

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Jane Helms Vance

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: April 10, 2015

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is April 10, 2015. My name is Therese Strohmer. I'm actually at Jackson Library, here, with Jane Vance in Greensboro to conduct an oral history for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina of Greensboro. Jane, would you like to state your name the way you'd like it to read on your collection?

JV: Let's call it Jane Helms Vance.

TS: Okay, that sounds good. Well, Jane, why don't you state out by telling me a little bit about when and where you were born?

JV: I was born in Kinston, North Carolina, March 11, 1944, in what was Kinston Memorial Hospital, which is now a nursing home. [chuckles]

TS: Is that right?

JV: Yes. And, also, my brother was born there; I have one brother.

TS: You have one brother?

JV: Yes.

TS: And your parents, what did they do for a living?

JV: Well, my mother's a homemaker, my daddy was a general contractor and he built lots of nice homes. Now, we lived in Goldsboro and that's where his business was, but he built homes and schools and churches; built some beautiful churches.

TS: Did he do it all by himself or did he have people helping him?

JV: Well, he—Well, he had his company.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And actually, he did some of—I don't know if he was an architect at heart but I'm pretty sure he designed the stained glass window at Good—what was Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Goldsboro, because he—I think he built that. And it's no longer Good Shepherd, it's something else.

TS: Yeah.

JV: But anyway—

TS: But it was at that time.

JV: I have had copies of the—oh, what—not watercolor, but pencil—colored pencil drawings that he did.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh [unclear] of the stained glass?

JV: Yes, he was quite an artist.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And printed—He printed—He never wrote script, he always printed.

TS: Printed.

JV: And so, he did beautiful blueprints too.

TS: Oh, nice; very nice.

JV: But yes, he was a general contractor.

TS: So you grew up in what town?

JV: I was—Well, I was raised in Wayne County.

TS: Okay.

JV: I liv—We—Because my parents lived in Goldsboro when I was born—

TS: Okay.

JV: —but my mother's doctor was in Go—Kinston.

TS: Oh, I see, okay.

JV: So that's why we went over there to get born. [chuckles]

TS: Now, did you live in the city, did you live outside—

JV: Well, until—through the second grade we lived in town in an apartment—the Edgewood Apartments in Goldsboro—and went to Edgewood Primary School, and about that time is when integration became a consideration, and my folks knew that with school assignments that we were going to be moved from where we were going at Edgewood to Walnut Street School. They didn't want us to go Walnut Street. The only way out was to move out.

TS: Why didn't they want you to go to Walnut?

JV: Well, the schools weren't good.

TS: Okay.

JV: I mean, I will not say because it was black, but it was not a good school.

TS: Right.

JV: I mean, it was an old—much older school, whereas Edgewood was fairly new. And anyway—

TS: So this was, like, in the early fifties?

JV: Yeah, that would have in—well, '52.

TS: Fifty-two.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

JV: So we moved out into the county and—near Dudley. We went to Brogden, which was a one through twelve grade school; no such thing as kindergarten back then. And so, my brother and I both graduated from Brogden.

TS: Now, how close in age were you and your brother?

JV: Fourteen months—Yeah, fourteen months.

TS: Oh, yeah, almost Irish twins [slang for a pair of siblings born less than 12 months apart].
[both chuckle]

JV: Yeah. Okay.

TS: So you're out in the country. Now, were there a lot of other houses or friends or kids around?

JV: Well, it happens that these friends of my daddy, Winfield Byrd, he was a—kind of the vice president at Dewey Brothers [Inc.] in Goldsboro. They were good friends, and so they also moved, probably for the same reason.

TS: Okay.

JV: And so, they had—at the time they had two kids, and then I think they had a couple more later, but anyway, two of them were our ages.

TS: I see, okay.

JV: And so, we went to school together. But other than that, there weren't many children really close; not close enough that we would walk to play with them or anything like that.

TS: Yeah. Well, what kind of things did you do for fun in the fifties there?

JV: Well, we played Round Up; that's kind of softball.

TS: Oh, okay, hitting the ball around.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: And—Yeah, yeah. Well, yeah. [chuckles]

TS: No?

JV: And we—

TS: You can describe it.

JV: Yeah. Well, how did—Okay, if you were at bat, you hit the ball—somebody would pitch and you'd hit the ball, and whoever got the ball, if they could catch it in the air or on first bounce it was their bat next.

TS: Okay.

JV: If they—nobody caught it on first bounce or in the air, then whoever got it would roll the ball toward the bat, which was laid on the ground, and if it hit it—

TS: Hit the bat?

JV: —it was their turn. If it hit it. [unclear]. [both chuckle] So we played a lot of that, and we didn't have much room to play wide open games because there were a lot of pine trees around.

TS: Okay.

JV: So we just had to do the best we could with—driveway, or something like that.

TS: Did you spend a lot of time outside?

JV: Oh, yeah. Oh, sure; all the time. I mean, we'd play hide-and-go-seek, throw the statue—or sling the statue, and—

TS: What's that one?

JV: Well, that was—A person who is kind of the object would grab hold of the arm of the other people and throw them around, and the person who they threw around would land in a position.

TS: You had to stay in that position?

JV: Yeah, had to stay in that position—

TS: Okay.

JV: —until everybody had been thrown, and then the person who did the throwing said, "Well, that person is more—looks more like the statue I had in mine so—" kind of a stupid game. [chuckling]

TS: Oh, it's a kid's fun game. It's imagination, right?

JV: Yeah, yeah.

TS: Yeah. Now, you had done, like, a little questionnaire with me back in 2007, and in that you had called yourself a tomboy, I think—

JV: Yes.

TS: —because you said there were a lot of boys around that you played with.

JV: Yeah. When we—When we lived in Goldsboro, was before we moved out in the county, it was an apartment complex so there were a lot of kids there.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And there was room to play.

TS: Okay.

JV: And so, we played a lot of—well, softball—whatever you call it, that kind of ball, and I was the only girl that was interested. There were two or three other girls but—

TS: They didn't want to play?

JV: They didn't want to play. They were playing dolls and I never was into—

TS: No?

JV: Yeah, I had dolls. But anyway, I—

TS: You'd rather be playing softball.

JV: I'd rather be playing softball, and so I learned how to throw a ball, [chuckles] that wasn't like a girl.

TS: That's right.

JV: And so, I was—I was always an athlete—

TS: Yeah?

JV: —after that.

TS: You always enjoyed that?

JV: Yes.

TS: Now, did you enjoy school?

JV: Yes, I liked school a lot. I mean, I was good.

TS: Yeah?

JV: Yeah.

TS: What did you like about school?

JV: Well, I liked math, I liked science, I didn't care much for English, but I just—I liked school. I had good teachers for a lot of the grades. Some of them were not so good, but I had—Ardine Lewis, in the seventh grade, was the greatest teacher I had.

TS: Seventh?

JV: Seventh. She made me work, because except for her I never had to work.

TS: [chuckles] Is that right?

JV: Yeah.

TS: So she challenged you.

JV: Yes, yes.

TS: Other than that you did pretty well?

JV: Yeah.

TS: You were challenged?

JV: Yeah. I mean, I was valedictorian.

TS: Yeah. [unclear]

JV: No—Or was I? Was I salutatorian? I don't know.

TS: In your paper you said your brother was salutatorian the year before and then you were valedictorian.

JV: Yeah, I guess. Okay, I forgot. [both chuckle]

TS: It's not seared in your memory.

JV: Right, not any more.

TS: So you're going through elementary school, and are you thinking about your future; like, what you're going to do when you grow up? Did you ever think about stuff like that?

JV: I can remember in the ninth grade, it came through to me that I was interested in the weather, and I—maybe I would like to be—work in the weather bureau.

TS: How'd you get interested in that?

JV: Books, I guess. I don't—I don't know. I don't know what it was, but I've always been interested in maps.

TS: Maps.

JV: Always.

TS: Yeah.

JV: I mean, Daddy would go somewhere and come back with a map—a folding map. Oh man, I would just pore over that thing, and to this day—to this day—oh, thank the Lord for Google Earth [a virtual globe, map, and geographical information program].

TS: [chuckles]

JV: I mean, I love Google Earth.

TS: [We'll have to?] look at all the—yeah.

JV: So anyway, I wanted meteorology.

TS: Okay.

JV: And then when I got old enough that I could be serious about what to do, I thought, well—I also wanted to be in the air force; maybe I could be in the weather in the air force. Well, I don't know—I can't remember now what it was that meant I didn't do that. I think I found out there was a lot of math—higher math—and I kind of made a mess of things with calculus. I mean, that was the end of the math major, so—

TS: So you switched.

JV: —so I switched to geography.

TS: Okay.

JV: And—

TS: That's your map side.

JV: Yeah, that's the map side. As a matter of fact, I think I was one of the first—I was in the first class that had map major at this school.

TS: When you went to Woman's College [now the University of North Carolina at Greensboro] here?

JV: Yeah.

TS: Well, we'll get up to that in a minute, then.

JV: Yeah.

TS: So you're a child of the fifties. Now, did you ever go to any, like, dances or—

JV: I was not a—No, I never cared for that.

TS: No? No sock hops or anything?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: As a matter of fact—No. I mean, we didn't have that many of them anyway, but I was the wallflower.

TS: Yeah?

JV: I didn't want to go to the junior prom and the senior prom. I didn't want to go but I did because I had to.

TS: Yeah?

JV: [chuckles] No, and to this day I don't—I'm not interested in dancing.

TS: Yeah.

JV: Now, my husband, he was a dancer.

TS: Is that right?

JV: But—

TS: So you would do it with him?

JV: I would do it with him; just slow dancing.

TS: Yeah. No jigs or anything.

JV: No.

TS: [chuckles] Okay. So you weren't necessarily interested in all the music that was going on at that time?

JV: Well, my mother got me interested in classical music when we were still living in Goldsboro, and so I didn't care that much for rock and roll. It was loud. I mean, I just wasn't interested in it. And I had albums with John Phillip Sousa [American composer and conductor]. I had Bozo the Clown. And I had—I'm thinking of another one but I can't—things like that.

TS: That's okay.

JV: But I didn't care for the loud rock and roll music.

TS: Right.

JV: But I love music today. I mean—

TS: Yeah?

JV: Yeah.

TS: What do you like today?

JV: Classical. [both chuckle]

TS: Same thing.

JV: I went through a period where I liked country, when it was country.

TS: Yeah.

JV: Not when it crossed over into—

TS: More pop music?

JV: Yeah.

TS: Yeah, real country.

JV: Right.

TS: Okay.

JV: And I like bluegrass. I really didn't know what bluegrass was until I was getting old.

TS: Oh, really?

JV: Because—Actually, bluegrass was more like what we called "hillbilly," back when I was a kid, and my mother didn't want me to listen to that. She thought it was hillbilly.

TS: I see. Well, she's having you listen to classical.

JV: Yeah. [both chuckle]

TS: Now, we had the Cold War going on.

[The Cold War was a state of political and military tension after World War II between powers in the Western Bloc (the United States, its NATO allies and others) and powers in the Eastern Bloc (the Soviet Union and its allies in the Warsaw Pact)]

JV: Yes.

TS: Did you ever do anything like "duck and cover"; worries about nuclear war with the Soviets or anything?

["Duck and cover" is a method of personal protection against the effects of a nuclear explosion]

JV: Well, we didn't do anything like that in school, however, I remember when I was going to school at Brogden—and see, we had to walk down the driveway to get to the bus stop, and a fellow who lived across the street from us was a pilot—an [Convair] F-102 [Delta Dagger] pilot over at Seymour Johnson [Air Force Base]—and so he sometimes would fly around, buzz us. But I loved Seymour Johnson and jets. But when the Cold War came and I could read newspapers and listen to Walter Cronkite [American broadcast journalist]—I guess Walter Cronkite there then—it was Douglas Edwards [American television newscast anchor] probably. When the threats came, like down in Cuba, I can remember getting off the bus and walking up the drive to home, and this plane flew by and I momentarily became scared, and could it possibly be a Soviet—a MiG [military aircraft].

TS: Right.

JV: I mean, it was a real strange sensation. I mean, it passed but—

TS: Right.

JV: —I thought about that.

TS: Well, just because it happened so suddenly—

JV: Yeah.

TS: —and you weren't expecting it.

JV: Yes.

TS: Yeah. Interesting. Okay. Well, now, when you got to high school—let's see—it's still in the fifties. You graduated in sixty—

JV: Sixty-two.

TS: —two, okay. Was there anything going on in the world that you were interested in as a young child?

JV: Gosh. Well, I knew about the Korean War. My grandparents lived in Kinston at the time—or—well—and we went over there to spend a lot of time; we loved that. And I can—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: At your grandparents?

JV: To this day, I can remember being in the dining room and my grandmother's in the kitchen, and she had her wringer washing machine in there, and the radio was on and they were reading off the names of the troops that were coming home. It was either that they were coming home or troops that had been killed—reported killed. I'm not sure what it was.

TS: Not sure which.

JV: But it had to do with the Korean War.

TS: And that was on the radio.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Now, you're finishing up your high school, are you wanting to go to college then?

JV: Yeah, I just assumed I would.

TS: You did?

JV: Yeah, both my brother and I, we just assumed that, yeah, we're going to go to college. And—Now, my brother [chuckles], he was accepted at Carolina [University of North

Carolina at Chapel Hill] and he went to Carolina, but then he was subject to the draft, so he—to avoid the draft he joined the air force.

TS: He joined the air force? Yeah.

JV: Yeah. But—Of course, I didn't have that obligation.

TS: Right.

JV: I didn't have to worry about it so I went—Well, actually, where I thought I wanted to go to school first was—it's either Florida State [University] or Flor—the one in Gainesville.

TS: University of Florida.

JV: Okay. They had a meteorology program, and I said, "Oh boy, I'll go down there and get into meteorology." Well, I knew before long there was no way I was going to go down there; I was going to be in-state.

TS: Yeah? Why is that?

JV: And—Money.

TS: Oh, money, okay.

JV: I mean, I didn't know how much it cost but I wasn't going to press to go somewhere that my—

TS: Was going to be more expensive?

JV: Yeah, yeah.

TS: So how'd you end up here at Woman's College?

JV: Well, I went to Girls State [workshop in the legislative process sponsored by the North Carolina American Legion Auxiliary] when I was a—I guess a rising junior, and I stayed in [Moore/]Strong [Residence Hall]—I don't know what I might have told you before; I think it was Strong, is where I stayed. And it was a wonderful time.

TS: Yeah.

JV: I loved it. I loved the campus. I fell in love with Woman's College, that's what it was then. I just loved it.

TS: And you decided this is the place for you.

JV: "That's where I'm going." I didn't know, actually, where else I could go, because I might have gone to Carolina, except in those days they would not accept women freshman unless you were in a specialized program; pharmacy, or something like that.

TS: Is this UNC?

JV: Yeah.

TS: Yeah.

JV: Yeah. And so, I says, "Okay, I'll go to WC [Woman's College] and then transfer," but of course I didn't; I stayed.

TS: You stayed here, yeah.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Well, what was it like here back at that time? I mean, you're on campus today and—

JV: Well, of course, the campus wasn't as big then.

TS: Right.

JV: And everything was within walking distance, and I walked everywhere on campus. I did have a bicycle for a while but that—I'd just as soon walk, frankly.

TS: I was walking with some ladies yesterday who are coming for the reunion, and I guess they're [class of] '65?

JV: Sixty-five, yeah.

TS: And so, they were saying how the housing was just—like, where the parking garage is—

JV: Yes.

TS: —there was, like, little houses—

JV: Yes.

TS: —and things like that.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Where did you stay at? Did you have, like, a dorm or house?

JV: For Girls State?

TS: No, for when you actually came to school.

JV: Well, when I got my acceptance and then the—Oh, by the way, I got my acceptance letter on my birthday.

TS: Oh.

JV: It was the greatest birthday in the world. And so, later on you get your packet and your dorm assignment. Well, I had said whatever my preference was—I don't know what I put down—but I wound up being in Grogan. However, they said, "Due to construction problems it might not be ready when you show up on campus." And so, they said, a week before I was to show up, "You will be in Woman's [Residence Hall]." There was Woman's, and what was that other one? [Kirkland—JV added later]. There were two of them. They were down in the valley there where the dining hall has expanded I think.

TS: Okay.

JV: Over there where the steps are.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: It's okay, we can look it up.

JV: Yeah. And so, I'm—Kirkland [Dormitory].

TS: Okay.

JV: Woman's and Kirkland. Oh my Lord, those were fire traps. I mean, the huge room—it was my remembrance, but good Lord, you didn't want to live in that.

TS: How were they fire traps?

JV: They were old.

TS: Okay.

JV: Old wood. I mean, old. And I didn't know how they were going to pack us up—all these women—girls—in this dorm. So I was prepared to go into Woman's Hall. So the day that we showed up—my folks drove me up there with all my worldly possessions, drove up to Woman's, big sign: Go to Grogan. It's open.

TS: Oh.

JV: Hallelujah.

TS: You were pretty happy about that?

JV: Yes, I was. So—I've got—I have a—The story is backwards—not backwards. That was—That was when I was a sophomore.

TS: Okay.

JV: Because actually I was in Jamison [Residence Hall]—

TS: For your freshman?

JV: —in the quad for my freshman year. That was all cut and dry; Jamison, yeah. But it's when I was a sophomore—

TV: Sophomore, okay.

JV: —that was when—

TS: They were moving you to—

JV: Yeah. I was in Jamison, and I had three room—let's see. There were three in our room—Was it three or four? Whatever it was—because they were overcrowded. And so, as students would drop out, if they had any extra space then they'd just shuffle around. So it turns out that I was in the only room that still had three people in a room at the end of the school year.

TS: Oh, is that right?

JV: Yeah.

TS: Okay. So pretty tight.

JV: Yeah. Well, they were big—

TS: Not too—

JV: —bigger rooms than they are today.

TS: Oh, okay.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Now, you had mentioned a little bit about the integration that was happening in the first few years you were here too.

JV: Yes. Well, my daddy, he was a fair man, but he was a segregationist, and when he found out that there might be—we didn't call them black, we called them negroes—in the school, he said, "Well, you might not be going there."

I was like, "Oh no. I don't know what to—what I'm going to do now."

So we just had to wait a little while and he kind of—he mellowed. He didn't make a big stink about it, and so I went to Greensboro. But when I got here there were—In my class I believe there were only four black students, and I think they all stayed together. I'm not sure where they stayed; somewhere in the Quad.

TS: Yeah.

JV: But I knew who they were, but they were not in my—I didn't avoid them but I—

TS: Right, they weren't in your classes and things like that.

JV: Right, yeah.

TS: Well, you would have been here, then, with the 1960 sit-in to—

[On 4 February 1960 four NC Agricultural and Technical State University students started a sit-in at the "whites only" Woolworth's lunch counter in downtown Greensboro to protest segregation]

JV: Yeah. Yeah.

TS: What about that?

JV: Well, they—I remember that they were going to have some kind of a—they, I don't know who "they" was now.

TS: [chuckles]

JV: They were going to have some kind of a sit—I don't know what it was—and word was getting around and I thought, "Well, am I going to do this or not?" And I declined. I decided my job at Greensboro was to go to school, it wasn't to cause political problems. And I think I remember when they did the stuff down at Woolworth's. Is that where it was?

TS: Yeah.

JV: Yeah. But I didn't know any of these people. I don't know if they had a demonstration by our students or not.

TS: In the ensuing weeks that people kept going, I think that some of the ladies that did get involved, a couple of them, kind of, initially got in trouble—

JV: Yes.

TS: —because they had their [class] jackets on, is what I remember.

JV: Oh, okay.

TS: Right, so you had to wear your jacket.

JV: Yes.

TS: But what did you think about what was going on with this demand for a right to integrate at the lunch counter and things like that?

JV: Well—

TS: Just at that time. It's hard to put yourself back in time.

JV: I don't know, except that when I grew up you had your white water fountain and your negro water—colored—pardon me—colored water fountains, and your rest rooms, and all like that, and you were just raised and you didn't know why but that's the way it was.
 I remember being in a—I believe it's the train station in Wilson [North Carolina], and we were in the waiting room and I told my mother—I said, "Well, I've got to go to the bathroom."
 And she says, "Well, it's right over there." Well, she pointed over there but there were two rest rooms, but I didn't pay any attention; I went into a rest room because I had to go to the bathroom. And when I came out she says, "Did you realize you went in the colored rest room?"
 I says, "Well, no." [chuckles] I mean, it was—

TS: Right, you just went in.

JV: Yeah. Yeah. So—I mean, I was never one to make trouble—

TS: Right.

JV: —but then I never thought deeply about putting myself into a colored person's shoes. I just—I don't know. I didn't—I don't know, I just didn't avoid anything but—

TS: Right.

JV: —I wasn't faced with places I had to make a stand.

TS: Right, you had your own path and your—

JV: Yeah.

TS: —life thing that's going on. I mean, this was swirling around you, too, though.

JV: I mean, I knew what my father thought, but my mother, she was the more calming person. And when we were driving somewhere in the car and there was this fellow on the side of the road—it was a boy in my class—and she says, "Well, let's pick him up."

She says, "Now, we don't pick up hitchhikers. You don't pick up anybody you don't know, but we know who that is."

I say, "Okay."

So we stopped and we picked him up, and he got in, and we drove on wherever he was going, and in the course of just conversation he said something about "nigger", and my mother said, "You do not use that word in this car." And we didn't use it. I never used it. But I knew what it was. But she told him, "You don't do that." So despite what my daddy thought—and I'm sure he had colored fellows who were workers for him in his construction business, but he—

TS: Socially, it was different.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: Socially, yeah.

TS: It was different in the way that that time was, yeah. Well, it's just interesting because not a lot of people go through that, that'll look at this interview and they'll be like, "What was it like then?"

JV: Yes.

TS: That's what we're trying to get at. So you're going along and you're going to school. Now, did you have the curfews and things like that, where the doors were shut and you had to get in by a certain time?

JV: Oh, yeah.

TS: Yeah?

JV: You had to be in by—let me see. Well, I know ten o'clock, absolutely ten o'clock, and you had to have permission to go places on the weekends. Now, you could get a blanket thing from your parents that you could go to places that the student, as a group, might go, but if you had a separate thing—like, for instance, I was with the Lutheran Students Association and we went to some places, so I had to know ahead of time where we were

going and when so I could get my mother to sign a permission slip and have it mailed in time to give to the dorm mother.

TS: In time. I see. Yeah, very different today.

JV: Right. And of course, there were only women in the dorms, and so there should be no man—I mean, if your boyfriend came he would have to wait for you in the parlor, and they would call you, say, "Your date—" or whatever—"is here."

TS: Did you date? Did you do—

JV: No. No.

TS: Not too much. You just—

JV: I never was much of a dater. [chuckles]

TS: Well, you said, too, that you'd go home when you could.

JV: Yeah. I mean, for big holidays and—and I remember they told me I couldn't go home for—I don't know if it was three, four, six weeks, whatever it was, until I could go home. I thought, "Oh my Lord, I don't know if I'm going to make it."

TS: Were you homesick?

JV: Yeah, I was homesick, and I was glad when I was able to go home. And when I got home and I saw everything was there, I was good [for] the rest of my life about being able to go anywhere I wanted.

TS: Why is that?

JV: Well, the insecurity of—in the homesickness is wondering, "Is it still there? Do they give a darn?"

TS: "Are they going to remember me?"

JV: Yeah, yeah. But when I got back there everything was in its place—

TS: Yeah.

JV: —and it was alright.

TS: That's nice.

JV: So I could go back to school and enjoy it and go home again.

TS: Now, were there any professors or instructors that you had that you enjoyed learning from here?

JV: Dr. [Eugene E.] Pfaff. He was—P-F-A-F-F—He was my History 101, and he was kind of tough, I—but I think underneath he wasn't as tough. But yes, I liked him. I feel like I learned something from him. And let's see what other teachers I really liked. Oh, her first name was Margaret Hunt, I can't remember her last name, she was political science, and that was the one course that I took as an—audited; I took it because I wanted to.

TS: Okay.

JV: And it was political science and it was American government—federal government, that's what it was. I loved that. [chuckles] And she—When it was exam time and I didn't show up, and maybe it was a midterm or something, and so the next class there I was, she says, "Ms. Helms, where were you for your test?"
And I says, "Well, I'm auditing. I'm not supposed to take tests."

TS: That was—

JV: [chuckling] "I think."

TS: So that was okay?

JV: Yeah.

TS: Maybe she didn't know you were auditing.

JV: I guess. I mean, surely she did but—

TS: [chuckles]

JV: Anyway.

TS: You said you originally came in as a math major?

JV: Yes. No—Yes. Yes, I was a math—math major.

TS: But you switched to geography.

JV: Yeah, I did two years of math, and I loved trig[onometry], but when I got to calculus, man, I was a dead duck [slang for "unsuccessful"]. There was just some concepts I just could not get and that's when I said, "No, no more." And so, when I was a junior I changed my major, and then there was plenty of time to get all my stuff.

TS: Was there?

JV: Yeah.

TS: What did you think about your experience here at Woman's College?

JV: I loved it. I loved it. And I would recommend anybody to come. I mean, I guess it's like it was—I know it's not like it was when I was here but—

TS: What'd you like best about it?

JV: Well, I don't know, I liked going to classes, and we had a nice little group, we tried to eat our meals—especially the evening meal—at the time same time. I don't know. I just liked it all.

TS: Yeah. Friendships and things like that.

JV: Yes.

TS: Yeah. So as you're going along, what do you think you're going to do for your degree?

JV: Well, I had had thoughts about meteorology, then I changed it to geography, but I didn't know what exactly, and at the same time I'm thinking military, because of the military heritage in my family.

TS: Yes.

JV: And I wondered, "Well, how can I meld the two?" So as I got—about a junior, that's when you have to start making decisions, and so I did sit for the—some kind of qualification test, and also the Civil Service qualification test. And I had decided I really wanted the [United States] Air Force, and if I couldn't get the Air Force I was going to go in the [U.S.] Coast Guard, because I have a soft spot—spot on my heart for the Coast Guard.

TS: How come?

JV: Well, my daddy had a property down at Cape Lookout [North Carolina], and we went down there in summer. Other people went to the beach; we went to Cape Lookout. And we fished and we went swimming in the ocean and we just played; climbed the sand dunes. I loved it. And daddy was good friends with the chief over there, I forgot what his name was [Wink Robinson—JV added later]. But anyway, so we got to ride a lot of the Coast Guard boats. And sometimes—let's see. Now, Daddy had a boat that we would put in the water at Harkers Island, and then drive over. But sometimes he—I think if he left the boat down there between trips his buddies—Oh, no, no, it was—his last name was Kelly, and he was the mail—he was the mailman.

TS: Okay.

JV: He took the mail boat over to the station—or over to the Cape, and so Daddy would ride the mail boat with whatever his name was. Anyway, that was a lot of fun.

TS: You enjoyed that?

JV: I enjoyed that. We got to go over to the station, when it was occupied; it's not active anymore. And they also had ponies and cows in those days, and this Coast Guard fellow, he managed to lasso a colt of one of the mares, and so—I've got a picture somewhere.

TS: Like a wild horse?

JV: Huh?

TS: Was it one of the wild horses?

JV: Yes, yes. Mustangs, I guess, is what—Outer Banks ponies.

TS: Okay.

JV: And anyway, I just loved, loved the guys. We'd go over to their mess hall, had coffee out of these humongous, heavy cer—not ceramic—but anyway, heavy coffee cups. I mean, I just loved the Coast Guard. So if I couldn't make the air force I was going to go in the Coast Guard. If I couldn't go in the Coast Guard I was going to join the Civil Service. And I actually had a job offer for the—whatever they call it—the [Department of Defense] Mapping Agency that was in St. Louis [Missouri] —

TS: Oh, you did?

JV: —as a GIS [geographic information system] [unclear]—[chuckles]

TS: [unclear] really long.

JV: —starting out. I mean, I didn't know anything; they were going to have to train me for everything. So I knew I had a job, because I had that before I got my acceptance into the air force, but luckily the air force took me.

TS: And you were interested in the air force—kind of with the [unclear] we were talking about earlier, with the Seymour Johnson—

JV: Yeah.

TS: —and the planes—

JV: Yeah.

TS: —and you had said something about the romanticism of the planes—

JV: Yeah.

TS: —was something that really attracted you.

JV: Oh gosh, yeah, they—When we lived out near Dudley—well, Brogden, we were not far from the end of the runway, and when these tankers and bombers took off, I mean, it would just rattle your house, but Michael and I loved it.

TS: [chuckles]

JV: Oh, we loved it.

TS: Michael's your brother?

JV: Yeah. I mean—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Yeah. And he went in the air force too? He was already in the air force.

JV: Well, he—Yes, he enlisted before I came in.

TS: Right.

JV: But the [Boeing] KC-135s, they were loaded—loaded—with jet fuel and they—I swear, I didn't know if they were going to make it over my—our roof; they were so low when they took off. Now, the bombers, they're big airplanes but they didn't have that load, and so—Anyway, they were loud, and we can see the irises of the pilots' [eyes].

TS: [chuckles] Oh yeah, that[?] black clothes[?].

JV: Yeah.

TS: Well, that's kind of neat.

JV: Yeah.

TS: So you decided to join the air force—they accepted you—and what did your parents think about that.

JV: Oh, they were—they were thrilled. I mean, they both wanted me to do what I wanted to do.

TS: Yes.

JV: I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't been in the air force, but they didn't push me to go in or to not go in.

TS: They just supported the decisions—

JV: They supported me, whatever I wanted to do.

TS: Now, you had said you'd looked earlier at some of your—the papers that you had, like your dad's draft notes where he then was III-A [Selective Service classification "deferred for dependency reasons"], is that right?

JV: Yes.

TS: The business he was doing was supporting World War II?

JV: Yeah. Of course, he had dependents; he had his wife and one child at the time.

TS: Right.

JV: But to me the important—more important thing was that he was a contractor, and he built two of the—well, I don't know how many—on Cape Lookout, that's how he got to Cape Lookout, he built some observation posts over there; they were made of wood. And they were still there when I was a child when we went over there.

TS: Yeah?

JV: And of course they're gone now—the weather.

TS: Yeah.

JV: But yeah, he built those and—I mean, they were watching for U-Boats off the coast. And he also did some work—it was near Cape Ann. Is that Maryland? Yeah. I don't know what he did over there. But he also, I believe, did some work having to do with Fort Macon. I mean, that's a Civil War fort, but it was used in World War II.

TS: World War II. And you had other relatives that were connected to the military.

JV: Yes.

TS: You had your brother, you had—was it on your mother—

JV: Well—

TS: —mother's side?

JV: Well, my mother's side I know more than anything else. My maternal grandfather, he was enlisted and up in Fort Strong, Massachusetts, in WWI [World War I], and then my mother's two brothers were both in World War II. Her twin brother was an officer and he was in—well, what is NC—wait a minute—NSA [National Security Agency] type.

TS: Okay.

JV: Spooks [slang for undercover agents or spies].

TS: [chuckles] Spooks.

JV: And her other younger brother, he was in the army also, but was enlisted and he was in the motor pool.

TS: Okay.

JV: And was in England when they were—before D-Day, and they were waterproofing Jeeps and other trucks that were subsequently going to be used on D-Day.

[D-Day, or the Normandy Landings, were the landing operations on 6 June 1944 of the Allied Invasion of Normandy in Operation Overlord during World War II. It was the largest seaborne invasion in history.]

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: That were going over?

JV: And—Let's see. Her brother-in-law, he was also in the army at— [Fort McClellan at Anniston [Alabama]—JV added later].

TS: It's okay.

JV: —North Alabama.

TS: [chuckles]

JV: Fort something in North Alabama.

TS: That's alright.

JV: Yeah.

TS: But you got this really rich heritage—

JV: Yes.

TS: —and these people, some of them were still in when you enlisted.

JV: Oh, sure.

TS: Or when you signed up.

JV: Yeah, all of them.

TS: Yeah, because a lot of them retired, right.

JV: Yes.

TS: And it's a time when, really, there's not that many women in the military at all.

JV: Not many in the line, meaning they weren't in the medical corps. I mean, there were lots of nurses, but few in the line, and in those days there were none flying or navigating—

TS: Right.

JV: —on airplanes, except flight nurses. But—So anyway. So I'm joining the air force and when I got to Barksdale [Air Force Base in Louisiana], which was my first real assignment, my brother, he was in the air force and he was about to be shipped off to Southeast Asia, and he was married, and I thought they wouldn't send him to Vietnam. I think he had orders—almost orders to Cam Ranh Bay [Vietnam]. And I didn't like that, and I says, "Well, if I go to Vietnam will they send him not to Cam Ranh Bay?"

And I—So I called a lot of people and they said, "Well—" I don't qualify as sole surviving son, like the Sullivans, but they would take that into consideration, but especially since he was married and I was not, I had no dependents, and you're a female. Well, hot damn. [chuckling] Fill a couple of blocks here, we're going to send a woman, why [not?] an officer to Vietnam. Because at the time I think there were about ten in-country.

[The five Sullivan brothers were World War II sailors serving together on the USS Juneau (CL-52) who were all killed in action on its sinking around 13 November 1942. As a direct result of the Sullivans' deaths the U.S. War Department adopted the Sole Survivor Policy designed to protect members of a family from the draft or from combat duty if they have already lost family members in military service.]

TS: Not that many in the air force for sure.

JV: Oh no, lots in the air force, but only ten line—female line officers—

TS: Right.

JV: —in the air—in Vietnam.

TS: Yes.

JV: So I says, "I want to go to Vietnam."
"Wonderful. We'll fix you right up, and we'll make a deal; we will divert your brother to Bangkok [Thailand]."

TS: Okay.

JV: So.

TS: Well, before we get to Vietnam, let's talk a little bit about when you first went in and you went through your officer training. How was that for you? Where'd you go? You went to San Antonio [Texas], Medina —

JV: Oh, yes, Medina Base [at Lackland Air Force Base] near San Antonio, and—let's see—we had a flight of about twelve—called a class—a small class—and I think they tried to make sure how ever many women there were in the class—and I can only remember looking from that picture, there's at least about twenty I would guess—they made sure that there were at least two women together in their individual flights.

TS: Okay.

JV: And—But—And we were in this one dorm—called a dorm, it's a barracks, and I'm not sure if there were any men at all. It was a two story barracks but I'm not sure if they allowed any men in it. If they had enough room then it was no problem.

TS: Right.

JV: But we were all together.

TS: All the women stayed together.

JV: The women, yeah, yeah.

TS: Well, was there anything particularly difficult about that sort of—

JV: No.

TS: —course for you at all?

JV: No.

TS: Academically or physically?

JV: No, no.

TS: No?

JV: We had a—they call it conditioning, PT [physical training].

TS: Okay.

JV: But it was no big deal.

TS: Nothing really—

JV: No. And we marched. Okay, marching.

TS: Yeah?

JV: I loved it, but I could not see up ahead. Okay, they had "taller tap", meaning where you all get together you—if you have somebody who—in front of you who is shorter than you then you were the taller one and you tap that person and you swap places, so that the tallest people wound up in the front and, like, to one side, see. So I was the short one, I was always in the back. And so, when we would go to our marching exercise—practice, whatever—and we would get into bigger groups, and I could follow command, that's no problem, but I couldn't tell what the ones in the front were doing. And so, as part of your marching you were required to command a little group, and you were supposed to do a number of commands—and I don't know how many, five or seven, whatever it was—and you could pick out the list that you wanted. And so, anyway, I could—I couldn't remember what something was, because I had never been able to see it.

TS: [chuckles]

JV: And so, if you give them the wrong command you know they're going—It was a mess. [both chuckle] I flunked marching. So anyway.

TS: But they had you do some kind of remedial [unclear].

JV: Yeah, so I had to go to—So yeah, what I had to do is, at a big mass lecture—I mean, the whole auditorium full of the whole class—and so since I had flunked something that meant I had to sit up front, and my job was when the people on the stage had arrived for the—to open the class, my job was to stand up and say, "Class, in seats" or "Ten-hut" or something like that. Actually, I thought it was fun but I only had to do it once, but that was a penalty for flunking something. [both chuckle] And everybody kind of laughed at me, because little ol' me.

TS: Yeah.

JV: That was kind of fun.

TS: But you made it through.

JV: I made it through, yeah.

TS: Yeah.

JV: I mean, if I had been really, really smart I would have gotten a regular commission, because a certain percentage—I mean, the cream of the crop—were offered regular commissions, which is tenure. I mean, that's regular; you're not going to be booted out for anything. But I didn't. I mean, I wasn't bad, I was in the bottom 98%, but that's okay.

TS: [chuckles]

JV: But I did make regular later on.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And so, that's—

TS: That helped you later?

JV: Yeah.

TS: Well, then, the first assignment that you got, you went to Barksdale?

JV: Yes.

TS: Is that right.

JV: Yes.

TS: In Shreveport, Louisiana, 1967.

JV: Yes.

TS: Tell us about that. What was that like? Oh, your job too. You went into, you said, computers, data automation.

JV: Yes. Well, when I arrived on base—Well, first you go to the CBPO, Consolidated Base Personnel Office, and you check in and you process in, and I don't remember when it was I actually met my—where I was going to work.

TS: Right.

JV: But they had said—Now, this is data automation, which is a part of the comptroller in those days, and so new officers were all—always taken to the comptroller to be introduced. And they—Now, this is in 1966, and so you still had a lot of older, senior officers who were of WWII vintage; the colonels were like that. And so, they had told me, "Well, this guy is like that, and he likes it when you come in you go—you march in, you say, 'Lieutenant Helms reporting for duty, sir.'"

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Salute, stand at attention.

JV: And that's the only time in my life I ever had to do that.

TS: [chuckles] Right.

JV: And I'm—And it's too bad because that's the way the military should be, but these days it's like just going to your job.

TS: Yeah.

JV: Anyway. [chuckles]

TS: Well, apparently it was that way in the sixties, too, because you only had to do it once.

JV: Yeah, yeah.

TS: So you're learning, you're a green officer.

JV: Yeah, absolutely.

TS: How were you feeling about putting on the uniform, getting up every day?

JV: That was fine, because I'm a person of structure.

TS: Structure.

JV: Yes, regularity. Yes siree.

TS: That was good.

JV: Yes, it was. And—Now, actually, I wasn't there too long before I went to Sheppard [Air Force Base in Texas] for my data automation training.

TS: Training.

JV: And so, I was there for about three months I think, and I loved that. But when I was at Barksdale, to tell you the truth, I don't know what I did. [chuckling] I mean, I didn't know anything about anything. I vaguely recall that—See, this was Second Air Force. I was assigned to Second Combat Support Group, which was base level, but the way they worked out the personnel business I actually worked in Second Air Force. And so, seems to me like we—there were some other bases that we did some kind of programming support. I don't know. I really—

TS: [chuckles]

JV: But we would get new programs from on high.

TS: Right.

JV: And we would just have to, I don't know, make copies of them and send them somewhere else. I really don't know. I mean, the GIs [airmen] did it.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: [unclear]. Right.

JV: But—

TS: Just sending the orders down the line, that sort of thing?

JV: Yes. Yes.

TS: Well, what were your housing conditions like at first?

JV: Well, when I first got there, there was not enough quarters. I mean, this is in—Vietnam is building up and they're getting a lot of young people and nowhere to put them. So they didn't have any—enough BOQs—Bachelor Officer's Quarters—so I was given permission to live off base. And so, I found this apartment, which was a bit of a dump; I was glad to get out of it. But I did live in an apartment, and I had a—Let's see—fifty-five dollars housing allowance a month. Or maybe that was what my rent was. It seems to me like I got more housing allowance than I had to pay—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: You got a little bit extra?

JV: Yeah, yeah. But it was a dump. So after a while, when they had completed construction of a new BOQ, they said, "It's time to move."
I said, "Great." So I moved in when—

TS: Where did you do your eating with that?

JV: Well, when I lived in the BOQ—I never have eaten breakfast. I didn't—I just had coffee.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: No, you're not a breakfast eater?

JV: But I was close enough I could walk home and get something to eat, and most of these places had a—an exchange cafeteria, or something like that. But—

TS: You didn't have to go to an Officers' Club or anything?

JV: Well, I didn't—I mean, I could have but I didn't.

TS: But you didn't have to?

JV: No. It was closer—I mean, the BOQ was closer than the O Club [Officers' Club], though, so.

TS: Okay. Okay. So you're learning, you're starting to learn a little bit about automation, and you had said something when you had written to me about when you went in you wanted to make it a career.

JV: Yes.

TS: And how did you know you wanted to make it a career when you're so young and—

JV: Well, I don't know, just because—Well, my mother's twin brother, he was a careerist, and maybe he's the only one, but, I don't know, I just—

TS: It seemed like that would work.

JV: Yeah, that was the thing to do.

TS: Yeah.

JV: Yes.

TS: And so, you're liking it, you're enjoying the time, and stuff like that. So you're in Barksdale, now, and this is a period when Vietnam was really, really going on. I mean—

JV: Yes.

TS: —it's a pretty hot war.

JV: Yes.

TS: Did you have any views, politically, about the war? Did you—

JV: I tried to understand what it was about; the dom—the domino theory; that was what I knew about more than anything else. So that if Vietnam fell, then what was next? And so, we had to stop them right there. And so, I was anxious to do my part. And I despised the demonstrators and—

[The domino theory was prominent from the 1950s to the 1980s and speculated that if one country in a region came under the influence of communism, then the surrounding countries would follow in a domino effect]

TS: Why did you despise them?

JV: Because I thought they were stupid; they didn't know what they were doing. People like that who—the ones that live on campuses, live in a cloistered world and they don't know what real life is, and that's the same thing today.

TS: Yeah. So the antiwar protestors, do you feel like they were undermining things or—

JV: Oh sure.

TS: Yeah?

JV: Yes.

TS: Was any of that going on around Shreveport or anywhere—

JV: No.

TS: No.

JV: No. Now, see, most of these air force towns—military towns—they are military friendly.

TS: So it's just stuff you read about, like, in the papers and things like that.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: In papers and TV, yeah.

TS: Now, you had talked a little while ago how one of the reasons you wanted to go to Vietnam, too, was because you wanted to keep your brother out of it.

JV: Yes.

TS: And so, you volunteered.

JV: Yes.

TS: And you got accepted.

JV: Yes.

TS: And so, tell me about that; tell me about going to Vietnam.

JV: Well, I drove myself to—Let's see—Travis Air Force Base; that was the jumping off place.

TS: Out in California?

JV: Yeah. And so, I left my car with my brother's [chuckles] father-in-law [in Sacramento [California]—JV added later].

TS: Okay.

JV: And they kept it; it was theirs. And so, I—It seemed like it was a long time of processing at Travis, till we finally got on the plane. Of course, it was a commercial [aircraft].

TS: Okay.

JV: I can't remember the term for it when they are under contract [contracted commercial air fleet].

TS: Right.

JV: But anyway. Probably Continental [Airlines] or Braniff [International Airways]. So we were flying—I'm not sure if on that flight they let the woman and/or the officers on first

or not. Of course, there wouldn't have been many women anyway. But it was a long flight, and when we were getting close to being able to land, we—they said that we can't go to Tan Son Nhut [Air Base], Saigon, because we had a six hour—six or twelve hour delay leaving Travis [due to a false bomb threat—JV added later]. That meant everything was backed up. You could not land at Tan Son Nhut except in the daytime. Well, it was dark. It would have been dark. So we had to go to Kade—Kadena [Air Base]; I think it was Kadena, near Iwo Jima [Japan]. Anyway, Kadena.

And so, we landed there, and everybody got out, and we stayed in quarters somewhere; didn't get a bit of sleep I'm sure.

TS: [chuckles]

JV: And then we get back on the airplane to go, but we're still—we're on a—sitting in the stupid airplane, the engines are running away, but they wouldn't let us take off because we would still get there too soon. Well, smoking was permitted. I thought I was going to suffocate.

TS: On the plane?

JV: All these people were smoking. Oh, it was terrible. Anyway, we finally took off and we go to Tan Son Nhut. So as you're approaching Saigon, instead of a nice gradual, easy descent they come in level and then they make a nose dive, and then they land; the purpose being to avoid anti-aircraft fire.

TS: Fire? Yeah?

JV: Even if they were only rifles, which they did do.

TS: Were you nervous at all about that?

JV: No, that was just the way it was. Kind of exciting.

TS: Oh yeah? [chuckles] Okay. Now, you got there—I wasn't exactly sure—looks like, maybe, May?

JV: May of—

TS: Nineteen sixty-eight?

JV: Probably about the thirteenth of May, yeah.

TS: And so, this is after the Tet Offensive that had happened.

[The Tet Offensive was one of the largest military campaigns of the Vietnam War, launched on 30 January 1968, by forces of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese People's

Army of Vietnam against the forces of the South Vietnamese Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the United States Armed Forces, and their allies. It was a campaign of surprise attacks against military and civilian command and control centers throughout South Vietnam]

JV: The big Tet.

TS: The big Tet.

JV: Yeah.

TS: The initial one, right?

JV: That was in February, but they did—they were finishing up, what they called, Little Tet [Mini-Tet], that was a little bit—maybe about that same time when I was going in.

TS: So what was it like then? Do you remember getting off the plane? Do you remember anything about your initial—

JV: No, that was more [unclear]—

TS: Oh, because you were so tired.

JV: Tired, yeah, and, of course, there I am, female, and an officer, and they don't know what to do with me.

TS: Oh, they don't?

JV: Of course, what they do is they probably split up army here, air force there, if there's any navy split them up, and they probably have places—they know where they're going. But with me, I think they didn't really know what they were supposed to do with me. I finally wound up going to this—I think it was a hotel or something, it'd been commandeered by the military, and maybe stayed one night there. And that's when they found out that they had this empty room in the barracks, because this girl was gone TDY [temporary duty] for about six months—

TS: Right.

JV: —so there's a place I could stay.

TS: So you took over here room while she was gone?

JV: So they took me there. Well, when it's time to have this in-processing you very quickly have to get there. I'm not sure if I've got my jet lag taken care of or not. But anyway. And I don't know how—what my transportation was; I have no idea how I got—

TS: Right.

JV: —to places. But anyway, I got to this place and it was under this—it was a building but there were no screened windows. I mean, it was just air blowing in, that was all it was. And lots of guys there doing the same thing, in-processing.

Anyway, I'm sitting on this chair or whatever—bench—and all of a sudden, oh man, I think somebody said, "How about I—something to drink?"

I said, "Well, yeah." And I looked at—they had a water jug—fountain thing—with water in it, and it was the most God-awful stuff I ever saw. It was green. I thought, "Are you—I've got to drink that stuff? Yuk." So I said, "Yeah, I guess so." So I got a paper cup full of this water and I put it to my mouth and I threw up. I mean, I threw up. And I don't know that I'd had anything to eat, it might have just been dry-heaves, but I was sick to my stomach. And I thought, "What have I gotten myself into?"

TS: [chuckles]

JV: And it's embarrassing besides that.

TS: Yeah.

JV: But then I kind of calmed down and I didn't have any trouble after that.

TS: That was it.

JV: Yeah, it was kind of like going to school and then home the first time.

TS: Oh.

JV: You go the first time and everything's all right.

TS: Your nerves, kind of, were all—

JV: Yeah, yeah. And so, after I threw up and—

TS: Got it all out of your system.

JV: Yeah, and everything was fine.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And the water wasn't that bad. It looked awful. They had to treat it and that's—whatever—however they treated it [unclear] green like that.

TS: The water?

JV: Yeah.

TS: You drank it later?

JV: Yes.

TS: [chuckles] I don't know that I would have if they'd given that to me. So you're in Vietnam, and tell me a little bit about, like, the office that you worked in—

JV: Yes.

TS: —what that was like. Were there very many women? What was it like?

JV: Well, the office was in a large complex, because the Base Exchange—under the same roof. The Base Exchange was there and they had a movie theater, and the comptroller; that's what we were under. And so, we were just—Well, we were just in part of that. Before I got there, and not too many months before I got there, they were in a Quonset hut. I had pictures of it. I don't know where they're at.

TS: For the office that they worked in?

JV: Yes.

TS: Okay.

JV: And so—But anyway, at the time I was there we were in this building, and, I mean, it was not sorry conditions at all. I mean, it was great.

TS: Pretty nice?

JV: Yeah. I mean, it wasn't "modern" modern but it was quite workable. I mean, if you didn't know where you were you wouldn't have known you were in Vietnam. Maybe a little crude wood and everything, but painted nicely.

TS: Were there a lot of other women with you?

JV: No, there were no women in the comptroller that I remember. The only women where I was, was the key puncher and the maid, or janitor.

TS: Was the key puncher—

JV: Vietnamese.

TS: Vietnamese, okay. When you had left from—What was it?—Barksdale, were there many women in your field at that time?

JV: I believe there were—I know there were some women enlisted people there. I'm not sure if she was, kind of, secretarial, or if she was in the data automation business; I don't remember.

TS: Yeah? Not a whole lot though?

JV: No. And there were civilian women, but I think I was the only officer.

TS: Officer?

JV: Yes.

TS: Okay. The hours, generally—What?—twelve hour shifts?

JV: Almost twelve. Let's see, I forgot when I actually got in there in the morning. Maybe about 7:30, but you didn't leave until 6:00 in the evening.

TS: Okay. And six days a week?

JV: Yeah.

TS: Yeah.

JV: Now, I think Saturday they might say, "Well, two o'clock, go home."

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: [unclear] early?

JV: Yeah, yeah.

TS: But you kept a pretty busy schedule.

JV: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's not like you are wondering, "Well, when will the day end?" It was never like that.

TS: Yeah, just kept going.

JV: Yes.

TS: Well, one of the interesting things that I remember reading that you wrote was how with the money exchange, right, you didn't use the American currency because of—to keep the black market—

JV: Right.

TS: So you had—What was that called?—MPC?

JV: MPC; Military—

TS: Military Payment—

JV: —Payment—

TS: —Certificate.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

JV: Well, when you get to the—Now, when did we do it? That might have been one of the things we were doing at the airport that took so long. As soon as you got off the plane and started your processing in the airport they took your money.

TS: Exchanged it.

JV: I mean, you could have—Let's see—pennies—Now, I'm not sure, they might even have taken the silver.

TS: Yeah. I think you had written that you could have change but not dollars.

JV: Yes. Yeah. And so—But a lot of people like me, we were illegal, we were criminals. I kept a two dollar—or was it a one dollar—anyway, a bill in my wallet for the duration.

TS: Yeah. Just to keep it—

JV: Yes.

TS: Keep some American with you?

JV: Right. Yes.

TS: It was interesting, too, because it sounded like at the comptroller you actually had to—Did you print the money there or did you work on, like—

JV: No, no, no, no, no, no.

TS: But you got ready for it to—

JV: Yeah.

TS: —the exchange [unclear] change?

JV: When there was a money changing time, and they did it at least two times while I was there, to break the black market. They had to change—

TS: [unclear]

JV: —the MPC money also. And so, it was a deep dark secret. I mean, maybe top secret; I don't know. But the comptroller was the office that executed it.

TS: Okay.

JV: And so, they would—I don't know how they did it because that was—

TS: Out of your—

JV: —accounting and finance people. We were—

TS: Not your field.

JV: Yeah, but it was under our roof.

TS: Right.

JV: And so, they would receive the monies somehow and keep it until the magic day, and they might know a day ahead of time, but they couldn't tell anybody. I mean, even the GIs, because they were the big part of the black market.

TS: Right.

JV: So the day it happened they said, "Alright, on this time you go—your group goes to this place, you turn in your old MPC and you get your new MPC," and that was it.

TS: Yeah. Now, did you use your MPCs to buy much in the marketplace?

JV: Not really because I didn't—I didn't go off base that much. I never went off base by myself. But there was a commissary downtown and once in a while our group would go down there and get stuff for the office; soda pop; I don't know what else.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And so, we'd ride the pickup truck and go down there, and that was—that was exciting. I mean, driving down Vietnamese roads and everything.

TS: Yeah.

JV: But you'd go in there and it was—it was a commissary just like back home but a little cruder.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And so, you'd get the stuff and then you'd go back home—or back to the base. So that was—I didn't do that—I didn't even go once a month.

TS: No? Not that much, then.

JV: No.

TS: Were you nervous at all? Were you ever afraid?

JV: I was watchful, because while I was there there were some, like, pipe bombs. And there was this military bus that had some people going somewhere and this other female line officer—I think she worked over at base supply—she happened to be on this bus wherever they went, and so there was the explosion and she got injured. She got a Purple Heart. [chuckles]

TS: She got—

JV: Yeah, because she was injured—

TS: I see.

JV: —in a war zone.

TS: Yeah.

JV: But anyway, yes, so it did happen.

TS: Yeah.

JV: So you were—

TS: You have to be careful.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Well, you weren't all that interested in going off the post or the base.

JV: No, no, I knew better.

TS: It's a pretty big base, wasn't it?

JV: Yeah, yeah it was. Now, the guys, they did. I mean—Of course, they went for the brothels, and I don't know what else all, and there was this one place called 100 P Alley; I think is what it was called. And so, for a hundred P—piasters [Vietnamese currency]—you could have a good time.

TS: Yeah?

JV: And so, when we did go somewhere, like down to the commissary, I says, "Where is this place?"

And they said, "You want to know?"

I said, "Yeah." So they drove me by it and—100 P Alley. [both chuckle]

TS: Now, you also said you got a few rides on a helicopter.

JV: Yeah, one—

TS: One?

JV: I don't—You make friends, and have friends of friends, and I think this was the rescue squadron, whatever it was, and I think we did some jobs for them.

TS: Yes.

JV: And so, they let us go for a ride; the officers, me, I don't know who else. And it was on one of these—it wasn't a Huey [Bell UH-1 Iroquois military helicopter] it was a—some kind of rescue helicopter. And so, he—the pilot, he flew us around places and I says, "Can you do loop de loops?"

And he said, "Well, yeah," and so, he—helicopter did a loop de loop.

TS: Oh, nice.

JV: Yeah. So—But that was fun.

TS: How far up did you go? Was it just around the base?

JV: Yeah, just around Saigon. We didn't—You didn't dare go far.

TS: Yeah.

JV: I mean, it probably was illegal for the military to go beyond the perimeter.

TS: Right. And then—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: Dangerous.

TS: And you did a few boat rides on the river?

JV: Well, I didn't go on a boat ride but, again, it must have been a job we did for somebody—

TS: Yeah.

JV: —and they said, "Do you want to come see what a container ship looks like?"
"Yeah, yeah!"
So we go down to the dock and there was this—I mean, it was a big boat; I mean, oceangoing boat. And so, we looked around, and he opened the hatch and there was about a million apples down there, and it was cold. I mean, it was just a boat full of apples.

TS: Full of apples.

JV: Yeah. Yeah. But they did tell us about how dangerous it was just getting to the ocean from where they were on the Saigon River.

TS: Oh, to get out?

JV: Yeah.

TS: And travel. Well, that—

JV: So I would not have wanted to take a boat ride of the Saigon River.

TS: No. [chuckles] No. Well, you also talked about watching the war from your—

JV: Yes.

TS: —from your room.

JV: Well, in the—where I lived the most in this barracks, I was on the top—Was I on the top floor? Geez, I think I was. Yeah, I was. And I'm in the end room. And so, when the fighting was really bad, and I can't tell you exactly when that was, I could hear gunfire. I mean, it—not small arms but big gunfire in the distance. I could also hear concussions from the B-52s dropping bombs about ten miles away, which was getting pretty close I thought. And somebody had mentioned something about sitting out on the end of the—of the—call it the deck, and watching the war. [chuckles]

TS: But you did.

JV: But we did.

TS: You saw the tracer?

JV: Yeah. Well, let's see. I'm not sure if we actually saw the tracers or not, but you could hear it.

[Tracers, or tracer ammunition, are bullets or cannon projectiles that are built with a small pyrotechnic charge in their base that burns very brightly, making the projectile trajectory visible to the naked eye during daylight, and very bright during nighttime firing]

TS: You could hear it mostly?

JV: Yes.

TS: Yeah. Was that nerve-wracking at all?

JV: No, no.

TS: Not really?

JV: No.

TS: You felt pretty safe?

JV: Yeah, yeah.

TS: You have to go down to alert [unclear]?

JV: Yeah, a couple times when they would—the siren would go off and they would tell us, "Well, if the siren goes off you just leave your room and go downstairs," and there were sandbag bumpers—bunkers around all the barracks, so you were just supposed to crouch down there. So yeah, that happened a lot.

TS: Did it?

JV: There was a period where it happened a lot.

TS: There was a lot going on.

JV: Yes.

TS: Did you have to do that mostly at night, or was it sometimes when you were working, or—

JV: Well, it would have been when I was not working, so it could have been daytime on the weekend or at night, and most likely it was in the daytime.

TS: But not at work, you didn't really have to—

JV: Well, now, there, I think we did a couple times have to go somewhere, and there was really nowhere safe, but the guys had stacked up all the paper—the boxes of paper up and had boards that went across, and then they put sandbags on top of that, and that was our bunker. Somebody said later on, "Well, that was the worst thing you could have done because all that stuff is going to come crashing on you." [both chuckle]

TS: Yeah.

JV: But we tried.

TS: Yeah. You did something anyway.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Now, you had shown me a letter that you wrote to your grandparents, I think it was.

JV: Yes.

TS: And you were talking about the mail system and communication.

JV: Yes.

TS: You want to talk about that?

JV: Well, there was a post office in that same building where the BX [base exchange] and our office was, and it just looked like a regular post office with the little pigeon holes; had a key. And so, your outgoing mail, if it was just a regular letter to the U.S. the postage was free, and so you just had your little envelope and when you finished addressing it and seal it you just wrote "Free" in the corner where there would have been a stamp, and that's all there was to it. I didn't realize till later, but they didn't even postmark it, so you didn't know—I mean, the person that got it didn't know when it was actually sent.

TS: Oh, okay.

JV: I would rather have it postmarked than not but—

TS: But yeah. Well, you got the date of the letter, right, so—

JV: Yes.

TS: Now, you also said you sent some tapes?

JV: Yes. Yeah, tapes qualified for free postage also, and so I had bought this little re—open reel, little tiny three inch reels, and a lot of people did that. And so, instead of just writing you could talk like I'm doing now—

TS: Right.

JV: —and describe watching the war at the end of the barracks.

TS: Do you still have some of those?

JV: I've got them all.

TS: Oh, you do?

JV: Yeah.

TS: Oh, okay.

JV: I think I know where they are. [chuckles] I'm not sure.

TS: That's pretty neat. That's pretty neat. You also had some R&R moments [unclear].

JV: Yeah. While you were in Vietnam you got to go on one—I guess it was just a one week R&R, rest and recuperation, and they had a—quite a list of places you could go. A lot of people liked Hong Kong [China], and then Singapore, and lots of places like that where the guys could go get the girls, primarily, and the ones that liked to shop could shop.

Well, they had Australia. I said, "Man, I want to go to Australia." So I did, I went to Australia, and that was the greatest week. I mean, we stopped in Darwin [Australia] and they wouldn't let us get off except to stay in the airport, because we were under quarantine, for one thing; the Australians thought we were contaminated. And so, before we got off this—I forget if it was a person from the airport or if it was our stewardess, she had this aerosol can and she goes walking down the aisle spraying this, as if that's going to kill anything. And so, anyway, they did that before we got off.

TS: Right.

JV: But then we had to get back on and fly the rest of the way down to Sydney. And so, I got off there and one of the—there was a fellow with me who worked—he was also in the data automation business but he worked for Seventh Air Force, and so we knew each other and so we stayed in the same hotel on the beach. Oh, what's the name of that beach? [Manly Beach—JV added later] Kind of a main beach in Sydney. But anyway, on the beach. It was awesome.

TS: Yeah? Real Pretty?

JV: It was wonderful. And it was walking distance to a place where you could get the bus down to somewhere and then get the fer—the ferry—What do you call those ferries that are fast ferries? Air—Airfoil; Airfoil boats; man, they were fast.

TS: Oh, okay. Oh, okay.

JV: Yeah, yeah.

TS: They were just on the top of the water?

JV: Yeah. Yeah. Fast. They're about fifty miles an hour I think. But we signed up with some of the other guys to go to certain places.

TS: Like, a little tour?

JV: Yeah, just like if you were on a cruise.

TS: Yeah.

JV: So went lots of places.

TS: You enjoyed it?

JV: Oh yeah.

TS: Yeah.

JV: Had a ball. I was glad to get back. I mean, you would be surprised how much home is wherever it is.

TS: Yeah.

JV: Because this TDY made to John Hay [Air Station] in the Philippines, I was so glad to get back to Vietnam.

TS: Yeah. That was a little—was that a little later or earlier or something?

JV: That—Let's see [October, 1968—JV added later].

TS: At some other point during your career.

JV: Yeah, because I can't remember when my R&R was. I think that was, like, February or March, I don't know. Anyway. But both times when I was away I was glad to come back to my little place in Vietnam.

TS: And the other one was you were doing a temporary duty training, or some conference—

JV: It was a—It was a meeting like a seminar—

TS: Conference?

JV: Yeah, a conference; a conference. And there were people from Hawaii and—

TS: This was in the—I forget where you said it was—Philippines?

JV: It was—Yeah, Philippines. It was John Hay Air Base—

TS: Okay.

JV: —Baguio City. We flew into Clark Air Force Base [Clark Air Base], and then rode this pickup truck and/or bus up this—Oh my Lord—up this mountain, road beat up, to get to Baguio City, which was up in the mountain.

TS: Really windy road?

JV: Yes, it was, but it was interesting.

TS: I wish we were videotaping you—

JV: Yeah, oh gosh.

TS: —because Jane, your face [unclear] in this interview, you're so expressive in the way you're remembering it.

JV: Yeah.

TS: It's like your eyes just, kind of, can see—

JV: I mean, I'm there right now.

TS: Yeah.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Yeah, I can see.

JV: And it was a beautiful—What it was, was a resort and—Now, I think the John Hay Air Base has been closed as such; I do not know what they're doing with it now. But when I got up there, I mean, it's mountains. It looked like the North Carolina Appalachian Mountains; that's what it looked like. And we stayed in this cottage, I would call it, that had a fireplace, and this girl—Filipino girl, or wherever she was from, she and I, we

didn't know anything about how to do a fireplace, and we're trying to start it and didn't know about the damper.

TS: Oh.

JV: And all this smoke just inside that room. [both chuckling] But it got cold at night, and so we were glad to have the fireplace.

TS: Finally figured it out?

JV: Yeah, but that was fun.

TS: When you're in Vietnam, did you feel like you were doing a special part by being "in country"? I mean, was that something that was real special for you?

JV: Well, it—Yeah, two things that made me make it feel it was worthwhile; one is somebody had to go there to do the job, and the other one was, if I went, a man with a family wouldn't have to go.

TS: So you felt like that was—

JV: Yeah.

TS: —keeping somebody together with their family.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Well, what was it you enjoyed best about being in Vietnam?

JV: Well, I don't know, just being around all the military people.

TS: Yeah?

JV: Yes.

TS: Were you treated well?

JV: Yeah. There was one episode, and I forgot what kind of place it was, and I guess he was—he was an officer, I don't know if he was air force or army. I think he was air force. But whatever kind of business it was I had with him, he was upset that I was over there because he felt like I was causing trouble because they were having to tiptoe around me to make sure I, as a female, was safe—that I didn't get captured and raped and all like that—and he resented that I was there. What can you say? I mean—

TS: Like they're doing special treatment for women?

JV: I didn't think there was any special treatment, I mean—

TS: But his view.

JV: But his view, yeah. I don't think the male officers lived in any worse conditions than I did, so I don't know what he was talking about.

TS: Right. Oh, when we were going through the pictures, too, you were talking about the type of uniforms that you wore in Vietnam.

JV: Yes.

TS: Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

JV: Well, when I first got there I was wearing the little pinstripe, whatever—

TS: Seersucker?

JV: Seersucker, yeah. And that's what I wore most of the time. They called it the 1505 war, meaning that the [male—JV clarified later] officers would wear their equivalent to 1505, that was a color number, and it's beige.

TS: Yes.

JV: And—

TS: It's a beige uniform?

JV: Yeah, that the men wore. Now, the women did not have such a color. Ours was this—

TS: Like a seersucker?

JV: Yeah. And so, I wore that most of the time. Well, after I'd been there a while I was contacted by somebody in the personnel center. See, personnel runs the uniforms; what you wear, when you wear it, and all like that. And they were testing a casual workday uniform for women, consist—

TS: Like—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: —consisting—

TS: —two piece, still?

JV: Yeah, consisting of a dark blue skirt; it wasn't wraparound but it—all the way around but I think it was kind of like a wraparound. But anyway. And a light blue shirt. And so, I said, "Yeah, I'll experiment with that" Man, I was glad to have it. I mean—

TS: Pretty comfortable?

JV: It was. Oh yeah, a whole lot better than the regular one.

TS: Yeah?

JV: So I wore that the rest of the time. And as a matter of fact, it was so comfortable, when I got back to my first base after I had been in Vietnam I asked them, "May I wear this, because it was legal in Vietnam? Is it legal here?"
And they said, "Eh, no."

TS: No?

JV: No. They did not approve subsequently.

TS: Oh, the test one.

JV: Yeah, they didn't approve it, no. I loved it.

TS: You also wore fatigues a few times?

JV: Yeah, I was issued a set of fatigues, and—but the only—since it was 1505 war I didn't wear that either, except when I was doing something extracurricular, such as—I did have to go to the firing range to requalify.

TS: Oh, you did?

JV: Yes. And so, I had it for that. And then also this community thing—project that our office was doing building this little house, yeah, I wore it for that because it was kind of—

TS: Dirty and dusty?

JV: —dirty, yeah, but that was the only time.

TS: So not much. Mostly you just wore the skirt—

JV: Yeah.

TS: —and then the blue blouse on top.

JV: Yes.

TS: Well, what was it like to finally leave? I mean, were you excited but—

JV: Well, when it came time to leave—Well, now, let's back up and talk about assignments in general. The air force is not like the army. The army sends units over. The air force sends individuals over. So you don't leave until your replacement comes, and so mine, I think they wondered, well, was he ever going to come. [chuckles] And I was beginning to wonder—Well, I didn't want to stay longer than my year, but I was willing to stay as long as I had to. And then it does get to the point where I am ready to go home.

TS: You got the short timers itch?

JV: Yeah. And when he—my replacement did come, he actually got there early. I think he did, or maybe they told me I could leave—I don't remember. But overlap is a hard time. Nobody is doing the job but both of you are there. I don't like transition, I can't stand it.

TS: [chuckles]

JV: But anyway, I finally did leave, I think it was May 3, but I was about a week or ten days short of a whole year.

TS: The whole year.

JV: Yes. And I was ready to go, but I worried about leaving the other guys behind.

TS: Yeah.

JV: I mean, I knew they'd be fine but—

TS: Yeah, but the ones you were working with.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Well, what was it like to come home?

JV: Well, we'll talk about the airplane trip first.

TS: Okay.

JV: When they got us in the airport to go home I knew already that they did have officers first, and they have women first, and I says, "That's terrific. I know where to sit." And you don't sit in the front, you sit where the escape door is because that had leg room. And I thought, "Well, that's being kind of selfish, because some guy—six, seven foot guy, he ought to be sitting there." I says, "Listen, I hardly ever, ever invoke officer privilege; RHIP [Rank Has Its Privileges]; I hardly every give that," but by gosh, I was going to do that as I suffered the fourteen hour flight. So all aboard. I get on this bus—I think they

sent me on a bus by myself first. So anyway, I get on the plane, go up, and I make a beeline for that seat.

TS: So you got some cushy, roomy seat.

JV: Yes, leg room; leg room; main thing, leg room.

TS: Now, were these commercial flights going back too?

JV: Yeah, probably Braniff and Continental.

TS: Yeah.

JV: I think they did most of them. And so, we left and—Now, we did stop in—well, it was an air base in Japan [Probably Yokoto—JV added later].

TS: Okay.

JV: I can't remember which one it was now, but we did stop there, and they let us off, but I mean, it was almost like they had armed guards around us. I mean, get us in this little room. I don't know why they thought anybody would try to run away from there. I mean, you were on your way home. I mean, they kept close guard on us. And they also—Let me see. When did we get our MPC change back; I don't remember. But that had to happen sometime. And they did have a little store in the airport, and you just wanted to buy anything—a magazine or something—and lo and behold, they're using MPC over there, it's a different kind, and I think they would accept—

TS: What you had.

JV: —our money or whatever—silver or whatever it was; American money. But I was shocked; I didn't know they used MPC over there too. So anyway, get on—back on the plane, take off, and we're flying home, and I didn't realize what great circle really meant, because we were way north and we could—I think we could see the coast of Alaska.

[A great circle of a sphere is the intersection of the sphere and a plane which passes through the center point of the sphere]

TS: Oh yeah.

JV: And so, then you're heart goes pitter patter. I mean—

TS: There's America.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And then when you can finally see—well, the west coast.

TS: Did you land in San Francisco?

JV: Travis.

TS: Oh, Travis.

JV: Wait a minute. Yeah, it was Travis.

TS: Travis, okay.

JV: Yeah, it had to be Travis.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And so, there were several people on the airplane, we kind of got—officers—we got together and we said, "Okay, we're going to—" was it San Francisco?"—"to get a plane." See, you could buy your tickets in Vietnam, but—and that was a big deal because you didn't have to pay tax.

TS: Okay.

JV: And I'm not sure how much of a reservation you had. I'm really—I never did understand if I had a reservation or if it was just—

TS: An open ticket.

JV: Yeah. But anyway, we had our tickets, and so we all piled in—four or five of us piled in one taxi and we rode from Travis to—

TS: San Francisco?

JV: —San Francisco. Or maybe it was McClellan [Air Force Base, Sacramento, California]. Where—I don't remember where we were.

TS: That's okay.

JV: Yeah, so anyway, we go to the airport and then it was just like you were anybody else. I mean, you were in uniform. And I got on my airplane and—I don't know. I had a good flight; the people were nice when they found out where I was from and all like that.

TS: And you headed back to Atlanta, I think you said.

JV: Yeah, I had to go to Atlanta, and then—How did I get home from there? I think I went to—Did I go to New Bern or—I don't remember.

TS: It's okay, Jane.

JV: Yeah.

TS: But you said people treated you nice.

JV: Yeah, they did.

TS: Because some people had an experience coming back.

JV: Well, later on you'd run into people that were not pleasant.

TS: What would they say?

JV: I don't know. I can't remember words they said but—they never accused me of killing babies or anything like that, but they were just antiwar.

TS: Negative.

JV: And they didn't like anything military.

TS: Were you in uniform when you had these exchanges?

JV: Yeah, because they would not know, if I wasn't in uniform.

TS: Right. Yeah.

JV: And when I did fly domestic in those days I usually flew spa—military space [Space Available, or Space-A]—whatever they called it, it was half price.

TS: Oh, right.

JV: I could fly half price, but I had to be in uniform.

TS: [unclear]

JV: But that's a pretty good deal.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And since I was flying kind of Space-A, one trip I made was on a United—or was it Delta? Anyway, I headed for the back and I got my seat, and the stewardess came by

when they were ready to close up, she says, "We need to rebalance the plane. We're overloaded in the back and they need to put some more people up in first class. Would you like to ride in first class?"

I said, "Oh, yes. Throw me in that briar patch," and I flew first class.

TS: That's real nice.

JV: But she picked me out because I was military. [My 102 pounds would hardly be consequential in balancing aircraft.—JV added later]

TS: That's very nice. Well, let me ask you a couple things about some of the things that were going on in the world at this time. So in 1968, that was quite a transformative year.

JV: Yes.

TS: I guess in a lot of ways, and even before. We didn't even talk about—You would have been just in the air force when JFK [President John Fitzgerald Kennedy] was assassinated, right?

JV: I was still here.

TS: Oh, you're still here. You graduated—

JV: Yeah, that was '70—'70—

TS: That's right, '66 you graduated, right?

JV: When did—

TS: You graduated in '63. I mean, he was assassinated in '63.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: He was killed in '63, yeah.

TS: So you would have been here.

JV: Yeah, I was here.

TS: Sixty-two is when you got here.

JV: Right.

TS: Got my years all mixed up.

JV: Yeah, I was still here. I remember—If you still want to know.

TS: Yes, I do.

JV: I was walking—See, everybody's thinking about Thanksgiving; that's all they're thinking about.

TS: Right.

JV: And so, I'm walking, I guess, from the library to somewhere and I heard somebody say some—"Did you hear this?"
I said, "No, what?"
And so, they said, "JFK's been shot."
And I thought, "This is pretty serious." I—You don't know what's rumor or how much is true. But I went on—I guess I went to the dorm and found out more about it. See, I did not have a TV. I had a radio but I didn't have a TV; nobody had TVs in their room. We had a TV down in the basement. Wait a minute. Sixty-three. Yeah, I would have been in Grogan.

TS: Yes.

JV: But yeah. So that's how I found out; I was walking—

TS: What did you think about it?

JV: Well, it was a terrible thing. I mean, what would anybody want to do a thing like that for? I mean, I was barely old enough—Well, wait a minute. Maybe I hadn't even voted yet, because you couldn't vote until you were twenty-one. I would have been a Republican, but you don't shoot presidents; you just don't do that.

TS: But did it make you fearful at all?

JV: No.

TS: No?

JV: No.

TS: Nothing like that?

JV: No. But no. But later on when [Dr.] Martin Luther King [Jr.] had been assassinated I was at Shreveport—Barksdale, and I was driving home, and I don't know why I was driving up on [Interstate] 40 to go across because I usually would go down lower. But anyway, I was driving through Tennessee and I was concerned about the—about a cold-blooded

killer being loose, and they were having the traffic stops on Interstate 40—or 20, whatever it was.

TS: On 40? Yeah?

JV: And so, I had a pistol; I've always had a pistol. So I had it with me. There was no such thing as concealed weapons in those days; licenses. But anyway, I had it with me, and I'm driving along and I know there's a—

TS: Checkpoint?

JV: —checkpoint. I had my pistol right there—

TS: On the seat?

JV: —on the seat, and so I got stopped, and I wasn't—wouldn't have been in uniform, but anyway, I showed him my driver's license and my military ID card, and he says, "Is everything fine?"

I said, "Yeah." I says, "I have this gun right here."

He says, "Okay, be careful," and then he took off—I took off.

TS: Yeah.

JV: But yes, I was concerned. Don't ask me. I should not have been driving on that road. [chuckles] Maybe I thought it was safer than all the other roads, because they didn't have—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Was this, like, the day he was shot or around that timeframe?

JV: Well, I think whatever his name was was still on the loose.

TS: Okay. The assassin.

[James Earl Ray assassinated civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on 4 April 1968]

JV: Yeah.

TS: Now, you had a pistol. Did you shoot as a young girl?

JV: Well, yeah, we—I mean, we lived out in the country, and so we could go shoot target—we didn't shoot animals.

TS: Just target practice?

JV: Just target practice, yeah.

TS: Yeah. You had talked, I think, about on one base where you originally got that pistol you couldn't take it in your room or—

JV: Yeah, right, when you lived on base, if you lived in the single member quarters, like the GIs in their barracks and we in our BOQ [Bachelor Officer Quarters], you could not have a pistol in your room, which I thought was stupid. I mean, maybe—But I had to check it in at the security air police.

TS: [chuckles] And check it out again?

JV: Yeah.

TS: Yeah. Okay. It's '68, so just before you went to Vietnam you had Martin Luther King Jr. assassinated.

JV: Yes.

TS: And then when you're in Vietnam Robert Kennedy was assassinated.

[Robert Francis "Bobby" Kennedy was assassinated shortly after midnight on 5 June 1968 and died the following day]

JV: I guess. I don't—didn't remember much about that.

TS: Because you get the, kind of, news that quickly.

JV: Oh, well, yeah, we got news. We had Armed Forces television [Armed Forces Network].

TS: Yeah.

JV: Yeah, yeah, we got all the news.

TS: But that didn't really—

JV: No, I—Again, what was the point in shooting somebody like that? I just—

TS: So the counter-culture's going on. We talked about antiwar protesters. Yeah. But there's also a counter-culture with not just the antiwar and sometimes separate from that, but Woodstock and the drug culture and [unclear] power.

JV: Well—

TS: Things like that.

JV: Damn—Bunch of damn hippies. I can't tolerate them. I had nothing to do with them. I was never ever attracted to drugs or any of that stuff, and I thought, "How can you waste your life doing that?"

TS: Well, they say there was a lot of drug use in Vietnam, not—

JV: Oh, yeah, yeah.

TS: Did you see that via other people?

JV: No.

TS: Just heard about it?

JV: I knew it went on, sure.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And our guys in our office, they knew where to get it—

TS: Yeah.

JV: —and I suppose they got it themselves, but it wasn't rampant in our group, but it was in the army. The army had a—I mean, they had a tough life over there. They had fragging. You know what fragging is?

[The term fragging is used to describe the deliberate killing, or attempted killing, by a soldier of a fellow soldier, usually a superior or non-commissioned officer]

TS: Shooting an officer?

JV: Yeah.

TS: Did you hear about episodes of that while you were there?

JV: Yeah. I mean, there was nothing—that was army stuff.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Nothing personally.

JV: But it would be in the news, yeah.

TS: Well, the other thing, then, I think you would have been back because it was later that summer, was the moon landing, in '69.

JV: Okay, I was at Randolph, and I lived in the apartments off base, and I stayed up for that.

TS: Did you?

JV: I did.

TS: Yeah.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Was it pretty neat?

JV: Yeah, that was great.

TS: Was that something that you had followed at all; like, the space war between the Soviets and the United States, and the race to the moon, things like that?

JV: Well, yeah. Yeah, sure. Now, there was a bad thing that occurred to me in conjunction with the space program. When I was at—living in Shreveport in the apartment off base, that was about the time when they had a fire in the—in the Mercury—

[On 27 January 1967 the cabin in the Apollo 1 Space Command Module caught on fire during a rehearsal launch and killed all of the crew members aboard]

TS: Oh, right.

JV: They had oxygen inside and it caught fire.

TS: Right.

JV: Oh, that was terrible. Well, it happened—

TS: Was that in Texas?

JV: No, no. Where was—I guess it was down at—

TS: Florida?

JV: Florida. Anyway, the reason I can remember when it was is because it was the same day, or the day after that, that my grandfather had a severe stroke, and I just always remember the two of those things.

TS: Oh, together?

JV: Yes.

TS: Yeah, that happened right around that time.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Well, now, you're—when you can back from Vietnam and you ended up at Randolph [Air Force Base, Texas]. Now, this is your first time to Randolph, right? Because you ended up at Randolph three times.

JV: Three times, yeah.

TS: So you're in Randolph, and was it—how was your experience overall at Randolph when you were stationed there?

JV: Well, that's the base everybody wanted to go to and I got to go there three times. [chuckles]

TS: Why did everybody want to go there?

JV: Well, it's close to San Antonio, which was a wonderful city, and it's—San Antonio is the birthplace of military air, and so everybody has a—has an attraction to the air force people. Randolph is an old base. It was named for a fellow who was killed in an early accident—airplane accident and—But anyway, it's a beautiful base. And so, I was just tickled pink [slang for very happy] that I got assigned there. I didn't know anybody to pull strings to get me there, so I don't know how I wound up there; I really don't.

TS: Yeah. Now, you're still in the data automation?

JV: Well, I'm in the field but not in that organization. I was a programmer.

TS: A programmer.

JV: Computer programmer, back in the days when everybody programmed in COBOL.

TS: Yeah, how was that? That's math, isn't it?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: You could do COBOL. No, no, no, programming.

TS: No numbers[?]?

JV: No, no, no, no; not at all. Common business-oriented language; COBOL. It—I mean, it could be made hard but it was easy.

TS: [chuckles] Okay.

JV: And that's why everybody learned it, because it was easier than some other languages that were more precise. But anyway, I was in—this was a personnel center, and I was assigned to a unit that did the—let's see—airmen—anyway, it was the personnel, the airmen side, the enlisted personnel side.

TS: Okay.

JV: There was an officers' side and enlisted. I can't remember what they're called. [Airmen Personnel Data System (APDS)—JV added later.]

TS: That's okay.

JV: So anyway, there were about six of us programmers, and two officers, and the rest military enlisted, and then we worked for a civilian fellow. And so, we—each of us had one or two main programs, and so what we had to do is take—make upgrades to them, make them work together, and then they sent them out to the world, to all the base level CBPOs, Consolidated Base Personnel Offices, who ran on Burroughs 263s [Burroughs B263 computers]; punch cards.

TS: Right, the punch cards.

JV: Yeah.

TS: So you got it all figured out in Randolph and then sent it out from there.

JV: Yes.

TS: Okay.

JV: Or did I work on the Major Command side? Maybe I worked on—because—

TS: That's right. I think you [unclear] down a lot more detail than in here.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: They [unclear] major command, maybe we were major command, and we also worked on Honeywell [computers].

TS: Yeah.

JV: But anyway, whatever level it was, we did the programming and the updating and then they would—the programs would be sent out to all the units, whether it was base level or major command level.

TS: So let's see. Yeah, that's what you said, maintenance. And this is where you played badminton.

JV: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

TS: How was that?

JV: Oh boy. Well, that was great because that's how I met my husband. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah?

JV: Yeah. Well, they liked you to do something to keep active.

TS: Right.

JV: So they said, "Lunch is a good time. Go to the gym, do something." A lot of guys played basketball and handball and racket ball, and, well, I didn't do any of that so we had badminton, so I started playing badminton. I had taken a semester of badminton here as my PE [physical education].

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Here at Woman's College, okay.

JV: Yes. And so, we played and played almost every day that I was at Randolph.

TS: And you talked a little bit about—like, there weren't any women's facilities for you, right?

JV: No, no. So when I would show up, need a place to change, or even go to the bathroom, they had to put a sign on this door saying "Women Only, No Men," or something like that, and it worked most of the time. [chuckles]

TS: But not all the time?

JV: Once in a while some man would be in a hurry and go in, not read the sign.

TS: Not read the sign; they're just used to that door.

JV: Yeah. And then later on they—there's this little bitty building—I don't know what it was—next to the gym, it was on the flight line, and there was a shower and restroom in there, and so they fixed that up for the women. So I had to go outside to this little room.

TS: That's interesting how you saw that kind of change over time, starting in the sixties and then ending up in the late eighties where the facilities weren't always ready for women [unclear].

JV: Right. And they were reluctant. Certain people were reluctant to acquiesce to my needs.

TS: Yeah.

JV: I mean, gave me a hard time. "Why do you need a place to do this?" And—Because I was the only one, and you can understand today when minorities of—any kind of minority, whether—anything, and they ask—handicapped, "Well, I've got to have this."
Well, you're only one in a hundred thousand and you want us to spend—" So I can understand, but still.

TS: But you've described yourself as someone who doesn't really makes a lot of waves too.

JV: Right.

TS: So how did you negotiate that?

JV: No, I just listened to them and tried to be nice to them, and sugar draws more flies than vinegar, and so eventually I—they gave us a whole locker room, because by that time more women were coming in. They didn't play badminton but they did other things—

TS: Right.

JV: —in the gym.

TS: Right. So as more came in they had to accommodate them, right?

JV: Yeah, yeah.

TS: I see. And so, do you think, like, with yourself, just winning over people personally maybe helped too—

JV: Yes.

TS: —to try to get more support for whatever you needed as a woman that was different.

JV: Yes.

TS: So privacy, things like that.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Yeah. So you had talked about a particular assignment that you didn't like as much, I think that was at Langley [Air Force Base in Virginia].

JV: Yeah, Well, this was in a tactical data processing support unit, and I didn't know squat about tactical air command. And they were doing things like—I mean, I guess computers out in the field in the war zone, they didn't have many on the ground, and so they were just starting to do that. I mean, they had these militarized computers and—but they were programming things that I just didn't understand, and I—the programming language, I think it was JOVIAL. I couldn't—

[JOVIAL is a high-level computer programming language specialized for the development of embedded systems (specialized computer systems designed to perform one or a few dedicated functions, usually embedded as part of a complete device including mechanical parts)]

TS: It just wasn't something you were familiar with.

JV: Right, I was just not in my element. And besides that, the building where we worked was a terrible place to work. It was so cold, because in those days the machines were still huge and they had to be kept cool. It was freezing, freezing, but our floor—or underneath is where some of the circulation was; just freezing.

TS: It kept your legs really cold.

JV: Yes. It was awful. And, I don't know, I just didn't—I didn't like it.

TS: You didn't have a good fit with that—

JV: I didn't—

TS: —particular place.

JV: Right.

TS: So then you came back to Randolph.

JV: Yes.

TS: And—

JV: Because I was married; I got, what we call, a Join Spouse [Assignment Program] tour.

TS: Where did you meet your husband?

JV: Well, we played badminton.

TS: Originally [unclear].

JV: Yeah, originally; yeah. And so—

TS: Now, is he in the military?

JV: He was retired. See, he was twenty-eight years my senior.

TS: Okay.

JV: So he was in civil service; he was a retired double dipper [slang for earning a salary from a federal job while collecting a military pension]. And so, he was in civil service in the personnel center and worked two or three cubicles down—or office groups down, and so—and he—during his lifetime he was a specimen, an athlete. I mean, in WWII. I mean, he played—he played baseball, basketball at Kelly Field [Annex, formerly Kelly Air Force Base, Texas]. I mean—

TS: Yeah. So you had fun playing with him.

JV: Yeah, yeah, and he played squash and racquetball and all that kind of stuff. So anyway, I don't know how they talked him into badminton because he never played badminton either, but a bunch of us in that floor—

TS: Yeah.

JV: —we said, "Let's go give it a whirl." And there's also one guy, he was a civilian, he had—whatever you call it that the spine is frozen.

TS: Okay.

JV: And he couldn't—he couldn't move so he would play ball—he would run back there—

TS: [chuckles]

JV: So we'd never ever—

TS: I seriously need a video. [chuckling]

JV: We would never hit a lob over his head.

TS: Okay.

JV: Because he couldn't get it.

TS: Yeah. So just to have him play.

JV: Yeah.

TS: That's fun.

JV: So anyway, that's how I met him.

TS: Okay.

JV: And so, then when I was sent to Langley we were probably going to be an item, and so when I got married then they gave me a Join Spouse transfer.

TS: To go back, because he was connected with the air force through civilian employment.

JV: Yes.

TS: Okay. I didn't know that they did that.

JV: Well, they do it more for when you're military to military, and it's difficult if you're air force and army or something like that, but it's easier if you're air force, air force.

TS: Right, then you can get—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: They do everything they can.

TS: I actually really hadn't thought about that too much.

JV: Yes.

TS: So we're getting into the late seventies that you're there at Randolph, and then you head to the Pentagon for a little bit.

JV: Yes.

TS: What happens—

JV: Well, I—Let me see. Did I try—Okay, I wanted to get an extension. See, a normal tour at personnel center was four years, and so I wanted—I wanted to stay.

TS: At Randolph?

JV: Yeah, but they wouldn't let me have the extension so I went—

TS: It looks like you had—you went from '74 to '79 and that's five years.

JV: Yeah. At Randolph?

TS: Yes.

JV: Well—Yeah, okay, let's—whatever. [both chuckle]

TS: Okay. Maybe not. Maybe I wrote it down wrong.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: But I tried to get—Maybe it was my first when I tried to get out.

TS: Yeah.

JV: I don't remember. But anyway, they wouldn't give me an extension so I say, "Okay." So I go to the Pentagon at the National Guard Bureau, and they didn't have any quarters at first. Of course, there's no quarters at the Pentagon so you'd have to live—if you wanted quarters you'd have to live at Bolling [Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling; formerly Bolling Air Force Base], but they didn't have any open so I lived off—We lived off base, and I had this apartment, took the city bus in, and while we were there for a while, voilà, quarters opened at Bolling, so we moved into family quarters at Bolling and lived there for the rest of my tour.

Now, I worked in the Pentagon itself for most of the time in the National Guard Bureau, comptroller, data automation. It was the same kind of organization that was at other places. And so, our little office, we kind of oversaw the data automation offices at

all of these Air National Guard sites, of which there were one hundred and, almost two, in each state.

TS: Okay.

JV: That's how many units they had at the time. And so, every time there was a change to something—Let's see. We would try to man—Okay, what we did is we managed their equipment. Everybody had the same kind of Burroughs 3500 or 3510, whatever it was, but they didn't all have the same amount of storage space, disk—not disk, it was mass storage is what it was. And so, you—We were to keep track of the usage that was going to come down the pipe.

TS: Okay.

JV: Like, the people—personnel—would say, "We're going to have this kind of update and it's going to take thirty-five—not gigs [gigabytes], thirty-five bo—KB [kilobyte] or something, whatever it was.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And so, you would look at each base and see if their computer was big enough.

TS: To hold that.

JV: And eventually you'd have to say, "Okay, you—we will order you—"

TS: A new computer if there wasn't enough room?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: Yeah, or a little more mass storage or something like that.

TS: Oh, okay.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Oh, so you really had to track that pretty careful.

JV: Yeah, yeah, but it was fun, I enjoyed it.

TS: Yeah.

JV: Yeah, I really did. And so—At one time they—Like, these data automation conferences we had at ATC [Air Training Command] at the major command level, we also had them

at the Air Force Data—AFDC—Data Services—something—Center [AFDSDC Air Force Data Services Development Center—JV corrected later] at Gunter Air Force Station [Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base], that's in Montgomery, Alabama. And so, I think about every year they had a big conference, and so we—me, myself, and this other guy from the Guard Bureau—we went there representing the Air National Guard. And—Now, what was I going to say about that? [both laugh] I forgot what it was. I don't remember what I was—It's something has escaped me.

TS: That's okay. That's alright. It might come back to you.

JV: But anyway. Yeah.

TS: You were talking about how that system was all over the place, right?

JV: Yes, it was standard—they were standard systems; standard system. And so, then there came a time where for some reason or other they moved our office to [Joint Base] Andrews [in Maryland]. See, there's the Air National Guard Support Center [Air National Guard Readiness Center] out there—

TS: Okay.

JV: —and there are some offices, but for some reason or other we weren't there before, but we did move there. So I still lived at Bolling but I worked at Andrews and—

TS: Did the same thing?

JV: —did the same thing; absolutely the same thing.

TS: And then at some point did you go back to the Pentagon?

JV: I think we did.

TS: Yeah?

JV: I think I was at the Pentagon [unclear]

TS: So they just weren't sure where to put you. [both chuckle]

JV: Yeah.

TS: Well, now you've been in—'66, [unclear]—twelve, thirteen, fourteen years, and how do you feel, overall, like you've been treated with promotions, just in general?

JV: Well, I was treated fairly because I was not a politician; I was not climbing the rungs; I wanted to do my job and do it well. And so, I did not go out to find contacts, mentors, and so I did not make lieutenant colonel, I retired as a major, but that was okay.

TS: That was okay by you?

JV: Yeah, yeah.

TS: But did you feel you were treated fairly in that, in—

JV: Yeah, because I wasn't—I was not—I did not need power; I did not need grade to do—to have self-satisfaction.

TS: Right.

JV: I just wanted to do my job.

TS: Well, one thing I think that you were talking about, when you talked about the type of work that you were doing that struck me, was you said you liked managing things not people.

JV: Originally, yeah, and now. See, I was never a manager.

TS: Yeah.

JV: Never. That's why I only got as far as I did, because if you can't lead people and organizations you're not going to get anywhere, but I was content to be down working like that.

TS: But you also mentioned that the part that you enjoyed about it was that it was a team effort.

JV: Oh, yeah, yeah.

TS: Yeah.

JV: I liked being part of a team. I remember what went over my head.

TS: Oh, okay.

JV: While I was at the Guard Bureau, and I don't know how long I had been there, this general was in the—no, at headquarters level [Headquarters USAF—JV clarified later]; data automation was not under the comptroller. See, that was a big deal, about midway into my career, to get data automation out from under the comptroller—

TS: The comptroller.

JV: —because—I mean, historically, we were there because we crunched numbers and we were just like finance and accounting and budget, but more and more we became—

TS: It was changing.

JV: Yeah, and we knew nothing—and to be promoted in the comptroller you had to be—spend time in data automation, finance, and budgeting. We didn't know anything about those things; had nothing to do with it.

TS: And they didn't know anything about you either, right?

JV: That's right. And so, eventually we were separated. So—

TS: Where did they move you to?

JV: Well, our own little world.

TS: Okay.

JV: I mean, information systems, in and of itself.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So it became separate. Okay.

JV: Yes. Because we did work for everybody.

TS: And this is where it moved to just as you were getting out, right?

JV: No.

TS: They moved you before?

JV: It had happened before, but when I was in the Pentagon it was still like that I guess.

TS: Still part of the comptroller?

JV: But anyway. So I'm in the Pentagon at the Guard Bureau—don't remember how long I'd been there—and here's this general in the new information systems, or whatever they called it.

TS: Okay.

JV: Not comptroller, but information systems. And I—everybody knew his reputation as a pretty good guy, and I forgot what his background was, but anyway, we liked that he was

leading us. And so, I get this call from his office and he—they said, "Well, General So-and-so would like to speak to you."

I said, "Me?"

TS: [chuckles]

JV: And so, I said, "Well, okay." And so, I went up and met my appointment, had a nice chat, and he said, well, he was just wondering if he would like—if I would like to work for him—for his office. I said, "Well—" Anybody else would have said, "Yes, when do I start?" But I didn't. I said, "Well—" I liked where I was, I liked what I was doing, I felt like I was accomplishing something, and so I said, "Well, with all due respect, I think I'll just stay." That was probably why I didn't get promoted. I mean, not because anybody had it in for me, but had I accepted that job—

TS: Right.

JV: —I would have promoted.

TS: You're being graded under a general and a different kind of [unclear].

JV: Yeah, yeah. But everybody told me how stupid I was. I said, "No, I'm not that kind of manager/leader.

TS: It wasn't for you.

JV: It wasn't for me.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And I was not—I never regretted it; never regretted it.

TS: You just enjoyed what you were doing.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Yeah. Well, you seem to really have enjoyed being in the air force and having that—

JV: Oh, sure.

TS: —atmosphere and everything.

JV: Yes.

TS: So the Pentagon up until about '84, and then you head back for your last tour to Randolph.

JV: Yes.

TS: You just can't get away from Randolph.

JV: Well, of course, Bill's from there. He was born in San Antonio.

TS: Oh, so you put in for it and you wanted to get there?

JV: Well, by then we could pull strings.

TS: Okay.

JV: See, he worked at MPC [USAF Military Personnel Center] and he—now, he was retired. He retired when we moved to—let's see. Maybe it was before that. Anyway, he was retired when we were at the Pentagon, but he still knew people. I mean, people who worked for him were still there and they were moving up the chain.

TS: Oh, so they would accommodate him for things he wanted to do?

JV: Yes. And so—

TS: That's how you got to go back.

JV: That is right, back to, almost, the desk that I left.

TS: Is that right?

JV: Yes. [both chuckle] Couldn't ask for better.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And I was doing, practically, the same thing I did when I was there before, except I did—I was more into the—let me see. Was I doing the—I—

TS: It's okay. You wrote a lot of it down in the one thing that we can look at if they want to get into that detail. Well, you also talked about other sports, besides the great sport of badminton, that you were playing.

JV: Yes.

TS: That you played during your time in the air force.

JV: Yeah. I played softball. We—On Randolph we had a—the base—women's team played in a league including civilian teams.

TS: Right.

JV: And so, we played a lot. We just played and had a good time.

TS: What position were you in in softball?

JV: Well, either—let's see—third or—

TS: Yeah?

JV: —or short—

TS: Infield?

JV: Yeah, well, they had short field; they had ten on a team.

TS: Okay.

JV: I never played that because I didn't have the arm to throw it in from the outfield, but I played third base when they found out I could throw it from third to first.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And it was more of that. And so—

TS: You have to have a decent arm for that.

JV: Yeah, yeah.

TS: Yeah.

JV: So anyway, I loved softball.

TS: Yeah.

JV: Yes siree, I loved that.

TS: Played a lot of that?

JV: Yes.

TS: And then you also played a little basketball and volleyball too?

JV: I played a little bit of—I think we had a little bit of basketball at Shreveport [Barksdale Air Force Base], but I don't remember much about that. Maybe we didn't, I don't know. And I'll have to tell you, this is—as you be getting older you realize that time is passing

you by, because I never was able to play a lot of basketball again after I left WC, and I thought, "I'll be able to play at the next base, at the next base, at the ne—" I never did.

TS: Yeah?

JV: And I said, "I'm getting old—"

TS: [chuckles]

JV: "—for basketball." Now, you can play softball forever.

TS: Yeah.

JV: But not basketball.

TS: Well, you got some volleyball in, too, though, because that's one of the pictures you showed me.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: Yeah, that's right; yeah, yeah. I played volleyball in the same—Well, now this time it wasn't a local league it was an air training command league.

TS: Okay.

JV: There are several bases; Chanute [Air Force Base] and—which is up in Illinois, and other bases.

TS: So you played, like, a base team.

JV: Yeah. So we would have ATC command tournament, and I liked volleyball but I was too short and I didn't know how to serve without getting blisters. I just—

TS: Oh, the bruises and everything.

JV: Yeah, they didn't do much overhand serving in those days, it was—

TS: Under? Well, you could do some wicked serves with the underhand.

JV: Yeah, yeah, but I was just too short to be effective.

TS: Okay. Well, let's talk a little bit, then, about any memorable awards or decorations that you might have ever received.

JV: Well, they al—they always say that everybody gets the same award; that is, when you put your time in your going to get your award. So you just don't know how much of them are really, really great.

TS: Yeah. You talked a little bit about award inflation, I think.

JV: Yeah, that's the exact word, inflation. When I was in Vietnam, every time a GI would be ready to go home, that was one of my jobs as a base—as the assistant data automation officer, was to do paperwork, including writing up awards.

TS: Citations?

JV: Yeah. Well, they came pre—pre-worded practically. All you had to do was write in their name and the date, and I thought, "That's nothing. That doesn't say anything." And so, I started writing them myself, because I knew who they were and I could say what they did.

And the word was that when the people at CBPO got them to process them they said, "These are great," because they were written for the person.

TS: Yes.

JV: So I feel like my part in getting somebody else something was more meaningful.

TS: Than the ones that you received?

JV: Yeah. Yeah.

TS: Well, because you did get the Bronze Star.

JV: Well, again, if you survive—Okay, if you survive, airmen got the air force Commendation Medal, officers got the Bronze Star, senior officers, like colonels or generals, they got Legion of Merit. See—

TS: So it depended on your rank what you were going to get.

JV: Yeah. Yeah.

TS: That's—

JV: I mean, it's a shame, because somebody who really earned a Bronze Star, I would never want to stand next to them.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: One for valor.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Because there's different, like—

JV: Yeah, and it should—they should never have given Bronze Stars for administrative stuff; make it another one. I think they did finally; they have made another medal for service like that, not the Bronze Star.

TS: Like meritorious service?

JV: Yeah, yeah.

TS: Yeah. Well, you've described your relationship with some supervisors and peers and things like that, but as time changed and more women were coming in did you see any change in the atmosphere of the office?

JV: Well, yeah, I guess. I mean, I worked in the kind of places where there are a lot of civilians, and if you're going to have civilians you're going to have civilian women, so it was—what's the difference between having a new female officer or military person when you already got a bunch of female wo—civilians.

TS: So you think that helped the transition?

JV: Well, yeah. I mean, it wasn't such a big deal. Now, in Vietnam it was a big deal because there are no civilian women that were—Well, you don't—you can't count the keypunchers. I'm talking about somebody in the real management—

TS: Positions.

JV: Yeah.

TS: So there wasn't more resistance there; that one guy you were talking about who thought you needed to be protected.

JV: Well, there was another one in the Pentagon. In the comptroller there was also a graphics section, and they, for some reason or another, wound up down in the basement of the Pentagon. But anyway, I had occasion to go down to get some kind of graphics job done, and there was this civilian man who was working on this desk, check-in place, and so I said, "Well, I've got this job," and I—the gist of it is he would not call me by my rank; captain or major, whatever I was; he kept saying Miss. "What in the world are you doing that for? You're going out of your way. You can see what my grade is." And I don't know. See, I am a pushover. You can back me in a corner and I'll stay there. But I really—that really got to me and I finally laid it out. I says, "Listen, I am in the military. I

earned my grade. I'd appreciate it if you'd associate me with the grade." And he did after that.

TS: After that?

JV: Yeah.

TS: Did you face any other kinds of discrimination as a woman?

JV: No.

TS: No?

JV: No.

TS: Okay. Now, we hear a lot more today about sexual assault, sexual abuse in the military.

JV: Yes.

TS: Did you ever hear about anything like that going on?

JV: No.

TS: No?

JV: I wondered where all that was happening.

TS: Yeah. Do you think it might have to do with, like, the leadership and where you're working, and things like that?

JV: Well, I don't know. Like I said, I don't know where it was all happening so I—

TS: Yeah. You never heard of anyone you worked with—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: Never.

TS: But you didn't work with a lot of women in the—

JV: No, no, but if it had happened it would have been publicized. I just never heard of it.

TS: Yeah.

JV: I mean, it just seemed like it exploded over night after I had retired or—well, maybe before I retired, I don't know, but I just never heard of it around where I was.

TS: Where you were at.

JV: Yes.

TS: We started talking about this just a little bit, the issue of supervising people or managing people. At first you said that wasn't something you were interested in.

JV: I am not a manager.

TS: But did you ever have to supervise anyone?

JV: Well, I mean, technically I was—the GIs that were there—and I could write a darn good APR, Airman Performance [Report]—whatever it was. I could write a good one of those but I couldn't tell somebody how to do their job and—or balance workloads. That just seemed to be taken care of. I mean, if you were this kind of person you got that work; if you were that kind of person you got that; I didn't have to—

TS: Did you have NCOs [non-commissioned officers] that you worked with that helped you with that at all?

JV: Oh yeah.

TS: Yeah?

JV: Yeah. Oh, yeah. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah. Those were your mentors then—

JV: Right.

TS: —in some ways. So did you have to mentor anyone?

JV: No, not really.

TS: Not really?

JV: No.

TS: It just wasn't that kind of a job, right?

JV: Correct.

TS: You had a lot of projects—

JV: Yeah.

TS: —and went more along those kinds of lines. We didn't touch on this earlier, but the Women's Movement was going on around the time you got in the service. Do you think that affected how you felt about equality or jobs for women or—

JV: Well, I don't think I thought about it quite like that, because it just seemed that the things that I did and wanted to do just came naturally, and I never thought, "Well, I'm breaking ground here or this glass ceiling." I never thought of it like this; just that, "I want to be in cartography so I'm going to do this," or, "I want to be in—wound up—" Oh, the reason I went in to data automation is because I aced the—[chuckling]

TS: The test on it?

JV: Yeah. I mean, they couldn't believe it. I can hardly remember what the test was about, but I'm a good test taker anyway.

TS: [chuckles]

JV: But all those things that I did, I did because I was interested in it and it just seemed to be natural, and I never thought about, "Well, why aren't the other—any other women doing this?"

TS: Right. Well, if you had been in the civilian world trying to do it, the issue of being in the military, you're getting promoted sometimes just by time and service and grade and stuff—

JV: Yes.

TS: —but in the civilian world it might not happen quite that same way.

JV: Yes.

TS: Right? But when I talk to a lot of the women of the era that you were in, a lot of them say, "Well, the military looked good to me because I knew I was going to get the same pay—

JV: Yes.

TS: —and the jobs was really interesting, whereas my choices were, like, teacher, nurse, and secretary," or something, I think were the three.

JV: Right. Right.

TS: And so, I didn't have a lot of people saying, "Cartography was one of the options I had."

JV: Yeah, yeah.

TS: But for you it's seems like you just saw that it would just happen.

JV: Well, it matched. I wanted military, I wanted cartography if I could get it.

TS: Right.

JV: And it just so happens that I could get both in the air force.

TS: Yeah.

JV: I didn't, but that's okay.

TS: Right. Yeah, because you were interested in the kind of work that you were doing.

JV: Yeah, yeah.

TS: But the buzz about what was going on with the Women's Movement and feminism and things like that, what did you think about it?

JV: Burning your bras was stupid, things like that. I don't know. I accept the fact that a woman who is married and has a child has a difficult decision to make; are they going to stay at home, because I think a child should be raised at home with its mother, or—

TS: But what if they don't have that option?

JV: Yeah. That's tough. I mean, I was never in that position so I can't really criticize anybody who's made a decision one way or the other.

TS: Yeah. Well, now we've got women who are fighter jet pilots.

JV: Yes.

TS: And on submarines, and a lot of that more closer to the ground combat action than ever before with the recent war. What do you think about all that?

JV: I think it's fine. I think it's fine. If they're qualified. You know that story about that navy—female navy pilot who goofed up her aircraft carrier landing. Well, she erred somehow, and I don't know if somebody was killed, but anyway, they all said they—that she shouldn't have been flying because she wasn't qualified, and I think it is terrible that people get put in positions that they're not qualified—I don't care if they're men or women or what, and so if she were not qualified to do that carrier landing she shouldn't have been in that position.

TS: Right. I think I know who you're talking about there. If man had made an error and killed people, do you think it—So the woman's under the microscope in a way that maybe a man would never be.

JV: Correct, yeah.

TS: Is that fair?

JV: No.

TS: [chuckles] But it's just the way it is?

JV: That's the way it is.

TS: Yeah.

JV: And it's the way it will be for another fifty or a hundred years.

TS: You think?

JV: It's going to take a long time.

TS: So that's another common theme I guess I heard, is not so much that women had to prove themselves, because men had to prove themselves, but once the man proves himself that was it, but a women had to prove herself over and over and over again everywhere she went.

JV: Yes.

TS: Unless, like, you're working at a lot of the same places and knew a lot of the same people.

JV: Yes.

TS: It might have been a little different. I don't know.

JV: No, I think the job I was doing was—would have been done the same way by a man no matter where it was.

TS: Yeah? But, I mean, as far as proving yourself in what you did.

JV: Oh. No, I don't think there was any gender pref—pressure.

TS: In the type of situation that you were in?

JV: No.

TS: Oh, the other thing that happened, too, was, pretty much the whole time you were in there wasn't anything like "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" or the repeal of that, there was, like—You aren't supposed to be a homosexual or you're going to get kicked out. Well, then in the nineties there was "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and that's since been repealed so you can be openly gay or lesbian.

JV: Yes.

TS: What are your feelings on that issue?

JV: Well, if I—if I was dictator—as my mother always said—

TS: [chuckles]

JV: If I was dictator—

TS: Yeah?

JV: —pe—anybody can live together with anybody else they want, but the definition of marriage is a man and a woman, and if—so I don't care if you're homosexual and in the military, but you just can't get married and you can't demand dependent privileges like a man and a woman when they're married. I'm sorry but—

TS: Right. Well, when you were in a woman who was married to a man, if the man was a civilian—couldn't get dependent privileges.

JV: Well, right, it was—it was difficult.

TS: They had to prove over 50% of the—

JV: Yeah, it was just kind of ridiculous, and they did finally say, "Well, no, that's not fair." And so—Now, if military are married to military then they have to do something different. I don't know if they add them up and divide by two; I don't know how they do that.

TS: Yeah, I think they just take the highest one.

JV: Yeah. But—Yeah, I remember, that's right, that they—the woman could not get dependent—

TS: Right.

JV: Yeah.

TS: It's interesting the way that you're phrasing it for two gay people.

JV: Yeah, but that's because I don't believe in—

TS: Right.

JV: —marriage.

TS: Right. But what about just—take out that issue of marriage, but just the work part; like, the performance.

JV: Well, now it's okay. I mean, I can understand why it wasn't allowed before, and it was because of blackmail. That—If you were gay and were found to be—and found out to be gay, and you had access to—I don't know—secret stuff, you could be blackmailed into divulging things, because you wouldn't want to tell anybody that you were—Now that that is not a problem, because now you can tell people you are gay, nobody can blackmail you for it.

TS: Yeah. It almost like a catch-22, though, right? So if you couldn't tell anybody and you— if you could tell people then you wouldn't be blackmailed.

JV: Right. Right.

TS: So it's almost like they were in a catch-22. So if they were not able to tell—

JV: Well, it—

TS: As a society it was much more—overall in society—

JV: Well, but in the military—we're talking about military—if you were gay and somebody found out and could accuse you of something such as, "Go get me this secret or else I'll tell everybody—"

TS: Right, but if they could tell they wouldn't have been able—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JV: But they—Then there wouldn't have been the blackmail.

TS: Right.

JV: So therefore, let them come in.

TS: Yeah, so you think the way that the culture has changed has helped change—

JV: Oh, yeah.

TS: —that kind of—

JV: Yeah, although I think maybe the air—the military is more conservative than society at large, and so there might still be a lot of senior people who are not accepting, and I don't know if they could make it hard for any gay military people.

TS: Like under their command or something?

JV: Yeah. And of course, if they did then they could be in trouble now.

TS: Yeah, that's true.

JV: But if they could do anything up to a point where they could then be charged with something.

TS: So is this kind of a tricky but—get to negotiate those kind of feelings about that. So in 1987 you're going to retire.

JV: Yes.

TS: When did you finally decide that this was it, you were going to go ahead and retire?

JV: Up or out.

TS: Okay, that'll push you.

JV: Yeah, yeah, so I—since I had not made lieutenant colonel then the time was—there's a formula.

TS: Okay, so you had your twenty years.

JV: So I had twenty-one years and something months.

TS: Was that okay with you? Were you alright? Would you have rather stayed in?

JV: Well, I think I was probably about ready to settle down, because I had married Bill, and we—where we lived, if I had been promoted and stayed in they might have moved me.

TS: Oh, right.

JV: And I wouldn't have wanted to do—That's what everybody, late in their career, what they face.

TS: They're comfortable where they're at.

JV: Yeah, if they put down roots and they've got children going to high school and stuff like that.

TS: I see.

JV: And so, they—

TS: So you've got to make that kind of life decision.

JV: Yeah. They might like the job and like to do it forever but there are realities.

TS: Yeah. And your husband had been retired for a while at this point.

JV: Oh, yeah. See, he was—he retired from the military in 1956, and then he retired from civil service—let me see. I guess it was when—shortly after we got married.

TS: So it was early seventies, mid seventies?

JV: No, no, no, no, wait, because I did get to go back to Randolph, so he did still work while I was at my first tour at Randolph.

TS: Okay.

JV: Okay. But then when I moved to—transferred to the Pentagon, that's when he retired.

TS: Oh, around '74. No, wait, '79ish.

JV: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

JV: I guess that's when it was. But anyway, he was [unclear].

TS: So he'd been retired for almost a decade then.

JV: Yeah, yeah.

TS: Yeah. So—

JV: But I hated for him to not be home since he was that much older than me, and he had children there in the San Antonio area, and grandchildren. It was important to me that he stay close to his family.

TS: How was your transition, then, from the air force to the civilian life?

JV: It was fine. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah?

JV: It was kind of eerie the first week after I retired, that—still got the commissary and all like that that I go to, and so when I would go on base and do the shopping and stuff I would have a guilt complex if I saw somebody from my office and I'd think, "Why am I here?" [both chuckle] "I ought to be at work."

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: "Why am I at work?"

JV: That's right, yeah.

TS: Yeah. I'm sure that wore off after a while.

JV: Yeah, yeah.

TS: Yeah, did it? Now, did you go back to work and do anything or did you stay retired?

JV: No. Everybody said, "Well, what are you going to do when you retire?"

I said, "Well—" I was already doing the database stuff for my church. I said, "That was plenty of work. I was working not-for-profit."

TS: Yeah, lots of—

JV: Working just as hard.

TS: Putting a lot of time in, yeah. Now, have you used any of your veterans' benefits; the housing—

JV: Let me see. I got the vet—GI Bi—No. The VA [Veteran's Administration] loans for purchases of homes, yeah.

TS: And then you had told me, I think, that you also got your masters.

JV: Yeah, when I went to night school at Randolph for my masters out of Saint Mary's in San Antonio; I used the GI Bill for that.

TS: What'd you get your masters in?

JV: What was it? [both chuckle]

TS: Sorry.

JV: MS in Information Systems.

TS: Okay. Very good. Now, have you ever had to use the VA for anything?

JV: Not directly, but immediately upon retiring I was given—or maybe before I retired I was given an appointment at the VA hospital, Audie [L.] Murphy [Memorial VA Hospital], in San Antonio for dental work. Apparently—and I didn't know this—the air force—or the military, they're supposed to leave you in a good condition—physical condition, and I still needed some dental work, so they—instead of making an attempt to do it with the base clinic they sent me over to Audie Murphy, which was fine; I didn't care.

TS: And it worked out okay?

JV: Yeah, and that was a long time.

TS: Well, would you consider yourself a trailblazer in your field, in the air force?

JV: I didn't think so.

TS: Even though you're, like, the only woman?

JV: I didn't feel like it at the time.

TS: No?

JV: I was just doing my job.

TS: Upon reflection do you think at all?

JV: Well, I don't think of it like that, no.

TS: Yeah. No?

JV: No.

TS: But the women that came after you then. Like you said, more and more came in.

JV: Now, the people who did—Like, for instance, when I was at Randolph—

TS: Yes.

JV: —I had thyroid surgery. Before they found out what it really was I was seen by a—she was a nurse, an RN, and she was looking me over and she said, "You need to get that looked at." And so, on her—at her behest I did follow up. It turned out that that nurse,

when she found out they were opening up flying, she signed up for flying and she was one of the first—in the group of the first women pilots.

TS: Oh, is that right?

JV: Yes. [chuckles]

TS: Oh, wow. So you see her as a trailblazer?

JV: Yes, her, yes. That's a trailblazer.

TS: But not something like data automation—

JV: No.

TS: —where you're one of the first women in it.

JV: No, no.

TS: No?

JV: Just office work.

TS: Somebody still has to pave a trail.

JV: I suppose. [both chuckle]

TS: You're still leaving food crumbs along the way no matter what you do. Well, would you recommend the service to any young woman or man today?

JV: Certainly. As a matter of fact, I'm disappointed that nobody else in my generation, my family, besides my brother, has served. I mean, they're old enough to retire; all of us now.

TS: Right.

JV: But I haven't heard a peep from anybody who's the least bit interested. And I have to say that I would have a difficult time with the Commander in Chief we've got now, but you just have to be sure to remember that you're serving your country and the presidency, not a man. But when I was at the Pentagon, that's when [Ronald Wilson] Reagan was president. I'll tell you, morale was just through the roof. We loved him. But after I retired, this friend of the woman that I said I still keep up with—

TS: Right.

JV: —Ginger—she was telling me about how morale was going down when we got other presidents that followed Reagan.

TS: Yeah.

JV: Yeah. And I would hate to hear from anybody now.

TS: Yeah.

JV: I really would. Some—Well, okay. [chuckles]

TS: That's how you're going to leave it? [chuckles]

JV: Yes.

TS: Okay. Well, do you think that your life has been different because you joined the air force back in '66?

JV: Oh, I think so, yeah; yeah. I don't know what I would have been if I hadn't done that, but I think the military life is distinct; it's different from other lives. You might be doing the same job—a similar job to anybody in civilian life, but it's still—the military life is different.

TS: What's different about it?

JV: Well, you do what you're told, you go where you're told, but you willingly do that.

TS: Right.

JV: And you're doing it not to make money; nobody makes money.

TS: Yeah. You can't just quit, say, "I don't think so."

JV: Well, yeah, you can. You could just quit, unless you had an enlistment but—

TS: Yeah.

JV: I would never have quit.

TS: It's a different kind of commitment.

JV: Yeah; oh, yeah.

TS: Different kind of responsibility.

JV: Yes.

TS: Yeah.

JV: I mean, see, I don't really know what it's like to work for a corporation; I just don't have a sense for—how do you know—how do you get promoted? Do you have to ask all the time? Do they move you around all the time? What do you have to wear?

TS: Right. All those decisions.

JV: Yeah.

TS: [chuckles] Well, is there anything in particular that you would want a civilian to know or understand about the air force or military that they may not appreciate?

JV: Well, that you're serving your country; that's the main thing. You have to want to do that, and people who don't stay, I think, decide, "Well, maybe it's not worth it. May—" I don't know. But I—Well, when I had my retirement ceremony—I think I wrote this up—they asked me did I have anything to say. Well, I'm—I don't—walk—talk on my feet—do speaking on my feet very well but I said, "One thing I remember is that the motto of my school—this school was 'Service' and I felt like that was what I did." And see, I get all chokey about it just thinking about—

TS: Yeah.

JV: —service—

TS: Service.

JV: —to my country and my school.

TS: Yeah.

JV: I don't know if somebody who works for McDonald's headquarters thinks like that.

TS: Yeah, in the same way.

JV: Yes.

TS: Well, following on that then, one question I ask is, what does patriotism mean to you?

JV: Everything. And it's important to keep it despite what other people are doing to the country—undermining things—and you have to remember that it's—the vast majority of the people are patriotic, and you have to make sure that outside influences don't overcome the patriots.

TS: Well, if you had to do it all over again would you do it again?

JV: Sure, in a heartbeat.

TS: Anything you'd do differently?

JV: No, [chuckles] not really, no.

TS: No?

JV: No. This is what was intended to be.

TS: Yeah. Well, I don't have any more formal questions. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you wanted to mention?

JV: No. [chuckles]

TS: No? I think we covered quite a lot.

JV: Yeah, I think so.

TS: Well, Jane, thank you so much for coming today. I really appreciate it. It's been nice to talk with you.

JV: Well, I enjoyed being here.

TS: Alright, I'll go ahead and shut it off.

JV: Okay.

[End of Interview]