

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Vanessa Sharpe Bennett

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: 17 July 2016

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is July 17, 2016. My name is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the home of Vanessa Bennett in Raleigh, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Vanessa, how would you like your name to be on the collection?

VB: Vanessa Sharpe Bennett.

TS: Okay. Vanessa, why don't we start out by having you tell me just a little about where and when were you born?

VB: September 16, 1961 in Newark, New Jersey; in the inner city of Newark, New Jersey.

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

VB: I have five siblings; three brothers and two sisters.

TS: Where do you fit in that?

VB: I'm the oldest.

TS: You're the oldest!

VB: I'm the oldest of them.

TS: Are you?

VB: Yes.

TS: Okay. Were you in charge?

VB: Not really. My sister, Yolanda, she's really more of the take charge.

TS: Were you guys close in age?

VB: Two years apart. She's more outgoing. I kind of grew into that role, so to speak. [both chuckle]

TS: So there was eight of you?

VB: No, there's five of us.

TS: Five.

VB: Yes, and one of my sisters is a stepsister. We just always refer to her as our sister.

TS: Sure. Of course. What was it like growing up? Did your folks work? Both work? Where'd they work at? Things like that.

VB: My father was self-employed.

TS: Okay.

VB: At one time, he owned two corner stores and an apartment building—

TS: Oh, wow. He's busy.

VB: —yes—in Newark. And my mother, she really didn't work until my youngest brother, Sean, was in middle school.

TS: She had a lot of kids to take care of.

VB: Yes. She really didn't work until he was about in middle school.

TS: Yeah.

VB: But my father, he was self-employed for a good many years until he died. He used to drive a bread truck. I don't know if many people remember Betty Lou Bread.

TS: I do not.

VB: But I remember that; he used to drive a bread truck; Betty Lou Bread. Then one day someone had a store that they wanted to sell and they offered to sell it to him and he bought the store because that's really what changed the trajectory of our life.

TS: Was it?

VB: Yes.

TS: Did you notice it as a young girl?

VB: Yes.

TS: What kind of changes?

VB: Because we grew up in Newark. And as a matter of fact, my husband grew up in the same neighborhood when we were, like, six, seven years old.

TS: Really? But you didn't know him?

VB: Yeah, I knew him. I didn't like him. [both chuckle] I didn't like him. He used to throw rocks at me and call me "big eyes," stuff like that. But we all kind of grew up together during that time, and that was late sixties, early seventies, where I would have an aunt living upstairs or cousins across the street, whatever. And when my father bought the businesses, we moved. We moved out of from renting into our own home. You know what I mean? And it was very different. We didn't like it at first.

TS: No?

VB: No.

TS: Because you were away from the rest of your family?

VB: We was away from the rest of our family. And during that time, honestly, there may have been four black families on both sides of the street, and we were—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Were you in the suburbs?

VB: —and we were one of maybe four, and it was just—It was a little challenging at first because of the times were we living in, and even though it was a nice house and a nice neighborhood, I remember it being so quiet at night, but with that, it was challenging because there were people that didn't want us there, but that kind of changed the trajectory.

TS: It's interesting that you talk about it in that way because when people open up their history books and they read about Newark, New Jersey in the sixties and seventies, they're thinking of a lot of violence, a lot of racial tension, that kind of thing.

VB: Yes.

TS: As a young girl, what was your personal experience?

VB: We were—Even with everything that was going on, we were sort of sheltered. You know what I mean? I realized and I knew it was going on, but we were sort of sheltered from it.

TS: Did you have certain places you had to be, like, very strict?

VB: Oh, yeah. She was really a great aunt, but she was more like a grandmother to me, she would babysit us. We would go to her house a lot when we were growing up, like if my parents had somewhere to go, and she wouldn't let you move off her front steps. You couldn't move off her front steps. If you wanted to go outside, you had to sit on the steps. It sounds cliché but our parents and my aunts and whatnot, they were like—you had to be home, you had to be in the house, before street lights came on. And during those times, the late sixties and stuff, it was a good time, even if you were growing up in the inner city, because there were always block parties, things of that nature, where they block off the street, and people would cook, and the kids with hopscotch and all that stuff.

TS: You'd play.

VB: Yeah.

TS: Yeah.

VB: It was really good times, although things was happening in the world that wasn't so good.

TS: I think it's important sometimes to show there's life going on. There's living. There's community, right? And to get the perception that people are just hunkered down, [chuckles] isn't the case, right?

VB: Right.

TS: Even though, like you say, you had certain boundaries that your family set for you.

VB: Yes, and like I said, growing up during that time, before we moved into our house, all the relatives lived there. It was a community of the relatives. Honestly, all your cousins, all your uncles, they all lived around the corner, next door, across the street. That's how we grew up. It's not like that anymore, but that's how we grew up. So there was always a sense of community. Everybody looked after you.

TS: Yeah. And probably too many eyes on you. [both chuckle]

VB: Yes, yes, yes.

TS: It's cool that you said you played hopscotch.

VB: Jacks.

TS: Jacks, yeah. Oh, yeah.

VB: The things we used to do—and I know you know—my kids didn't do.

TS: Right.

VB: We had to actually go outside to play. We had to make up stuff.

TS: We didn't have these gadgets in our hand.

VB: Right. One, two, three, greenlight [Red Light/Green Light].

TS: Yeah. Kick the can.

VB: Yes.

TS: Yeah, exactly. One, two, three, greenlight. I haven't thought about that in a while but, yeah, we played that, too. Hide-and-go-seek.

VB: Yes. And we would always have these clubs. Don't ask me what kind of clubs they were. We would always have these clubs, and I was always the leader of the club, and everybody used to have to put their little nickel, dime, quarter in, and then after I collect everybody's money, we'd go down to the corner store and buy all this penny candy.

TS: [chuckles] But you had the power to control it.

VB: Yes!

TS: Were you one of the older ones?

VB: Yes. I had cousins that were my age—I have cousins that's my age—but they always took my lead with that.

TS: Yeah. I know what you mean about the clubs though, right? Secret clubs. You are not in this club.

VB: [chuckling] Yes.

TS: Even if you're my cousin, I do not care. This is our club.

VB: You got it. You're thinking about it now, right?

TS: Yes, I am. About how old were you when you moved to the house?

VB: When we moved to the house, I was maybe in fourth grade.

TS: Okay, still pretty young.

VB: The interesting thing about this is we moved from North East Orange, and at that time, the part of East Orange that we lived in wasn't very segregated—or should I say it was. Like I said, there was maybe only four or five black families on our block, both sides, going from the top to the bottom. However, the interesting thing about where we lived there and the elementary school I went to, guess who was my sister's classmate and my classmate? Whitney Houston [American singer and actress].

TS: Oh, really?

VB: Yes. I remember Whitney Houston before she became Whitney Houston.

TS: How was she?

VB: She could sing then, and I can remember the music teacher—I can see him in my head—downstairs he was always playing and she was singing. Her brother, Michael—I grew up with her brother, Michael, and we graduated together. I remember when Cissy Houston [American gospel singer; mother of Whitney Houston] and John Amos [American actor] came to our elementary school, which was Frank—it used to be called Franklin [Benjamin Franklin School?] at the time. They've since changed it to Whitney Houston Elementary School [The Whitney E. Houston Academy of Creative and Performing Arts].

TS: As they should have. [chuckles]

VB: But I remember. I was just telling my husband the other day, we were watching *Good Times* [1970s American television sitcom], and that's not something we watch often but we just happened to be watching it. And I said to him, "I remember when John Amos and Cissy Houston came to our school."

He was like, "Really?"

I was like, "Yes. Yep." [both chuckle]

Yeah, so that's the school we—It was about fourth grade when we moved to East Orange and moved in the house.

TS: Okay. How old are you about there?

VB: Fourth grade, maybe—what?—nine, ten, something like that.

TS: So it's '71? Were the schools integrated?

VB: Yes, the schools were integrated.

TS: Had they been for a while? I mean, as far as you know. You're just a kid going to school, right?

VB: Right. As far as I know, maybe they had. I really can't speak to that. I don't—That wasn't something on top of my radar then.

TS: Right. So the racial tension that you felt in that suburb from your neighbors is not like what you felt at school.

VB: No. And also, I think it's important to point out that the block we lived on in East Orange, at the end of the block was another city—another town.

TS: Okay. You're right bordering—

VB: Right. And the town that started at the end of our block was primarily white.

TS: Okay.

VB: Even though it was mostly whites on our block. But the town, which was Bloomfield, that was at the end of the block, was a white town. I remember in the beginning, like I said, it wasn't so pleasant, because sometimes we would walk from our house to Bloomfield, which was the shopping cen—they had little shops in Bloomfield. And one time, specifically, I remember walking to the shopping center, which from my house it would have been maybe a fifteen-minute walk, and I remember kids throwing rocks at us, calling—

TS: Just as you're walking?

VB: As we were walking to Bloomfield Center, throwing rocks at us and calling us the N-word [referring to a derogatory term for African Americans]. Yeah.

TS: How did you respond? Just keep walking?

VB: Kept walking, but I was pissed. I'm being diplomatic but I was pissed.

TS: And then you had to go back.

VB: And then I had to go back. And that, for me, was eye-awakening, because where we came from there weren't any whites. You know what I mean? It was Hispanics, blacks, but it wasn't no whites and it was more communal. So to go from there to here, even though it was nicer, and then have to encounter that, it was—and I'm still young.

TS: Shocking, shocking.

VB: Right. It was like, "Oh." I remember my parents just kept saying stuff like, "Don't pay that any attention." So what would happen is, on the weekend a lot we would go back to the old neighborhood because we really didn't have any friends there. All our cousins and our friends were back in the old neighborhood, so a lot of times on the weekends we would go back to the old neighborhood. And then gradually my cousins started—

TS: Moving out?

VB: Moving out and moving closer to where we were. I remember we used to go back to the old neighborhood a lot.

TS: Like, "Let's be in a place of comfort," right?

VB: Yes. You didn't really have any friends, except for the people you knew in school. Your cousins and the people that you know from the time you were born are still there. That's where you want to go back. Because where we moved to, kids weren't playing out in the street. You didn't see people—The things we grew up doing; people weren't doing that where we moved. So we wanted to go back where the fun was. [both chuckle]

TS: I don't blame you. I would've wanted to do the same thing.

VB: We wanted to go back to where the fun was.

TS: Yeah. You were a young girl when Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot and killed. Do you remember that at all?

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

VB: Yes and no. I remember—

TS: You were seven years old, right?

VB: Yes and no, because I remember one time—this was before we moved to the house—we stayed in this apartment building maybe a month, two months the most; we were in and out. But what I do remember was, during the time that we were staying in this apartment building—and now that I'm older, in my mind, I surmised it as maybe this was the time in between the closing or something. Didn't know that then, but I'm thinking the month or two we were in this apartment building before we lived in the house, maybe that's what was going on.

TS: Right.

VB: Right? But I do remember—and I was telling my husband this not too long ago—when we was in this apartment building, we were outside and we were kind of just hanging out outside, and all of a sudden—I don't know if I want to share this—but all of a sudden you heard gunfire, and all I remember was running underneath the stairs until it stopped, and then went upstairs into the apartment we stayed at. And I remember my mother saying

she called the police, but right after that, I would say maybe two weeks later, we were out of there and we were in the house.

TS: Right. Yeah.

VB: You know what I mean? Now, what am I, fifty-four years old? At that time, you remember certain things that happen in your life but you don't remember what precipitated it.

TS: Sure, sure, of course.

VB: But from time to time, when I think about different things that occurred in my life, I come up with my best guesstimation [combination of guess and estimation] of what may have been the cause and effect.

TS: Right. Yeah. That was something that really frightened you at that time?

VB: Yes. Keep in mind, I didn't realize that it was people—gunfire. All I remember was people scattered, and I remember someone basically saying, "Take cover." The only thing I knew to do was hide under the stairs until everything calmed down, and then I went upstairs.

TS: Right.

VB: Yeah. It's funny what you remember, right?

TS: Yeah. Well, we have our survival instincts to run or confront, and young kids are usually doing the running.

VB: Exactly. Yeah, that's all I remember; everybody just kind of took off. And I remember people just saying, "Hide," or, "Take cover," and I just hid under the stairs. And then when it was over I went upstairs to the apartment, and I remember my mother saying something about the fact—I vaguely remember her saying something about she called the police.

TS: Maybe to keep you feeling like that was a sense of security, right?

VB: Yes. Vaguely remember that.

TS: How was school for you? Did you like school?

VB: Growing up?

TS: Yeah.

VB: We went to—at the time that was Franklin School. I liked it because it was different. Different in the sense of compared to where I came from, it looked like they had more to do.

TS: More challenging?

VB: More challenging. You know what I mean? Like, it felt like a real school.

TS: Okay. Compared to where you came from?

VB: Right. Compared to the school that I came from. And keep in mind, the school that I came from, I remember very little about that.

TS: Sure, because you were really young.

VB: Right. I remember very little about that, but it was very structured.

TS: At Franklin?

VB: Right. You know what? Now I'm thinking about it, the school that I went to when we moved in the house, and the school that I was at, both of them was named Franklin.

TS: Really?

VB: Yeah, both of them was named Franklin. Yeah. But it was very—The one when we went to the house was very structured. It seemed like they had a lot more activities. And believe it or not, the friendships that I made in fourth grade—fourth, fifth grade, whatever, when I went to that school—I'm still friends with a handful of them.

TS: Yeah.

VB: Even when we went to middle school and high school, that core that I met there in fourth and fifth grade—

TS: You all stayed together.

VB: —we stayed together. And even when I went in the military, when I would home to visit, I would always visit with—

TS: These people.

VB: —these people, because they knew me—To me, it's almost like they knew me when.
[chuckles]

TS: Right. I think a lot of times we connect to those people because our values are formed at that time, right? So those are the ones we have comfort with.

VB: And they took me in. You know what I mean? I was the outsider, so—

TS: How were you an outsider?

VB: Those particular women, they already knew each other.

TS: Oh, I see, when you went and moved.

VB: Right.

TS: Okay, so they let you in their group.

VB: Right. They already knew each other.

TS: What do you call that—part of your crew?

VB: Right. Exactly, Therese. [chuckles] They were already friends, and I didn't know anybody, and they pulled me in the fold. I didn't realize, honestly—I'm going to tell you something—I didn't realize until we went to high school that they were the cool girls.
[both chuckling]

TS: And you were in that group.

VB: I was in that group. I didn't realize it, honest to God, Therese. Honest to God.

TS: Well, why do you think they picked you for that?

VB: I don't know.

TS: No, I'm just saying, they wanted to have the cool girl that's coming in.

VB: I don't know, because to—honestly, I always—By the time we were freshmen, it hit me like, "Why are they friends with me?" You know what I mean? They were able to do—They were doing stuff that I wasn't doing or couldn't do. They had more freedom.

TS: Oh, okay. You had to get back home, even still, later?

VB: Yeah. They had more freedom and I was like, "Why are they friends with me?" You started wondering, but I don't know.

TS: Yeah, but obviously, it wasn't to take advantage of you because you're still friends.

VB: Yeah, yeah.

TS: What kind of things did do you guys do for fun?

VB: Back then?

TS: Yeah.

VB: Oh, my God. I would say, for me, the fun didn't start a little bit until high school, maybe sophomore year. Somebody was always throwing a house party. Somebody was always throwing something. And what I remember most about those days is, at every party, at every gathering, Marvin Gaye [American singer and songwriter] was playing; "Got to Give It Up".

TS: I was just going to say, "What kind of music were you listening to?" Because I could bet that we were not listening to the same music necessarily in the seventies. I had a lot of John Denver [American singer-songwriter].

VB: Okay. [both laugh] A lot of Marvin.

TS: Well, we had disco too.

VB: Yes, yes. A lot of disco.

TS: Diana Ross.

VB: "I Will Survive" [performed by American singer Gloria Gaynor]. Yeah. That's what I meant, was always somebody was throwing some type of gathering. And half the time, I wasn't supposed to be there.

TS: No.

VB: No, but I would sneak and go.

TS: [chuckles] Well, you were in high school.

VB: Yeah, I would sneak and go. One time, my mother—just a very quick, funny story—I asked my mother if I can go to this house party, and she reluctantly said "yes" but she said something like I had to be home by ten o'clock, and it was around the corner from my house at the time. And I'm at this house party, and I'm just dancing with this guy at the time who was supposedly my boyfriend, and all of the sudden, I remember—like, there was the red and green lights dim, and all I remember is I felt the room—[chuckles] I felt the room—people were—you could feel people leaving. You know how you just feel it? And I remember someone tapping on my shoulder, and it was my mother with her robe and rollers in her hair—Yeah—and she was like, "If you don't get your butt home right now—"

TS: Apparently, it was past ten o'clock.

VB: It was past ten o'clock. I was so embarrassed. I'll never forget that as long as I live.

TS: Were people scattering because they saw your mom?

VB: Yeah. [both chuckle] I didn't see her coming. I was so into this guy.

TS: The music.

VB: But I remember feeling like, "Something's happening."

TS: "It's not about me, though, so I'm going to keep on."

VB: And my mother walked around that corner with her slippers and her robe and those big pink rollers in her hair. I'll never forget that.

TS: Did she say yes to any more parties after that?

VB: Let me tell you something. I don't know what got into me in my high school years, but no. But I remember one time, my husband laughed, he was like, "I couldn't even see you doing that."
I was like, "Trust me. I did it."
I remember, vaguely, one time my parents were gone somewhere—and I don't remember where my brothers and sisters were—but I remember they were going somewhere and they were supposed to be gone for a couple of hours. And I think I might have been a junior. And I decided I'm going to have a party. I'm with the cool group. I realize now that my friends are cool, right? I'm inviting everybody over, because I'm like, "I'm good. My parents are going to be gone for hours." And we're dancing, we've got beer, cigarettes, all this kind of stuff. I remember—You see how this area is? I remember the way the house was, and the living room, the driveway—You came up the driveway and parked.

TS: And then you'd walk in through the living room.

VB: Right. And I remember seeing my parent's car come up the driveway, and it was like, "[gasps]."

TS: "Everybody get out!"

VB: Yes. I'm pushing people out. I'm pushing people out like, "You got to get the hell out of here." I'm pushing people out the door really quickly. Like, really quick. Keep in mind, there's beer cans and all this stuff going on. I'm not even thinking about that. It was just like, "You've got to get out." And my parents came through the back door, and you could still smell the cigarette smoke and stuff like that. Well, needless to say, it was not a good evening for me.

TS: I imagine not.

VB: Yes, yes, yes.

TS: I imagine not. [chuckles] When you're in school, did you have a favorite subject or a favorite teacher or stuff that you really enjoyed, besides all the social I'm sure that you enjoyed as being a popular student?

VB: Not me, my friends.

TS: Your friends, that's right.

VB: During that time—I wish I could remember her name—But during that time, most of the females were pushed into secretarial stuff, right?

TS: Right.

VB: Business, secretarial stuff; that's what I remember. And there used to be—my typing teacher, she was typing/home ec [economics] teacher. I can see her face; I don't remember her name. She was mean, but she was good because she really pushed you, and I remember being really fast. I learned how to do steno [stenography], and to this day, sometimes I still write some things in steno because I remember it from back in those days.

TS: Sure.

VB: What I remember—I guess you could call it a subject—was because of the fact that I was really good at it. Really good at the steno and the whole business thing, that when I graduated from high school, I got accepted into Katharine Gibbs [College]. I don't know if you ever heard of that.

TS: No.

VB: But Katharine Gibbs, at the time, was almost like a community college, but it focused on getting a job, like, business. Most of the women and young ladies that graduated from that, they got—I remember they got good jobs, like, at the courthouse or lawyer's office, because you had all these skills that would make you the good assistant.

TS: Okay.

VB: And I got accepted into that because I was so good at the steno, the typing, all that stuff they was teaching you back then, and that was a big deal. I remember my mom was—she was so happy, so proud that I got into this school, because she knew the reputation of this school at the time. This was a big deal. This was a freakin' big deal. But I didn't graduate—

TS: Was it all women in the school?

VB: All women. Very competitive. *Very* competitive.

TS: All different backgrounds?

VB: Yes. It was in Upper Montclair [New Jersey], which is where a lot of white people lived, and I remember I used to have to catch the bus up there. And you're talking—At this time we're talking, like, '79, '80. But like I said, my mother was really, really happy. You would have thought she hit the lottery; you would have thought she hit the lottery by me getting into this school. But I didn't graduate because I got into it with somebody there, a white girl.

TS: At the school?

VB: Yes.

TS: What do you mean by you "got into it?"

VB: I got into it—And I'll never forget the dean or whatever, she took this chick's side.

TS: Oh, really?

VB: Yeah. And I was pissed. I was like, "This is not where I want to be." But long story short, I remember I was going up the stairs and this girl was going down the stairs. And she and I had some classes together. And the school was in a big, big house, like a mansion. I remember we were passing each other—I was going up, she was going down—and she had some of her friends with her. And like I said, at this time, I had graduated from high school. I remember her—she said something to the effect—about watermelon and fried chicken. Seriously.

TS: Really racist.

VB: We're talking this is like, '79. This was just before I went in the army.

TS: Right.

VB: She was—For whatever reason, she was like—and I was trying to be cool because I was clearly outnumbered. [both chuckle] I was clearly outnumbered. Because there were some African-American girls there but it wasn't a lot, and we all kind of gravitated to each other because we were clearly the minority.

[Speaking simultaneously]

TS: For support. Right.

VB: You know what I mean? I mean, seriously, if it was ten, that was a lot. You see what I'm saying?

So one day, she—this chick, I don't remember her name—she came out and she said something like that to me and I just lost it. I just lost it. I went at her like you wouldn't believe, because now, like I said—

TS: You mean physically or verbally?

VB: Verbally.

TS: Okay.

VB: I went at her like you wouldn't believe. Because at this time I'm sixteen, seventeen, something like that. So I'm clearly aware of what you're saying to me. You know what I mean?

TS: [chuckles]

VB: I know what you're saying to me, and you're with your friends, and you're coming out like this. No.

TS: Right. Because you push back against it.

VB: Right. I clearly went at her. I remember that. I went in. The dean called us into her office and the dean came down on me. She basically expelled me even though the people—

TS: Why did they say that it was your fault?

VB: "We don't use that type of language here."

TS: But her language was okay?

VB: Right. And I'm like, "What?" She clearly came down on me and I recognized what was happening. "*You* can't say anything. I don't care, but *you* can't."

I was like, "Screw you. I'm out of here. This is not what I want to be a part of."

TS: Right.

VB: I waited almost a month before I told my mother.

TS: I'm sure. [chuckles]

VB: I would just get lost during the day and my mother was thinking I was going to school. And then finally I was tired of getting lost all day, and I told her what happened. She was disappointed but she understood. She was like, "Why didn't you say anything?"

I was like, "I didn't want to get you upset."

Because she was like, "I would have came up there like a—" I was like, "You wouldn't have been able to do anything because her mind was already made up."

TS: Sure. But she could have spoken her mind.

VB: Her mind was already made up. So at that point, my mother was like—my parents were like, "What are you going to do? Because obviously, you're not going back to Katharine Gibbs. You're at a fork in the road. What are you going to do?" Which led me to the military, and the reason why I decided to go into the military is because I had other family members, like cousins. All of them were men. A lot of them had went into the military.

TS: No women?

VB: No women that I can recall that had gone to the military. And I remember as a kid when they would come home and they would be in uniform, and they would talk about places they'd gone and things that they did. When I was faced with, "What am I going to do?" all the sudden I started thinking about my cousins that had left and went in the military.

When I was young, I was an avid reader, and I'm still like that to this day, an avid reader. And I remember I used to sit on our basement steps, and I would always sit there on the steps and just read, read, read, read, read. What intrigued me about all the reading is, when you read, it allows you to go somewhere else.

TS: You have an adventure in your mind.

VB: Right. And I put the two together, and I knew that I wanted to go back to school, so I was like, "You know what? I'm going in the military." And you know what I did? I didn't tell my parents until—

TS: How old were you?

VB: If I'm not mistaken, I turned eighteen or nineteen in the military.

TS: Okay.

VB: I didn't tell my parents that I did this until it was a done deal. Seriously. I didn't tell them until I had taken the test, everything was—the package was done. And I remember my father being happy, because he was like, "Oh, I think that's a great idea, good opportunity for you," blah blah, blah.

And my mother was like, "How could you do this? Why didn't you talk to us about this?" My mother was like—She wasn't happy about it.

I used to tell my husband, I said, "I still remember the day that the recruiter came and picked me up and left, because my mother's face was on the window and her eyes were so sad as we drove away."

But that's why I joined the military, because I was like, "I don't want to get a job." I had jobs in high school, like McDonalds [fast-food restaurant], that type of stuff.

TS: Low skill, low pay, weird hours.

VB: Exactly. And so, after talking to my cousins—And by this time, the cousins that were in the military had already discharged. After talking to them about it, and they were promoting it. They was like, "I think it's a good idea. I think it's a good idea."

So I decided, one, I can get out—I can leave; two, I can see the world; and the last on my list was I could get an education. [both chuckle]

TS: It was in there somewhere, though. It was in there somewhere, there you go.

VB: Yeah. Because I knew at the end of the day, "You still need to get your education, Vanessa." But it wasn't foremost; it wasn't on the top of the list.

TS: Right. Right. Why did you pick the army?

VB: Because of all my cousins.

TS: They were in the army?

VB: All my cousins that were in the army.

TS: So it was just familiar.

VB: Yes.

TS: Is that the only recruiter you talked to?

VB: Yeah.

TS: Yeah.

VB: None of my cousins were in any other branch, so that was all I knew, and I was only going by things that they told me. So that's why I chose the army.

TS: Yeah. It makes sense. It does. You go away from your mother and she's near tears, and your dad's like, "Okay." And your siblings, what did they think?

VB: They didn't care.

TS: What about your friends—the cool friends?

VB: The cool friends, they couldn't believe that I was doing it.

TS: Okay.

VB: They were like, "You're doing what? I'm scared [unclear] in the military."
It was like, "Okay."

TS: They accepted it, but they just thought it was a little out of whack or something?

VB: Yes. Because at that time, especially those ladies, it was like half just got good jobs and half went to college, and the ones in that group that I was with that decided to go to college, they did very well; like, architect, lawyer. You know what I mean? But those were the real smart ones in the group. The ones that decided to go to college—

TS: They were ambitious.

VB: Right, they got good jobs. And the ones that was into business, like I was, they got good jobs, too, but it was like at the veteran's hospital or—

TS: There might have been only a certain tier they could get to in those fields, right?

VB: Exactly. Yeah.

TS: Interesting.

VB: Like I said, we're talking '79, '80.

TS: Thirty-five years ago.

VB: Yes. And now, looking back on it, to be quite honest with you, I recognize that it was—a lot of it had to do with the area—not the area, but where we lived, because by the time I graduated from high school, it was a whole lot more blacks in the neighborhood. A lot of white people had moved out. At the time when we first moved there, there were plumbers, electricians, like, it was working class, but they made good money. You know what I mean?

TS: Yes.

VB: By the time I graduated from high school, a lot of them had already moved out. So looking back at that now, I recognize what it was. You know what I'm saying? I recognize it.
Because when I—At one time I wanted to be a teacher, and this was when I got out of the military. And you know how you have to do the teaching assistant and you have to go to different schools, right? That's when it hit me. Certain neighborhoods have more at their disposal.

TS: Right.

VB: Certain things are pushed more to children in certain neighborhoods than they are in others.

TS: Right.

VB: You see what I'm saying?

TS: Oh, yeah.

VB: But these are things that I realized after the fact, not when I'm seventeen, eighteen years old.

TS: Sure. Yeah. That's why when I was talking earlier, about what were your dreams as a young girl, what did you think was possible for Vanessa as a young girl?

VB: I always—and my husband will tell you this—I always saw myself traveling the world. Always. I always saw myself traveling the world. I always saw myself an entrepreneur, and I believe that I got that business side from my father, because when my father had his stores—My father didn't have—he didn't go past the eighth grade. However, like I said, he owned two grocery stores and an apartment building, and what he used to do when I was in high school—one, we had to work in the store. We had to work; like, do the cashier. That taught me how to count money at an early age really good. And what he would do is, say he had contracts or things of that nature, between me and my mother, he would say, "Vanessa, take a look at this. Take a look at this for me. What are they saying?" And I'm like—

TS: Because he couldn't read it?

VB: Right. He could read it but he was limited.

TS: On his comprehension of what—

VB: Right, right.

TS: Because some of the verbiage of contracts are pretty convoluted.

VB: Right. And keep in mind, like I said, I'm seventeen, eighteen at the time. It's not like I really understood it, but between me and my mother we had a good sense. And he had lawyers and things of that nature, but what that did was—and I didn't know it at the time—it had me thinking, "I could do this." You see? But I didn't put that together then. It was just, he's my father and he's like, "Vanessa, I need you to take a look at that."

Or when he would come home at night and he would have what he made for that day, we had to help him count the money, get—and at the time, I'm not realizing what I'm picking up.

TS: Right. He's not saying, "Vanessa, here's today lesson. We're going to do this."

VB: Right. Right.

TS: It just kind of rolled.

VB: Right. And like I said, at that time I wasn't thinking like that. However, as I got older, I knew I always leaned towards one way. And the house that we lived in, the nice house, was a three-family house. So my mother—My parents had tenants. I wasn't putting it together until at one point I owned a house, and now I'm dealing with tenants. You see what I'm saying.

TS: Yeah.

VB: You don't think about your—things that you go through in your life, how it's going to help you or hinder you later.

TS: Right. Yeah, very true. We build on those kind of values and lessons that we learned, or take a different path.

VB: Exactly.

TS: Right.

VB: That's what made me go into the military, because, one, I wanted to travel. That was the number one thing, to be quite honest with you. I wanted to travel to some of the places that I read about, and I got to do that.

TS: Yes. That's awesome. Let's talk about you going into basic training, then.

VB: In a nutshell, I hated it.

TS: [chuckles] Okay.

VB: I hated it. I thought these people were crazy; like, your drill sergeants and stuff.

TS: Right. I got to talk about where you were at. Oh, you're at Fort McClellan, so you're in [Anniston] Alabama. You're going from New Jersey to Alabama.

VB: Yes. It's hot, it's in August, and I thought they were crazy because everybody was yelling all the time. Here I am living with people that I don't know; open bay [barracks; large open room filled with bunk beds]. The interesting thing about it, I'm going to tell you the truth, was that a lot of people fell out; a lot of people didn't make it.

TS: In your unit?

VB: Yeah. A lot of people didn't make it. And they used to use a lot of profanity.

TS: The drill instructors?

VB: Yes. To try and motivate you. You know what I mean? However, what was funny about it, it didn't bother me. I didn't wimp out, because it wasn't like I didn't hear the language before. [chuckles] And it was a lot of young girls; they weren't used to that. So you put the training, in addition to the fact that you got people in your face all the time yelling at you.

TS: So the emotional part about the breaking you down and building you up was okay.

VB: It was okay. It didn't bother me. It honestly didn't bother me.

TS: Even though the way you talk about yourself, it sounds like you had a higher level of maturity than a lot of young women at your age when you went in.

VB: And it could have been because of my life experiences.

TS: Yeah.

VB: You know what I mean? Because, like I said, growing up in Newark, and some of the things that I saw and I witnessed. Even when it came down to racism at the time. It makes you grow up really quickly. The only thing I really didn't like was living with all these people.

TS: [chuckles] That's the part that you hated?

VB: It was living—

TS: The lack of privacy?

VB: Yeah. Living with all these people. However, some thirty-odd years later, I realize how that helped me.

TS: How do you think it helped you?

VB: Oh, because you know what? I can get along with anybody.

TS: Yeah.

VB: I'm like a freakin' chameleon. You know what I'm saying, Therese? I'm not just saying that. I can get along—You can put me damn near any environment and I'm going to make it [unclear].

TS: Do you think you were like that before you went in though?

VB: No.

TS: You don't?

VB: I don't think I was like that because—No, I don't think I was like that.

TS: Really? Okay.

VB: And it taught me how to be a leader. It taught me how to think on my feet. You know what I'm saying?

TS: Yes.

VB: And like I said, I can adjust very quickly. I can adjust very quickly. And since all those years and different positions I've held, that's one of the main things that stood out in all my evaluations; "Vanessa, you're very good at—" I know it. But at the time I didn't like it, but when you're forced to live with people, shower with people, you're in the freakin' woods with people, in the foxhole, you're up doing—What do you call that when you—The guard?

TS: Yeah. Sentry duty and all that.

VB: Yeah. Come on, Therese, when you're—

TS: I joined the air force, Vanessa. [chuckles]

VB: Oh, that's right. That's right. That's right. That's right. So some of these things you might not have had to do.

TS: No, no.

VB: But we had—When you're put in positions when you're with people and you've got to do some of these things and you're relying on these people, you learn. You learn how to get along.

TS: So the carrot, not the stick, when you're trying to influence people to be team players and things like that.

[The phrase "carrot and stick" is a metaphor for the use of a combination of reward and punishment to induce a desired behavior]

VB: Yes. And that has helped me—It has definitely helped me through the years. Because right now I deal with a lot of doctors who have huge egos, and I have to stroke them a lot. But I know how to do it.

TS: Yeah. It's just business.

VB: Yeah. Second nature; it's second nature.

TS: When you were in basic and you did the physical activity, was that challenging at all?

VB: That was challenging in the beginning.

TS: At the beginning?

VB: Yes, it was challenging at the beginning because I didn't want to do it. [both chuckle]

TS: That's a problem, I think.

VB: I didn't want to do it, and it was a lot more strenuous than I thought it would be. And what added—The thing about it, you have to remember, when I first went in, I went in 1980 and I was in Germany, and this was before they came out with a PT [physical training] uniform; physical education uniform. Before you could wear sneakers and—

TS: Yeah, I was going to ask you, you did all your PT in boots, right?

VB: Yes. The PT in boots, in Germany, in the cold. It was a lot of hills; a lot of inclines. So I didn't particularly care for it. However, you accept that this is what you signed up for and it's not going to go away. They're not going to stop. Just because you don't like it, they're not going to say, "Vanessa—or Sharpe, you don't have to do it." I just got with it; "this is what I have to do." And you know something, Therese? To this day, my husband will tell you, I still—I work out a lot.

TS: Yeah.

VB: I work out a lot because I like the feeling afterwards; not because I really like to work out. It's just I like the feeling afterwards. But in the beginning it was hard. And that was part of the reason why I got out, because it started changing—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Yeah. Getting older.

VB: Yeah. Your body starts changing. [both chuckle] Your body starts changing a little bit, and by the time I got out, they had really become strict on your running times, and all this kind of stuff. I was like, "Forget this. Forget it."

TS: Yeah. Is there anything else you want to say about your basic training?

VB: No.

TS: Food was good?

VB: I don't remember.

TS: Climate was perfect?

VB: It wasn't. That's really a fog.

TS: Well, you're just trying to get through.

VB: Right.

TS: Just trying to get through it, get it done. What's next?

VB: Basic and AIT [Advanced Individual Training], it's not—I don't have a lot of memories of that, because like you said, all I was thinking about doing is, "I need to finish. I need to stay focused so I can get through this." I didn't know what lied ahead but I knew it wasn't—

[Advanced Individual Training (AIT) is where enlisted soldiers go after basic/boot camp to learn the skills for their MOS (Military Occupational Specialty/ job)]

TS: Something different was ahead.

VB: Something different, right. So that was a fog. All I remember about AIT was it wasn't as bad as basic.

TS: Okay. [both chuckle] That's not a ringing endorsement.

VB: It wasn't as bad. We were in classes most of the day.

TS: Yeah.

VB: You still had—

TS: Where did you go to—I forget. Oh, Fort Lee. You're just in Virginia.

VB: Yes. Still had to do your PT and stuff, but for the most part, after PT, you're in classes during the day, and I didn't understand a doggone thing they were teaching me.

TS: No?

VB: No.

TS: Oh, we forgot to talk about what your AIT was. What was the job that you signed up for?

VB: I signed up for—It was basically supplies. So with that MOS you would run a supply—

TS: Warehouse or something?

VB: Supply warehouse or something. I've never done it.

TS: You never used it the whole time you were in the army?

VB: Never used it. Never.

TS: Alright. Well, let's talk about that then. Do you need a break or anything? You doing alright?

VB: I'm good.

TS: You get your first—Now, did you get a dream sheet, like, "Here are the places in the world that Vanessa wants to go?"

VB: I remember I didn't—I didn't request—To my knowledge, I didn't request to go to Germany.

TS: No?

VB: That first tour, I never said, "I want to go to Germany." It was more like, "This is where you're going."

TS: Okay. Did you not want to go?

VB: I didn't know what to expect. I believe, if I'm remembering correctly, I was a little afraid because I'd never been out of the United States. You know what I'm saying? But from what I can remember, nobody asked me. The second time I had a say-so, but nobody asked me if this is where I wanted to go. I just got orders saying, "This is where you're going."

TS: Right. At the end of your AIT.

VB: Right. What happened was, as far as the jobs were considered, even though I was supposedly trained to be in the warehouse, when I got to Germany, at my first duty station, I remember there was this guy named Sergeant Love and he was my platoon sergeant. And I remember one day, when I first got there, he was like, "Alright, Sharpe, we got to get you oriented," blah, blah, blah, all this kind of stuff, along with everybody else. But I remember him saying one day, he had to hurry up and do what he was doing with the group of us because he had to go back to the office and take care of some stuff; get some stuff typed. And I remember him saying—

TS: Something typed?

VB: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

VB: And I remember him saying something to the effect of—It was almost like he put out a feeler like, "Who wants to get out of doing something?" Right? "Who out here can type?" In other words, it was something unpleasant that us—the newbies was going to have to do.

TS: Right.

VB: The new people that don't even have a—

TS: No stripes [rank]?

VB: No stripes. It was something unpleasant that we were going to have to do and he was basically saying, "Who knows how to type? Whoever—If any of you know how to type—" You would get out of doing whatever it was that we were going to have to do.

TS: The extra duty or something.

VB: Right. So I was like, "I know how to type." [both chuckle] Because, remember, in high school—

TS: Yeah, you were the whiz!

VB: I was the whiz! [both laughing]

TS: "Pick me! Pick me!"

VB: "Me! I was like, "Me!" I remember that. He was like, "Sharpe, you can type?"
 "Yes, sir."
 He was like, "You can come out of formation." So I get out of formation, and he was like, "Meet me in the office." I go to his office, and I don't remember what it was—I think it was some kind of contract or whatever, because the office that he worked in was personnel.

TS: Okay. They do a lot of typing.

VB: Yes. It was personnel, so new people coming in; all that kind of stuff. So he sent me to—told me to meet him at his office. I went there and I typed up what he was doing, and he was basically like, "You're pretty good."
 I was like, "Yeah."

So what was happening, instead of me going to the warehouse where I was supposed—trained to go, he would always—and he was my platoon sergeant—he would always say, "Sharpe, you're not going to warehouse today. I've got some stuff. Meet me at the office." Right?

TS: Right.

VB: I was like, "Okay." So it just kept happening. So finally he said to me one day—I want to say maybe three, four months in—he said, "I can use you in the office." And it was him and it was the second lieutenant—the captain that was over our unit, right?—because I was working in—where the big boys were.

TS: Right, headquarters.

VB: Yeah. He said to me one day—he was like, "Look. Basically, this is really not your job, but we can use you." He was like, "Do you want to go do what you were trained to do or do you want to stay working in here?" And I had already got a peek now on what—

TS: [both chuckling] What they're going to—

VB: —of what they're doing out there.

TS: It didn't seem so appealing?

VB: No.

TS: Okay.

VB: I was like, "I want to stay here."

He said, "Well, okay. If you want to stay here we're going to have to give you—this is going to have to be your secondary MOS." Then that way, they can legitimately—

TS: They just assigned it to you.

VB: Right. That way, I can legitimately stay working at headquarters, and that's what I did.

TS: Okay. Did you like it?

VB: Yeah, because, like I said—

TS: Did you keep peeking out your window at supply?

VB: Yes! I was in air—

TS: Conditioning.

VB: Yeah, I was in air, and I saw—I got to see—Because one of my best friends, later on, was the warehouse sergeant, who played a big, big role in my life, if I would be honest with you; he played a big role in my life. And I saw some of the stuff that they were doing and I was like, "I like where I am better." And that's why I never saw a lot of field time.

TS: You didn't?

VB: No, I never saw—only what was required as a unit; like, the two weeks, go out in the field.

TS: Okay.

VB: But because I was in that type of MOS, and the duties I did, from one unit from when I left Germany the first time to when I went to Fort Hood [Texas], that's where they placed me. It was almost like a resume; see what you did, who you worked for.

TS: Right. So it didn't matter. Now, what about for your promotions, did you have to test in your primary MOS?

VB: Nope.

TS: You didn't? How did that work?

VB: I don't know, but I didn't. [both chuckle] I would have remembered that because I would have failed. You know what I mean?

TS: Yeah.

VB: I would have failed. But long story short, the guy that I said, who later became one of my very good friends, who was the supply sergeant, he took me under his wing, because he was from New York, I was from [New] Jersey, so that was that—We're sort of from the same—

TS: It's the same region.

VB: Right. The same region. And we both had a love of "Do the Hustle" ["The Hustle"] hustling, dancing, right?

TS: Now that's in my head. Thank you very much.

VB: We had a love for that, and he used to go to the different clubs and enter in all these hustling contests, and when he realized that I knew how to hustle too, we became partners. So we would go to all the clubs. We were winning. We were doing all these hustling contests. So me and him became good friends because we were from the same region and we shared dancing.

He said to me one day—he said, "Sharpe, okay, you're messing around." I didn't like him at first. I liked him but I didn't like him. He was basically saying this hustling thing is good, but you got to get serious about your career. Because he was real smart. He had two bachelor's degrees already. He had his goals. He wanted to be sergeant major one day or something. And he was like, "This hustling thing is good but you've got to do something else."

I was like, "What are you talking about?"

He was like, "You need to get promoted, and you need to get promoted quickly, and I'm going to help you do it."

So what he did—and this is the honest-to-goodness truth—was—It was a mix between us dancing, because he still liked to do that, and he used to DJ [disc jockey] in the different clubs, but he groomed me on what it took to get promoted. I got promoted in, like, a year.

TS: So like, Below the Zone?

[Below the Zone (BTZ) is a competitive early promotion program offered to enlisted U.S. Air Force personnel in the grade of Airman First Class/E-3. This early promotion opportunity is restricted to elite airmen who stand out from their peers and perform duties at a level above their current rank]

VB: Yeah. I went from zero to a hundred like that. I wasn't even in the army two years and I was promoted to a SPEC-4 [Army specialist, E-4 ranking]

TS: Oh.

VB: Because he groomed me. And what he did—Because as a matter of fact, here are some pictures right here where I'm getting awards. And what he did was, since he was—He was like a super soldier. He was a freakin' super soldier. He was always—Everything was starched, like—

TS: Totally strac [military slang, meaning "a well-organized, well turned-out soldier"].

VB: Yeah. He was the super freakin' soldier. [both chuckle] And he started telling me what to do. He was like, "What you need to do—You're going out for Soldier of the Quarter, or Soldier of the Month."

And I was like, "I don't want to do that."

He was like, "You're doing it."

So he would prep me; "This is what they're going to ask you. This is what you need to do to win Soldier of the Month, Soldier of the Quarter." Right?

So by me doing that, now I got these letters of recommendations, awards, because I'm super soldier too now, right? [chuckling] I'm super soldier too, because my best friend here is super soldier.

TS: And he can't be hanging around no slackers.

VB: Right. That's basically what he said; "We do this and this is cool but if you're hanging with me, you've got to be super soldier too."

TS: What kind of things did he tell you you needed to do to prepare for those kind of things?

VB: One, my appearance. He was like—

TS: Your appearance?

VB: Yeah, my appearance. He was like, "Every time you step out of that door, you need to be sharp, like, your name, from head to toe. Boots; people need to see their face in your boots. Your uniform has to be tight. Everything that's on your uniform has to be tight."
Then, he was giving me materials to go over to read; like, what does it take to be a sharp shooter, or stuff like that. Because in order for you to make Soldier of the Month or Soldier of the Quarter, you had to know basic military stuff, but more than what the average person knew.

TS: Like, some tactics and strategy.

VB: Yeah, stuff like that.

TS: And maybe what was going on in the world, and things like that.

VB: Yeah, from what I'm vaguely remembering. If they teach you this in school, like every soldier, you needed to know above that.

TS: Okay.

VB: And they—What it would be, it would be you and three or four other people in front of the sergeant major or—

TS: Like a panel.

VB: Like a panel, right. And they're quizzing you. They're looking at how you dress, they're looking at how you march; all that kind of stuff. So he would prep me for these things to the point that I was super soldier too.
So what happened was, because I started winning all these things, when it came down for me being able to apply for sergeant, it was almost in the bag because—I was getting ready to say management—but the officers already knew who I was because I competed so much and I worked in the office. You see what I'm saying?

TS: Right. They were familiar with you and your work.

VB: They were familiar with me. Right.

TS: How you looked every day.

VB: Exactly. The only thing was, like, if it says according to regulations that you have to be in the military, let's say, eighteen months before you can go up before the board to get promoted, that was the only thing. It came down to, okay, you got eighteen months in, we're going to put you in for promotion, and that's how it went.

TS: Gotcha. So, yeah. How'd you feel about that?

VB: Good. [chuckles] Because that was more money. Yeah. That was more money. I was able to move off-post.

TS: Yeah. You were at Kaiserslautern [Army Base in Germany], right?

VB: Yes.

TS: Tell somebody who's not familiar with being stationed in Germany what that was like.

VB: I loved it. I totally immersed myself in the culture, meaning, I didn't stay—I didn't just limit myself to being on post or going to other military posts. So whether it was some kind of festival going on, or going to different bars or whatever, in the culture—I mean, in the off-post—I would go. The food. I would go. I totally immersed myself in it, which also helped me to speak and read it quicker.

TS: German?

VB: German, right. I totally immersed myself in it. I loved it. I loved it.

TS: Did you have a favorite kind of food there that you liked?

VB: I don't think I had a favorite type of food. I know I ate a lot of bratwurst, but I don't think I had a favorite type of food.

TS: No? Because sometimes what you got at those festivals, like that chicken that they made—

VB: Schnitzel [meat that has been pounded thin and then fried].

TS: The schnitzel, stuff like that.

VB: I don't think I had a favorite. I don't believe I had a favorite.

TS: But you just enjoyed being out on the economy. You were out of the barracks.

VB: Yeah. I think—I didn't move out of the barracks until my second tour.

TS: Okay, so you're still—

VB: Yes. I didn't move out the barracks until I went back the second time.

TS: I'm sorry, the name of the sergeant you were talking—that you did "The Hustle"—

VB: Yeah, Sergeant Higgins.

TS: Was that at Kaiserslautern or was this later at—

VB: It was at Kaiserslautern, because he eventually had to—

TS: PCS [permanent change of station—the official relocation of an active duty military service member to a different duty location].

VB: He had to PCS. However, before he PCSed, he saw me get those orders for sergeant, so that was a good moment, because he was proud, I was proud.

TS: Sure.

VB: I was happy. I hated to see him go because he was like a big brother. You know what I mean?

TS: Sure.

VB: Even though I had other friends there, he was a big brother and a protector. You know what I mean?

TS: Yeah.

VB: And he was really popular out there, especially with the ladies; a nice-looking guy. So it was like, whenever you saw him, you saw me. Or if they didn't know where he was, they would say, "Sharpe, where's Higgins?"
 I was like, "I don't know," or whatever.
 But I remember being very sad when he PCSed. And we stayed in contact for a little while, and then it kind of, like, died out.

TS: It's hard sometimes because everybody's moving and you don't know when.

VB: Exactly. I remember after he left, and two other people—females—that I had grown close to, when they left, I was like—I remember feeling like, "Okay, I'm ready to go now." Because even though you know other people, it was a group of us that we did so much together and they helped—They were already there. Again, here I am, the outsider coming in. They were already there, and they kind of took me under their wing, and they would take me around and introduce me to other people. You know what I mean?

TS: Yeah. Did you have a sponsor when you came to Germany?

VB: I don't remember.

TS: Somebody who'd meet you and take you around. Probably not then. You probably would remember.

VB: I don't remember that. The people that I met took me around, because I remember when I got there and got my room assignment, one of my roommates—because there was four of us at the time—one of my roommates asked me, "Where are you from?" She said, "You sound like you're from up north somewhere." And she was from Pittsburgh [Pennsylvania]. And when I told her she said, "Oh, you know who you'd get along with? You'd probably really get along with Higgins."

TS: [chuckles] And that's what made that connection.

VB: Right. She was like, "He's from New York. You two would probably really get along." So one day he came by—because he was friends with the other ladies—and one day he came by, and I remember him looking at me like, "Who's this?" And they made the introductions and he looked like, "Who are you?"
And I was looking at him like, "Well, who are *you*?"

TS: [chuckles] Right.

VB: And we didn't hit it off at first because I thought he was really arrogant, but then I realized that that was a turn-on for him, that I was talking back so much. [both chuckle] Like, he got a rise out of that.

TS: Sure.

VB: Yeah. But it was a group of them, some other guys too, that I became really close with, and they taught me the land; they taught me the lay of the land.

TS: So you enjoyed being in Germany?

VB: Oh, yeah.

TS: Did you travel much in that first tour?

VB: The first tour I went to Nancy [France]. I went to Paris [France].

TS: What's Nancy?

VB: Nancy, France.

TS: Oh, okay. Oh, is that the place that just got the—

VB: No.

TS: Someplace else?

VB: Yes.

TS: Oh, that's Nice [France]. Nice.

VB: And this was N-A-N-C-Y.

TS: Okay.

VB: The first tour, because the—what do you call it? They would have these things on the weekends that you could go—

TS: Tours. Travel tours that you could take, right through the rec [recreation] center and everything.

VB: Yes. Right. And me and my friends, we would do that. If everybody had a free weekend, we would do one of those—

TS: Sign up.

VB: Yes. Go on one of those free—not free—but one of those—

TS: Inexpensive. And the exchange rate was very beneficial at that time.

VB: Right. Exactly. So the first tour, that's where I went; I went to—went to Paris and to Nancy, France.

TS: Nancy. What'd you like? Did you like France?

VB: From what I remember, yeah. From what I remember, I remember it seeming a lot like New York to me.

TS: Really?

VB: Yeah.

TS: Big city?

VB: Yes.

TS: A lot of bustle.

VB: Yes.

TS: Some rude people. [chuckles]

VB: And it could have been—Yeah. And it could have been because of—since we were with this excursion type of thing where—

TS: They knew that you were military.

VB: Right. That could have played a lot into it.

TS: You get a certain kind of treatment.

VB: Yeah.

TS: Yeah. I think that was. So you got to see the Eiffel Tower?

VB: Yes.

TS: Did you go to the Louvre [the world's largest art museum; located in Paris, France]?

VB: I didn't get to the Louvre. It was a really quick—

TS: Oh, because it's like a weekend tour.

VB: Yes.

TS: That's cool. Did you do any of the volksmarches [German, meaning "people's march; a form of non-competitive fitness walking] or get down to the Oktoberfest?

VB: Yeah, I went to the Oktoberfest, and I went to the Oktoberfest the second tour, not the first tour. I went to Oktoberfest, did a lot of the wine—

TS: Festivals.

VB: —wine festivals. Oh, yeah.

TS: That is a good spot to be for them.

VB: Yes. And the second time I went to Amsterdam [Netherlands], Belgium, and—what do you call it?

TS: Austria?

VB: No. Berlin.

TS: Oh, Berlin. Oh, right, yeah. That was the second tour. We can talk about that now.

VB: The second tour, it was not my plan to go back to Germany. Even though I enjoyed it, it wasn't my plan because I had already been there. I wanted to go to California because I hadn't ever been to the West Coast.

TS: Right.

VB: So I don't know if it's the same thing in the air force, but when you reenlist they ask you where you want to go and you put your top three of where you want to be stationed at. And I remember putting California first. Right? I wanted to go to California.

TS: When did you reenlist?

VB: I want to say late '83, '84.

TS: Okay. So you enlisted for three years to start?

VB: See.

TS: There it is. She's showing me a picture of her reenlistment. Do you originally sign up for three years?

VB: I originally signed up for three years and I reenlisted for three more.

TS: For three, I gotcha.

VB: See, this is me at the desk when I first got—

TS: Yeah, there you go. Yeah, you're looking pretty sharp. You're starched up. [both chuckle] Okay. We can go back to Germany. You want to tell the story about getting to Fort Ord [California]—

VB: Right, because I think that's a pretty—

TS: Maybe tell that first. Okay.

VB: That was pretty—Yeah, that—

TS: Go more chronologically.

VB: Yeah.

TS: Okay, so you're enjoying Germany.

VB: Yes.

TS: Did you want to leave?

VB: At the time that I left I was ready to leave because all my friends had left.

TS: Okay, that's right.

VB: Even though I had met new people, it wasn't the same. I guess it was—

TS: How long was your tour supposed to be in Germany? Was it supposed to be a two year?

VB: I think so.

TS: Okay.

VB: I think so. Yeah. I believe it was. I don't really remember. But to fast forward, I signed up to go to California after—When it was time to reenlist, I wanted to go to California.

TS: Okay.

VB: I remember being overjoyed when I saw my orders and it said I was going to Fort Ord, California. I was like, "Yes! I'm going to Fort Ord. I'm going to California." I was really excited. Time to go. I go to Fort Ord, California, and I remember it being very foggy. A whole lot of fog. I remember that. Long story short, I was only there a weekend.

TS: Really?

VB: I was only there a weekend. Long story short—Let's just say I got there on a Friday evening. I don't really remember but I'm thinking it was a Friday evening. It was dark. It was foggy. The next day, I remember meeting this guy. I thought he was cute, right? I was like, "Wow. He's cute." The guy comes up to me, introduces himself to me, and asks me do I want to go to lunch with him the next day or something like that.

Of course, me, I'm like, "Yeah!" [both chuckle] Because I was already eyeing him, thinking he was cute, and now he came up to me and he's like—I'm like, "Sure."

So he mentioned where he would want to meet for lunch. I get to this spot where he says we're going to meet for lunch—and now, keep in mind, I'm thinking he's cute and it's me and him. It's me, him, and another—he shows up with somebody else. And I remember it was a round booth. I'll never forget it. This is going to trip you out. It's a round booth. I'm caught off guard because, one, I thought it was going to be me and him, but okay. Okay, I'll take it.

Sit down at the booth, and all of the sudden, he starts asking me questions about myself, like, "Where are you from?" At first, I wasn't like—just trying to get to get to know me. "Where are you from? How long have you been here?" Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah; that type of stuff. Then he asked me—Was it him or his friend? I think it was his

friend—asked me, "When's the last time you spoke to your father?" Never, ever laid eyes on this guy in my life.

I'm like, "What?"

He's like, "When's the last time you spoke to your father?"

I was like, "I don't know. Maybe about a month ago." Something like that.

This guy starts telling me, "You need to call your father. Your father's very sick." Seriously, There's, I'm not even making this up. Some things you never forget. This guy was telling me so much about me and my family. Never met him before.

TS: Now, this is the friend of the cute guy?

VB: This is the friend of the guy. Yeah. Never met him before. Never! He shook me up so much that after we finished that lunch, or whatever it was, I called home.

TS: Sure. I would have, too.

VB: Right?

TS: Sure.

VB: Come to find out, my father had been sick; very sick. Nobody told me. My mother was like, "We didn't want to—"

TS: Worry you.

VB: "We didn't want to worry you." Right? So I'm telling my mother about this—well, it was supposed to have been a date—and how I met this guy. She said, "That's divine intervention, Vanessa." Right?

Right after that, they come to me and say, "There was a mistake in your orders. You're not supposed to be here." Yeah. They said, "There was a mistake in your orders. You're not supposed to be here. We're sending you to Fort Hood."

TS: So you're just supposed to show up so you can meet that guy?

VB: That's how I took it.

TS: Yeah.

VB: That's how I took it, because by the time the weekend was over, I was being sent to Fort Hood.

TS: Wow.

VB: That's the only thing I can think of, because I never saw the guy again, never heard from him again. He delivered the message, and then they tell me, "You're not supposed to be here. There was a mistake in your orders."

TS: Wow.

VB: And they send me to Fort Hood.

TS: Very interesting.

VB: Seriously. Not even making this up.

TS: Were you tripping [slang for upset] at that time?

VB: Yes. I was—I remember being scared, nervous, a whole lot of different feelings. You know what I'm saying? Because here I am a black girl, I grew up in the church; a Baptist church. My mother was a Bible-toting—[chuckles] You know what I'm saying?

TS: Right.

VB: The only thing that I can think of was this was divine intervention.

TS: Did you call home more after that?

VB: Yes. You know I did. You know I did.

TS: Do you think about, now, how—because communication is so different today than it was back at that time. When you're in Germany, you had to make those almost satellite phone calls. Did you ever do that?

VB: Yeah.

TS: And you have that delay of time, and then, "Okay," and then they speak, and then you got to wait, like that.

VB: Yeah. I know, especially when I was overseas a lot, I used to hear my father in the background saying, "Is she calling collect again?" [both chuckle]

[A collect call is a telephone call in which the calling party wants to place a call at the called party's expense]

TS: Well, because there's a whole lot of five marks [currency] you had to put in those machines.

VB: Yes! "Is she calling collect again?" Yeah. I mean, one time my mother walked me through—I wasn't in Germany, I was in Fort Hood—she walked me through—No, it was in Germany, I was in Frankfurt at that time—she walked me through a whole

Thanksgiving dinner on the phone. [both chuckle] My father was having a fit, but she walked me through a whole Thanksgiving dinner on the phone, because I decided I wanted to invite some friends over to my place, and at this time I was living off post.

TS: So she was telling you how to make everything.

VB: She was telling me how to make everything. [chuckling]

TS: Yeah. Good for her. That's awesome. That's good. When you got to Fort Hood, then— But now, all your stuff was sent to Fort Ord, wasn't it? So you had nothing, probably, except for whatever you carried with you.

VB: Yeah. I remember it was this confusion for a couple of days. Confusion as far as, "Why am I here?" because I wouldn't have ever chose to go to Fort Hood. "Why am I here?" Meeting the guy in Fort Ord, that whole thing, it was like I was in a state of confusion, I remember, for a minute. Feeling lost a little bit, like, "Why did this happen?" I remember that. And you can see now, I've never forgotten that.

TS: No, I can see why you wouldn't.

VB: Never.

TS: Did you get settled in at Fort Hood, then?

VB: I eventually got settled in. One thing I do remember, as my first initial introduction to Fort Hood was, I remember we were in this formation outside, and I was not used to that type of heat and humidity in Fort Hood. And I remember we were standing at attention, and I'm standing there, and next thing you know, when I open my eyes, I'm in my room. I had passed out. I was not—

TS: Fainted?

VB: Yeah. I wasn't—I remember that.

TS: You didn't conk your head or anything, did you?

VB: No, I just remember standing there and—

TS: Somebody must have caught you.

VB: Somebody must have caught me and they took me to my room, and when I opened my eyes I was in my room.

TS: Was anybody there?

VB: Yeah. I think my roommate was there.

TS: Making sure you were okay.

VB: Yes. But I remember, "What happened?"

TS: Yeah. No kidding.

VB: That was a, "Hello, and welcome to Fort Hood." [both chuckle]

TS: Yeah. What kind of job did you do there? Same administrative—

VB: Same thing; admin. I don't remember—I don't think it was personnel. I don't believe it was personnel, but it was admin.

TS: You get to use your typing skills again?

VB: Yes. I got to use my typing skills again.

TS: IBM Selectric [model of electric typewriter].

VB: Yes!

TS: Ding!

VB: I remember—I can't think of his name now but I can see his face—a guy I worked for was really funny. He reminded me of—Remember *Tool Time*, that TV show [*Home Improvement*]?

TS: Yeah.

VB: What's his name? Tim?

TS: Tim Allen?

VB: That's who he reminded me of, and even kind of resembled him. He was funny as hell. He was a funny guy. He was really funny. [chuckles] He was a funny guy.

TS: I get it, I get it. Okay. And he was at work with you?

VB: Yes.

TS: Okay. Did you live on post, then, at Fort Hood?

VB: Yes, I lived on post. Fort Hood was kind of—

TS: It's huge, right?

VB: Yes. Fort Hood was kind of like a pit stop. It was okay. I made friends. I got engaged for the first time there.

TS: You did?

VB: Yeah. But it was just kind of like, okay. It wasn't nothing—I remember there was nothing about it that was very memorable.

TS: Well, you had just left Germany.

VB: Yeah. Right. After leaving Germany to come to Fort Hood—

TS: Did you have any of the cultural shock coming back to the United States after being in Germany for a while; like, for things like going to a restaurant, because things are so much faster pace here? Do you remember any of that?

VB: I remember thinking—If I were to be honest with you, I remember thinking, not only coming back to the United States, but even going back home, I felt like the United States was slower.

TS: Slower in tempo or in like—

VB: In just, like, what was happening. Just life itself. I remember feeling like, "I want to go back. I want to go back overseas." I felt like I preferred to be there.

TS: Yeah.

VB: And I guess, like I said—

TS: What drew you to it, do you think?

VB: Hmm?

TS: What drew you to wanting to be overseas?

VB: I guess, I immersed myself and people that I was friends with did, so it was almost like I had a whole other life outside—when I got off.

TS: Right, off duty.

VB: Off duty, yeah.

TS: Was it the adventure part of being—

VB: Yeah, I think it was the adventure part. I think it was the adventure part, because I'm like that to this day. My husband does care to—He'll travel if I want to go somewhere, but he's not going to initiate it.

TS: Right.

VB: I'm the one like, "Hey, let's go to—"
He's like, "What? Why do you want to go to—"

TS: You got that bug in you where you want to see something, right?

VB: Yes. And I've realized—I've noticed through the years that other people that I've met that are prior military, they're the same way.

TS: I think that's probably true because you're so used to every two or three years picking up and going somewhere.

VB: Exactly.

TS: Did you notice if you're in a place and you're getting a little tired of your supervisor, you know either you or that supervisor's going to leave at a certain time?

VB: Yes.

TS: I wish I had the video on your face right then—if we had a video—because—Yeah.

VB: Yes. Yes. That is so true. That is so freakin' true. It is. I don't want to say that I get bored. I think I just get, "Okay, enough of this gig. What else is going on?"

TS: Right. Well, I think some questions that people get about being in the military—"Well, you got to move all the time. You've got to do all this." But they don't see that flip side. They're not stuck in an office with somebody for ten years that they can't stand because you're going to have some kind of transition, either you or them.

VB: And I think it has affected me in a not so positive way. I think it has affected me when it comes to relationships with other people. It's almost like I can take it or leave it, to be honest with you; it's almost like I can take it or leave it. And my husband brought that to my attention. I don't have a problem not being your friend anymore. [both chuckle] If it's ran its course, it's ran its course. Whatever. Peace be with you.

TS: That's not always received very well.

VB: No. And I don't even care. [chuckles] You know what I'm saying? It doesn't bother me. It really—it doesn't really bother me that much. And my husband asked me one time, he said, "Where do you think that comes from?" That I'm like that. Sometimes I'm like that

with him. He said, "Where do you think that comes from?" And I guess it was the way he asked it; like, you're not normal. Where does—

And I thought about it and I said, "You know what? I've never thought about it before, but I think I got used to the fact that you make friends with people, and then they're gone or you're gone, and then you're on to the next place and you meet new people, and it's fun while it lasted, and then either they're gone or you're gone." So I never—I got to the place where I learned not to invest myself a lot emotionally.

TS: Right, because if you invest too much, then they go, there goes your heart.

VB: Yes. I don't care whether they were boyfriends or girlfriends, I learned not to invest so much emotionally and—

TS: That's a great point.

VB: And at this stage in my life, people that I consider in my inner circle, so to speak, I really care, because I've allowed you to come in, even though I'm taking a chance that we can have a tiff [petty quarrel], you can move away, whatever. You know what I mean? And that's a big deal for me, because I had learned for so long to only care for eighteen months. [both chuckle] Seriously, right? I learned that everything changes.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: There's truth to that.

VB: So only care for this amount of time. Or if I meet you and I say, "How long you been here?" [both laugh]

And you say, "Oh, I've been here a year already." Then I know that we're not even getting close because she's leaving soon.

TS: If you got here last week, we can talk.

VB: Yes.

TS: That's interesting. That's a really good way to look at the transitory nature of the military and friendships.

VB: I learned that, and it's carried into my civilian life for years, even at my corporate job, I don't let people get close to me. I'm like a mystery. I don't let people—

TS: "Goodbye. See you Monday."

VB: Yeah. I can be very—during the time that we're having a conversation, I can be very engaging, gregarious, we're having a good time, but after that conversation is over, it's over. You know what I'm saying?

TS: Yeah.

VB: It's not intentional. I just think I've trained myself to be that way.

TS: Sure, sure. So you're engaged at Fort Hood. Did you get married too?

VB: No.

TS: You just got engaged.

VB: We got engaged, and he was getting out—his time was up and he was getting out—and he wanted me to get out. He was coming back to North Carolina. Matter of fact, he was from North Carolina. And he was like, "I'm getting out. You should get out too." And I looked at him and I realized that I wasn't ready to get out; like, I didn't like you or love you enough to get out.

TS: Right. Or he didn't enough to travel with you.

VB: Right. Because he was in a—

TS: [unclear]

VB: Yeah, he was in a combat type of unit where he spent a lot of time in the field and—

TS: He was done.

VB: He was done and he didn't want no more of it. It was basically—I was like, "I'm not ready."
So he let me keep the ring and he was like, "Well, you can keep it, I bought it for you, but I'm out." And it hurt. It hurt because I really liked him a lot—thought I loved him—but I wasn't ready to go to the South. And look, where did I end up?

TS: Right here in North Carolina.

VB: Right here. I wasn't ready to get out and come to the South and be somebody's wife and mother and all that.

TS: Yeah. Did you put in to go back to Germany, then? How did you end up—

VB: I think the way I wind up coming back was, at the time, my choices where Korea, Germany, and—whatever. But the choices that I had based on what my job was, I figured my best bet was to come back to Germany. I didn't want to go to Korea, and I forget

where the other place was but I didn't want to, so I was like, "Well, I know what to expect in Germany, so I'll go back to Germany."

TS: Right. And then you went to Frankfurt?

VB: Then I went to Frankfurt. Go figure, right?

TS: Not very far from K-town.

[Between 1950 and 1955, Kaiserslautern, Germany developed into the largest U.S. military community outside of the United States. It was also referred to as "K-town," a term coined by the American military population who had trouble pronouncing the name]

VB: Yeah. Go figure, right?

TS: That's right. How was this tour?

VB: Let me put my head in that frame of mind for a minute.

TS: You talked a little bit about it. You said this was when you were in the barracks the whole time the first time, right?

VB: Yes.

TS: And then you came back. Did you have to go through the processing center again and they assign you where you're going to go?

VB: Yes. I remember the second time, initially, I was a little disappointed, and if I'm remembering correctly, I think I was disappointed because even though I went back to a country I was familiar with, I realized you can't replicate what happened the first time. The same people are not there. You're not in the same town. I realized you can't go back. You can't make it—

TS: Right. The same.

VB: You can't make it the same.

TS: It's going to be a different experience.

VB: Exactly, exactly. And I think once I accepted that, I was okay. I just accepted that, "Okay, here I am." At some point—I don't know what led up to it—but I remember being offered the opportunity to move off post, and I was like, "Yeah." I wanted to be on my own and not have a roommate. I think it was just me and one other person, because of my rank.

TS: Right. Because you're a sergeant.

VB: Yeah. I think it was just me and one other person in a room. But I remember being offered the opportunity to move off post, and was told I could get a stipend or something like that to move off post. This shows how much I knew. So I move off post, find a place, right? One, I didn't calculate exactly how much it was going to cost me to live off post. Even with the stipend, it was a pretty penny. And the place that I found was at least—I want to say at least forty-five minutes away.

TS: Forty-five?

VB: Yeah. It was out there.

TS: Where the heck were you living?

VB: It was out there, Therese. However, I remember when I would go home, it was so far removed from the base that I loved it.

TS: Loved the drive home.

VB: Yeah.

TS: Decompressing.

VB: Yes.

TS: By the time you got home, it was gone.

VB: Yeah. It was gone. It was a two bedroom. I remember having a little balcony. It was clearly in the community, the town. It was clearly there. You could forget you were in the military.

Long story short, like I said, the drive started getting to me after a while, and how much it was costing me. So I had a girlfriend at the time and she was pregnant—she had just found out she was pregnant or something like that—and she didn't want to be in the barracks anymore, so I asked her did she want to move in with me, because I'm figuring she could help me with the expenses, and she did. And it was good for a minute, until her boyfriend was always there.

TS: Right. Then it's not your place anymore.

VB: Yeah. I remember thinking back at that time, "I'm so freaking annoyed."

But it was good for a while, and I stayed there until it was about time for her to have the baby and she was going back to New York; I remember that. She was going back to New York, and I didn't find out until through a third-person that she wasn't planning on coming back. She went home—

TS: She was done.

VB: She was done. I couldn't afford the place, so I think I wound up—I moved back on base but I didn't have—by that time I didn't have long left before I was getting out.

TS: Okay.

VB: But the drive was starting to get to me, because even though I loved it, if we had to be in formation at five o'clock in the morning, what time do I have to leave? [chuckles]

TS: Right. Pretty early.

VB: Yeah.

TS: Yeah, and then you had snow, too, right?

VB: It was like—

TS: Yeah. I still can't believe it was forty-five minutes away.

VB: It was at least forty-five minutes away, and I remember when friends—when I first moved out there and friends would come to visit, they were like, "Where the hell are you?" [both chuckle]

TS: "How did you find this place?"

[Speaking Simultaneously]

VB: "How did you find this place?" That was basically what they were saying. "How did you find this place?" And I don't even remember how I found it, to be honest with you.

TS: Somebody probably said, "Hey, check here," or something.

VB: Yeah. I don't even remember, but I remember saying, "Oh, wow, this is nice." I think it might have been a weekend when I went out there and didn't have to work on duty, not thinking about every day getting up, or if they call an alert—

TS: Yeah. [chuckles]

VB: —and now I've got to make—And they didn't want to hear, "I live off post, forty-five minutes away."
Like, "You better have your butt in there."

TS: You've got an hour, right?

VB: Yeah.

TS: So you got to just put clothes on and go.

VB: Yes.

TS: When did you start thinking about that you wanted to get out of the army?

VB: What made me start thinking about it was—Alright, when I first went in, I was anywhere between eighteen and nineteen, right? And things were a lot more lax. By the time I was starting to finish up for my second—for my reenlistment, I remember that they—Alright, I'll give you an example. Let's just say, for instance, based on my age—

TS: Like twenty-four?

VB: Yeah. Say, at twenty-four they would normally give you, let's say, ten minutes—

TS: To run.

VB: —to do a mile, let's just say. Right? Now it was like you got to do it in eight minutes.

TS: Right.

VB: Or let's say, for my age, I was only required to do fifty push-ups. Now they're saying, "You've got to do sixty-five." It became so—In my opinion, they were requiring so much more than I was willing to give, and then—I've often thought about this, Therese—that when you're seventeen or eighteen, you're more easily molded. Right?

TS: Most people. [both laughing]

VB: I've thought about this, seriously, even before this interview. You're more easily molded. You're more easily to go along with some stuff. By the time you are twenty-three, twenty-four, you've sort of realized you've got a mind of your own. Right?

TS: Yes.

VB: You're sort of realized you got a mind of your own and you're like, "You know what? I don't want to do sixty-five push-ups, and I don't feel like busting my ass to do a mile in eight minutes." So I said, "If you're feeling like this and you're an NCO [Non-commissioned officer], you're—

TS: Right. Super soldier wasn't there to stay on your butt either.

VB: [laughs] Super soldier! I wasn't feeling the super soldier thing anymore. You can't be a leader and know you feel this way. You don't want that to trickle down to people that's

looking up to you. So I said, "Vanessa, if you know you really feel like this, maybe you should get out, because it's not going to be getting any easier, and they're not going to make any exceptions for you."

TS: Probably not.

VB: So I said, "You know it's not in your heart anymore to do it—to try to stay—keep up trying to be a super soldier. You just don't want to do it anymore." And that coupled with learning about my father and staying in touch with home, I decided to get out, which I'm glad I did because three years after I got out he passed away.

TS: Your father did?

VB: Yes. When I came home, he was like, "You shouldn't have did it. You should have stayed, Vanessa. There's nothing here," blah, blah, blah. And he was right. However, I think about it like, if I didn't make the decision to get out, that would have been another three years and I wouldn't have been able to spend it with him.

TS: Right.

VB: I wouldn't have been able to spend it with him. Those were the circumstances that lead to it; me discharging out.

TS: Yeah. Was it hard to transition back?

VB: Oh, my God, yes.

TS: What was hard about it?

VB: Everything. [both chuckle]

TS: Just that.

VB: Everything, Therese. I'm serious. Everything. Because I came back home, and I realized that I had changed but the people around me hadn't, and I realized that I had seen things and been places that they hadn't, so my whole outlook on life was totally different than theirs. You know what I mean? And it wasn't their fault. It was just that I had had different experiences. You see what I'm saying?

TS: Yes.

VB: So I came back home and I'm like, "What the hell am I doing here?" It was really hard. And I had a job lined up for me when I got back home. My mother was sending me the newspapers from home.

TS: Oh, so you could find one before you—

VB: Yes. So I had a job, a good job, a decent job at [unclear Street?], because of my typing skills. [both chuckle]

TS: It's too bad you didn't run into that girl that—

VB: Yes.

TS: Was it Katherine Briggs? Is that what you called her?

VB: Katharine Gibbs, that chick. Yeah. It was hard. I did not want to be there. I had made the decision to get out, and once I was out for good, I just—It was hard. It was hard.

TS: Yeah. Well, there's different things that I think you lose, but I probably shouldn't say what they are for you. What did you think you lost?

VB: I felt that I lost the camaraderie, and the fellowship shared interest with my fellow soldiers, because even if you don't like it anymore, you have something in common. Right?

TS: Yeah. Shared hardships.

VB: Yeah. You have something in common. They under—We all speak the same language; we all spoke the same language. And even when it came to social interests, we shared the same—You know what I mean? It was nothing for us to find something to get into or to go and do. For me to come home, back to the neighborhood I grew up in, and look around me and see that nothing has changed. Because it's different to take thirty days off and come home, and you're running around the place and you're seeing your friends and family members and then you're out. Right?

TS: Right.

VB: You're not sticking and staying. You're sticking and leaving. So now, to realize you're not leaving in thirty days, you're here, it was hard. It was hard. I had to learn how to be—I had to learn how to get along with people I didn't want to be around again.

TS: Again. [chuckles] Right.

VB: Or learn what it's like to be a civilian.

TS: Did you feel like sometimes at work there was a sense of urgency missing about getting things done?

VB: Yes, yes. That's a good point. That's a good point, because being in the military, everything's urgent. Everything is dress, right, dress [a military drill command used during marching]. Everything is yesterday—You know how it is. And when I got out, it

wasn't that sense of urgency, but I still had that mentality, so I'm still operating like I've got somebody to report to, and in a sense, I did—I had a manager or whatever—but it was different. It was different. And I never—Now that I think about it, I never lost it.

TS: The sense of urgency?

VB: The sense of urgency, I've never lost it. In some respects, that's helped me a lot in my civilian career, because that way of thinking—

TS: Like task-oriented?

VB: Yes. Yes. I will take charge in a minute.

TS: Like when a meeting starts to go sideways.

VB: Yes, I will pull it in real quick. I will, "Let's come back. Come back, everybody." Or if I see somebody going on, "Okay, so what would you say if we were to sum this up, what are the three goals that you're trying to do right now?" I'm quick to do that because I don't have time. [chuckles]

TS: Right. Right. I think that's a common learned skill, maybe. Some people, I think, already have it.

VB: It was definitely a learned skill for me because I can't say that I was like that as a kid, but after being in the military and the way—Like my husband says, "They brainwashed you." He says it all the time. "You're brainwashed." Coming from that military background, it's instinctive, I think. You just operate that way.

TS: Is there anything that you don't think a civilian might know or understand about being in the military, besides these things we've talked about?

VB: That they might not understand?

TS: Yeah. Or they might misunderstand about a person in the army.

VB: I would say one misconception that I've heard—especially when I first got out—There were a lot of people from my neighborhood that believed, or thought, that there was a lot of gay women, especially when I would say, "Oh, yeah, you sleep in one big room, the showers—" For me—and I think—you know what, Therese?—and I think that's why I have a problem with it today. I never saw a bunch of women, females, all in the same showers and stuff like that; not when I first went in. Right? And I wasn't used to seeing interracial couples in my neighborhood.

So initially when I went in, I realized, we're all sleeping in the same room, we're all in the same showers. At first it was just like, "This is gross." Right?

TS: Right.

VB: But during the years, it was like, "Eh, whatever. I'm not paying attention to you. You ain't paying attention to me." Right?

And people that I grew up with, they were like, "What do you mean you're all in the same showers?"

"Yeah, you get undressed and you take a shower. Nobody has time to be doing all of that. Nobody has—" They—

TS: They see it more as a sexual thing rather than, "I'm tired. My day's over. I'm—" whatever.

VB: Yes. I think it was a lot of misconceptions around that. And like I said, with the interracial thing, if I—When I would come back home, especially during the early years, if I would see someone that was an interracial couple, I wasn't taken aback anymore. I wasn't looking, like, "Why are they together?" Because I had gotten used to seeing that overseas.

TS: Right.

VB: I saw a lot of that overseas. And the whole nudity thing. Overseas, at the time, there was no shame with the nudity. I was invited one time to a nudist beach and didn't know it. [both chuckle] I didn't know it was a nudist beach.

TS: What about wearing orange pants with Birkenstocks? That's something that takes some getting used to, too, I think.

VB: Exactly. [chuckles] Exactly. I realized that I had grown. I realized that I had grown, because a lot of them were still thinking the same way, and I realized that I wasn't thinking like that anymore.

TS: Yeah. What caused you to go into the reserve?

VB: What caused me to go back in the reserve is, I was previously married and—

TS: This is while you were out of the army?

VB: Yes, this is while I was out of the army. I was previously reserve, and he had been in the military, too, but I didn't know him from the military. And my ex-husband, he—I'll put it like this—he took care of everything, basically. And it was good until it wasn't good anymore. And I was working part-time, because he was like, "You don't have to go back to work full-time. You can stay home, take care of the baby."

And I was like, "Oh, well, I don't really want to stay home completely. Maybe I'll just get a little part-time job;" a reason to get out of the house in the morning.

TS: Right.

VB: So that's what I did, and it was good until it wasn't good anymore. When him and I finally separated and divorced, I hadn't went back to work full-time yet.

TS: And you had children?

VB: And by this time, now I got two little girls, so I'm like, "What am I going to do? I need some extra money." I was like, "Maybe I can go back. Maybe I can go in the reserves, because that's only one weekend a month, and that'll be a couple of extra dollars in my pocket," not including two weeks that they go away. So that's why I went back.

TS: Okay. To get some extra spending money.

VB: To get some extra spending money, because I was divorcing my husband and I needed the money; I needed the extra money. And I wasn't ready to go full-time yet because I had—

TS: Two girls.

VB: I had two girls. And because my house was a three-family house, the house almost supported itself. You know what I mean? I figured, "Okay, I'm working part-time. I make okay money. And with the military and the house bringing in its own money, I'll be okay."

TS: So you had some tenants?

VB: Yeah, I had tenants. So that's why I went back into the reserves, to be honest with you.

TS: How was the atmosphere in the reserve different, or the same, as it was when you were in the active duty?

VB: It was different because you could turn that off.

TS: Yeah?

VB: I'd show up there—Let's say it was the second weekend in the month—You'd do whatever you were going to do and you leave. And most of the time, people were talking about their civilian lives anyway. It was just a weekend gig.

TS: Did you continue to type or did you do something different?

VB: What was I doing?

TS: This is in New York, right?

VB: Yes. It was still the typing thing. [both chuckle]

TS: You're probably on a different typewriter by now, maybe.

VB: Yeah. Computers.

TS: Computers, right.

VB: Yeah. It was just—To me, honestly, it was just a way to bring in some extra money, because I needed it and this was something I knew I could do.

TS: What did you do with your girls when you had to do the two weeks?

VB: I would let them stay with one of my aunts.

TS: Okay.

VB: One of my aunts or one of my cousins would watch the girls, because by that time, my mother had moved back to North Carolina, and most of my siblings had moved to North Carolina.

TS: Oh, yeah? Okay. That's where your mom was from, was North Carolina?

VB: My mom was originally from North Carolina.

TS: And because your father had passed away?

VB: Right. So she decided to come back. And most of my siblings, not too long after she moved back, followed her. But I wasn't—You know me, I'm the only one, I got to go—If they go left, I got to go right. [both chuckle] You know what I mean? I got to be different. I stayed, and plus, I was in—by this time I had went back to school; I had went back to school to get my degree. I had too much going on there to just say, "Ah—"

TS: "Let me go to follow everybody else."

VB: Right. I was trying to get my life back into some kind of normalcy and establish stuff for my girls. Plus, my sister had told me, she said, "Vanessa, if you're going to come—" to North Carolina—she was like—one of my sisters—she was like, "If you're going to come, don't come without your degree."
I said, "Okay."
She said, "I'm just saying."

TS: For job opportunities and things?

VB: For job opportunities. She was like, "If you're going to come, don't come without your degree." She was like, "I know mommy wants you to come with the girls, but I'm just saying—"

TS: Finish it.

VB: "—finish it, and then come if you're going to come." Long story short, eventually I met my husband, who I knew from being a kid. We ran into each other thirty years later. Go figure.

TS: In New York?

VB: In Jersey.

TS: Oh, in Jersey, okay.

VB: We ran into each other thirty years later, and I was on the cusp of finalizing my divorce, and he was like, "Well, what you been up to?" [both chuckle]

TS: Timing is everything.

VB: Yeah. "What you been up to? I see you had a couple babies."

TS: Right.

VB: And from that day forward, we have been together. He watched me go through the divorce and everything. But how he played into this whole army thing and me moving here to North Carolina—I realized that my mother was very sick, and we had been coming back and forth driving to North Carolina to see her, and by this time I had finished. Because I think I only had, maybe, five classes left. And he was like, "Just finish. Just—Don't worry about the kids. Just finish. Just go ahead and knock it out. That's all I want you to concentrate on." And that's what I did.

And I realized my mother was sick; she had cancer. I didn't know it was stage four. My husband had said to me one day—because I knew it was a lot on him, the kids, to keep going back and forth—he said, "If you can get a job in North Carolina, let's move." We didn't know how long my mother had. He was like, "Let's move. Then that way we can stop going back and forth. You'll be closer to your mother."

I was like, "Really?"

He was like, "Yeah."

Why did I get two job offers?

TS: [chuckles]

VB: Why did I get two job offers within the month? And he couldn't believe it. He was like, "I just said that. I didn't think you was—I didn't really think you were going to get two job offers."

TS: He forgot you have that little guy hovering around at circular tables.

VB: Yes. And that's how we ended up in North Carolina.

TS: When did you move down here?

VB: In 2007.

TS: Two thousand and seven.

VB: And the thing about it, my house—the house that I had in Jersey—I bought it off of my mother, so I bought the house that I grew up in. After my father died, she said she wanted to sell the house; it's just too many memories.

TS: Right.

VB: You know she gave it to us, basically, for nothing.

TS: Pennies on the dollar.

VB: Right. Me and my ex-husband and I bought him out. And my husband, who's—he's into home improvement and stuff—I prayed about it one day. I was like, "Lord, what do you want me to do? Seriously. What do you want me to do? Because if it's me needing to give up this house, I'll give it up." And enter him, and I didn't know that's what he did for a living.

So anyway, he redid the house from top to bottom; it didn't even feel like the same house. And my mother was like—she visited one time and she said, "I really like what you've done with the house. It doesn't feel the same."

I said, "That's what I was going for." [chuckles] I was going for—If I was going to buy a house I didn't want it to look—But I used my GI Bill to help me finish school, to help me buy my first house, which in turn, got me here.

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

TS: Yeah. Well, we have to go back just a little bit, because you said you got out of the reserve a month after 9/11.

[The September 11, 2001 attacks, or 9/11, was a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda on the United States on the morning of 11 September 2001. The attacks killed 2,996 people and injured over 6,000 others]

VB: Oh, yeah.

TS: Tell me about that.

VB: I'm in the reserve. Right, Therese?

TS: Yes.

VB: Doing my little military thing. And by this time, I had a full-time job at a hospital.

TS: You didn't really need the extra income anymore.

VB: Right. I had a full-time job at the hospital working with new docs, right? And the doctor that I worked for at the time, she knew that I was in the reserve and she used to pick with me all the time. Because one day—long story short—one day, somebody came into the office and was being sort of aggressive towards her, because she was a short, little doctor. And was being kind of aggressive towards her, and I didn't even—I'm going to be honest with you, I didn't even realize I was doing it. I backed the person out of the office; got the person out; like, backed them out. Didn't even realize I was doing it.

Afterwards, she said to me, she was like, "Oh, my God. That military stuff really kind of kicked in." I'm paraphrasing. But she was like, "That military stuff—" She kept telling everybody that would listen, "Do you know what Vanessa did?" [chuckles] And I—

TS: It wasn't, like, with your M-16 in your hand—

VB: Right, no.

TS: —you were just deescalating, pushing back.

VB: Exactly. And like I said, I didn't even realize I was doing it.

Next thing you know, I get a call one day at work from the reserve unit, and they said—I'm aware that 9/11 had hit—and they basically said make sure to have my bags packed; make sure that I'm good to go; make sure I have everything in order at home, and to be on standby for a call. So it became very real to me, like, "What? What?"

And I remember telling my husband. Because we were engaged but not married yet, because we got married in 2002. I remember telling my husband, I remember telling my mother, and both of them said the same thing. My mother said, "Well, Vanessa, can't you tell them you can't go?" Yeah, my mother. "Can't you tell them you can't go? Can't you tell them you've got two babies?" Blah blah blah blah.

I said, "No. It's not going to work, Ma."

So my husband looked at me like, "What does this mean? We're supposed to be getting married. What does this mean?"

I said, "This means that if they call me and tell me I got to go, I got to go."

I remember making sure—I'm talking to my lawyer, making sure I had certain things in writing, because I didn't know—I knew what this meant but I didn't know what this meant.

TS: Sure.

VB: My mother said to me, she says, "Well, I'm going to pray about this, and I'm going to pray that they don't give you a call; that they don't call you." She said, "But you got to promise me something. You don't get this call, you're out."

I was like, "Okay, mom."

My husband basically said the same thing, he was like, "You don't need that money. You don't need it. We're getting ready to get married."

TS: Your life has changed.

VB: "Your life has changed. You don't need to do this."

I was like, "You're right."

TS: Did you feel an obligation at all?

VB: To?

TS: Well, having the uniform on.

VB: Yeah. Honestly, I did have mixed feelings about it because—not that I wanted to be deployed or anything like that. However, I had made this decision to go back. And in the back of my mind I was thinking, "I could do this until I retire," because I had a sweet thing going on. You what I mean? Like, one weekend a month. I'm making decent money. I can keep this gig going and retire. This is what—When I made that decision to go reserve, this is—When I saw how this reserve thing worked, I was like, "I can handle this." So I was a little conflicted. I was a little conflicted. However, the reality was 9/11 hit, and if they called me, I had to go. I never got the call. I never got the call.

And I had a girlfriend that worked in personnel, so I said, "I think it's time for me to reach out and touch somebody." [both chuckle] So I called my girlfriend that worked in personnel, and I knew that she could expedite some stuff, so I told her what the deal was. I said, "I can't take a chance with this. I'm going to put in the paperwork to get out. Can you push this through?"

And she said, "I got you." Next thing you know, I got discharge papers.

TS: You're out.

VB: I'm out. I'm not even going to say the funny thing about it, because in the reserve unit I did meet people—know people that was in my unit. The thing about it—It was that there were some guys that I knew, they did wind up getting deployed, and I found out that a couple of guys that I knew didn't make it back. And that really got to me. Because it's different when you hear people—units are getting deployed and don't know anybody; you can't personally say that you know anyone that was deployed. But when you know them, it makes it real personal.

One of my friends at the time, she was a sergeant major. She told me about a couple of guys that I knew in the unit that—and it really—My heart was heavy, because these was guys that you saw once a month.

TS: Right. And trained with.

VB: And you trained with them and you ate with them. I was like, "Who? Are you serious?"
She was like, "Yeah."

TS: How long now have we been? Fifteen years, almost, in Afghanistan, right? What do you think about these wars that we've had since you got out?

VB: That's a good question. Honestly, I feel like it's all about a big misunderstanding. You see what I'm saying? I feel like people don't take the time to understand people, and to understand different cultures, and different values and morals of people. You see what I'm saying?

TS: Yes.

VB: It's a big misunderstanding. Because the truth of the matter is, the only thing that's really different about anybody is the color of your skin. If you bleed and I bleed, you're going—
If somebody cuts and somebody cuts me, guess what? The same color blood is going to come out of you that's going to come out of me.

TS: Right.

VB: You see what I'm saying?

TS: Yeah.

VB: And I'm a spiritual person so I believe, and I know that we're all spirits. You know what I mean? You feel just like I feel. You have heartache just like I have heartache. And I think people—with all these wars, I think people just don't take the time to get to know each other. People have no empathy.

TS: Are you talking about how we get into the war itself? So 9/11—

VB: It's money. It's politics.

TS: It's not just about being attacked.

VB: Right. From the beginning of time, there's been conflict.

TS: What would you say if one of your daughters wanted to go into the military?

VB: Oh, honey, my twenty-year-old wanted to go into the Marine Corps.

TS: Your twenty-year-old daughter?

VB: Yes, and I talked her out of that, *because* of the times.

TS: Because of the wars going on.

VB: Because of the times; I talked her out of that. And I remember I was travelling somewhere, and it just so happened there was a woman sitting next to me. She was a big deal in the military. She was a retired air force, army, something, but she had been in a long time; a long time.

TS: She was an officer?

VB: She was an officer. But we just—I didn't know it at the time, we just got to talking. Long story short, I was telling her how my youngest daughter was headstrong into going, and she said, "Want me to talk to her?"

TS: Really?

VB: Honest to goodness. She said, "Do you want me to talk to her?"

I said, "Would you? Because, see, she thinks I'm just, 'Mommy don't want me to go.' But if she hears it from you—" So the woman gave me her cell phone number. I gave it to my daughter. My daughter was hesitant in calling her, but one day I called, and the woman was just talking. She wasn't like, "You shouldn't do this," blah blah blah blah. She did good. She didn't come from that angle. She was basically like, "I retired—" let's just say from the air force—"thirty years ago." She was still involved in some kind of way.

TS: Was it Pat Foote? General Foote?

[Pat Foote is a retired U.S. Army Brigadier General. She served from 1959 to 1989, rising to the rank of brigadier general in 1986, and holds many firsts for women in the U.S. Army]

VB: I don't remember her name but she was a big deal.

TS: Was she a white woman?

VB: Yes, she was a white woman. She was a white woman and she was a big deal, because when she started telling me her story, I was like—

TS: Had she been to Vietnam? I wonder. Well, we can talk off tape about that.

VB: Yeah. But she was a white woman.

TS: Alright.

VB: Like I said, she didn't come from the angle of—

TS: Was she from North Carolina?

VB: I want to say, "Yeah."

TS: I bet that's who it was then. Yeah.

VB: I want to say, "Yeah." I want to say, "Yeah."

TS: Of course, there's lots of—

VB: Yeah, but she was a big deal.

TS: Okay.

VB: Between her, between me, between her, and one day, my daughter had to confess—I said, "Brittany, listen to me—" and this was when she was in her senior year in high school. I said, "Let me tell you something. These recruiters that come to the schools, they're there to do just that; recruit. They're not going to tell you everything. They're going to just gloss it and they're going to make it—they're going to tell you whatever they may need to say to you so that you sign on the line."

TS: The *Private Benjamin* story [1980 American comedy film starring Goldie Hawn, about a sheltered wealthy woman who joins the U.S. Army].

VB: Exactly. And she was talking marines. Something happened between the three conversations, where one day she came home and she said, "Okay, mommy. You can stop with the 'Don't go in the marines' thing. I'm not going to do it."
 I was like, "Hallelujah." I was running through the house.
 And my husband was like, "I'm surprised. You went in, but you talked her out of it."
 I said, "It's not the same time—it's not the same time—especially with all this talk about women being on the front-line—" blah blah blah blah. And that was another thing she was saying—that the recruiter was saying: "Well, you wouldn't see combat. You wouldn't—"
 I was like, "Do you watch the news? Do you hear what's going on? That's bull [bullshit]."

TS: What do you think about the idea of women in combat?

VB: I'm not for it.

TS: Do you think they should be able to do it if they want to or if they can?

VB: I believe if they want to and they can, sure. But personally, I'm not for it.

TS: Well, you don't want to do however many push-ups either, right? [chuckles]

VB: That's true. That's true. I'm a lady's lady. I just think that, personally, if we can support them—

TS: Women, you mean?

VB: Women, right. If women soldiers, airmen, or whatever, if we can support them, I'm all for that, without us being on the front line.

TS: Right.

VB: Because as strong as we want to say that we are, physically and emotionally or whatever, we're not as strong as men are. We can't carry the same kind of weight. We take things more to heart than they do. And I think that to witness some of what's going on out there on the battlefields, I think—Look at how many people—men—are coming home with PS—

TS: PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder].

VB: PTSD. That has severe ramifications. I was listening to talk radio the other day when someone suggested that maybe some of these guys are ex-military that never got the help that they needed.

TS: Which guys?

VB: That are doing all the shootings and stuff.

TS: Oh, like the one in Dallas.

[On 7 July 2016, Micah Xavier Johnson, a U.S. Army Reserve, ambushed white police officers in Dallas, Texas, killing five officers and injuring nine others. Johnson was reportedly angry over police shootings of black men and stated that he wanted to kill white people, especially white police officers]

VB: Yeah. And never got the help that they—the proper psychological help that they need.

TS: It could be true.

VB: It could be true. You know what I mean? I have a cousin—a female cousin—to this day—she was in the Gulf—

TS: The Gulf War in the nineties?

[The First Gulf War occurred from 2 August 1990 to 29 February 1991. Codenamed Operation Desert Shield for operations leading to the buildup of troops and defense of Saudi Arabia, and Operation Desert Storm in its combat phase, it was a war waged by coalition forces from 35 nations led by the US against Iraq in response to Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait.]

VB: Yeah, she was in that, and to this day, she's not right; to this day.

TS: They say there's some sort of illness that has come out of that. What do you think?

VB: To this day, Therese, she's—If she was sitting here talking to you, she would come across to you fairly normal, but she has such a visceral dislike or—

TS: Like a rage?

VB: —rage for the military and that time that she was in. You know what I mean?

TS: Yeah.

VB: You know what I'm saying? I can be sitting here talking to her and one minute we're laughing and joking about old times growing up, and if it turns to military, she's—

TS: It's a whole different world to her.

VB: It's a whole different world.

TS: Something happened.

VB: I know she's on medication. That's what I'm saying, I'm not—Maybe it's too personal for me because of my cousin, but I'm just—I'm not for it. I'm not for it. Anybody that wants to, I'm not going to stop them. I would probably throw in my little two cents and try to discourage, knowing me, to be quite honest with you, but.

TS: What do you think about this whole idea, now—We were talking about lesbians earlier, right, and the shower thing?

VB: Yes.

TS: The whole idea of really, they were hidden when you were in, and then they had the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" when you were kind of in the reserve, and then that policy's gone. What do you think about the policy of allowing homosexuals to be openly in the military?

["Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was the official U.S. policy on military service by gays, bisexuals, and lesbians. The policy prohibited military personnel from discriminating against or harassing closeted homosexual or bisexual service members, while barring openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual person from military service. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was repealed 20 September 2011]

VB: I'm for it, because I'd rather know that you are.

TS: [chuckles]

VB: You know what I'm saying? And I had an experience like that while I was in the military.

TS: You did? What happened?

VB: Yeah. I had—I was friends with this female. I don't remember her name. Let's just say "Kathy".

TS: Sounds good. Kathy.

VB: I was friends with Kathy. We hung out a lot; went to different clubs, bars, whatever. And she was from New York. And one day, we were coming back from a field exercise and we were in the back of a truck and everybody was asleep. We're in the back of the truck, and she started talking to me like, "Oh, you know I really like you, Sharpe, and you're my girl." And I still wasn't paying it no—

TS: No. Right. You weren't getting that—whatever she was—

VB: Yeah, still wasn't paying it really no attention. And then one day, back at the barracks at the room, she came by my room and she made it very clear to me that she was fluid; like, she goes both ways. She goes both ways [bisexual].

TS: Gotcha.

VB: And that she had an interest in me. First, I laughed. First, I laughed because I had been around this chick for a while, never picked up any signs. Then when she made it clear, like, "No, I'm serious."

I was basically like, "No, I don't go that way." Keep in mind, after that, she couldn't come to my room when I was changing clothes and stuff because now I know.

TS: Right.

VB: Now I know that this is how—You're looking at me like that. So I'm for it, because I'd rather know you are. [both chuckle] You know what I mean?

TS: Right.

VB: I'd rather know that—

TS: Yeah. But other than that, you don't think it's a problem?

VB: I don't think so. It's just—I look at it like this, what is the issue? You prefer men or you prefer wom—same sex. What goes on in your bedroom is none of my business, as long as you can do the job.

TS: Yeah.

VB: As long as you can still protect me and you've still got my back.

TS: Well, we've covered a lot of these. A couple of things I haven't asked you is—I want to actually frame it in a different way though. In the army, compared to all the rest of the services, just in aggregate numbers, there's more black women as a percentage.

VB: Yes.

TS: A lot of them are in leadership roles. A lot more lower level, obviously. And then, I think as far as the percentages go, it's higher percentages of women who are black that are in the army than men—not in numbers, but percentages. Did you ever feel like you were discriminated against in any of your roles, either because of your gender or because of your race at all?

VB: While I was in the military?

TS: While you were in the military, yeah.

VB: Honestly, no.

TS: No?

VB: Honestly, no, and I might have been a few of those outliers, because I have met people through the years, after the fact—

TS: Right. Talking about it.

VB: Right, that had some unpleasant situations or whatever. I can't say—It never happened like that for me.

TS: Well, you had super soldier there to guard you.

VB: [chuckles] That's right. I can honestly say that I didn't have any of those experiences. Now, I have—one of the brothers, he went in and he hated it. He hated it. He complained a lot about unfair situations and things of that nature, so he didn't even do—As soon as he was able to get out he was—

TS: He got out.

VB: He was out.

TS: Of course, it matters a lot what unit you're in, who the leadership is, where you're at, all those.

VB: Exactly. Exactly. And I think if I had of—If things had not fell in place the way they did for me, I more than likely would have had a totally opposite—or would not have had the experiences that I did. But the way things—

TS: You had good mentors.

VB: Exactly. The way things fell in place for me played a lot into it. You know what I mean?

TS: Yeah. So you feel like you were treated fairly.

VB: Yes.

TS: And for the promotions—which you talked about earlier—even in the reserve, did you feel that way?

VB: As far as the reserve goes, I'm going to be honest with you, it was a totally different mentality.

TS: You weren't it in for that. You were just in it for a different reason.

VB: Exactly. It was a totally different mentality for most of the people, because for most of them, they looked at it like, "This is just a weekend gig." And I wasn't thinking about promotions or—

TS: Right. Even though you had it in the back of your mind—"Maybe I could stay in and get a pension"—but it wasn't driving you.

VB: No. No.

TS: So that was the difference in that.

VB: I just—Yeah.

TS: Did you mentor anyone yourself?

VB: No, no.

TS: Never were in that kind of role where you had people under you to—

VB: For a period of time I was a squad leader, but—or should I say—however, I was just doing my job. There was no—I don't recall anyone sticking out that demonstrated—what's the word I'm looking for?—demonstrated a need or desire to excel.

TS: Right. They didn't stand out, like, "Oh, this one we've got to make sure stays in."

VB: Right. Yeah. I don't recall that. To be honest with me, I wasn't even demonstrating that. You know what I'm saying? I wasn't even demonstrating that at that time. It's just that my friend was like, "No, you're going to do this."

TS: Yeah. Well, we talked about a lot of these other things. One of the things I wanted to ask you about was—and I've only got a couple of questions left—how do you think your life is different—and you have talked about this—because you went in and signed up for the army way back in 1980? How's your life different? How do you think it would be different if you hadn't?

VB: I think what the army has done, being in the military has done, like I said, it opened up my world beyond where I grew up. It taught me skills that—at an early age that I might not have learned if I stayed home; like, leadership skills, critical thinking, how to assess a situation very quickly and come up with a game plan. I'm like that at home; like, "No. Let's do it this—" You know what I mean?

TS: Not just plan A and B, but plan C, D, and E, right?

VB: Right. It gets on his nerves. It does.

TS: [chuckles] Contingency plan one, two, three, four and five.

VB: Yes. I can't help it, right?

TS: Right.

VB: And I look at some people that I grew up with, how their lives are—the ones that are still alive—how their lives are. And without me not knowing the full back story, part of me believes it's because they never got out. You know what I mean?

TS: Right.

VB: They never ventured out and somehow felt helpless. And like I said, being in the military, it affects me to this day. I know that I have a rich life. I know this. I'm not a millionaire or anything like that. You know what I'm saying? By no means are we millionaires or

anything like that, but we live a very rich life. My husband has said on plenty, plenty of times that if he hadn't have married me, he don't think he would have been so apt to try different things, even if it comes down to different food. You know what I'm saying?

TS: Right.

VB: Because he's one of—If he likes fried chicken, rice, and string beans, that's what he's going to eat.

TS: So you opened up his world view too.

VB: Yes. I'm like, "Let's go to the Moroccan restaurant."
He's like, "Why are they eating with their hands?"
"Just come on!"

TS: Right, right.

VB: And I know that's because the military has a lot to do with it, because like I said, even though my parents, my father, had the two businesses, we weren't millionaires. We did okay.

TS: Right.

VB: We did okay. However, some of things that I wanted to do in my life and experience in my life, I knew that that was my shot. That was my opportunity. And you're either going to take it now or it's not going to happen.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: It's going to pass you by.

VB: Right. And honestly, that's how I felt. Like, "You know you want to travel. You know you want to go to school. You know you want to do this. What's the quickest route to get you there? Let's do this."

TS: Did you have the adventure that you thought you would?

VB: Oh, my God. Yeah. Yeah. [chuckles] Some stuff that I'm not even going to say, but yeah. But it was all that. It was. That's why I said, for some people, they can't say that, but I feel like—

TS: Well, we're just talking about your experience.

VB: Right. The way things happened, the way they happened and the timing of it, made it a good experience. And I think, too, because I was open.

TS: Right. You were open to going places and seeing things when you were there. You didn't just stay on the post.

VB: Right. I was open, and it was like I wanted to take it all in. So I think that kind of propelled some things. If someone said, "Hey, you want [unclear]?"
"Where? Uh, sure. Yeah, I'll go."

TS: So one opening your mind up to different opportunities open them up to even more.

VB: Yes.

TS: There's more doors open.

VB: Plus, like I said, going to school; I didn't have the money. My parents didn't have the money. And after that Katharine Gibbs thing. [both chuckle] After that. We all know that education opens doors, and I had my kids still going to school.

TS: Right now?

VB: Yeah. It was when I was going to school, my daughters were young. They came to my graduation.

TS: That's right. That's right. They were young.

VB: They came to my graduation. It definitely opened doors and opportunities. I was going like, "I'm taking advantage of this. I'm taking advantage of this shit." [both chuckle]

TS: Well, what does patriotism mean to you?

VB: That's a good question. We are all—I shouldn't say "we are all"—But this United States of America, this is our country, good, bad, or indifferent. You know what I mean? I wouldn't want to live—As much as I've had fun in other countries, other places, I wouldn't want to live any other place. We have more opportunities than most do in the world. So patriotism, for me is, do I always agree with things I see and hear, as far as politics and how things are ran? No. However, this is my country. At the end of the day, this is my country. And I love and respect it. You know what I'm saying?

TS: Yeah.

VB: It's not perfect, but I feel that I belong here. This is my country too. Hell, my people helped build it. [chuckles]

TS: That's right. That's right.

VB: So that's what—Look—

TS: You can criticize it, but you can still love it.

VB: Exactly. When we go to the ball game and they play the—

TS: "Star Spangled Banner."

VB: —"Star Spangled Banner." Yeah. I still stand up and put my hand on my heart, because you know what? This is a part of me. This is a part of my children and my children's children. Not unless they take us all to this—send us to Mars someplace, this is my country too. And I wore that uniform. And as much as I had a good time doing other things, I know what that uniform meant. I wasn't that naïve. I took advantage of the opportunity that the military gave me but I also knew what putting on that military uniform meant. I know what it meant.

TS: What did it mean?

VB: It meant that I'm willing and I'm volunteering to defend this country from—What do you call it?

TS: All enemies, foreign and domestic. [part of the Oath of Enlistment]

VB: There you go. Exactly. I knew, and I'm not just saying that. I knew what that meant. I knew what that meant. That's why, when I got the call when 9/11 hit, as much as I was afraid—because sure, you're going to be—you realize that your life may change in any moment, I knew what it meant. I signed up for it.

TS: You would have gone if you'd gotten the call.

VB: Right. I wouldn't have went AWOL [absent without official leave]. [both chuckle] I wouldn't have went AWOL, because I knew when I signed up to go back that—

TS: You made a commitment.

VB: I made a commitment.

TS: Yeah.

VB: Irregardless[sic] of how it turns out, you've got to see it through. You got to see it through.

TS: Well, I don't have any more questions, but is there any final words you want to say about your service? Or is there anything that we haven't talked about that you wanted to mention?

VB: I think—or I'm not even going to say "I think"—Out of all the experiences that I've had in my life to this point—and I've had quite a few—that is, by far, the most memorable. Because I have one or two girlfriends that I met during those years that we're still friends. We talk about our kids, and some of them, their grandkids. Those are friendships that I feel closer to than the cool girls from back in school. You know what I mean? Because with the cool girls, that was for that time, but my friends that I met when I went in the military, that's a whole different thing. And when I go to events where it's other women there in the military, that's a bond, irregardless[sic] of what branch of service you served in. You know what I mean? We all know what that means.

TS: Where you're from.

VB: Right. Right. It's like we're all kindred spirits. And I do; I feel good when I meet other servicewomen that's been in the military because we speak the same language.

TS: There's a bond, for sure.

VB: There's a bond. My husband told me, he said, "You know what I noticed?"
I said, "What's that?"
He said, "You and your friends, you're all alike. You're very similar." And I realized that a lot of my friends are ex-military. I'm not offended by the harshness or the matter-of-fact attitude—"get to the point." [chuckles]

TS: Right. Right.

VB: I'm not offended because I know where that comes from, because I know I can be that way. It was a really good time in my life. And just the fact that when I took the time to try to find some stuff, I was on the floor in my bedroom like, "Oh, wow, look at you."

TS: You look pretty good, Vanessa! But you look great now too.

VB: I appreciate you taking the time to come over here and to let me share my story because, as we were having this conversation, I thought about stuff I hadn't thought about in a while. I knew you were going to ask me questions, but I didn't take any time to think about what I would say or what I would share.

TS: Well, I thank you. I'm really glad that I got to meet you today.

VB: Yeah.

TS: Well, if you don't have anything else, I can turn it off, if you want.

VB: Okay.

[End of Interview]