WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Dorothy J. Rechel

INTERVIEWER: Eric Elliott

DATE: January 22, 2001

[Begin Interview]

EE: My name is Eric Elliott, and I am with the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. This is an interview for the Women Veterans Historical Project at the university. Today is January 22 in the year 2001. It's not a space odyssey, but, in fact, it's a lovely winter's afternoon in Hendersonville, North Carolina, and I'm at the home of Dorothy—Dottie—

DR: Rechel.

EE: —Rechel. Ms. Rechel, thank you for sitting down with me today in this exercise of self-discovery. We appreciate you doing this on behalf of the school.

The first question I'm going to ask you is probably the toughest, just because it's the first—it's not tough in context—and that is simply if you could tell me where were you born and where did you grow up?

DR: Born in Cincinnati. I didn't leave there until I left for Fort Lee.

EE: How about your family? Did you have any brothers and sisters?

DR: Yes. I have a brother who's three years younger than I. We were a family of four.

EE: What did your folks do in Cincinnati?

DR: Well, I guess my father probably did a variety of things. He went to work, I guess most notably, at the same place his father had, the Powell Valve Company. At that time, that was kind of what one did.

My mother was the ever-popular homemaker until such time as Dick and I were in high school. Then she went to work in the automobile business, and she was pretty good at that, as well as enjoyed it a lot.

EE: What did you say, the valve company, Power Valve Company?

DR: Powell Valve Company.

EE: What do they do, kind of industrial pipe valves, or what kind of stuff?

DR: Yes. Oh, yes. They got the [U.S.] Army, [U.S.] Navy "E" [Ribbon] during the Second World War.

EE: So he had some big work, then. Okay.

DR: You know, submarines, ships, and things need all kinds of valves. Yes. It was not like kitchen sink. It was the giant stuff.

EE: It was like a combination foundry and engineering house and everything else.

DR: Exactly.

EE: You were telling me before we started this that your family is German. Your mom spoke German in the house.

DR: Well, she did before she went to school when she was younger.

EE: Was anybody in your family in the service at any time? Had they ever served in the service?

DR: No. I don't think so. We had a couple of cousins who were drafted, I guess, during the Second World War.

EE: Do you remember Pearl Harbor Day? You would have been a little girl.

DR: Not in the way that—yes, I know it was the seventh of December, 1940, but—

EE: But you don't have any visceral memory of it.

DR: No. I don't have any particular memory of the impact or anything like that.

EE: And I guess when you went to school, when you first started going to school, that was it. So you don't really have any distinct memory of anything other than, "Okay. I guess we're saving for war bonds, collecting scrap or—"

DR: Yes. Yes. We used to save stuff like that. Of course, toothpaste came in those metal tubes. I remember ration points. We bought war bond stamps in school, sell those little things and fill up a book, and that sort of thing. My father was an air raid warden on the block.

Now, Cincinnati was—

EE: Cincinnati's pretty far inland.

DR: Yes, but a manufacturing capital of the world. Between Cincinnati Milling Machine and a whole bunch—the stuff that Proctor and Gamble was supplying—we were a target, even though not on the coast or not a port or that kind of thing.

EE: It was still a concern.

DR: There was good reason to kind of pay attention to what was going on. So they had a very active Civil Defense Corps, I guess they called it, and my father was the warden on the block.

Dick and I loved it. We had more neat stuff to play with. We actually had gas masks, steel pots, and just a whole bunch of good stuff that the warden kept in the basement there for the fire extinguisher.

EE: That was kind of exciting then.

DR: Oh, it was. We were having a ball. Of course, obviously, it was a very serious matter, but we weren't—

EE: But from a kid's perspective, it wasn't that serious, I guess.

DR: —quite old enough to grasp that. So we thought it was loads of fun.

EE: Do you have any recollection of when President Roosevelt passed away or the end of the war? Do you remember those events?

DR: Yes, I do. I remember when President Roosevelt was—when he died, and mainly because we had changed schools. We had moved our home about two miles, and I was in a new class at the time. I was probably in the fifth grade, I think. Yes, I was in fifth grade.

Of course, I was getting accustomed to new classmates, a new teacher, and I was trying to pay attention and fit in quickly. I remember—her name was Gertrude Coles —Mrs. Coles coming in and making the announcement in our class that President Roosevelt had died. I didn't really have much of a sense—see, the Germans in Cincinnati are all Republicans, so we did not revere this man, great as he may have been—now we find out it was his wife that was great—but whoever that was, see.

So it wasn't that he was a figure to me that had the importance that he probably had, but I remember that. The end of the war was—well, VE Day in particular. There was a gathering on Fountain Square in Cincinnati like no other. I mean, it was like Times Square on New Year's Eve.

We all jumped on the streetcar and rushed to town, and everyone just acted like fools. Stuff was flying out of windows, and it was highly exciting. So, of course, my only recollection back then was just being a winner. That's a lot of fun.

It's funny how that is so indelible to—when you mention. I mean, I don't go around thinking about, "Golly, we had fun on VE Day on Fountain Square," but it's a very—it's a very key memory.

EE: I guess your family was far enough removed, having immigrated a generation or two before that. Did you all have any relatives back in Europe that you kept in contact with?

DR: I know of none that they kept in contact with. My mother was about third generation American, I think. Her elder sister, who died last month at 102—have I got genes? Wow.

EE: Wow. Sounds great.

DR: Ave was—she kept—you know, nowadays, everybody's a genealogist. They throw all this stuff on a computer now, but she was actually writing this stuff down in this hard-to-read European thing.

EE: *Altschrift* [old script], right.

DR: So she knew a lot more about that sort of thing than we did. There may have been some contact, but it was not on the part of my parents.

EE: Were you somebody who liked school growing up?

DR: No. I never cared for it particularly. It wasn't difficult.

EE: You'd rather do something else with your time.

DR: Yes.

EE: Did you play sports, or did you get involved in other things [unclear] when you were younger?

DR: Yes. I always played softball. Of course, it wasn't the situation we have now with Title IX and all that stuff, where there are many team sports and individual sports and things for female students as well as the males. So it was just something we did kind of on our own.

But there were city leagues. Merchants, you know, would sponsor teams, age group teams. So all summer long, I'd be playing ball with somebody's coal company shirt on, which was fitting, the way I ran. I was not fleet of foot.

EE: At that time, the high schools in Ohio, were they twelve-year high schools?

DR: Yes.

EE: North Carolina was a little slow getting on the twelve-year system, for some reason. So you would have graduated when?

DR: I graduated in 1952.

EE: Do you recall, if you graduated in ’52, if some of your classmates were—were they called up for Korea, some of your friends?

DR: I don’t know. I was not—

EE: You weren’t plugged into the world scene at that time.

DR: No. I just really didn’t care that much about what the others in my class were doing. I had a few close friends, of course, but it just wasn’t my thing. I was not particularly social.

EE: That’s sixteen, ignorant of the world and not really caring about it.

DR: Sort of a social agnostic, I suppose. I don’t know what they were doing. I didn’t care. My closest friends went on to nurse’s training at the University of Cincinnati, and I went to work in a bank. All I ever really wanted to do was be in the army, and I don’t know why that is.

EE: You had that in your head before you graduated?

DR: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. That’s all I really wanted to do. That was kind of like, “Well, maybe there’s something else you could do. Nah. That wouldn’t be any fun.”

EE: It would have been, I guess—’48 was when Truman signed the order saying women could come in on a regular basis.

DR: Well, of course, I knew these things. What that had to do with it, I’m not sure, but I was seventeen when I graduated from high school, and I couldn’t get in then, so I had to—

EE: How old did you have to be to join the army?

DR: You had to be eighteen with parental consent or twenty-one without. So I had to do something. So I went to work at the Atlas National Bank.

That was interesting. It was something I knew nothing about. Believe it or not, it was, at that time even, '52—you know, "I like Ike," it's not that far away—I would sit there with a hand operated adding machine and calculate interest and put it in a ledger, send out—

EE: You had the tape that was a mile long that you'd have to keep?

DR: Oh, yes, out the door. I mean, boy, we were really provincial, but that was fun.

EE: I remember those days. It hasn't been that long. Hand-held calculators started in the early seventies.

DR: Yes. [Demonstrates]

EE: My dad still preferred that when I was younger.

DR: So I was a bank teller then until I started exploring enlisting.

EE: How did your folks feel about you joining the service? You say there was no family experience. What did they think about it?

DR: They were probably shocked, although it wasn't like I never expressed an affinity—

EE: They'd had some warning.

DR: Oh, must have. I mean, just the things that I suppose I showed interest in. But then again, that sets—you know, there goes your baby. They did not hesitate to give permission because that's what I wanted to do. I think it took them a little while, probably, to get used to it. But hey, you don't want to support this dumpy kid the rest of your life, do you?

EE: Had you ever been on a big trip outside of Cincinnati before joining the service?

DR: No. Once or twice, we visited relatives in Cleveland. That was about it. We'd drive around on weekends just for entertainment.

On Sunday, we'd get in the car and drive down to Richmond, Kentucky, and have dinner and drive home again, that sort of thing. But that's what people did, no TV, visit relatives. I'd never really been anywhere.

EE: When you signed up, and you signed up there in Cincinnati, I guess it was for a three-year tour?

DR: Yes, it was for three years.

EE: Did you have the option or did you express an opinion about how you'd like to spend your time in the service, what kind of work?

DR: Yes. Yes. At that time, there was a two-year enlistment unassigned, just take your chances, or for three years. If qualified of course, you could enlist for specific schooling or an assignment like Europe or something.

Actually, that medical technology course that I attended very briefly was my choice. I had been pre-qualified for that and had that assignment in exchange for a three-year enlistment that provided that, following successful completion, naturally, of basic training, you would be assigned to that class in this specialty. That's as far as it went. Then it was up to you, of course, to make the grades and whatever.

But when I was at Fort Lee in basic training, I started to find out there were some other things going on. One of the things that was immediately apparent and available was what they call leadership school, which was a second eight—it was another kind of basic training tacked on, another eight weeks of what they call leadership school, in which one learned to drill troops and perhaps teach classes, teach drill, that sort of thing. You had to be unencumbered to be considered for selection for this.

I had to decide, then, whether to give up my schooling guarantee and take a chance on getting this other deal or just bag that and go on to school. Then who cares anyway? So I thought, "Hey, that's kind of cool, too." So I released the schooling commitment, did get assigned to leadership school—how could they miss? That was a no-brainer. And then from there was reassigned anyway to what I would have gotten eight weeks earlier.

So I did have a school guarantee, which I gave up. Then I got it back anyway, but did not complete that schooling because I went into a troop work kind of assignment right there.

EE: Most everybody has a set of memories about basic training. How was that experience for you?

DR: I enjoyed it. I really did. It was not like anything that I had ever experienced. I don't think I was undisciplined, but I know it was nothing like—nothing even way like some of those people in there had experienced. [laughs]

EE: What were some of the things that were the most striking to you? Was it the discipline, or was it the fact that you go from a family where there's you and your brother to this mass of humanity running for the shower?

DR: Just this totally different way of living. Now, of course, I'd been to movies. We all saw *This Is the Army* and all this stuff.

People were in barracks, and they were in rows of beds, and somebody would come in and yell, and everybody would hit the floor scrambling. That you

knew. You knew you got up early. That was no problem. I always got up early and raced around.

But these were wooden barracks, old, way old, and very uncomfortable. They were heated with coal. They had a furnace in each building, and the firemen, the guys that were supposed to shovel coal in there, were not Rhodes scholars. Sometimes they didn't show up. [laughs] So it was kind of unreliable.

And what we did was, three nights a week, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, GI this barracks after we had trained all day or pulled KP [kitchen patrol] or whatever we'd done. We'd go back there, scrub the floors with bleach, scrub buckets, and knocking each other's knuckles with those wooden scrub brushes just for fun. We kept doing this three nights a week for eight weeks.

I was trying really hard to be a company guy, but I could never make any sense out of this. It hasn't got dirty. We haven't even been in this place.

EE: You just had to work for the discipline, something we always did, but we thought, "This is stupid." [laughter]

DR: I can recall that aspect of it and somebody skipping—we figured it out. There were two stories, and we were berthed alphabetically. So the second floor were people with Rs, Ss, Ws, you know, the tail-end of the alphabet. The mops and buckets and the cleaning utensils had to be shared between two floors.

Well, we figured it out on the second floor where I was, that we could—well, everybody had to go in the mess hall. I mean, you didn't have any choice. You marched over there and went in. If somebody just walked through and walked right on out and ran back and got all the mops and buckets for the second floor, then the rest of us would sneak food out to make up for the missed meal so that we could at least get started right away. If we had to wait around, these other people—

EE: You were lost.

DR: Yes. You were there all night. So I can recall that, and also the business of being on KP. Now, that wasn't all that bad, I didn't think. The grease trap was another matter. This was—

EE: Cleaning out the grease trap?

DR: Yes. Okay. Well, the first time that I was there on KP, I just got stuck on that, and it was absolutely revolting. I'd say, "Jeez." I'd be looking around at other people washing dishes and filling salt shakers and lining up the—

EE: It's enough to make you a vegetarian, isn't it? [laughs]

DR: "There's got to be another way." Well, milk came in little bottles like this, little individual milk bottles, and they were in cases about like so, about this high.

The dairy who was supplying us would deliver these. It must have been in the middle of the night because we could walk over there to our KP, which we pulled every six days the whole time we were there, and these cases were all stacked up on the back porch of the mess hall. The first time I got the grease trap. The second time I got assigned to carrying in the milk.

There was a gal whose last name was Rook, and she was in the next bed to mine, of course, and we always got on the same roster together. I said, "Rookie, try this one." We would go in this little body that we were to the mess hall and bang on the back door, and the cook, who had been there all night for all I know, would come and let us in and check us off because she had the roster, as we came in.

The third time we were on KP, as we came in, Rookie and I were each carrying a case of milk, which we picked up as we went by. They'd go, "Oh, great. Put it right over here." Good enough. Then I'm going out the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going out to get the rest of the milk."

"Oh, fine. You do that."

Rookie and I carried milk in the rest of the time. We never did—we never did clip trays, we never cleaned the grease trap, we just carried in milk, smiling, "Here you go, Sergeant."

EE: See, now, that's an important skill for having later on.

DR: I remember that so clearly. I can just see these cold, starry nights. I enlisted on the thirtieth of October, so it was pretty chilly.

EE: It was eight weeks for basic?

DR: Yes, eight weeks.

EE: Were all of your instructors in basic women at this time?

DR: Oh, yes.

EE: So your drill instructor was a woman.

DR: Everybody, yes, officers teaching many of the classes. Actually, the enlisted, I think, only taught such things as drill and physical training, but the classroom type—

EE: Were all officers.

DR: Officers.

EE: What was the uniform like? What did you think of the uniform when you went in?

DR: Well, actually, I liked everything about it. I just was receptive.

EE: It was right for you. You were ready for it.

DR: It was right for me. It looked kind of silly, that old taupe thing, that stupid hat. Not that basic trainees had any occasion to wear that hat. We had somebody—I think they were worn—the pot hat, as we called them, I think they were to be worn for graduation from basic.

We had a gal, she was Indian. Her name was Donna Hilliker. She was from Michigan, Lake Orion, Michigan. I remember that because we went to two Women's Opens there, not because Donna Hilliker was from there. But anyway, her head was so big they couldn't get a hat that would fit her. I think they went to like twenty-three and a half or twenty-four, and Donna would use—

EE: Good gracious.

DR: She had a head like a bucket. Well, they ordered it. You know, anything could be made, but it didn't get there in time. So I don't even think we wore them—you know, everybody had a uniform, so we had to wear our caps.

EE: Well, at basic you're not doing a lot of socializing anyway.

You're there for another eight weeks for this leadership course. Then you go to Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. You were starting out, so you took the leadership course, but you weren't assigned immediately to do that, and you started out back in the med tech training that you had signed up for originally?

DR: Yes. Yes. I went to Fort Sam Houston.

EE: So you were sort of waiting to see if they were going to use you in that training.

DR: Yes. Well, the way it worked was, your record always showed—

EE: That you had had the course.

DR: Always had a designator. They put an "L" behind your vital information so that it would always be known that you had that qualification, that training had been given. Then when people needed somebody, they'd just look for it. "Oh, there's one. Let's see if we can use her."

EE: And it was, you said, only about six months, and you went down in early '54 to Sam Houston, I guess probably March or something?

DR: I went down in early '54, something like that. Then—

EE: By the fall, you were doing the—

DR: August of the following year I was on to Europe.

EE: You went to Europe after that.

DR: Yes.

EE: So you were working—and I wanted to get this part on tape. You started out in the med tech course, but then after about six months, which would have been the fall of—

DR: Not even that long.

EE: Not even that long.

DR: No.

EE: By the summer of ’54 then you were—

DR: I was assigned to the—

EE: —a cadre member in the WAC detachment.

DR: A cadre member of the WAC detachment. That’s right.

EE: And you basically were assisting by marching the troops around and getting them to drill and that kind of thing?

DR: Yes. Well, I was a mail clerk in the unit, but the way it was at Fort Sam Houston, many of the basic medical technician courses, the medics, you know, the ones on the ward, were instructed in areas pretty far removed from the central—the quadrangle with the—the brick buildings, the stucco buildings, tile roofs down there, of course.

These kids would get on a bus in the morning and be taken down to some of these areas where the classrooms were employed for these basic courses. So I’d go down there with them. I’d march them around to different things.

EE: What’s the ratio of men to women at Sam Houston?

DR: I have no idea.

EE: A lot more men than women, I’m assuming.

DR: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Certainly was.

EE: And were you all kept fairly separate from the men?

DR: You mean as far as housing?

EE: Yes.

DR: Well, the Medical Field Service School, which was what they called it—I don't know what they call it. It may not even be there now. It was just a giant quadrangle, parade ground in the center.

EE: So that whole quadrangle was the medical school area.

DR: Well, it was the housing for the students, and some of the classrooms were also in these buildings. There were so many women—of course, that was something—women got sent to the medics. Women got sent to cooking. Women got sent to clerk typing.

There's a variety of medical courses. There's pharmacy technology. There's these things.

EE: So everybody at that training was a woman. It wasn't a coed training.

DR: No. No, not at all. It was coed training, but everybody in this building was a woman.

We had this big building to house the students regardless of the course they were in. Some of these were older people coming back for an advanced—there's an advanced medical tech course. It was forty-eight weeks in length, and you had some people—

EE: How long would this have been had you taken the full course, ten months?

DR: I believe the basic course was sixteen weeks.

EE: Where I'm going at with this is that this would be, at Sam Houston, the first time that you're a WAC in uniform having contact with other male army people. And what was that experience like?

DR: I don't remember. It must have been okay. It was no big deal.

EE: No harassment. Nobody giving you grief. They were pretty much acclimated to the fact then.

DR: So far as I know. So far as I recall.

You know, one of the things that I do recognize about myself, I do not perceive slights. I don't take it personally. There could have been all kinds of stuff going down—

EE: But it went right past you and you didn't let it bother you one bit.

DR: I don't respond to that. I just don't. "What's the matter with you?" I just don't take it personally.

I can't recall that that was such a shock. Of course there were men. There were lots of men. They were medics and MPs [military police] and everything. The living conditions, of course, we still were very much segregated, but we weren't on a WAC Center, we weren't on a WAC training center. We were in this building, and the other guys were in that building.

Well, okay, that had nothing particular to do with us. I don't recall. There may have been one or two other women, maybe two, in that class, that first class. The rest of them were men. Of course, there were many men in the classes to which I marched my troops. They were all, everything, integrated from then on.

EE: This training, then, one of the things that I hear from people who went into the WAC that they sort of missed when they merged is this feeling of being separate and apart and somehow special. Yet for you, right after basic, you're put into a training discipline that puts you right with men right from the start, in your training [unclear].

DR: Yes. Yes. Now, for example, at the WAC School down there at Fort McClellan, as I indicated earlier, you know, I worked as an instructor there, and those classes were not integrated. That was strictly—there were just so many women going to clerk typist training and then someplace else, there wasn't any sense in sending them to Fort Leonard Wood to clerk typing school and then someplace else.

They just stayed where they were. Like I stayed there for leadership school, they just stayed where they were. Those classes were not integrated, although they could have been.

EE: Your time in the service really—although it overlaps, if you look at the calendar, with when Korea came to an end. Korea didn't really affect you in your service time. And here in '55, in August, you're headed to Orléans, France?

DR: Yes, I was.

EE: And you had a nice time working into clerical—as a clerical position there.

DR: They call it the Engineer Agency.

EE: Is it a quartermaster thing?

DR: [U.S. Army] Corps of Engineers. They were concerned with supply and re-supply of any equipment or spare parts for engineer equipment in U.S. Army Europe, which was a part of the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] force at that time. I guess it still is, come to think of it.

EE: And you were at that place for about two years, is that right?

DR: About a year and a half, I guess it was. Months kind of escape me a little bit there.

EE: Anyway, that took you through your first three years.

DR: Just about. Just about.

EE: And you had a chance to do something—I guess you had a chance to do a little sightseeing while you were over there as well, did you not?

DR: That was something not to be missed. I had a good buddy in the—in fact, Dan worked like the next desk over. Interesting man, Dan Something-or-other, who was a graduate of the University of Chicago.

This guy was pretty smart. He taught himself to speak French. He was a little out of round, but we got on quite well. He and I, on a number of occasions, would jump on this electric train that whizzes you across the continent and go to Paris for the weekend. We'd go together, and we'd come back together, and once in a while—I might say, we were not spending the weekend—we were not shacking up in Paris on the weekend. We just went together and came back together. We might share a meal together. He went and did whatever he did, and I just—

EE: There's a lot to see there.

DR: Oh, yes. Yes.

EE: And you're doing this at twenty-one.

DR: Yes. I guess I was.

EE: That's amazing, to be that young and to see that.

DR: What an opportunity, huh?

EE: And there's not many places that somebody will have—and the service, this is one thing so many people comment on, is it takes you to places that you would never go to otherwise, never have the opportunity to see and to experience.

DR: But once you were there, you couldn't just sit in the barracks. You could, but that was kind of—so we went—I had some friends who had a car somehow. I think that car had a longer career than the rest of us. When somebody would leave, they'd sell it to somebody who'd just got there. It was an old German Opel.

I had two close friends in the barracks there. We didn't work together, but we quartered together, and they were SFCs [sergeant first class], they were high ranks, and they had a car. They were also—I don't know about Chief. Davie was just an absolutely incurable Catholic, and she wanted to go to Lourdes. So we jumped in the car and went to Lourdes.

I really, really enjoyed it because that, seeing the Pyrenees, sunrise, my God, it's incredible. It's like the northern lights only down here, just some really striking visual memories. But anyway, it turned out none of us—the Chief could speak German. Well, that didn't do you too much good when you'd just crossed into Portugal, you know. [laughter] I kind of hacked around with some French that I picked up along the way, but we had a good trip. You did stuff like that.

EE: You didn't really care about how it was going to work. You just got in the car and just went.

DR: That's right. We didn't think, "Oh, gosh, I'd better take French first." "Hey, let's go."

EE: Well, that's the virtue of going when you're young. You just don't worry about the details. You just let it take care of itself.

You were there and reenlisted, came back, and you said you came back to Bragg for a short time at the command headquarters in Bragg?

DR: Yes. They had these little commands where they'd stick a loser for the commander; call it U.S. Army Garrison, Special Troops. Special? What's special about them? Nothing. But that was always the name they gave to the housing activities.

There'd be a WAC detachment. There'd be an MP detachment. There might be a Signal company.

Anyway, these would be the enlisted folks who worked in those different areas, except, of course, for the women. No matter where you worked, you were always in a WAC detachment. If you were in a hospital or wherever, it didn't matter. It was just women because the whole thing was predicated on the housing.

I went to that headquarters, and it was—I don't know. We had a message center and hung out with the sergeant major, just did whatever, you know, whatever needed doing, we did it.

EE: The decision to reenlist is an interesting one for people, because sometimes they become a three-year diversion to something more long term. Were you thinking when you reenlisted, "I want to get my twenty," or were you just thinking, "I'll do another three"?

DR: I don't know that I had twenty or thirty years in mind, but I—

EE: You liked what you had experienced and said, "Let's have some more of it."

DR: I had made the choice, and it never dawned on me not to carry on, march on.

EE: And in a sense, you enjoyed the work that you were doing in the office, and you liked that, and you didn't have a discussion about, "Well, I want to see this part of the world, and the next part. I want to do this thing." How actively involved were you in trying to give them input on where you wanted to be placed? You were still awful young.

DR: Nobody asked.

EE: Nobody asked.

DR: No. Nobody wanted to know that. Well, there were so many things that were so brand-new to me. This was so cool.

It's not for everyone. We ran across an awful lot of people who should never have been there in the first place, and we couldn't get rid of them fast enough, get them back to a life that they could handle better than this. It's not for everybody, by no means.

But if you're one of those for whom it is, then you'd better be good—that's the first thing, be good at it—and there's literally no limit. That deal at Fort Bragg—that was very brief before we got picked for this Missile Master thing—but there was a requirement that the unit conduct its own training. It's like one afternoon a week or something, and one of the cadre members was the training NCO [non-commissioned officer]. Well, he or she, whatever it was, would do these training classes. Then there was also an additional requirement that some of this unit training meet the requirement for CBR [chemical biological and radiological] training, chemical—

EE: Biological.

DR: —nuclear warfare things, individual protection, how to use the equipment—

EE: There's that gas mask again.

DR: Gas mask again. And the individual who gave this training had to be CBR qualified. You went to a course just for that.

Now, this wasn't going to go anywhere. It was right there on post and stuff, but somebody said—besides what I was doing, I was also the barracks sergeant in the building in which I lived—said, "Do you think you could do this?"

"Of course I could do it. Sure. Where is it?"

So I went to the course. I was the honor graduate, and the guys didn't like that. That's one instance. That's one instance of animosity, because I could. I wanted to and I did and I could. So there were all these other things that were just sweetening the pot. I didn't have to agonize over whether to reenlist.

EE: Well, it had been cool, but you were telling me beforehand that the coolest thing was yet to come, because you told me your best job while you were in the service was probably your next station stop, which was at Fort Meade, Maryland.

DR: I really believe that.

EE: This was the first Missile Master Station? This was a semiautomatic air defense system that was being installed.

DR: Yes. It was radar.

EE: And what was distinctive for your participation as a WAC was that this was one of the first times that they let women in the "artillery" of the services.

DR: That's right. That was what they had to get over. I think the Director was Colonel Milligan at the time. I believe that's right. And old Mary Lou, she took that and ran with it. She apparently was instrumental in getting this change of policy, or more like, I suppose, an exception to policy, to allow the assignment of women to what was by definition a combat arm.

There was no combat, but it was a combat arm. So we had the opportunity to work in the specially constructed building, computers before there were computers. The frames were huge.

EE: You put them on your desktop now.

DR: Yes, going this way. It had to be sixty-eight degrees at all times in the whole building. So it was kind of cold in the Blue Room, which is what we called the area where we worked because you had to work under blue lights. We were all looking at radar screens, and you had to have the proper lighting to be able to distinguish—interpret what you were seeing.

They had had a completely automatic aircraft tracking system whereby radar would pick up an aircraft, get some data about it, and fire a missile to intercept it. And they had that in '48; I think I was told, something like that. But what was missing was the human finger on the button.

EE: To make sure the information was right, sort of a fail-safe—

DR: So they redid that. They redid the whole thing, and they put people, target trackers down on the floor, the next row behind them, height finders, and friendly protectors, and the different things that we folks were called.

EE: So how many people on a given shift would be in this? I assume this is a twenty-four hour a day, three shift—

DR: We worked twenty-four hours. We were off for forty-eight. The first twenty-four was pure off, and the second twenty-four was standby in case you had to be pulled up. We would work a normal day, usually, in training, like eight o'clock in the morning, and then minimum manning all night. That is, you would have a skeleton, an officer and maybe four enlisted people up on the bridge all night long monitoring the radars.

There were three shifts, A, B, and C. A Shift, Captain Porterfield's shift, we were bridge players. Captain Porterfield and his wife played bridge every night that he wasn't working, and he swiftly got rid of anybody that didn't play bridge. We had two tables of bridge going all night long unless there was major training or something. People would get up to go on shift, and somebody would sit down in a hot seat, not even cool off. We just played bridge, bridge, bridge, bridge, and drank coffee. It was very much a team thing, of course.

EE: How many people all together, and how many men, how many women, were in this. You said that—

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

DR: Okay. There were eleven enlisted women, and eventually—well, one officer anyway, Ruth Hunter. She was on the B shift, but we got her transferred to A because she played bridge real well.

Of course, these people were split between three shifts, and on my shift, I think there were three other women. It couldn't have been more than four total. Maybe there were two others. I don't really remember at this point, but we were divided among the shifts so we were very much in the minority there. I don't recall what full staffing in the Blue Room would be, but you had six trackers down there, you had two height finders here, three friendly protectors, and there's five officers up on the top.

EE: Is this the whole East Coast, these radar stations were, or just for around the capital [unclear]?

DR: Well, this one was the capital, the Washington-Baltimore air defense sector. Now, there were similar installations. There was Oakdale, Pennsylvania. There was one out in Seattle. They had a couple more around the country. But we were doing the Washington-Baltimore area defense, and of course that's high profile stuff.

EE: Well, and this is during the cold war, where everybody's building missile after missile and you just don't know what's going next.

DR: So there was a lot of attention, and it was good because people—

EE: Kept you on your toes.

DR: It was good for us, yes, because we had to be good, and also people—

EE: So you had to learn to read a radar screen and—

DR: Follow that screen.

EE: How long was the training for this? You were there '57 to '60.

DR: The initial training was a couple weeks in length. I can't think—

EE: This is what Martin Marietta [Corporation] came down to help with?

DR: Martin Marietta came down, used classrooms right there on the post, and gave us the basic instruction that we would need to get in there and start doing stuff. We were constantly trained. You know, they just keep on to you.

At one point in that assignment, I went with others from that particular place, 35th Air Defense Artillery Brigade, to Fort Bliss, Texas. There's an armpit. We were trained there by the Raytheon Corporation, which had developed what they called counter countermeasures radar. Everything was so basic at that time that an aircraft could confuse radar by shoveling out chaff.

EE: Just any kind of metal to get an echo.

DR: Reflective tinfoil, confetti. Of course, these were not jet aircraft whistling by, somebody throwing it out the door. That was termed radar countermeasures, doing things to confuse the radar, mislead the radar, flying goofy to evade. Counter countermeasures was kind of a filter, basically speaking, a filter they could put on these things, and you had to know how to use it, but it would allow you to read through this fairly effectively.

So that was kind of an interesting thing. It was a week, and that was the longest week of my life because we were in these winterized tents, and it was cold, and you had a coal stove in the middle of the place to keep you warm, and you were trying to concentrate. You can't, you know. When you're really cold, it's hard to concentrate.

EE: By the time you finished this tour at Fort Meade, you'd been in for almost seven years, '53 to '60?

DR: Let me see. I guess.

EE: How many times had you been on bivouac since you joined? Did they take you on a regular basis no matter what your work was?

DR: No.

EE: Did you get out of that?

DR: Yes. They didn't do that. We had sort of an activity like that at the conclusion of basic training, which was almost an in-course type thing, overnight deal. We did it in Europe as part of the NATO exercises, but it was not a regular thing, and it was just no big deal.

EE: So you didn't have to do that once you got to Meade.

DR: No, we didn't at Meade.

EE: You're there as the 3rd Army's rep at Fort Meade, and then you say your dad took ill, and you got switched back—or was that—

DR: No. That was later.

EE: Oh, you came back to recruit for a year in '60.

DR: Yes. Yes. That was just—

EE: Was that part of the expected life cycle in somebody's career, that at some point—is that one of those things, that as you got in there, you realized that at some point you'd be asked to do that?

DR: You might expect that, if you look half decent and could speak.

EE: They were looking for [unclear], obviously.

DR: There would be some people who would not, probably, do well in that kind of an assignment, but yes, I think probably as far as—certainly the officers' careers were so structured, they had to go there, they had to have this, they had to have that, they had to do something else and had to have progressive kinds of things as a prerequisite to advancing in rank and advancing responsibility.

It's not quite that structured with the enlisted people, but if you're going to get senior NCO status, you're going to have to have either one strict specialty at which you're absolutely the best, like aircraft mechanic or something, or else you're going to have to have a varied kind of career with fairly good results doing a variety of things.

EE: Varied in the sense of [unclear] personnel as well as technical expertise, in a sense.

DR: Yes. Yes. Just a real mish-mash.

EE: And I've read things about the way the service is. I know General [Jeanne M.] Holm's book about the service talks about that in the fifties as sort of this decline in numbers because they really didn't know quite how to integrate women into the services. Then Vietnam, they kicked back up again. You were a recruiting officer in 1960. How difficult is it to recruit women in 1960?

DR: It wasn't easy. It wasn't easy. You did some active things, like addressing school groups, and there were some schools that wouldn't let us in, and a lot of it was very passive. We'd just kind of sit there and wait for them to walk in the office.

EE: Were women allowed in ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps] in 1960?

DR: No, I don't think—I don't recall the date that—no. That was a little early. Or if they were, none of them had come out of it yet, you know, to—

EE: It wasn't a good ground for recruits then, ROTC?

DR: That was something that wasn't—it wasn't publicized where I was, and I don't even know that I was on recruiting then. So I was never too clear on that aspect of ROTC.

EE: Do you remember the slogan that you used. It wasn't "Free a Man to Fight." What was the slogan in 1960?

DR: I don't know. [laughs]

EE: You know, they've changed now. After "Be All That You Can Be," they've become now "An Army of One" for the newest slogan.

DR: Now, that makes no sense to me. What does that mean?

EE: I don't understand what it means.

DR: That may have started—

EE: It surely doesn't sound like it ought to be to me.

DR: Maybe "Be All That You Can Be" was. That was around for years and years. I don't remember. That wasn't one of my career highlights, and it was okay, but it wasn't something that—

EE: Well, after this year of doing recruiting back in the Cincinnati area, you had your longest stay back in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, at the Army Signal Center, back doing administrative work again.

DR: Yes.

EE: And you eventually became administrative supervisor there? Was there some school or something?

DR: No. I just was in that—

EE: Just seniority and your experience in this stuff. Tell me what happens at the Army Signal Center. You were telling me about in France you were working with supplying parts to all these different locations. What was the work load at the Army Signal Center? What was that like?

DR: Well, that was—a lot of it was purely theoretical at that point. The Army Signal School was actually in Fort Gordon, Georgia. So the training was taking place someplace else.

We did doctrinal stuff, but it wasn't a matter of training troops, which of course was something I had known a little bit about before then. It was the case that the different branches—not arms like Infantry, but the different branches, the Signal Corps, the Quartermaster Corps, the Engineers, all that bunch, ordnance—they would write their own doctrine, they would supply their own equipment, they would push their agendas, "We need this, that, and the other thing." They would try to get funding for this stuff. At the branch centers, you'd be more engaged in that kind of stuff—

EE: Negotiating for them and trying to—

DR: Yes. Yes. And then—

EE: Sort of like procurement for that area then.

DR: Yes. And that stuff would have to go to Europe, and this stuff's got to go to Japan, and whatever the installations needed. So it was just a place where you dabbled in the nuts and bolts of that one branch's part of the whole army effort.

EE: You were there for almost six years, '61 to '67?

DR: Yes, I guess. In '67, I went to—

EE: In another year, you're eventually going to go to Vietnam, but during your time at Monmouth, the Vietnam War is ratcheting up. Does that become part of the conversation? How does that fit into your stay at Monmouth? How is that affecting your work?

DR: Well, I really wasn't aware of the impact of that conflict so far as our work was concerned. Now, personally—now, what have we got here? We've got a career type, absolutely committed. There's no way I'm going to get out of here before I complete a career. And a war, to a careerist—

EE: That's where you've got to be.

DR: It's where you've got to be. And you don't have to be particularly brilliant to perceive that, and you don't have to be unusually courageous to want to go. In fact, you had to be pretty dumb not to pick that up. [laughter] Now, they were not sending women who don't volunteer.

EE: Did you volunteer from Monmouth to go, or was it down—you left in May of '67 for the WAC Training Center.

DR: I did volunteer from Fort Monmouth.

EE: You did volunteer, but it didn't get accepted.

DR: Right. And the request was pending, it had been forwarded, and in the meantime, they came along and nailed me to go to the WAC Center. Somebody was foolish enough to say, "Do you want to pull that application? I had to pick myself up from laughing. Of course not. [laughs]

So actually, I was working there at Fort McClellan at the WAC School as an instructor when I was advised that my application had been accepted, and unless I had changed my mind and there was some serious objection now, they were going to issue orders assigning me to Vietnam. I said, "You fire away. I'm ready."

EE: It was only a brief time, but from our talk before the tape got rolling here, I wanted to give you a chance to explain what a joy it was to be a troop trainer for a short period of time, Company A, Third Platoon, at McClellan, because it—had girls changed, the kind of women who were coming into the service, from the time you went in to the sixties? Could you tell in the kind of women that were coming in?

DR: Oh, I think so. I think so. And you didn't need to be in the army or out to know that that was the case. There was a whole different generation almost. The joy that

you mentioned was in the fact that it was brief, mercifully brief, and I only had to go through one cycle.

I just don't care for that. It was not something that—what was it not something that? It wasn't something that I felt I could do as well as I wanted to do everything, because I have very little patience with deliberate disobedience, with refusal to learn. Now, there are a lot of people, they can't do it, but you can tell the difference, and that is not somebody I want to be around.

EE: If you're not a team player, why waste your time with it?

DR: It's too important a deal to put up with that—just crap from somebody who is so disaffected and so unhappy that she doesn't know what else to do.

EE: And you got away from that by just going to become an instructor where people were there to do a task, you only had to deal with them doing that task, and you got about a—

DR: Well, that was offered to me as an alternative, and I said, "Of course I can do that. You bet I can do that," and it was fun.

EE: You didn't pick the best time to go into Vietnam, for Tet.

DR: Maybe it was. Maybe it was. That's when it was really—

EE: Maybe it was. February of '68, you flew into Bien Hoa, and they had to circle to patch up the holes before you could land? [laughter]

DR: Yes. They had a charter all the way from Travis, Honolulu, Wake Island, some other darned place. It seemed like it took forever. Then when we finally got there, they waved us off a couple of times while this bulldozer was out there filling in these holes that had been blown in the landing strip. Wow, this is heavy stuff.

Of course, this is February. It was cold in Cincinnati when I left and Chicago when I changed planes, and here we are with our wool uniforms, and God, sweat pouring off. Of course, we were given appropriate uniforms when we got to the unit, finally got there. It was such a departure and so very interesting as a result. Here I am with my wool uniform, sweating like a hog. [laughs] It was—was it what you expected? Who knew what to expect? It's the other side of the world, something I have never at any time—

EE: Had you talked to a lot of people before going over about what their experience had been?

DR: No, I didn't care.

EE: You just wanted to be there.

DR: I just wanted to go. So I went, and I was—of course, I was very [unclear].

EE: You were at the headquarters of the U.S. Army in Vietnam at Long Binh?

DR: In Long Binh, that's right.

EE: How far is that from Saigon?

DR: Not very. I think I remember it taking about—it probably took about an hour to drive. We did not go around the country. You sort of tended to stay put where you were. Even in that area, we would be under attack, rockets mostly, barbed wire all around the perimeter. They'd pick bodies off there every morning there was. The people out there, down on the edge, really had a hard way to go.

One night, a rocket hit a barracks right across from us. In fact, we watched it. People we knew were in their beds. So you really weren't safe anywhere. But it's not like we were at Chu Lai or something, where it was—still, it was like watching a movie. It really was. We could sit out in the evening and watch. You know, the rockets would leave these trails, tracks, and you could see them coming over, and you'd see ours going out.

They would sometimes fire these—they have heavy artillery as well, and they'd fire these things from a place behind us, and we'd hear them going over the building, the most God-awful whistle, and you'd think, "Jeez." But this kind of thing or something drop on your head, there was no way to evade it. You don't even know it's coming. So you just go and march along.

EE: You have to put up with it.

DR: Well, it's so different from what they're—

EE: Were you ever afraid?

DR: Not really. Not really. The night that I got there, there was—at Bien Hoa, there was an ammunition dump, and that was hit by Viet Cong rockets. So I've been there, just from suppertime till it got dark. I was a real newbie.

Our barracks at the time—although they did get better quarters later—were eight-by-ten rooms, just two stories high, one long line of things just like a shoe box then there was a little balcony on the second floor that you used to walk along as a hallway, walk to your door, and you had this little bitty room, a bed and a fluorescent light. The war was so much more interesting for those of us who were on the second floor because it was like looking at a movie. We'd stand out there on the balcony and watch all this stuff going on.

As I was out on the balcony looking around, just taking this all in, couldn't believe it, here goes this fireball, when they hit one of those ammunition

revetments at Bien Hoa. That's what it looked like, one of those mushroom cloud things.

EE: [Unclear]

DR: A fireball went up. I didn't quite know which way to go, anywhere, stand there or whatever. I turned around and ducked back in my room because I was standing right at my door, and the ground was shaking from these sort of domino explosions. I thought, "Well, maybe under the bed." [laughter] I had a flimsy army cot. While I was still making up my mind, that fluorescent light fell off the ceiling and hit me on the head and knocked me to the floor. I went, "Well, isn't this a fine kettle of fish? Lesson learned number one, don't stand around wondering." [laughs]

Now, they did have some bunkers in each barracks area. They had made these—it was like a bomb shelter above ground, sort of. They were like landscape timbers or something, and they'd build this kind of a tunnel thing. There was a bench to sit on down each side. Then they had sand bags, and then shoveled dirt over it and all. I guess it was a good idea, but of course, you would have to be kind of close to this thing to start with, because it wasn't like an air raid, when you knew what was happening. These rockets would just come flying in from wherever.

EE: Had they prepared you in any sort of way for the fact, "Here's what it's going to be like" for you coming in?

DR: I don't recall that there was any kind orientation. On the other hand, everything ramped up, as we say now, or accelerated, so quickly during that particular period—

EE: It was totally unexpected, this assault, because you all—I know some of the women who were in an earlier combat in a similar war, they were given the little brochures "What To Do In Case You're Captured." They said, "I guess this means we're getting serious now. [laughter] You didn't have that opportunity because these attacks, these guerrilla attacks, came out of the blue on this base.

DR: Yes. They couldn't be—they couldn't be predicted.

EE: So this was a totally different level of the war. This where, back home, people are wondering, "What are we getting into over there?"

DR: Oh, sure, and the body counts every night and all that kind of stuff. That didn't help much, I'm sure, at least not for my mother and father.

I had taken a little tape recorder with me. I hate to write, and it wouldn't have been too practical anyway because stuff took too long, and I had bought a similar recorder for my father. I said, "Maybe I can make some tapes, and I'll

send you some tapes." So I was going to try my thing out that first night I was there, and I had this thing I was fiddling with, and the thing was running when this occurred.

I was trying express what it was like, what it looked like, and I was saying, "Well, maybe that's north. I think it's north." I thought, "Gee, you don't even know what you're talking about. You don't know which way you're facing." I haven't heard the tape in years, because who's got a reel-to-reel thing anymore? I've got it here someplace, but you can hear the big boom on it, and somebody I had known in an earlier—

EE: We've probably got a reel-to-reel at school. We'd be glad to make a copy for you on cassette.

DR: You may have it, if you like. Someone I had known in an earlier assignment, I guess at Fort Monmouth, was in the unit there. She was already there, Lucky Allen. And you hear this big boom, and this sound—you know, stuff falling, and I remember Lucky yelling upstairs, "DJ, are you okay?" and I said, "Yeah, fine. I'm all right." Then you hear all these other people just scampering around and stuff because—"I'm going to send this to my mother?"

EE: This is reassuring. [laughs]

DR: I don't think so. I don't believe so. So of course it never went anywhere, but I listened to it a couple of times, and as I say, who's got one of those anymore and it sits there languishing. It was not something that you could be prepared for, and it was no fault of anybody's that we weren't trained for this kind of thing because who knew?

EE: But just listening to you and any experience like that brings back so many memories which you can't put into words because you start seeing things and remembering things. You were there, and for people who were not there, what's the biggest misconception people have about Vietnam that somebody who was there could tell them?

DR: Oh, I don't know. I would imagine the politics of the thing. People, other service members, these kinds of things didn't concern us because it wasn't anything we could do anything about. I did not realize until maybe years later that there was so much opposition to this; there was so much unrest and even civil disobedience, the students. We didn't know anything about that.

I had a job at Fort Something-or-Other, and that wasn't something that—nobody likes a war, but boy, it's an opportunity for the careerist. It's the only war we had. Korea was over by the time I got around. [laughter] So it wasn't something that we—we didn't take sides on it. You know, let it go. Hey, listen, this is a ticket punch if there ever was one, besides which, you want to be there because that's where it's at, that's where it's happening. So I was surprised, as I

say, to realize, in some cases years later, that there had been so much dissension and disagreement in this country over the involvement at all.

EE: You stayed at Long Binh the whole time, the whole year you were there?

DR: Yes.

EE: And you were talking about that you got your stay extended for a couple of weeks so you'd get your $3,000 bonus.

DR: Absolutely.

EE: And get you a new car. Then you came back stateside in March of '69 to Fort Benjamin Harrison to be closer to your dad, who was in poor health.

DR: Well, he was not in good health, and that was like ninety or a hundred miles from home. So I would go home most weekends.

EE: You were at—was it Adjutant General School?

DR: The Adjutant General School, yes. Fort Ben Harrison's been closed now, and I don't know where it is, I mean, AG School. Everything's—

EE: How long was AG School?

DR: How long was it? That was a group of courses.

EE: Oh, so you were just working in the office there.

DR: No. They taught all kinds of stuff. They taught recruiting. They taught all kinds of administrative specialties. The Finance School was also there. They taught the people who did all that kind of stuff. In fact, we were in the same building with the Finance School.

EE: Were you there to learn a particular skill?

DR: No. I was an instructor. That's the second time I was a service school instructor.

EE: And you were instructing in office procedures or—

DR: Yes, whatever.

EE: You were there for about a year.

DR: Something like that.

EE: And then went to Fort Bragg for a short period of time.

DR: Yes. Actually, I was supposed to be assigned to Fort Huachuca in Arizona as first sergeant because it was time now—you get to that level where you've got to—you've got this progression of assignments that you'd better be on the track, and it was my time to be a first sergeant. Fort Huachuca was this place that they had in mind.

I said, "Oh, Gracie, I don't know. That's an awful long way away. You know I'm here because I'm kind of close to my family, and I don't know about that."

She said, "Well, the only other one I've got is Fort Bragg, and if I were you, I'd take Fort Huachuca."

Fort Bragg, now there, it's kind of—it was kind of tough to be a woman at Fort Bragg. There were too many—airborne—they thought—

EE: Gung ho?

DR: Yes. Yes. So I knew there were going to be some problems there, but I said, "Well, that's not that far away. I guess I'll probably have that instead." So I went there then as a first sergeant in the WAC unit. That's something else I did not have any interest in. I just loathe that kind of stuff.

EE: That's the troop work again.

DR: I just don't want to do that.

EE: You were only doing that for a short period, then you got transferred.

DR: I was only doing that for a short period of time and then I got lucky, I got very lucky. A malcontent, which is the best I can say about that poor individual, was—she was being separated, what we called a board case, a board action to separate somebody unsuitable or unfit or un-something-or-other for service, and she was very impatient.

The wheels turn slowly sometimes, you know, and not—she thought she could get out and be back in Philadelphia by the weekend. Well, that's not the way it goes. So she was really agitating, and she'd come in the orderly room every day to demand to know what was the status of her separation. If we knew, we'd tell her, or there was no change. That wasn't good enough.

She came in there one day. She was really hot. She was asked to please sit down over there, and the commanding officer, who was just as sick of her as the rest of them and couldn't come too soon, said, "If you'll just have a seat over there, let me call our headquarters and see what the delay might be." Major Paniak apparently didn't come back with an answer quick enough.

I was working on a duty roster and sitting at my desk, and I was not looking up. She walked over to the corner of my desk, took off her shoe, and cracked me right over the head with it. A shoe is a dirty thing to get hit with, the heel of her shoe. It laid my head wide open.

EE: Good Lord. I don't think she went out under the MP's escort.

DR: Well, I, of course—I was just blank for a minute. I opened my eyes again and could see the blood running over on my duty rosters, of all things. You know, there's only one copy of those. They sewed it up, and that hurts because there's no placed to put Novocain in your head. They sewed it up, and of course, I recovered.

They took the woman to a psychiatrist that afternoon, and he recommended she be given a three-day pass. I said, "That's enough of that shit. That is enough. I want out of here. If this is what—"

EE: You're not going to put up with this. Right.

DR: So I asked to be reassigned, and they said, "Well, you seem to have a better reason for it than most." [laughs]

EE: I'd say that physical injury is a good reason to get out.

DR: So I was reassigned on the post to XVIII Airborne Corps, the G5 office, which did absolutely nothing because it's civil affairs. Now, that wasn't their fault, that there was nothing for them to do.

I mean, if we'd have been occupying Ethiopia or something, then Civil Affairs might have had something to do. A tornado came through Fayetteville in that time, and Civil Affairs did get to do something with respect to the community in that regard, but it was just kind of "wait and see what we can come up with."

Then I got assigned to Fort Monroe, to the Continental Army Command, and that was a real winner, a lovely place and a good job.

EE: You were there till the end of your career.

DR: Yes, I was. Now, in the middle of it—

EE: You'd run your twenty already before you got out, actually. You could have gotten out in '73.

DR: Yes. I had twenty-three years for retired pay purposes. I went to the Sergeant Major Academy in 1974, I think it was. It's worn off my ring.

That was kind of a new thing. The idea was to be able to parallel senior service schools, War College, ICAF [Industrial College of the Armed Forces], that kind of thing, with some sort of educational capper for senior enlisted people.

I was a master sergeant. I was promoted to master sergeant while I was in Vietnam, and I was, of course, a first sergeant [unclear]—

EE: This was going to be a cap that was new for WACs and regular army as well?

DR: Yes. It was a new school. The first class was in 1973. That was at Fort Bliss again. Boy. That's a part of the country I don't care to see again. The first class consisted of fifty or sixty men and one woman, Sergeant Major Betty Benson. She's one of the best.

I had been with Betty on several different assignments, including Vietnam, where she was a field first sergeant. She was assigned to the Recruiting Command, which was in Hampton, Virginia, right there by Fort Monroe. So Betty was the first. Class Two, there were no women. In Class Three, there were two, now-retired Sergeant Major Helen Johnston and I. Now, that's the tapioca, because if you get through there, all you do is—unless you're just awful, just horrible, or take up drugs or something, you really, for practical purposes, just sit there and wait to be promoted to sergeant major.

I have no doubt in the world that Vietnam, and get you a Bronze Star or something like that, that had a lot to do with selection criteria for the academy. Now, of course, it's old stuff and—

EE: You got the Bronze Star?

DR: Yes. Lots of people have been to—and many women, and there are a lot of them, but at the time that I retired, there were like—I think there were twelve other women in the whole army who were sergeant major, and now they're just crawling out of the woodwork.

EE: It is different.

DR: It is different. An article in our paper and the Nashville paper this morning about three women at Pope Air Force Base who all have the highest rank in—

EE: Well, it's interesting. Not only did you run into Ann at Fort Monroe, but she had gone through the War College as one of the first women there, and you're one of the first in this parallel enlisted—

DR: Yes. Yes. Well, what they did was they tried to make it not just a service school but also set up a social situation similar to what you get at the War College. The men brought their families. They brought their wives.

To do this, to be able to do this, you have to have a course of a certain minimum length. It has to be a permanent change of station. It had to be a PCS. That's the only way that they could get their wives there and then they'd have coffees and do all that stuff.

EE: Was the school for you, then, held at Monroe?

DR: No. The school was at Fort Bliss, and to be able to accept it—

EE: So all three of those, those first three, were at Bliss.

DR: Yes. That's where it is. In order to be able to accept the school assignment, I had to be transferred from Fort Monroe and take my chances on getting back to this job that I was really enjoying.

But fortunately, Ann felt that General Smith, the DCSPER [Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel], would go for the idea, and these things—it happens all the time. "Oh, really? What do you know. That's such good luck. Oh, I am so pleased. What great good luck." So back I went and finished what I was doing. But in the meantime, of course, it was quite a valuable experience, and career-wise, hey, and I was promoted to sergeant major at Fort Monroe.

Used to be that you'd have to serve two years after service school assignment of any length, kind of a pay-back, or you would have to serve some period of time, a minimum period of time, in your pay grade before you could retire in order for them—a pay-back to get their money out of it. But at that particular time, because they were trying to get rid of some people, reduction in force and different things, they had cut that to six months in grade. So I didn't have to spend two years. Besides, I would have had to go to Europe, and without being there, I knew that that was such a difficult assignment. I just didn't want to do it anymore.

I felt like when it was time to leave, you'll know. When you can't be as enthusiastic about it and you can't try as hard and maybe not accomplish as much, then you'd better pack your duffel bag and go to a different life.

EE: And your work at Monroe, then, the last year or two, you were talking about that you were—that place, that command center, was actually—was coordinating what things you'd have to change in the service to accommodate fully integrating women.

DR: Yes. That was a major command. We had installations all over the country. These were the installations where training was the principal endeavor and similar to the Forces Command, which is—what is that place in Atlanta? It escapes me now. They had jurisdiction over places where—like the Infantry Training Center. I mean it's training, yes, but infantry and the forces.

We were Training and Doctrine. They were manpower. Part of our work was going like two little evangelists all over to these installations which were under TRADOC [US Army Training and Doctrine Command] to spread the word, solve all their problems for them, just show the flag, tell them what we knew, make what suggestions we could, take the questions that they had and just try to convey the idea that it's not all that difficult. It's not going to happen, it has

happened, so this is how we react. This is how we get it up to speed on these things.

None of that was too difficult. But the hard thing was, a lot of these specialties in which the women were growing in nontraditional areas, there was so much physically to be done. They needed a work uniform to match. They needed a complete set of fatigues. They didn't need skirts and dress hats. They needed the boots and the—

EE: Sure.

DR: The initial clothing bag, as it was called, that you got in basic training had a little bit of work clothing in it and a whole bunch of class A stuff. If these people show up anywhere without the uniforms that they need to do the job they're assigned to, that commander has got to come up with those uniforms, and it wasn't in his budget.

I don't know whether Ann feels this way or not. We didn't have the trouble with the installations we had with the Director of the WAC at the time, because that woman, Inez Bailey, she was out of the Exhibit Team—

EE: She loved those uniforms.

DR: —she was worried about her ascots, jabots, as you know, and that god-awful green polyester summer thing. Not only would she not hear it, she didn't understand it. We briefed till we were blue in the face, and we'd go to Washington and try. That was so frustrating. It had nothing to do with feminine image. It had nothing to do with anything except bucks, dollars and cents.

How can we expect these commanders to accept and hopefully, some day, even ask for these women if they come in there ill-equipped, not properly dressed, and this guy's got to come up with the uniform somehow? They're not ready to work when they get there. That was the biggest problem out of the whole thing, and it was coming right out of the Pentagon because of that particular woman. Now, I'm sure she's a dear lady and all that, but boy, what a blockhead. She just didn't get it, and that made that aspect of it difficult.

EE: You were at a different stage in your career in a sense. From General Bailey—

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

EE: As I was saying on the other tape, women who served in the WAC who were very nostalgic about something was lost when the WAC was fully integrated into the army, and you have a different opinion.

DR: Yes, but that's—that's just me personally. The army is a very paternalistic place—maternalistic, I suppose, if you're talking about—you get, "You don't feel well? Oh, go on sick call." You see a doctor. You'll never see the same guy twice. "Here, take these." "Oh, sure, Doc." You didn't participate in things the way we do now, making choices and so forth. You just didn't whatever.

Actually, I suppose that's the definition of discipline. You just accepted things and you went and did it and didn't call for independent thought or even in some cases allow for it. A lot of people find this very comforting. A lot of people find that very comforting, and that WAC detachment was their family. Those were their sisters.

I'm going to use up your tape. A cousin of mine joined WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service] when she graduated from high school in Cleveland, which was probably like '43 or something. Marge served three years with duration plus six, whatever it was, got out of the WAVES, married a man she'd met there and had four kids, homemaker, housekeeper. She continued to go to reunions in some kind of gathering.

Now, what it was I don't know, whether it was a purely social group, whether it was some kind of reserve thing, whether it was some kind of a service organization like Kiwanis, I don't know. But anyway, she'd go all around the country to these kind of things, and sometimes she'd drag Bob along, but he didn't really care much for that.

In later years, Marge developed every problem there is. Twice she was clinically dead and was revived. She had everything wrong with her. Just before she went into kidney dialysis, with medical records like this, with an escort, she went to Pearl Harbor for the fiftieth anniversary observance of the Japanese raid against medical advice. With escort, she dragged herself over there. I could never understand that.

Now, Marge is probably about ten years older than I, so we weren't truly contemporaries. That always puzzled me. And when she went to Pearl Harbor, I said to Ann, "I think it's gone to her head. This woman's nuts. What is it?"

Well, you know, the Women's Army Corps came about just a few months after Pearl Harbor, a few months later, six months later. There were women who served just during the war and never again.

The fiftieth WAC reunion—was a thing that always took place at Fort McClellan, every other year at Fort McClellan. Now it's moved to the—this year it will be at Fort Lee, where the new Army Women's Museum will be opened. At the fiftieth anniversary—I've never gone to a single one of these things, so all I know is what I was told—Anniston was filled with these people who had served one enlistment.

I said to Ann, "That's what it is. This was my job. This was my life. It was no big deal, but it was probably so different, so totally distinctive, that they pick up their skirts and they dash across the country to see who looks worse and if anybody's still alive." I thought, "I finally get it." I could never feel that way, partly because of the way I am, just me, and partly because it was my life, it was

my job. So I didn't think it was anything unusual. I can't see going off on cross country trips for reunions that I wouldn't enjoy anyway.

If there's anyone that—there have been very few people—we've cared to keep in contact with over these years, why, we've done so. But I don't know. I guess it wasn't unusual enough that I could find that exhilaration in getting together with these people or feel that crushed, like they shot the horse out from under me, when they disestablished the Women's Army Corps because it wasn't anything, really, to start with except a bunch of women meeting and then meeting again two or three assignments later. It wasn't a corps. It just was a sorority. I guess some people derive more from the group experience than others, share misery or something.

EE: If a young woman came to you today and said, "I'm thinking about joining the army," what would your advice be to her?

DR: Consider it very seriously. Do consider it, because it can be a wonderful experience, short term. It can be a wonderful life. But while you're considering it, make sure that you realize they are buying your loyalty, they're buying your best effort, and you've got to take that seriously, but not yourself. If you can do that, if you can sort it out—you've got to take that seriously because you're going to be asked to do some things that seem very dumb, and indeed are dumb within your context, the framework which you know, because you're there for training and you don't know anything yet.

EE: Sort of like scrubbing those floors.

DR: Like scrubbing those floors. And if you take yourself too seriously, you're not going to be happy. But if you can get all that, what a great ride.

EE: Fewer and fewer people have families that have connections to the service, just because World War II was a total war and thankfully we have fewer and fewer wars. We had Desert Storm ten years ago.

DR: Yes. Can you believe that?

EE: That's amazing that time has flowed that fast. I have a picture of our little young one who was born just before Desert Storm, and he's now getting ready for middle school.

For people who are not connected to the service, what is the biggest misconception that they have, do you think, about service people? What would you like for them to know different?

DR: Oh, gee, that's kind of hard, mainly because we don't have a whole bunch of associates in all age groups. We're already plugged into our own little things.

I think probably people still think it's Beetle Bailey. I think that probably people—just the way we live anymore. Most people would rather have a root canal than feel they're losing even a shred of personal independence. They're so afraid, in many cases, that they're going to be required to do something that isn't comfortable or fun.

I don't mean that everybody is soft, but we're a lot different than we used to be. As far as I understand your question, and you understand that I have kind of a limited circle of contacts these days by choice, I imagine it's, "They peel potatoes," and focus more on the things that would be distasteful than look at the wonderful educational opportunities. And my goodness, this Montgomery Bill is so generous. Holy smokes, you really—I can't think of a single thing—what could you do to get that much money for education in that short a time?

EE: Well, you've already told me some magic words today in talking about one of the times in your career. You said it was "just so cool." So I know your answer to this question before I ask it, but let me ask it for the record. If you had it to do over again, which nobody has the option in life, but if you had it to do over again, would you join the service again?

DR: Oh, indeed. Oh, indeed. Indeed. Yes. I might not do it now because I'd be a different person now and in a different age and everything else. There's just so many interests that people have. There's so much more information that they have. There's so many more choices, probably, that they could make to get where they're going that maybe it's going to be very, very difficult to keep a force without drafting or something. Maybe it is. And just throwing money isn't going to—

EE: It's not necessarily going to do it.

DR: No. No. Because even if they try to—every time you turn around, they're getting a pay raise. Well, still, they've got this priceless training, and they can't keep pilots, and they can't—the competition is so fierce these days for people with a half decent attitude and a brain cell or two that I might be more distracted.

But for some reason, and I don't know what it was, because we were not a service family, that was all I ever wanted to do. So I didn't consider—I had gotten a small scholarship to the University of Cincinnati, which I declined, to be able to go. Now, do I miss that? No. I've picked up an associate degree, mostly on equivalency and plugged in what I needed. It's not important to me, never has been.

EE: Well, it took us a hundred minutes, rather than ninety, which is too short, but we've gone over a lot today. Is there anything about your service time or experience that I haven't asked you about that you want to share for the record?

DR: I don't believe so. You've been very thorough, and you've given me a chance to talk.

EE: Well, I've certainly enjoyed it.

DR: Well, this has been [unclear].

EE: It's exciting to hear stories, and the thing is that if, at the end of your—reflecting back on your career, if you can still use the phrase "so cool," I know it's meant a lot to you. So on behalf of the school, thank you for your service and thank you for your time today.

DR: Well, thank you for coming. This has been a real treat for me.

[End of Interview]