WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Flora V. Taylor

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: January 15, 2012

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is January 15, 2012. This is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the home of Flo Taylor in Greensboro, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. Flo, if you can state your name the way you want it to be on your collection?

FT: Flora V. Taylor.

TS: Okay. Well, Flo, let's start out by having you tell me a little about when and where you were born?

FT: Memphis, Tennessee, 1964.

TS: Nineteen sixty-four?

FT: Yep.

TS: And are you—do you have any siblings?

FT: No siblings.

TS: You're an only child?

FT: Yes.

TS: So, did your—your mom and dad, father or—who did you grow up with?

FT: My mom some, my dad some, my grandfather.

TS: Yes. And did you grow up in Memphis?

FT: Yes.

TS: What was that like?

FT: It was rough.

TS: Was it?

FT: Yeah, I came from a really rough neighborhood. So, yeah. It was—it was rough.

TS: Huh, did you have some—did you—did you get to have some fun—did you do any fun things? Like did you play games or anything like that?

FT: Yes, I did. You know, I skated—

TS: Skated?

FT: Played basketball.

TS: What kind of skating?

FT: You know the old metal skates?

TS: Yes.

FT: You know, just put your foot in them. Yes.

TS: Roller skates?

FT: Roller skates, yes.

TS: Okay.

FT: Did a lot of that, and biking, and playing basketball.

TS: Lot of basketball?

FT: Yes.

TS: Were you an athletic girl?

FT: Yes, I was.

TS: Did you have cousins or anything to play with?

FT: Yes, but they didn't live near me. They lived like on the other side of town, so, I saw them sometimes on the weekends.

TS: Yeah?

FT: Yes, yes.

TS: Now, do you remember—do you have any memorable moments about growing up in Memphis?

FT: Not good ones. [chuckles]

TS: No? Okay. Well did you—did you go to a local school? Did you walk? Or take a bus or anything like that?

FT: Well, I would—I went to Catholic school for a little while, then I went to public school. I rode the bus, you know, I was bussed at one time. Then I rode the city bus to high school. I went to a rough high school.

TS: Yes?

FT: And, yeah. It was—it was tough.

TS: Tough neighborhood, tough time.

FT: Tough high school, yes.

TS: Did you like your classes or anything?

FT: Not really. I mean—but I was smart, so, you know, it wasn't a challenge for me—

TS: Right.

FT: —but it was challenging to stay out of trouble. [chuckles]

TS: Was it?

FT: Yes.

TS: What a–what did your folks do for a living? I know we talked a little bit about your grandfather.

FT: Oh, he owned a construction company. So, my mother really didn't work, and I really don't know what my father did.

TS: Yes?

FT: Yes. [chuckles]

TS: Well, you're showing me that picture of your house, that nice brick house.

FT: Yes, that's because, you know, my grandfather was a construction owner, and had resources, and you know, a construction owner's going to have a nice house most of the time, maybe not a construction worker, but an owner.

TS: Right.

FT: Yes.

TS: Right. Well did you—so, growing up, did you have, like, any expectations for yourself as what, you know, you were going to do when you grew up or anything like that, or did anybody have expectations for you?

FT: Not really. You know my guidance counselors, like, people at school did, because like I said, I was smart in school and, you know, they were like, "Oh, let us give you a scholarship."

And I was like, "No," like they had insulted me or something, you know. [laughter]

TS: Why did—why'd you say that?

FT: I don't know why, I was like, I guess because that's what everybody was doing, going to college, and I was like, "I don't think I want to do that," you know. I didn't know what it was, but it just seemed like I wanted to be different from what everybody else was doing.

TS: So if they were offering you something, immediately you were like, "Ah, I don't think so."

FT: No. [chuckles]

TS: Well, were there classes that you did like? Even though you didn't necessarily like school so much, were there subjects that you enjoyed?

FT: No, not really.

TS: Not really? So, when you, when you got—when you're going through school—

FT: Yes.

TS: —when did you get this idea of going into the service?

FT: Well, first I tried school. I got a little motivated because I got the *Who's Who of American High School Students*. [Who's Who Among American High School Students]

TS: Oh, okay.

FT: They invited me to be in the—in this book, I mean, through my guidance counselor. And I was like, "Oh yeah sure," and so, I said, "Well, I'm going to give college a try, a little," you know, "when I graduate," so three semesters.

TS: Oh, okay. Where'd you go?

FT: State Tech in Memphis. [State Technical Institute at Memphis, Tennessee]

TS: How was that?

FT: And I was doing construction.

TS: Working in construction?

FT: No, that was my—

TS: That was your major?

FT: Yes. Construction Technology.

TS: Did you like it?

FT: Not really.

TS: No?

FT: Then, people were discouraging you in the eighties, like, women in construction. "All you're going to be doing is standing out there holding the signs." Slow, you know, "You're not really going to be doing anything important."

TS: Were you interested in it because of your grandfather?

FT: Yes, and plus, I wanted to build my own house like he had done. I said when I graduate from construction I can go on to architect. But, yes, I was discouraged a lot from doing that because they said women didn't really do good in construction. Especially back in the eighties, you know, the way things were.

TS: Were they pushing you towards any other subject?

FT: No, not really.

TS: No?

FT: No.

TS: So, what did you—what were you thinking about what you wanted to do then?

FT: I was thinking about—
[speaking simultaneously]
TS: Do you remember your thought process back then? How old were you then? Seventeen, eighteen?

FT: Eighteen, yes. I was thinking about getting away.

TS: Getting away?

FT: Getting away from Memphis, and how could I do that and be successful and not be in college. There's got to be a way.

TS: Okay.

FT: So, I said, "Oh, the military. That's probably—that's a good start anyway." At least, going to—try it part time and see how I liked it.

TS: Now, did any recruiters come to your high school or college or anything like that?

FT: No.

TS: No?

FT: No.

TS: Did you know anybody that had been in the military?

FT: My grandfather had, but it was, like, in fifties so he just stayed a little while.

TS: Like, his two year draft time?

FT: Yes, right. He never really talked about it. I just knew that he did.

TS: When did you decide to join the army reserve? How did that come about?

FT: I just—I really thought of it on my own. It was a way to test it out, to see if I liked it, and to, if I did, go active and I could get away. I wanted to get away from my environment, and school wasn't going to do that. When I went to the army, you know, it was a good experience. It really was. It was tough; it changed me.

TS: How did it change you?

FT: It made me really more focused and disciplined. I saw that there were other things, you know, going on besides in Memphis, which wasn't much good. It just gave me a different perspective.

TS: Were you in school then still or were you—

FT: No, I got out of school.

TS: Got out of school. Were you working?

FT: No.

TS: So, you were just doing the reserve. Was it—it was a weekend a month—

FT: Yes, one weekend a month, yes.

TS: You went to—you had told me that you had joined and what year was that? Eighty—

FT: Eighty-three.

TS: Eighty-three.

FT: December of '83, yes.

TS: And you went to boot camp in Fort Jackson [South Carolina]?

FT: April of '84, yes.

TS: Tell me about that experience. What was that like?

FT: It was tough, but—now remember, everything in my life was tough. So, it was just par for the course. But it really changed me because it was something that I wanted and this was going to be the start. This was going to be the great start that I needed, so I knew that I needed to do it no matter how, but it was tough.

TS: What—Was it mentally, physically, emotionally? Which way was it tough?

FT: It was mentally and physically. You know, it was hard. There's a lot of things; getting up at four-thirty in the morning, having watch during the night, you know, just so many things. Learning all the different things about weaponry and qualifying with guns and making sure you know how to set up a mine. It was just so many different things, and it was all timed and it just—I guess it just taught me to keep moving, keep going. There's always something you need to be doing and thinking about, until we, you know, at night at ten o'clock you went to sleep. But you've got to be thinking about what's next. You know, staying out of trouble, studying your studies.

TS: So, you saw it as kind of as a means to get somewhere else.

FT: Yes.

TS: Okay. What did you think about that training and that discipline that you're getting. What—Did you enjoy it or were you just, like, "Oh my gosh, let me just get through this."?

FT: No, I did. I appreciated what it did for me. I needed a change. I needed some direction. In a way I was like that because I had to be, you know, I was sort of my own guide and stuff like that.

TS: When you picked the army reserve did you look at any of the other services at that time?

FT: No, because I knew that it was downtown. I knew about it—I knew somebody that was in it.

TS: That had gone in the reserves?

FT: They were already in there. No, it was someone I knew through somebody else. So, it was convenient, you know?

TS: I see. And what did your family think about it when you said, "Hey, I'm going to go in the army reserves."?

FT: Well, they thought I shouldn't leave. Of course, what are you going to think; your only child leaves.

TS: Your mom wasn't all that thrilled about it?

FT: No.

TS: How about your grandfather?

FT: He had already died by then.

TS: Had he?

FT: Yes.

TS: So, you couldn't talk to him about it.

FT: No.

TS: What do you think he would have thought about it?

FT: He probably would have been glad that I was doing something constructive.

TS: Yeah. So, you're in Fort Jackson and then, now, did you have to pick a trade or did they choose a trade for you or something?

FT: Well, it's based upon your ASVAB [armed services vocational aptitude battery] scores. You've heard of the ASVAB test which military people take, sort of like a battery test. The higher you score the more selection of jobs you have available to you. You know what I mean? If you score high you have more selection. If you score low, you know, you don't have that much of a selection, and basically you can pick anything in between. You basically—It was up to you, and if you didn't do so well on the test you could go to this school and they would help you, prepare to take it again to qualify for more jobs.

TS: Okay. What kind of jobs did you qualify for? Anything that seemed interesting to you?

FT: Not at the time. People were trying to tell you in boot camp, you know, you would hear things about, "Oh, you don't want to take that because you're going to always be in the field," or, you know what I mean? They were trying to say comfort—get jobs where you won't have to be outside or out in the field. You know how people talk and things like that, so.

TS: When you went through the basic training, was that integrated men and women at that time or was it just women?

FT: No, it was separate. It was women separate from the men.

TS: Was it at that time?

FT: In the army.

TS: In the army.

FT: Yes. Not in the Coast Guard. [chuckles]

TS: Well, let's talk about that then. How did you come to join the Coast Guard, then?

FT: Advertisement and it looked like a lot of fun.

TS: Advertisement?

FT: Yes. And it was, like—after drilling in my reserve unit and cleaning weapons and, you know, nuclear, biological, backsack[?]. Getting all that ready I was like, "This is—This is just not for me." You know, just ready—preparing for war; get your backsack ready, get, you know, like, that's not what I want to do. I want to help people. I don't want to kill. That's not in me. Even though I knew a woman wouldn't be in combat. I want to be in something where I can help people. And when I saw a commercial on the Coast Guard, how they go rescue people at sea and I was like, "Oh yeah! And that's the service too, and look how cool that boat is!"

TS: Had you liked boating before then? Had you been on boats?

FT: I had seen boating, like, it was within walking distance of my neighborhood where they used to have these boat races and stuff like that. It looked fun.

TS: But you never got to do it?

FT: No. No.

TS: Oh, okay. So, what did you want to do? Did you go to a recruiter?

FT: Yes, I went to a recruiter and I told him I was in the army reserve and I wanted to join; I wanted to switch over to the Coast Guard, active, full time, you know, and just go.

TS: Right.

FT: He said, "Okay, Can you swim?"
I was like, "Yes."
He was like, "Okay." And so there I was signing up.

TS: Did you do it right away or did you think about it?

FT: No.
[speaking simultaneously]
TS: You walked right in—

FT: I took the ASVAB again because they have a different, you know, way I guess that they—

TS: Criteria?

FT: Because their jobs are different. You know what I mean?

TS: Right.

FT: Than from the army. Their jobs are different. There too, if you didn't score high, they would also let you take the ASVAB again once you got out of boot camp to get a better score and be available for more jobs.

TS: Did you take it again or did you take it just the first time?

FT: No. No. I just took it the first time.

TS: So then, what kind of jobs were you qualified for?

FT: You know, SK—they didn't have as many as the army.

TS: SK is the store keeper?

FT: Yes. Yeoman. I can't even remember all the jobs they had.

TS: Were they—Did women have less opportunities than men?

FT: Boatswain mates—No, they had the same. They had the same opportunities. They had women boatswain mates. They'd drive in the boats, MKs [machinery technicians], you know, working on the machinery, working on the engine and stuff like that. But I didn't want to drive—I didn't want to, really, be in charge of the boat. [chuckles]

TS: Okay. You didn't want to have that responsibility, or?

FT: It just seemed, you know, because you go straight to a unit—like in the army you go straight to school to learn your job. In the Coast Guard you go to a unit first and then you get placed on a list to go to the school you want to go to. Unless you picked a critical rating, like sonar tech or something, back then, then you could go to school right away. There was some critical jobs, but most of the time you had to get on a list and wait.

TS: Okay.

FT: So, you got to go in the field to see what people were doing, which is a great idea, to see "Oh, I don't want to do that," or "Yes, I want to do that." You know?

TS: It gave you more grounding and foundation for picking something that you might be more comfortable with?

FT: Yeah, instead of just reading something and saying, "Yes, that sounds good." [chuckles]

TS: What did you end up deciding you wanted to do?

FT: Well, I was an SK, and plus you had collateral duties. Then it was decided at the unit, "You're going to be an EMT as well, so we're sending you to EMT school," which was in Petaluma [California]. So I went to EMT school for, like, I forget. Maybe four weeks. So I could be—when the boats go out, you know, you've got the boat crew, you've got the boatswain mates, the MK that works on the boat. You've got the—

TS: What does MK stand for again?

FT: Machinery technician. They, you know, like the mechanic. They worked on the boat.

TS: Taking care of the engine and—

FT: The boatswain mate is driving the boat and telling people what to do; he's in charge. And then you've got the seamen, the deckhands like me with the lines and stuff. You know, pulling the people out of the water and pulling boats alongside, tying them to your boat, towing them, doing all that kind of stuff. Then if somebody was in a medical crisis, then you had an EMT on board.

TS: I see. Now, did you—did you have to go through boot camp again for the Coast Guard?

FT: Yes. Yes. April 1, 1985.

TS: How was that different from the army?

FT: It was so different because, see, the army, it was so tough. It tore you down, but then it builds you back up again. It really did. It got rid of—it just [exhales]—you can't explain it. You go to boot camp and they—you've got to get up a four-thirty in the morning. Somebody's screaming in your face all the time. You've got to make the decision about this, that. The bed's got to be [so] tight they can bounce a quarter off of it. You've got to have everything in your drawers, you know. No dust. You know, they're just acting out, and you know that nothing you can do is going to be right. Nothing.

TS: How did you handle that in the army? Was that—Did you get any demerits or were you, like—did you handle it pretty well?

FT: Yes, I did good 'cause I had this plan. When I left Memphis I had this plan, I've got to make it work. This is my chance right here.

TS: So, you had that motivation to make it work.

FT: Yes.

TS: Then, the Coast Guard was easier?

FT: Easier.

TS: In what way?

FT: Because all that screaming and all that, I was already used to that. Because it was, maybe, a year to the date that I had just went to boot camp. Not even a year, you know, less than a year I'm back in boot camp and it was, like, —And other people were there for the first time; any boot camp. It was, like—it was no comparison really.

TS: Did you have the same sort of intensity that you're getting yelled at?

FT: No, but see, once you've already had that it's like, I guess it would be like being in the Marine Corps and then going to Coast Guard. Oh okay, now what?

TS: So, it doesn't affect you in the same way? Even though they might have—be doing some of the similar things it's just not affecting you because you're prepared for it.

FT: Yes. And everything was, you know, basically the same. It was less intense, less time at the range, less people flipping out and quitting and going crazy.

TS: Did you have that happen in the army?

FT: Oh, yes. People dropping like flies.

TS: What kind if things would they do?

FT: They just couldn't take it, you know? The physical, you know, stress fractures. A lot of different things. It wasn't what they expected. It was—

TS: So, you saw a lot of people drop out in the army? Not so much in the Coast Guard?

FT: Some, but no, not so much.

TS: Now, what about the swimming? I've always heard that's a tough part of the Coast Guard.

FT: Well, they teach people. I mean, ideally you would come there swimming, knowing, but if not they would teach you. They would give you a week or whatever, and most people made it.

TS: Most people did?

FT: Yes.

TS: Did you enjoy it the second time at all?

FT: Boot camp?

TS: Yes.

FT: Yes. I did. I enjoyed it. Because I was like, "What's next? Where am I going?" I knew I was active, unlike in the army. But see, here's the thing, depending on how well you did also in boot camp is what you got to pick in order of where you go.

TS: Oh, okay.

FT: You know what I mean?

TS: Sure.

FT: I want to say I had either number one or number two pick and I chose Savannah, Georgia.

TS: Okay. Did you—Had you known what your job was going to be by then?

FT: No.

TS: This is where you went and observed, then?

FT: Yes. This is where you went to a station; small boat station.

TS: Why did you want to go to Savannah?

FT: Georgia? Because, I don't know, it was close.

TS: But still a distance.

FT: Yes.

TS: Tell me about that experience.

FT: Savannah, it was challenging because, you know, something new, different. There was a lot to do; qualify as a boat crew member, learn about the Coast Guard, picking up drowning people or people who have drowned. We had a drug bust. [chuckles]

TS: Oh yeah?

FT: Yes.

TS: Out on the water?

FT: Yes, Well, people were basically ditching their marijuana off the boat, and those drugs dealers, you know, they have lots of money and resources so their boat was—it outran our boat like that. But they were afraid of getting caught so they just started throwing stuff off the boat. We called in helo [helicopter] support, but by the time they came they were already gone.

TS: So you didn't catch them?

FT: No. And we would work some with DEA. A lot of people out, lost out at sea. People—

TS: What do you mean?

FT: You know, like, they don't know how to get back to where they came from.

TS: Oh, they got lost.

FT: Yes.

TS: Literally lost.

FT: Yes.

TS: You mean exactly that, ok.

FT: Wives calling in, husband went out fishing, never came back. All kind of stuff. Somebody ran out of gas, boats turned over. Because we were, I don't know if you've ever been to Savannah, but we were close to Hilton Head [Island, South Carolina], Harbor Town. Actually, my station sat right on the waterfront, and it was a huge channel. We were right next door to the Savannah Pilots [Association] and they would escort these huge tankers up the Savannah River. Because that's one of the busiest ports right there, the—

TS: I'm not familiar with it.

FT: —Savannah. Yes.

TS: Okay.

FT: And—just—it was challenging but it was defining my life, right there in the Coast Guard. Right there, it was happening.

TS: In what way? Tell me about that some more. What do you mean?

FT: You know, I got to see what it was all about. That's it right there. At that small boat station, you know, "Mayday", that's like somebody calling 911. "Go help somebody, and by the way, strap on this nine millimeter and take that M16." Go help no matter what time it was. And helping people that were drowning or turned over, just—and it was more like it, it was like, "Yeah, this is more like it." Even though it was hard to see some things and do some things, you know that's what military life is going to be like.

TS: What things were really hard?

FT: Well, to see the woman crying on the pier and the husband is drowned or something, you know, or can't be found; those kinds of things.

TS: Did you have to talk to them at all, or at this level you're just kind of observing?

FT: Yes, when we would come in to the pier you could see the whole family standing out there sometimes, or whatever. Picking up somebody that's drowned and bringing them back to the station.

TS: How was that the first time you had to do that?

FT: [pause] It was my job, because you know, I've seen people die before. Remember my neighborhood. [chuckles] So, you know what I'm saying?

TS: Yes.

FT: Not that it gets better, but it wasn't like, "Oh my god! A dead person!" Because I had already seen that before. It wasn't as shocking or anything.

TS: So, you had some emotional—

FT: Detachment. Yes.

TS: Okay, good word. From that.

FT: Yes.

TS: What—Was it interesting to you too because it was exciting, every day you didn't know what was going to happen?

FT: Yes. It was. It really was. You wonder what's going to happen next.

TS: Now, were you thinking, "Okay I'm going to do"—how many years did you sign up for?

FT: Oh, four.

TS: Four? So, you were thinking I'm going to do my four, and then what?

FT: I want to extend. I extended a lot.

TS: Did you?

FT: Yes.

TS: Did you ever think, "I'm going to do this for twenty years"?

FT: No. No.

TS: It just kind of led to that down the road?

FT: Yes. Because it was fun going different places, meeting people. It really was. I met a lot of—but you always had to be on your p's and q's. It wasn't like a regular job. Rules are very strict. You couldn't associate with the officers, really, be friends. There were a lot of boundaries that you had to be careful about.

TS: Was that fairly easy to do, the boundaries, or was that difficult sometimes?

FT: Yes. I mean, as you went along and saw examples of what happened if you didn't, [chuckling] it got pretty easy.

TS: Do you remember anything in particular?

FT: No. No. No. Not that I want to, you know—Let me just say you really got to be on your p's and q's.

TS: When did you decide—so it wasn't in Savannah that you thought this SK job would be really neat?

FT: Yes. Because we had an SK at the unit, I mean, he was striking, trying to be an SK. You know, working as an SK, and I was, like, "Yeah. That's pretty good. I like to do office paperwork and order supplies and stuff like that." And you also do—

TS: Duty.

FT: —the boat stuff. Yes.

TS: So you got to do both.

FT: Yes.

TS: So like your main nine to five job?

FT: Yes.

TS: I don't know if it was nine to five.

FT: That's right. Well, that's a way of putting it. You had a job that you went to school for, but everybody's main job is search and rescue.

TS: Okay. Everybody in the Coast Guard?
[speaking simultaneously]
FT: Everybody's job. Yes. No matter what your rank is.

TS: Is that right?

FT: Yes! Everybody.

TS: I didn't know that.

FT: You've got to search and rescue. If you're on a ship, you're on a small boat station, you're in some group in support of that, of rescuing.

TS: I see. So, that's like the mission?

FT: Because remember, they started out the Coast Guard with the lighthouse and everything; helping ships that were lost, and you know what I mean?

TS: Okay. So, that's like the core mission of the Coast Guard, to do that?

FT: Search and rescue.

TS: Did you get that feeling, then, even in these first few years that, "You know, this is what I'm doing. I am helping."?

FT: Yes, I did. I wanted to be—you know, I don't know what it—about me in my life made me what to be that kind of person, but I've always felt that I did want to be helping in some way. In a big way not just, you know what I mean?

TS: Right.

FT: And I guess I found that out in the army, when I was sitting there at drill, what you did was get your backsack and everything ready, you know, "Clean those weapons up for war." That's what you're preparing for. You know? I was like, "No, I can't do this."

TS: Right. You've got to do something different, but you still wanted to connect it to the—

FT: Yes. To the military.
[speaking simultaneously]
TS: It's interesting—So, tell me a little bit about, like, okay, do you remember the first time you put the uniform on?

FT: Which one? The army uniform—

TS: Either one. Either one.

FT: Yes, I remember it. It was a lot to have on, for one thing. And then you had your name tag on, and your dog tags you had to keep up with, and these things you tied around the bottom of your BDUs, your battle dress uniform. It was a lot to keep up with. And you had to keep them clean, which was hard to do. You know, looking neat when you're being told to get down on the ground every time you turn around, you know, it's like—[chuckles]

TS: But did you like it? Was that something you took some pride in?

FT: Yes. It was comfortable. It felt like I was meant to do it. I felt like I was.

TS: Tell me a little bit about what you saw were differences between, maybe, the army culture and this Coast Guard culture that you went into.

FT: The army, it was more like—it was a lot of people and they have all these systems in place and everybody's, like I said, preparing for war or for some field trip or some exercise about "We're going out in the field. We're going to practice this. And we're going to practice that," and all of this. While in the Coast Guard you were doing, you weren't practicing. It was every day. You're not practicing for war. You're not practicing to save somebody. You've got to go save somebody. You've got to go check out this hot tip we got about this boat. We might go on a drug bust, you know, you're doing something. You're not preparing for if something happens. It is happening.

TS: Interesting. That's an interesting difference that you're talking about. Well, did you—when you went to your—to train for the SK, where did you go for that training?

FT: Petaluma.

TS: How was that?

FT: It was good. It was good. I liked Petaluma. I went there for lots of training. I went there for the EMT training, I went there for some—my SK school, which was about nine weeks. Then I went there for some refresher schools for SK. Then I went to the chief's academy [Chief Petty Officer Academy] out there. So, you know, it seems like all the time I was back in Petaluma for something; at that San Francisco airport switching into my uniform. Because that's a long journey, you know.

TS: So when you got—when you left—oh, you were going to tell me, too, something, about an enlistment bonus.

FT: Oh yes, when you join the army, I forget how many years it was, five or seven years, they give you a certain amount of money. And they give you half of it, you know, in fulfillment, and then they'll give you the other half when you get half way there. Well, since I joined the Coast Guard I didn't really fulfill the half that they had paid me for, so little did I know that they wanted some of that money back, because I was gone. I was off in the Coast Guard.

TS: It's not like you had a conversation with the army. Okay.

FT: No, So, I come to find out, and it was by shock, that they wanted that money back and they had reported me to the credit bureaus. They had been sending letters to my house in Memphis, and no one was giving me my mail, and saying, "Hey, you owe us money." It seems like to me that they would have, because I was still in the service, like, garnished my wages or something.

TS: Right.

FT: But they ruined my credit.

TS: Did that ever get resolved?

FT: Yes, it got resolved. Because I think that they didn't know that I had went active duty to the Coast Guard.

TS: I see. So, they're like, "Ah, she's gone, what?"

FT: Yes. What happened? I mean, they knew—they thought I just got out, you know what I mean?

TS: So, then they went after you because of that and then they found—

FT: And I did not know it. I went to buy a car and they were like, "You can't—You've got bad credit."

I'm like, "No, I've never purchased this."

They were like, "The United States government."

I was like, "What!"

[both chuckle]

TS: That would be a shocker to find out for something like that. Well, so, you've kind of described this a little bit for me, but—so like, a typical day at your—once you became the store keeper, can you describe a typical—where'd you go next; for your next station? That was when you went to Fort Lee?

FT: Oh Fort Lee, that was army school.

TS: That was army?

FT: Army school. When I went to my unit after I left Petaluma I went to Cape May [United States Coast Guard Training Center Cape May].

TS: That's right. Cape May.

FT: I was working in the uniform distribution center. And basically just passing out—boot camp is there. One of the boot camps for the Coast Guard was in Cape May. I worked this uniform distribution where all the recruits would come in and get fitted for their uniforms. We would also ship out uniforms to all different places, you know, people calling in for uniforms. So, I worked in this uniform distribution center. That was one—that was something I did.

TS: What did you think of the differences between the uniforms of the [U.S.] Army and the Coast Guard?

FT: Better; a lot better.

TS: Coast Guard?

FT: Yes, it was a lot better uniform.

TS: They seem more tailored or something, too.

FT: Yes.

TS: Were they?

FT: They just—they're not battledress uniforms. They weren't battledress uniforms. They were just regular, looks like—almost like a police officer.

TS: Yes. So they looked nice. So, did you also continue to do temporary duty, special duty in Cape May?

FT: Well, yes, you could get—yes, you had duty. What was my duty at Cape May? [pause] Yeah, duty driver, you know, go pick up the captain at the airport. Barracks duty—

TS: What'd you do there?
[speaking simultaneously]
FT: —somebody's got to be up twenty-four hours watching the coming and goings of people in the barracks.

TS: Now, did you live in the barracks?

FT: Yes, for a while until me and my friend, we moved out.

TS: That was in Cape May?

FT: Yes.

TS: What was it like in the barracks; living in the barracks?

FT: Fire drills. [chuckles]

TS: Did you have the health and welfare checks?

FT: Yes. Inspections.

TS: What happened there?

FT: But not as much, no, not as much, but we had them. No big deal. The biggest thing was the fire drills. I think something was wrong with the fire alarm. [Therese chuckles] Because it would be, I mean, it would go off every other night! Okay, who needs a fire drill three or four times a week?

TS: Because then you're going to start not paying attention to it.

FT: There was something wrong. Yes. Started hiding in their lockers. [chuckles]

TS: Did you feel like you had a lack of privacy?

FT: No, because at that time it was two people in the room.

TS: Oh, okay. So, you weren't in open bays. You just had private quarters in the barracks. Okay.

FT: Open bays—yes.

TS: Did you have shared bathrooms?

FT: Yes.

TS: Was it like a suite or was it—

FT: No, you had to go to the bathroom down the hall. It was disgusting. It was.

TS: So, then you were able to get a place off?

FT: Yes.
[comments about puppies redacted]
TS: So, you're at Cape May and you're—you decide you want to go off base, so you got a friend—how was that? Did you get paid to do that? Did you have to be a certain rank?

FT: Not at first, but later you did. You got put on a list.

TS: Okay. Like a waiting list?

FT: Yes. And once the barracks got up to a certain occupancy, then they would give it to somebody. Because somebody has to move, you know what I mean?

TS: Okay. So, even though you're already off, if the occupancy level went to a certain level—

FT: Yes.

TS: —then they'd start to pay you[?].

FT: Yes, because technically they couldn't give up your room.

TS: Oh, I see. So, you could always move back?

FT: Yes.

TS: I got it. Okay. That makes sense. And then, you talked a little bit about you played some sports.

FT: Yes, I played racquetball; in Cape May I started playing. I really enjoyed it. It was great. I broke my thumb playing.

TS: You broke your thumb?

FT: Yes. The captain of the base, he played. We would go to Philadelphia to play in regional tournaments with the navy people and pretty much clean house.

TS: How'd you do?

FT: I won, and he won too. We won. They put it in the Cape May newspaper "Coast Guard Wins Big." The captain and me, you know, we come back and they put these plaques up, which I have in the attic. And put them up in the gym for everybody to see and then they'll eventually give them to you. It was pretty cool.

TS: Did you enjoy that about the Coast Guard, having those kind of opportunities for recreation?

FT: Yes. You could do that in the army too, yes, you could do that. But theirs was more structured because, you know, they had the football team; they have all that. The Coast Guard doesn't have that.

TS: Not as many. Did—You had said growing up you played basketball. Did you get to play any basketball?

FT: Just pick up, yes, on the Coast Guard. That was fun.

TS: Did you stay—did you have annual training where you had to stay in shape? Like, annual—

FT: Yes. We had weigh-ins and stuff like that. You had to weigh a certain amount.

TS: When did you run that marathon? Was that later in your career?

FT: Yes, that was in—when I was in Seattle.

TS: In Seattle.

FT: Yes, my first one. That was in '98.

TS: Did you train very long for that?

FT: Well, I was a runner anyway.

TS: Were you?

FT: So, yes, it was just stepping up the miles, you know, but I was already running a lot and athletic, so—

TS: Had you always been a runner?

FT: Not really. Maybe that helped because the more you run and wear yourself out, you know, you probably wouldn't be able to do it. Like now, I wouldn't.

TS: Right. Now, what about your mom? Was she getting more comfortable with you being in the Coast Guard?

FT: She passed in my first unit.

TS: Oh, she did?

FT: Yes.

TS: Did she get comfortable with you being in?

FT: No, she never did, and like I said it was my first unit when she, you know.

TS: And that was in Savannah?

FT: Yes.

TS: While you were in Savannah, I see. So, you had made a choice to go into this new exciting career to get away from Memphis.

FT: To get away from Memphis and to try to be successful in another way besides the traditional educational—

TS: Right. No scholarship.

FT: Don't insult me by offering me a scholarship. Are you crazy? I'm going to do something else.

TS: So, how are you finding it? Are you finding that this, I guess the word I'm—like, did you feel like you fit in to this kind of life in the Coast Guard?

FT: I did and as I got up in the ranks—and a lot of the people were going to college part time, and you know, I started to CLEP test, College Level Exam Program. And then I started to take one course a semester because they—the higher ups were talking about "It's still important to have education when you get out," you know, "You're not going to be doing this forever. That's important. That's important." And I was trying to get that associate's before I got out, when I decided I am going to get out, and I did. [chuckles]

TS: You did get your associate's?

FT: And I—By taking one course at a time, you know, I had those three semesters I told you about. I started at State Tech. I CLEP test, and I took tests online, or you know how they do it, they send you the work in the mail and then you send it back? I took my final—

TS: Correspondence course, I think they call it?

FT: Yes. I took my final exam and proctored it at the college, and I had my degree.

TS: Excellent. Did you find—did you enjoy doing that kind of study more than you had when you were going to school?

FT: Well, it was just that it was convenient at the time. But it's been so long I don't even know what it's like to be sitting in a classroom. We're talking '83, early part of '83.

TS: Was the last time you'd been in a classroom?

FT: Yes.

TS: Or, like, that kind of learning. What about—you had talked about when you were going to school in [the] construction field that you were discouraged. Right?

FT: Women in construction.

TS: Women in construction. What was it like in the eighties as a woman in the Coast Guard, or how were you treated by your male peers?

FT: I was treated okay because, like I said, I had that physical ability. [dog barks in background] I had the—I could hold my own, basically. But I saw some women that couldn't. They—you know, it's hard when you're trying to keep up. Guys are stronger, yeah whatever, but I was too. So, I did good; me personally. Other women maybe not so much.

TS: Did you have anybody that mentored you along, to say, "Hey Flo, maybe you should try this course or do this."?

FT: No, nobody mentored me.

TS: No? So, you had to kind of figure everything out—

FT: Yes. Yes.

TS: —on your own?

FT: On my own.

TS: Did you help anybody when you got to be chief petty officer? Did you mentor anybody?

FT: Well, when I got to be a chief I was at a unit—I was in my twilight tour. My last tour, okay? It was at the Facilities Design and Construction Center where these—all these engineers and architects were in there doing plans and designs to either renovate or build new stations. Exactly where I, you know, in the environment I wanted to be in but not in the capacity.

TS: Right. Years ago.

FT: They were all officers and then there were some civilians. And these were brilliant people, they really were, and I really liked being around them because they knew their stuff. So, I was—It was me and one other girl, we were the two only enlisted people there; I was a chief and she was a first class. She had been in just as many years as I had, but I think what held her from making chief was she'd never been on a ship. I'm not saying that was the only reason, but you know, if you don't get on a ship in your career—

[end first recording, begin second recording]

TS: Well, and the Coast Guard let women on ships pretty early.

FT: Oh yes. Yes. You could be on a ship.

TS: You never had any trouble? Well, let's talk about that. What assignment was that that you got? You got a couple of them, right?

FT: The Midgett.

TS: The Midgett. Tell me about the Midgett. That's a great name for a ship.

FT: Yes, it was good. We did a lot of Alaskan patrols, the Bering Sea.

TS: So, it was a cutter?

FT: Yes, it was a cutter. Three seventy-eight. Three hundred and seventy-eight foot.

TS: Tell me about that. Tell me, like, what's that like to be on a cutter in the Bering Sea? That doesn't—seems cold for one.

FT: It's—It was so cold. It really was. The wind, the waves, it was just—but it was sort of adventurous, too. It was, like, I just don't know how to say it. It was danger, but you knew you were going to survive. It was just—I was like, "Might as well enjoy it. I'm here, and we're here for a reason." And some of the guys on the boat would go to fish school. They'd let them off so they could go see what types of fish, because we did the fishing patrols to make that the fisherman were catching the right types of fish; they weren't catching the baby fish. All of that. Learning all about what is being caught and what's legal to be caught.

TS: Is this is international waters or is this in U.S. waters?

FT: The Bering Sea? Oh, well, it's Alaska, so I would say yes.

TS: Okay. Was it—Did you have contact with foreign vessels, I mean, or was it just American, mostly, vessels?

FT: Well, mostly American but the guys out their fishing, trying to catch—and crab season, trying to catch as many crab legs as they can because that season is in and that's their

livelihood for the whole year. They kill themselves trying to catch all these crabs or, you know, get themselves in positions where they need the Coast Guard.

TS: Help.

FT: It's an industry, you know, crabs. Coast Guard, you go out there and you help those people if they need it.

TS: What kinds of situations did you have out there?

FT: Oh gosh. [sighs] All kinds. We had one where we had to rescue them from the beach because the ship ran aground, and it started leaking oil out into the Alaskan bay, or somewhere out there. It was so windy and it was so close to the beach that our ship wouldn't be able to get in there without running aground. So, we had to go rent some econovans, go to the beach on the other side of Dutch Harbor [Unalaska, Alaska], and rescue these people from the beach.

TS: How'd you do that?

FT: Well, people in the water with lines and stuff. Getting them off the boat, putting life jackets—they had run aground. The wind sort of pushed them, I mean, it was relentless. I am telling you it—that is an extreme weather place, it really is. There are some times the wind is so—blowing so strong that, you know, the helicopters, they can't go up. You can't hardly walk down a pier, the wind is pushing you back in Dutch Harbor. Basically I just say those vans, we ended up buying them. [both chuckle]

TS: Oh yeah?

FT: They were—

TS: They got trashed pretty bad?

FT: Oh yes, yes. [dog barks]

TS: So, do you—you're on the beach, you're using the lines and you're trying to rescue people from that ship that had gone aground.

FT: Yes, and people—

TS: What was your role in that? What did you have to do personally?

FT: Well, just, I went there and helped rent those vans and, you know, getting all the supplies that they would need and stuff like that. Gear and stuff like that.

TS: Right. So, was that—you said it was exciting and dangerous and kind of adventurous, I think is the word you used?

FT: Yes, it was and, you know, doing stuff out there on the ship; whatever you could.

TS: Now, this is when you were stationed in Seattle?

FT: Seattle, on the boat, yes. That was—Seattle was just the port where the ship tied up. We weren't there [chuckles], you know, it was like we were always gone.

[speaking simultaneously]

TS: You never got to see much of Seattle?

FT: Yes. I saw some of it, not much. I brought in the year 2000 there.

TS: Oh, so the millennium you got to do there.

FT: Yes.

TS: Now, did you—so, okay, you're there in the late nineties?

FT: Yes, I went there from '97 to 2000.

TS: Ninety-seven to 2000.

FT: Yes.

TS: Was that the period of time when you went on the Constellation?

FT: Yes, to the Persian Gulf. We did a six month patrol within part of the battle group, Operation Southern Watch, sort of residuals of the Gulf War.

TS: So, tell me about that. What did you have to do? Did the Midgett go in the—

FT: Yes, the Midgett went as part of the battle group.

TS: Okay. [extraneous comments about puppy redacted]

FT: And it was one of the ships in that battle group.

TS: You said this was the first time that the navy—

FT: The Coast Guard.

TS: —the Coast Guard had gone with the navy group?

FT: Yes.

TS: You went to Bahrain?

FT: I went to Bahrain for part of the beach detachment to [unclear] supplies and logistics for the Coast Guard and the navy had their people. I went with the navy people that was working the logistics for them, so I was the Coast Guard rep and then you had about four or five guys that was representing the navy, getting their supplies and everything that they needed. So, we were situated right there in Bahrain. We all had to stay at different places because you couldn't have more than, like, ten percent of any military people in one place in Bahrain.

TS: Why?

FT: Because it would be a target. Everybody was scattered out all over town so one place couldn't be targeted: oh, that's where all the military people are. [dog barks]

TS: I see. So, they had—what was it like? What was the environment like because—so, you were just in the Bering Sea where it's cold and windy and now you're in the desert.

FT: Yes, I'm in the desert; from one extreme to the next. I think it got to 133 [degrees] one day. Hot, you know, you walk from one building to the next, you're sweating. When we went out in town we couldn't wear our military uniform; we had to wear civilian clothes.

TS: Why was that?

FT: So we wouldn't be targeted.

TS: That was a concern at that time?

FT: Yes. Yes.

TS: This is before 9/11?
[speaking simultaneously]
FT: 9/11. Yes, it was still, you know.

TS: Tense? A tense area?

FT: Yes.

TS: How did you like that tour?

FT: I liked it. I mean, I did because it was different and I was doing something different from what everybody else on the ship was doing.

TS: Were you the only one from the Coast Guard—

FT: Yes.

TS: —that got to go to Bahrain, then?

FT: Yes.

TS: Oh, okay.

FT: So, I was their support on the ground, and when they pulled in to Bahrain I had all their supplies waiting for them at the dock and everything. They would radio in and say or send a message of what they were going to need and all of that stuff, so I was taking care. It was, like, six months of straight work; did not have one day off.

TS: No?

FT: No.

TS: Didn't get to see any of the sights or anything?

FT: Oh yeah, well, I went out when I would go out of town and drive and I had to take a driving test to get a license there.

TS: Oh really?

FT: Yes.

TS: How was that?

FT: It was okay, I mean, their driving, you know—I have never—I can say I've never been to, and I went to Oman as well, I have never seen such richness and extravagance.

TS: What was it like?

FT: They have everything that we have. They have, just, you know, everything. It was a rich country. They got cars riding around, they had Mercedes and Rolls Royce. You know, because it's oil; all those people over in Bahrain. It was very ritzy. Very ritzy. Not third world like you think.

TS: Oh, really? The part that you saw?

FT: Yes.

TS: Was it—Could you go into a store and buy whatever you wanted, then?

FT: Yes. They had a mall. They had everything. They had Sony dealer, your Rolex dealer, they—everything.

TS: Did they cater to the military at all?

FT: No. No. [chuckles]

TS: I don't mean as in that you had to pay top dollar, is that what you're saying?

FT: No. No. No. You got—You could get deals. You had to work with them. They had the flea market, they called them souks.

TS: Souks?

FT: Souks. Yes.

TS: Was there anything you enjoyed over there to see that was different from—

FT: You know, not really. It was, just, since I had to be there I just noted how interesting it was and just taking it in. Not that I would want to be there. You had to get—some places you go you have to have passports and then other places you've got to have, what is it, visas and country clearance. You couldn't just go over there and say, "Oh, I'm think I'm going to go to Bahrain." You have to be invited, basically.

TS: Same with Oman?

FT: Yes.

TS: When you went there did you have to have a special pass to get—

FT: Well, by then I joined back up with the ship and we went over there. Really nice. Really nice. Whew. Sort of like you think about you see stuff on T.V. like Dubai and stuff? Nice like that.

TS: It's all clean. Everything's—

FT: Yes. Now, they had some areas, but we didn't see those. I didn't see those areas that were—all I saw were good areas; people living in villas and, you know, it was nice for the most part.

TS: Okay. Now, did you feel like during this period as you're extending and going along and saying, "Oh, I think I'll stay in the Coast Guard a little bit longer," do you feel like you were being treated fairly for your promotions?

FT: Oh yes.

TS: Things like that?

FT: Yes. Yes. I did. But I started thinking about my life too. I knew that I was getting up there at twenty, and okay, I'm not getting any younger. Yes, I'm getting where I could retire. There's got to be life after this.

TS: How old were you when you joined the service?

FT: Nineteen.

TS: Nineteen?

FT: Yes.

TS: So you're thinking, "Twenty years, it's before I'm forty and I can retire."?

FT: Yes. I did. I retired—I could have. When I finally left I was forty, but I could have retired because when I ended up leaving I had twenty-one years and nine months. You know, counting the drills. All the—everything counted.

TS: Right, so, it's not like this wasn't something you had necessarily, maybe it was, something you planned from the beginning.

FT: I wanted to be—yeah, I wanted to have a good start, you know, and I felt like I wasn't having that in Memphis. But as it went on it got better and I was like, "Hey, I could actually get a pension and get medical and dental. Yes, I might hang out."

But at the same time maybe could have been a little bit more preparing for, like, out in the civilian world by maybe getting a bachelor's degree or something like that because that's still the best credential you can have. Yes, people are happy to say, "Oh yeah, you retired from the military, great, great." But still, most people competing out here in today's job market, they have bachelor's degrees, they have master's degrees. Nobody's going to say, "Oh no, I'm hiring this person. They're retired from the military." You know what I'm saying? [chuckling]

TS: Right. It doesn't actually jump out at them on the resume, sort of thing?

FT: Yes. Yes. But I've been fortunate enough that—to have a job. In fact, when I knew that I was going to get out, after I said I was going to retire, because I was going back to another ship from Norfolk and I had these dogs and I was like, "Uh. I'm forty and if I'm ever going to have a life outside of the military I need to make a move." And so, I got a part time job at FedEx while I was still in the Coast Guard. They hired me, and I would work early mornings and then go to the Coast Guard. So I said, "Look you guys, I'm

retiring to FedEx. Will you transfer me to Greensboro? Will you give me a job in Greensboro? Please. Please. Please."

And they did. They said, "Okay, we'll transfer you to Greensboro. We'll give you a job there." And so, when I retired I came to Greensboro. And let me see, I retired on a Thursday, moved here on a Friday, FedEx called me Monday and said come to work Tuesday.

TS: Why did you pick Greensboro?

FT: My friend Pat and Trish was here. Trish was here because Pat had already died, but Trish was here and it was, like, my folks had passed, no siblings. Had a rough time of it in Memphis. Why go back there? You know? Another new start.

TS: Fresh start in Greensboro?

FT: Yes. And I said to myself when I left my unit, "I'm going there"—the engineers and stuff they would say, "Well, where are you going to retire to? Tell us, all these exciting places you've been."

I'm like, "I'm going to Greensboro."

They were like, "Greensboro?! Where is that at? Green—South Carolina?" Nobody knew where it was. Nobody had heard of it. "Why you want to go there?!"

I was like, "Look. I'm going. For better or worse."

TS: Had you been here before?

FT: I had visited, you know, I told you I visited Pat, my friend that was in the Coast Guard that passed, and Trish lived here. We were stationed together, you know, chums. It was like college buddies. Some people keep up with their college buddies. But it was, like, I didn't want to go back to Memphis. There's really no reason to go back there. I'm going to come here, and after FedEx I looked for—that was my first signal that I really needed to have a better degree, because I had been working at FedEx and I asked them if they would promote me. And they says, "No, because you don't have a bachelor's degree."

So I was like, "Okay." And I went and got a job at the VA; downtown Winston[-Salem] I worked there for a year and a half until I saw the job at the school. Been working ever since.

TS: Yeah. Well, let me back up a little bit for a couple of things that happened while you were still in the service. Because, tell me about—we talked about the transformation, this is before we turned the tape on, about the Coast Guard being in transportation and they're moving to homeland security after 9/11. What do you remember about 9/11? Do you remember that day?

FT: Well, yeah, I was at work.

TS: Where were you at?

FT: I was in Norfolk.

TS: Norfolk?

FT: The place I worked at was right at the airport, I mean, it was like across the street, literally. And the reason that's important is because when we heard about that, what was happening, all the airports—all the airplanes started coming in. You know, they were telling everybody to land, and it was like—I was looking out the back door of the place where I was working and you could just see all these lights from the planes just lining up to come into Norfolk [International] Airport. It's big but it's not that big. People had to go somewhere.

TS: Right.

FT: It was like, wow, you knew something was going on. They told some of the people in the office that they wanted to go home. They was upset or whatever. They could just go or whatever. But I stayed there—

TS: What did you think at the time, like, did you guys have the T.V. on?

FT: Yes. It was horrible. I mean, we were standing right there looking at it, and then you just saw before your eyes the building just start to fall down. It was, like, —it was an awful feeling, and at first you know, you thought it was an accident. But then after that second one you knew it wasn't. You just didn't know what was next.

I was on this team, the damage assessment team, this last unit, thinking, "Oh. I might have to go somewhere." Yes, that's what I was thinking because, you know, we would, for hurricanes or something like that. It was—It was awful. And everything got tight; security everywhere.

TS: How did things change for—that you noticed? Things that you visibly noticed that changed?

FT: Well, on the bases and stuff they tightened up security. Check in under your car, I mean, everything just got really more security focused then. Everything was challenged; everybody.

TS: You couldn't just drive on the base and flash your card or whatever?

FT: No. No. No. So, it just got—got a little tight after that.

TS: Did you see changes from when you went from transportation to homeland security? Did there seem to be—did the Coast Guard seem to be different?

FT: No, was seamless. It really was. They just said we're now part of the—which it makes sense if you're going to make, you know, another agency to put the Coast Guard in it, because why were we in the department of transportation? You what I'm saying? With the airplanes. It just made more sense, you know, if you made a new agency and called it that.

TS: Well, did you—you said that—you really didn't have a mentor through your career, but how were your relations with your superiors?

FT: It was good because I was focused. I wanted to retire. I wanted to make chief, so when I started to get higher up, and I wasn't one of those party type people, you what I mean? I stayed back, I was shore patrol, just not into that party mode. And so, I was reliable and trustworthy. I was like their Johnny-on-the-spot. I was good with them. I was athletic and it was all good; no surprises.

TS: Did you ever see or experience any discrimination of any form?

FT: No, I didn't.

TS: Did you ever see anything like that or hear about it?

FT: You heard, but the people—the punishment was so stiff. It was like, I see it now that I'm out more than I did when I was there.

TS: Really?

FT: Yes.

TS: You mean in the civilian world?

FT: Yes.

TS: What kind of examples do you see now?

FT: I just—that people are—they have these cliquish groups. You know, I noticed their—sometimes there are, everybody's the same, you know what I mean, in this group. Whereas in the military everybody was sort of—you're all together. Leave all the other baggage about black, white, all of that stuff, and social class. Because not everybody that was in the Coast Guard—you know, some kids in the Coast Guard, their parents had money. I was like wow, really? Because usually you see that in the officer ranks where kids are trying to be like their father who was in the military and they're officers; not in the enlisted ranks. But there were some kids I saw in there that their folks had money. I was shocked that they were in, but they were. They could have gone to school—to an Ivy League school or whatever.

TS: Why didn't they?

FT: Different reasons. Who knows?

TS: Did you have conversations with them about it?

FT: No. Some—you know how some rich kids are, they're just rebellious, they just wanted to do something else. Like me, I didn't want to go to school. I wasn't a rich kid but I wanted to do something else, you know, I didn't want to follow the—yes.

TS: How about for sexual harassment? Anything along those lines?

FT: No.

TS: Do you think that—Did you see any changes from the period from the eighties through the 2000s how women might have been treated in the service? Did that change over time at all do you think?

FT: Well, you know, women started to fight for more things that they wanted to do, like flying, combat, and being in combat. So, this stuff started coming to the forefront more and it just became more accepting. The women are in charge of the ships, of the cutters. It was like—I was like, if anybody can do it, let them do it. They're smart. They can do it.

TS: Was there anything that women couldn't do, like, when you first came in that they could do later?

FT: Well—

TS: In the Coast Guard specifically.

FT: In the Coast Guard specifically?

TS: You said they were driving boats when you first came in the eighties.

FT: Yes. Yes. I don't know of anything. If they had the knowledge, yes, it wasn't anything that was so physical.

TS: Hard to—

FT: Right.

TS: —to do. What about—Did you have any heroes or heroines at that time, you know, that you admired, whether they're military or civilian or anything like that? Any political leaders?

FT: I liked Colin Powell.

TS: What did you like about him?

FT: That he had come up through the ranks like that and then become the Secretary of State, you know, it was just like people respected him and he talked so eloquently.

TS: Did you ever get a chance to see him?

FT: I saw him here in Greensboro. He was on this tour, I forgot, some business type tour deal thing, and it was like, he was up talking on stage, but not up close.

TS: How was he?

FT: He was good.

TS: Yeah?

FT: He was good.

TS: Was it inspirational, motivational?

FT: Yes, he is. Because he knows. He's a four star general. That's—That is quite an achievement right there. That's like getting your Ph.D. [both laughing]

TS: Something like that.

FT: Yes.

TS: Well, you were in during—there was a lot of different crisis that happened when you were in the service, because we had the Panama invasion. Did the Coast Guard have anything to do with that?

FT: The Panama Canal thing?

TS: It's when we went and got, what's his name?

FT: Oh, yes. Noriega?

TS: Noriega.

FT: No, I wasn't in that. I think maybe I was just coming in or something like that.

TS: Right. That was '89. And then, you're—the first Gulf War.

FT: Yes, that was huge. Like I said, part of when we went to the Persian Gulf, Operation Southern Watch, was, you know, keeping those waters open and making sure we enforced those embargoes that they had put on—

TS: For Saddam Hussein and Iraq?

FT: Yes. Yes.

TS: Okay. So, that was part of what you were doing there. Do you remember anything about the Challenger explosion?

FT: Yes, I was at my first Coast Guard unit in Savannah, and it happened one day when we was at work. I mean, it's—everybody was talking about it, and Coast Guard boats in that area, of course, they was recovering wreckage and stuff like that.

TS: So, you heard the chatter about that?

FT: Yes.

TS: What was happening with the Coast Guard. I wouldn't have thought about that the Coast Guard would have been part of the people trying to recover—

FT: Yes. In that area.

TS: In that area. Yes. What do you think about now, that in the service that women, even though they're not openly allowed to have combat positions, they are doing combat roles like fighter jets and things like that. What do you think about that? People who say, "No. Women—there are things that women should not be able to do."

FT: I say if they can be police officers and firemen they're already in combat. It's just in a different place. You know, you have a police officer go answer a 911 call, she could be killed right then. That's combat, so what's the distinction? Because they say, well, it's going to bring the male counterpart down because he's going to be trying to save the woman. Well, not really. It's like, is the male cop going to go follow the female cop to the 911 call? It's the same thing, really. You never know what you're going to encounter. Fighting a fire, she's got to pull somebody out of that burning house or smoky house.

TS: So, if they can do that they can do whatever in the military.

FT: That's what I say.

TS: Well, they have the—I guess, right now the big thing in the navy is with the submarines, that women on submarines, the close quarters of that. Does that seem to be any kind of obstacle at all?

FT: I don't think so. I mean ,what? People can't control themselves? If you're on a submarine you have some control. You should. Because those people go under psych eval—they have all kinds of training and evaluation they have to go through before you can be stationed on a submarine. They'd don't just let anybody say, "Oh, I want to be on a submarine!" So, if you get on there and then you're going to try to sexually harass somebody I don't think—that's—that's crazy.

TS: What about this whole aspect—a couple years a big thing in the military has been about "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and the repeal of that. What are your thoughts on that?

FT: They should have did it a long time ago. You know, they lost a lot of good people to that. They really did. They lost a lot of good people to that.

TS: When you said you [comments about puppies redacted] —So, when did you decide, you know, when you came to a point where you thought, "Well—" Actually, let's talk about first before we do this, about you becoming a chief petty officer. Just the whole ceremony of it, and the ritual of it.

FT: Yes, you hear about it all the time, and you know it's one of the things—you don't have to do it, but there's a lot of pressure from your peers to do it. "It's so much fun," you know how it is. It's like, yes, they do it and everybody supports it, so why not have that experience.

TS: Tell me about it because we talked about it before we turned the tape on, so tell me the kind of things you had to do.

FT: You know, just, do your arms with, like, a fish or something, like it's a rifle; you're passing a fish back and forth. Getting silly-string sprayed all on you. Low crawling, get down, you know, like a dog.

TS: So, you had to do whatever they were telling you?

FT: Yes.

TS: Was it other—Who was it that was telling you to do these things?

FT: Other chiefs. Other people that had already gone through it.

TS: So, passed through the gauntlet.

FT: Yes.

TS: Now, what was that drink you were describing to me?

FT: Truth serum. [chuckles]

TS: Tell me the truth serum, like, what did you have to put in that? What were you making that out of?

FT: You know it varies, but we put bacon grease in and pieces of candy, tabasco sauce, chopped up some onions, just, nasty.

TS: And then you had to drink it?

FT: Well, yes. Or pretend like it. I was, like, "I'm going to throw up."
They was like, "Okay, don't drink it. Because nobody wants you to throw up."
[Therese chuckles]
"I'm going to throw up."

TS: So, how did you feel then? What kind of feeling was it for you to make this rank of chief petty officer?

FT: It was great.
[speaking simultaneously]
TS: This young girl from Memphis who wanted to get out and do something.

FT: It was good because that's, like, management. You made management. It's good. You're no longer one of the grunts. You get to tell people what to do, and it was good. And, you know, it's good to retire at that level or above because, I mean, people at E6 and below they retire or whatever. But when you retire as an E7 or above you were successful; you made it. And people recognize that too, you know, certain jobs people will say, "What was your rank?" And when you say that, they know that you made it to the upper level.

TS: Right.

FT: Because there's chief, senior chief, and master chief.

TS: Seven, eight, and nine.

FT: Yes.

TS: Did your job change at all after you made that?

FT: No, because I was at that unit, I told you, with the architects and stuff like that.

TS: You and just this other enlisted, just two enlisted women.

FT: Yes. And she retired, then it was just me, the only enlisted person there that was a chief. So, you had a lot of top heavy people at this unit.

TS: So, did you ever get to manage anyone; supervise?

FT: No. [chuckles]

TS: At that level? So, what made you decide to retire? What were your thoughts on that?

FT: Because I wanted to get out and, you know, have a life with myself and stop moving around. Be able to keep my dogs and, you know—

TS: Like settle somewhere.

FT: Yes. Settle somewhere, and know what it's like to be at home for a holiday and decorate or something, you know, just stuff that civilian people do. Demilitarize. It was like, okay, I got my great start, move on.

TS: What was it like, that transition? You talked about it a little bit from, you know, getting the job from FedEx and getting your jobs. But, I mean, emotionally, that leaving this military environment after twenty years.

FT: It was good. It felt like a relief because I'd made it. It was like, "Whew." A lot of times you don't think you're going to make it. There's just so many things that could happen that you can't control, and I was just thinking what a relief, I made it. That's how it felt.

TS: Really? Made it through the military?

FT: Yes. I've accomplished something. I've done something. And I didn't have to get a bachelor's degree or master's degree to do it, I did it. I got my pension, I got medical, and I'm happy about it. It's great.

TS: Do you see any other differences between the civilian and the military work environment?

FT: Yes, as far as I'm concerned anyway, I think that military people, you know, they work better, more diligently. They have that sense of, got to get something done.

TS: Sense of urgency?

FT: Yes, you got to get it done. Great work ethic, you know, you got to show up to work every day, you don't [unclear] military AWOL. Structure.

TS: Is that missing somewhat in the civilian environment?

FT: Yes, yes, big time. I wonder how these people, how they make it.

TS: Do you think your life's different because you joined the military?

FT: Oh, definitely. Yes.

TS: What way?

FT: I'm just—I'm a different person. I'm more responsible and focused. Structured. Sense of purpose. I got some—

TS: What do you think your life would be like if you hadn't joined it?

FT: Who knows? It would have been probably, I don't know what would've happened. Not good because I definitely wasn't seeing college. I look at a friend of mine, or somebody I knew here in Greensboro, what we—the path that she chose, the education, got her a Ph.D. The path that I chose through the military, you know, basically got me a pension. We graduated the same year, she was Who's Who Among American High School Students at her place. It was just that, to look at somebody's life from the outside and then to look at mine just to see where we are and how we are. I'm working, she's working, she's moving, she's, I don't know, she's making more than me probably. But, you know—

TS: But you got your pension already?

FT: Yes.

TS: She probably didn't yet, necessarily.

FT: No.

TS: Did you—You worked at the VA, you said, for a little bit?

FT: Yes, after I left FedEx.

TS: What did you do for them there?

FT: I was a claims assistant helping to set up files for people, you know, making claims to the government, people wanting educational benefits, wanting to go to school through vocational rehabilitation. So, just, helping vets trying to get set up because they're getting ready to get out. And I learned a lot by being there because I didn't know any of these things could be available to me. You know, you learn things when you work at places like the VA and stuff that could benefit you.

TS: What was one of the things you learned about?

FT: At the regional offices? Well, I learned about a program that I'm working with the students at the school right now, and that's vocational rehabilitation where they go to

school if they're not employed because of some disability and stuff like that. It helped me to know enough to get this job, you know, I think maybe that's what made me a great candidate for the job, is that I was working at the VA when I left that place. Even though I didn't know a lot about education.

TS: You knew the hoops you had to jump through to get the stuff done.

FT: Yes, yes, and terms and things like that.

TS: Did you work with anybody who had experienced PTSD or do you know anybody in the military?

FT: Oh yes. A guy I worked with at the VA up there, he had been shot in the back by a drug dealer. The only thing saved him was his life jacket, I mean his—

TS: Flak jacket?

FT: No, his bullet proof vest.

TS: Oh, okay. Was he out on duty?

FT: Yes.

TS: Oh yeah?

FT: Yes.

TS: What service was he in?

FT: Coast Guard.

TS: Oh, like, doing a bust on a—

FT: Yes.

TS: Okay. So, he has some PTSD from that?

FT: Yeah, and some of the guys that come from the war, you know, they have it. They basically went to boot camp, went to school, and off to war you go. That's—I mean, I know they needed the people but I think that was just too soon in my opinion. Plus, boot camp isn't as tough as it used to be. You need that. You need for people to break down in boot camp, you don't want them to break down in battle. If they can't make it through boot camp, then they don't need to be there. That's what it is; it's a weeding process.

TS: So, you think maybe it's not weeded as carefully as it used to be?

FT: No, it's not as tough as it used to be, and that's why people can't, you know, they can't handle it. Like I said, I came from a neighborhood where I had already seen it, you know what I mean? A lot of people don't come from places where they had to think about protection, or they saw people die or whatever, and they first see this. You know, now, they crumble. They need to know about that in boot camp.

TS: So, that affects them later on?

FT: Oh, yes.

TS: Well, if some young person, male or female, comes up to you and says, "Hey Flo, I'm thinking about joining the Coast Guard or military." What would you tell them?

FT: I'd say, yes, go for it.

TS: Would you give them any cautionary words?

FT: No, I'd tell them go officer. [both chuckle] Go to West Point.

TS: Why would you say that?

FT: 'Cause, it very prestigious and it's, you know, you can make a lot of money, and you get a bachelor's degree when you graduate from the academy. You know what I mean? So, you get your education and you get the high paying job throughout. When I was land-based in Virginia, I worked part time at Wal-Mart on the weekends if I didn't have duty.

TS: Why?

FT: So I could make more money. I was making just enough, you know. I wasn't living on base and wasn't getting BAH [basic allowance for housing] right away so I needed to make money for rent, and that put me ahead.

TS: By having that second job?

FT: Yes. That put me ahead, it really did.

TS: How long did you do that?

FT: Well, I—what happened was I would have to leave to go somewhere and then when I come back I say, "Hey, I used to work at the Wal-Mart, you know."

They're like, "Yes. You're hired," and they'd hire me back. So, on and off I did it for, like, five years. And made—saved money.

TS: That was like money you could put in the bank and stuff?

FT: Yes.

TS: So, you think for enlisted the economics are tougher than the officers?

FT: Yes. Oh, yes, the officers made more money. Yes, definitely.

TS: And if you had a family even more so, I guess.

FT: Yes.

TS: What—what does patriotism mean to you?

FT: Patriotism? It means, you know, being faithful to your country and being appreciative of what you have here in the United States that other countries don't have. You don't even know what that is until you've seen it, and I've seen it. You need to really be thankful that you can go to church, that you've got running water, that you don't have somebody trying to dictate you, you know, as much as you do anyway, but. You know what I mean? Some people live in horrific conditions. They don't have freedom; they don't have a lot of things. They got—They don't have walls, like, to protect them. So, it means being faithful and true to your country, and being appreciative of what you have here in the United States.

TS: Do you think there's anything in particular that civilians have a misconception about, either the Coast Guard or the military in general?

FT: Well, they think that military people are not smart, but the people are resourceful, and they are. They have a different type of, you know, everybody offers something different, and they do. They know how to get things done. They're very direct. A lot of civilians I know beat around the bush. They don't know how to come out and just say or do, you know, they got to have meetings and you know what the end result is. Yes, so.

TS: Is there anything that you think that they don't understand about the military?

FT: No. What they need to understand that is if people didn't volunteer, is that they could be drafted, so they need to be appreciative for that if nothing else.

TS: That's a good point. Well, we talked about a lot of different things. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you wanted to bring up, that we haven't—

FT: No, I just wanted to bring up that I was on the navy ship doing that operation, you know, being the beach det[?] with them in the rain, and I received the navy-marine corps commendation. And some people that's in the navy and marine don't even get that.

TS: And that was for your service in Bahrain?

FT: Yes, so, I'm most proud—I did get one for Coast Guard but that is huge. A lot of people get achievement metals in the navy, in the marines. Some people don't even get commendation in the Coast Guard. But to get one from the [U.S.] Navy and the Marine Corps [unclear] joint, that is—that was huge.

TS: It was very memorable for you?

FT: Yes. Yes.

TS: You'll have to show me that.

FT: Okay.

TS: Anything else?

FT: No, that's it. I just, you know, recommend it for people, but I would also say get your education too because that's more important.

TS: Yes. Okay. Well, thank you Flo.

FT: You're welcome.

[End of interview]