WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Interviewee: Karen Miller

Interviewer: Therese Strohmer

Date: 17 July 2016

[Portions of this transcript have been redacted by request of the interviewee]

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is July 17, 2016. My name is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the home of Karen Miller in Hillsborough, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Karen, could you say your name the way you'd like it to be on the collection?

KM: Karen Miller.

TS: Okay. Well, Karen, why don't we start off by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born, when you were born, and about growing up, maybe?

KM: Okay. I am a military brat. I was born in Kansas [1958]. We left, like, a couple of months after I was born so I don't know anything about Kansas.

TS: Where'd you go to?

KM: Oh, my Lord. I moved a minimum of ten times before I was seventeen.

TS: Really?

KM: Yeah. All over.

TS: Was your father in the service?

KM: Yeah. That's right. My father—I came from a very military family background.

TS: Okay.

KM: My—Every male that I knew served in the military. My father was in the air force. My grandfather was navy. I've had marine uncles. We've been in every branch. Army. And on both sides. My mother's British and all her family is military as well.

TS: Okay.

KM: Air force; my aunt, my uncles, [chuckles] my grandfather was army.

TS: Wow.

KM: Very, very military, so I was born to the military. And we moved—I lived in many different states: Washington, South Carolina, Maryland, Kansas, and then Germany, England a few times. I spent most—I'd say over half the childhood not in this country.

TS: Really?

KM: Yeah.

TS: What did your dad do in the air force?

KM: He repaired aircraft. So he worked on the electronics and stuff in the aircrafts; repairman.

TS: Okay. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

KM: I have three younger sisters.

TS: Okay.

KM: And I think the military service is going to stop with me, though. My nephews and nieces, we've said enough, I think.

TS: Yeah? And your sisters didn't join either?

KM: No.

TS: No? Just you?

KM: Yeah.

TS: Okay. Now, your mom, did she work outside the house?

KM: Yes. In some places that we lived she did; in some she did not.

TS: Because it was tough as a dependent wife to get—

KM: Yeah, find employment. She worked in factories and stuff. The military's not a lucrative career, so. [chuckles]

TS: Right. That's interesting. So you're a young girl, you're moving around a lot. Besides where

you live now, when people say, "Where are you from?" what do you say?

KM: I just say Maryland because that was where most of my family lives.

TS: Okay.

KM: Like, I would take people to visit my mom—my parents—and just visit my family, and I would get lost, and they're like, "How can you not know where your parents live?"
And I'm like, "Because I lived there for four months [both chuckle] before I left."
So I just say Maryland, even though I know very little about —

TS: Even though it doesn't really seem like home?

KM: Well, there's no place—I'm from nowhere, I'm from everywhere. That's what I feel.

TS: You're from everywhere, yeah.

KM: Or nowhere.

TS: Do you have any first memories of growing up as a young girl?

KM: My first memories are England. I went to an English school, I—Since my mom was British and my aunts and uncles were all there, so I felt very British for quite a while. And then we moved to America, and I can remember trying to speak with an American accent.

TS: Oh, did you have a British accent?

KM: Oh, yes.

TS: Yeah?

KM: And I would practice, and apparently did not do very well because I was constantly harassed about my English accent. So I worked very hard to lose it so that I can't even do an English accent now. [chuckles]

TS: I bet you could. [both laughing] I bet you could. But that's all right. How much younger were your younger sisters? Pretty close in age?

KM: One was four years younger, the other two are, like, ten years younger. Eight, ten—

TS: Oh, okay.

KM: Quite a difference. We—

TS: Especially as a young girl, that's a big difference, right?

KM: Oh, yes. And they basically—the two younger ones especially, but even the next one had a different childhood than I did. Because my father retired when I was seventeen, so they stopped moving, they were only seven.

TS: Right.

KM: So they really are Marylanders. [chuckles]

TS: Oh, got it, right.

KM: They even have that funny accent.

TS: Did you like the idea of moving around as a young girl, and seeing news things, or was it hard to get to know kids in your classroom again?

KM: For me, since I didn't know anything else, I thought that was quite normal. I had no issue with it at all. My sister—the one that's four years younger—she had a bit of a hard time. Like, I would have to hold her hand the first day of school, and take her to class. But for the most part, I just grew up thinking everything's temporary.

TS: Really?

KM: People are temporary, they come and go; it's, like, that's just what life was. Which got me later in life when I was like, "Oh, there's repercussions to knowing people for many years, and living one place." [both chuckle] That was a complete surprise to me.

TS: Right. Yeah. That's right. That's true. Well, that's something we can talk about later, how those repercussions come around or how that makes a difference.

So you're a young girl, you're growing up. Now, did you enjoy school?

KM: Some of them. Some I would go and they were farther behind than I was in the prior school, others were way ahead of me, so I don't think I really—well, my mother was extremely—neither of my parents graduated high school or anything, but my mother was insistent that I get educated, so I knew how to read and write before I even went into school. She was very much involved in those early years. And then it got out of her league so she stopped.

TS: Right.

KM: But I think I did average. I was okay; I wasn't great.

TS: Well, what kinds of things did you like doing as a young girl?

KM: Oh, my God. I mean, I played. We did lots of—sometimes we were on military bases. It was during Vietnam, so we played with Dad's guns [chuckles] and—

TS: You played with his guns?

KM: We'd go shooting [using ammunition only when accompanied by their father—KM clarified later.] and play with gas masks, and just kind of weird little soldiers. It was very military. [But also this happened when stationed in Idaho – a lot of desert. –KM added later.]

TS: Well, that's the environment you were in, right?

KM: Yeah.

TS: It was the Vietnam Era. Did your dad go to Vietnam?

KM: He did not. I was lucky, because for me Vietnam was, that's the place people's dads went and they didn't come back. Or like, we would—I remember distinctly chaplains in the car would drive into the neighborhood—one of the places I lived—and we would just all stop because we would not know whose house they were going to, and it was notify somebody, and then the people would just disappear, and I always wondered where they went, because I didn't have a concept of a home, that these families had to go to once their dad died.

TS: Right.

KM: But it was—So Vietnam—Of course, my father's friends would come back and they were just kind of odd sometimes. And I had a friend whose father, he was army, came back and, oh, my God, he was a violent man. She would come and race to our—She would spend many nights at our house and we would avoid that.

TS: To try to get away from her dad?

KM: Yeah. Because he didn't handle it well. I guess he had PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], which nobody talked about back then, but.

TS: Right.

KM: Who knows? My father avoided it, luckily, but he was air force; he wouldn't have been as much into it as the army guys. The army kids, their fathers were the ones that mostly were more afraid. But to me, Vietnam was just real personal; that's where your dad's—and everybody dreaded their dad getting assigned to Vietnam.

TS: Did you talk about it amongst yourselves, as kids?

KM: Not too much.

TS: No?

KM: It was just, that's just life.

TS: That's just what you got, right? So when you're ten or something, you're right in the middle of anti-war and the counterculture.

KM: Well, I did not know that, because I was overseas.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Right. Because you're on a military base?

KM: I was overseas during most of those years, in England and Germany, and I had no idea of hippies or anti-war stuff.

TS: No?

KM: I listened to Armed Service Radio. And the Europeans weren't that invested in it. [Comment redacted]

[The American Forces Network (AFN) is the broadcast service operated by the United States Armed Forces' American Forces Radio and Television Service (AFRTS) for its entertainment and command internal information networks worldwide]

TS: Right.

KM: So I didn't really—I did not know—I knew Vietnam, I knew that's where dads went, but I did not know about protesters or—

TS: No?

KM: I mean, I was not exposed to that.

TS: When did you get exposure to it?

KM: I would—Gosh, it would have had to have been—I came back in '74 or five. We went to Washington state, and that was after the war, I think.

TS: Yeah.

KM: I remember being in Germany and I had a wristband, they were these metal things that you wore for POWs [prisoners of war].

TS: Right.

KM: And I chose an air force guy because my dad was air force; Captain Donald Spoon.

TS: Oh, right, you got his name too.

KM: Oh, God, I wore it for so many years. But they were listing all the people that were being released—the POWs being released—on the [Armed Forces—KM added later] TV, and me and my girlfriends, we were like—it seems like maybe fourteen or fifteen, I don't know.

TS: Right.

KM: Maybe fifteen, sixteen, I don't remember how old I was—but, like, "He's yours, he's yours."

TS: Did he get released?

KM: His name scrolled by and we all jumped up and down. [chuckles]

TS: Oh yeah, that's great. That's really cool.

KM: So by the time I got back to the States, I think Vietnam was pretty much over, and I've never really thought about it too much.

TS: No? Yeah. Well, that year of '68, there's a lot of things going on in the United States too. We had Martin Luther King, Jr.

[On 4 April 1968, American clergyman and civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated by James Earl Ray, a fugitive from Missouri State Penitentiary.]

KM: Didn't know any of that.

TS: Robert F. Kennedy assassinated. All the riots going on. That was just like not—

[On 5 June 1968, presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy was fatally shot shortly after winning the California presidential primaries during the 1968 elections]

KM: I had no idea. I'm sure—

TS: You were, like, in a bubble that was a little different.

KM: I'm sure adults probably knew, but I had no idea all this—I mean, there were so many things that I didn't know about till I—it was almost like I was an immigrant by the time I

came back. I was like, "I don't know anything about your culture." [both chuckle]

TS: "I have to learn to be an American now."

KM: Exactly. And now I'm as American as there is—[chuckling]

TS: There you go. Did you have a sense, as a young girl, like, what you wanted to do when you grew up. Did you have any dreams about, "When I grow up I want to be—" x, y, or z?

KM: No. Because I can remember when I was a girl, it was like, "Are you going to be a nurse or an airline stewardess?" Or something like that. Neither felt very appealing to me.

TS: Right.

KM: And I really had no idea; I knew nothing but the military. And so—And basically, that's probably why I ended up in the military, because I remember the Christmas before I—graduated my parents bought me a suitcase, so I was like, "Okay, I guess I'm leaving." [both chuckle] And so, I was like—I didn't really ever have a sense of what I wanted to be or do, and—

TS: Did you ever think about college?

KM: I—We had no concept of it. Like I said, my parents were [not] college graduate—

TS: Not college graduates?

KM: —they were high school dropouts. I do remember, once, talking to them in that last year, going, "I'd like to go to college," because I'd heard about it then. [chuckles]

TS: Right.

KM: They were shocked. They were like, "It never—Sorry, we never considered that you would want to go to college." So I knew I was on my own, and that's fine. But I knew that the—And I knew no other life but the military, and it was a recession back in '76.

TS: You graduated from high school in '76?

KM: Yes

TS: Okay.

KM: And there was no work. I mean, there was—I got a low paying job in a bakery for a short period of time. I was like, "I've got to do something." And I always had the sense that I wanted to better myself. I didn't want to be poor like the way we grew up. I was like, "I despise being poor. There's no choices in being poor."

TS: Right.

KM: So I went down to the recruiting station, there were four doors and I went in the first one; happened to be the navy. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah?

KM: So I went and I joined the navy.

TS: You didn't even consider the other services, it was just the first one?

KM: No, it was the first door. It didn't really matter. And I was like, "I'm going to go to the military because I don't really know anything else, and I want a GI Bill."

[The GI Bill provides educational assistance to servicemembers, veterans, and their dependents]

TS: You knew that the GI Bill would give you some education?

KM: I knew that I did want to go to college, and the GI Bill was the way I was going to do it.

TS: Good. Okay, so when you talked to your recruiter, was it a man or a woman?

KM: It was a man.

TS: Did they say, "Well, you can have these kinds of jobs"?

KM: They did. They laid out a couple of—I guess I took some tests and did okay, and apparently women had to score higher than men to get in, which sucked, I found out. But it also made us a little bit smarter than the guys we worked with. [chuckles]

TS: Right.

KM: I thought, "That was stupid." But yeah, he laid out a couple of different jobs and stuff, and I had thought, "Computers; I want computers for sure," and so I became a data processor.

TS: Okay.

KM: Even though, their computers then could fill this room and have less power than that notebook.

TS: Oh, right. Or this phone right here.

KM: Exactly.

TS: How old are you at this point? Are you eighteen yet?

KM: Seventeen.

TS: Seventeen.

KM: I think I joined—I might have been eighteen. When I went in, I was eighteen, so.

TS: Yeah. Did you do, like, a delayed enlistment?

KM: Yes, delayed enlistment, and luckily, because I got in under the old GI Bill, before enlist—

TS: Before VEAP [Veterans Educational Assistance Program]?

KM: Yes. They changed it that January and I had gotten in just before it, so I got the old GI Bill, luckily.

TS: Yeah. Yeah, the VEAP—Yeah.

KM: The Vietnam one, yeah.

TS: That's right. So you signed up. You went in, you said, about March of '77?

KM: Yes.

TS: Okay. What did your family and friends think about your decision?

KM: They thought it was a smart thing to do. "What else would you do but join the military?" [chuckles]

TS: Yeah. Well, I mean, you also joined the navy instead of the air force.

KM: Oh, well, I have so many different branches that it wasn't a—

TS: Friends in different branches?

KM: Yeah. Or just relatives; they all served in different branches.
TS: Oh, I see, that's right.

KM: So my father, it wasn't like a slight to him that I went into that instead of the air force.

TS: Gotcha.

KM: He was like—Although, he did say, "You're going to be sorry you chose the navy." [chuckles]

TS: Did he say that?

KM: He said he would have preferred the air force. I think he knew I was gay [homosexual].

TS: Oh, did he?

KM: And he thought the air force would be a lot nicer.

TS: For you? Yeah.

KM: Because when you think of the services, air force is the top, cream of the crop, and then you have your—probably the navy's next, and then the marines, and then the army.

TS: You put the army way down in the bottom?

KM: Oh yeah. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah. Okay. Did you know that you were gay, too, when you—

KM: No.

TS: But you said your dad had some sort of inkling?

KM: Oh yeah. I mean, they would take me to a toy store and I would pick out soldiers, my sister would pick a Barbie. I was like—I was stupid not to know, but it was not like today when they had it on TV, they have it on all the—

TS: Right.

KM: Kids today are much smarter.

TS: Well, there was also no culture to actually hook into, right?

KM: No. Not really.

TS: Yeah.

KM: And I moved so often, it wasn't like I was going to form relationships with anybody, really.

TS: Right. And you're still pretty young, right?

KM: Yeah.

TS: Maybe just barely eighteen.

KM: My senior year, I was in two different high—or high schools for my senior year, so it's not like I formed any real relationships with anybody that weren't superficial.

TS: Yeah, because you knew you were going to leave, right?

KM: Yeah, or—Or if I wasn't—Even if I was going to be there for a year and a half or two years, they were gone on in six months.

TS: That's true, because of the other people leaving too. Right, okay. Well, why don't you tell me about basic training, then? You went to [Naval Training Center] Orlando [Florida]?

KM: Yes.

TS: How was that?

KM: It was fine. I had no—I mean, they tried to yell and intimidate you, and I was like, "My mother could scare me more than you." [both chuckle]

TS: Yeah?

KM: So I was kind of made to be in the military [unclear].

TS: So you were emotionally prepared to handle that kind of intimidation and stuff like that.

KM: Oh, God, yes. Oh, God, they could not—

TS: They couldn't rattle you?

KM: Hell no. I was like, "I've seen much worse." [chuckles] Being in a military family, it's kind of inherently violent to begin with.

TS: Yeah?

KM: Yeah. That's what they're made to do: kill.

TS: Were you at all physically challenged by what you had to do?

KM: Not really. I did get bronchitis my final week and had a hard time running, but there was no way in hell I was going to be set back another week in that place. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah. Now, how about the swimming?

KM: I could not swim, and I get sea sick, so the navy would seem like an odd choice, but it was kind of like a *Private Benjamin* thing when I went into the recruiter. He was like, "Well, they don't put women on ships." And they didn't. And I was like, "Okay."

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

TS: You weren't worried about getting sea sick?

KM: No. I didn't think I'd ever be on a ship. It was just like *Private Benjamin*, "This is going to be great." You're going to get these prime duties because they don't put women on ships. [chuckling]

TS: What did you think it was going to be like? What was your expectation then, at that time?

KM: I didn't really have many as—I was terrible because I—For coming from a military family, I didn't really like authority much, or being told what to do, which I didn't really realize until I was in the military, and I was like, "Oh. I'm not really like the rest of the family." [chuckles]

TS: Yeah. Or maybe you'd just had enough of it, right?

KM: Yeah, maybe so; always being told what to do and discipline and—But I didn't find it particularly challenging. I also was just taking care of myself. I remember at one point our—I don't know what they call them now—CO [commanding officer] or something—the woman in charge of our unit—our little group—wanted me to become a—I can't remember what they call them now—a wing leader or something—I was like, "No. I'm just going to get myself through[?]."

TS: Right. You were just like, "I don't want to be in leadership, I don't want to be in the spotlight. I just want to get through it and—"

KM: Yeah. It wasn't physically hard, or even really mentally hard, but it was a drag being there, and it was—and a lot of women were having emotional problems and things, and I, being British and military, I was like, "Huh?." [chuckling]

TS: Did you have, like, the women who were crying at night and—

KM: Yeah. And others that just kind of had breakdowns and stuff, and I was a little baffled, but it was the first time being in that close of quarters with all these people and all the emotion. [chuckles]

TS: Right. So there's a lot going on; a lot of young people and they're have—a lot of them haven't been away from probably their home place or their family.

KM: Yeah.

TS: Whereas, you'd moved around, been all over the world, and done things and—

KM: I was totally prepared.

TS: Yeah.

KM: I mean, emotionally or whatever, it was like it was just another day.

TS: So then you went to your training, and you told me where that was at.

KM: San Diego.

TS: Oh, San Diego. As a data processer? And you spent six months, you said, there? Something like that?

KM: I can't remember.

TS: Three to six months, something like that?

KM: Yeah.

TS: How was that?

KM: I was in California in the late seventies and I was not interested in going to school. [both chuckle]

TS: What were you interested in?

KM: I was in—I had discovered women. [chuckles] And there was gay pride—It was like a—just thing—whole thing happening in California in the seventies, and I discovered that I was gay, and I just really wanted to spend a lot of time in gay bars and—[chuckling]

TS: And not in school?

KM: Not in school.

TS: How'd that work out for you?

KM: Oh, Lord, my instructor, he would come around in the classroom, I'd be falling asleep, he'd slam the ruler on my desk and wake me up suddenly, and he would—and I got into trouble because my grades were not very well, and he pulled me out, he was like, "I'm dumping you. You're getting out of here."

And I was like, "Oh, God, give me another chance."

So I really buckled down and I studied and I managed to get through the school, with low grades, which did follow me, because then, of course, every command I went to was like, "We know you're not very smart." [chuckles]

I'm like, "[unclear]"

TS: Because of the grades that you had gotten in your training.

KM: Yeah, that did probably.

TS: So you were just out partying and—

KM: Very much so. Very much like—And starting to feel a real gay identity because that's what was happening at the time. There was like—I really felt like, "Oh, my God, we're going to have all these rights. We're going to—" Because I was stupid and I was young, and it was this big swell of activity that was happening out there at that time, and I thought, "Things are going to change really fast."

TS: Right. And they didn't, right? But, now, were you afraid of getting kicked out because of that?

KM: I was not—I think pretty early on—I don't know that I really thought about the future, but I did know that I wanted to go to college, and I don't think that I was really thinking military was going to be my career.

TS: Right, you just wanted to get the GI Bill.

KM: Yeah. And—I don't know. I mean, I probably—maybe I thought I would just stay in because I didn't know anything else, but I was meeting other people now that weren't in the military, and I was starting to see there's other choices than the military.

TS: Right.

KM: So I wasn't—And I wasn't that concerned about getting caught so much.

TS: No?

KM: But I did know to not just advertise it. Or talk about it with the classmates and stuff.

TS: When you're going out to the gay bars and stuff, didn't they have a list—"Don't go to these bars"?

KM: Not—They might have but I never saw one, yeah.

TS: [chuckles]

KM: It was pretty laid back in California. Even San Diego, the base I was on, it was pretty laid back, I felt like. They weren't really that concerned about—they were more concerned "Am I going to pass the class?" [chuckles]

TS: Yeah. They just wanted you to get through it, then, right?

KM: Yeah. And I had a terrible—I had this roommate who I—I was not used to drinking. I—My preference was always smoking pot [marijuana] so I wasn't really used to alcohol.

TS: Right.

KM: And I got drunk and I threw up on her bed, so she complained and they put me in an AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] program and—

TS: Had you been drinking very much up to that point?

KM: No. [chuckles]

TS: It was just like you had just gotten sick.

KM: Yes, because I wasn't used to drinking, and I didn't like drinking, I'd much prefer to get high. But they put me in an AA program in San Diego where I had to find my own AA programs to go to and get them marked off on my card. Which meant I just had to go to all these peculiar—find AA meetings and get mine marked off. But it was terrible because those meetings are so depressing, it was like the only time in my life I felt like wanting a drink, after one of those. [both chuckle] And they would go around and say, "I'm So-and-so, I'm an alcoholic."

And I'm like, "I'm Karen and I'm not an alcoholic."

And they're just like, "Yeah, right."

TS: Would you say that and they'd all be like, "What are—"

KM: Yeah, they thought I was—

TS: Yeah. Like you were in denial or something.

KM: Yeah, exactly. I'm like, "I'm just getting my card marked."

TS: "I'm just here for, yeah, a punch, thank you."

KM: To this day, I'm probably the least drinking drinker you've ever met. [chuckling]

TS: That had to go through AA, right? Yeah.

KM: So I did learn a lot about alcoholism though and stuff. But my family never had any alcoholism, and so I was really—not much drinkers and stuff.

TS: Was it pretty easy to find drugs though?

KM: Oh, yes.

TS: Was it?

KM: Drugs were everywhere in the seventies.

TS: Was it easy to find it off the base, on the base?

KM: Both.

TS: Both? It didn't matter?

KM: It didn't really—I mean, and it felt like it was nothing to ask somebody—not a higher-upper or anything but your—"Do you know where some pot is?" And that somebody knew always.

TS: Yeah. You weren't afraid of getting turned in for something?

KM: No. No. Because like I said, I was a child of the seventies and pot was everywhere.

TS: Right.

KM: Through high school, through—I probably didn't ever smoke as much as I did in the military, before or after. [chuckles]

TS: That was your course of pot smoking experience.

KM: Yeah.

TS: But you had smoked it before?

KM: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

KM: Oh, God, yeah. I was like, "Oh, this is what I like." And I was never that much into alcohol, but that's—I think that's just because of my generation, that's what we did.

TS: Okay, so you made it through your training by the skin of your teeth [idiom for barely], it sounds like. And then you got your first assignment and you ended up—

KM: Navy Yard in Washington, D.C.

TS: Navy Yard in Washington, D.C. But you were familiar with that area because you had family in Maryland, right?

KM: Yeah. I could visit my family.

TS: Did you put in for that assignment or did they just say, " You're going here?"

KM: Oh, heck no. I said, "Anywhere on the West Coast."

TS: Anywhere on the West Coast and they sent you to the East Coast?

KM: Yes. Oh, of course. [both chuckle]

TS: Okay.

KM: I was liking the West Coast. A lot.

TS: Oh, yeah, you wanted to stay there. I got it. Were you a little disappointed?

KM: Yeah. I was like, "Well, this sucks, but okay." [chuckles]

TS: How was that? You get there and you're doing your job for the first time. Is it just like a regular office in the Navy Yard?

KM: It was big computer—We had a big computer room, and cipher lock so that nobody could come in.

TS: The little punch numbers?

KM: Yeah. And we all wore civilian clothes. Back then we did not wear military uniforms. I think it was part of this post-Vietnam Era that the military kept more of a low profile or something. But it didn't even feel like being in the military necessarily because we wore civilian clothes, work three days on, three days off. We all lived—Most of us, we would have to have, like—we were so low paid you'd have to have, like, four people living in one place together.

TS: Instead of the barracks?

KM: Yeah.

TS: You didn't want to live in the barracks?

KM: I did for a little while, but it was very crowded, and my roommates, one was pregnant, and the other one, she just—she spent her entire time stoned, smoking, and listening to—I don't know—some music I did not like. [Comment redacted].

TS: You had limits. Standards.

KM: I was like—I did have a couple of jobs, because we were paid so poorly that I always had a second job the entire time.

TS: Oh, you did? Where else did you go?

KM: I worked at K-Mart, I drove a school bus for retarded [learning-disabled]—children and adults; I had all these jobs that I would get and get fired or just leave or whatever.

TS: Yeah.

KM: Always something to supplement my income, so it felt like I was constantly racing around the beltway of D.C. going to a different job.

TS: Wow, okay. Tell me a little about your job. Now, in that field that you were in, were there a lot of women, was it a good ratio?

KM: There were actually. It was a good ratio; it was 50/50 I think.

TS: Really? Okay.

KM: Maybe—No, maybe 60/40.

TS: Pretty high.

KM: There was a number of women. There was—It probably wasn't as many as the men, but they also were—this was computers, and computers were new, and they were—all had to have a certain level of testing on the—whatever those tests they give you when you go in the military.

TS: Right.

KM: Determine your IQ [intelligence quotient] or something. They all had to [score—KM edited later.] And most of them came from good places and just were kind of regular, and since we all wore civilian clothes and it was very civilian-like, I had no problems. There was no harassments or anything.

TS: No?

KM: I had a—I worked a nightshift with three guys, and they taught me how to play spades [card game] because there was [not a lot to do—KM edited later]—but they would—they were serious about their spades, and if I messed up they would fling the cards in my face, [both chuckle] and I'd go off and sulk and they'd have to come back and apologize to get me to play more.

TS: Because they needed the partner, right?

KM: Yes.

TS: That's right. You can't play it if you don't have enough people, that's right. So you're in,

kind of, a civilian atmosphere, you feel?

KM: Yeah. And I had one—my supervisor on that shift was—he was a drug dealer and he would pull the cipher lock and dump a big pile of pot and we had to clean it for him. [chuckles]

TS: What do you mean by he'd "pull the cipher lock?"

KM: So nobody could come in the door. It was 2:00 in the morning, nobody was going to be coming, but he pulled it just in case. And he put us in the back and it was like—we had to clean his pot for him.

TS: How do you clean pot?

KM: You take the seeds out, you sift it, take the seeds out.

TS: Okay. I have no idea.

KM: Bag it.

TS: Alright.

KM: And so, we had to do that frequently.

TS: Did you get free pot for doing it?

KM: Oh, yeah. He'd give us a baggie. [chuckles]

TS: So it was worth your time?

KM: Yeah. And it was really kind of dead at night in there so it was a great shift to have; the night shift.

TS: Yeah. So there's not much else going on?

KM: No, because you'd load up the computers—they had punch cards back then—and it would just read them and then take it forever to process whatever, the programmers up above. We were just techs; we just loaded the computer, we didn't do programming and stuff. They would take all night to run, so we just were sitting there for the most part.

TS: Waiting for the shift to end?

KM: Yeah.

TS: Did you play any sports in the navy?

KM: No, I didn't. I was never much of a sports person.

TS: No? Didn't have that kind of interest?

KM: And I don't even know if they had any team there. It was very much—It wasn't cohesive in a lot of ways because, like I say, it was like a civilian job almost.

TS: You just showing up and—

KM: Do your shift.

TS: No formation?

KM: No; very rare. I mean, it was so bad. Yeah, we lived off base. I had lots of part time jobs. It was almost like not being in the military. They were all pleasant people. [both chuckle]

TS: They were all pleasant so it was different. How was the culture different in that area from San Diego, where you said it was much—

KM: It was more restrictive but, still, I wasn't really worried too much. I knew a couple of gay girls and we—eventually I moved in with a couple of gay girls and we all lived together.

TS: Were they in the navy?

KM: They were navy but they weren't—they might have been in my building but they weren't in my unit. So I can't really remember what they did. It was more like just roommates.

TS: Yeah. How do you find out other people are gay in the military?

KM: Oh, gosh, they would have things like—Oh, "I was down on—"

They'd say, "What'd you do last night?"

"Oh, I was down on the 8th Street." If you're gay, you know that's a gay and lesbian bar. If you're not, you don't know what the heck I'm talking about.

TS: Yeah.

KM: Stuff like that. Or, of course, you could spot some. Some had no choice but to be gay. [chuckles]

TS: Was there any particular music or anything that you listened to?

KM: No, just whatever was—

TS: You didn't? You weren't into that folk music, like Christian, or Cris Williamson [American lesbian singer-songwriter], or any of that?

KM: Didn't hear about that, really, until I got out.

TS: Yeah.

KM: We just listened to regular music that was on the radio.

TS: No niche music for the gay culture.

KM: No, not there. Not even on the ship really.

TS: No? Okay, so a typical day is pretty lax.

KM: It was.

TS: Yeah?

KM: It was pretty cush [easy] duty I think, now.

TS: You said you worked three days on, three days off?

KM: Yes.

TS: Those three days off, you worked another job a lot, too, so did you go anywhere though; visit family, travel?

KM: I would visit my family quite a bit, hang out with friends. Now, we were very poor, so sometimes, if it was before payday, we would try to sleep as much as possible because we were so fricking hungry. [both chuckle]

TS: So not to think about food?

KM: Yeah.

TS: You couldn't go down to the chow hall or anything?

KM: No. If you chose off base housing they wouldn't let you eat on base—

TS: Oh, right.

KM: —which really sucked. We were always in search of food. Very poor. I think—Gosh, I kind of remember my paycheck was ninety-seven dollars, twice a month or something; it was really low. [chuckles]

TS: So you just, kind of, were struggling to survive.

KM: Yeah, it was all about just surviving. [both chuckle]

TS: Did you enjoy working? What were you thinking about being in the navy at this time? Was it okay? Just a job?

KM: It was just a job. I did enjoy the computers; I loved computers. I was—They shifted me to a day shift and I started getting in trouble because I wouldn't get there on time. All of that. And so, I did a lot of extra duty then.

TS: What did you have to do for extra duty?

KM: You just had to—That's the one time I think we might have worn uniforms. We wore dungarees, but I don't even know what we did. We were confined to that building [chuckles] and—

TS: Like, picking up cigarette butts or—

KM: No.

TS: Nothing like that?

KM: I can't even remember. We hung out—Like, we would man the desk and check people coming in; that they were authorized to be there, or something like that. I can't really remember doing anything in particular, except for hanging out in the little dorm room there.

TS: So it was basically you were punished by having to stay somewhere for a certain period of time.

KM: Yes.

TS: And then you were free to go.

KM: Like, they didn't have us—We didn't even clean bathrooms, we didn't pick up trash, we didn't take out our trash. I mean, nothing. It was ridiculous. [both chuckle]

TS: Well, you said at some point you wanted to change your career. When did that happen?

KM: That would be when I was at my next duty station.

TS: Not until then?

KM: Yeah, this one I did get in trouble and I had to go to a school in the armpit of the navy.

TS: Where's that at?

KM: Biloxi, Mississippi. And I had to go, and I knew I had to do well.

TS: You had to go to school? Is this, like, a rehab school or something?

KM: No, it was data processing school to learn some other skills. I just knew I had to do very well because I was in a lot of trouble, and basically it was like, "You're going to do well at this school or you're going to be picking up trash in Anacostia, across the bay there in D.C. from the Navy Yard.

I was like, "Okay." So I got there and I really buckled down and I did very well; I got one of the highest scores they'd ever gotten.

TS: Good.

KM: And I came back and the captain wanted to give me an award. They scheduled it for one of my days off. I had a flat tire on the way so I didn't make the ceremony, so I ended up with extra duty for about a month and a half. [chuckling]

TS: Because you didn't make your own ceremony.

KM: Yes. I was like, "This sucks so bad." [chuckling]

TS: Karen, that's a good story.

KM: "This really sucks."

TS: If they hadn't scheduled you to go to the special ceremony you wouldn't have had extra duty, right?

KM: That's right. So I spent, like, about a month, a month and a half, in that building. Like, "Oh, God. [chuckling] This is the last time I ever do well at anything."

TS: [chuckles] Somehow the motivational key is not finding its way to you, right.

KM: Yeah. [unclear] some saying about "No good deed goes unpunished."

TS: That's right. That's right. So then did you put in for a new assignment?

KM: It was time, I think.

TS: It was time? It was—what?—two years?

KM: Yeah. And I don't know how I ended up—they—the ship—I believe they cherry picked a lot of the old—the higher ranking women, because they were really smart and good at their jobs. I don't know how I ended up there.

TS: Well, tell us where you ended up.

KM: So anyway. They transferred me to [USS] *L.Y. Spear* in Norfolk, Virginia. It was one of

three ships that they were putting women on for the first time ever. [USS] *Vulcan* and [USS] *L.Y. Spear* were in Norfolk, and [USS *Emory S.*] *Land* was in Washington, I think.

TS: Okay. Were you shocked that you were going on a ship?

KM: I was, since my recruiter said women don't go on ships. [both chuckle]

TS: Alright.

KM: I was like, "Huh?" But it was a shock because it was the real navy.

TS: Oh, that was more of a shock.

KM: Yeah. And I was so bad, oh, my God. It was a long drive down there, and I was really bored so I smoked a little joint on the way [chuckles] to checking in. But I also had only parts of my uniform because I hadn't had a uniform in a while, and I walked up there with brown shoes. You would think that—So I check on board with brown shoes and my uniform and got in trouble immediately. I was like, "Oh, God."

TS: What kind of shoes were you supposed to have?

KM: They were black Corfam shoes.

TS: Oh right.

KM: Shiny black uniform shoes. And I was like, "Oh, this is great," right off the bat. But I didn't really know the real navy until this.

TS: Right.

KM: And then it was like, "Oh, this is different. The ship is the real navy." [chuckles] It was a culture shock.

TS: When you're stationed there, you're on the ship. You don't have any berthing outside the ship or anything?

KM: When you're in port you can get apartments, and we would get short term apartments that several of us would live in because, of course, you can't afford anything on navy pay. But that's—These pictures over there are mostly apartments that we rented temporary. Norfolk's known for having these short-term apartments because navy people have to come and go all the time.

TS: Okay.

KM: So I stayed on board initially, until I got to know people, and then we got apartments. And so, they put us—Yeah, there might have been twenty women at first. Now, this is eleven

hundred crew. If they want to do an experiment, they really should have put half and half, or 40/60, or something. Don't just put—

TS: Ratio for men to women?

KM: Yes, for men and women. Don't just put a few women.

TS: So it was twenty out of eleven hundred?

KM: Something like that, initially.

TS: And did they have officers that were women?

KM: Yes, they had gone on before as enlisted. There was two or three of them.

TS: Still a small ratio.

KM: Yeah. They had gone on before us, and then us women went on, the enlisted, and like I say, they were mostly—it seemed like a lot of higher ranking ones and they were good women; they were.

TS: The enlisted were higher ranking?

KM: Yes.

TS: Okay.

KM: And they were—I think they were hand chosen or something. I don't know. Or they had to volunteer. I don't know how, but they were impressive women.

TS: Yeah?

KM: These were gung-ho navy women, and a little shocked to see me, I think. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah?

KM: They were really impressive, very good at their jobs, had every award they could possibly get; just like a little—the salad on their chest with all the medals.

TS: Right.

KM: And very impressive women. And then there—us lower ranking ones, not all were hand-picked. They were just, kind of, transferred on. Me—Jolene and some other—we were seamen, low ranks. But it was the real navy. It was like, "Oh, I don't like this."

TS: You didn't like it right away?

KM: Well, not really, but it was really different. I wasn't used to military. And it was surprising to them, because they're like, "You've been in a couple years. You should know all this." The older women.

I'm like, "I don't know any of this." [both chuckling]

TS: "My dad was in the air force." I'm sure if you said that, that didn't go over well. Okay, so you're saying it's different, things like—you didn't have the uniform.

KM: Yeah, I had to start wearing a uniform.

TS: Did you have formation?

KM: Yes, we had all of that stuff.

TS: Regular formation. Inspections, I'm sure.

KM: Inspections. And you do your own trash; you have to clean and stuff like that. I was like, "Wow." [chuckles]

TS: You had to clean up after yourself.

KM: Yeah.

TS: And so, in your area, how much room did you have?

KM: Oh, none. It's like your rack—your bed—was your space; that's it.

TS: Now, do you have a place to put things? Where do you put your stuff?

KM: If you're on the top two racks you only have your locker. If you're on the bottom rack—and I was on the bottom—I had a—you could lift up your bed and there was a storage space in there for placing all your personal items.

TS: Did you also have a locker?

KM: I did, so I had more room than others.

TS: Okay.

KM: Actually, I think the middle rack also had a—they could lift up their bed. I think just the top rack—couldn't.

TS: The top rack.

KM: If I remember right.

TS: So that's, like, all your worldly possessions that you can take on to the ship—

KM: Yes.

TS: Is what you could fit in your locker and that other space?

KM: Very tiny, little half locker, and on your bed. But I didn't have much anyway so it didn't matter.

TS: No? No? So that was maybe even a culture shock, right?

KM: Oh, it was, it was totally, because I was a E-3 seaman when I went on so I was expected to know more than I did. [chuckles]

TS: Did you at least know who to salute?

KM: Yeah, you salute officers but not—I can't remember the rule—even today—

TS: With the hat on or off?

KM: Yeah. If they're indoors. So mostly I avoided them; I was like, "I can't remember the rules so I'm going over here. " [both chuckle]

TS: Alright. So you've got a new, different kind of way of living, and you have a new way of working, and dressing.

KM: Yes.

TS: And then, also, you're thrown into an environment where the ratio of men to women is very different, and maybe the attitudes—are they different?

KM: Since I was gay, I think I had it better than the straight women because I wasn't trying to associate with the men as much as them, or do things off the ship with them. We had—The number of women grew pretty quickly to about a hundred or something, and so maybe twenty of us were gay.

TS: Really? So a lot?

KM: Now, the reason being is because they chose well performing women who, back then—women didn't have lots of choices in jobs—as many—especially for gay women that maybe didn't want to be a secretary or something, and so they chose the military, that was their career, and they were going to do well at it. They were high performing, and they had to support themselves. So I think that's why they were so good.

TS: They had a lot of ambition because they knew that they weren't going to get the same kind

of opportunities, maybe, outside in the civilian world?

KM: Exactly. That's what I think. And this was a career where they could support themselves, and have a pension and all of that.

TS: Benefits and all that stuff.

KM: Yes, when they got out. So I think that's what attracted many—

TS: I mean, that's not why you were in the navy necessarily, it was for the education.

KM: Yeah. And also because I just came from military—it's like I divided people that I met into, like, five groups or something: you were born into it, you were running away from something, whatever.

TS: Right. Right. When you're around this group, this environment, and it's different from what you had been in, how did you feel about that? How were you reacting to the work environment, the different cultural shift that you were in on the ship?

KM: Yeah. There was—I don't know. Being in close quarters all the time with these people, I kind of admired the women, and a lot of the men were really good, and they were pretty fair to me. I did not have as bad, like I say, as other women. And again, I was in shift work again, so I was working in the evening shift so I didn't see much of the crew at all, to begin with. I thought the women were quite impressive. I still was getting in trouble. [chuckles]

TS: Why are we getting in trouble, Karen?

KM: Well, again, I would like—I was much more interested in partying, and I had part time jobs and stuff. Even there in Norfolk. I had moved to Norfolk, I didn't even know the area and I got a job driving a cab. [both chuckle] Because it's one of the jobs when you go to a place you can usually get one really fast.

TS: Cab driver, really? Okay.

KM: And so, I would have to ask people, "Now, where's that street?" [laughing] I'd have to bullshit my way through it.

TS: That's right, you would not be very familiar. We didn't have GPS [Global Positioning System] then.

KM: No.

TS: That's too funny.

KM: Oh, God, the things you do to survive. When we went out to sea I sold Avon.

[Avon Products, Inc. is a direct selling company in beauty, household, and personal care categories]

TS: There you go.

KM: Had a captive crew.

TS: Yes, that's right.

KM: I was very—did well in Avon sales.

TS: Did you?

KM: People are like, "You're selling Avon?" It's money.

TS: It's a living. A girl's got to do what a girl's got to do, right? Well, talk a little bit about, if you don't mind, you say that you had it easier than some of the other women. So women who were not gay, how were they treated on the ship by the men?

KM: Well, you know in the military [back then, don't know about today—KM added later], you're either a whore or a lesbian; dyke or whore, that's all you are to the guys. And I felt like I know that there was women that—I know they had some sexual abuse amongst them. For the most part we were pretty safe and pretty good, but I do know some women—like, there were certain parts of ships I wouldn't go in. I was like—I protected myself. I was really good at not putting myself in a dangerous place or anything—I was better than most.

TS: You're, like, street smart in that way. Ship smart.

KM: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. So I—And there were some really dumb, naive young girls that came on that didn't have this, and I know that one got abused; one girl in particular. But—And I felt bad for them, but I don't know how you teach somebody to stay away from bad guys.

TS: Right. Well, at that time there wasn't really a system set up for women to report that kind of thing, was there?

KM: Not that I know of. But I didn't put myself in those positions and yet I still got some harassment and some—but I was like—

TS: What was typical harassment that you would get?

KM: Oh, "Hey, babe, you want to do—Why don't you come with me here?" Or just all sorts of things about women and stuff and I—But I didn't really—I was kind of tough. [chuckles] I was like, "Fuck you."

TS: Is that what you would say?

KM: Yeah. "Leave me alone," whatever. But I also didn't put myself in positions where I'd be in danger, for the most part. And most of the guys I worked with were pretty decent, because I, again, worked in the upper—the ship is—the lower you go the less educated or whatever—the people. I shouldn't even put that in there because that will cause controversy.

TS: Well, there's a class structure to the military anyhow, right, through rank.

KM: Yes. And it also kind of was with job, I thought.

TS: Right.

KM: And the people I worked with had much more schooling. Even if they hadn't had it out of the military, they did during the military; they had much more schooling, more education. And I don't know why—I think maybe some of the older men did not like women on the ship, but most of the guys I worked with, they were just as new as I was and they didn't experience anything really different. Or if they had, they might have had one posting before *Spear*, so it wasn't that big of a deal to them. And I must say, I worked with a lot of people—guys that smoked pot, and we would smoke pot. [both chuckle]

TS: So you had some common interests.

KM: Yeah. And pot tends to make you not really aggressive. [chuckles] It's not like guys that drink alcohol and rape women. It was like they just were more laid back and potheads.

TS: So you got in with the right crowd, is that what you're saying, Karen?

KM: Yeah. [chuckles] And it was not uncommon and we'd—But I mostly hung with the lesbians, I'd say, and I was—when I wasn't on duty I left the ship and I just hung off base.

TS: You didn't stay on it for any kind of social thing?

KM: No.

TS: People are getting kicked out for being gay.

KM: Yes, and it did get worse as the times went on. Like I said, I did not have as much of abuse as the other women, but I did have some. But like I say, I didn't put myself in danger, and I also found the best thing was be—just retort right back to them; "Shut the fuck up."

TS: Yeah.

KM: Or whatever.

TS: Would you get accused of being a lesbian—

KM: Oh, yeah.

TS: —and would they say, "You don't want to sleep with me—" blah, blah, blah.

KM: Oh, absolutely. And I'd be like, "God, are you the choice?" Or whatever.

TS: You had a list of things that you could choose from, I'm sure, for comebacks.

KM: I'd say all sorts of things to them: "Your girlfriend left you for a woman. She didn't notice the difference." [both laugh]

TS: How was that received?

KM: "Fuck you."

TS: And they'd leave you alone, right, because—

KM: But I was brought up in a different environment. I mean, it was like you had to be tough. I mean, I used to taunt bullies when I was a kid because I wouldn't take their crap. I would get beat up, but I wouldn't back down, because that's how I was taught.

TS: Right.

KM: You fight, you take care of yourself.

TS: You probably also established a reputation.

KM: I think mostly they didn't see me as much as others, too, because I worked different shifts. and stuff.

TS: Right.

KM: And I stayed away from them, and I knew who was trouble.

TS: And who wasn't.

KM: For the most part. But I still got called "dyke," I got called whatever. [chuckles] But—And there was times, like when we were out to sea, it was like, "If I never see another man in my life I would be so happy." It was like, "I'm so sick of [you guys?]."

But—I don't know. Poor Jolene[?], she was walking down the ladder outside the ship—it was very—like, from the fourth—it was like four stories high and coming down—she was like halfway down and somebody yelled, "Dyke!" to her, and the whole pier stopped and looked at her. And she said she didn't know whether to go back up or continue down, and I just cracked up laughing. [laughing]

TS: What are you going to do, right?

KM: Yeah. But she—And I had another friend, Slick, on the ship—I'll have to give you a picture of her—but she actually got shoved down the stairs—down the ladder—by somebody; she never did figure out who. They didn't like her, or women, dykes, who knows? Take your pick of what they didn't like. The men—We did these helo ops [helicopter operations]—this picture reminds me of that—VERTREP—vertical replenishment—and the men had a very odd attitude. It's like "Everybody has to do their part." Alright. We had some very small women. I mean, when you were done with that your arms—no package came in less than fifty pounds, and you had to line up in a row and—

TS: Pass them along?

KM: —pass them along. So like, when you're done your arms were just yellow, black and blue, with bruises.

TS: All the way from your shoulder to your wrist?

KM: Yeah. It was pretty intense. And we had girls that were really skinny and couldn't do it, and the guys were like, "See, you women can't do things." And it was like—So what we would do is we would put two women on the weak woman—on either side of her—and we would reach—

TS: Right across her?

KM: —right across her to—so that she wouldn't drop out of line, and yet we still got the packages going. And it's like, there's more than one way to do something.

TS: Right.

KM: Don't have to just be this macho guy.

TS: Right.

KM: And I remember my father telling me—he was one of the very few men that accepted women in his profession—in the air force—when they first started coming in. And he was like, "Yeah, we had the guys, we would—It would be like you had to lug the equipment across—over to the plane. This woman comes in and she puts it on a dolly [cart] and she moved it over. Next thing you know, the other men are, like, putting it on a dolly. [both chuckle] That machoism kind of went away." And it's like, I think that it's important that men work with women to at least learn other ways to do things.

TS: You don't have to use brute force every time.

KM: Exactly.

TS: Yeah.

KM: But they—I don't know if it pissed them off that we would circumvent their little world or what.

TS: I read something the other day from one of the conflicts—the wars—and they were asking how women did; it was earlier, I think it was Panama—and he said, "Well, how are the women? Are they strong enough?"

And he said something like, "They did fine. They did their job fine." And, yeah, some women can't do chin-ups and pull-ups like men, but you don't do that when you're under fire; you're not doing chin-ups and pull-ups.

KM: Exactly.

TS: You're doing the other types of jobs, so we all work together as a team.

KM: Yes.

TS: That has kind of stuck in my head, about the way everybody has a role and it's not the exact same role.

KM: Exactly. And us women pretty quickly pulled together. It was very much an "us and them."

TS: Was it? So you has some camaraderie just amongst the women?

KM: Oh, absolutely. Some of the best friends I've ever had in my life was the women on that ship.

TS: Yeah.

KM: Just absolute trust and—we're together.

TS: Now, when you had, maybe, a woman that was faltering, like you say—you gave a great example of that, with the packages—you kind of helped pick them up.

KM: Yes.

TS: But were there times when you're slapping your forehead, like, "Oh, come on. You're making us all look bad"?

KM: Not really, because we didn't have in that first group of women—didn't have any slackers; didn't have anybody that didn't try.

TS: Okay.

KM: I mean, I was probably the lowest of them all. [chuckles]

TS: Well, it sounds like you worked really hard.

KM: Yeah. I just couldn't get there on time.

TS: Right, those kind of things.

KM: I didn't purposely try to do bad work or anything, or slack off. I've always been a hard worker.

TS: It's just getting to work.

KM: Yeah. And listening to people with their silly rules. [both chuckle]

TS: Did you ever get in trouble for your drug use?

KM: I never got caught. Back then they did not test people for drugs, like I guess they do now. And it was kind of a weird era where you're after Vietnam, and before [President Ronald Wilson] Reagan, really.

TS: Right.

KM: And the military wasn't held in high regard. They actually let the guys grow beards. It was a weird period I think, where maybe they weren't getting a lot of recruits, they weren't—it wasn't as strict as it was before or after, I think. Just a golden time I was lucky to be in. [both chuckle]

TS: Transitionary period, maybe, right, from the Vietnam Era to the all-volunteer force, and lots more women.

KM: Because we definitely had some—a couple of guys on there that were on river boats in Vietnam, and I had the utmost respect for them. One had gained a lot of weight and was really being put down by his commander—his—the guy above him—and I was just, like, pissed about that. I was like, "You didn't do your time like he did. Leave the guy alone. Let him get his twenty and get out."

TS: Would you say that?

KM: Oh, no, not to him. No.

TS: On the inside.

KM: On the inside, yes. I was like, I had all the respect for the river boat guy that became overweight, and none for that younger guy who didn't do his time.

TS: Right.

KM: And yet was trying to put him down. It was like, "Just let him do his time. He did his job. You didn't it. You weren't there." So I felt for them, those kind of older guys, but he—they were also some of the more accepting fellows.

TS: Really? The ones that were in Vietnam?

KM: Yeah. They were—

TS: Accepting of women, you mean?

KM: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

KM: They were nicer to us, I think, than the guys that didn't do Vietnam. [chuckles]

TS: Interesting. That's interesting.

KM: I think maybe because they realize what's important and what's not. I don't know.

TS: Like, if you can do your job, it's fine.

KM: Yeah.

TS: It doesn't matter what your gender is, sort of thing.

KM: Yeah.

TS: I want to get to where you switched your job around.

KM: Oh, okay. So it was getting harder for the lesbians. This was the first time in the military where I had to actually start hiding it, and being careful.

TS: So this is, like, '80ish?

KM: Yeah. Yeah, about eighty, I guess.

TS: This is when Reagan came in.

KM: Is that what happened? [chuckles]

TS: He got elected in '80, so it would have been '81 when he came in.

KM: Didn't vote for him, so.

TS: So they're starting to crack down more on lesbians?

KM: Yes. And I had a gay friend who wasn't on the ship, and I saw her and she's like, "NIS [Naval Investigative Service] has recruited me. I'm going to—From this point on, if I ever see you again, you don't know me. You stay away—"

TS: She went undercover?

KM: Yeah. Which pissed me off because she's gay, and I'm like, "What the hell?"

TS: Did they know she was gay?

KM: I don't know. She certainly looked gay. She—Maybe that's why they wanted to use her.

TS: They were using her to infiltrate the lesbian community in the navy?

KM: Yes. The NIS apparently had nothing better to do with their time, and lesbians were easy pickings to them; just easy pickings.

TS: Right. She comes up to you and she says—

KM: "From now on, if I ever cross paths again, stay away from me. And I don't know you, you don't know me. I'm going for the NIS."

And I was like, "Why would you even do that?"

She's like, "It's just what I got."

I don't know if they caught her.

TS: Maybe they would have kicked her out if she hadn't—

KM: Yeah, I have no idea. She wouldn't explain, she just said, "I'm just warning you. Stay away." And I never did see her again, so.

TS: Right.

KM: But I think we—It started to get really hairy [scary]—and they were getting more abusive on the ship. Like, they'd—I was walking down the hallway—passageway—and this guy's introducing a new guy around, he's like, "Oh, and she's bi [bi-sexual]."

I'm like, "I am not bi." But then I shut my mouth really quickly because I didn't want to go any farther than that.

TS: Right. "I'm a lesbian. I am not bi."

KM: And we were—And it was getting to be a bit of a—I think what happened was—what saved us was the *Land*—the USS *Land* [or *Norton Sound*—KM added later]—had a huge witch hunt for lesbians. And there's only three of those ships. And it became—It got in the

news. They went on talk shows, like Phil Donahue or something.

[The *Phil Donahue Show* was a popular American television talk show that ran on national television from 1970 to 1996]

TS: The women went on?

KM: Yes.

TS: Okay.

KM: And it was just this huge thing. And I think the only reason we didn't get that on our ship is because our captain did not want that.

TS: Because it would reflect badly on him.

KM: Absolutely. A captain that has that kind of news or bad publicity, he's going to go nowhere; his career's over.

TS: Right.

KM: And I think the Norton Sound saved our butts. But I do remember the older women coming and making us all get together in a group and say, "We're in this together. You know how the NIS works. They never let just one person out."

Because I'd be like, "Screw it. Let me—" I was ready to go and say, "I'm gay. Get me off of here."

But you couldn't do that because they would always ask for other names, you had to give up other people, and so it was like, I can't take down all these women that—this is their career. It's okay for me because I know after this ship experience I'm getting out, I'm not staying in the military.

TS: Right.

KM: But they would gather us together to mostly keep us younger ones in line, I think.

TS: Right.

KM: And it was—

TS: So it's a meeting of the lesbians on the ship?

KM: Yes.

TS: Okay.

KM: They would take us off base and say, "We are in this together. You cannot say anything. You will bring us all down. It's all of us together."

And we're like, "Okay."

And we would do—the younger ones of us would do little subversive things. Like, I wore a lamdba necklace underneath my uniform, and Jolene wore a shirt that said "I know you know." And the older women would get pissed at that.

[The lambda symbol was adopted as a symbol for the Gay and Lesbian Movement in the 1970s.]

TS: Because they would recognize it.

KM: Yes. And they would get pissed, but we weren't doing anything really overt and we never would have said—we never would have talked. It just wasn't going to happen. But it was a—I probably have suppressed much because I absolutely knew at that point I was not going to be in the military. I stopped doing things. Like, one of our cruises we went to Diego Garcia [located in the India Ocean], and we sailed across the ocean for all these months, and I am sick as dog because I get sea sick.

TS: Oh, that's right. I forgot about that. Yeah.

KM: And yet I went on the island a couple of times, but then I didn't. It was like—because it was completely male on the island, no women stationed there. And when we pulled into the port it had a big sign saying "Welcome Love Boat." [chuckles]

TS: Did it really?

KM: Yeah. And I just went on a couple times, and then I was like, "I'm just staying on the ship," and I just started closing in and not wanting to interact with other people and the guys. I was like, "I just don't even want to put myself out there anymore."

I knew bad things were happening, I just don't remember what they were, but I know my attitude was I was hiding from the world, I'm going to smoke my pot, and I'm going to get the hell out of here, off of this ship.

TS: You were basically counting down your days.

KM: Yeah. And I was like, "This is just horrible, horrible." Because some things must have been happening to me that I just like—I never had physical abuse—I didn't—but lots and lots of intimidation and verbal shit all the time; just getting hit on all the time. I had a stalker at one point. I could not leave the ship without—I'd always make sure a guy—one of my crewmates—was with me; I was never alone.

TS: What kind of stalker; like a male stalker?

KM: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

KM: Oh, Jesus. I mean, I would always—they thought I was nuts—the other women—they're like, "What's wrong?" Because I really didn't want to talk about but, like—I think Jolene was in the car with me once and I would—I could see his car behind me and I made this sharp turn, I pulled in somewhere, turned off my lights, and I'm going, "Oh, oh, oh."

She's like, "What the hell?" [chuckles]

He drove by and I was like, "Oh, God." And he was—

TS: Did you report him?

KM: No.

TS: Why not?

KM: Because you couldn't admit to being gay. You couldn't bring any spotlight on yourself without the fear of—

TS: You couldn't say, "This jerk is stalking me?"

KM: No, because he was calling me dyke and all of this stuff. He knew I was gay, in his mind anyway. I don't know. Well, he did know I was gay, because he—my girlfriend at the time was on the [USS] *Vulcan*—and she never told me this; I found out she had died a couple years later—and at her funeral one of our friends told me, "You know he harassed her on the [USS] *Vulcan* and threatened to expose you two." And she never told me.

TS: Really?

KM: And I was like, "Son of a bitch." But no, you didn't ever—you always took care of things yourself, you never reported anything. I mean, oh, God. Back in the Navy Yard, I remember now, there was this guy—I was with a girl who—she was my girlfriend, I think, at that time, and we were parked there—we had gone and parked by the water and we were smoking a joint, we weren't doing anything else. But he came up and he's like, "What are you girls doing? I know you're together." He started running his hands through my hair and stuff.

And it's like, well, I couldn't say, "I'm smoking a joint. I'm not making out." [both chuckle] Which choice is worse?

TS: Who was the guy, from your ship?

KM: He was a—No.

TS: That you worked with?

KM: He was a ci—He was a—Whatever the navy MPs are.

TS: Okay.

KM: Who worked the gate and stuff. So he would stop me at the gate. Oh, God, and tried to rub his hands through my hair, he's like, "You and your girlfriend want to get with me?" And he would be standing outside my place. I would have to go out other doors, or I'd make sure I was always with somebody, and that's how you dealt with the stalkers; is you're never alone. You would just stay away from them and—

TS: Pretty stressful way to live.

KM: Oh, you're in constant fear, but that's just life. [chuckles] I didn't know any better. It's like, that's just how—stress—yeah, it was very stressful. I was always looking over my shoulder, and I would actually take a guy that I worked with, I would say, "Are you leaving now? Can I walk with you out there?" I didn't really tell them why.

TS: Right.

KM: And there was this lovely guy on the ship who really liked me a lot and I couldn't tell him I was gay. And one time he had walked me over to my car, he just kind of grabbed me and kissed me, "I just got to tell you I really like you."

And I'm like, "Oh, my God." [both chuckle]

And at that time the gay woman—one of the gay women walked around and saw it. But not only her, but the stalker guy was standing there. I was like, "Holy shit, my life has just [unclear] see me kissing a guy [unclear]. What else can happen?"

TS: Now you have no world to go into, right?

KM: I was like—So I went to her, I was like, "You didn't see anything. That was not what you thought."

But the guy, he was a lovely man, and I felt very, very bad that I couldn't tell him the truth. And that—And I think this whole oppression was getting to me, and I could see that the older women, there was some homophobia; the way that they would pick on those of us that had the little necklaces or something.

TS: Even though they, themselves, were lesbians.

KM: Yeah. There was some internalized homophobia going on. They were harder on us. And there was also alcoholism amongst them; they would drink a lot. And I was like, "I can't—I don't want to live this way. I don't want to turn into this."

TS: Right.

KM: And that's what the military did to gay women. You lived your life in fear; you lived your

life drinking too much. I mean, I smoked dope and stuff but I didn't consider that—I guess that was just as bad as the drinking, I don't know. But I could also not smoke dope, and when I got out it virtually stopped, because I was busy with college then.

TS: Yeah.

KM: But I was frightened that it could destroy me. And my mother was always like, "You've got to stop treating the navy like a hobby. [chuckles] You joined up, you've got to commit." And I just wasn't—

TS: How did she think you were treating it like a hobby?

KM: Because she knew I got in lots of trouble. She knew I had all these part time jobs and was always running around, and she would pack food in the bottom of my bag because she knew I was always hungry. Except for when I was on the ship; they fed us.

TS: Yeah.

KM: That was fine.

TS: That was a good thing about the ship, that you weren't hungry?

KM: Yeah. And apparently I'd been hungry a lot in my life, because when I went in boot camp I was one of the very few women that gained weight; I gained ten pounds. I was like, "This food is so good." [both chuckle] I loved it.

But I feel like there was just this horrible oppression that was really—and I knew I had to make a choice: either stay in and live with it and turn into these older women—who were wonderful, wonderful women—they had helped turn me around from being just this derelict—

TS: Did they turn you around?

KM: They did. They were an example. They were like—

TS: Like a good role model?

KM: Yes. They were so squared away, they were so dedicated to their jobs, that it made me—I stopped being quite as bad as I was. I was not—I was completely irresponsible, I think, is what my problem was. And they straightened me up a little bit and made me—and I started taking courses and I started thinking—

TS: College courses?

KM: Yes. And then on the ship they had this EO office—this education office—and you could go in and take courses. And I drove the woman nuts. I was like, "What courses do you got? What do you got? I'll take electronics. I'll take this engineering course. I'll take whatever." I

took math courses. It was like—I loved it; I loved learning. But drove her nuts.

TS: Why did it drive her nuts?

KM: She was kind of lazy; didn't want to do it. Also, she's like, "Why would you take an engineering job? That's not your rating."

And I was like, "Just because." And she didn't like that. She didn't like that you were going out of your rating. And I was like, "What a strange thing for the EO officer to have this attitude."

TS: Right; that you want to kind of keep busy and stay educated.

KM: Yeah, it was an escape; it was an escape to do these courses and I just thought they were great.

But, yeah, why I changed rates. I had this Mormon chief who was in charge of the DP [data processing], and at first he really liked me, because I was a hard worker for the most part, but then he found out I was gay. He was horrible. He—I mean, from then on I didn't do DP work anymore. All I did was clean heads [restrooms] and do helo ops, VERTREP; everything clean, clean, clean all the time. He was just awful. It was like I didn't even do my job anymore. I was just his maid and I had to clean all the heads. Every dirty job that came on that our department needed to send somebody to, he sent me, every time. He really hated gays.

TS: How did he find out?

KM: I think one of the other chiefs told him, or something happened where he knew I was in the group of the gay women. It's kind of hard to hide things on a ship. You just couldn't admit it.

TS: Right.

KM: They could do whatever they want. So I was like, "Okay," so I started cleaning the head so great; I mean, they were perfect, and they were so good, but his higher up—one of the officers—came and said, "Give that girl a day off for doing great work on the heads." [chuckling] And so, I used to get days off and it would piss him off so bad. "Son of a bitch."

TS: Very subversive way to get a day off.

KM: I was like, "I'm just going to do the best frigging job." [chuckling] But I did get—I hated it. So instead of going for the E-5—the petty officer second—I was like—I looked around. In the navy, if there's a job that needs more people, you could then take a test for that at your next advancement; instead of taking your advancement you could take and get transferred to advancement for that rating.

And so, I said, "I have to get away from this guy. I have to get away." So I took the—I found out ET—electronics technicians—which sounded interesting to me anyway; they needed people. So I took the exam for E-4 on the electronics [unclear] and I passed it

and he had no choice then; he had to let me go, and I moved up the ship. [chuckles]

TS: To a higher level.

KM: Yeah, to an even higher level—almost the highest level—and I got into electronics technician, repairing radar and communications equipment, stuff like that.

TS: How long did you end up doing that?

KM: It was the rest of my time on the ship, so—I don't know. Probably about half my time was in DP and half was in ET maybe.

TS: Okay. How was that? Did you enjoy working in that area?

KM: I did. They were, again, nice guys, very educated, as far as you can be educated in the military. They did have their little things they liked to do to newbies. [chuckles] Like, they would—I had these radios I had to repair and I didn't realize there was a second circuit going in that just delivered a few milliamps but I would touch it and go [makes buzzing noise] up my arm, I was like, "Ow." And they would giggle. I was like, "That can't be right." And I'd touch it again [makes buzzing noise again] [chuckles]

TS: They put it like that?

KM: They put it like that so that I would keep getting shocked. I did it about three times until I couldn't move my arm. "Oh, there's something wrong with this piece of equipment," and they'd just all burst out laughing. [chuckling] Fixed it.

TS: "Welcome to the club."

KM: Exactly. They would do things like that. I was like, "Oh, whatever. Boys will be boys." [chuckles]

TS: When they've got circuits to mess with, yeah, it can be dangerous.

KM: Yeah. They were a good group of guys up there.

TS: Did you feel accepted in that group?

KM: Yeah, they treated me very well. I don't think they cared if I was gay or not. It was, again, a very small shop. I worked with four other guys, and I think that helps. And they were—And one of them was actually a friend of a guy—a friend that I had from a prior station, so he was nice to me.

TS: He knew you?

KM: Yeah. And one was—three of them of course—two of them did drugs so we would smoke,

and we got to repair in the mast, so we would go up there because nobody would catch you up there. [both chuckle] It was just coming down that was hard; it was like, "Oh. I'm a little too stoned right now." We had to wait a little bit and they're like, "Come on. We've got to get down."

And one guy in that shop, I felt bad for him. We went on a cruise and when he came back his kids were with a neighbor because his wife had run off with a pizza delivery woman—or [I mean a] pizza delivery man—sorry—and he had to get out of the navy; he was forced out because he had these two children that needed—if you didn't have somebody to look after your kids, you had to get out. So I felt bad for him. He was a nice guy. And the other guy, he was older, but low rate—not very ambitious—and he had a heart attack and died on the mess.

TS: On the ship?

KM: Yeah. That was sad. I avoided the mess deck for the most part. One time I was—I went to eat there, it was very crowded, every table was taken, and I sat at a table and they all got up and left, because at that point everybody knew who the gay women were. And they all got up and left, so I had to eat there all by myself in a totally crowded mess deck, and nobody would sit there with me [chuckling] because I was queer. I was like, "Wow. Maybe I won't eat here anymore."

TS: Where did you eat, then, if you didn't eat there?

KM: I'd just grab things; a sandwich or something.

TS: Eat it and go? So there's this subculture of gay women—lesbians on the ship. Was there a subculture of gay men that you were aware of?

KM: I did not know any gay men.

TS: None?

KM: I didn't, not on the ship. They had to be there.

TS: Yeah.

KM: But I didn't know them. Maybe some of the others did. I think actually there was a guy that was good friends with one of the women, and that was back in a time when gay guys had these color codes of handkerchiefs they would put in their pockets and stuff. So every once in a while I'd see guys with that. And then I saw one straight guy decided to put one in his, I was like, "Oh, my God, you have no idea what you're doing." He just saw some of the guys with it. [chuckling] [unclear].

TS: Yeah. People can look up what that means. We'll just leave that. Or the transcriber can tell us what that's all about.

KM: Oh God, yeah, it was terrible; it was like what kind of sex they were into; the color of the handkerchief in their pocket.

TS: Right.

KM: Oh, Lord, you guys are crazy.

TS: Well, so you know you're going to get out. Are you looking forward to it?

KM: Oh, yes. By the end there, I was like, "I just would love to leave the ship now." I mean, it was—I considered deserting. I must have been getting a lot—

TS: Did you really?

KM: I did. I must have been getting a lot of abuse, and I just don't remember the daily crap, but I had considered—

TS: Was it worse, like, on a cruise?

KM: Yes.

TS: It was?

KM: Definitely was worse then.

TS: Because you couldn't get away from it.

KM: There was no escape.

TS: So you didn't really look forward to those?

KM: No. Plus, I got really sick.

TS: Right.

KM: One of the cruises, I got so sick that they—they dumped me in Greece on a pier. They're like, "Okay." They gave me a piece of paper saying, "You can fly any military flight to get back to Norfolk."

"Alright." I'm like, "Okay." So I'm really sick. I mean, I had gotten under a hundred pounds or something and they decided finally to just get rid of me for this cruise and they left me at a pier in Greece. [chuckles] And I was like, "Okay. I wonder if my parents will ever find my body or get closure."

TS: What do you mean, they just left you? What do you mean?

KM: They just took a boat, they were in the port, and they were going to be in Greece for a few

days, and they—so I got on one of the Liberty Boats that went over to the port, and they were like, "Alright, get off here." And I can't remember—there was supposed to be a military base nearby, or a place where I could fly out of nearby. I had, like, ten bucks in my pocket.

TS: Did they give you any money?

KM: No, they just gave me the paper to go.

TS: A paper that you could get on a flight, somewhere.

KM: Yes, any military flight, and I had to make my way back to Norfolk. And so, literally, I was like, "Well, I hope my parents get closure." But—And I actually had an uncle in Cyprus, and I was like, "How am I going to get to Cyprus?" So I was sitting there at this cafe, I was thinking I might as well spent a couple bucks here, and thinking, "How will I get to Cyprus? That's the closet relative I have here." And it's not that far off of Greece.

But this guy, actually, came and sat down. He's like, "Are you on the *L.Y. Spear*?"

"Yes." It was very weird; he was an American. And I was like, "Hello?"

And one of the women on the ship actually got a hold of him and told him to come and find me.

TS: Oh, really? Was he just a civilian working—

KM: No, he was a navy guy and I don't know what he was doing in Greece; he was stationed there I guess. But he took me to a military—where the plane would be, and I was like, "Wow. Thanks. How'd you recognize me?"

He looked at me, he's like, "You looked like the only woman in this place that came off a military ship." [both chuckle] Because, of course, I'm in civilian clothes and stuff, you didn't travel in uniform.

TS: So one of your friends had—

KM: Contacted him.

TS: Yeah.

KM: And he's like, "Do you know So-and-so?"

And I was like, "Yeah." And I thought that it was just coincidence, but I think she might have really contacted him. It might have been coincidence because he did say, "I heard that the *Spear* was going to be here and I have a friend on it," and he told me her name. But anyway, that was just a trip [odd experience]. I ended up flying to Spain.

TS: What happened when you got to the place—So he took you to—

KM: And I had my military ID and I had a piece of paper.

TS: And so, what did they say? "Oh, sure, come on?" Did they question you?

KM: No. You could fly any military transport flight. So they were—sometimes I'm sitting this way, with the cargo in back, sometimes you're sitting this way—you know how air force planes are.

TS: Yeah.

KM: [chuckles]

TS: It's like a C-5 or—

KM: Yeah. And so, it's usually in a cargo plane and I'm in those little netting seats. And they took me to Spain, then they took me to someplace in South Carolina, and I got off at an air base there and they're like—I'm like, "I've got to get to Norfolk."

And they're like, "Well, this place is closing in about twenty minutes. That's the last flight."

"Well, get me on it." So I got on it and I went to Frankfurt, Germany. [chuckles]

TS: Wait a minute. You went from South Carolina to Germany?

KM: Yes.

TS: Did you even know it was going there?

KM: No. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah, you don't have any stories at all. I don't know why we're doing this interview.

KM: So I was like, "Great."

TS: So at what point on that flight did you realize it wasn't to Norfolk or—

KM: It had been so many hours now and I hadn't see the sun, and it was like, "Where am I traveling that the sunrise hasn't happened yet?" And I'd been traveling for, I don't know, sixteen hours, [chuckling] and I kept hitting the time zones or something. It was like, "Oh."

So I ended up in Germany. I'm like, "Well, I've got some friends in Germany," and that's when I really thought about, "Right across that channel there is England and half my family." That's when I really thought about it. And I was really sick; I was just dying; I didn't really care if I died or not at that point. And I thought desertion, seriously, then, but I didn't do it.

TS: No?

KM: It was like, "I could so easily just disappear right here and never go on that ship again." But Frankfurt is a big airport so I got a flight to Virginia Beach, and from Virginia Beach I

walked to Norfolk. [chuckling] It was like I actually walked almost the way to Norfolk, I stopped at a friend's house, they're like, "What are you doing here?"

And I'm like, "I need to get to Norfolk."

TS: Oh my goodness.

KM: The navy really takes cares of their people, let me tell you. The air force never would have done that. [chuckling]

TS: Wow. How long did that take you to get back?

KM: I don't even know. I was in daze, I was sick.

TS: Yeah. So you get back, then what happens? You show up and you got these papers that say you can go wherever you want and—

KM: Well, they put me on a temporary duty on another ship that was right next to us.

TS: Okay.

KM: What was that ship? Was it the *Land*? I think that was the [USS *Emory S.*] *Land*. The one up in—The one in Washington with all the gays was not the *Land* it was the [USS] *Norton Sound*.

TS: Okay, that's right, it was the *Norton Sound*; that's right.

KM: It was the *Norton Sound*. That's right, because the *Land* was the one right next to us and that's where I got temporary duty until my ship got back.

TS: *Norton Sound*, yeah.

KM: I was like, "Great. Put me on another ship."

TS: That sounds right.

KM: Yes, it was the *Norton Sound* that saved our butts.

TS: Okay.

KM: Because NIS was horrible. All they were ever interested in was getting gay women, I thought. It was like, "You've really got no crime to investigate except for us?" [chuckles]

TS: Right.

KM: And we were just low, easy pickings, I thought.

TS: [unclear]

KM: I had a very low opinion of the NIS.

TS: Alright, so you're back in town and you're on this temporary ship, and what are you doing? What did they have you do?

KM: I drove their captain, and that was a mistake because I'm—if I'm in a car it's because I want to get somewhere and I want to get there fast, so I sped a lot. [chuckles]

TS: Captain didn't appreciate that?

KM: No. He's just like, "Sailor, what's your speed? Check your speed."
I'm like, "Oh, sorry." [both chuckle]

TS: That's what made you such a good cab driver, I'm sure.

KM: Oh, yeah. I was always in a—That got me in trouble in [Washington] D.C. one time. I got a lot of speeding tickets, and they came to my apartment and arrested me and—

TS: While you were in the service?

KM: Yes. I had to—my commander there was like, "Oh, God," and she made two marine guards go with me to make sure I went to the court and got my tickets taken care of and everything. Got extra duty, of course, again.

TS: Because they were just unpaid tickets?

KM: Yeah, unpaid speeding tickets. Like, I would get my license suspended in Maryland so I would go get a Virginia license. You can't do that these days but you could then; you could go to another state and get another license.

TS: So you just weren't paying the tickets. Well, you didn't have any money, you couldn't even eat.

KM: [chuckling] I thought it was the funniest thing because as I came out they were putting a parking ticket on their car.

TS: On the car that escorted you?

KM: The marines. [laughing]

TS: That's classic. Oh, my goodness. Well, did you have a plan for—Actually, let's finish the story you were telling me. You're on the *Land*, and then what happens?

KM: I stayed on there for a while until the *Spear* came back; just having a great time. I would get

out, went to bars and stuff, I was like, "Woohoo, I'm free for a moment." And this had to be, maybe, close to when I had to get out.

TS: Right.

KM: I don't remember what the dates are, because then the ship came in and it stayed in port. I don't think we did another cruise before I got out.

TS: Okay.

KM: Thank God. But by that point I was just fed up. I was like, "Oh, God, if I never see another man, I'm happy." [chuckles]

TS: But did you have a plan for when you got out?

KM: I did not.

TS: Okay.

KM: I just—I went to an employment agency when I got out and got some other job and just started tearing up school—going to school.

TS: Yeah.

KM: Get a degree and do something. But I really think it was those women that motivated me [unclear]; gave me some discipline, I think, is what it was; I wasn't disciplined, coming from a military family.

TS: [chuckles] Maybe you had some discipline, but you didn't really have a lot of ambition.

KM: Maybe that's it, I don't know; or I didn't know what to do.

TS: It seems like you had pride in the work that you actually, because if you're cleaning those heads to be spotless, that's a lot of pride.

KM: Yeah.

TS: You're just kind of there to do your time, right?

KM: Yeah.

TS: But you didn't have an ambition to have it a career. Did you have it make rank? Was that something you were ever concerned about?

KM: No. I did not, because that's why I switched from one—like, I had to switch. When I took that ET [electronic technician] test I had to take the test at the rank I was currently at. So I

forego going up in rate to take this other rate.

TS: To get into a different job?

KM: Yeah, to get out of the—

TS: Job [unclear].

KM: And it was pretty obvious to me that I was not going to stay in, which—So I guess the women, they gave me some discipline. It was like they couldn't—the navy couldn't instill fear in me because it was like, "Oh, you guys can't even put out any kind of abuse we had in our childhood." [chuckles]

TS: Right.

KM: But I also didn't know—The only reason I became an accountant is one of them—I was like, "What should I do?"

She's like, "Why don't you go be an accountant?"

And I was like, "Okay." So I said, "Okay." It was actually due to one of the women on the ship that I pursued accounting, because I had no idea what to do.

TS: Did you end up enjoying accounting?

KM: No, not really. Nowadays—Now, if I knew what I know now—my interests—I would absolutely be in the science field.

TS: Okay.

KM: Absolutely. But accounting is always employment; you can go anywhere, do—

TS: Get a job.

KM: Yeah. Accounting is secure.

TS: It's practical.

KM: Yeah, practical. [both chuckle]

TS: Well, did you have any kind of trans—I know you're very happy to be a civilian, but as you're making that transition, was it challenging at all, in any way?

KM: Yeah, I mean, it was—"What do you mean I don't take out my garbage?" Back to that sort of thing, like—And they were much more relaxed and laid back, and I really was stunned that I didn't have to take my garbage out. [chuckles]

TS: You mean, like, at your desk?

KM: Yeah. It took a long time before I left the office with garbage in there without wincing about it. And they were much more laid back. Although, I stayed in Norfolk, which was a big huge military town then, so almost everybody had been in the military or knew somebody, so it was an easy place to transition.

TS: Okay.

KM: So then I just tried to get on with life after that.

TS: Did you? Well, let me ask you a couple questions. You've actually answered a lot of the questions that are on here, about discrimination. How did you feel that the training that you got in the navy—do you think it was quality training?

KM: I do. It definitely—I mean, I didn't go into either one of those careers when I got out.

TS: Right.

KM: A little bit of computers, I dabbled in.

TS: Didn't necessarily use the fields you were in, but the training you had at the time was good.

KM: It was. I would say—And they gave me the GI Bill. I mean, I can't be sorry for doing it.

TS: Right.

KM: They changed me around, made me more responsible. [both chuckle]

TS: Well, you had a couple things that happened when you were in. The Iran Hostage Crisis was going on.

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

KM: Yes. We were on our way to the Bahamas—it was going to be lovely—and they diverted us to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, because of those Iranian hostages.

TS: So that affected you.

KM: Yeah, it was kind of a drag. But that was also the very first time I ever thought about being in the military, militarily; like, "Oh, we could actually be in danger or something." I never considered—

TS: Hadn't occurred to you before?

KM: Never. And they started doing all the drills on the ship; repel boarders and all of this stuff and I'm, like, "Huh?"

TS: Did you have to take part in that?

KM: Yeah.

TS: What do you do for that?

KM: Well, in my job—I had a couple of jobs. They put me as a shoring party, which is plugging holes in the ship if it's sinking. [chuckles]

TS: How do you plug holes in a ship? What do you do?

KM: Big old wood that hammers into the holes. I was like, "Really?" And stuff like that. I mean, you would literally plug holes.

TS: Wow.

KM: [unclear] Then they had me—I had to do the burns. Oh, it was so hot up there. I had to take classified papers, go to this—they have this little room on deck where you burn all the classified papers. And I had to do that anyway because that was part of our job.

TS: Did you have a clearance?

KM: Yeah. And so, I had to do that. That was so hot. Oh, my God.

TS: So it's in a room that you're burning—

KM: Yes, and you're just sweating to death. Yeah, I forgot about that. It was up there where we did our shellback initiation too. That was really nasty.

TS: The shellback. You want to explain to somebody what that is?

KM: When you cross the Equator it's a ceremony; it's ridiculous. You're a "wog" until you become a shellback—pollywog—and they can do demeaning things to you. So a lot of people had to walk around with leashes on them like dogs and stuff. But I, as usual, took care of myself. I ran up with two of the guys I worked with, and we pulled the cipher lock so that they couldn't—

TS: Couldn't get you?

KM: Yeah, because we were three wogs up there. And they're banging on the door, "Open the

door, sailor! That's an order!"

I'm like, "No!" [both laugh] "Screw you! Ha ha ha."

TS: Did you ever get retribution for that?

KM: Oh, God. When we had to go out to get the initiation, I had to throw away my uniform. It was irretrievable; it was so nasty. Oh, my God. I had to crawl through this tunnel of throw up, because so many people had thrown up before. I had to kiss the royal baby's belly; he greases his belly, he bows your head and rubs your head into his belly. All sorts of things. They got us.

TS: They got you pretty—

KM: They got us really good. It's like, "God."

TS: Oh, my goodness. I don't recall doing anything like that in the air force.

KM: Don't you have the blue nose or anything, when you—I don't remember if my dad had any.

[According to Navy tradition, when a sailor crosses the Arctic Circle for the first time, they become a member of "The Order of the Blue Nose (Domain of the Polar Bear)" and their nose is painted blue.]

TS: I didn't really fly, so. You're in the navy and you think you're going on ships. There wasn't really any chance of me going on planes at that time either.

KM: That's true, not in your rating.

TS: Yeah. How do you think your life was different because you joined the navy?

KM: I found out I was gay. [chuckles]

TS: Do you think you might have found that out otherwise?

KM: I guess eventually I would have.

TS: Why do you think it happened so much quicker because you were in the navy? Because you went to California?

KM: Yeah, and because there was a lot of queer women in the navy.

TS: Oh, okay.

KM: I mean, the first time I—when I was in boot camp, I was supposed to go around and do

head counts of everybody—one of those things they make you do—and I was one short and I couldn't figure out why, so I started flashing my flashlight on each bed. I got to one and these two women were in the bed together and they just look up and smile. I dropped the flashlight, it was rolling cross the floor, the light is shining on them. [laughing]

TS: What did you do?

KM: I just grabbed the flashlight and ran away.

TS: Check. Found her.

KM: Yeah. It was like, "Oh, my God." It had not occurred to me; that was one of my first inklings about, "Hey, women can be together." [chuckles]

TS: Wow. And so, that was at basic?

KM: Yeah. It was one of the first ones. That's another reason not to reenlist, because you had to sign a statement that you weren't gay.

TS: Did you have to sign that when you first signed up? Oh, because you didn't think you were.

KM: Yeah. I didn't have any experience with that. So it was like I had an issue with having to do that. I was like—Because it felt like things were changing—Like, I had—if I hadn't gone to California and exposed to what was going on there, it'd have been different.

TS: Yeah. Okay, so a couple questions about that. You got out in '81, and then in '94, under the Clinton Administration, they put in the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." What'd you think about that?

KM: I feel like it was progress. I'd wished they'd had that when I was in. It felt like they were giving them a pass. But I'd heard from people that were still in, that the NIS was just as aggressive as ever, going after lesbians, which I thought sucked. And I don't know whether that's true or not, but that's what they were telling me; some friends that remained in.

TS: What about, then, in recent years where it's been repealed?

KM: I felt absolute utter joy, and also that I was in an alternate universe. [both chuckle] I woke up in an alternate universe, it was like—

TS: Didn't expect it in your lifetime?

KM: No, I did not.

TS: Yeah.

KM: I did not. Just wow. And it's so—It's—To me, it's having the rights; I don't care what some

born-again Christian thinks or whatever. They can have whatever opinions they want. As long as I have legal rights, that's more important than anything to me. And with all the change—being able to get married—I never thought I'd see that. And it was so sad because when I was in California I thought things were progressing so fast. And then I go on the ship and it's like—boom—not only did it come to a stop, it regressed, and I felt so closeted.

TS: There was a backlash.

KM: Yeah. And I felt so closeted and so unable—you couldn't do anything without bringing down all the women, and it was wrong to do that.

TS: Right. Well, it's almost like there's a double-edged sword to that. You had that oppression, and yet you had this solidarity.

KM: Yes, that's true.

TS: You're in this special culture.

KM: That's true. I'll never have as close a relationship as I did with those women. They were just awesome. And I have tended to just move on because of my military background. I don't look back a lot. So I've lost contact with almost all of them.

TS: As you're looking through these pictures here?

KM: Yeah. It's like, "This is strange. How did that happen?" because we were so tight, but I was busy and I was—

TS: And everybody's moving on, right? When they get out, you don't know necessarily where they're going to go home to, right?

KM: That's true.

TS: It's not always easy to get ahold of people.

KM: Yeah.

TS: That's true.

KM: But we were very, very tight then. I really don't even have much interest in hooking up with them again or anything. It's so different now.

TS: But for that moment and that period, it was pretty special.

KM: Oh, yeah.

TS: Yeah.

KM: We were definitely there to watch each other.

TS: Is there anything you would like to tell a civilian—and you've told them, actually, a few things—maybe that they had a misconception about. Is there anything that you would specifically like to tell a civilian about being in the navy, or in the military, that they don't quite understand or maybe have misperception about?

KM: I'm really worried about how today it feels like only a certain group of people are going in the military, and you don't have as diverse a background as we did. I feel like I met people from a lot of different walks of life and backgrounds. One of the women was an orphan who grew up in orphanages. We had others who were quite middle class. I think I was the only military one.

TS: With a military background?

KM: Yeah. Some were in there to get their education, escape poverty, stuff like that. I feel like it's getting too narrow now, and I don't know if it's because there was still the draft, that a lot of people had been drafted or were in during a draft and were a lot—I felt like they were a lot more liberal back then than they are now; these military people. It's getting very conservative and less—they were actually kind of liberal, some of the older guys and stuff; they weren't all conservative. So I'm worried that our military is getting too narrow, and not enough people from different backgrounds are getting in and serving. Because it's important to get all those different perspectives. I met some really fine people in the military, and I'm sure there's plenty of fine people now, but—and they weren't all there for a career, but you still meet these—I think military people are—they were pretty good people for the most part, other than their prejudices. [both chuckle]

TS: Right. But you could try to stay away from them.

KM: Yeah, the bad ones. But—So I would tell civilians today, what are we going to do about this narrowing of this—only a certain type of people are going into the military and they're more and more conservative, and they're—

TS: It's not really a cross section of the United States, you mean?

KM: No, it's not. And I felt like it was back then. And I think maybe even less minorities go in now than there used to be. We had many, many blacks, we had Filipinos being in the navy because that was a way to citizenship and stuff. And some of my best friends, two of them were—one was a—they were both Mexican heritage—but one was an actual—worked in—as a crop picker—what do they call—

TS: Migrant worker?

KM: Migrant worker. And the other one, she was just this beautiful Hispanic woman or whatever. She—I don't know why she liked to hang out with me. That happened a lot. But

there was all people from different backgrounds; Puerto Ricans and stuff. I found out I didn't like squid. [both chuckle] And all of this stuff.

TS: A squid who doesn't like squid.

KM: Yeah. But I worry that it's getting a little too narrow, and I think they should be alarmed about that.

TS: That's an interesting point. I haven't actually heard anybody say that before, I don't think, but it's really interesting.

KM: Not only for the people that are serving; they don't get other points of view, they're getting too conservative, and that's how countries get overthrown. Look at Turkey.

TS: Right. It didn't quite work in Turkey; at least, it didn't seem to.

KM: Not this time. But you've got to have diversity and you have to have—it's important the military represents the whole country.

TS: Yeah.

KM: Not just a really small group.

TS: Well, do you feel you were—not necessarily at the time but now looking back—that you were a trailblazer by being one of the first women on the ships.

KM: They say I am; I didn't feel like it at all. It's just the luck of the draw or whatever. But I felt very certainly, pretty quickly after, that that was no experiment. That was going to be permanent. They cannot—I do feel like they should have put more women on, but they did build up to at least a hundred, and I was like—when we went to the San Diego—what was it?—Diego Garcia, because of that crisis, I was like, "Okay. There's no way they're taking us women off the ship. They're too crucial, in two crucial spots. This isn't an experiment. This is the future; this is what it's going to be from now on. Women on ships, and they're not going to take them off." Because that was one thing they said when I first went on a ship is, "If there's any trouble we're going to fly you off."

TS: That's what they said?

KM: Yeah. And it was like, "Okay, whatever," because I'd never really confronted the fact of actually being in the military and what it meant until then.

TS: Right.

KM: But it was really apparent it was not going to be an experiment anymore.

TS: Was it Zumwalt, the admiral that—

KM: I can't remember. That sounds familiar.

TS: Like, the Z-grams that he sent out.

[Elmo Russell "Bud" Zumwalt Jr. was an American naval officer and the youngest man to serve as Chief of Naval Operations. A decorated war veteran, Zumwalt reformed U.S. Navy personnel policies in an effort to improve enlisted life and ease racial tensions. "Z-gram" was the semi-official title for policy directives issued by Elmo Zumwalt as Chief of Naval Operations (CNO). Many of these directives were efforts to reform outdated policies potentially contributing to difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified naval personnel during the period of United States withdrawal from the Vietnam War]

KM: I can't remember.

TS: I can't remember when he—

KM: I don't remember.

TS: What do you think about, then, having women in combat? I mean, do you think there's any job or role women should not be playing in the navy or in the military in another service?

KM: Of course not. I think whatever a woman's qualified to do, she should do it. I'm scared for those women in combat. I'd be more scared of the guy she's serving with than the enemy. [chuckles]

TS: For what reason?

KM: Because, maybe, army guys might be a little rougher than air force or navy guys.

TS: But they're a cross section, too, right?

KM: They were but not as much. I was barracksed with—at one point—with every service, and it was pretty obvious—I don't want to say this—lower class people or whatever.

TS: Right. Less well-educated.

KM: Yeah. Were—Oh, God, you can never release this [chuckles]—

TS: Well, you're not the first person who's said that, Karen. I mean, but you're talking about a time when the army really had a difficulty in getting people because of—

KM: And they lowered the levels that men—to qualify.

TS: Right.

KM: But they did not lower the levels for the women.

TS: Right. They did actually, briefly, and then they raised them back up again. Yeah.

KM: And I just worry for them a little bit more than—And I worry for them because it's also a different time now; it seems more open and stuff. But I think women today have it harder than—

TS: Why do you think that?

KM: I just feel that way. They're under so much pressure today—social media, they don't have privacy, they can't get away from things like—I'm sure every ship now has internet, has—they're completely—they're not as isolated as when we went. When we left, we knew nothing of what was happening in the world.

TS: Right.

KM: It was just on that ship. I can remember repairing a radio once and just getting a snippet of some new song out, and it was The Pretenders, and I just like, "What is that new song?" It was like we never heard anything. Now they don't have that. But it also means they're so well connected, but it also means they never have privacy, they never have escape from anything. And I feel that these women have it harder today. And I feel like things have shifted. When I was a kid, there wasn't designer clothes; women and men wore practically the same thing; you wore jeans and a flannel shirt or whatever; t-shirts or whatever. It was less—

TS: In the seventies?

KM: Yeah. And girls today—including all the women that go in the navy—have a lot more pressure on them for their looks, their—what they can be. It's weird. Because you'd think that they have more opportunity, and they do if they're tough enough, but they're also under, I feel, a lot more pressure.

TS: Well, that actually makes me think about a question I should probably ask you about. So when you were growing up, you were, like, in this bubble in the military, and the counter-culture and anti-war. What about the Women's Movement?

[The Women's Movement, or second-wave feminist movement, refers to a series of political campaigns during the 1960s and 1970s for reforms on issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, equal pay, women's suffrage, and sexual harassment]

KM: Never heard of it.

TS: [chuckles]

KM: But at the same time, I didn't know any weak women. These women had to manage their households with no help when their husbands were gone, and my father, —when I was—I hardly saw him, and these women had to take care of themselves and their families; they were not pushovers.

TS: Right.

KM: And some of them worked, some of them didn't, but none of them were weak. And they had to put up with a lot. They had to put up with crazed, changed husbands that came back from war. I mean, when I think about what my mother went through with my father, it was like, "Oh." Because he was gone a lot. He didn't go to Vietnam, but he was gone a lot. I mean, so much so that there was one time he came back when I was a little girl and I didn't know who he was, and he grabbed me and hugged me and I started screaming, like, "Who are you?"

TS: Yeah.

KM: I felt like military women are just tough, these wives—they were, anyway, back then because there weren't these support groups like you have now. I don't know.

TS: That's a really thoughtful way to look at it.

KM: And I grew up never thinking that I wasn't allowed to do anything. My father actually kind of said to us, "You are never going to have to rely on any man in your life." I guess because he was such a shit he knew what men are like. [chuckles]

TS: Even though you said you maybe didn't have the kind of discipline that you later got in the navy, but you were independent.

KM: Oh, absolutely independent. There was no doubt that I had to take care of myself, and you were expected to take care of yourself. I mean, my mother used to give me a canteen and say, "Come back at dark." [both chuckling] "Get out of the house." And she gave me a canteen of water.

TS: Oh, my goodness. Well, you said you used your veteran's benefit to go to school.

KM: Yes.

TS: Did you ever use it for housing or anything?

KM: No.

TS: Nothing like that? Would you recommend the service to young people today?

KM: No.

TS: No?

KM: I tried very hard not to let any of my nieces or nephews go in.

TS: Why?

KM: I think there's other ways that you can live your life that are not as abusive. [chuckles] I mean, I have—it's weird, because I totally respect the military and I want them to be more diverse. I just don't want my own in it. It's kind of weird.

TS: We have contradictory thoughts all the time in our head.

KM: I do. I do.

TS: We all do. Sure.

KM: And it's like, I didn't want my nephews or—I didn't want them to suffer abuses, and yet I know it's so necessary for diverse people. And I do believe, still, that it is a way to get out of poverty, it's a way to better yourself, with whatever benefits they might have. Even if you don't have great education benefits now, like they did when I was in—I don't know what they have now—but at least you get job training, you get self-discipline; the stuff you need. And probably my nephews—some of my nephews and nieces—some of them might have been better off if they had gone in.

TS: How do you think they would be better off?

KM: I think they'd be less aimless. I have a couple that are just—they work at Wendy's [fast food restaurant] or whatever. I think they'd be less aimless and a little bit more motivated. So it probably would have been—

TS: Get some skills?

KM: Yes. So I do think it does—I guess I have to take it back—I guess—it's going to be hard—

TS: Maybe it depends on the person, you think?

KM: Yeah. It's going to be hard for you, but it will benefit you if you can stick to—if you can get through it. If you're tough. I do think you got to be kind of tough. A little bit. It depends what service, what rating you go into. There's some that are pretty nice ratings and you don't have—it's a lot like being a civilian or something. But I don't know. God, that's a tough question: Would I recommend it? Based on my experience, no. Based on what's good for a person to get ahead, yeah.

TS: Tough to say.

KM: Yeah.

TS: Maybe lay out the pros and the cons.

KM: Yeah. Say, "If you can—you're going to get abuse, but you might get that in regular life too. Not as much. [chuckles] But you're going to get it—women have to—and I don't know if women are as cohesive. I hope they are when they go in nowadays; that they stick together and watch each other's backs like we used to. I don't know.

TS: Would you do it again?

KM: I would probably not.

TS: [chuckles]

KM: I think there's ways I could have gotten to where I want to be without them, but maybe not. Maybe that is how I got to where I am.

TS: Well, we can't go back, anyhow, right?

KM: Yeah.

TS: Our choices are our choices, yeah. Well, what does patriotism mean to you?

KM: I really have a more world view than just America and nothing else. Maybe because I lived in those countries, maybe because I have relatives in other countries, I don't know. Patriotism is making the country a great place and that means accepting everybody. I am definitely not anti-immigrant. I almost feel like an immigrant myself sometimes. I feel like they off—give so much to this country that it's foolish to try to be anti-immigrant. So I'm not just "America is the greatest," because it's not the greatest. It is a great place, but it depends on what you're looking at. There's other aspects of life that are better in other countries. I am kind of a socialist-capitalist. I've done very well in a capitalist country, but I believe in socialist ideas; there's safety nets for the lowest people and I believe—I would like to see women be able to have paid-for daycare for several years.

TS: Right. There's things we could do better.

KM: Yes, absolutely. That other countries do, that I wish we would adopt in this country, but that definitely doesn't mean I'm unpatriotic. I think America has so much to offer. I sure as hell wouldn't want to be a woman in Iraq or something. [chuckles]

TS: Right, right.

KM: America is really great in so many ways, but it could definitely—it needs to loosen up a bit

and try to have a more worldly view. [both chuckling]

TS: Well, I don't have any more formal questions. Is there any last words that you'd like to say about your time in the navy?

KM: No. I've probably forgotten half of it.

TS: Well, I really, really appreciate you letting me come here and talk to you, Karen. I'll go ahead and turn it off, then.

[End of Interview]