

## **WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT**

### **ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

INTERVIEWEE: Susan Rita Purje Connor

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: August 22, 2015

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is August 22, [2014]. My name is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the home of Susan Connor in Newbern, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Woman Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina of [at] Greensboro. Susan, could you state your name the way that you'd like it to be on your collection?

SC: Sure. It's Susan Rita Purjee Connor.

TS: Excellent. Well, Susan, thanks so much for having me into your home. Why don't we start out by having you tell me a little bit about where you're from and when you were born?

SC: Okay. I was born in Long Island [New York] in 1945, just before the end, I think, of the Pacific War. My father was in the submarine service on the East Coast, fortunately, and my mother died two years after I was born. So I was actually raised by my grandparents. So when you asked what ethnicity—

TS: Oh right.

SC: —it was sort of like, "Oh, okay." And so, my upbringing was quite different.

TS: Did you have any siblings?

SC: No.

TS: No?

SC: No.

TS: Only child?

SC: Yeah. Yes, an only child. So—

TS: So your father was a widower?

SC: Yeah, early—Yeah, as a fairly young man. And back in those days men didn't usually take on the care of their children, I guess; I don't know.

TS: Now, did you go to your father's parents?

SC: Father's parents.

TS: Okay.

SC: Yes.

TS: Did you live with them?

SC: Yes.

TS: I see.

SC: I lived with them, and they were immigrants, so as a child I spoke Finnish and English, which was very interesting because I lived in a neighborhood that—at the end of the street there was a temple—a Jewish temple—and so all of my friends were Jewish, which was really very interesting because I learned a lot about their culture, and knew about the numbers on the forearms long before other people did [The Nazis tattooed concentration camp inmate identification numbers on inmates' left forearms].

TS: Yeah?

SC: I mean, it was just—

TS: From the Holocaust?

SC: From the Holocaust, yeah. So yeah, I grew up there. My father remarried when I was nine or so. I went to live with them when I was thirteen.

TS: Oh, so you had lived with your grandparents up to that point?

SC: Yeah

TS: Oh my goodness. What kind of transition was that?

SC: Pretty bad. [chuckles]

TS: I can imagine that's—

SC: It was pretty bad, but my stepmother had lost her baby at birth, so it was not a—it was not a good situation.

TS: Right.

SC: I should have stayed with my grandparents, but was anxious to get out—

TS: Right.

SC: —as soon as I could, and I was fortunate that my mother's mother had passed away and left me a small sum of money, with loans, I could go to college.

TS: Okay.

SC: And my father really—he really encouraged me to do that. That's probably the only nice thing he ever did to me. [chuckling] But he encouraged me to go. He said, "You can go."

TS: Yeah.

SC: So I went. And back in those days, in 1963, there were not very many four year programs.

TS: Right.

SC: So it was—it was good for me; laid a good foundation.

TS: Well, can you talk a little bit more about when you were living with your grandparents and growing up; like, when you went to school; how was that? Did you enjoy school?

SC: I liked school when I lived with my grandparents. I did very well in school. The thing that was probably the best part of it, is that the whole neighborhood was primarily immigrants or first generation Americans. So one block was Italian and one block was German and one block was Polish. I mean—So we had a whole variety of different nationalities, and it was really—it was really neat because everybody cherished their own culture, and so we all had a chance to be in each other's cultures.

TS: So you could, kind of, go in and out—

SC: Yeah.

TS: —depending on who you were visiting.

SC: Yeah. It was really—

TS: Did you all go to the same school?

SC: And we all went—we all walked to the same school, so it was a lot of fun. And that's probably the only thing. I'm an only child but in an odd way am not an only child because I had a lot of friends. So some of the things only children don't get to do, I did.

TS: A lot of kids your age and—

SC: All my age.

TS: Yeah,

SC: All my age, so it was really pretty—

TS: What things did you get to do, then?

SC: Well, we did a lot of playing, we rode bicycles, we went roller skating, and all that kind of stuff. I mean, it was a poor—it was a poor part of town; people were not wealthy at all. My grandmother would not let me go into anybody's pool, because polio was huge back then—

TS: Yes.

SC: —and she was very worried about that. So none of us—we'd go into the sprinkler; that was a big deal for the town. [both chuckle]

TS: Is that when they used to turn the sprinklers on; the firemen, when they'd come and—

SC: Oh, the hydrants. No, no, no. These were just sprinklers going back and forth.

TS: Oh, on the lawn.

SC: On the lawn, yeah, yeah. But I knew a lot about the Jewish community. I knew a lot about their foods and customs and things like that. And then I had friends who were either immigrants or first generation Italians. And so, I had a whole different variety of people, which was really a great way to grow up.

TS: Yeah. What did your grandparents do for a living?

SC: My grandfather was a carpenter.

TS: Okay.

SC: And my grandmother worked in the dietary part of school. Not a cook but a dietician.

TS: Right.

SC: And that was an on-the-job training I guess she got when she first came here. [chuckles]

TS: Is that right?

SC: Yeah.

TS: That's neat. Now, were they both from Finland?

SC: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

SC: Yeah.

TS: And then they came over.

SC: Yes. And they had a fairly large community in Brooklyn at the time, so we would go into—into Brooklyn and there were dance halls and delis and restaurants, and all that kind of stuff, which was really pretty cool.

TS: Yeah.

SC: It was a lot of fun; a lot of fun growing up.

TS: Now, you said you were pretty—you enjoyed school at this time. Did you have a favorite subject or—

SC: I loved history.

TS: History?

SC: Yeah. I still am a huge history buff.

TS: Yeah.

SC: I've got my eye glued to the history station all the time. [both chuckle] I really like learning about the Second World War, probably because I don't know that much about my mother, and don't really know that much about my father, either.

TS: Right.

SC: So I'm very much into looking at all those kinds of programs.

TS: Right.

SC: Interesting.

TS: Yes, it is. So you—Then you—So you went to live with your dad and your stepmother when you were thirteen.

SC: Yes.

TS: And so, you're getting close to high school there.

SC: Yes.

TS: And you said you didn't have the best experience.

SC: Right.

TS: When you went into high school, how was school? Did you enjoy—Did you do any extracurricular activities, or anything like that?

SC: It was horrible, because the school was not big enough to contain both the huge junior high school and the high school. So the first semester we went from 6:30 [a.m.] to 12:00 [p.m.], and the seniors went from 12:30 to 6:00, if that—if that's right; I can't remember.

TS: Something like that.

SC: Yeah. And then in the springtime we switched.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: You split it. Okay.

SC: There weren't enough books, and we had to sit two to a desk. So it was not really a good environment.

TS: What high school was that?

SC: Baldwin High School.

TS: Baldwin?

SC: Yeah. They eventually finished building the high school—the new high school—but by

then I think a lot of people had just, sort of—they lost that interest in learning because it was just—it was like cattle sort of; move from here to there and back again.

TS: Yeah.

SC: We didn't have enough books or anything so it was pretty chaotic.

TS: So your—this is, like, the late fifties?

SC: No, early sixties.

TS: Early sixties, when you were in high school?

SC: Yeah.

TS: So the—your—Okay, so you were born in 1945.

SC: Yes. I graduated high school in '63.

TS: Sixty-three, okay. So you were going through, like, the John F. [Fitzgerald] Kennedy years. What did you think about his—him as president, or did you have any thoughts of that at all?

SC: He died—was assassinated—the first semester of my college years.

TS: Yes.

SC: And it was just really devastating. My grandparents were not Democrats, and I really don't know that I knew much of anything about—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: You mean the difference between—Right.

SC: Yeah, at that point in time. But I remember just being devastated. It was just like—

TS: Do you remember hearing about his assassination?

SC: Oh yeah, I can tell you exactly where I was. I was going to chemistry class and somebody ran by and said that President Kennedy had been assassinated. Of course, everything—everything just literally stopped.

TS: Right.

SC: So I went back to the dorm and we watched the TV programs for the next—I don't know—how many days. I think Thanksgiving was supposed to be pretty close. At any rate, they all let us go home early. I can remember going to class and professor just standing there crying. I mean, it was just—it was just—it was incredible. It was just—You sort of think that the world is going to be okay, and there's not going to be anything going on, and I think that probably, sort of, started a lot of the unrest of my generation.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: The uncertainty? Yes.

SC: Yeah.

TS: Now, do you remember anything about, like, "duck and cover" [students were expected to kneel down under their desks with their hands clutched around their heads and necks as a method of personal protection against the effects of a nuclear explosion], those things for the nuclear—

SC: Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you about that. [chuckling]

TS: Yeah? Did you do that in school?

SC: Yeah, in elementary school.

TS: Okay.

SC: And here's the funny part about it. We had a disc that was about this round.

TS: Okay, so it's about the size of, like, an orange.

SC: Yeah, maybe about that big. At any rate, it was plastic.

TS: Okay.

SC: So they had a picture in the front—a picture of me—and in the back they had all my information, and the only way you could get into school was to show that you had—around your neck. So we had those drills everyday—every single day—because Grumman Airplane Company and somebody else was out in Long Island at that point in time. And many years later I thought to myself, "If there was a nuclear holocaust the plastic would have melted." [both chuckle] But yeah, we did that all through—all through school.

TS: Were you scared?

SC: Not really; didn't really understand it when I was younger.

TS: Did it seem like a game maybe?

SC: Yeah, it was sort of like get under—the thing—I think most of us complained about it was dirty; you have to be on the floor. And that's back in the day when people—we didn't wear slacks to school, you had to wear a dress or a skirt; something like that. Yeah, it was just bizarre. [both chuckle] I wish I still had that thing.

TS: Your little name tag?

SC: Yeah, my little medallion to get in and out of school. The other thing is, that when I was in kindergarten they were doing double blind tests on the polio vaccine, and I'm one of the people that got the real—

TS: The vaccine.

SC: —vaccine, and I got a letter thanking me—I mean, this is at age five, right.

TS: Right.

SC: And I don't know what my grandmother did with that letter but I wish I had it because I'm one of the first to have gotten—

TS: Test cases?

SC: Yeah.

TS: So they actually sent you a letter to acknowledge that you received the vaccine?

SC: Yes.

TS: I see.

SC: Yeah.

TS: Interesting. Well, so you—you made it through high school.

SC: Made it through high school.

TS: And now, while you're in high school, you had mentioned something about how you—at some point you were left money by your—

SC: Mother's mother.

TS: Maternal grandmother.

SC: Yeah.

TS: Were you thinking at any point about what you wanted to do when you grew up, or with your life, or anything like that?

SC: I wanted to be an archaeologist.

TS: And what gave you that interest?

SC: Because I loved history. I just—

TS: Were you a big reader?

SC: Oh yeah.

TS: Okay.

SC: Big, big reader; read lots and lots of stuff. But I just really thought it would be really neat to be an archaeologist, and I've always been interested in Egypt and all that kind of stuff, and I wish I had had the opportunity to go. My grandfather was in the Portuguese Merchant Marine, and they went—let's get this right—up the Nile [River] as far as you could go—

TS: Okay.

SC: —and down the Amazon as far as you could go. Yeah.

TS: Did he tell stories about that?

SC: Not too much.

TS: No?

SC: No, not too much. I have his mandolin. He used to play the mandolin when I was a kid for me.

TS: Did it give you a sense for adventure?

SC: Oh yeah, yeah. I really—I really wanted to travel, and I've been very fortunate. I've traveled a lot, and I'm finished traveling.

TS: Are you?

SC: Yeah, done; yeah. I just have had the opportunity. My husband traveled all over the world and I got to go with him a lot.

TS: Excellent.

SC: Yeah, so it was a lot of fun.

TS: So you wanted to be an archaeologist.

SC: Yes.

TS: And so, did you use your school for going to archaeology; taking a major for that?

SC: No, one of the books I read was—Oh my gosh, what is her name? Well, it was—it was a story about a medical missionary, and I was very—I did a lot of work for the Lutheran church; it's where I got confirmed and the whole nine yards. And the school I went to at the time was a pre-seminary Lutheran school, and that's the only school I applied to, and my pastor wrote a letter that, I guess, begged them to take me. [chuckles] I don't know what it was but it was enough to get me into the school.

TS: What school was that?

SC: Hartwick College in Oneonta, New York. And I had a terrible time adjusting.

TS: Why?

SC: It was—It was different, I felt out of place, which was very common for me because I basically was more of an immigrant, or a first generation American, and just didn't feel like I fit in with a lot of the—the men and women there. I eventually did, joined a sorority, did the whole nine yards, so it ended up being good.

TS: But the first year—

SC: First semester was like, "Ugh," really rough; very tough for me.

TS: What was your major?

SC: Nursing.

TS: Oh, so—Now, what—did this book that you read help you pick nursing, or what was that?

SC: I looked at "What could I do?" and back then being a secretary, being a nurse, or being a teacher were, like, the things that most women chose, and I decided nursing would be the best thing. I worked as a candy striper [a teenage girl who does volunteer nursing in a hospital] when I was in high school and I felt drawn to being a nurse. I think that's part of my personality of wanting to help people. So it was a good fit at first.

TS: Did you know—Did you have any role models for that at all?

SC: No. Except the—Except the people I met when I was working as a candy striper.

TS: A candy striper?

SC: They were very, very supportive of—I mean, I got a lot of support from the—I've always been very fortunate that there's always been people who have helped me along the way, which is a real blessing as far as I'm concerned. Yeah, it's just—it's the way my life has always been. I don't look for it but it always shows up. [both chuckle]

TS: Well, you recognize it, apparently, too.

SC: Yeah.

TS: It does show up.

SC: Yes.

TS: That's important too. So you—So you're in college and you get through the first semester, maybe second semester jitters and you kind of settle down?

SC: Yes.

TS: Now, did you do anything there for fun while you were in college?

SC: Let's see. I belonged to the Future Nurses [of America?], that kind of stuff. I sang in a group of—We had these competitions every year, and so we—I sang in a group that was part of the dorm that I lived in. We had a lot of fun doing that. It snowed all the time in Oneonta so we did a lot of sledding and—and stuff like that. I never went skiing; I wasn't interested. But I worked hard. I ended up on the Dean's List by the time I graduated.

TS: Excellent.

SC: Yeah. But I decided—My husband says I'm so much like my grandmother, I make a decision and just watch out, [both chuckling] because come hell or high water it's going to happen one way or the other.

TS: Everybody's getting out of your way, right?

SC: Just make a hole; here she comes.

TS: So now, at what point did you—Did you go right away into the navy or did you work in a hospital or something right after you graduated?

SC: I worked in a local hospital because it took—My friend—high school friend and I—we were actually going to go to Denver [Colorado]—and don't ask me why Denver, it just seemed like a place to go—but they wouldn't take us because we didn't have our licenses yet. So I said to Heidi—my friend—I said, "Let's join the navy." My father had been in the navy so that was the reason why I thought going into the navy would be a good idea.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Picked the navy? Yeah.

SC: And I had actually applied for the scholarship program because I had to take out some loans at the end of my school years because I didn't have enough money, and so I was going to join—they had this kind of nursing program that you—they pay for your junior and senior year and then you have X number of years to pay back. But right before I was going to be sworn in I dislocated my knee and couldn't pass the physical.

TS: This was in, like, your junior year?

SC: Yeah, my junior year.

TS: Okay.

SC: So at any rate, that was sort of the thinking, and so I said to Heidi, "Well, let's just join the navy."

TS: So you had thought about it before, then?

SC: To a certain degree, yeah.

TS: Okay.

SC: Yeah.

TS: What was your friend's name again?

SC: Heidi.

TS: Heidi. Did she—Was she interested in that—

SC: In the navy?

TS: Yes.

SC: Both of us just wanted to get out of New York. [both chuckle]

TS: Oh, okay. And this seemed like the—

SC: And this seemed like a good idea, yeah.

TS: Okay.

SC: And I think our parents were probably happier with that because we'd be—they thought—protected, to a certain extent, that kind of thing, so.

TS: That was the idea, then, that—

SC: Yeah. You don't just move out and go someplace.

TS: Yes. It was, like, the culture of the college, right? More protective.

SC: Yes, yeah.

TS: Maternalistic.

SC: Yeah. So off we went.

TS: Yeah. Well, tell me about that. How—What did your family think about joining the navy?

SC: I don't think they thought much of it at all, quite frankly.

TS: No?

SC: I mean, I had really been out of the family—I mean, I'd come home for holidays but I really wasn't—Here's my father who said, "Go to college. You've got the money. Go to college." And then I came home and he said, "Well, you're just a blankity-blank [substitute for a profanity]. Who are you? Just because you're going to college you think you know it all." And I probably was pretty know-it-all-ish. Anyway, who knows?

TS: [chuckles] What about your grandparents? What did they think?

SC: My grandparents were not happy about it, but they also understood the situation at home.

TS: Yeah?

SC: Because my mother—stepmother—had two children fairly close together—like, thirteen months apart—so the eldest—the older child—a girl, Karen—I ended up taking care of, which sort of limited my ability to go to do much in high school—

TS: I see.

SC: —other than go to classes.

TS: When you got to high school you got away from that.

SC: Not really. I ended up taking care of Karen pretty much, because looking back, I think my stepmother probably had postpartum depression.

TS: Post-partum?

SC: Yeah.

TS: How much younger was the young children to you?

SC: Karen is almost sixteen years younger than I am.

TS: Okay.

SC: And Bill, the brother, is probably, like, eighteen years.

TS: Okay.

SC: Or seventeen and a half years younger.

TS: Different generation.

SC: Oh yeah. A whole generation, yeah. And my grandparents knew that that was going on so they reluctantly were okay with it. They were not okay when I went to Vietnam.

TS: Well, we'll talk about that.

SC: A whole different story, yeah.

TS: So you saw the navy as an opportunity to get out of wherever you were at.

SC: Yes. And to travel and to do something, yeah.

TS: Okay. Now, what about your friends; what'd your friends think?

SC: Well, my—my one friend went with me.

TS: Right.

SC: So I mean, we were like two peas in a pod. I don't know that anybody—Most of the people in my class went to college. It was that kind of a community. And so, we just all, sort of, separated.

TS: Went your separate ways after you were done.

SC: Yeah, yeah. It was—Other than going to classes I did not participate in anything in school, because I had to come home and take care of Karen.

TS: I see.

SC: So I don't know that I really missed it, frankly. I mean, it was sort of the beginning; '63 is sort of the beginning of being, sort of, not in the same mold as everybody else. [chuckles]

TS: Right.

SC: So it was like, "No, I'm not going to do that." [both chuckle]

TS: You got—You went to—Let's see.

SC: Baldwin High School?

TS: Actual—When you went to Newport, Rhode Island, for your—for your training as an officer.

SC: Yes.

TS: That would be—That was right?

SC: Yeah.

TS: How was that? This was 1963.

SC: No, 1967.

TS: Nineteen sixty—Oh, yeah, right, you graduated.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SC: When I graduated from college.

TS: Time's flying.

SC: Oh yes, time is flying. Well, we went there, like, the week—Heidi and I went there, like, the end of October, the beginning of November, and if you've ever been up in Newport [chuckles] it's cold up there. So they fitted us for our uniforms, they attempted to teach us how to march. We had to learn how to stand duty. What else did we do? Not much.

TS: No?

SC: I mean, it was like—

TS: Learning the terminology of—

SC: Some of it, yeah.

TS: Some of it?

SC: The rest of it was, like, you'll get it someplace else.

TS: You'll catch on.

SC: Yeah, it was really a shortened—it was only four weeks.

TS: Was there anything that was particularly difficult?

SC: Not particularly.

TS: Okay.

SC: No.

TS: What'd you think about it? I mean, were you like, "This is okay"?

SC: This is exciting.

TS: Oh, you were excited?

SC: Yeah, I was excited. I mean, I met a lot of people there, and re-met then later on—

TS: Right.

SC: —which is what happens in the military. Oh, we had a great time. I mean, it was—we figured we were really hot stuff.

TS: Well, you told me off tape the story about your uniform.

SC: Yeah.

TS: Why don't you say that on tape?

SC: Okay, well, in November, in the cold, you wear dark blues—well, this is what we used to wear—dark blues. When I went down to Corpus Christi [Naval Air Station Corpus Christi, Texas], of course it was considerably warmer and they did not have the dress blue uniform, they had the light blue uniform, which I had tried on so I knew it fit me, but nobody bothered to tell me what pieces went together. And so, I put the pieces together wrong. [chuckles]

TS: This is—Oh, this is when you got to Texas.

SC: When I got to Texas, it was like—they always had these hail and farewells [military event whereby those coming to and departing from an organization are celebrated], you'd come in and get to meet the CO [commanding officer], and he doesn't know if you're coming or going, but you pretend. And somebody looked at me and said, "You know you're out of uniform?"

I was like, "Oh. Really?" [chuckling] It was very funny.

TS: They didn't cover that very clearly then?

SC: No, no, no. They only covered what you—

TS: You wore then.

SC: Uniform, nurses' uniforms, and the winter wear.

TS: Now, did you think at all about—So 1967, the Vietnam war has heated up.

SC: Yes.

TS: Did you—Is that at all in your thoughts when you went in to the navy?

SC: Not at all. In fact, I remember when the first Tết Offensive [the coordinated attack by communist forces, including both the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong, against Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam]. occurred, which was right in early '68.

TS: Yes.

SC: And they had these big headlines about Huế [Vietnam], but we didn't know how to pronounce it, so we're coming up with all these kind of strange names. I mean, H-U-Ê, how does that make "huey?"

TS: Right.

SC: It doesn't, unless you're Vietnamese. So that was like the first thing. It was like—I remember a doctor saying, "You don't understand. All these people have been killed," and it was sort of—it was sort of innocence on our behalf, which is—we didn't know how to pronounce it.

TS: Yes.

SC: We soon found out—

TS: Yeah.

SC: —because they—mostly Marines and sailors—started coming in with—with their combat gear on still, straight from what we called "the bush." They were like, boom, boom, boom, and ended up in Corpus Christi. So it was really interesting because we had to have a sergeant of arms to make sure they didn't have any weapons, stuff like that, because they got put on a gurney and off they went.

TS: When you went to Corpus Christi, what were you assigned to do?

SC: Oh, nights.

TS: Nights?

SC: [chuckles]

TS: Any—But, like, on the ward or just—any particular—like, emergen—

SC: No. Navy nurses are all called—Well, they used to all be called charge nurses, which meant that they would be people who would be in charge of the unit—

TS: Okay.

SC: —whatever. So when I first got there I was put on a back ward, which I still can't even remember how I got there, and it was a whole ward of probably fifty-so men who were old, who had DT [delirium tremens from withdrawal from alcohol] and what I had to do all night was pour paregoric—I can still smell it to this day—to give to the people—the men—to keep their DTs down.

TS: What's DT stand for?

SC: Delirium tremens.

TS: What does that do?

SC: In other words, they're alcoholics that have been drinking for such a long time—

TS: I see.

SC: —that they—

TS: Oh, right.

SC: Yeah.

TS: It sounds so familiar to me but I can't—

SC: Can't think of it, yeah.

TS: Okay.

SC: And so, that was, like, "Wait a minute."

TS: Did it seem like the care you thought you'd be giving?

SC: No. No, not at all. So—But the thing of it is, is that all of the ensigns got night duty; that was just expected.

TS: From the bottom up, right? They start out at the bottom.

SC: Yeah, start out at the absolute bottom of the pile. But we got there just before Thanksgiving and we went to—I can't remember who it was, a bunch of nurses—and they had just come off the [USS] *Repose*. They had been in Vietnam, like, '66 to '67—kind of that period of time—and they had been on the *Repose*, and they came back telling us all these stories about how useful they were and how—all these really great stories, which I came to find out were true. I mean, they weren't just making them up for the sake of making them up. And I remember there were a couple of us, we're just like, "Oh. This is what I want to do. I want to go see. I want to see what this is all about."

TS: So it inspired you to [unclear].

SC: Yeah. It was sort of interesting that I still didn't understand, really, what was going on.

TS: So you didn't really have, like, a political mentality about whether or not we should have been in the war and—because the protests were going on by then.

SC: Yeah, but in Corpus Christi they weren't.

TS: Okay. But were they up in—

SC: No.

TS: —in the Northeast?

SC: No, no, no. I was up in—I was in a college which was in the Catskill Mountains, so all that had—

TS: So you're isolated from it.

SC: Isolated from it all.

TS: Were you isolated from the counter-culture too?

SC: Oh yeah, very much so.

TS: Yeah. So all the sex, drugs, and rock and roll?

SC: No, none of that.

TS: No?

SC: None of that really. That really just wasn't what was going on around me. I was sort of naive about a lot of things.

TS: Well, you had your—your circle of your life and—

SC: Yes.

TS: —it just went only so far.

SC: Yeah, yeah. So another friend of mine and I decided that we were going to go to Vietnam.

TS: At what point? How long had you been in Texas when you—approximately?

SC: Let's see. Well, I went to Vietnam in '69.

TS: Okay.

SC: But I actually had orders earlier, but my stepbrother had severe diabetes and I didn't want to go overseas until they were fairly settled—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: He was stabilized?

SC: —with him. So I went over early in '69, just sort of, kind of, I want to see what—what this is all about. I've always been that kind of a person. I want to go—I want to go see it. I want to see what—what my experience is going to be. Interesting mistake. Got off the airplane in Da Nang [port city in Vietnam] and they were taking incoming [fire]. They handed us a flak jacket and a helmet, and sort of threw us in this bunker, and the woman that I had met on the airplane, Iris—and she was going to the [USS] *Sanctuary* [Naval Hospital Ship] also—the two of us were, like, in there, like, forever, and nobody bothered to tell us what the all clear signal was. [chuckles]

TS: So you just stayed in there?

SC: We just, sort of, stayed in there, thinking to ourselves, "Uh oh. What is going on?"

TS: That's, like, on your arrival.

SC: Yeah, yeah, running across the tarmac.

TS: When did you get to Vietnam, what month was that in '69?

SC: February.

TS: February?

SC: Yeah.

TS: Oh, [unclear Tết?]

SC: Yeah, just before the second Tết [Offensive], yeah.

TS: What were you thinking?

SC: That, "Oh!" [chuckles]

TS: So you had to actually fly into Vietnam.

SC: Flew into Da Nang, yes.

TS: To Da Nang.

SC: Yes.

TS: And then after that, what—how were you processed to get onto the—

SC: The *Sanctuary* was not in the harbor so we had to wait a day or two. They gave us a cot and said, "Well, if you're going to be here more than two or three days we're going to put you to work."  
"Okay."  
And then I remember driving in an open truck, going through Da Nang, and the smells were just incredible.

TS: What kind of smells?

SC: Oh, everything from decay to blood to excrement. I mean, it was just—it was, like, incredible.

TS: That's interesting, because a lot of people that I've talked to about their first impression of Vietnam, has a lot to do with how it smelled.

SC: It smelled. I mean—

TS: I get different descriptions of it, but yeah, it's always—very interesting.

SC: Yeah. Well, smell is one of the most primitive of our—of our senses, and to this day I can smell it.

TS: Yeah, I hear that, too, a lot.

SC: Yeah, a lot.

TS: Well, when you—when you signed up to go to Vietnam—

SC: Yes.

TS: —and then you got your orders, did you have a briefing to let you know what it was going to be like, or anything like that?

SC: No.

TS: No?

SC: No, nothing.

TS: Just like, "Here's what the—the day your plane's leaving," and stuff like that?

SC: Oh yeah, well, I knew—I flew out to California, to LAX [Los Angeles International Airport], then went over—my first helicopter ride—to San Bernardino [California], and then went across from there to, probably, Hawaii, and then from there to Da Nang.

TS: So the logistics, I mean, they told you.

SC: Yeah, they told us, they gave us—

TS: How was your first helicopter ride?

SC: Oh, [chuckles] it was phenomenal.

TS: Yeah?

SC: I loved it. I loved it. And anytime I had a chance to get on a helicopter I was on a helicopter, not really understanding that helicopters aren't supposed to be able to fly. I loved it. I just absolutely loved it, and yeah. They'd come—They'd come on board and—the helicopters—and maybe there'd be nothing to do, and they'd say, "Anybody want to go for a ride?"  
I'm like, "I want to go! I want to go!" [both laugh]

TS: That's neat. Some sort of freedom or—

SC: Yes.

TS: Yeah.

SC: Adventure.

TS: Adventure, right.

SC: Yeah, so.

TS: Okay, so you get—so you get, somehow, to the *Sanctuary*.

SC: Yes. Yeah, eventually. I mean, they had a boat that took us out to the ship, and there we were.

TS: What was your housing like on the ship?

SC: Housing was—Let's see. I would probably say maybe an eight by ten [foot] room, with bunk beds, with a big drawer underneath the bottom bunk, and then drawers underneath,

and two desks built into the bulkhead, with a safe, and you had to—you had to put the desk up in order to move around. And there were just pipes, there was nothing—nothing was finished on top. Gun metal gray, of course. [chuckles]

TS: Two to a room?

SC: Two to a room, yes. Yeah.

TS: Okay.

SC: We had a little sink, and not a closet but more like a—

TS: Like a rack or something?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SC: Well, if it was fan—if it was fancy it would be called an armoire but it was made out of metal, and that's where we kept our uniforms and stuff like that.

TS: Okay. Now, was it difficult to get to; did you have to, like, follow a convoluted path to it?

SC: No, the nurses were all housed in the front part of the ship, and the—and the wards—like, we were here, the captains were up here, and we were here on two levels. And then you'd go down a few steps and then I think that was the B deck, because there's an A deck, a B deck, and a C deck.

TS: Okay.

SC: And had a little—had a little bamboo, kind of, sofa in what was called "the lounge," [chuckles] with a TV that, I guess, was at least five or ten days behind what was happening. The astronauts landed on the moon in that—August of that year, and about ten days later we finally got to see it.

TS: [chuckles] But you'd heard about it, you just [unclear].

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SC: I'd heard about it. Yeah, I'd heard about it but hadn't seen it.

TS: Was it taped or something—that you watched?

SC: It was the AF—American Armed Services—

TS: Network?

SC: —Network. [American Forces Network] Yeah.

TS: AFN?

SC: Yeah, and that's—however they did that.

TS: Okay.

SC: I don't know if it was tapes or what.

TS: I think it might have had to have been then.

SC: Yeah.

TS: Yeah. So what about for food? How was that?

SC: We went to the officer's mess and had assigned seating, and—

TS: Did you have a certain hour you went, or depended on your shift, I guess?

SC: Well, they had two seatings, and the first seating, of course, was for the junior folk, [chuckling] and the nice time to eat, of course, was for the senior folks, but we could go in either way depending on what was going on, and a lot of times didn't get meals; I mean, it just didn't happen. So we kept supplies in our—in our stateroom. Sounds awfully luxurious—stateroom—it wasn't, not at all.

TS: How was the food? Was it good or—

SC: It was good. I swore I'd never eat scrambled eggs again, I would never drink iced tea again [both chuckle], and being on a ship, of course, there had to be a lip around the table because we weren't—we were rocking and rolling and you sort of has—and the Filipinos—What did they actually call them?

TS: Like, attendants?

SC: Yeah. They—

TS: Stewards.

SC: Like, stewards, yeah. If you put your fork down they whipped—so everybody learned how to hold on to their plate [unclear].

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Hang on to yours.

SC: It was very funny.

TS: So they cleaned up very quickly.

SC: Oh yeah, yeah, very quickly.

TS: They probably had to turn the tables.

SC: Yeah, really. Yeah, they had the gong; they announced dinner for the officers. And if you were lucky enough you might be able to get there. I do not remember the food being—I guess, edible, would be about as far as I would go with it.

TS: Yeah.

SC: And there was not—

TS: It's not like you're like, "Oh, it's chow time."

SC: "Oh yeah, let me go." The best place to eat was in the chief's mess because they had the good food.

TS: How did you get there?

SC: You got invited.

TS: Did you get invited?

SC: Oh yeah. [both chuckle] There were only eighteen of us women, and so the chiefs, yeah, they would always ask us to come over.

TS: There were only eighteen women, so—

SC: I think there were only eighteen women.

TS: Who else made up the rest of the crew, then?

SC: Well, Betsy was my roommate, and she had—she came from Boston. She was a phenomenal nurse; just phenomenal nurse. Next door was my friend from Corpus Christi,

because she had left earlier than I did because I had delayed my orders, and she was with a woman who was a—head of the medical technology—blood bank and all that kind of stuff—so she wasn't a nurse. And then there were two more rooms. [unclear] two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fifteen, because Jill was in a room with three.

TS: Jill [Corbusier] Mayer [WV0557]?

SC: Yeah. And maybe we were all on one floor. There weren't a lot of nurses. I mean, the head nurse—the chief nurse—and there must have been some downstairs. There probably were not more than twenty nurses all together.

TS: So who else—Were there, like, medics or—

SC: Corpsmen, yeah.

TS: Corpsmen, that's right.

SC: Corpsmen, you're right, right. They did most of the—of the actual work. I mean, we had to supervise and make sure things were running smoothly, and count out narcotics and stuff like that. And, of course, if there were—if somebody were coding or something like that, we had to do all that. I gave some direct care but not as much as nurses might think we did. We're more in charge of making sure that things got done in an orderly—

TS: By the book, by the corpsmen.

SC: By the corpsmen, yeah.

TS: Now, how many doctors were on the ship?

SC: Not a whole big bunch. I mean, there was a neurosurgeon.

TS: Okay.

SC: So you can imagine he was busy, like, 24/7. Of course, an anesthesiologist. There were two orthopedic guys. There was one who was an urologist, because we had a dialysis machine on board, which I don't think anybody else had. A couple of general medical officers. It was pretty thin. I mean, it wasn't—

TS: It's a lot smaller than I had pictured in—I mean, I hadn't really known how big the crew was, but for some reason I'm thinking, like, bigger. [chuckles]

SC: No, no, no, no.

TS: That's pretty small.

SC: Pretty small, yeah. I mean, we, theoretically, worked eight hour shifts, but that was in theory only. I mean, we knew that if there were—if there were patients coming in we certainly weren't going to leave one nurse with a whole pile of stuff to do.

TS: What was—What was a typical day, if there ever was a typical day?

SC: It was never a typical day. I mean, you usually—we got report, like, at 6:30 in the morning, and then had to make rounds, because it was more than one—except for the ICU [Intensive Care Unit] and the recovery room we covered multiple wards and needed[?] to see who was the sickest, and this, that, and the other thing. You didn't sit down, not at all, because then in between everything else, I mean, there'd be somebody bleeding out, or whatever the case may be, and IVs to change, and all that kind of stuff, so we were very busy all the time.

TS: How did the men get the ship? Was it by helicopter?

SC: Mostly by helicopter. Every once in a while—well, not them—the Vietnamese would come up on—with their little sampan boats and allow us—Excuse me—to take a—take their children up for care.

TS: Oh, so you took care of Vietnamese too?

SC: Oh yeah.

TS: Okay.

SC: The XO [executive officer] of the hospital was a plastic surgeon, and so he would do cleft palates by the hundreds; everybody knew about bác sĩ, which is a [Vietnamese] name for doctor, whose name I can't remember now. [chuckles] I can remember everybody called him bác sĩ, and he would do just—literally, hundreds of cleft palates; just incredible. Because those children would not have had a life; they would have just been put aside.

So yeah, we had a lot—we had a lot of children who had been blown up, lost arms and legs, and—

TS: Were they mostly being brought in by the Vietnamese?

SC: Yes.

TS: Okay.

SC: Yeah, they'd come in by the Vietnamese. A lot of times we didn't even know the child's name. I mean, the parents were so desperate, and we knew that they all had to be—they all were going to return to their homes, and they wouldn't have the antibiotics and ever—I mean, we'd spend some much time getting these children as good as they could get, knowing that they would go back to incredibly bad environment.

TS: The follow-up care, they wouldn't have any.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SC: There wouldn't be, no, no.

TS: What other kinds of things did you have to do for the children?

SC: Oh my. Well, it was everything from feeding some of them. A lot of them—I remember there was a little boy who had a huge tumor on the side of his face, and he would come up and have tears in his eyes and say, "Đau, đau," which meant pain, so we tried to give him as much medication as we could because he was suffering so badly. It was really heartbreaking; really, really heartbreaking.

And I look at the news today and I think to myself, "Those children—It's the children who suffer the most," because you can't grow up in a—in a chaotic environment like that—

TS: Yes.

SC: —and have much of anything.

TS: Was that unexpected for you?

SC: Yeah, it was very unexpected. I didn't expect that part to—didn't expect to see it. I mean, I think it was a wonderful addition—

TS: To get to help.

SC: —to get to help, also for me to really fully understand what war and combat—what it—parts of it that I didn't expect to experience.

TS: Yes.

SC: And it—it was just sometimes overwhelming. I mean, these little kids would come in so bad that you just keep them comfortable until they pass. And then, of course, we didn't know what to do, we didn't know who these children were, we didn't know where their parents were, and sometimes I guess they just got buried in unmarked graves, which to me is like, "Ugh, how bad is that?"

TS: Never knowing what—for the family—what happened to the child.

SC: And for the child to feel abandoned; I mean, I'm sure they felt abandoned.

TS: Yes. Or maybe they lost their family too.

SC: Who knows? Who knows? But then sometimes, one or two of the family members would come in and—I laugh, because you look at Vietnamese people today and they're much larger. Back then, they were, like, maybe four [feet] eight [inches] or five feet tall; very tall, very slender, because their diet was horrible. So sometimes mom or a sister or somebody would come in and they'd stay and we'd have four kids in the same bed, [chuckles] because they were so small; put two this way and two this way. They would come in and stay with their—with their child, which was probably the best.

TS: Right.

SC: But for a lot of kids, who knows? And they—they were very tribal at that time, I don't know that they are now, but if the child didn't belong to their particular tribe or group they wouldn't help the child. They were very, very tightknit and wouldn't allow any—any child from another group. I guess they were tribes; I'm not sure what they were.

TS: Yeah, to take them in?

SC: Take them in; no, no, they wouldn't take them in. And, of course, the children that were—I think they called them the "children of the sand" ["dust of life," or bụi đời]—in other words, children that were half African-American and half Vietnamese—they were—nobody would touch them.

TS: What about, like, half white and half Vietnamese?

SC: I don't know about that, because their skin might have been a little bit larger—I mean—

TS: Whiter.

SC: —whiter. Of course, if they had red hair that probably [chuckling] would be a good reason. That never seemed to be a problem that I remember. It might not have just reached the ship.

TS: Right.

SC: But there were children that were just—So there were a group of Marines, and some of us, put up a—I'm trying to think what the word is—like a—like a home, I guess you'd say, for these kids that had no place else to go and, of course, that was the first thing the communists just blew up, so. Marines are very strange people. [chuckles]

TS: In what way?

SC: I probably shouldn't say this. Because they're so rough and tough, and yet they will—they will pick up and help a child in a heartbeat; absolute heartbeat. And some of the children were strapped with bomb materials. I mean, what they see in Iraq and Afghanistan with the suicide bombers, they were doing that in Vietnam. It didn't keep the Marines from picking them up though, and that might have been very typical with all the branches of service, but the majority of men that we served were Marines and sailors.

TS: Because of the service that you were in.

SC: Yes. Yeah.

TS: So there's this rough exterior and yet this tenderness.

SC: Yes. Yeah. Oh, here comes my husband.

TS: Do you want me to pause it for a second?

SC: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

[Recording Paused]

SC: I don't know where we left off.

TS: Well, we were talking about the children and how the—

SC: The children, yeah.

TS: —the one home that you made that was blown up.

SC: Yeah.

TS: Yeah.

SC: I went on a couple of—what they called—I don't remem—I think mat—mats or something like that [MEDCAP, the Medical Civic Action Program, in which medical doctors, nurses and specialists with equipment and supplies set up a temporary field clinic to provide limited medical treatment to the local population]. At any rate, it was bringing medical supplies and doing inoculations and things like that into villages.

TS: Yes.

[Extraneous conversation between SC and husband, Richard, redacted]

SC: So I got a chance to do that a couple times, which was very, very interesting.

TS: Did you go into the country?

SC: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

SC: Yeah, into villages. But we had to wear our uniform—the infamous blue uniform—which I now knew how to—

TS: Put together?

SC: —put together.

TS: So, like, not fatigues or anything like that?

SC: I did fatigues once or twice. If I could find that picture I'd give it to you because it's a hoot. [both chuckle]

TS: So you're, like, in your dress blues, basically?

SC: Summer blues, yeah.

TS: Okay.

SC: With stockings, of course.

TS: Of course.

SC: I can remember the kids coming up and pinching the stockings.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: The stockings?

SC: And blue eyes—because I have blue eyes—

TS: Oh, right.

SC: —and they would say, "Blue eye, blue eye, blue eye." It was just—It was like they'd never seen these strange women before.

TS: Right.

SC: So it was sort of—it was interesting.

TS: What were the villages like?

SC: Sort of huts and—I mean, we set up outside the hut; we didn't go into any huts or anything like that. But people would bring their children to be inoculated, and some simple things that—that could be done, like, some pink eye and simple things like that. And then, of course, they'd bring out the children who were crippled for some reason, maybe birth defects or whatever, and we couldn't do anything for those, which was sort of sad.

TS: Yeah.

SC: Very, very sad. Went to Quảng Trị [city in the North Central Coast region of Vietnam], which is actually where I met Jill.

TS: Oh yeah, okay.

SC: Yeah. And went to their hospital, which had screened windows and the floor sloped, so what they did after every operation, they'd just hose down—this was a Vietnamese hospital, if you want to call it that.

TS: How did you meet Jill there? What was she doing?

SC: She—What would happen is, occasionally COs of various companies would invite us to come have dinner with them, usually something like that, and just sit around and talk. It was a good opportunity for the—for the people who were stationed on land. It also gave us a chance to get out of—hospital gets to feel very small when you're on board a ship.

TS: I bet.

SC: Yeah.

TS: I bet. How were those excursions, and were you beginning to get a sense more of what was—like you said, when you got there you were kind of naïve about the war and what was going on.

SC: Yes.

TS: Is your—Are you developing some sort of understanding, or your own opinion about the war and things?

SC: Well, one of the things that bothered me fairly early on, is that men would die, and because we didn't have internet or anything like that it would take the Red Cross maybe two or three days for the family to be notified, and in that two or three day period, this person who's died may have received letters from home or packages from home. I mean, it just—it broke my heart, because I would have thought that if I had a relative I would want to know exactly when they died. I'd prefer to have been there, and they weren't. They were just, more or less, by themselves unless—I mean, sometimes people would just die and we wouldn't even know it.

TS: So you mean some of them just died alone?

SC: Yeah, very much alone, and I can't imagine how difficult it must have been for—what they call—CACO [casualty assistance calls officer] teams. It's a minister and an officer and a senior enlisted, go to the homes of the family of the deceased person and they help them through the pro—through the process of notifying and stuff like that.

TS: That's when you hear about families saying they see them—

SC: "Here comes the black car."

TS: Right.

SC: Yeah. Two or three days, an hour, I don't know how long it would even take for the body to get home.

TS: Right.

SC: And some of these guys were really pretty badly messed up. We had a burn unit, and we also had a hyperbaric chamber, because we were a hell of a lot cleaner than anything on land, so we got a lot of burn patients and—

TS: That requires a very sterile environment, then?

SC: Well, it does. It wasn't really that sterile, but it was cleaner—

TS: Okay.

SC: —than that and—I mean, some of the people were beyond recognition. I'd think to myself, "How do you—How do you do that? How do you mourn—

TS: Right.

SC: —for somebody under those kind of circumstances?

TS: Well, you're very young, and you're very new to nursing, too.

SC: I was twenty-three when I went over there. I celebrated my twenty-fourth birthday there. Yeah, I was young, [chuckles] I was really young.

TS: I mean, and you're seeing all this devastation and then these broken bodies, and that's got to affect you. How—What did you do to try to cope?

SC: Shut down pretty well—

TS: Yeah?

SC: —pretty quickly. Oh, we'd do crazy things. We always thought the head nurse—the director of nursing, if you will—was so old, [chuckling] and I bet you she was of maybe forty.

TS: Right.

SC: I remembered—We remembered—We'd chuckle about this all the time. We used to say she was just some old biddy, and here we were, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five year old young women, and out here with all this horror going on, and we'd do all kinds of crazy stuff.

TS: Like what, Susan?

SC: "Like what, Susan?" [both chuckle] One time they painted my body.

TS: What color did you get?

SC: Rainbow colors.

TS: Okay. [both laugh]

SC: And someplace there's a picture of that, which will not be part of any exhibit.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: No? You're not going to put that in the collection?

SC: No, no, no, no, I think we'll leave that be. One night we—the doctors gave us porn movies, so we watched them backwards.

TS: Okay.

SC: Well, they were so stupid [unclear] so we decided to watch them backwards. And we did just crazy stuff.

TS: Yeah?

SC: I mean, you had to do it; you had to just be able to laugh, because if you didn't laugh you would be crying, and sometimes it was really rough.

TS: Yeah.

SC: Really, really rough.

TS: Now, you said earlier how sometimes they'd say, "Hey, let's go for a helicopter ride." How did that come—Like, where would you go?

SC: If things were relatively peaceful we might go into Da Nang. I went down to Saigon. Someplace in this trash I have a vase from Saigon.

TS: From Saigon.

SC: Yes. It was a beautiful city, very—it was like the Paris of the East, is what they called it. It's really, really nice. I don't know, we'd just go for a ride.

TS: Yeah.

SC: Go someplace.

TS: Did you do any kind of dating or anything along those lines?

SC: I did not. I felt—I made a decision very early on that I would never marry somebody in the military, because of, first of all, the moving and everything that they—most of them did at the time. And I just—I read two books, *Catch-22* [novel by Joseph Heller]—[chuckling] of all the books to read, right?—and a book about theosophy by Madame [Helena Petrovna] Blavatsky. One of the women that I was very good friends with who went to—I think she went to Camp Lejeune [North Carolina]. At any right, we were close enough, we used to go fishing together and stuff like that, she was a theosophist, and so she gave me the book about theosophy. Only two books I read the whole time I was there. Strange. [both chuckle]

TS: So you kept busy in other ways. In other ways you're a reader, though.

SC: Yeah, absolutely.

TS: I mean, you are a pretty voracious reader, right?

SC: Yeah.

TS: That's interesting. Did you write letters home or send tapes or anything like that?

SC: Sent—I sent some tapes home, yeah, and I wrote to my grandparents, but didn't get much mail back at all.

TS: No?

SC: No.

TS: Did you—When you wrote did you express truly how you were feeling or did you just—like, "Today—"?

SC: No, no.

TS: No. Surface, kind of—

SC: Yeah. "The sunrise was real pretty today. We had X,Y, Z, for breakfast," or something; I mean, very, very much—and I went on R&R [Rest and Relaxation], went to Hong Kong, so that was a big discussion, kind of—getting ready to go and then telling about Hong Kong.

TS: Oh, so you could talk about that.

SC: That—Yeah, right. But no, no, not at all. And in fact, when Richard and I got married I never told him anything.

TS: No?

SC: Nothing.

TS: He didn't even know that you had been in Vietnam?

SC: Oh, he knew I had been overseas.

TS: Okay.

SC: And everything, sort of, started coming to a head when they—We raised our kids in northern Virginia, and I think it was '81, they dedicated the Vietnam Vet [Veterans] Memorial, and I was already in graduate school and was asked to participate in the ceremony, and I literally could not move; could not even get up out of a chair, never

mind go do something like that. And it was years before I finally went there with a friend who—we had been on the ship together. It was horrific to even think about, and I just blacked—blanked that all out.

In fact, probably five or six years ago, we were watching a movie and I turned to Richard and I said, "Can you smell that?"

He goes, "What are you talking about?" And I realized I was smelling the smell of Vietnam. It was a movie—

TS: Like a trigger had brought that—

SC: Yeah, it triggered—yeah. But, of course, by that time I had already been working with the wounded vets for some time, so I was very alert, knew about that, triggers and things like that. But there are movies I just won't go see; just things—no.

TS: Right, there's no need to.

SC: No, no. And I feel like I have to stay fairly healthy because I do take care of a group of people who are—who are looking to me to help them get better.

TS: Have you told your story before to anyone, like you're doing today?

SC: Actually, about two year ago, the people from—someplace, I can't remember; I've got the paperwork—they did four phone interviews with me, and went into depth about somethings that were just—I had to stop the interview a couple of times it was so painful. [phone rings]

TS: Right. Let me pause for just a second while that rings.

SC: Yeah.

[Recording Paused]

TS: —I'm going to turn it back on, then. Okay, we're back again.

SC: So I did that, and I've done another interview—actually, when I lived in northern Virginia I went to the VA [Veterans Administration] when they were calling for people who had been—I don't know; what do you call it?—contaminated, or whatever, with Agent Orange.

[Agent Orange is one of the herbicides and defoliants used by the U.S. military as part of its herbicidal warfare program during the Vietnam War]

TS: Oh, did you—

SC: Yeah.

TS: How did you get—

SC: Well, because it'd be on people's uniforms and we'd be brushing it off—

TS: Oh.

SC: —and nobody told us.

TS: I never even thought of that.

SC: Yeah. And there were not enough women that would come forward so they could do a study.

TS: There weren't?

SC: Nope, and this is in Washington D.C. Because shortly thereafter, I would say probably six or eight months after I got out of the navy, found out that my thyroid was nonfunctioning, and the doctor who treated me, he was the one who said, "You know, you've been exposed to an herbicide, Agent Orange." It was not something we knew actually; nobody told us what that, sort of, orangey-yellow stuff was.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: The dust was, yeah.

SC: And—But it's not a presumed—presumptive condition, is what they call it.

TS: No?

SC: No.

TS: Well, what was—I understand that treating and seeing all the horrors had to have been very difficult.

SC: Yes.

TS: Was there a particular person or case that really resonates with you still, that you want to talk about?

SC: Yeah. Well, there was one guy, who was actually a corpsman, and he had a huge fragment wound in his stomach, and he really—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

[Technical error. Portions of the interview lost.]

TS: Okay, I'm sorry about that. We had a little, tiny glitch. I'll have to check to see where that went. You were talking about when you—you were put into recruiting, then, after San Diego.

SC: Yes.

TS: Where'd you go from there?

SC: My headquarters was in Cincinnati [Ohio]. I had the southern half of—from Dayton down, in Ohio, I had the west part of Indiana, had all of Kentucky, and the west part—I should have said east part of Indiana—the west part of West Virginia. So they were small recruiting stations.

TS: And you traveled around?

SC: And traveled—I traveled around, yeah.

TS: Okay.

SC: Yeah. And had to become a toastmaster—

TS: Okay. [both chuckle]

SC: —which actually helped me a lot later on in life.

TS: Yeah? Oh, okay.

SC: Yeah, it did.

TS: Had you been—done any public speaking or anything like that before?

SC: No.

TS: Were you nervous about that?

SC: Oh yeah.

TS: Yeah?

SC: Yeah, I was really nervous. And one of the first speeches I gave was when I swore in a bunch of women who were becoming nurses, and it was the day after my birthday, and that's only important because it was June 17 [1972], when Watergate happened, and I was like, "Wow, [both chuckle] the craziness continues."

[The Watergate scandal was a major political scandal that occurred in the United States in the 1970s as a result of the June 17, 1972 break-in at the Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters at the Watergate office complex in Washington, D.C., and President Richard Nixon's administration's attempted cover-up of its involvement.]

TS: Yeah. So how long did you do the recruiting?

SC: I did the recruiting a little bit less than a year. They had made a mistake on my paperwork, and actually they had not continued my contract. And I met Richard in the meantime. He was giving seminars about recruiting. Admiral [Elmo Russell "Bud", Jr.] Zumwalt had gotten in touch with him, so he was giving seminars on recruiting.

TS: Had he been in the navy [unclear]?

SC: No, no, no.

TS: Okay.

SC: [chuckles] At any rate, so that's—I met him in May of '72.

TS: Okay.

SC: Add—I mean, just met him.

TS: Right.

SC: We weren't dating or anything like that. And then he had business in Cincinnati later that summer, and we went on a couple of dates and ended up getting married, and got out of the military because they had made a mistake and they wouldn't guarantee me a duty station because they were riffing [Reduction in Force or downsizing.] all the middle management—

TS: Low ranks?

SC: —reservists. Yeah.

TS: Oh. Were you disappointed to get out then?

SC: I had mixed feelings about it. It had been my life for almost six years, and had a lot of friends. Didn't like the bureaucracy too much. What I was told after I had gotten out was that the plan for me was they were going to send me to graduate school.

TS: They told you that after you got out?

SC: Yeah. [chuckles]

TS: Well, that wasn't—That's like a little [knife in your back?].

SC: Yeah, really. It's like, "Gee, thanks for that."

TS: Did you have a difficult transition to the civilian life?

SC: It was very difficult because I really only knew navy nursing, and ended up working in the city, first as a recruiter for a hospital in Washington D.C., and then ended up working on staff development. So I never really went back to nursing per se.

TS: Did you ever want to?

SC: Nope.

TS: You thought that was it?

SC: That was it.

TS: So your nur—really, your nursing career was just during the war.

SC: Yeah, yeah. It was relatively short. Now, I worked as a nurse for years after that, but I was done, absolutely, and had started a masters at George Washington University in Human Resources, specifically staff development; that's exact—pretty much what I was going to end up doing.

TS: Now, let me ask you a couple of just general questions about that time and the military. Did you—Did you feel like you were treated fairly for promotions and just general, like, reviews and things like that when you were in the navy?

SC: Back then—back in the day—

TS: Yeah?

SC: —they didn't show you your fitness reports.

TS: They didn't?

SC: Nope, never knew what my fitness reports were.

TS: You never got any of them?

SC: Nope.

TS: So you don't—Did you get promoted on time and all that?

SC: Yeah.

TS: Yeah? Did you feel like you were being treated okay?

SC: Yeah, I guess so. I mean, I know that if I had stayed in I was ready to make lieutenant commander, which would have been pretty fast when you think about how many years of service I had in, so I was being promoted relatively quickly.

TS: And so, you got out—what was your rank, did you say?

SC: A lieutenant.

TS: Lieutenant.

SC: O-3, yes.

TS: Did you—How do you feel about the relationship you had with your peers, men and women?

SC: People from the ship, there are several of us who still keep in contact after all these years. It might only be a telephone call once or twice a year. Of course, with Jill here, I mean, Jill and I are best friends so we're—

TS: And so, you've stayed friends throughout that whole period?

SC: Yes.

TS: Were there moments when you kind of lost touch?

SC: Well, we'd always at least get the Christmas card out.

TS: Right.

SC: That kind of deal.

TS: That's staying in touch.

SC: Yes, staying in touch.

TS: Did you ever experience any level of discrimination?

SC: I don't know that I would call it discrimination. I think there was a lot of sexual innuendo.

TS: Like what would happen?

SC: Oh, doctors would make remarks about how you looked in your uniform, or I had one guy who always said to me, "If you ever decide that you're going to give it up for anybody, let me be the first one."

TS: How do you respond to those?

SC: I just sort of looked at him like, "You've got to be crazy." [chuckling]

TS: Do you think that was just the atmosphere that you kind of worked in at the time?

SC: I don't think so because it wasn't always that way. But quite frankly, one of the reasons why I didn't want to do nursing anymore either was because I didn't like the attitude of the doctors. They were pretty much—"Here comes the king," kind of deal.

TS: Pretty arrogant.

SC: Yeah, pretty arrogant and pretty—I don't know. I—Some of them I didn't even like the way they treated the patients, because I was a head nurse in San Diego after I got out of the surgical ICU—I was the head nurse of a big ward—and just didn't like it; just didn't like it at all. And a couple of times I went to the—to their superior and said I don't like what was said or how it was said or something.

TS: How was that handled?

SC: Probably nothing.

TS: No?

SC: No.

TS: But you got it off your chest, sort of?

SC: Yeah.

TS: Would you—Were you confrontational at all with the doctors themselves?

SC: Not too much. I mean, we had interns that came in on the first of July. I was very confrontational. I said, "Don't do anything." [both chuckling] July 1 was the worst day of the year, because you had these interns and they'd think they were going to be able to do everything and anything. So yeah.

TS: The nurses kind of do the check on the interns. I see.

SC: Okay.

TS: So you were aware of sexual harassment, then, in the [unclear]?

SC: Oh yeah, very much so.

TS: What about issues of, like, sexual assault and [unclear]?

SC: I was never sexually assaulted, no.

TS: Were you aware of anyone at the time that you were in?

SC: No, I was never aware of that, and that's something I think we women would have talked about. It's not to say that there weren't relationships going on, but it was a consensual thing. It wasn't like—no one was being forced or raped or anything like that, and I think that's something that, as a group, we would have known about. Maybe I'm being naïve about it but—There's a—There were some things, we had to stick up for each other.

TS: Yeah. What kind of things did you have to stick up for each other about?

SC: Well, you—there'd be—there'd be cases where you'd have to, sort of, fix something that a corpsman did that wasn't quite right or something like that, and we'd talk about it and say, "How can we get this fixed," if you will, "so that the corpsman is going to learn about it but it doesn't affect his evaluations[?] as a corpsman?" Because a lot of these guys—not a lot, maybe some of them—actually went back—went into the field. So schedules and things like that, I mean, even though the schedule might have said one thing we'd obviously help each other in situations.

TS: Did your views about the world change at all, or formulate at all?

SC: Yeah, I think they very much formulated, in that it was—I had no idea what I was getting into when I first started out.

TS: Right.

SC: And I ended up probably knowing more than I needed to know.

TS: About the suffering that was happening?

SC: Yeah, about the suffering. In some of the work I'm doing now I actually have seen Korean [War] vets and Vietnam vets, and an interesting phenomenon—at least interesting to me—is that to a person—they—they don't depersonalize the enemy. In other words—"Well, I was going to shoot him before he shot me." But now there's the—"Well, he might have had a family. Maybe he was somebody's brother." I think when you're in a situation in combat you can't personalize, you depersonalize people. And it's interesting how that has come to pass with a lot of the guys that I see, wondering, "Well, they had a family. I have a family." I wouldn't call it guilt per se, but I think it's a—an awareness that comes for a lot of folks who have some sense of introspection.

TS: So they're reflecting on—

SC: Yeah.

TS: —what was lost and—

SC: Yeah.

TS: —the lives of the—those they killed or had participated in.

SC: Right.

TS: Yeah.

SC: Which I think is sort of interesting. I've not read about that anyplace. Maybe I've just not read the right things, I don't know. [both chuckle]

TS: I don't know. Well, what about the politics at the time? Because you had—And then you had, like, the National Guard at Kent State, the shooting there, and Jackson—

[The Kent State shootings occurred May 4, 1970, at Kent State University, Ohio, and involved the shooting of unarmed college students by the Ohio National Guard. The Jackson State Killings occurred on May 15, 1970, at Jackson State College, Mississippi, and involved the police shooting African American students, killing two.]

SC: I was there, like, eight months after it happened.

TS: After, oh. How was that environment at the time, then?

SC: We didn't go to Kent State. [chuckles]

TS: You were in that area—That's right, because you were in—

SC: Yeah.

TS: You were in Cincinnati?

SC: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

SC: One of the Marine Corps substations was bombed.

TS: It was?

SC: Yeah, in Zanesville, Ohio. But I was just, sort of, not oblivious but just not worried about anything like that. I just didn't let it be part of who I was. I was in pretty bad shape back in those days. I was pretty much a one dimensional kind of person, didn't let anything bother me, just put one foot in front of the other.

TS: Not reflective[?], not really, just—

SC: Nothing.

TS: —keep moving?

SC: Just keep moving.

TS: Yes.

SC: When I got off the airplane at LAX [Los Angeles International Airport] there was a—some kind of strike going on, I can't really remember, and a bunch of hippies surrounded me and started calling me a baby killer.

TS: Because you were in uniform?

SC: Because I was in uniform, and spitting on me and stuff like that.

TS: They spit on you?

SC: Yeah. Yeah. It's like, "Yeah, welcome back."

TS: So what did you do?

SC: I didn't do anything. There were a group of Marines that were standing maybe ten, fifteen feet away and they saw, and they saw my ribbons and knew where I had been, and they got things handled.

TS: How did they handle it?

SC: They just shoved them out of the way and just surrounded me.

TS: Protected you?

SC: Yeah, so.

TS: Did you—Well, did you consider yourself a Vietnam veteran?

SC: No.

TS: At what point did you think you did?

SC: Maybe ten years ago. They had the [Vietnam] Women's Memorial, and we lived in northern Virginia at the time, so we opened the—our house and said, "Anybody who wants to come, bring a sleeping bag, whatever." So the whole group of us—And we had sashes made, and put all our ribbons and medals and stuff like that, and we walked down Constitution Avenue [in Washington, D.C.]. And that started it for me, because there was a guy in the crowd that said, "Hey, Lieutenant Purje, how you doing?"

It was like, "Holy crap." [chuckles]

TS: He knew you?

SC: Yeah. And that started it for me. It was the first time I identified myself with that group. That was—What?—'91, '92, because we moved down here in '94. That was, sort of, the start. And then the clinical director, who just, sort of, gave me a gentle shove into that.

TS: Right.

SC: And as I've worked with Wounded Warriors I've become—feeling more kinship.

[The Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) is a charity and veterans service organization that offers a variety of programs, service and events for wounded veterans of the military actions following the events of September 11, 2001.]

TS: Do you think there's a—Well, you had talked about the bond between people that have been in the combat zone.

SC: Yes.

TS: Do you think there's that bond between Vietnam veterans, or is it all even across—is it special with them, and then—but if you've been involved in some sort of combat zone it's also a connection but a little different?

SC: I'm not sure I understand your question.

TS: Okay. Is there a bond between Vietnam veterans—

SC: Yes.

TS: —that's unique with the bond that you have with someone who's been in the Korean War?

SC: Yes, there is, very much so. I mean, I have just been flying that POW/MIA [prisoner of war/missing in action] flag for, probably, about nine, ten months.

TS: Yeah.

SC: And that's part of my growing connection. I've attended some Vietnam vet groups that more—I think they're more or less, like, trying to help other vets; it's not a social club kind of thing.

TS: Right.

SC: And I join it but I don't have the time, because they meet on Tuesdays and I work Tuesdays.

TS: But you want to have some connection to [unclear].

SC: Yeah, I have a connection with that. And Jill and this woman, Jane—we call her Army Jane because we know three Janes, [both chuckle] so she's Army Jane—we get together.

TS: Yeah?

SC: Jane wants to talk to me more about things that relate to Wounded Warriors and such, because she's done a lot of work within the Vietnam vet community, helping people get whatever they need, so.

TS: Right.

SC: Yeah.

TS: So there is that strong bond that you were talking about earlier.

SC: I wouldn't call it as strong as I feel toward my shipmates—

TS: Right, okay.

SC: —but, yeah, there was [unclear].

TS: Because you were there together.

SC: Yeah.

TS: Why do you think it took you so long to recognize—or I don't know that recognize is the right word—but acknowledge that you, too, were a Vietnam veteran?

SC: Probably because I was so closed down. In between all this period I went through a lot of therapy; I knew that I was broken. Of course, they really didn't know [chuckles] what was really going on, because they still didn't talk about Vietnam.

TS: No?

SC: No. But I knew that it—there was enough going on with me that I needed to talk to somebody, so I saw different therapists over the years, trying to get myself, sort of, straightened out, if you will. It—I said to Dick the other day, we were talking about something, and I said, "You know? The kids have never asked me a question about when I was in the navy. Not one blessed question." That's how cut off I was.

TS: Yeah. You had a wall there—

SC: Oh yeah.

TS: —that they weren't going to penetrate, or try to.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SC: No. No. So it's—it's been a long—it's been a long process for me.

TS: When did you get involved—In the work that you did, when did you decide to go in that direction? I mean that you're doing now.

SC: Well, after I met my first patient, who was—who had really, really bad PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]; he hallucinated, he patrolled his neighborhood. I mean, which is very common with these guys; they patrol the neighborhood and they're armored up to the teeth with guns and rifles and shotguns, and whatever else.

At any rate, I met him and we just really got along very well. I mean, it was just that kind of thing. And as gruff and as rum—tumble—rough and tumble as he was, he had insight, and he told me a lot about what he did and he also cried a lot. I mean, he was really very open with me. And then shortly after that, when people realized that I was doing this, I got a fair number of referrals, and just how it evolved.

I have one woman that I worked with who was a navy nurse who was in [Operation] Desert Shield/[Operation] Desert Storm, and she had become a minister, and she had said to me, "Your life was put together so that you could do this now," and I firmly believe that. Everything, when you look how my life went, led to me doing this kind of work.

TS: To be in a place for people to come to and—

SC: Yeah. Yeah. And I should be retiring. I should have retired already. [both chuckling] But I really enjoy my work, I feel like I make a contribution, and so I'll keep doing it, till I don't know when. I tell the clinical director, "When I've got my little walker and my oxygen tank it's probably time to let me go."

TS: When you—We talked a little bit about your disconnect with the counterculture and the politics of the time. How about the feminist movement at all? Did you have any—

SC: None of that.

TS: No?

SC: None of that. But I will say, I was home, probably—let's see. I'm trying to think when Woodstock was. See, I missed Woodstock.

[The Woodstock Music & Art Fair was a music festival held in Bethel, New York, from August 15 to 18, 1969.]

TS: Sixty—

SC: Sixty-nine, August of '69. But I didn't come home until March of '70.

TS: Okay.

SC: And a friend took me to see the movie *Woodstock*, and I really—I probably cried, because I realized that was a part of my peers that I had nothing to do with.

TS: Right.

SC: Nothing, didn't know about it; wasn't exactly something that was advertised on—

TS: Right. [chuckling] AFN?

SC: AFN. [chuckles] They're weren't going to be showing that. So what little news we got about it wasn't as important as it was.

TS: How about what was going on with the Equal Rights Amendment? That would have been, like, actually, at the height of the time you got—just were getting out that it was passed in the Congress.

SC: It's was—There's probably a lot of people that don't know this, but there was an uprising of black Marines in—I think it was in July, and the only reason I know this is because my friend Ann and I were trying to catch a helicopter to get to someplace else and we ended up there, and—

TS: Where were you going?

SC: I'm trying to think of where we were going.

TS: Oh, it's okay if you don't know.

SC: Maybe Japan.

TS: Okay.

SC: We might have been going to Jap—I think we were trying to go to Thailand but we ended up in Japan; mainland Japan.

TS: Okay.

SC: And it wasn't scary from my point of view because everybody was very protective of us; I mean, we weren't part of it but we were watching some of it go on. And right from the get-go I would not allow people to use any kind of depersonalizing—like, I wouldn't let them call Vietnamese "gooks."

TS: That was probably pretty common, wasn't it?

SC: Oh yeah.

TS: You wouldn't let them use that in front of you?

SC: No, no.

TS: And so, any, like, racist terms or—

SC: Yeah.

TS: Sexist terms? Would you make those go away too?

SC: Yeah, I would just—I just didn't—I wouldn't tolerate it. And to this day, I mean, especially the "N" word.

TS: Yes.

SC: I have to back up, because I just realized why I am the way I am.

TS: Okay. [chuckles]

SC: When I'm between my sophomore and junior year of college I worked evenings at a county hospital, and I was the only white person on staff there. There was this woman—

TS: This was in New York?

SC: In New York, right. There was a woman named Mrs. Coe—Mrs. Cook, who I will bless forever. She would come up behind me, because I'd open a drawer and leave it open, I'd open a cabinet, leave it open. I mean, it was just—I was nineteen years old, what did I know? And she would come up behind me, say, "You've got to close that. You've got to close that." Of course, that was a wonderful thing for her to do. I mean, she didn't have to do it but she did it to keep me on the straight and narrow.

So when I left at the end of the summer, they gave me a goodbye party, and it was at her house. And on top of her console TV—I don't know if you remember console TVs—

TS: Yes.

SC: —there's a whole bunch of pictures of a guy who was probably about my age. So I asked her about him, and he had been killed in some of the race riots in the south.

TS: Was it her son?

SC: Yes. I didn't know anything about any of that. I was like, "My God." So I became very aware of that kind of stuff.

TS: The racial tensions?

SC: Yeah. Yeah, very much so. And so, fast forward it. So I was not the person—I mean, you just weren't going to use derogatory terms.

TS: But—So you said that during—when—the time when you were in Vietnam there were race riots.

SC: Yeah.

TS: Overseas?

SC: In Vietnam.

TS: In Vietnam?

SC: Yeah. They think they were in Chu Lai but I can't [unclear].

TS: I think they were in several places.

SC: Might have been.

TS: Yeah.

SC: Might have been. And because when you look at—most—I mean, there was a draft going on by that time, and so people were being drafted, and of course, unemployed people probably got drafted first; I don't know how all that worked. But it seemed more than not, African-American men were put at the front to be the point, or the people to go into the tunnels and things like that, which were the most dangerous jobs.

TS: So you saw discrimination?

SC: I assume it was discrimination.

TS: Yeah.

SC: Although, I used to see a guy, [chuckles] one of my patients, who was a tunnel rat; incredible stories about that. And he was white, not black. But yeah, it was that, kind of, not too subtle—

TS: Right.

SC: —business going on, so.

TS: Did you—The changes that have come in the military for women over the years, things like—I think we talked about this when I first got here, before we started the tape—that the idea of, like, there's women helicopter pilots and now they're starting to open up combat positions. What do you think about all that?

SC: I think it's wonderful, and I—and I—along with the women that I served with, I feel that in a way we helped that movement. I mean, there were nurses in combat areas during the Second World War. I don't know too much about whether they were actually in Korea

because they had hospital ships by that time, but I think we've all made that contribution to get to a place where a woman can be more than a clerk, or that they can fly helicopters and fly jets, and do all that stuff. I think it's wonderful. I mean, if that's—if that's what you want to do.

TS: Do you think that the women's movement helped with that, to open up any of those positions?

SC: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. I think—I think after the Second World War, when people had to—women had to work in the workforce because there were so many men in the military, I think women got a taste of that kind of "making my own money," so to speak, and going out to work and having that responsibility, and also that opportunity to—to do more than a housewife. And I don't have anything against being a housewife, I think it's—I think it's really important for young children to have a mother around, but yeah, I mean—

TS: But not just to be in these narrow roles.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

SC: Yeah. I mean, not everybody wants to do that, not everybody's going to be a good mother. [chuckles]

TS: Right.

SC: Whatever. Yeah. So I think my generation also made a contribution to that, and I think it's wonderful.

TS: What about the policy of—When you were in, if there was a homosexual found out or—that they got kicked out, and then came a policy called "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" in the nineties.

SC: Yes.

TS: And then now that's been repealed, and so there can be open gays and lesbians.

SC: Yes.

TS: So what—How do you—What are your thoughts on all that—those changes?

SC: I think it's great. I don't have any problem with any of that. I think that, quite frankly, it's nobody's business. [chuckles]

TS: Well, do you think there's any roles that women should not be doing in the military at all?

SC: I happen to know that they're starting the unit that is going to be women as infantry. I know that's about to start up because some of my guys have been talking about it. They hate it, by the way. [chuckles] But—

TS: They hate it because of—they don't think women are physically capable, mostly—

SC: Yeah, yeah.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: —or because it's the men's job, or both?

SC: Both.

TS: Yeah.

SC: Both probably. But I think it's wonderful. If they want to do that, God bless them; it wouldn't be me. But if that's what you want to do, and you can—and you can do the job—I don't like the idea that there will be different standards for women than men. I think they need to be able to hold up their end of the deal, so to speak. If you want to do that, go for it, I think it's great.

TS: Now, have you had any contacts or work with the Veterans Administration?

SC: Indirectly, in that I write a lot of reports for guys who are trying to get their VA benefits, and my oncologist keeps telling me I need to—need to apply for VA benefits.

TS: You haven't applied?

SC: No. [chuckles]

TS: Someone needs to be your advocate, it sounds like.

SC: Yeah. Army Jane keeps telling me she's just going to come here someday and we're just going to sit down and do it.

TS: There you go.

SC: Yeah.

TS: Well, do you think your life has been different because of your time in the military?

SC: Oh, absolutely; absolutely. I was a pretty naïve—didn't really understand that there was something in the world going on beyond my little, tiny circle, and it's given me the opportunity to really—to finally live. It took a long time.

TS: Yeah?

SC: Yeah.

TS: How long did it take?

SC: Probably almost all my life.

TS: It's a work in progress, then.

SC: Yeah, yeah, it is. Yeah. I can say that I'm proud of being in the military, having been in. I would not have said that before, but I am proud. I think what I did was important, that it made a difference, and for me that's what life is, sort of, kind of, all about.

TS: To make a difference?

SC: To make a difference, yeah.

TS: Would you recommend it—the service to young men and women today?

SC: No.

TS: Why not.

SC: Because of the military wars. I'm—I am so ambivalent about all of it, because on the one hand I understand why it has to be, but on the other hand, if I had a son that was considering that I would do just about anything not to have him join the military.

TS: Because of the death and destruction?

SC: Yeah. A person can't go through combat—And I always said I went on the ship as a twenty-three year old and I left as a fifty year old, and I know lots of people say that. But these young men who are nineteen and twenty years old, after they've—what they've seen and what they've done, their life ends and they pick up a different life; a life that—

TS: They've been transformed?

SC: Yeah, in not a good way, from my point of view.

TS: Right.

SC: Now, do I think we need to protect our people? Yeah. I'm extremely angry about Benghazi [Libya] still, after all this time. So I'm ambivalent; both sides of the street. I know we need to have people to protect us, but it's not the thing I would necessarily recommend.

[The 2012 Benghazi attack took place on the evening of September 11, 2012, when Islamic militants attacked the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya, killing U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and U.S. Foreign Service Information Management Officer Sean Smith.]

TS: What does patriotism mean to you?

SC: I don't know. That's an interesting question, because I know people get really angry when other people burn flags and stuff like that, and it's like, "It's just cloth." I mean, that doesn't seem to—

TS: And yet you have a flag flying out front—

SC: Yeah.

TS: —with the POW/MIA flag.

SC: Yeah. [unclear] contradiction [unclear] sometimes. It's not the burning of the flag, it's what—the reason for why that's happening. I mean, they're looking to be very disrespectful, but it's disrespectful not because the piece of cloth is burning but because what it represents to people who do that. That's how I think about it.

TS: The people behind all the wars?

SC: Burning effigies, and all the rest of that. Yeah, it's like—that's the thing. I mean, supposedly, after the Second World War we were going to have some peace around here. That didn't last very long.

TS: No. Well, do you think there's anything in particular that you would want a civilian to know or understand about what it's like to serve in the military, or that they may not understand or appreciate?

SC: For me, it was an incredibly maturing experience, in that I also learned about—more about the world, and I was, like I said before, very naïve about a lot of different things. I don't know that men and women today are quite that way; I don't know; I don't know that. I think for some people to be in a position where there's discipline and routine and regularity and stuff like that, it's very good for them, and can be a very good basis for

their future, but I think a lot of people—I don't think a lot of people would really fit into that.

Having said that, I always ask my guys, "Why did you join the Marine Corps?" And they—99.9% say, "Because of 9/11."

Now, to me, that's incredibly patriotic, and yet I suspect that they thought they were going to be out there "revenging", if you will—if that's a word—what happened on 9/11, and I'm not sure that that's—that's how it's ended up. I don't know that. But it's very interesting because the service today is an all-volunteer service. In fact, they [don't even?] to the point now where the judge says, "You either go to jail or join the Marine Corps;" they don't even do that anymore.

TS: Right.

SC: I mean, we have young men and women who are very, very bright, do well, but are looking to get out, just like I did forty-five years ago; I wanted to get out, didn't want to be stuck. They looked around and saw that their buddies were going to be in no productive future, no place really to advance, and stuff like that; they didn't want to do that. I didn't want to do that. And then on top with 9/11, a lot of them, that's why they joined.

TS: Would you do it again?

SC: If I were in the same circumstances, yes.

TS: Yes?

SC: I would, because it made me who I am today, and—yeah, I would. It changed me in a lot of ways, it separated me from my peers a lot, because my peers were busy doing all this other stuff and I was floating around on a little boat. Yeah, I'd do it again.

TS: I don't have any more formal questions. Is there anything that you want to add that I haven't covered or you want to talk about?

SC: No. I'm just surprised [at the end?] that, yeah, I would do it again; in spite of everything I'd do it again.

TS: Well, maybe that's a good place to end it.

SC: Yes.

TS: Okay, we'll turn it off.

[End of Interview]

