was glad that I didn't have to drive to Stewart.

[chuckles] But the second time it's happened, I had a job. I was working for the post office, I had an income, I had a place to live that I was paying rent for, and I had status with the [United States] Postal Service at that time. Which is funny, because when I left the Postal Service I was relieved. [chuckles]

But the first time was because I didn't know where to go; I didn't know what's the next step. When I left the National Guard, I was already in a lifestyle.

KH: Right. So it was an easier transition, you're saying, than the first time, for sure.

CK: Yes.

KH: And so, did you just stay at that job, then? What'd you do from there?

CK: Well, I stayed with the post office till 2010—2011. What happened with the post office was my military past was catching up to me. I was getting pains in my arm. I have Degenerative Disc Disease [osteoarthritis of the spine], which I knew was acting up. I used to wear leg braces, but every time I wore my braces people said, "Well, you're just doing that to get attention." Postal workers are very—There's a whole thing on post office alone that I could write a book on.

But they tried to get me to retire ten years before I actually finally did, because I kept saying, "I'm a disabled person, but I have the right to be employed. When you guys hired me, you knew what you were getting. You wanted to fill the quota of a disabled veteran; a woman disabled veteran. You got me, you trained me."

I had issues about seeing things—the dyslexia—numbers backwards and stuff—but when I got my own route I was doing pretty well, but I wasn't doing it fast enough. They kept pushing for faster, faster. And then you go to the union and the union says, "Well, they're doing that to everybody."

To which my line was, "Well, when are you going to stop it? You're the union."

The last—I'd say the last three years—I used to keep a record of everything with the post office, and the post office decided to—"You're wasting our time. We're not paying you to write notes." So I started recording what was happening on the job, and I have about seven discs—seven little memory chips—of how I was treated and stuff at the post office.

KH: You felt you were being treated differently on the basis of what main factors?

CK: The fact that I'm slow.

KH: And that was related to a disability?

CK: I think I was always slow. I just never—I couldn't move as—well, service-wise, I mean, I know that if I walked too fast I'll fall. I hold the record for the most trips and falls in the Danbury area. And I don't know why I fall. I'll just be walking along and then all of a sudden it's like the legs stopped and I'm down.

KH: Where were you living at this point?

CK: I lived in Danbury at one point.

KH: Is that Connecticut?

CK: Connecticut, yes. Then I moved back to New York. Then my mom got sick with cancer so I stayed—I was in Connecticut and then I had to move back because my mom was sick. Then I had a car accident in [20]06 and believe it or not, when I had that accident I realized that my life was boring—when I worked for the post office—and I decided to stand up for myself. Which is another thing management doesn't like. You stand up for yourself and you have an answer for everything. I'm military, what did you expect? I have to know everything.

But when mom had cancer and I had the accident, and I had a hard time adjusting after that. In fact, I stayed in Yonkers, living with my parents, till my parents passed away; because they both ended up with cancer at the same time.

But the post office, it just—between trying to do the post office, taking care of mom and dad, and, I mean, they come at you with, "Why are you five minutes late coming back?"

"Well, I left five minutes late, therefore, I will come back five minutes late."

"Well, that's not an answer."

"Yes, it is."

I should give you those discs one of these days too.

KH: Sure.

CK: I was racking[?] mail, my back was killing me, then all of a sudden, I couldn't move my arm. And I realized that whatever happened to me in the military is going to get worse, so that's when I filed for disability retirement.

KH: And you're talking about what happened at Fort McClellan, in particular?

CK: I usually put it as Fort McClellan. I mean, Fort Knox; the worst thing I'd seen at Fort Knox was when they had a train derailment, and the chemicals on one of the cars burnt. Somewhere I have pictures of that too. But Fort Knox, they had their chemical training and everything else. You don't really know what's there. I mean, they have a—Fort Knox has the Disney Barracks. They built the Disney Barracks, then they found out they built the Disney Barracks on an old ammo dump. So they had to take down the Disney Barracks, clean up the area, and rebuild. At least, that's what they told me. But I do know that some of the stuff I'm experiencing, I do believe it is from Fort McClellan.

[The Fort Knox Disney Barracks complex is named for Major General Paul Disney, a World War II veteran and first commander of the Armor Training Center at Fort Knox]

KH: How was it to meet other people through the making of that documentary who have been through a similar experience with chronic illness?

CK: It was great. I mean, some, I've had personality conflicts with, but most of them, though, they were all nice people. It was worth doing the movie. I even told them before, "I don't want to do a 'would've, could've, should've.' I'm going to do it—" which is actually the first time since I ever did anything on a spur of the moment.

KH: And that was in 2012?

CK: Two thousand fourteen we did it.

KH: Okay. So not too long ago. Are you in touch with any of those people that you met?

CK: Some of them I am. It's kind of like we were all going our separate ways. We'll check each other once in a while on Facebook. One gal in Massachusetts I am in constant contact with; see how she's doing. In fact, we had a reunion 2015. She said she couldn't come down because she didn't have the money, and I said, "If you can get a train ticket to come down you can stay with me." And we drove through Fort McClellan. Somebody was able to get us on the National Guard side so we could see the Women's Army Corps chapel that's still there.

KH: Right, and you showed me some pictures from the chapel.

CK: The museum is—The military mus—The—Not the Women's Army Corps museum; I think they moved that to Virginia. The MP Museum was contaminated, I remember that, but I don't remember what the contaminant of[?]. Fort McClellan also had a POW [prisoner of war] camp for the Germans and Italians.

KH: World War II?

CK: World War II; that they stayed in. Those buildings are still there from what I hear.

KH: Oh, really?

CK: And nearby they had the dog training for the MPs, and I've heard stories where the dog's pads of their feet were burning because of the chemicals.

KH: Wow.

CK: They have so much info.

KH: I read a little bit just prepping for this interview—just a couple articles—and yeah, it sounds like it's a real toxic site. It's a superfund site, right?

[A Superfund site is any land in the United States that has been contaminated by hazardous waste and identified by the EPA as a candidate for cleanup because it poses a risk to human health and/or the environment. These sites are placed on the National Priorities List (NPL)]

CK: Superfund site. Which it saddens me, because when I was there, for before I realized there was any problems, I mean, it—the idea of doing challenges, get home, find out you passed this, you passed that, it's like, "Yeah, that's one more step, one more step." I didn't think I'd survive it. I really didn't think I'd make it.

And the best part was that now that—years later—if I didn't go, I wouldn't be the person I am. Yeah, I'm loud and everything else, but I wouldn't stand up for myself, and the army did teach me how to stand up for myself and say, "I ain't going to take your bullshit." And it taught me patience. [chuckles]

KH: So you would go back and do it again even though you—

CK: Preferably not basic training.

KH: [unclear] next few parts.

CK: There was structure, you knew what you were expected to be. Always learning, always do—what's the newest thing to do, what's up, and—there's something to say to have purpose. And then to know that you're one of the few people that did do it, it's like—was it—when I was in A[I]T, there was the Ayatollah Khomeini that was on an air base nearby where [Fort] Sam Houston [Texas] was, and they told us a few times that they may call us out to do guard duty if they're shorthanded. But just the fact that, "Here I am. I am part of history—" one of those nameless people that are in the background—but I was there. I was there when the Cubans came. I saw their struggles. I witnessed all this stuff. You're not going to see that on the civilian side.

[Sayyid Ruhollah Mūsavi Khomeini, known in the Western World as Ayatollah Khomeini, was an Iranian Shia Muslim religious leader, revolutionary, and politician. He was the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution]

KH: What would you want civilians to know about what it was like for you in the military?

CK: That's hard to say, because unless you—I often ask my brother, "How's it feel to be a father?" Now, everyone could tell you [unclear], but if you're a parent you know the hardships, the joys, but you can't explain it to me because I don't have children. And I think it's the same with military. I can't explain to you the good, the bad, and everything with the military because you don't have an idea, you never experienced it. I've met the

wannabes. I had a supervisor that loved anything to do with aircraft; he takes pictures; total wannabe. Well, unless he actually sat in the cockpit and flew it he'll never know.

KH: Did you fly planes?

CK: No.

KH: But you were in planes.

CK: The 105th New York Air National Guard is home of the C-5 Galaxies, which is the largest aircraft in the free world. I mean, you could put buses on those—on the aircraft. For me to inspect an aircraft like that, besides the cargo bay. Then you had to go upstairs where the crew stayed, inspect that. Then you had to go back down into the main cargo area, go to the front of the plane, go upstairs, and that's where the troops stayed when they were going to transport them.

KH: What were you inspecting for exactly?

CK: When you're checking aircraft, it's usually rodents. [chuckles] Is there any signs of an infestation? You don't want to bring back something from overseas. Checking the cleanliness of the place; is there any food left behind from previous flights. C-5 Galaxy.

KH: Are you looking at the picture?

CK: Yeah. The first thing you would say is, "How does this puppy get off the ground?" That's a blurred picture of it, but that's—

KH: Wow, that's huge. Wow.

CK: You could put a helicopter in—

KH: Yeah, you could put many other planes inside that plane.

CK: How can I explain a C-5 Galaxy to civilians?

KH: Right.

CK: Other than how the hell does it get off the ground?

KH: Okay. So you left, for the second time; you were medically discharged.

CK: Yes.

KH: You did not receive a pension. Has the military supported you since you've, or have you been relying on civilian benefits and that kind of stuff?

CK: I've been relying on civilian benefits. In fact, I took—what do they call it?—they call it "buy back." I bought back my military time in order for me to have three more years to my postal pension.

[The Military Buyback Program is a benefit for all veterans with active duty military service time to receive credit for their military service time to be added to their years of civil service with the government and increases their retirement annuity]

KH: I've not heard of that.

CK: Yeah. Generally what it is, is they—when you get to work for the federal government, you have the opportunity to buy back your time. The only problem is you should do it in the beginning because they add interest as time goes on. So if I paid it in the beginning, I only would have paid six hundred dollars instead of the two thousand, one hundred dollars that I paid to buy back my military time. But it adds my three years into my postal retirement.

KH: Your medical discharge did not qualify you for any VA benefits?

CK: Well, that's what—I mean, my one officer, he was able to help me get an increase in disability, because of my being kicked out on Prozac. When did I have the—Somebody had wrote me a letter, and when I got kicked out of the National Guard I was so beyond myself I literally threw stuff away, which I wish I didn't. But my mother, being the meticulous person who has to put everything in files, I've kept some of the paperwork and I found out that I do have some kind of a retirement, but I never figured it out—how to do it—and when I asked a friend—a fellow vet about it—he said, "Oh, you can go and get yourself an ID and you can go on military installations because you're retired, according to them." It's a medical discharge, so I should be able to get that. Right now, my disability rating is 80%; I can't figure out how to get that to 100[%]; one of these days.

KH: How did you end up in North Carolina?

CK: Oh, North Carolina. I have Raynaud's [syndrome], which is—I lose circulation in the wintertime, which was the biggest problem I had with the postal service, and my plans to retire was warmth, where I don't have to worry about freezing. Florida has alligators, by the way. [chuckles]

[Raynaud's syndrome is a medical condition in which spasm of arteries cause episodes of reduced blood flow]

But my uncle, that I showed you a picture of, he liked it down here, and he said the winters are pretty mild, and if it snows, all they do is close up the sidewalks. Stay in the house, you're fine. So it was warm enough, it has the seasons. The reason why I picked this particular area is, believe it or not, is that the—Durham is known as the City of Medicine, and I figured whatever problems that I got sick from the military, my answers would be here; this would be the first place that would come up with an answer why I have this problem, why I have this medical problem. You've got three or four medical universities here. Somebody would know something. And I figured if anything that would be the best place for me to get medical care. Hence, here I am.

KH: When did you move?

CK: I moved down here—Well, I officially came down here the fifth of February 2011—2013. My mom had passed away. I stayed for the memorial stuff. And when everything was done I threw everything in a trailer and I moved down here. I already bought the house. It was just pack up and go.

KH: Wow.

CK: My mother laughed about it because she found out I bought a house, she goes, "A daughter of mine bought a house." I guess it was unthinkable back then that I could own something and I could—just as equal as the guys.

KH: Yeah. And you said, too, that she grew up pretty poor.

CK: She grew up poor. I mean, I've seen pictures of my mom; she was a hot, hot lady. How could she—But she loved my father to no end. [unclear] we laugh about it because when my mother first met my father, my father said, "I was going to marry you."

And my mother said, "I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth."

KH: [chuckles]

CK: They were on the boat ride—what did they call that boat ride across the Hudson [River]?

KH: The ferry?

CK: Yeah, the ferry.

KH: Staten Island Ferry?

CK: No. It just went around the Hudson River, and I can't think of the name of it. That's awful, because a New Yorker not knowing—Oh, Circle Line [now named Circle Line Sightseeing Cruises].

KH: Oh, okay.

CK: And it used to stop in Yonkers, and that's when my father met my mother.

KH: On the boat.

CK: They was coming off the boat. She was on a class trip, I believe, or—yeah, she was on a class trip at the time. A lot of stories with them.

KH: That's sweet. Well, before we go start looking at some of the photos and stuff, is there anything else you wanted to say about your time in the military that we didn't cover, or just something overall that you'd like people to know?

CK: I think my gabbing has been—it kind of says it all, I hope.

KH: You've said it all. Okay, well, let's go look through a few photos, and I'll take some notes. And then I might take a few pictures of anything that I think we can try to get scanned in the future.

[End of Interview; 1:38:15]

[CK and KH look at pictures for remainder of recording]