

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Kathryn Wirkus

INTERVIEWER: Hermann J. Trojanowski

DATE: November 2, 2007

N.B. This transcript has been edited by request of the interviewee. Access to the entire interview transcript will be restricted until January 1, 2034.

[Begin Interview]

HT: Okay, today is Friday, November 2, 2007, and my name is Hermann Trojanowski and I'm at the UNCG [University of North Carolina at Greensboro] campus office with Lieutenant Colonel Wirkus to conduct an oral history interview for the Carter Women Veterans Historical Project at the university. Col. Wirkus, if you would give me your full name, we'll use that as a test to see how we both sound on this tape recorder.

KW: Kathryn Faustine Wirkus.

[recorder paused]

HT: One more time please. [laughs]

KW: My background is I was born—maybe I could change the story this time. I was born and reared in Miami, Florida, to—with both parents living at home. Mother, father, two sisters; I was the youngest of three girls.

My dad was first generation American. He was a Polish—my grandfather was a Polish immigrant, a coal miner in Pennsylvania. My dad was the youngest of thirteen, and he joined—and there was twenty-two years age difference between my dad and the oldest brother. And my father joined the air force, I think sometime probably 1938. And I know he served in Panama as enlisted. And then I know, because I have his records, that somehow he either, you know got a battlefield commission or whatever, I don't know, but he joined the air force as an officer in 1941—sorry, in 1943, and served as an officer in World War II in Europe, in north Africa as a radar observer and a bombardier. He flew

the bullfighters and the [de Havilland] mosquito aircraft. And he was with the 416th night fighter squadron, and then—to 1946 when he got out. And actually I have his DD-214 [discharge papers]. He died in February of 1995. But he was a schoolteacher. He was a high school guidance counselor. He went to school on the GI Bill at the University of Miami, and he also—as a guidance counselor he worked with a lot of the kids to put them into the military, because they didn't know where else they wanted to go or what they wanted to do. So he helped get a lot of young people enlisted into the military.

My mom was an only child. She was born and reared in Miami. She attended Duke University for three years and then transferred to Florida State College for Women, which is now Florida State University. She graduated in 1940. She also taught elementary school.

And on my mother's side, my great-grandfather was a portrait artist, Henry Salem Hubbell, and he was one of the founding regents of the University of Miami. And Hubbell, it's the Hubbell—same as the Hubbell telescope. All the Hubbells in the US are all from the same Seth Hubbell. And there's the Hubbell Family Historical Society and, you know, all those things.

And then my grandfather, Willard Hubbell, was an architectural engineer and he was a professor in the University of Miami, and he also served in world war one in the army. My grandmother on my mother's side was from Denton, Texas, and somehow she made her way to Philadelphia and attended—graduated from Drexel Institute [of Art, Science and Industry] in 1920, which is now Drexel University. So I come from a very long line of educators.

My oldest sister, Winifred, lives in Indonesia. She's married to an Indonesian national. She earned her doctorate in economics in south East Asia studies from Cornell [University]. And actually, that's also where my grandfather on my mother's side went to school. And she teaches at the University of—some—one of the universities in Indonesia, and her husband is also, he has his doctorate in linguistics. And he is also a professor at the, I think it's the IKIP University in Malang. And they have three grown children living in Indonesia.

My middle sister, Lydia, lives in Alaska. She decided that she wanted an adventure and was tired of living in Miami, so a little bit before, maybe a year before I went in the air force, she moved to Alaska. Just packed her bags, and packed her car, and drove up with her roommate all the way to Alaska. She had her teaching degree, she had her masters, and so she decided that that was the best thing to do. At that time, in the early, probably mid-seventies, they were crying and dying for women and teachers up in Alaska, so she got a job immediately. And she now has two wonderful grown sons, and they live in San Francisco. She retired last year from teaching, but she still lives in Alaska. So we're very, very close, even though she lives a long way from home.

I attended Coral Gables Senior High School. I graduated in 1970. Coral Gables is a suburb of Miami. And at the time when I was growing up, we lived in what were considered the boonies. It was just actually Dade County, and it wasn't even in the city. But now, of course, it's very high end, and mega millions. So that's pretty much my basic background. Just kind of according to some of these things that I've made some notes on. You know my favorite subjects in school were chorus, art, home ec[onomics], government, and Spanish. My least favorites were math and sciences. [chuckles]

HT: After high school, you went on to college. And where did you decide to go and why?

KW: Well, I graduated. I decided I didn't want to attend a university in Florida because both my sisters and my mother had gone to Florida State [University], and I just, I don't know, I wanted to go somewhere else where I wasn't Rosemary's daughter or Leonard's daughter, or Winifred or Lydia's sister. And I really don't think that I comprehended it at the time, or was even able to articulate, I wanted the independence. I wanted to be my own person.

So my grandparents had always had a summer home in Waynesville, North Carolina, and it was almost like a Chautauqua where there was a University of Miami enclave. And so we had some amazing wonderful summers up in North Carolina, because we didn't have very much money so we would go up there or we'd go camping, and it was a lot cooler in North Carolina than it was in Miami during the summer.

So I had very good memories of North Carolina, and I just thought, "Well hey, you know, I can use the North Carolina summer home as my address, so I could get in-state tuition in North Carolina." So that's what I did. I applied to Guilford College, Wake Forest [University], and UNCG. And I really didn't think that I was going to get accepted to any one of them, but I did. I got accepted to all three of them. And I couldn't afford to go to Wake or Guilford, because they were both private colleges. And I—my—I didn't even—I don't think it even occurred to me to apply for a scholarship. I didn't think I would probably get one. [chuckles] So I knew I could get in-state tuition from UNCG, so that's what I did. And I knew that actually though, that they had a good art school and design and education. So that was one of the other—and I knew also that I didn't want to go to [The University of North Carolina at] Chapel Hill because it was so huge. My high school was 3,600 kids; my graduating class was 1,500. And so I really wanted to go to a college that—where somebody might actually know me, and I might be able to get to know the professors and I wouldn't be another lost in the milieu.

HT: So you started what year?

KW: 1970.

HT: 1970. What was UNCG like in 1970?

KW: Oh, my gosh. It was—

HT: Do you recall?

KW: Yes, it was small, and it was warm, and even though—yes, there was probably about seven thousand students there, I would say. It was so different for me, obviously, because I—well, first of all, I'd never seen snow. I'd never seen the leaves change. And so that was kind of a new, exciting environment. But, you know, I know that a lot of people these days, they—my sister included—they, you know, when their kids are getting ready to go to college, they pack them up and they drive them to the college, and they help them get set up in their dorm room or their apartment. Well, I got on the airplane in Miami with my one suitcase and a footlocker of whatever else that I was taking and got

on the airplane in Miami and got off at the airport in Greensboro/High Point. I don't know, maybe I took a taxi, maybe there was a shuttle. I don't know. But I just know that I somehow got to campus and showed up at Spencer Hall, and was like, "Okay, here I am."

HT: Had you been on campus before that?

KW: I don't think so.

HT: Oh, my gosh.

KW: I don't remember. I do not recall actually even visiting the campus. And you know, I look back and think, "Holy smokes, that was pretty brave!"

HT: And your parents didn't accompany you?

KW: No! They didn't!

HT: Wow.

KW: They, well, I don't know. They just—that wasn't something they did. [chuckles] So, you know, "Here I am. I showed up. I'm here. Okay, what do I do now?" But it was a very difficult transition, obviously, for my first year. I was really naïve. I came from a fairly sheltered background. Both my parents were educators. My dad was very strict. My mother was caring, but also strict. And so it was the first time I was really away from home. And so, of course, I got a little wild and crazy, but not too far out there. But I, you know—okay, so I gained twenty-five pounds because of 'midnight study break,' which of course consisted of all the desserts and, you know, from lunch and dinner and the leftover doughnuts and whatever else was from breakfast. And again, I didn't grow up with all those. I didn't have—You know, we didn't eat dessert. We didn't have a lot of high stuff. My mother was very, very interested in nutrition. And so, of course, I gained twenty-five pounds, because, lord knows, you're eating at ten o'clock at night and you're eating all this bad stuff.

Oh, yeah, and my GPA [grade point average] was 1.9 my freshman year. I discovered the hard way that you don't—if you don't go to class, you will probably fail that class. [laughs] So it took me the next three years to bring my grades up to where I was on the dean's list my final, my senior year. And I started running. I had not—I was not athletic as a kid. I was, you know—I wore braces and glasses and I didn't have a lot of self confidence. I was actually overweight as a younger elementary school child. So I didn't have a real good self concept on a lot of levels. But I saw that the other women out there running, and of course I'd never run in my life. I hadn't done any athletics. But I saw that they wore these black shoes with little white stripes. Of course, I know now that those were soccer shoes, not running shoes. But I went and bought myself a pair and got on the track, and I could barely make it around a quarter of a mile without dying and heaving. So little by little I just worked up to where I was running and then I discovered I was pretty good at it and I really loved running, and I started cross country, not in college, but we'll get to that later.

And I really loved my classes. I had an English instructor, Claire Angle, and she was just such a huge influence on my life because she was caring and supportive and had me really realize that I had a creative side and that I could write and that I could express myself in communication. So I really think that she is—you know, we always look back and say, “Who is one of our most important teachers?” And I really believe she is. So if she’s out there somewhere, thank you Claire.

And my art classes—I had gone—my intent was to be an art major and get a BFA [bachelor of fine arts]. Of course, my dad was like, “And how do you expect to earn a living when you have a BFA and you have all these art classes, but you have no way to earn a living?” So I changed my major to early childhood education. And actually, I’m glad I did because I really loved working with the little ones and really wanted to work with having children be excited about learning and having that—set that pace for their entire life.

And I really learned how to study, I think, by trial and error. Obviously not going to class was one of the errors. But I remember taking copious notes in class and I got to be pretty good. I could just take lots of notes. But then I would come back to my dorm room and type up the notes. It was pretty laborious, but that, somehow, was how I learned. And I think through that process I learned that there were people that learned different ways. I’m very visual, I’m very tactile, and I’m not real auditory. My auditory retention is not so good. So I had to some way learn how to put that down. Which I think, again, set me up in the future for both teaching and learning. And, you know, I read every—I had to read everything. I had to read every book, every paper. I wasn’t just one of these people who could just skim the stuff and go in and take the test. Nope. I had to read everything. So I spent lots of time in the library—after my freshman year. [chuckles]

I—and because I had to take physics and chemistry—even though I was an education major, we still had to take those classes. I put it off until my senior year, senior semester, because I was pretty stressed over having to actually take them, and I thought “I’m never going to graduate. I won’t get through these classes.” So of course I got a tutor, and she was this wonderful Chinese graduate student that just helped me kind of beat the stuff into my head. But she also broke it down so I could understand it. So I was tutored, and I got help from the professor, so I honestly think at that point they just—they knew I was trying. They knew I was doing the homework. They knew I was doing everything. But I got a D in both classes, but at least I graduated! [laughs] Because if I had failed those classes, I wouldn’t have graduated. So that’s pretty much the academic side.

HT: What was—what about your social life on campus in those early seventies?

KW: You know, it was fun and crazy and I had some wonderful—I had a wonderful roommate, a couple of different roommates, and, you know, I had a good group of friends. We laughed and, you know, went—and again it was so different for me because one of my best friends lived on a dairy farm in Burlington and—Emily Hoffman—and she came from a fairly large family. So she and I became real close and would go home to her house, because it was only a half an hour drive to Burlington then, and it was on a dairy farm. Just really wonderful experiences.

I didn't date, I would say, a lot. It was mostly going out in groups. I didn't really have a boyfriend. Although, you know, I fell in love, you know, three, four, five, ten times, I'm sure.

HT: Right, I was going to ask you. The first guys came on campus fall of '64, so by the time you got here, there weren't that many of them. So how did that affect classes and that sort of thing?

KW: I will definitely say, I mean it's no mystery, that a lot of the men that were on campus were gay, that—because they were here for the music, dance, theatre, art. And so a lot of—I had a lot of men friends that were gay. And so [UNCG] really had a sort of that side, but then also had the straight guys that were here, and they were probably in heaven. Are you kidding? They had all these women to choose from. Oh, my gosh.

So I had, I think I had a pretty good mix of good friends and good support, you know, trying different lifestyles, and I guess everybody was a hippie back then. I don't know. [chuckles] Everybody—at least all my friends were. We wore bell bottoms.

The only thing I knew—there was a couple of guys that came back from Vietnam, and I knew they were somehow really different. And I look back now and understand a whole lot more. I'm sure they had PTSD [post traumatic stress disorder] and I knew they were the—they used drugs. And I knew they used a lot of drugs.

HT: Were drugs prevalent on campus at that time?

KW: I'm sure they were. But I never did acid, it was too—that to me was too permanent in a sense, too scary, and I didn't want to fry my brain, and so I guess being a chicken was probably a good thing.

HT: At that time—I think it happened about that time—there was an area in front of Brown called hippie hill. Do you recall anything about that? Late sixties, early seventies?

KW: No, but I probably was there. [laughs]

HT: Well, eventually what the university did was actually planted barberry bushes in front of Brown Building.

KW: Wow.

HT: And they had thorns on them, so that drove—

KW: How funny.

HT: —the counter culture people away from that area. So that might—

KW: Now, I remember Tate Street.

HT: Yes, Tate Street. That may have been before your time.

KW: Yeah, I remember the hippies were down on Tate Street, and that's where the scene was. But again, I wasn't—I kind of—again, growing up in Miami, we were sort of ahead of a lot of that power curve. It's kind of like, "Okay, well I've been there done that, you know, that's sort of passé," at that point. But I never really did any hard drugs, because, again, I was just too chicken.

HT: Well, what was—did you live all four years in Spencer, or did you—?

KW: You know, I got—so I lived in Spencer my first year, and then my next three years I lived in the international house [Phillips-Hawkins dormitory] on the Spanish floor, and it was just so wonderful. And again, it was this small—it was this community. It was a small community, and it was the international—again, it was that international sort of global view of life that my mother had instilled in us, you know, [like] my sister living in Indonesia. And we had traveled. We had saved up all our nickels and dimes and gone to Europe when I was sixteen and had a Eurail pass. I remember it well. We each were allowed one suitcase. [laughs] But that was a very huge event in my life, to spend two months in Europe when I was a kid. So I was very comfortable around the international community and really wanted to be part of that. And so—and all the wonderful fun things that we did at the international house. We had international week and the costumes, and the, I don't know, the cooking.

My best friend was—across the hall roommate—she was from Vietnam. Hahn Tran was her name. She was a graduate student. And she taught—she and I became just fast friends. In fact, we were going to go to Vietnam. She was here on a student visa, of course, you know, during the war. This was probably 1972, and we had planned on going to Vietnam to see her family in the summer of '75. But of course Saigon fell apart at that point, so my parents had offered to adopt her so that she would be able to stay in this country. But at that point she was able to apply for a refugee visa. And actually, I'm still in touch with Hahn. She came to my retirement ceremony. So it's pretty cool. But, so, and then—yeah, I really loved living in the international house because of all the activities involved.

HT: Which dorm was that in at that time, do you recall?

KW: I do not know. It was just called the International House.

HT: If we can back track just a second to Spencer. There have been rumors for years that a ghost named Annabelle haunts Spencer. Did you ever hear anything about anything like that?

KW: No, I don't. I don't remember.

HT: That might have been afterwards, because we've dug up some stories about, supposedly, this ghost that supposedly haunts Spencer, from the sixties on, particularly in the seventies—eighties, I'm sorry. That might have been—

KW: What did she do?

HT: She's supposed to have been the ghost of a student that hung herself from one of the bell towers. Of course, none of this can be proven, and then all this is just allegations, but the kids love the story about the ghosts that haunt not only Spencer but also Mary Foust [dormitory] and Aycock Auditorium.

KW: Oh cool. What I think I liked about Spencer was it was old.

HT: Yes.

KW: I didn't want to live in whatever—I forget the name of it, Cone or something. I didn't want to live in one of the new, square, brick buildings. I love antiques, I love antique architecture. I live in a vintage home now. I loved, I absolutely loved living in Spencer because it was old.

HT: Well, after you graduated, what came next in your life? Did you teach or—

KW: After I graduated, I moved back to Miami. And again, I didn't know what to do. I just thought "Well, okay, I have a teaching degree. I'm supposed to teach, so I have to go back to Miami." I didn't know what else to do, didn't know where else to go. So I moved back to Miami and got a job in the Miami-Dade County school system, where my dad had taught for thirty years, and I taught kindergarten, because that's what my degree was in. And I was the youngest on the faculty by twenty-two years. [chuckles] Yeah. And I loved my kids, I loved teaching, but it was one of those where—oh my gosh, mid-seventies—where they had this crazy concept of quote-unquote "open classrooms." Well, they got the concept wrong, because the open classroom system didn't mean open space. [laughs] So we had ninety kindergarten kids in one area.

HT: Oh, gosh.

KW: Yeah, with three teachers. It was a zoo, as you can imagine. And it just was not a good—I mean, it was a good experience, but it wasn't. Again, a light bulb kind of came on in my head one day when I looked in the teachers' lounge, and said "Oh, they're all fat and forty. I don't want to do this for the next twenty-five years and be there." So I got myself together and moved back to Greensboro, because that was—and plus, I didn't really know anybody in Miami anymore. I didn't keep in touch with any of my high school friends. I had gone away to college. All of them had stayed there and either not gone to college or had gone away to college, so I didn't know anybody in Miami anymore. And so I moved back to Greensboro, because that's where I had people. That's where I had friends. So I decided to go back to UNCG for a second BA [bachelor of arts] in music or, and sort of and, at the same time, get a masters in communication and broadcast journalism. Gee, there's a real marketable degree.

Of course, because I, you know, was going to school, I worked at a restaurant. And it was called Frenchie's Restaurant. But of course, I wanted to be the waitress, but because I had the degree, the manager put me as the cashier. Oh lord, remember, I don't do math real well. [laughs] But I learned. I learned really fast. And so part—and it was a small restaurant where you had the same people coming in. So we had one family, you know, client who came in. He owned a magazine called *This Week in the Triad*. And it

was really a hotel—it was in the hotels and the restaurants, and it was things to do in Greensboro, High Point, Winston-Salem, essentially. I don't know if it still exists. It's probably morphed into something else, because they still have those kinds of magazines. So he asked me if I wanted to work for him and sell the ads. I'm like "Oh, my gosh! This sounds like fun. I don't know what that means, but I can do it."

So I sold the ads. I wrote the copy. I designed the ads. And then a little bit later on, when I was—after a few months, he hired a graphic artist. And of course, mind you, darling, this is before computer-aided graphics, so she actually drew the stuff. So together I would kind of design what I thought that it should look like, and she would draw it out, and we would kind of work together for the ads. Isn't that amazing? And then we would strip the ads. It was like the old copy machine, but it wasn't a copy machine. It was actually negatives that we created, and then you'd strip in the negatives, and then you'd put it on the press and all that. So it was really cool because I learned a lot. But sort of—okay so, that's that.

And then prior to that job I had just—I was really kind of stressing over, "What am I going to do with my life?" And I thought, well, "What does every, you know, red blooded American male do that doesn't know what they want to do with their life? They join the military." So I thought "Okay! I'll join the military." Well, you know, it never occurred to me that as a female that that was unusual. Because I think—because, again, going back to my dad, I had heard it and seen it so much, and I didn't have any brothers, so it was just like, "Well yes, this is normal. I'll join the military." But they—so I applied, but because I was a non-tech major, and they were just drawing down from Vietnam—and then it was the draw down and they were starting to come back up a little bit. So OTS, Officer Training School, had—it was the balloon, and OTS could shrink and grow as needed, based on the needs of the military. So I applied to OTS, but it took thirteen months for my application and all the processing to go through. So I just thought, "This ain't going to happen." So that's why I got a job, went back to school. And then they called after about—I don't know. I think I was working for *This Week in the Triad* for maybe six to eight months, and of course my sales were exponential. And I drove to all three cities and I loved it and I did that. I won a trip to the Bahamas because of my sales! But then when I got called to go to the air force, it was like, "Well you got to be here in a month," or whatever it was. I don't remember.

HT: Do you recall why you decided on the air force as opposed to the army or the navy?

KW: You know, I don't remember, but I think it was probably again my dad, but also the—I think my test scores were better for the air force than the navy. I kind of liked the navy uniforms. [laughs] I didn't know anything about the navy but they sure looked nice. That's a really good reason. And the army was just like "Oh no. Oh no, no, no." And the Marine Corps wasn't even a consideration. So that pretty much left the air force. And again, I think probably, you know, my dad's influence.

HT: Sure.

KW: That is funny. And you know, nobody that I knew from high school or college was in the military.

HT: Do you recall what year this was? [Nineteen] seventy-six, maybe?

KW: Let's see. Yes, it would've had to been because I graduated in '74, taught till '75, so this was probably around '76. And I really had never consulted anybody or talked to anybody about it. I don't remember talking to anybody on campus. I don't even remember talking to the recruiter. I mean, I remember going to the recruiter, and they were off campus though. But I just—it was just one of those things where it was like, "Well, I don't know what else to do to my life." So I figure I spent four years in college; if I could spend four years in the military, that might help figure out what I wanted to do.

That was really what was the deciding factor, because I really loved working at the magazine, and I could see myself going to New York, in advertising. That was my next goal. However, it took a sharp right turn and went into the air force. Because I really thought, you know, I can always go back into advertising. I can always go back into doing something like that. It'll be there. But I might not have another opportunity to go into the air force. And I thought, "Well, if I don't like it, it's only four years, deal with it, move on." So that's what I did.

HT: Did you have to take some sort of physical or written test in order to join the air force? Do you recall anything about that?

KW: Yes, they call it the AFOQT, Air Force Officer Qualifying Test. And again, it was really one of those serendipitous kind of things, that because I was going through communication broadcast journalism, I took these electronics courses and bandwidth, stuff that I never would have any clue about. And so I did amazingly well on the air force mechanical and electrical portion, and of course the written and the English—probably not real well on the math. But at that point in time they looked at the whole person concept. And so I took that, and, you know, obviously I must have done pretty well on it. I don't think they ever tell you your scores. I mean, maybe they do these days, but I don't remember ever knowing what my scores were.

HT: What did your friends here in Greensboro and your family think once you told them that you were planning to do this or had done this?

KW: I don't even remember any of my friends' sort of having an opinion. One friend I know was very supportive and she in fact took me down to the recruiting station where I actually was sworn in. And I remember her older brother. He was supportive and, but it was sort of "What are you doing?" You know? But I don't remember anybody either being for or against it. And then my dad came and packed my—helped me pack out, and drove back to Miami with my little, all my little worldly belongings probably in one little U-Haul trailer. Because I wanted to go in from Miami because that was what was called your 'home of record', so that when you finally decide to get out, the military sends you

back to your home of record. So I thought, “Well, I probably needed to do that,” because I had never really lived anywhere else, and my parents had lived there for forty years.

HT: This was right after, as we mentioned earlier, Saigon had fallen, so I wonder if perhaps maybe your family or friends might have had some negative things to say about joining the military?

KW: I don’t remember any negativity. In fact my dad was, he was really, really happy and really proud of me. [He] took me to the high school to meet people, you know, “This is my daughter. She’s going to OTS. She’s going to—.” So I think it was a big deal that I was going to be an officer.

HT: And where did you go to OTS?

KW: It was at Medina Annex off of Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. Getting ready to go at the MEPS [United States Military Entrance Processing Command] station in Miami, there was probably eight or ten guys that were going in as enlisted, but I was the only officer. So immediately I’m the one put in charge. You know, I don’t know any more than the rest of these guys do. But they gave me the packet. It’s one of those things where I’m like, “Wow.” They gave me this packet that had everybody’s paperwork in it, and they said, “Okay, you’re in charge.” And so I had to herd everybody to get to the airport and make sure all these guys that were going in—I mean, they were eighteen, I was twenty-six—and getting everybody moving in the right direction and get on the airplane and get off at San Antonio. And I’ll never forget, I was wearing heels and a skirt and a blouse that I had sewed specifically for my entry into the air force. [laughter] Oh, my gosh!

HT: What time of year was this? Do you recall?

KW: Yes, June.

HT: June, okay. Nice and warm.

KW: In fact, I have a picture in there. I’ll show you the picture of my outfit to show off at OTS. Of course, I had my portable electric typewriter that everybody laughed at. Well let me tell you, that puppy came in handy. More on that later. It was really scary and exciting at the same time. I just don’t remember people that—I don’t remember any negative, any negativity.

HT: What was your first impression of Lackland once you got there?

KW: Oh, my gosh. Oh, my gosh. It was chaos, just chaos. And I again, I don’t know whether that chaos is built in. I’m sure it is. But it was just chaotic. And when I got there, it was hot and I was exhausted, because of course you didn’t get any sleep the night before. And trying to figure out—get my suitcase and carry my typewriter. [laughs] And there was—I couldn’t understand. There wasn’t anybody there to help me! You know, it was like, “You got to do this all on your own,” and in my high heels and my hose. So finally I just took off my heels and just—I was barefoot because I couldn’t walk on the tarmac. We

got off the airplane—I don't know. I don't remember how we got from the airport to the base, but I know it was on a bus. And we were having to schlep all our stuff and carry this stuff, and it was hot and I was tired, and so by the time we got there it just—it was just chaos.

And then I can remember trying to find our dorm room. And you know, you were shunted from this building to that building and you had to carry your stuff and you had to put your stuff here, and then you had to go to this other building and sign all these papers and go for the shots, and, like I say, it was just chaos. I then—it was like, I don't know, it seemed like eleven o'clock at night, midnight, who knows, when I finally got into my dorm room. And then of course there was, "No, you're not in this room," and you have to move all your stuff down the hall to another room. And then there was no bedding, there was no sheets. So finally you just fall into bed, and then of course you're awakened at probably five o'clock in the morning the next morning. And you have to get up and, you know, put on your PT [physical training] gear and get out the door. And oh, god. It was just, it was just really, really hard. I don't think I cried, but I wanted to. But at the same time I knew, "Man I can't fall apart. Everybody's going to look at me and think I'm a wimp."

HT: Were you in open bay situation?

KW: No, the officers—yes, we had our own dorm rooms.

HT: Individual rooms?

KW: Individual rooms—no, we had a roommate.

HT: Oh, okay.

KW: Yes, we had two to a room and, I mean, it was like a dorm. But we had like one kind of closet where there was two sides, and we had our clothes on one side, and you know our stuff. And then we had a drawer, a kind of a big drawer underneath the closet that we had to put a lock on. And then we had our laundry bag, and we had—but you had to have it, you had to have it perfectly ironed, our laundry bag. Where it was like a fan. So you had to fold it. And then iron it so that it would sort of fan out at the top. [chuckling] And we had to have our beds perfectly made where you could literally bounce a quarter on it. And we were shown how to make those, and then had our closets and our clothes perfectly lined up. And then we had to have the floor perfectly clean. And every Saturday we had to—we called it taping the floor, because after you mopped it with Mop 'N Glow on your hands and knees, then you take the yard stick and you take a piece of masking tape on it, and you go over the floor with masking tape on the floor to pick up every lint, every speck, every piece of anything. [laughs]

And I remember OTS was really hard! It was very different from my life. I was a kindergarten teacher. I had come from a fairly free flowing, I mean, strict background, but also sort of free flowing. And I was kind of a free flowing kind of a person, and so being that disciplined was really, really hard. And yet at the same time I liked it because it was order. And I tend—because I do tend to be a little ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder] and a little chaotic. I loved the order and the routine.

My roommate, my first roommate, she didn't like me. [chuckles] I don't know. It was just, you know, personality differences. So I got a different roommate and we were just soul mates. We just loved each other and we helped each other. And again it was that "cooperate and graduate" feeling. And there was—I was probably one of maybe four women in my flight, and there was fourteen in my flight. And the rest of the guys were, I think—well, there was a pretty good mix. But maybe 30/70, between non-prior service and prior service. And I know they do that deliberately, because our prior service guys were the enlisted members coming in to go to OTS, so they had already been in the military anywhere from probably two to ten years. They saved my bacon, because they knew the routine, the ropes, the deal, how to, you know, cooperate and graduate, and study, and march, and all that kind of stuff. And, you know we had our drawer—

But anyways, so my roommate number two, she couldn't run worth a darn. And kind of rewind the tape, going back to my running, that I loved to run. I found I was good at it. I got some better shoes. And so I ran about six miles a day at OTS, because I knew I could do it. It was a stress reliever. It was all the things that you know now about exercise and running, but it was also the thing that I really excelled at because I wasn't real good at the academic and the defense studies, because it was so new. It was something I'd never done before. So I was able to get my roommate out and help her run, kind of be that coach, be that cheerleader, and with some of the other people. And they in turn helped teach me how to march, how to learn the defense studies, how to study for the air force tests, 'cause there's a certain way you study and a certain way you take the test. So it was really that beautiful symbiotic relationship.

I kind of wrote down here "the panic box." We had our little drawer that had all of our stuff and it was basically your secure area where you put your money and your vitamins or your passport or whatever it was you had in there. But you know, to teach the concept of security, because if you're going to be working in a secure area, you can't leave the safe open or any of these other things. Well, I didn't, I didn't lock my drawer one day, so I got like two thousand demerits, the most that had ever been in the entire history of the OTS. It just meant that I couldn't go off base that next weekend. But it was pretty much ingrained in my brain at that point.

But the tests, they, you know, I studied; they were hard. But one of the things that I remember was, again, is that whole group helping each other and studying after hours when we were supposed to have lights out. We would put—we had these little florescent lights that were a little thing that you put on your desk. So we would put our red t-shirts over the light and stuff a towel under the door so that you couldn't see the light if the officers were walking down the halls.

HT: So the guys and the women were in the same dorm?

KW: Yes.

HT: Okay.

KW: We were—the women were on one floor. And we had our own bathroom, bathroom down the hall. And the guys had, I think there was—yes, I think there was—because there wasn't that many women, we only had one floor in the dorm.

HT: What was the typical day like during OTS?

KW: Chaos. You know, it wasn't really chaos. It was up very early and getting up, getting showered, getting out the door, getting downstairs in formation in uniform, standing at attention until everybody got there. And then I remember you couldn't be more than one minute late or two minutes early to get to chow hall. Maybe it was the other way, but it was like a very narrow window, and so you had to get down there, get organized, march to the chow hall within a certain time hack. And we all took turns being the flight leader to march everybody down there. And you had to report in, report to chow, do the time hacks.

And again, we would all play kind of jokes on each other. And it was dark in the morning and we had our little flashlights that had the little cone on the front, and we called them Lackland Lasers—

[End CD 1—Begin CD 2]

KW: —down to the chow hall. And to be really bratty to the company behind us, our flight behind us, we would go under the trees and then shine our lights up into the trees.

[recording paused]

HT: Let's see, you were talking about—

KW: Lackland Lasers.

HT: Lackland Lasers.

KW: These silly flashlights that we had to carry because it was dark. So as we were marching to chow we would—I could remember that we would just be past the trees, just barely past the trees, and the flight behind us would be coming up. And it's not like we did this every day, but, you know, occasionally we would shine the flashlights up in the trees and the birds, there was thousands of birds that lived in these trees, and of course they would all, you know, flutter and fly and squawk and poop. So the guys behind us sometimes would be nuked with the poop. And so that was just sort of OTS humor. And then of course you get in trouble because you'd have bird poop on your uniform, and you'd have to go back and change. But it was just all in good fun. Everybody had, you know, some pretty funny stuff that we did.

And we had, I think, some of the—one of the best times was getting our uniforms. That was such a big event after we were in our fatigues. And we had the old green fatigues which were—we called them the pickle suits. [laughs] We had—I had masking tape for my nametag before we got our nametags. It was like when we first got there,

that's what we were issued was our pickle suits. And then the big event was going to get our uniforms and going over to the supply. And we had this giant duffel bag that we had to carry all of our boots and our supplies. And of course it's—we're talking July, June, July—no, July, August, September I was at OTS in San Antonio, and it was just hot and sweaty.

So I remember going over and getting our uniforms. That was really exciting, and getting our original uniform, our dress. Our class A service dress was this little box coat that General Jeanne Holm had designed for the women. And then we had the ugly, ugly beret that was just like this mushroom sitting on your head. It was despicable. And the women had to wear the beret, and the guys got to wear the flight hats. Actually they wore the wheel hats for the dress uniform. So you could not do anything with this hat, because you couldn't put it in your pocket, you couldn't crush it, and you know, put it on and work. It had to just sort of sit lightly on the table or on the chair or underneath your chair. It was just the most ridiculous hat we ever had. I can't even imagine. I'm going on and on, but—[laughs]. And so we got our uniforms and that was pretty exciting and it was the little, the short shirt that you didn't even tuck in. And I don't even remember—I don't even remember. We had our skirts and we had pants. We could—we actually had to buy the pants ourselves, because the issue pants, you know, they weren't such good fabric.

But going through OTS, again, it was really a “cooperate and graduate” feeling.

HT: Did you have any time off at all like a weekend pass or anything like that during the twelve weeks?

KW: Not very often! [laughs] Yeah, I did. In fact, we had some Saudi officers who were also training with us, and they were going through OTS and also pilot school. So I met a Saudi officer, but he was going back to Saudi for six weeks, so he let me use his brand new 1978 Firebird, red Firebird. So I had a car. And I got in trouble because I drove to one of the drill practices. I mean, I got in really deep trouble because I was supposed to have marched everywhere. But I had a car, so of course I was going to drive it. So I didn't get to go downtown that weekend. But we tried to get off base and we would go, you know, again, a group of us would go downtown and go to the restaurants and go to the river walk, just to be out. And it was—these are the people that during that twelve weeks you just really cried and died together and grew very, very, very, very close.

HT: A real bonding experience sounds like.

KW: Absolutely. And I'd never had that in my life before, ever. I'd never experienced that. And so it was really quite amazing and a real life-changing experience for me.

HT: What about after graduation? What happened then?

KW: Let's see. Our graduation was pretty amazing. Actually, my mother knew—had been—gone to school with one of the—a guy who actually became one of the—he was like a, I don't know, two star, three star general officer. So he actually came to our graduation as my invited guest, and so he was the highest ranking officer in the review for our graduation parade. So my mom and dad [and sister Lydia—KW added] came and

they—General [Robert] Malloy lived in San Antonio at that time, and so I think he had just retired. So that was pretty fun, and pretty special.

And then before I graduated, about like two weeks before, we got our orders, we got our assignments. And we had what was called—it was like the night before our graduation our commissioning ceremony we had our FIGMO, “finally I got my orders,” or one of those words. And we had a big party and it was where everybody would create—our underclassmen would create a shirt for us that kind of denoted some of the fun stuff and goofy things that happened. It was, again, that feeling of such huge camaraderie.

So then my—one of the guys in my flight, who—I think he was a personnel officer-- “Hey, you’re going here, and you’re going there.” He came and told me, because I didn’t know what career field I was going into, you know, I don’t know, I didn’t pay attention or had forgotten or wasn’t assigned one. I don’t know. I don’t know.

And so he came back and he goes “Oh, guess what. You got orders. You’re going to—” I don’t know, I think it was Minot [Air Force Base, North Dakota] or Chanute [Air Force Base, Illinois] for tech school. And he says, “And your career field is munitions maintenance officer.” And I was just “What!? This cannot be. There’s a mistake somewhere.” So I really was kind of freaking out. I just thought, “I can’t do this. I don’t want—I didn’t come in the air force to be a munitions officer. I don’t want to count bombs. I don’t even know what they do.” I don’t even know what a munitions maintenance officer did and I didn’t want to know.

And I wanted to be a personnel officer or an admin officer. And at that time we did have admin officers. And so he—the guys in my flight said, “Okay, here’s what you do. You write a letter. Go up the chain of command. Write a letter to the squadron commander, your flight commander, your squadron commander, the wing commander, and you request to change your career field and you request a meeting with the accessions officers over at Randolph [Air Force Base],” which is the Air Force personnel center.

So that’s what I did. [laughs] I got on my little typewriter and wrote these letters, and got my mother to send me my résumé and some of the work I had done that—and the feeling was, “You can take these gold bars and shove them where the sun doesn’t shine. I’m not going to be a munitions maintenance officer. I’ll go back to being a school teacher. I’m not doing this.” I guess I had nothing to fear, nothing to lose, so I just went for it. And sure enough I was able to get an interview with the captain over at Randolph, the accessions officer, and I drove my borrowed red 1978 Thunderbird over to Randolph, and went in and met with this captain. And of course, being a good OT [officer in training], I reported in, “Sir, Captain, OT Wirkus reporting as ordered,” and sat down and talked to him. I begged him. I just pleaded with him. I said “Please, you’ve got to find me another career field. I can’t do this.” I’m sure he was a personnel officer trying to fill all the billets.

And so we talked for a little while and he says, “Okay, well how about air traffic control?” I was like, “Oh god, I can’t do air traffic control. I’ll die. I can’t do math. You’re not listening to me!” And so I think he was getting frustrated and I was getting frustrated and I was just like, “Please, don’t you have anything in personnel or administration?” And he goes, “We’re 900% over-manned in personnel,” because I was

the last class of the fiscal year, so all these other career fields were all full, so they had to stick people in to career fields that they needed. Needs of the air force, you know. But I pleaded with him, so I think out of the goodness of his heart, he put me into the education and training career field. There was only 250 officers in the entire air force in that career field. So I was eternally grateful. So that's how I ended up in education and training.

And so my first duty assignment was Maxwell [Gunter] Air Force Base [Alabama], which is called Air University. And I did not go to tech school. I went direct duty. All my friends went to tech school. I was like, "I want to go to tech school." [laughs] They said "you have a degree in education, you don't need to go to tech school." So at that point I didn't argue. And so I did. And I was the second, second lieutenant that had ever been assigned to Headquarters AFROTC [Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps] at Maxwell. The first second lieutenant ever to be assigned got there six months before I did, so—in the whole history of Headquarters of ROTC.

But again we were—the air force was starting to balloon up, so we were getting—we were commissioning about 450 people every six weeks for OTS at that time, so there was a whole glut of second lieutenants coming in, so they didn't know where to put people. They were just throwing them everywhere. But on Maxwell it was all Air University so they had Air Command [and] Staff College, Squadron Officer School, Air War College, The Chaplain's School, the JAG [Judge Advocate General's Corps] School. I don't think there was any tech schools. But it was all, you know—and then they had the Community College of the Air Force Administration and then the Headquarters of ROTC. So it was all, everything having to do with education and professional military education in the air force.

So I was assigned to Headquarters at AFROTC in their field training program. Well, University of North Carolina at Greensboro didn't have an ROTC program, so I didn't know the first thing about ROTC. So again I was—it was setting the stage for my entire air force career. There had never been anybody, no second lieutenant in this job that I had just been put into. I was basically scheduling the ROTC cadets into their field training program, and I was helping to write curriculum and design training programs for ROTC, which I loved.

And I had to live on base in the dorms because we were second lieutenants and the general, the commanding general, at that point had said everybody had to live on base. And then probably a year later, because there was getting to be so many of us new people coming in, you know, we were able to live off base in an apartment. But everybody, I will say, as a female, the first words out of everybody's mouth was, "Oh, so you must be a nurse," because they were not used to having female line officers as second lieutenants. So that was a fairly big event I remember. And yeah, my best friends were, the other women, and they were all nurses, because there was not that many of us [line officers—added by KW].

HT: Did you every encounter and discrimination—overt?

KW: I would say absolutely, yes, but throughout my entire career. In my opinion, the—it was not a good situation to put us second lieutenants, young officers, into dorms where at the other end of the hall were the colonels that were attending Air War College. It was

terrible. And here we were these, you know, young, bright lieutenants, full of life and energy and ready to go. We should've have been either in a dorm with all the other lieutenants. But it ended up being a very not good situation. So I believe that we were preyed on. I really would say that that's what happened to an extent, and it was not a good situation. But you don't know those things at the time. And we were thrust into a situation that now, I think, I really believe now people would be horrified to have, you know, a whole bunch of second lieutenants in with a whole bunch of full colonels. It was just not a good situation because there was no—it just wasn't a good situation.

HT: Did it affect the morale of the second lieutenants?

KW: Oh no, we were partying hard. [laughter] Because these guys had money. They were there to party. So we would go out. We would have parties in the dorms. We'd have parties downtown. We'd have parties. I mean, it was party city. I mean, I learned a lot. The guys were great. Some of them were really wonderful, wonderful men...I grew up very fast, after being fairly sheltered and naïve in college.

HT: And how long were you at Maxwell?

KW: For two years. Two years and then moved to Headquarters Air Force Office of Special Investigations [OSI] in Washington, D.C. It was actually—we were stationed in the Forestall Building, downtown Washington, D.C., across from the Smithsonian. And so moved there and got a—bought a little townhouse, 975 square feet, cost me \$975 a month for my mortgage. And I should've kept it because it's in Parkfairfax now, right off Glebe Road in Alexandria, Virginia. It was three miles from the Pentagon, three miles from the Capitol, it was just fabulous. So I was able to ride my bike in, but I took the bus to work.

And, you know, it was very—and at that point it was—I can't remember, but it was the Reagan era, so he brought back a pride in the uniform and a pride in being in the military. And before, when I first had gotten there, we really weren't allowed to wear our uniforms downtown and—because it was just—it wasn't safe. And then when, I guess it was 1980, President Reagan was elected, and I marched in his inaugural parade. I was the only female in the active duty air force contingency. So they had, you know, [U.S.] Army, [U.S.] Navy, [U.S.] Air Force, [U.S.] Marines. And I was the only female, and I was the only—I think I was the only officer in the contingency. There had to be another officer. No, there was other officers. I was the only female and definitely the only 2LT [second lieutenant]. So that was pretty, pretty cool. Yeah, I was just barely a second lieutenant or I was barely a first lieutenant because I was only a second lieutenant for two years.

But yes, it was pretty exciting to march in the parade. It [the temperature] started out kind of in the, probably in the forties maybe fifties, and it was a little overcast, but by the time we marched on, it was in the twenties. It was freezing cold, but we were just wearing our service dress uniforms. And I can remember putting my sweater underneath my uniform and sort of turning it up and taping it, hoping it wasn't going to fall down and be over my coat. But I can remember, you know, President Reagan loved horses. And so we marched right behind a, I think, a color guard on horseback. And, you know, you couldn't deviate when you were marching in formation. So we had to march

definitely through steaming piles of horse poop. And you know it was just too funny. Because like I said, it was twenty degrees and then my shoe came untied and I was thinking, “Oh, God, Oh, God. I’m going to step out of my shoes. I’m going to have to march through horse poop and just keep going.” [laughter] It’s just one of those things you remember. So no, it did not happen. My shoe came untied, but I had my shoe intact.

But I really loved being in Washington because it was the feeling that, “Wow, I’m here in my nation’s capital and I’m serving in the military and I get to drive by the monuments every day, and that this is, you know, our local news is really our national news.” And I think it really awakened in me really my purpose in the military in a lot of ways. I was part of the junior—it’s called the International Junior Officers. Yeah, International Junior Officers Club. So kind of, again, going back to my international experience and love of international affairs. But we had parties in the different embassies, so with the different officers that were there, as part of the Junior, the International Junior Officers.

HT: What did you actually do?

KW: At—in OSI?

HT: Yes.

KW: I was an education training officer for—it was an AFSC [Air Force Specialty Code] awarding institution, which means that they, their school, was like a tech school. And they actually awarded the air force specialty code designator by going through their, I don’t know, I think it’s [a] twelve weeks class, to become a special agent. So nobody had been there before to do the actual curriculum design and development. And when I looked in the files, they had their lesson plans on yellow legal pads just stuffed into the files. So I worked really hard to try to have a standardized lesson plan and standardized instruction.

[I was then] sent to Kirtland Air Force Base in New Mexico. And [I] got there and was the education training officer for the 1550 Combat Crew Training Wing, which was a helicopter school. I don’t know where we trained—combat search and rescue and special operations [We trained aircrew and pararescue for combat search and rescue and special operations helicopter and C-130 aircraft.—KW corrected later.] And that was just when special operations was really starting to come into focus also. And I was—one more time, nobody had ever been there as an education training officer before I got there, and it was working to do program, curriculum design, evaluation analysis of the training programs and so created that part of my team. I was the captain. And I really loved—I loved being there on the operational base. I absolutely—to me that was like “Wow, I’m in the air force. This is where it is,” because I was at a base level, wing level.

And again, I had been in—my first two assignments I’d been at headquarters level. I didn’t know anything about the air force. I’d never been to tech school, so I had just—I didn’t know a lot of things that I “should have known.” And again, you hear that stereotyping was, “Captain, you should know this by now,” kind of thing, that feeling. And again, being a woman I didn’t have the good ole’ boy networking going on. I didn’t have a mentor. I didn’t have the “daddy rabbit,” we would call them, where I looked

around at my peers and all my peers were men and had that. But again, it never really occurred to me. I never really thought about it too much. I just was like, “Let me just do my job.”

So I really loved being at Kirtland and did some really, I believe, good work there with PJs [parajumpers], and again it was an opportunity for me to run. I started doing half marathons, just really doing a lot of running and a lot of training outside—my bicycle riding and working with guys that were actually training for the Olympics in bicycling.

It was just this horrible culture shock when I first got to New Mexico. I hated it. It was so brown. I mean, I was used to living in D.C. I was used to being back East. It was just brown. I just thought, “Oh my god. I’ve been sent to hell.” And finally—and I got lost. I didn’t know—I was by myself. I was trying to find a friend, a friend’s house in one of those—I was there for maybe four, five, six weeks—and I just got so turned around and it was dark and I couldn’t find any land marks and I didn’t have a compass in my car, it was nothing, I just couldn’t find my way home. I just pulled over to the side of the road and burst into tears and cried for about half an hour and said, “Okay, that’s done. Get it together. Get the map. Find your way home.” [laughs] So that’s what I had to do.

HT: Where is Kirtland Air Force Base in New Mexico?

KW: In Albuquerque.

HT: Oh, okay.

KW: So [I] was there and then had a couple of different jobs when I was in Albuquerque. And my wing commander—there was supposed to be—the historian was in the civil service, GS [general schedule], I don’t know, maybe [pay grade] 12—and for some odd reason, I don’t know what happened, but he hadn’t done his job for like the last two years. He’d been hiding in his office or, “Oh yeah, I’m out doing such and such,” but he hadn’t produced. It was like, you know, publish or perish. [He] hadn’t produced anything for two years. Oh, my gosh! So, of course, guess what? Guess who’s coming to dinner? The IG. [laughs] So my boss, the wing commander, said, “I need you to write this history.” [So I said,] “Okay, Boss, whatever you need.”

HT: So you actually wrote a history of the base?

KW: I wrote a history of our unit.

HT: Unit, okay.

KW: Because there was a base historian. And so—but there actually is a career field, an AFSC, as the historian. So I found the base historian, and he was a retired chief master sergeant who had been a historian on active duty and was now a civil service GS-12 historian. The coolest guy. I mean just, he was this old crusty chief, and smart, and from Louisiana. So I said, “Chief, I really need your help on this. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to start. I don’t know how to get there” And so he taught me, because he’d been with SAC [Strategic Air Command], and he taught me how to write a history. And he said, “The most important thing for you to know is it’s not how many airplanes, how many nuts and bolts that we have, it’s what do the people do to accomplish the mission.”

And so from that perspective, I was able to—it was one of the best jobs I ever had in the air force, because I went—I was everywhere. I interviewed people on flight line. I interviewed—basically, what you’re doing. I interviewed people. I wrote the history. And I got it back—Oh, and this was before we had computers, so I had to write everything out. And the only computer that we had was the secretary had a word processor, and the disk was about twelve inches by twelve inches. And I don’t know what it called, the Phoenix program or something, and you put this disk in this big giant word processor and I was just entranced. And I just was like, “Maria, you’ve got to show me how to use this thing. I love it. I have to use it.” So I stayed after work and she showed me how to use it. And that was really my first introduction to computers. And so I begged and pleaded and got my boss to get me a computer so that I could do my work. So I was like—I was one of the first people on base that had a computer.

HT: How long did it take you do the history? What period of time did you have?

KW: I probably got it done in six months, a two year backlog, and really busted my behind to get it done. And then got it published, got all the documents, got all the supporting docs, and actually it is in the Maxwell—I think it’s in the Maxwell library. It’s part of the permanent collection. And that’s one of the things I can really be proud of, is that my name is on that history. I was the author. I wrote that.

And so I did that, and that was for two years. And then I did the next year and then I think the next. I think it was either two or three years that I did. And then, actually, at that point in eighty—December of ’89, I got passed over for promotion to major, and I really liked being in the air force. I didn’t know what to do. I thought, “Well, I guess I’ll have to go back to teaching school.” But what I did was I decided to stay in the Air National Guard. So I left active duty and went into the Air National Guard in New Mexico. And lo and behold, they had a position open that was for an education and training officer for the New Mexico [Air National Guard], the whole guard, and the guard unit was actually collocated on Kirtland.

So I went in the guard, and I had met my future husband about a year, I guess maybe two before that, and he was an active duty security forces officer. What we’d call security police. Then I got off active duty, went in the guard and got a job downtown as a juvenile probation officer. So I worked—I was in juvenile probation. Then Tommy [Lott] immediately deployed to Honduras for six months. Soto Cano [Air Base] as the, I guess he was like the provost marshal. It was a joint assignment, so he was the chief of security for the base

And then Tom, my husband Tom, came back from Honduras mid-tour in May. We flew to Vegas and got married. He flew back to Albuquerque, flew back down to Honduras. And I flew—I came back to Albuquerque and got hurt at work. We were doing takedown techniques for self-defense, and [I] was subsequently, from those tests, was diagnosed with kidney cancer. So I guess this was about—it was like—well, it was the week before Tom was due back in July. So I was diagnosed with kidney cancer a week before he came home, or maybe two weeks. No, I guess it was right after.

HT: How did they find it?

KW: I got hurt doing tech[niques]—we were doing take own techniques, and my partner was a big guy and he fell on me. So, you know, I hurt my back. And I thought, well—I was trying to be gracious about it, because he felt really bad. But we were in the gym. And so I was getting on the airplane the next day to go to Miami for my high school twenty year reunion, I think. And so my mother had a, like an osteopath, chiropractor. So he adjusted my back to where it was—I could deal with life and it didn't hurt so bad. But then when I came back to Albuquerque, I thought, you know, you never know. I'm going to file for workers comp[ensation], because ten years from now I could have something wrong with my back, and who knows.

Fortuitously, there was—so I did, and they took a back x-ray, and there was calcification on the tumor, and that was what showed up on the x-ray. And they didn't know what it was, so they sent me for ultrasound and then they sent me for CAT [computed tomography] scan, and it showed up on the CAT scan big as life. So they wanted to do surgery like the next day. But they wanted to build up my blood platelets, so it was like two weeks I was on iron. So then they took my own blood in case I needed a transfusion so that they weren't having to deal with the blood bank. And so I was in the hospital for about a week. And it was renal cell carcinoma, and the tumor was the size of a grapefruit. It was stage one cancer.

HT: Good grief.

KW: I know. It was just amazing. I was thirty-six and was totally asymptomatic. I mean my back hurt because I ran, so it never occurred to me that I was anything other than that. And I was totally asymptomatic other than a little bit of pain on my right side.

So six weeks after I had surgery we—I had to sell my house, and we moved to—on my husband's orders, we moved to Norton Air Force Base in San Bernardino [California]. And I was pretty sick, needless to say. I didn't have chemo[therapy]. I didn't have radiation, but I was pretty weak. But the good news was I had been in such good shape because I had been a runner, and I had been in really good physical condition, [so] that I healed pretty quick. But it was still, you know, it was a long time.

But all that being said, I stayed in my guard unit, so I had to fly back to Albuquerque once a month to participate in my guard drill. And so I did that for two years—well, eighteen months. And then I found a unit at Norton, and I was the—I found a reserve unit at Norton, and so I became the social actions officer, which was the—what we call now EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity]. Military equal opportunity treatment. We did drug and alcohol counseling and investigated sexual harassment complaints, and taught sexual harassment training. In fact, I created the first sexual harassment training that had been conducted at Norton Air Force Base.

HT: Right. During that time did you miss being on active duty?

KW: Yes, I did. It was really different. But at the same time I was in that same world, because my husband was active duty. So I wasn't that far away from it. It was kind of fun because

I still had my reserve stuff. But I was—so I got a teaching job in California and I taught bilingual kindergarten. Actually, it was a K-1 [kindergarten-first grade] combined class, because they were so desperate for bilingual teachers. So I taught bilingual Spanish and English kindergarten. And then the next year I taught bilingual Spanish and English 1-2 [first grade-second grade], because it was the same kids. So I had most—a lot of the same kids from K-1 into the 1-2. And [I] was continuing to do my reserve duty, so it was hard. I'll tell you it was really hard to—because I felt like I had three jobs. I was married, I was teaching school, and I was in the reserves.

HT: And recovering from cancer.

KW: Oh, yeah. Yes, exactly. So it was kind of a tough times. And my husband was pretty obsessive and his work was pretty, you know, difficult. I mean he was the commander of security forces, and there wasn't one weekend that he wasn't called out because the cops are always in trouble. [laughs] So [I] was there for two years. [Then] we moved from there to Little Rock, Arkansas.

HT: Your husband was transferred?

KW: He was transferred, yes. We moved every eighteen months. And so I had to, you know, like, stay back, finish out my teaching year, and then pack up everything and move. And so he was out there by himself. I was out there by myself. And this was at—from Norton—When we left Norton to Little Rock, I had to stay back because I was teaching school. And then when I got to Little Rock, he had been living in the dorm. He had to live in a dorm for like eight months. And so we finally got a house on base and then I sort of commuted back to Little Rock for a while.

And then I ended up I couldn't—they couldn't find a unit in Little Rock, because they only had the mobile aerial port squadron; they didn't have a career field, my career field. They didn't have a position for me. So I went inactive and was inactive for probably a year. And then we moved from Little Rock back to California, to March Air Force Base, and my husband was the squadron commander for security forces squadron at March. Oh, and of course, Norton closed maybe a year after we left. The base closed. They were in a lot of closure modes. And then when we got to March, it was on the closure list, so they were in closure mode.

And so, at that point, I didn't have a job. So the squadron commander for the mission support squadron was—became my best friend. And she lived like one house away from us on base. We lived in these wonderful little historic houses. And so she got deployed. She got orders to deploy, and so she asked, she was like, "I need somebody." What they did was just move everybody up. Her squadron section commander was getting out of the air force. The flight commander they moved up into the squadron commander position, so they put me in as the squadron section commander, which is basically the administrative position. So I was on orders for 120 days while she was deployed, and during that time was then able to find another reserve position called IMA, Individual Mobilization Augmentee.

[End CD 2—Begin CD 3]

KW: —unit. So you don't drill with a unit one weekend a month. You actually do your drills with the active duty unit, which was cool. It's the best—I mean, it's the best kept secret in the air force. So I did that, found a position, then we got orders to Panama. My husband got orders for Panama with U.S. Southern Command. So we moved to Panama. And so I was—actually got an assignment as an Individual Mobilization Augmentee to U.S. Southern Command in Panama. And it was just perfect, because I was able to work on orders with the unit and I was actual—

[recording error]

HT: —[with] Southern Command.

KW: With Southern Command, so I got a job, because again, we were closing down the [Panama] Canal. The Americans were getting out. Yes, we closed down Norton, we closed down March, and it was like, "Oh, my gosh, here come the Lotts. I guess we're closing down the base." So we were getting ready to turn the Canal back to the Panamanians. So this was '97 I guess. I got a job at the—with the Air Force Treaty Implementation Program—treaty implementation plan, TIP—as one of the management analysts, personnel management analysts. It was a temporary GS-12 job. And in the meantime did my air force reserve stuff, and finished—

HT: [coughs] Excuse me.

KW: —and took Air Command Staff College through seminar in Panama. And I got my PME, my professional military education. Got that done. And while I was working, you know, doing reserve stuff and going to school.

I loved Panama. My mother had been there in 1940, probably right before the war. And she worked in the Panama Canal Zone and worked in the administrative building. And so it was very, very, very special to me to be living and working in Panama. And it was very much like home. I loved everything—I mean I loved Panama. But we, you know, everybody has a maid story and everybody has stories about trying to get stuff fixed. And it was Panamanian time. If you've got—if they say they're going to show up on Thursday at 3:00, they'll probably be there Monday at 2:00. [chuckles]

So we were in Panama for eighteen months, and then the command moved to Miami. So we moved the entire U.S. Southern Command from Quarry Heights in Panama to Miami. And there was just so many wonderful things about Panama, and really—so a lot of historic things, and we lived in this nineteen—this beautiful historic house built in 1932. It was just so beautiful. On Howard—we lived on Albrook Air Force Base. I worked on Howard Air Force Base, and my husband worked on Quarry Heights. We had one car. And they were working on the Bridge of the Americas, so sometimes it could

take you two hours to get across the bridge. So I had the car Tuesdays and Thursdays, or Monday, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Tom had it Tuesdays and Thursdays. So we would take each other to work. And the traffic was gross. It was just so bad. But again, it was some really wonderful, wonderful precious times and we met some really wonderful, wonderful people. And [we] really got wonderful work experience because we were working in joint environment, so it was working with—really the first time we were working with the other services. And so, you know, we had a much greater understanding of jointness [sic]. And General Wesley Clark was our commander. He was the U.S. Southern Command commander in Panama. And so that was kind of interesting.

And then we came back. When we moved the command to Miami I was still assigned as the Individual Mobilization Augmentee to the director of personnel at that time. Then when we moved to Miami, the army, the navy, and the Marine Corps had an Office of Reserve Affairs, so they administered their reserve program for the command. The air force just was missing in action. Somehow it just never got put into, you know, the personnel system. So my boss at the time that I was working for was the Director of Reserve Affairs. So together, we basically—I wrote the job description for an O-5 position and an E-8. I wrote the job description. I wrote the personnel descriptions. I staffed it. I sent it up through the joint staff. I sent it up to the air staff so that they would fund it and they would authorize it. And I guess it turns out I was the most qualified for the position, so I got selected to fill that position. [laughter] And it was what's called AGR, active guard reserve. And what it was is is a reservist on active duty, working reserve issues.

At that time I went back on active duty. And at the same time my husband retired. And this was in Miami. So he worked for—he got a job working in corporate security for Publix Super Markets, which is a wonderful position, great supermarkets. And I became the Air Force Reserve Program Manager for Headquarters, U.S. Southern Command. And [I] stood up their air force reserve program from absolutely ground up. I mean, I created the files. I created the processes So I just put some sort of structure and some order out of chaos for the command. And we deployed a lot of people down range. We filled a lot of positions with, of course, Spanish-speakers, and a lot of the civil engineer programs.

And we did hurricane relief for hurricane Mitch and George. And that was a huge number of people that we deployed down range, as well as we had to clean up our own. We had to evacuate from Miami from, I don't know, one of those hurricanes; I can't remember which one it was. But at least luckily, it did not do what it was—as much damage as it did down range.

And so I was also selected to stand up the education and training office for U.S. Southern Command, because who knows what happened during the move. You know, that wasn't in the blue prints. There was no office of—education services office. Well, with the air force—and, you know, we always joke about the army, but the army was in charge at that point. The air force is really big into education. Well, the army must not have been so much, because there was no education services office. So myself and another female lieutenant colonel were selected to stand up this office, get it up and running, get the—help people with their tuition assistance, get them in school, do the tuition vouchers and counseling and all that kind of stuff, career counseling. And then we

did that for probably, I don't know, six to eight months. And then wrote the position description, so then we turned it over to the GS-9 and -11, or whatever it was, for their—so that they had a education services office.

And then I kind of went back over to my other job as the air force reserve program manager. And we built, really, the program from I don't know how many slots, probably thirty-three to sixty-five maybe. So we pretty well doubled the program. And was mostly intel[ligence] officers, obviously, working in the command. But we had you know few others parts and pieces of other career fields. And then from there, my job took us to Denver. And I was—

HT: So finally your husband followed you.

KW: Yes! That's was the first time. That's the first time, exactly. And it was fairly traumatic for him. I mean he was excited about it to begin with, I think, until the reality hit. But we moved—I was selected to come to Denver as the career management—the chief of career management within the directorate of assignments for the air force reserve. It was at the Air Reserve Personnel Center, ARPC. And I worked for Colonel Pat [Patricia A.] Quisenberry, and she was—she was—we called her Xena, the Warrior Princess, because she was wonderful and scary at the same time. [laughs] And yet she taught me a lot about really a lot of things that I would've—I wish I had had her earlier in my career.

HT: Sounds like a true mentor [unclear].

KW: She really truly was a good mentor. And she taught me a lot about lots of different things.

[recording paused]

HT: —Back to Xena the Warrior Princess.

KW: When I got to Denver.

HT: Yes.

KW: She is the one who brought me to the Air Reserve Personnel Center in Denver, and she truly looks like Xena, the Warrior Princess. In fact, we even have one of those Xena dolls, that when I saw it I gave it to her as—She had a whole bunch of Xena stuff, and actually she liked that. But she really was a good mentor, a good friend. She was very hard to work for. She was very exacting and very—you know, she was truly a workaholic. She'd show up to work at five o'clock in the morning and leave at nine and expect the other officers to do the same thing.

So in the meantime, my husband was looking for work, because he had been retired and that's when we moved here to Denver. And so I worked in the—as a career—let me get this right—career manager for the assignments directorate. [I] worked there for two years and then moved over to the deputy as customer assistance for Air

Reserve Personnel Center. And we had our client base really was about nine thousand people—nine hundred thousand, because we had all the air national guard and all the air force reserve records that we were responsible for.

And so all of our customers were all over the world. And then of course 9/11 [September 11, 2001], I was—we ended up working three shifts. And I was the officer in charge for the swing shift for a while, mid shift for a while, and then things kind of got settled down. But we launched about 4,500 reservists, and that was, I mean, that was the whole purpose of the Air Reserve Personnel Center, is we knew where the reservists were. We had to notify them, we had to have a muster, we had to get them sent out, and we launched about 4,500. Some of the folks, I mean they were on the airplane with just their ID cards. They didn't even have orders. And it was amazing.

But it also showed some of the—where we needed to work on some things and some processes that had glitches. For example, the personnel database, the personnel system did not talk to the pay system, so that was a huge issue, even though we were in the same building, believe it or not. Defense finance and account service was on the other side of our building, but when we launched the reservists—because they were reservists, they had a full time job someplace else—they did not get paid. And so a lot of the kids were not getting paid because somehow there was a glitch in the system to get that pay started. So it was just horrible. It was just really, really a bad situation. But we were able to work that out. We got, you know, some pretty smart people involved, pretty high level and so that you know that was not an issue.

But there was just a lot of computer processes that had not really worked very well or had never been tested, actually. One of the things that we did that we were able to find—for example, the chief of the air force reserve three star [general] wanted to find people that were—that had the skill, like computer skills or certain specific skills. So we were able to run [a] database and get that, those civilian skills, and bring those people on active duty, specifically based on their civilian skills. So we created the civilian skills databank, and then that really is now a requirement by—not OPM [Office of Personnel Management], but the chief of staff of the air force.

HT: And all of this was a result of 9/11.

KW: Yes. And then—so then after that, I moved over to the customer—director of—deputy director for customer assistance, where we really handled all the—just about—we had a phone bank. We had [a] call center probably of, I don't know, fifteen to twenty people maybe. And so you're getting calls from all over the world for everything you can possibly imagine, from needing a copy of their records to “How do I do this with my Servicemen's Group Life Insurance?” to “I want to get my kid enrolled in school.” You know, you name it.

And so that we had—and that was one of the things that we, after 9/11 we established about, I don't remember, but it was probably about 250 FAQs, frequently asked questions. And that was online, and that was really the first time that that had ever been done as part of the customer assistance. Because, obviously, moving into a technological age, we couldn't—and the phone lines were jammed, and why are you waiting twenty minutes for a call when you can go online? And you can go online at two

o'clock in the morning. And so a lot of these [FAQs] cut down on the wait time, and it also cut down on the call time, because we built in the database so that the call center agent could pull up one of the frequently asked questions and go through [it] as a tier one. And then if they couldn't answer that question they'd send it to tier two, which was one of the supervisors, and then tier three, or me, [chuckles] you know, as the deputy. So they really did a good job, and it's pretty much evolved even way, way, way more so than when I left. It's really become very, very high tech.

So I was there for two years and then moved. I got passed over for [full colonel] in '06 but I wanted to stay on at least another two years, so Col. Quisenberry was instrumental in helping me apply to the [U.S.] Air Force Academy and to really help with standing up the Air Force Reserve program on the academy. So I was selected to go down there, and there was—I was a lieutenant colonel as the program manager and I had a female NCO [non-commissioned officer] who was the, my NCOIC [non-commissioned officer in charge] basically. And then eventually Col. Quisenberry was able to get there about a year later as the air force reserve advisor to the superintendent of the academy. Big long title, but what she was [was] basically the liaison between the commander—the commandant of the academy—sorry, the superintendent of the academy and the [U.S.] Air Force Reserve.

So we put together the program for the Air Force Reserve, the individual mobilization augmentees into the air force academy, where before it had just been real ad hoc kind of real loosey goosey. And there had been one NCO who was kind of sort of doing it part time [as program manager--KW added later], but there wasn't really any standardized processes and procedures. And there wasn't anybody full time to help with, you know, recruiting and bringing people into the positions, assessing, doing the baseline personnel manpower analysis of what kinds of positions does the Air Force Academy need, and how many in the military arena, the academic arena, and the athletic arena, because those are the three main areas that the air force academy teaches. So now we have air force reservists plugged into each one of those places. Plus, we have a separate air force reserve unit that does the—that instructs the flying training, the soaring, and the jumping, and those are big, big, big programs for the cadets at the Air Force Academy. Big morale issue, of course, because these cadets want to jump out of perfectly good airplanes. I don't know why, but [laughs]. No, it's a real big issue, so the reservists really are the ones that are able to teach that, because that way we're not taking operational pilots out of the operational air force to teach the flying training.

So it was really—I really loved being at the academy, and we were really brought down partly to help as mentors and as senior female officers and senior female NCOs to show that presence and to really help with that whole sexual harassment issue and the ensuing fallout from that. And to really talk to the cadets about, actually the reserves, also, that they can still continue to serve, maybe not on active duty, but they can still continue to serve, because that was never really—that was sort of a hush, hush subject that nobody really talked about. But the reserves are becoming more and more utilized and becoming more and more professional, really. I sponsored a cadet on the Air Force Academy. She's the first female cadet from Colombia, and when I was—

I forgot to talk about my deployment. I should probably talk about that. Before I went to the Air Force Academy, in March—October of 2002, I volunteered to deploy to

Bogotá, Colombia. And it was voluntary, but I really really, really wanted to go [for] a couple personal reasons but also professional reasons. My husband had left to go to a job in West Palm Beach. And so this position, this deployment, came up and I'm a Spanish speaker, so I just thought, "Wow, this is just so perfect. I would love to go." So I begged, pleaded, sniveled, and groveled to be able to get to go. [laughs] And my commander authorized it. She released me because I—it was taking me out of a one deep position for five months, and yet a huge opportunity. So packed my bags and went to Bogotá.

But I was terrified, absolutely terrified, because of all the intel briefings that you get where all the FARC, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia. So I was expecting to see a sniper behind every tree waiting to shoot me. When in fact it was a truly life changing event for me, in that I felt like I had worked for twenty-five years to get to this point.

I was the deputy of the training mission. We had five missions. We had army, navy, air force, the training, and the logistics missions, and that was part of the U.S. military group in—from in the embassy in Bogotá. And our embassy in Bogotá is the largest embassy in Latin America. And in fact, General Colin Powell—well, Secretary Powell at that point, came down and we were able to meet him. And he talked to the people working in the embassy, so that was pretty cool.

But basically what I—my job at that time was to help with, coordinate the training programs that the US was offering to the Colombian military and the Colombian National Police. And we had to vet the Colombian nationals for human rights abuses, to make sure that they were not on any one of the State Department lists of being convicted or suspected of human rights abuses. So we had to vet every person, every Colombian military member who wanted to take one of the American-funded courses. So I set up the database, set up—the guy before me that was there kind of started the database and I took it to the next level and was able to automate it a little bit better, and then sent that over to the State Department. So it was very interesting. And also, I was a coordinator for the mobile training teams, the MTTs, that came down to train the Colombian military. And that was—we trained them in everything from, you know, CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation] and first aid to night vision goggle maintenance and aircraft accidents or aircraft investigations or aircraft maintenance.

But the best part was, because I was working in what they call the Colombian Pentagon—it was the Centro Administracion Nacional [CAN]—and was, you know—lived in an apartment downtown with one or two other military gals. And this was the most beautiful apartment that I've ever lived in in my life. It was probably 2,500 square feet, hardwood mahogany floors, and in a really beautiful district in downtown Bogotá that was in the embassy district, and we had the Panamanian embassy nearby and, I think, the Venezuelan and Japanese, and it was just like—well, that was my neighborhood. It was so beautiful. And I was able to speak Spanish a lot, you know, all day. And really just, really changed my life.

The people that I met in Colombia were spectacular. They loved their country and I was, like I say, I was terrified. I was even afraid to go out my front door until when I started work. The first week I was there, I met a guy who had lived in New Jersey of all things. He was Colombian, lived in New Jersey, and he was the English teacher at the CAN. And so he and I got to talking. We got to be good friends. He was a very dynamic

individual, and so, because of Cesar, he invited me to go to meet with his English students at one of the pubs, you know, local places downtown. Actually, it was a park three blocks from my house. Didn't even know it existed. It was so beautiful. And so pretty much from then on I didn't worry about it, because I saw, "Wow, people live, they go, they shop, they dine they dance," and they just live life normally. You pay attention to petty crimes and stupid stuff, but I never felt—I really truly never felt unsafe down there.

As I was getting ready to leave, they, the FARC, bombed the building about ten blocks from my house. I mean, it looked like the [Alfred P.] Murrah [Federal] Building [of the Oklahoma City bombing]. It sheared off the whole front half of the building. And there was a children's Christmas party—or no, it was a birthday party, so, you know, twelve children died and I think thirty-seven people all together. And that was fairly traumatic. But again it's—it was just this feeling of—I mean I really, I just had such huge sadness because I had felt such a close, closeness to Colombia and the people.

And two weeks before I left [on] a small aircraft. It was a contractor aircraft. And there was five—there was four American contractors and I think one Colombian sergeant. Somehow the plane went down in the jungle in the middle of, unfortunately, where the FARC were heavily, heavily influenced. And they went down and they—the sergeant was killed, and one of our American contractors was killed. The other three American contractors were taken, kidnapped and taken into the jungle.

But again, based on all that happened, it was amazing to watch how, operationally, what we did to find those guys. To be part of that whole process where we had briefings at six o'clock in the morning and six o'clock at night with all the different agencies, DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency], DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency], FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], the intel people. But just to see how all the agencies worked together, and truly this interagency operation, to watch that and to be part of it was again this feeling of, "Wow, this is what I spent twenty-five years in the air force training for."

So it really was a life changing event. It was, truly. Being deployed to Bogotá was absolutely a life-changing event and really made me know that—it gave me back a feeling of being part of something that was really important. And it also helped on the personal side, because my husband had just left. I was going through some pretty traumatic times with having him leave.

[I] came back to Denver and then that's when I was sent down couple months later to the Air Force Academy to finish out my air force career. Like I said, we set up the air force reservist program at the academy. I commuted. I bought a house, bought an antique house in Denver so I commuted from Denver to the Air Force Academy, to [Colorado] Springs. I had a little apartment in Colorado Springs because it would take me over an hour on a good day, one way, to get down there. So I just said, "You know, I'm just going to suck it up, pay for an apartment, deal with it," and then long term it was very—it was actually the best thing to do, because the price of gas and all that other stuff. But also, now I have my house for four years as opposed to when I had to getting ready to retire and then try to look for a house and start all over again.

And then in April of '06 I retired. And I had my ceremony in January of '06 at the Air Force Academy. And my sister [Lydia—KW changed later] and my two nephews

came down. That was pretty special. And Hanh, my across the hall roommate from UNCG, came down, so it was pretty spectacular.

HT: So all told you were in what, I think you said twenty-seven total years?

KW: Twenty-seven total years but twenty-one active. I had twenty-seven total years service and then twenty-one active for retirement purposes, pay.

HT: And you probably wouldn't take anything for those twenty-seven years?

KW: No sir. [chuckling] Like I say there was the good and bad and the scary, but all total I am so appreciative of the opportunities that I had, so appreciative of what I learned. Hopefully, you know, you don't make the same mistake more than once, you know, maybe twice. But really appreciate the people and I think that's what I miss the most. And the dynamism. I miss having really smart people around me all the time. I mean really smart. And people that I could go to or ask questions or we could bounce stuff off of. There was just always a feeling of it was very dynamic. And I don't have that right now.

HT: Maybe soon you will.

KW: Yes.

HT: What was the hardest thing you ever had to do physically while you—in your twenty-seven years?

KW: Get through OTS. [laughter] Yeah, I would say learning how to, you know, pass the PT tests. I mean, you know, doing pushups and sit-ups. Even though I was a runner, it was really, really hard to just get through that, because it was the initial training and I didn't know anything about it and I had never really had to do anything. I wasn't an athlete in high school or college.

HT: What about emotionally? What was the hardest thing emotionally that you ever had to go through?

KW: I think of a couple of times. In Washington, D.C., when I was facing being out of the air force, I had to keep it together and not explode or implode. And know that I was right and that I was okay as who I was, regardless of what people were saying about me. And then the second time, I think, was when my husband left and I still had, again, I still had to keep it together. And, you know, going to Bogotá and facing a whole different world and a whole different life and having to speak Spanish every day, 24/7, my head hurt so bad. I mean it was hard at work, but then I also had to deal with the fact that he had left, and that was pretty devastating to me emotionally. But I also, I came through it. And I came out stronger.

HT: Do you recall any embarrassing or hilarious moments along the way?

KW: Oh god, there's thousands. [laughter]

HT: What really stands out in your mind?

KW: Well, once one time when I was in—a second lieutenant, we had—General Easton was our, my first commander, and he was head of Air Force ROTC and, you know, again, we're all lieutenants. We're all these goofy lieutenants. It was actually a bunch of women, too, some of the nurses. And I don't know, somebody got married and we were having a party. It was like one of the do's on base. So we had these little hors d'oeuvre-y sandwiches, and I picked up an egg salad, and you know how egg salad is kind of gooshy? Now here's a good—never eat egg salad at one of those formal do's. Of course, I'm standing talking to the general, and the egg salad slid off [chuckles] slid off the bread and just went plop, right on the general's shoe.

HT: Like bird poop almost.

KW: That's what it looked like. And everybody—all of us just went, "Oh, my gosh!" and he just laughed. And so I picked up a napkin and wiped it off the general's shoe and said, "Oh, my gosh. I'm so sorry sir!" You know, what are you doing to do? You just keep going. I mean that was just one of gosh, so many, I mean thousands of funny things that happened. But also, oh, any embarrassing stuff, you just try to forget it.

HT: What are some of the things that you did during your spare time or off-duty times along the way? I know you said you ran marathons and that sort of thing.

KW: Yes, I tried to do that. And I also, I did get my master's degree in, let's see, 1984 to '86. So I was in New Mexico, and I went to school one night a week for two years to get my masters in guidance and counseling. But, you know, I wanted to get it before I got out, because I needed—I wanted to get the tuition assistance and get the help from the air force.

I always seem to be drawn to the antique furniture, so I would go to antique auctions and buy furniture and strip it and refinish it and then sell it or give it away. I just really liked the wood and I was just drawn to that. When I lived in New Mexico, I had a garden. I had a huge vegetable garden. Lord knows, I had more vegetables than I could eat so I ended up doing that and giving them away. Tried—I probably didn't do as much community service as I should have, but seems like I was always in school of some sort or another. I don't remember really hanging out so much. I probably did, but it seems like I was always taking some sort of class.

HT: What kind of changes did you see in the air force over your twenty-seven years?

KW: Well, first off, they allowed women at the Air Force Academy. I think the first graduating class was 1986, but don't trust me on that one. Honestly, I didn't even know that they didn't allow women at the Air Force Academy. I just, it never occurred to me. I mean—

HT: I'm the same way, because I always thought they—

KW: Yes, you do.

HT: Yeah.

KW: But it never occurred to me that women were not part of the academy. So when I—I mean in 1986 I was already in New Mexico. I had been in for almost ten years. So it just, it wasn't like it was earth shattering because I was in far flung New Mexico, but that is a huge change. And we also now have the first female Thunderbird pilot, so that's pretty huge. And again, part of what I'm seeing is because of that twenty-five, you know, twenty to twenty-five years time frame, are women that are able to go to the Air Force Academy now are able to have the same career opportunities that the men have had forever. But there was always a glass ceiling, because to be in command positions, to be command pilot, to be, you know, general officer material, you had to have been one of the ring knockers. I mean it's a brotherhood. To go through the academy—and then those academy grad[uates] are already in a position of leadership and greater responsibility and better jobs.

HT: Now did you see any difference—let me see how to phrase this. The people who went through OTS, was there any difference between them and the ones that had gone through the academy? Were they treated differently?

KW: Sometimes. And there was, of course, kind of inner—intra-service rivalry or that, “Oh, well, he's a zoomie,” meaning graduate from the Air Force Academy, or, “You're a ninety-day wonder,” which would be me, going through the OTS. But by and large, I don't see—and again that's what we always used to say is, “The color of my gold bars is no different from the color of a zoomie or an ROTC grad.” In some ways, I think the ROTC and the OTS graduates have more of a maturity because they've had to work, they had to work a little harder [once they graduated—KW added later.] I mean, yes, going through the academy is tough stuff, there's no doubt. But I think sometimes they're pegged as they can't think on their own, which is not in fact true. But again there's always that intra-service rivalry. So I don't really know, but I think that the opportunities sometimes are presented if you're an academy grad.

HT: Right. Whom did you admire and respect a great deal during your twenty-seven years? Heroes, heroines?

KW: It was really hard in—because I don't really feel like I had a lot of good female mentors in my career. I would say Col. Quisenberry. Again, that was that love/hate relationship. But she was a very good role model in a lot of ways. My heroes were really General [Alfred A.] Valenzuela, who was my—the deputy commander for U.S. Southern Command. And he was an army guy, but he taught me a lot even though I was, you know, kind of late in my career. I was a major, lieutenant colonel. He helped me get promoted to lieutenant colonel. And some good commanders along the way, but I don't think anybody really stands out as dynamic, other than those people.

HT: Can you describe your adjustment to civilian life? Of course it's been fairly recently.

KW: It's hard. It's hard. I expect—I think I expected people to be of higher standards and ethics, because for so many years that was my peer group, those were the people I was around. That was just—life was ops normal. I worked with very high level people. And I will definitely say, U.S. Southern Command, when you're working with the best of the best at a joint command, so you've got army, navy, air force, marines, and then working at the academy, where you got the top of the top. So I really miss that dynamism and that energy and then working with these really smart people, really high level. I mean, we wrote congressional testimony for the CINC [commander in chief] for the commander at SOUTHCOM. Yes, it may have been only one paragraph but it was my piece! And you think, "Wow, we're getting the boss ready to go before Congress."

HT: What national or international events stand out in your life? Your military life?

KW: Well, personally, I got to go to Santiago, Chile, as the personnel—basically, I was the personnel officer for the third largest air show in the world. In 2000 I think? Yes, it was in 2000. FIDAE, F-I-D-A-E, I think. It's an acronym for [Feria Internacional del Aire y del Espacio/International Air & Space Fair]—but it was the coolest thing of all, because it was an international air show and we had aircraft from all over the world that don't ever come to the U.S. We had the Russian—some Russian MiGs and some Chinese aircraft and just on and on and on. And it was just so amazing. And to really be able to mingle with the other international officers and have that opportunity to be in Santiago. It was truly, truly wonderful. And again, [to] listen to a different perspective of the world than just from the U.S. military standpoint.

In terms of like Somalia or the Persian Gulf, it impacted—but again I wasn't deployed and I didn't know a lot of people that were deployed. I know more people now that were deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq than I have in any of the other wars. My best friend was deployed to Afghanistan for three months—no, I think it was four months. And, you know, we talked a lot on the phone while she was over there. And just to know and to hear her talk about how women are treated over in Afghanistan—

[recording error]

KW: [My friend Therese Robinson—KW added later]—got deployed [and her daughter was only 2 years old—KW added later], so it was pretty tough stuff. And she was setting up, you know, like a day care, helping the Afghanistan, Afghani minister of culture, set up the infrastructure for establishing a civil service process. And day care processes." So that brought it closer to me than anything else, because I had been in Bogotá as opposed to Afghanistan.

HT: Would you consider yourself to be an independent person?

KW: Yes, I guess so. [laughter] Yeah. I don't know if I ever thought about it, but yes I would.

HT: And do you think you've always been that way, or did the military help you on that way?

KW: No, I think I've been pretty independent. I don't think I would've gone towards the military had I not. So it's like chicken and egg. I think that there are people that are drawn to that and that therefore then it trains and creates that more so, but I think you have to be drawn to it or—

[recording paused]

HT: Okay, we were talking about independence. Let's see, what do you think about the impact the military has had on your life?

KW: It's profound. I would not be who I am. I would probably be teaching school in Miami.

HT: Or retired.

KW: Yes, or retired. Yes. And, again, there's so many things that I don't even really think that about the military that has impacted my life and made me who I am, good and bad. As well as the positive side, there's also some of the negative aspects that have—there's some things that have impacted me within my marriage and within the military that I'm having to work through.

HT: Do you think the military is a good career choice for women?

KW: Absolutely. I really believe that it is more—it sounds sort of strange, but it is. You have more of an opportunity to be equal. You're never going to be equal. I mean, "All things being equal," well, all things are never equal. But you have—I believe you have the career opportunities and the—more so now, because there are more women in the military, and because of that mix there are more women in the military, therefore the culture is changing. I believe that. And as we [have] more women in the military our corporate thought process will—is changing. The strategic view maybe is changing. And ultimately, hopefully, that will affect how we treat our young women, you know, career people, but also have that as a ripple effect out to—you know, maybe we won't have to go to war.

HT: How do you feel about women in combat positions?

KW: I think there should not be any laws barring, you know. I think it's presumptuous and I think it's arrogant to say "Well, yes, why don't we send the boys over there and let the girls stay home?" I don't think so. If I am—and since I have worked in the joint arena, there's some pretty dynamite Marines, and they want to be treated just like the male Marines. They're a Marine, and that's the difference in a lot of the services. As a Marine, you're a Marine. And I know some women—and I just don't think that there should be any bars, there should be anything barring women from being equal.

And that goes back to also the career progression. That if we're not given the opportunity to prove ourselves, and to prove our mettle, and then therefore we're not going to be able to get the decorations and the medals and the experience of command in battle and command and leadership positions in a very serious situation. So we're not going to be able to have that opportunity to then, therefore, in peacetime a environment, to be a good commander and to move forward. And so it's not just like the career progression, it's about being able to have that opportunity to serve and to be a better commander.

HT: I don't have any other questions formally. I think we've covered a great deal this afternoon and this morning. Do you have anything you'd like to add that I haven't asked?

KW: Let me look through here real quick and see if there was something. [pause] No, I don't think of anything. I just want to say thank you for having an interest and for capturing—wanting to capture some of this, because as every woman is different, every experience is different.

HT: Right.

KW: And yet there isn't—now that I'm working in the veterans' community, there's an underlying understanding that doesn't even need to be spoken. I have veterans coming back from Iraq from combat situations and they, bless their hearts, they kind of look at me like probably their other mother or their auntie, but that I have had one, several young people coming back saying, "I can't talk to my mom. I can't talk to my dad. They don't understand." And even though I wasn't in combat in Afghanistan or Iraq, they know that there is that underlying understanding of knowing what they went through and what they have been, what their life is about.

HT: Some sort of shared experiences there.

KW: That are completely different, and that nobody who is not a veteran, you simply do not understand.

HT: All right, well thank you so much. It's been very, very interesting.

KW: My honor.

HT: Thank you so much.

[End of Interview]