

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Theresa G. Sosnowski Kerr

INTERVIEWER: Beth Ann Koelsch

DATE: 15 February 2024

Transcript has been edited by TSK

[Also present was Brian Kerr]

[Begin Interview]

BAK: Introduction and then we'll go. So today is February 15th, 2024. My name is Beth Ann Koelsch, and I'm doing an oral history interview with Theresa Kerr via Microsoft Teams at her home in Hull, Massachusetts, correct?

TSK: Correct.

BAK: Okay. So we're doing an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Project at the University of North Carolina [at Greensboro]. Mrs. Kerr, if you could state your name the way you would like it to read on your collection.

TSK: I suppose Theresa G. Kerr.

BAK: Okay, sounds great. Mrs. Kerr, can you tell me a little [about] where and when you were born, and a little bit about your family?

TSK: I was born on January 28th, 1927. I'm going to take a drink of water.

BAK: Yeah, of course.

Brian: Hey, Beth Ann. This is Brian [Kerr].

BAK: Hi Brian.

Brian: Last night we were discussing that she wants Sosnowski in there, because all the documents we sent you have Sosnowski.

BAK: Okay. So Theresa Sosnowski—

Brian: Theresa G. Sosnowski Kerr.

BAK: Okay, well we'll do that then. Good Polish name there.

Brian: Yeah.

TSK: Polish name. Parents came from Poland.

BAK: I have Polish ancestry. But this isn't about me. So okay. So you were born in Salem, Massachusetts? Correct?

TSK: Yes.

BAK: Okay. And what did your parents do for—

TSK: My mother was deceased when I was eighteen months old.

BAK: Oh, my!

TSK: Yeah. But I was one of a family of eight.

BAK: Okay. And what did your father do for work?

TSK: My father was a leather worker. It was stretching leather. That's very manual type of leather. Probably not much money in it, but that's what— [laughs]

BAK: That's what we have. Okay.

TSK: Yeah.

BAK: And you have seven siblings.

TSK: [unclear]

BAK: Where did you go—I'm sorry?

TSK: Everybody's passed. Yeah.

BAK: Where did you go to high school?

TSK: Salem. Salem, Mass.

BAK: Okay. And what was your favorite subject in high school?

TSK: I loved—I actually liked everything, but I liked doing—Trying to think. I guess I would say I liked doing anything with numbers and math, so it was probably math, one of those subjects.

BAK: Okay. What year did you graduate high school?

TSK: 1944, I believe.

BAK: Oh, wow! Right in the middle of the war.

TSK: No, wait a minute. What, honey?

Brian: You were in the—

TSK: In the service.

Brian: Okay. '44 would work. Yeah. Okay.

TSK: And when I graduated was '44.

BAK: Okay. Wow! As I said, right in the middle of the war.

TSK: Yeah.

BAK: What did you do after you graduated?

TSK: After I graduated, I went to Connecticut and I was working where they made the airplanes, and I was working in there with the manual stuff, putting rivets like a Rosie the Riveter.

[Rosie the Riveter is an allegorical cultural icon in the United States who represents the women who worked in factories and shipyards during World War II, many of whom produced munitions and war supplies. These women sometimes took entirely new jobs replacing the male workers who joined the military.]

BAK: Oh wow! So you were a Rosie?

TSK: Yeah, I did some of that. And of course from school I studied and had shorthand and everything, so I just worked there. And then when the war started to be, they were talking peace talks. So I went and worked in an office, went back to school, in the school in Salem. It was like a high school. Salem Commercial School, I think it was called. So that's where I continued with my shorthand and all that stuff.

BAK: Okay.

TSK: So when I went to the Marine Corps, I was put into—All the most of the Marine Corps women were women who had that kind of background, where they had gone to college.

BAK: Okay. So you went to commercial school—

TSK: Yes.

BAK: —and you joined the marines in 1949. Why did you decide to join the marines?

TSK: Well, I had never heard anything bad about it. And my brother, one of my brothers that was in the navy, when I talked to him, I said, "I'm thinking about joining up." I said, "They were talking peace talks." He's the one that suggested. He was in the navy, but he said, "If you're going to go anywhere, go into the Marine Corps."

BAK: Because—?

TSK: He just thought that they were the best.

BAK: Okay. And why did you, I mean there were—

TSK: Maybe—

BAK: In 1949, there were not a lot of women in the military. Why did you choose to join up?

TSK: I guess I really was kind of, not exactly floundering, but not knowing what to do with myself. I had gone to that school and brushed up on all my shorthand and typing and all that. So I figured that would help me when I went to the Marine Corps, because that's all the women were doing. There was no fighting or anything. It was just all working.

BAK: Okay. Did you—

TSK: [unclear]

BAK: I'm sorry. How did your rest of your siblings and friends react when you told them you had joined the marines?

TSK: I guess I never heard anything any different, because one of my friends, we used to sit and talk about what are we going to do with ourselves. My father, these very expensive schools came to Salem and talked to me, and I said, "My father can't afford to send me to the school you're talking about." It was always those elite women colleges. Because I graduated, I think it was in the fifth highest in the class. So they came. One of the men came, but my father was just a hardworking man, worked in the leather factory, and I said, "I don't have money." And in these days, I didn't know what they taught. Nowadays the girls will say, "What kind of money you're going to give me?" That type of thing. But it was nothing like that where they were offering money. I said—I thought, I'll just go—I'm going to take a sip of my water.

BAK: Of course. Take as much water as you want. And we can take a break whenever you want to.

TSK: Yeah, it's okay. To go in the Marine Corps, as I said, one of my brothers, I had an army brother, and I had two in the navy. And one of my brothers said, "If you're going to go anywhere, go in the Marine Corps. It's just the tradition and everything about it." Anyway, I did go. And I went and talked to the [Marine Corps recruiter—TSK corrected later.] They had an office there. Could have been Boston, I can't remember. But anyway, I took a picture. That's probably one of them that you have seen me looking with. You can see that one.

[shows photograph]

BAK: Can you hold it up a little bit more? Actually, sorry, in front of your face would be helpful. There we go. Oh yeah, yeah. Okay. Your son had—So that was when you were being recruited, or that seems to be a—

TSK: Yeah, this is when I went into the Navy Annex, I believe they had an office, and talked to them about joining up, and that's exactly what I did. I kind of hesitated just before then, and he called, and he says, "The bus is going to pick you up." So kind of said, "Okay, I'm going."

BAK: Okay. Didn't want to be rude. Okay.

TSK: So that was the picture in there that you have. It's not the one you gave Jeffrey, I don't think.

BAK: No, no.

[telephone rings]

TSK: Brian. Yeah. What? Oh, he's getting it. He's getting it.

BAK: Okay. So what I have in your information form, you signed the paperwork on and joined August, I'm sorry, April 7th, 1949. So where did you go for basic training? You went to—

TSK: Parris Island.

[Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island is an 8,095-acre military installation located within Port Royal, South Carolina. Parris Island is used for United States Marine Corps Recruit Training of enlisted marines living east of the Mississippi River to receive initial training.]

BAK: Okay. Was this the first time you'd been that far away from home?

TSK: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I did a trip to—I was in Florida for some of the winter with the girlfriends, things like that. And Connecticut, I did work in Connecticut for a while. My aunt and uncle lived there, and my sister had gone to work. So it was just short-lived. And then I decided I didn't know what to do with myself, and service sounded like something I would like.

BAK: Okay. What do you remember about your first days in service? Or you describe a typical day.

TSK: Well, we didn't have a barracks yet. And the way they were working it, the men, or the boys, whatever they were called, the young men, would be taken out of one of the buildings and put in another. So we got our own building. It was in the Navy Annex across the street from where we worked [comment deleted], and that's where there were all the offices were there, and that's where I got a job. I don't mean a job. That's where I was stationed in the barracks, and I worked across the street in the Navy Annex.

BAK: Were you enlisted, or an officer?

TSK: Yeah. No, I was enlisted. Yeah.

BAK: Okay, okay. Do you remember anything else about your basic training? Or bootcamp, it would've been.

TSK: Yeah, bootcamp was great. I did like it. We marched and we had lessons. I was tops in the group. We had all the administration stuff. We were taught that. So I was top on that and—

BAK: When you—

TSK: That's where we went to get the lessons to know how we were going to type the letters. Because it was the type of letters that were written up by, say, generals, and then it would say their names that would be passed on. It was that type of a thing. So that's where I worked. I worked like as a secretary.

BAK: Okay. And that was at the Navy Annex in Arlington. So you—

TSK: Yeah, yes.

BAK: Okay.

TSK: Like offices across the street? Yeah.

Brian: But what about [unclear]. She's asking about—

TSK: Parris Island.

BAK: Yeah. Do you remember, I mean, you learned to march you said, but do you have any other memories, funny stories, challenges from basic? I mean from bootcamp?

TSK: In bootcamp, I was in the second class. There was one class before me, which they didn't realize. They didn't look into that kind of stuff in the recruiting office, because I was certainly able to go to the first. But I was in the second class, and we were very close to both of them because we were in the same barracks, but they were probably in one section. Yeah. So I really enjoyed all those years, because I met a lot of wonderful friends that I kept in touch with for quite a few years.

BAK: Okay. Did you—How did the male marines deal with you? Because that would have been a new thing.

TSK: I think they liked us. [laughs]

Brian: Want me to leave the room, Ma?

TSK: No, no, I was just saying that we would go swimming at the pool on the site, and the male marines would be up in their barracks. And we were walking through. They would go, "How do the big guns go?" And they would say, "BAM." Which was in their way of calling us Broad Ass Marines.

BAK: Right. I've heard some women marines called themselves. They decided that "BAM" meant Beautiful American Marines.

TSK: Yeah. That's what we told them. Yep.

BAK: Excellent.

TSK: We passed it down.

BAK: Okay. And how many women were in your class?

TSK: Oh, gosh!

BAK: About. I don't need—

TSK: Looked like maybe thirty or so.

BAK: Okay.

TSK: I'm looking at them. We didn't have a barracks. Brian probably showed you the pictures.

Brian: I think I sent that, but—

TSK: Yeah. Well, what we did, the men had to get out of the barracks, and the navy had their own, and when they got out, that made room for us to have a barracks. They would, I don't know, they just gave them another building, I guess.

BAK: They had sleep outside with the sand fleas.

TSK: [laughs] Yeah, that was something. The sand, yeah.

BAK: Oh, you remember the sand, or the sand fleas?

TSK: Oh, yes. Yeah. The wind blowing, and we'd be marching or whatever we did.

BAK: Did you have to do a lot of—I'm sorry, go ahead.

TSK: It wasn't a lot of that, but they did teach us how to drill[Comment deleted by TSK later]

BAK: Okay. Did you have any challenges in bootcamp? Homesick, anything? Getting along with people—

TSK: No, no.

BAK: Physical, the PT? No? You made—

TSK: It was fantastic.

BAK: Okay.

TSK: And the first class there, they were very handy for anything we wanted to know. But we moved into the barracks. No, everything was fine. In fact, we went out with a lot of the marines to go to the beach, and they were really good. Of course, they were sneaky. We would be at the desk, and our people coming back from the little liberties and stuff. And they had a thing apparently that if you ring your bell, the thing, three times, that meant we were in trouble at our barracks. So they were sneaky. They'd say I had to call one time to make sure they were listening, and they would say, "We didn't get that." So obviously they rang us three times, and then the marines come running into the barracks where I

was sitting. What are you doing here? There's nothing wrong. They all laughed. That was sneaky. They wanted to get into the women barracks.

BAK: Oh, so they rang the bell. I got it. Okay. Very clever.

TSK: They made me ring it, but they're the ones that said, "We didn't hear it, ring it again." So I obviously fell for it. Didn't know that's what they were doing. Sneaky.

BAK: I'm guessing you didn't make that mistake twice.

TSK: No. But it was funny when we realized it. Because a lot of us went walking with those marines, and it wasn't much to do there. Go to the movies on the base. And it was a good time. Made some great friends, made wonderful friends.

BAK: That's great. So before we move to Arlington, do you remember, is there anything else you wanted to mention from bootcamp? Anything you remember?

TSK: Well, bootcamp was great. We made a lot of good friends, and then we were assigned. We went to Arlington, Virginia. We still didn't have to do all that drilling and stuff. We all got work at the Navy Annex once—

BAK: Oh, so everyone, okay.

TSK: Yeah. I went to the class. It was a boy, one of the males and I, we were the tops in the class, and that's where we learned about the Marine Corps, and how to type the letters. And so that's what I did there. And then they put me—They were really moving the young men out to go to war, which was sad for us, because we were filling all those positions. So you knew that this young marine that I was talking would probably be sent to Korea in no time at all. That was the sad part about it. You know?

BAK: So you said everyone was sent up to the Navy Annex in your—

TSK: Yeah.

BAK: Okay.

TSK: Well, the first class was already there, so a lot of them got the jobs with the higher ups. But I was secretary to a lieutenant colonel. Yeah. It was nice. They were—

BAK: What was his name?

TSK: Something like Gotbaugh, G-O-T- something. I forget his name right now, but that's what it is. [Comment deleted by TSK]

BAK: Right. And what was a typical day like there? So you said you lived near the Annex?

TSK: Yeah, we were there. We moved out each time the class came, they had to wait until we got into the barracks. So, the first time when I went in, there wasn't a barracks for us because the women that were in the navy were there, but then they had to move. The other males went out and they had their own barracks, so it was kind of moving from one barracks to another.

BAK: Did you have a lot of—I'm sorry, go ahead.

TSK: What we did when we were in between getting into the barracks, they paid us to go and find a place to live. So five of us find that until they could get us into the barracks. So, you probably saw the picture that they—Can you see that?

BAK: No, you have to hold it up, just because you're below the camera. A little bit more.

TSK: This way?

BAK: No, up.

TSK: Okay.

BAK: Closer to your face.

TSK: In front of my face?

BAK: Okay. I saw it for a second. And that's in Arlington?

TSK: Yeah.

BAK: I don't think I got that photo, but—

Brian: Let me see here. But that's what she's seeing right there. This little picture here. So yeah, the camera is up here, so if you have it. That's all right, Ma.

TSK: These are just the girls that I lived out with. We had to find places to live before we could get into the barracks. And of course, they paid for us. So these were my roommates. I think he probably showed you. I don't know if he—

BAK: I don't think. Brian, did you send me that one? I don't think you did.

Brian: I did not. No.

BAK: Yeah, I'd be happy for scans of any of them, so that would be great.

Brian: Okay. I'll see you get them all.

BAK: Okay.

Brian: Didn't want to overwhelm you with—I didn't know what was where.

TSK: Yeah.

BAK: All right.

TSK: Yeah. These four girls and I. So there were five of us. We rented, the navy paid for it, but it was a home that apparently—

Brian: I'll take that picture, Ma.

TSK: —apparently had servants, because on the floor where we were, it was on the board where it would ring if they wanted the—

BAK: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

TSK: —the housekeeper and stuff like that. But we all had our own room because they had a lot of—If they were ringing it you knew that they had people working for them, maids and whatnot. So we all had our own rooms there. And the tough part of that was that one of us had to wake the other ones up, and that was so hard. I would have the alarm clock under the bed. And you don't know how many times I reached over to make sure that it hadn't shut off, because I said I had four other girls to worry about getting to—We would have turns. Nobody wanted the job. [laughs]

BAK: Right. Right. What time did you have to get up?

TSK: Well, we had to get the bus. So I imagine we must have got up around seven o'clock, and we had to get our showers done and all that, get dressed. And as I said, we had to come down probably four flights of stairs.

BAK: Oh, wow!

TSK: But we weren't in there too long. Once the barracks were opened up, we went there.

BAK: What did you prefer? Did you like the house or the barracks life better?

TSK: Well, I really enjoyed being in the barracks because all of our friends were there from bootcamp and everything else. And we would get together, go walking or going out to eat and everything. So yeah, I enjoyed being out. Because the barracks, all you pretty much did in there was to sleep. But yeah, I remember they would have one person in charge of getting Like they would have assigned some girls to do—Like one assignment was to make sure that the shower area was all cleaned and all that. And of course I went to work, and I said to the girls, "You do this, and you do that." So I get a call, and one of the girls left the mop and the pail right in the middle of that, the place where they showered, which did not look good when they came around with the officers to inspect.

So I was in up there because we were folding sheets and everything else. That was our punishment. But it was because this one, I used to get so mad at her, she was such a lazy person. She was in the bunk, next one over. She was not the greatest person to have on your little committee, as I used to call them. [laughs]

BAK: That's not great.

TSK: Yeah.

BAK: Did you work with the navy women at all, or interact with them?

TSK: Not really. Once we got our own barracks, we pretty much—We probably knew a lot of them, but you sort of hung with your own little groups. Did make some nice friends, a lot of nice friends. You probably pull up some of those pictures. Yeah.

BAK: That is great. So you were essentially the personal secretary to a general.

TSK: Yes.

BAK: And did you like that job or was it—?

TSK: Well, it was a [brigadier-TSK added later] general, and he had all these—I forget what they were called. They were people who worked for the navy, but they were not in the service, but they were all part of the government. And during that time was when, what's his name, the one that was looking for people that were in the military that he was calling, saying that they were not patriots and stuff like that?

BAK: Joseph McCarthy.

[Joseph Raymond McCarthy was an American politician who served as a Republican United States senator from the state of Wisconsin from 1947 until his death in 1957. Beginning in 1950, McCarthy became the most visible public face of a period in the United States in which Cold War tensions fueled fears of widespread communist subversion. He alleged that numerous communists, Soviet spies and sympathizers had infiltrated the United States federal government, universities, film industry, and elsewhere.]

TSK: McCarthy, yeah, yeah.

BAK: Oh, so it was during that.

TSK: During that time. Because yeah, they were questioning even a lot of the people that were working in the office that were just not military people but working for the government.

BAK: Right.

TSK: And that was a scary time because I—

BAK: Yes, it was.

TSK: These were all men and young guys that we were familiar with, because they were writing up a lot of the stuff for the Marine Corps.

BAK: Yes. Did anyone get fired?

TSK: I don't know whether I was there. I wouldn't be surprised that they were being questioned or anything else. But I know—

BAK: Did they question any of the women marines?

TSK: No.

BAK: Were you questioned?

TSK: No, not at all.

BAK: Nice to avoid the McCarthyism there. Wow!

TSK: Yeah. Yeah. Yep. Yeah.

BAK: Did you follow that closely? That whole—

TSK: Yes, I did. I don't know what happened. [Comment deleted by TSK later]

BAK: Yes. Okay. So I have here on the form, so you became a recruiter also?

TSK: Well, that was just going out and try to get women to join the marines. Yeah.

BAK: Okay. So was that at the same time you worked for the general, or is that afterwards?

Brian: Well, that's when you moved to Boston, Ma. You were working out of Boston.

TSK: Yeah, I was working out of Boston. And the recruiting was pretty much just going and setting up a little booth maybe, near the theaters and things like that, trying to get women. Because they did have the marines that were in the, what do you call the ones, Brian? The ones that weren't really called in as regular marines?

Brian: Reservists?

TSK: Reservists. Yeah. They were reservists. So when I went to Boston, it was pretty much working with the reserves, and also trying to get women to join up for the Marine Corps.

BAK: So how did you get that job? I mean, did you want that job? Did you ask for it, or they just said, "Surprise"?

TSK: No, I was working, and then we always kind of knew which areas were opening up, and I found out that they were going to open up the women's—They had the reserves, but they were opening it up. And I had already put in over three years, and we were extended for one more year. So when I found out it was in Boston, I just talked to the general and I

said, "You've got a lot of good help here." And I said, "I haven't seen my family for some time." And I said, "I'd like it if you would put me in for it." Which I got, of course. And that's how I got into Boston.

BAK: Okay.

TSK: It wasn't too much recruiting, but sometimes I'd have little groups of the reserves and would teach them stuff about the Marine Corps and that kind of stuff, trying to get them to join out of the reserves.

BAK: Did you get anyone to join?

TSK: I can't remember, but I think there were a couple that switched over. There weren't too many in the reserves then.

BAK: Okay. The uniforms are nice.

TSK: Oh, God! Those were the old ones. They were terrible.

BAK: Oh, they were? Tell me why they were terrible.

TSK: They were so skimpy because it was wartime, so everything was—The skirts were long, but they fit us, but they were just very skimpy, I would say. There was no extra room in them.

BAK: Oh, so they're very tight.

TSK: Yeah. Yeah, they're not the greatest. I did buy my own shoes for bootcamp, and unfortunately, I didn't realize I could have used those because the others were terrible, and I got really bad blisters from—

BAK: Oh, no!

TSK: —until I finally said something to the drill instructor, and she said, "Well, you can wear your own shoes." Because they were made for lace-ups in black, got them in one of the shoe stores. Yeah. So once I got those and put some things on the back of my heels, once they cleared up they were fine.

BAK: Okay. Now you said you signed up originally for three years, but they extended it because of the war?

TSK: Yeah. And I got married in six months into that time. So, the peace talks was talk, they were talking about that. So I had met a marine who was getting out of the Marine Corps. He had just finished his tour of duty and he was there.

BAK: In Boston?

TSK: Yeah, in Boston. Some girl had changed his  orders so that he could meet her girlfriend.

BAK: Oh!

TSK: Yeah. But it didn't work out for her. I snagged him. [laughs]

BAK: Nice! Did you immediately go, "This one's mine," or how did that work out?

TSK: He was there waiting for March. He was getting out of the service, and that's how I met him. He was a photographer. He was a Korean War photographer.

[The Korean War was fought between North Korea and South Korea from 1950 to 1953. The war began on 25 June 1950 when North Korea invaded South Korea. The war ceased with an armistice on 27 July 1953. North Korea was supported by China and the Soviet Union while South Korea was supported by the United States and the United Nations.]

BAK: Oh, wow! He was over—

TSK: Oh, yeah, he was in Korea.

BAK: Oh, gosh

TSK: A lot of his pictures you see of the frozen marines and stuff [at the Chosin Reservoir—TSK added later], he had to take those kinds of pictures. So I used to go downstairs and look at the latest pictures they had of this. So I met him when he was waiting there to go home, because he was getting out of the service. But that's where I met him anyway. I looked at him and I said, "That navy girl is not going to get him."

BAK: [laughs] Semper Fi. Right? Wow! That's great. The navy girl is not going to get—All right. That's my favorite line so far. Okay, did you have any—? So how did you feel when they extended your term?

TSK: I don't think I thought too much about it, because I really didn't have—I had a good job in the Marine Corps. I was secretary and all that. So by the time I met my husband, Frank, and so he got a job in New York. He was a newspaper reporter—And so when he got that job, I went in and talked to the general and I said, "Now that they're having the peace talks and all that", and I said, "Put in six months of the extra year and I want to get married." And I said, "My husband-to-be", I says, "Got a job." And so he was in one of those—What was that called, "Honey, where—"

Brian: He was a reporter or—

TSK: Or he went and was in the office in New York. So anyway—

Brian: I don't know what Dad did. I thought he had gone into a—Okay.

TSK: Yeah, he was out, but he was in the newspaper business.

Brian: UPI or—

[United Press International (UPI) is an American international news agency whose newswires, photo, news film, and audio services provided news material to thousands of newspapers, magazines, radio, and television stations for most of the 20th century until its eventual decline beginning in the early 1980s.]

TSK: Yeah.

Brian: Not UPI, United Press International or—

BAK: AP?

[The Associated Press (AP) is an American not-for-profit news agency headquartered in New York City. Founded in 1846, it operates as a cooperative, unincorporated association, and produces news reports that are distributed to its members, major United States daily newspapers and radio and television broadcasters.]

TSK: [Comment deleted] Anyway [inaudible 00:33:36] but that's one of the reasons I stayed in Boston. And then when we were going to get married. But I had gone in through six

months of that one year that they were extending us, and I guess that's how I got out and I got married.

BAK: Okay. What was your highest rank when you left? What was your rank?

TSK: Staff sergeant.

BAK: Did you supervise other marines?

TSK: Not really.

BAK: Not really. Okay. Did you have any—I mean—. So, you had mentioned "BAM." Are there any other reactions that you had from civilians or fellow navy or marines that you—was noteworthy to you? Negative or positive?

TSK: No, I never ran into any problems. We always laughed at what the boys were yelling until the woman, one of the wives of an officer, was there at the swimming pool with us. Because we probably laughed at it, but she said, "What are they yelling, "BAMs for? " And she says, "They're calling because they call you Broad Ass Marines."

BAK: What'd she say to that?

TSK: I told the girls, I said, "You know what they're yelling? They're not being nice."

BAK: No, wow!

TSK: None of us were broad ass, not in the Marine Corps. You know?

BAK: No. No. Okay. I always wonder where that came from.

TSK: Yeah. That was from the young Marines up in the barracks, and we'd be going to the swimming pool and one of them always would yell, "What are the—." I don't know what they would yell, "What are the BAMs called," or something like that. And they would go, yeah, that's what they'd say, "What are the BAMs called?" And then they'd all yell, "BAMs." And then the lady told us it meant Broad Ass Marines.

BAK: Were you surprised the first time you heard that?

TSK: Yeah, I did. Because we didn't have anybody that was chunky in the Marine Corps.

BAK: So you just let it roll off your back?

TSK: Yeah, we did. Yeah.

BAK: Okay.

TSK: I think somewhere along the line. We were very good friends with them because they would have get-togethers, and sometimes when we were living out, there would be a party where we'd invite them, a few of them that we got to know. And we'd go to the beach with them. We'd pile into a car or two, whoever had them. So I really enjoyed bootcamp. I think we all did. We didn't shoot with the guns or anything, but we would go and watch the fellows doing their exercises. But of course, after that, women came down, I'm sure we're taught how to fire.

[Section deleted]

How was your transition? I mean, you had spent four years in the military, and then suddenly you're a civilian. Did you have any issues going back?

TSK: Not really. We all sort of stuck together when we went into the barracks and all that. Some of us, we had to kind of separate. So, you sort of tried to stay with the ones you were most friendly with in the barracks. But that was when we went into the barracks. After we left, we were living in those rooms that were set up for the help.

BAK: Yes. Okay. So—

TSK: Mostly we kept in touch with the ones there around when we slept in the barracks, we had our cots in there, and we kind of got to know certain ones more than the others. Because it was a pretty good size class, I think. I don't remember how many were in there.

BAK: Okay.

TSK: I think probably the high thirties or something.

BAK: Okay. So in that time, as I said, there was not a lot of women serving. I mean, do you consider yourself a trailblazer?

TSK: Well, there was one class before us, but I still, we were very close. It almost blended, you know what I mean? We were in the barracks, and they were just down a little hall from

us, so we got to be friends with the first class, too. And of course, the navy, the recruiter, I mean I was certainly available to have got into that first class, but I don't think that they looked into those kinds of things. They were just trying to get you now. But we became friends with them because they were same thing. And it's probably thirty something of us in each class. So, we always made a lot of friends. But of course, you always made friends mostly with the ones that you were in the barracks with, and the ones that you joined with.

BAK: Okay. So you went to New York. I mean, did you have any issues with people not believing you were a veteran?

TSK: What do you mean by when I was in New York?

BAK: I'm sorry. Didn't you get married and go to New York?

TSK: Oh, yeah.

BAK: I'm talking after the service.

TSK: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I got out because my husband got that job in New York.

BAK: Yes.

TSK: Yeah, no, everybody—I think some of the girls got married, and so they got out that way. When they went home, they obviously met a few of them. A few of them probably got married to some of the marines, but most of them said, "I didn't go in the Marine Corps to marry a marine." You know that time—

Brian: When you were out, Ma, how did people react to you as a veteran? Did they believe you were a veteran? I mean, it was probably pretty strange in those days to have a woman marine in society.

TSK: Well, the only time I would have my uniform up—The only time I would have my uniform up is when I was living at home for a while because I thought, why live out? I can live in my home that I was raised in. So, I was there until I got discharged when I got married. We were into that last year anyway. It was talking peace talks then. But no, I think a lot of girls were joining up at that time, because one of my friends went into the army, and I think one went navy. It was a time when we were kind of floating around not knowing what to do with ourselves. Going to school. And I said, well, it sounded like it would be a good fit for us when we were at that time, sitting around having our coffee.

BAK: Yeah, have you—I'm sorry, go ahead.

TSK: I was saying one of them went into the navy, I don't think in the army. I think one went in the navy, and of course I went in the Marine Corps, so they got three of us out of the five, I think.

BAK: That's pretty good. Pretty high percentage. So have you used the VA [Veterans Administration] for any benefits?

TSK: Yeah, I go to the VA all the time.

BAK: Okay.

TSK: I did—When I was working when I got out, I was working at a bank, and not as a teller but downstairs, as we called it, where we handled the loans and stuff. That's what I did for a while. And then, I don't know if that's when I—Yeah, no, I was married then.

BAK: Okay. So do you follow the news of the marines or are you—

TSK: Not really.

BAK: Not really?

TSK: If it was wartime. That's when, of course, we did.

BAK: Okay.

Brian: Tell her about Parris Island in 2019. You went to the graduation. That was—

TSK: Yeah.

Brian: Not as an invite. We just attended.

TSK: Yeah, we went there. And it was funny, because I saw the platoon that I was in and I went over and got a picture with the—

BAK: Oh, really?

TSK: Yeah.

BAK: Wow!

TSK: Yeah.

BAK: They must have been thrilled to meet you.

TSK: Anyway, she introduced me to the class, said I was in the second class. I don't know which class that was by then.

BAK: Right. Wow!

TSK: Yeah. So that was interesting. And I said to her, "That was my platoon," and all that. So it was really—

BAK: Did any of the other boots ask you any questions about your time? I mean, that's impressive, second class.

TSK: Yeah, second class. I think they were there, and they sort of marched out, or whatever they were doing. So, I just talked to the girl that was in charge of them, and I just told her that that was my group that I was in, and—

BAK: What did she say?

TSK: She said, "Really?" You know, that type of thing. I said, "Yeah, I was in the second class." And I said, "This was so familiar when I went in there and saw that it was in such and such." Yeah, I forget what even it is then.

BAK: Wow! Okay.

TSK: Yeah, she probably introduced me to the group that she was staff sergeant for—. What were we there for at that time, Brian?

Brian: Well, we went to just watch Marine Corps graduation. So you went up after they had released everybody, so everybody was milling around. So, the company had been dismissed. Their parents were coming onto the floor. So you just basically talked to this one staff sergeant that I can recall. That's the picture we have with that lady, staff sergeant.

TSK: Yeah.

BAK: That's amazing.

TSK: Yeah. You said were mostly the boys that were graduating.

Brian: No, there were two girl companies. So, there was, on that one particular day, there was two whole female companies.

TSK: Yeah. I don't know. I can't remember whether she might've introduced me to them.

Brian: No, they had to dismiss, so—

TSK: Yeah, they dismissed.

Brian: They were scattering to the wind.

TSK: Yeah, I talked to her. Yeah. So that was strange to see them come in and see that the same platoon numbers and everything else.

BAK: Wow! Besides that, was it different? I mean, just how they marched, or did they do the same thing that you did?

TSK: I think they did the same thing if they just marched out just like we did. We didn't do that much marching. We would march just to keep us marching, learning.

BAK: Right.

TSK: And then, yeah. We pretty much were on our own once we got to bootcamp and working. And you're in the barracks and you're on your own, really. Did you [unclear] for them. Like I said that girl left the mop in the—

BAK: Right. Right.

TSK: You can imagine what I—

BAK: Yeah, I like how you're never going to let that one go. I get that.

TSK: Yeah.

BAK: Yeah.

TSK: Yeah, no.

BAK: Did she shape up at all, or she just—

TSK: I don't know what they did with her, but she was not the cleanest marine or anything. She didn't make her bed or something, she'd dash out, you know.

BAK: Wow!

TSK: But I ended up folding stuff, because I was in charge, and she was supposed to be the last one of the group.

BAK: Right.

TSK: The two of us were. Yeah. No, it was simple. We were friends with everybody in the barracks. But she was not a good marine. I wonder how long she lasted. [laughs]

BAK: Yeah, unfortunately I can't look that one up but—

TSK: Yeah, I don't even remember her name.

BAK: Okay. All right. Well, great. I have a few more questions. How has your life been different because of your time in the military? Your time in the marines?

TSK: I guess I learned a lot in the Marine Corps, as far as raising a family. And my husband stayed in the reserves, I think. My life was good with him. Unfortunately, he passed on. But we lived, when he got that job with United Press, so we lived in New York for a while. And then it was so cold, and one day he said, "What are we doing here with this cold area?" And we packed up and we moved to California.

BAK: Oh, wow! Where in California?

TSK: Like the hillbillies, you know. You remember *The Beverly Hillbillies*?

The Beverly Hillbillies is an American television sitcom that was broadcast on CBS from 1962 to 1971. It had an ensemble cast featuring Buddy Ebsen, Irene Ryan, Donna Douglas, and Max Baer Jr. as the Clampetts, a poor, backwoods family from Silver

Dollar City in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri, who move to posh Beverly Hills, California, after striking oil on their land.]

BAK: [laughs] I do remember that. So you had a Model T [car] and—

TSK: [laughs] Yeah. Unfortunately, we weren't in that group on that. But that was funny. I used to watch that show. Moved to Beverly Hills.

BAK: Yes, yep. Texas Tea [oil]. So I have on here that Brian was in the navy. Where any of your other sons or your daughter, did they join?

TSK: I had one brother. No, I had two brothers. One was in the army, and one was in the navy.

Brian: No, I was the only one that went in the military.

TSK: Oh, he's talking about my brothers, huh?

Brian: No, your kids.

TSK: Oh, my kids. You're talking about my children?

BAK: Yes.

TSK: Oh, I was thinking about—Yeah.

Brian: Just me.

TSK: Yeah. Brian was the only one that went into the service.

BAK: Brian, did you talk to your Mom or your Dad about it, or just what was your—

TSK: He went in between—

Brian: My Dad gave me some advice, but mostly it was a guy I worked with who was a pharmacist. He had been a navy pharmacist mate in World War II and I became a navy corpsman as well. And then I got stuck with the marines for four years. I went to Camp Pendleton first, and then Camp Lejeune. So as you know, the Marine Corps doesn't have a medical department, so they took me.

BAK: Right. Right.

Brian: And I'm like, I can't get away from marines. I got a mother, I got a dad, and [unclear].

TSK: Yeah.

BAK: That's great. Now, if someone came up to you and asked if they—Either a young man or young woman, would you recommend that they join up or not? If they were looking for advice?

TSK: I'd certainly say it was good. I'd say it was a good thing to do, going to the military. Because when you got out, you could go to college free. I said that was a thing that I— Except that I just stayed home and had a family. But I certainly always recommended it to anybody, which I did. Sometimes women would ask me, and I said, "You just go in and do your job and learn a little bit about it, and when you get out, you could go to college on the service." And I had told them it was a good life. It really was. I enjoyed it. Made wonderful friends for life. For quite a few years we all kept in touch. Some of them had babies.

BAK: Including you.

TSK: Yeah.

BAK: I have two more questions. What does the word patriotism mean to you?

TSK: Patriotism. Being honest and knowing that it's a wonderful country that we're in, and always be faithful to the flag in the United States of America. And I've always been gung-ho, as I say, in the military.

BAK: Okay.

TSK: Always saying wonderful things. I had no bad memories, just good memories. I tell them that it's good, especially when I was recruiting. I said, "It's a good thing. You can always get out and go to college afterwards. And if you decide to stay in and you're eligible to, if you've gone to college, you can go to be an officer." And I said, "It's a good life." And I said to them, "If you're floundering and not knowing what to do with yourself."

BAK: Okay. And my last question, is there anything in particular that you would want someone who's a civilian to know or understand about what it's like to serve in the military that they might not understand or appreciate?

TSK: I think that they would enjoy the camaraderie that they would have with other women. And as far as that, I don't know whether there was any bad stuff. They would always—you would find—Sometimes you'd find one girl that's not there any longer. They might've found something or—One of the things that always bothered me one time when I was in bootcamp, and there was a girl, one of the girls, and that she was just a kind-hearted little young girl. And I don't know why some of the girls in the barracks didn't like her. They said, "Oh, she feeds the pigeons," and things like that. And honestly, yeah, it was a strangest thing. I said, "What are you doing?" I says, "They're drumming her out of the corps." I said, "With what you're saying about her." I says, "So what? A lot of people feed pigeons." And that was the one thing that I thought was so bad about the—I don't know which girls they were that caused the problem there.

BAK: Wow!

TSK: But that was the only thing that, yeah, I thought was not the thing to do.

BAK: Gosh, that sounds horrible.

TSK: Yeah. It was not nice. Not nice.

BAK: No.

TSK: I felt so bad for her. She had a party, and they gave her luggage to go, and then she had to leave. And I thought that way—I kind of said, "Well, certain girls are not girls that I'm going to be really close to."

BAK: Right. I mean, they drummed her—I mean, that wasn't against any regulations.

TSK: No, it wasn't. I just don't know. They just thought they made it sound as if she had something wrong with her. I don't know what it was.

BAK: Interesting.

TSK: I did not stay friends with any of the people that did anything like that. I thought I might have even said something. I don't know. I don't know if I said anything to—Why they did that. I didn't think it was nice. Yeah.

BAK: No, geez.

TSK: Yeah. It's huge.

BAK: Wow!

TSK: I don't know if there was something else in that, but the fact that, that's the only thing I could remember that them saying, "Well, she feeds pigeons when she goes out." I don't know what else they had against her. I wasn't that close to her, but she was in the barracks, and I kind of said—I don't know if I said anything. Some of the girls would make friends with the DIs [drill instructors], but I just said—Ask that they would just be trying to be on good terms with them and not get the bad cop, be the bad artist.

Brian: Did you have female or male DIs?

TSK: Female.

Brian: Okay. All right.

BAK: I didn't know you could try to be friends with them while they were drill instructors. Or they just sucking up, do you think?

TSK: The drill instructors, there were just a couple of them that had probably been in the reserves. I went out with one of the male drills.

BAK: Oh, okay.

TSK: We would date. Once we got to boot camp, you could stay in the barracks. I told you about them making you ring the bell three times.

Brian: Yeah.

BAK: Yes.

TSK: Yeah. Yeah. So it was a big joke on—Big joke.

BAK: Got it.

TSK: Yeah.

BAK: Well, I don't have any other formal questions. Is there anything you want to add about a memory or a commentary?

TSK: All I can say is it was a wonderful time, time spent in the Marine Corps. Made wonderful friends for life, for a long time. I'm sure most of them gone. I'm into my 97th year. It was a good time. And I would say to anybody, if you want an education afterwards, this is a good thing. And I says if you do a good job, you'll be promoted each time. I went from private first class to staff sergeant.

[telephone rings]

TSK: If I stayed in longer, but I got married, and my husband was a staff sergeant too when he got out.

TSK: That's nothing, Brian.

Brian: Yeah.

TSK: You can just—

Brian: [unclear] the war had not started. You didn't even know about the war? I mean there was—

TSK: Oh no, the war was going on. Your Dad was a combat photographer. That's where all the Korean War stills came from. All the frozen marines and stuff.

BAK: Yeah. Wow!

TSK: Yeah, he had come back from Korea. But I said, "How did you do that?" You had a camera and a gun. You know? You put your camera down and use your gun when you had to, and vice versa.

BAK: Wow!

TSK: A lot of the pictures from the Korean War, he took. He wasn't afraid of anything. That was the funny part. He was a marine, all through and through.

BAK: Okay. And you snagged him, so well done.

TSK: I snagged him from that—Yeah. I snagged him from a navy girl. Navy!

BAK: [laughs] They're just navy.

TSK: What were they called? Yeah.

BAK: The WAVEs [Women accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service—United States Navy]

TSK: The WAVEs, yeah. Yeah.

BAK: Okay. Well, is there anything else you want to add or—?

TSK: You know, I would say anybody that doesn't know what to do with their lives, and if they know that they can take orders, and it's a different kind of a life, but it's a good life. And when you get through with it you can either stay in, go to school, try to be an officer if you wanted to, if you had the education. And that's what I would tell them when I was joining them up, too.

BAK: Okay.

TSK: So it was a good life. Yeah.

BAK: Okay.

TSK: You probably saw some of the pictures. And it was good that I was able to come to Boston when it was during the time when they would talk in [Korean] peace talks, so it was like cutting into half a year of the one that they put on us. Like I signed up for three years and then they put that one extra year, but then it was easy to get out halfway when they started signing peace.

BAK: Right. Okay. I get it. Yeah. Sorry, I hadn't gotten that, but I get it now.

TSK: Yeah.

BAK: Okay, great. Well, I really appreciate your taking the time to talk with me.

TSK: And if there's anything you need to know, or missed, you can always have Brian to call. You've got Brian's number, is that what you do?

BAK: I do.

TSK: [unclear] Yeah.

Brian: She's going to send a transcript, Ma, and we could kind of review it and make sure—

TSK: Yeah, if there's anything that's missing.

BAK: Okay. And you can certainly add anything or take anything out later. So well, thank you.
And thank you, Brian. Thank your son there.

Brian: Yep. Well, I appreciate you.

BAK: Yeah.

TSK: Nineteen hundred forty-nine on this one here. That was in—

Brian: [unclear] Yeah. All right.

TSK: Okay.

BAK: Okay. All right. Thank you.

TSK: You're welcome.

BAK: Have a great rest of the day. Watch out for the snow.

TSK: I'm looking at my village. I had a snow village over here in the—

BAK: Yeah, well in North Carolina we don't have any, so we just watch it on the TV. All right.
Well, thank you. Thank you, Mrs. Kerr. Thank you, Brian.

Brian: Thank you.

TSK: Thank you.

Brian: We appreciate it.

BAK: All right. Take care.

TSK: Very nice talking to you.

BAK: Nice talking to you. All right. Bye.

[End of Interview]