Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, initiating an oral history interview with Dr. Donna Dean, a veteran of the US Navy. Today’s date is the eighth of June 2004. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock and Donna is speaking to me by phone from Washington state. Good morning Donna.

Donna Dean: Good morning.

LC: Donna, if we could, I’d like to begin by asking you just general biographical questions. Where were your born and when?

DD: I was born on 23 February 1941 in Ross Hospital, Marin County. My family lived in Mill Valley, California, at the time.

LC: Were your parents native Californians?

DD: No, no. My father was from Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, and my mother was from Downers Grove, Illinois.

LC: How did they happen to be in California at the time of your birth?

DD: My father was stationed in the Army at Ft. Berry or Ft. Cronkite. They’re right next to each other there on the coast; one of the two, Ft. Berry, I think. And my mother had followed the rest of her extended family out to California in the ’30s, I think.

LC: Had they come out because of the Depression and because things were problematical in the Midwest or do you know?
DD: I really don’t know. Possibly, possibly.

LC: Now is it the case that your mom had gone to college?

DD: She had when she met my father, gone to normal school, which was a type of two-year school that turned out teachers. And this was prior to the time when a four-year degree was the norm and she did not get her four-year degree until my twin sister and I were sixteen years old.

LC: Okay, but she had wanted to have a career in teaching, or was that the direction that was available?

DD: That, I think, was the direction that was available. She had started university and her father, who was rather unstable I guess you would say, had agreed to put her through university and then decided at some point that he wasn’t going to do that, leaving her rather stranded.

LC: Okay.

DD: So she went ahead and went into the normal school thing. In later years, she said what she really would’ve liked to do was write poetry and to be a nun in the Episcopal Church, which I found rather stunning. But after listening to her, I think it’s true. I think that really would have been suitable for her and something she would’ve wanted to do. She knew a lot of writers and she loved poetry, and some of her friends, in fact, became well known writers.

LC: So was she, I mean, is it fair to say that she was something of a frustrated literary person or intellectual, something like that?

DD: She was certainly frustrated. She was frustrated middle class, for one thing, because we were anything but. And I think she longed for a more tidy life. A more, not elite, but a life more dominated by the mind than anything else. She wasn’t well equipped to deal with the grittier aspects of life, shall we say?

LC: Okay, and some of those were introduced, I gather, by your dad?

DD: Yeah. In those days no one had any idea what alcoholism was. And he had been introduced to alcohol. He fought in Nicaragua in the ’20s in the Marines. He joined the Marines at fourteen.

LC: Okay.
DD: He had a brutal background. Excuse me. I’m going to choke. (Coughs) He had a brutal familial background. His family was Irish and I strongly suspect his father was a drunk. And he used to, among other things, tie the children up to posts in the basement and beat them with a horsewhip. And my father had run away with his favorite sister when he was about twelve and the priest found them and made them go back home, telling them to honor their mother and their father. And my father would get into knife fights with his brothers. There were seven children all together, and when he was fourteen, he was very big. He was about six-foot-four.

LC: Wow.

DD: And he ran away and joined the Marine Corps, which in those days was none too careful about certification and documentation and that kind of thing.

LC: Sure.

DD: And he served as a drill instructor at Parris Island in the Marines for a while and then he was sent to Nicaragua as an interpreter. And he had what was apparently a heart attack and there were no doctors, there were no medicines. The only treatment was whiskey. And so he was given whiskey and he undoubtedly had the genetic predisposition common amongst Irishmen and he became an alcoholic in time. And when he met my mother he had gone from the Marine Corps to the Army and never rose above corporal and then he would be busted back down to private for fights and drinking. He was exceedingly violent on the outside, never to his family. But she simply wasn’t equipped to deal with that. No one would have been back then.

LC: Yeah, and of course, not much of a network for her, at least in formal terms, perhaps informally within the family, but in formal terms, networks to support spouses just weren’t present.

DD: No, there wasn’t any. And there wasn’t any within the family, either.

LC: Okay, so she was kind of on her own handling this.

DD: Right.

LC: Okay.

DD: Right.

LC: And your dad at some point switched from the Marines, then, to the Army, am I right thinking that?
DD: Yes.

LC: Okay. And he was approximately how old, then, at your birth? Any idea?

DD: I think mid-thirties.

LC: Okay. And Donna, you were one of a set of twins.

DD: Mm-hm.

LC: Okay, can you tell me a little bit about that? Do you have a brother or sister?

DD: I have a twin sister and she lives nearby.

LC: Nearby you now?

DD: Yes.

LC: Oh, that’s good.

DD: She’s about an hour away.

LC: Okay.

DD: However, she hasn’t always. We’ve both moved around a lot, her primarily in California, me all over.

LC: Sure. What kind of a career if she’s had one has she engaged in? Can you just give a brief sketch of what she has been doing?

DD: Well, she’s had a very sad life.

LC: Okay.

DD: She’s had four husbands, all of whom were extremely dysfunctional. Three of them alcoholics, all of them abusive. And she herself has a very peculiar drinking pattern, but technically it doesn’t fill the bill for alcoholism because she can quit when she wants to. But she suffers from bipolar disease.

LC: Yes.

DD: And when she gets into a depressive cycle, she drinks enormous quantities of alcohol.

LC: Okay.

DD: And she continues to do that until she cycles out.

LC: Okay.

DD: So she’s had basically a minimal fringes sort of existence.

LC: Okay, yes it sounds quite tumultuous.
DD: Yes, she’s never had any kind of security. She has worked very hard, but most of the time for little or no wages because she would allow herself to be exploited. And she hasn’t even worked enough to have come up with a decent Social Security income. Though she lives on, now her last husband burned himself to death last summer in drunken stupor. He burned his mobile home down around himself and she’s living on his Social Security.

LC: Was that an intentional suicide, do you know, or is it not clear?

DD: It depends on how you define intentional. He knew he would kill himself if he continued to drink the way he did and to smoke and to consume unbelievable quantities of Pepsi, because he had huge bleeding ulcers.

LC: Right.

DD: And he often said he had no reason to keep living and he didn’t make any attempt to stop drinking. He wouldn’t admit he had a drinking problem.

LC: Wow.

DD: And he essentially had been killing himself for the, I don’t know, the last fifteen years or so since his first wife died of cancer. And to my knowledge, he never made any effort whatsoever to change anything. He was evaluated. I kept prodding and he was evaluated for alcoholism. But of course if you lie about your behavior to the evaluator, you’re not going to be diagnosed as an alcoholic.

LC: Right, you can stay outside the criteria.

DD: Right, you just say, “No, no one’s ever said anything to me.” You know.

LC: Exactly, right.

DD: So, in that sense, yes, he committed suicide. Did he mean to do it that night? No, he fell asleep in a chair. He’d gotten to the point where he sat in his chair twenty-four hours a day. He had a caretaker and she would come in and he would have soiled himself and didn’t move, couldn’t walk, couldn’t stand up, would fall down on the floor drunk and couldn’t get up, that kind of thing. And the inevitable end, of course, since he was a chain-smoker, was that he would burn the house down, which he did. His chair caught on fire and then the house caught on fire and that was the end of it.

LC: Donna, is your sister recovering from that or was that, you know something that released her in some way?
DD: She has manufactured a mythical past.

LC: Really?

DD: And sees herself as the grieving widow. Nobody can understand the pain she bears except other widows and so on and so forth. And we don’t talk about it too much. I told her the best thing that could’ve happened other than shooting the son-of-a-bitch between the eyes was for him to die, and she didn’t find that sensitive. I don’t know why.

LC: I don’t either. It seems imminently reasonable, if nothing else. (Laughing)

DD: Yeah, it does to me. (Laughing)

LC: Well, Donna, let’s talk about you. I know that your sister, just by virtue of the fact that she’s a twin. By the way, is she a fraternal twin or—?

DD: Yeah, fraternal.

LC: Is, you know, she’s certainly, you know, linked to you in a particular way. But I really wonder if we could talk a little bit about your growing up and things that interested you when you were just a youngster. What kinds of things were you drawn to? Music? Writing? Science?

DD: I loved books, and the animals. But when I was a child, before I went to school, I locked myself in the bathroom as long as I could get away with it and taught myself how to read. We always kept a Reader’s Digest in the bathroom. And in fact, for many years until I was an adult, I thought there was something vaguely nasty about the Reader’s Digest. (Laughing)

LC: It was linked in your mind.

DD: You didn’t mention it in polite company. But I taught myself how to read and one day my mother said I just issued forth and proceeded to regale my mother and my father about the complete life cycle of bees.

LC: Really?

DD: Yeah. (Laughing)

LC: Now you taught yourself to read?

DD: Mm-hm.

LC: I mean, this is extraordinary.
DD: It was something I guess I felt compelled to do. My mother always had books. She had a complete set of famous literature, you know, one of those.

LC: Yes, *Great Books* or something like that.

DD: Yeah, and she loved reading. And my father—well, he only had a limited education—had a photographic memory and he was extremely intelligent, was possibly more intelligent than my mother, and never forgot anything he read. So when he was sober, there was a lot of discussion about different topics. And somehow I put together that books equal knowledge equal interesting life.

LC: Okay, right.

DD: And so by the time I went to school, I could read. I could read adult things like magazines and newspapers. And so I never had to sit there and do the *See Spot Run* stuff. I was allowed to sit there by myself and read whatever I wanted to read because my mother was a teacher and the teachers knew her and so I was indulged, I guess you could say, in that aspect. And whenever we went over to anybody’s house, I was raised with the concept that children are to be seen and not heard. All they had to do was give me a pile of magazines and I was happy. You wouldn’t hear a peep out of me for hours. And when I got older and could go to the library. I read some incredible stuff. In fact, one of the earliest things I remember reading is a series of books by Mary Lasswell, who wrote *Tooner Schooner* and *Suds in Your Eye*. I don’t know if these titles mean anything to you, but they were written during the war about some old ladies that lived in the Ark (editor’s note: the Noah’s Ark junkyard) in San Diego.

LC: (Laughing)

DD: And they must make do. I mean, they literally piece their lives together selling gardenias to sailors and working in the tuna factories and things. And they’re very, very funny and I loved them. In fact, when I joined the Navy and was later stationed in San Diego, I was thrilled to death to actually find this bar in the books she used to mention.

LC: No kidding.

DD: Yeah, where they had tropical storms. You know, they had palm trees and stuff painted on the wall and they’d have this tropical storm with thunder and lightning. And I actually found that bar. It was a real place, and I was so excited.
LC: It’s real; it exists.

DD: Yeah, and I started to talk to the bartender about it because these books were part of my blood by then.

LC: Sure.

DD: And he didn’t know what I was talking about.

LC: He didn’t have a clue.

DD: No. And I was just crushed. And I was stationed at headquarters, 12th Naval District, directly across the street from where the Ark would have been if it had been real. The Ark was actually supposed to be a junkyard with an old shack built of planks. And these ladies drank beer in massive quantities and the wall was made up of beer cans full of sand. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

DD: I just loved these books.

LC: Yeah.

DD: They’re collector’s items now and I have one entire set and part of another.

LC: I was going to ask you if you’d found a way to get hold of copies.

DD: Absolutely. I have put together several sets and given them to friends because I wanted to share them with people because they’re old and few people remember them now.

LC: Right, yes. I mean, I certainly am not an expert on children’s fiction or fiction at all really, and I had not heard of them, so it’s great that you mentioned them actually.

DD: Well, they weren’t children’s fiction.

LC: So they were sort of—who was the target audience? I mean, was it adult—?

DD: Adults, yeah, wartime.

LC: Okay.

DD: It took, the storyline took place during the war and the characters were all involved one way and another. The main characters were these four old ladies, but they would have contact with soldiers and sailors; sailors actually, not soldiers. And one of them has a nephew who’s in the Navy and he’s a boatswain’s mate. In time, he marries
and they have a baby back in New York and the old ladies get into this huge old Cadillac and drive across country to see the baby. They’re just funny.

LC: Yeah, it sounds pretty cool. It sounds good.

DD: They’re funny. And no matter what is thrown at them, they survive. I think that’s what appeals to me as an adult. That no matter what they run into, they come up with some ingenious way of beating the system and they thrive at it. A tax accountant is a con artist and he takes their taxes. They’re about to lose their beloved Ark. So they go to work in the tuna factory to put together enough money to pay the taxes. And later in the next book, they nail him for bootlegging.

LC: (Laughing) Yeah, it sounds pretty good, actually.

DD: You have to read them. Mary Lasswell. I cannot recommend them highly enough.

LC: Yeah, it sounds like a must read. (Laughing)

DD: Oh, yes. But anyway, I think I loved reading more than anything, and it took me to worlds I couldn’t go otherwise. Because really my life wasn’t really very happy under the circumstances. And the other thing that got me through life was access to the outdoors. And did you read Deep Six?

LC: Yes.

DD: Well, those Marin Hills are real. And everything that I talk about, with the exception of She Coyote of course, is real and they’re still there. Everything is like it was because it was made into a natural refuge or recreation area.

LC: It’s a preserve of some kind.

DD: Yeah. So it’s still intact. But my sister and I would spend every available moment up in those hills playing by ourselves or with another little girl. And they were magical to me. You’ve never been to California I suppose?

LC: Oh, I have been. Yes, I have.

DD: Have you been there?

LC: I’ve driven through there, although I didn’t spend time there. But I mean, it’s a gorgeous, I mean, obviously a beautiful part of this country.

DD: Well the fog rolls in in the evening in a solid bank, and I mean it literally rolls over you. You can sit and watch it from a distance and see it come over like a
blanket. And of course, that’s sensually exciting. It’s a sensory overload almost to kids in particular I think because suddenly you’re in another world and everything is muffled and you can’t hear anything. You don’t hear the traffic down on the highway. You don’t hear any of the voices from Marin City. You don’t hear anything, and that was wonderful. And some of the places we lived had vast tracks of forests, Ponderosa Pine and Sugar Pine mostly, that hadn’t yet been logged and we spent a lot of time in the woods. And even my grandmother had a little six-acre place and next to it was a very large fruit orchard and even the orchard was a grand place to play in because there were no people, there were just the trees. And on the other side of it, which seemed a great distance to us, but of course it wasn’t, we were very small; but on the other side of it was a belt of woods, pinewoods. And I think that if I could have, I would’ve spent all my time out like that. And I had a dog that I loved beyond words.

LC: What was your dog’s name?

DD: Her name was Mittens.

LC: What kind of dog was she?

DD: She was a Husky mix or probably a Collie-Husky mix. She was very beautiful. And when we were living in Marin City, we only had a very small yard and she was quite a guard dog and somebody tried to poison her twice. So she had to go live with my grandmother.

LC: Was that a neighbor or somebody who did that? Do you have any idea?

DD: Just the kids I suppose.

LC: But she was—yeah, go head, go head Donna.

DD: The kids that grow up in a situation like Marin City are often quite violent and angry and they will victimize the small, the helpless, the young. And she made them angry by barking, I suppose. But they also poisoned a couple of kittens that we had, too. And certainly a kitten was no threat.

LC: Right, right. It was something that was being done. There was a little fad or something that they were; some kids were doing this.

DD: Yeah, I suppose. But anyway, Mittens had to go live with my grandmother.

LC: Oh, that’s heartbreaking.

DD: It was.
LC: Oh.

DD: Especially since it was quite a distance from Marin City to Grass Valley where my mother lived, I mean, my grandmother lived. And we didn’t get there that often and when we went, Mittens didn’t recognize me.

LC: That’s tough. That’s very hard. You’re speaking to a confirmed dog lover, so I think I have some empathy for what you’re feeling and what you felt at that time. Donna, tell me about your own experience with education. Did you like school? You mentioned that at least part of the time you got to do in terms of reading, you got to read.

DD: Yeah, that, I liked that. But I apparently have very, very minimal right brain damage, possibly from my father’s alcoholism, and have never had the capacity for math, and certainly not in a standardized way. So I didn’t do well from the beginning and I was humiliated by the teachers at the critical juncture when I was learning the more complex things like addition, subtraction, and division. And I remember clearly one event where we were learning carrying. And I was trying to be a good girl because if anything emphasized by my mother, it was “Don’t humiliate me. You’re my daughter. Be good in school.” So I went down my paper and I made the cross outs on the carrying signs, not knowing that you weren’t going to have to carry with every one of them. And my teacher came along and she saw my paper and she snatched it up and crumbled it up and threw it away and yelled at me for being a bad girl and I was stupid. And I didn’t know we were going to have to do any carrying and I should stay with the class and pay attention to what she was saying and not get ahead. So it’s silly now, but what I should’ve done is bitten her on the leg.

LC: (Laughing)

DD: That really stuck with me and I could never do the math clear up through grad school, I couldn’t do the math. And at one point in algebra—I always had to take remedial math, but I would always also get into the advanced English courses.

LC: Sure, right.

DD: And I would be bored to tears with the rest of it. And I would occasionally get into trouble for other things. Like in the junior year of high school, we were supposed to write stories. And I wrote a story having to do with racial discrimination and the teacher called my mother to school to tell her that I shouldn’t be concerned about such
issues at my age. And she was very concerned about me involving myself in things like that. This is one time my mother stuck up for me.

LC: Did she?

DD: Normally she didn’t, yeah.

LC: What happened in this incident?

DD: She told her that she saw nothing wrong with having an interest in that sort of thing, that it was part of life and there was no reason to think a junior in high school was unaware of such issues, particularly since I had lived in Marin City and seen it.

LC: Can you tell a little bit about that Donna? What kinds of things had you seen in Marin City that caused you, you think, to have some awareness of racial difference and discrimination?

DD: Well, the things I say in Deep Six other than the specificities are quite true. Tamalpais was the high school for Marin City. Well first let me go back a little further.

LC: Sure.

DD: We moved to Marin City as we were going into the fourth grade or fifth grade. And on the first day of school, I walked in and was beaten up by black girls and I didn’t say anything about it. But they would beat me up pretty badly and that went on for a couple of weeks. And then finally they decided we were going to be best buddies because I hadn’t told the teacher on them. And so I wasn’t a snitch. But it was my first experience of racial discrimination. And then later when I went to high school, the kids I’d been playing with all along were suddenly in one group and the white kids and mixed Indians and Mexicans were in another. And we were still friendly, but we weren’t friends as such. And it was so seamless, that looking back, I’m not sure when it happened or how, but there was no interracial dating, it wasn’t even a question. We just knew it. It was as though it seeped into us through osmosis, even though we’d grown up together. And I think that racism was so pervasive and systemic that there was never one point where you were told “never the twain shall meet.” It was just sort of accepted by both sides. And the only time that was broken, there was an annual race riot, and it was called that, with Sir Francis Drake High School in the nearby town of San Anselmo, to which I ended up going later my sophomore year. And then all of the Marin City kids fought for Tam (Tamalpais) against Sir Francis Drake and that was lumping us all
together as Marin City kids, period, regardless of melatonin. That was kind of unique, I think.

LC: How did that race riot day or event happen? I mean, it happened every year around what time?

DD: Football season.

LC: Okay. So, the football—?

DD: And the boys would, there would be an agreement of where it would be and the boys would go physically fight. The girls didn’t really do anything.

LC: Did they go?

DD: No.

LC: Okay, they weren’t even there. The girls generally weren’t there.

DD: No, no.

LC: So it would just be like a free for all between the guys from—?

DD: I guess so.

LC: Oh, my God. Wow.

DD: I don’t think there was any serious damage done. As far as I know, chains and knives and zip guns weren’t used. It was just sort of a fistfight kind of thing. And I don’t think anybody ever got seriously hurt, I never heard about it, anyway.

LC: Wow, wow.

DD: But it was one of those traditions.

LC: That football has passed on to all of us.

DD: I did not know—this is true, as odd as it might seem—I did not know how prejudiced my parents were. And my father was missing at this point, so it would’ve been my mother. But I had a friend in school named Johnny Rhodes and he was black. And I was out washing the windows in the parking lot one day and he drove by and he saw me out there and he drove in because he was so proud of himself. He had a car. And cars were rare amongst the poor high school kids.

LC: Oh, sure. Absolutely.

DD: And here he’d gotten himself a car and he was showing it off to everybody he could find. So I went over and admired it and so on and so forth and we talked a little and then he left. And I finished washing the windows and I walked in the house and my
mother was sitting in a chair in the middle of the room with this really odd, glazed, look on her face and it scared me terribly. And I kept asking her what was the matter and she wouldn’t answer and finally she started saying repetitively, “My own daughter. My own daughter.” And I’m by this time beside myself saying, “What did I do? I finished the windows. Why are you mad at me? What have I done?” And finally she said, “You were talking to a nigger.” And my jaw dropped open and my heart sank down to my feet and I said, “That’s Johnny. That’s Johnny Rhodes. I’ve known him since I was in the fifth grade. All I was doing was talking to him. He came by and saw me and showed me his car. What’s the matter with that?” And she kept saying, “He’s a nigger. He’s a nigger.” And that was the first time I had any idea how my mother felt about things. Now mind you, she had sent my sister and me to Bible school at the holy-roller black church with all the black children.

LC: Why was that?

DD: Well, that’s what there was. And she usually taught during the summer.

LC: Okay.

DD: And it was a place to send us to do things and you did crafts and things.

LC: Sure, like a vacation Bible school kind of thing.

DD: Yeah, right. And then at the end of it, we did go to church, I remember, and everybody’s hooting and hollering and waving their arms and singing and I got really into the spirit of it and got saved. I thought that was kind of cool.

LC: It is kind of cool.

DD: (Laughing) You know, I just got caught up in the spirit of it all.

LC: Well, there you go. I mean, that’s the whole point of it, isn’t it? I mean, that’s what everybody was doing.

DD: (Laughing) I guess so.

LC: (Laughing)

DD: I don’t know what my mother thought about it.

LC: Well, had you ever heard her use that word before?

DD: Not that I recall.

LC: Never heard her say—?

DD: However, it was so commonly in use I might have.
LC: Okay, okay.

DD: But it wouldn’t necessarily have sunk in.

LC: Wouldn’t have struck you in the way this incident—?

DD: No, and later I was to hear a great deal more of it.

LC: From her?

DD: And everybody in the family.

LC: Okay.

DD: And when I was stationed in Naples in the late ’70s, my first cousin and her husband came to visit and to do some touristing around. And I was involved by then in that horrendous situation in Naples and was trying to talk to her about what was happening to me. And she relieved herself of the opinion that God created the races separately and there should be no intermarriage and there shouldn’t be any living in the same neighborhood kind of shit. And I was stunned that she still bought this crap at this age because by then I was quite an informed and activist liberal, flaming liberal.

LC: And you’re in your mid-thirties at that point?

DD: Yes.

LC: And living your own life.

DD: Yeah, right, and here she is, she’s nine months younger and here she is coming off with the same old Nazi line and I thought, “My God, where have you been, my dear?”

LC: And actually, that’s of interest. Where had she been? Had she been living somewhere in the, you know, living some kind of secluded life?

DD: No. No, she hadn’t. However, she had not had much exposure to people of color, I suppose. And thinking back, there was—we went to junior college together. We lived together.

LC: Oh, okay.

DD: And we remained close until I joined the Navy and she married. But there had been a young man that I had a crush on, but he had a crush on her. And she wouldn’t date him and I could never understand it because he was this absolute hunk. God, he was gorgeous.

LC: (Laughing)
DD: And he was Japanese and I later discovered that she was just as prejudice
against Asians as she was against blacks.

LC: Okay.

DD: And she’d never changed, I guess. I hadn’t realized it because where we
went to junior college, Santa Rosa, California, there weren’t, as I recall, any black people.
There were Asians and some Mexicans, but no blacks. So, beats me.

LC: So in that context, the African American issue didn’t really come up, at least
when you guys were living together?

DD: No. But afterwards, we both moved to San Francisco and we went to a
couple of these dances that they would have for the servicemen.

LC: Sure.

DD: This was during the Cuban Missile Crisis. We would be bussed by the Red
Cross to Hamilton Air Force Base and Travis Air Force Base. And whether the whole
Air Force was like that or not, I don’t know. But there were great many blacks at Travis
and Hamilton and there would be trouble when the black guys would ask us to dance and
then the white guys would want to fight over it, which just disgusted me. But my cousin
had never said anything about the blacks wanting to dance with her. And a lot of times,
what they wanted to do was start fights. Young men are young men, regardless of color.
But she hadn’t said anything. And after she married—she married a sailor—I would’ve
thought she ran into blacks, but maybe not. But it certainly came as a surprise to me.

LC: That’s interesting.

DD: And I’d been tootling along in my life becoming this wild-eyed feminist.
And in fact, when I was stationed in Italy, I was in the Equal Opportunity Program and I
was a human resource management specialist and it was our job to go around and educate
the crews of the ships on race relations, and that’s what I did. So, you can imagine what
a shock this was.

LC: Absolutely, to come, you know, out of your own family to have this kind of
thing come up and you had no—

DD: Yeah, your whole family is just slightly to the right of Hitler.

LC: (Laughing)

DD: Oh, God.
LC: Yeah. Well, Donna, I want to ask you about that, the work that you did based out of Naples and also, you know, the situations that arose for you there. But first, let’s, if you agree, I’d like to find out about your transition from being a civilian to actually inquiring about a military career. How did that arise?

DD: Well, it’s really kind of a neat story.

LC: Okay.

DD: I was working for the telephone company. I had an AA degree.

LC: Which you had from Santa Rosa?

DD: Right. And reality had set home because I worked in San Francisco. Well, I started out in Santa Rosa as a telephone operator, then I transferred to San Francisco as the service rep. No, I’m sorry, my cousin was a service rep. I went to work for the Yellow Pages.

LC: Okay.

DD: And there were thousands of women working for the phone company in San Francisco and none of them made more than a dollar or so above minimum wage and they only went to the first line supervisor positions. And none of them had any access to the more lucrative positions of the higher supervisory levels or in particular, sales. And sales was immensely lucrative.

LC: And this was apparent to you. You were looking around and observing.

DD: Oh yeah, yes, yes.

LC: Because this is the early ’60s. This is what, ’61 or 2, or something like that, somewhere in there?

DD: Yeah, yeah. And I worked in an office that was basically a city block long and there were desks. We women were divided up into three sections and there was a women supervisor for each section and we were divided up by alphabetical order within the Yellow Pages and I had washing machines through Z. Anyway, there was one-woman supervisor at a desk in the middle of all the rows of minions. And then in the middle of the room behind that supervisor was a desk occupied by the overlord of the three sections and that was a male. And then at the end was a desk occupied by the supreme overlord who was a male; and there was never any question about moving up. I became quite good friends with my supervisor and we talked about this at length. In fact,
we remained friends until we lost contact just a few years ago, really. And she was
accepting of it in a way, but quite forthcoming about the impossibility of moving up in
the phone company. And I had asked about transferring to sales because, frankly, I
wanted more money, I was making minimum wage. Living in San Francisco, I got
malnutrition because I could not afford food, rent, and bus fare.

LC: What part of San Francisco were you living in?
DD: I started out—and this was prior to the hippies.

LC: Sure.
DD: I started out on Haight Street and later moved to Diamond Heights. I lived in
a little two-room basement apartment in someone’s house. And it was really quite a
choice place in that it had a magnificent view, but it was as cheap as you could get at the
time, was ninety dollars a month.

LC: I hear you.
DD: And I lived there until I moved away to finish university to get my
bachelor’s to get a commission. So I had an uncle, my favorite uncle, my grandmother’s
brother, George Boles who was even then quite famous locally and in California because
he had sailed with the Great White Fleet. And he used to talk about it all the time and
going into Catania after Etna erupted and helping rebuild Catania, rescue people. And he
had stayed in the reserves until he had to retire. Then he joined the fleet reserves and he
continued to work until just before his death in his late nineties. And he would show up
at the fleet reserves dinners and things as a speaker and I adored him. He liked us kids.
And I guess I had been complaining about my lot in life because back then all you could
do was the kind of work I was doing or you could be a file clerk or some other menial job
for minimum wage. I mean, there was nothing else. And he said, “Why don’t you join
the Navy?” And I thought, “What a cool idea.” Because I really like sailors with their
tattoos and their skintight tailor mates and their embroidered cuffs turned back and their
gold earrings.

LC: That was all looking pretty good.
DD: Whoa, yeah!
LC: (Laughing) Okay.
DD: So I thought, “Well, that’s a thought.” And he said, “You can get a commission with two years of college.” Because when he was on active duty, you could. So I contacted the recruiter and I was pretty much aware that we were going to go to war in Vietnam by then.

LC: Now this would’ve been in 1963?

DD: Yeah, yeah. And they sent over to my apartment the commanding officer of an all WAVE (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service) unit at Treasure Island in the reserves. At first they told me I couldn’t be an officer with two years. So they sent Tena Catena over to talk to me and she—(Laughing), good old Tena. We’re still in contact. She’s a beloved friend of mine.

LC: Okay.

DD: And she was so enthusiastic about the reserves and the fun I could have and I could work my way up. I could finish college, get a degree, get a commission, and I fell for it. So, I said, “Oh, well. Why not? It’s one weekend a month, two weeks a year. I’ll make some extra money. I’ll have a good time.” And boy did I. We met at Treasure Island and there were just a handful of us and several of us became inseparable. And one of them was a black woman named Vicki, Vicki Monroe, who if I didn’t think of some kind of prank to pull, she did. And we had more fun than a barrel of monkeys. I could hardly wait for drill night.

LC: Really?

DD: Yeah. And still, our chief petty officer and our first class made us work. We did better than all the male units on the base in the academic course work and the drilling and all that because Tena wasn’t putting up with any kind of hanky panky and neither were the chief and the first class. But we still had a wonderful time. And of course, there were sailors everywhere. And it became not just apparent, but it became reality that we were at war. And the papers were full of the bodies coming home from Vietnam, the anti-war demonstrations were in full cry. I decided I would indeed do what I felt was my duty, finish school, and get a commission.

LC: Now when did you actually finish school?

DD: I went back in 1965 and graduated in 1967 by the skin of my teeth because I had to cobble together enough credits. I’ve always been, not a dilettante, but a butterfly
sampling this, that, and the other thing academically. And I didn’t have enough credits in
any one thing to get a bachelor’s degree except Spanish. So I was pushing the age limit
for a commission, had to finish in two years. So I declared Spanish as a major and
journalism as a minor and put together enough credits to do that.

LC: In what institution did you get the degree from then?
DD: At that time, it was Sacramento State. It’s now the University of California,
Sacramento campus. And I went to summer school, as well, picking up additional credits
I needed at American River Junior College because there were some things I had not
done that were necessary for the bachelor’s.

LC: Right, you had to fill some requirements.
DD: Right, right. So I basically was in school continuously until I graduated in
1967 and left almost immediately for officer candidate training school in Newport, Rhode
Island. Got of commission, the rest is history.

LC: (Laughing) Yes, it absolutely is. Donna, let me ask you a little bit about
being in the Bay area during this time period, ’65, ’66, ’67. You mentioned that the anti-
war movement was developing. Of course, there’s also musical movement going on and
a lot of cultural change happening and a lot of the triggers of that were centered there in
the Bay area. How much of that did you see or experience? Any incidents come to mind
around all of that?

DD: Well, one, I wasn’t involved in it. I still feel very, very strongly about it.
There was a lot of publicity about a nurse, Susan something-or-other who was
demonstrating against the war. And she had been put through university by the Navy and
I and everyone else I knew felt nothing but contempt for her. I mean, here she avails
herself of a free education—we had to pay for ours—and then she bites the hand that
feeds her, so to speak. And at that time, and throughout my career, and this is a very
shameful thing for me now, but I was a hawk of the first degree. I believed everything I
was told. I believed we had to go to Vietnam. I believed in the Domino Theory. I
believed we were doing the right thing. I thought the anti-war demonstrators were a lot of
spoiled rotten middle class kids playing at poverty living in the streets and everything the
way they did. And what they needed was a good, swift kick in the ass and to get drafted.
And for whatever reason, I did not see the other side or even consider it, and that possibly
part of it was self-protective. But when you get into the military, you exist in a bell jar
sort of existence and you become part of a culture and you don’t really participate much
in the outside world. I was older than the hippies, to begin with.

LD: Yeah.

DD: I barely made it under the wire at the age of twenty-seven to get
commissioned. So I didn’t relate to them anyway due to age. And I would have in class,
speech class in particular where we were forced to speak, I would have some very—
now—embarrassing things to say.

LD: And you say that because your political views have shifted, to say the least?

DD: Oh yes, yes. We had no business being in Vietnam, none whatsoever and I
would not admit that until 1983. I just couldn’t face that. However, I had already
developed an inability to deal with anything regarding the war, even though I never went.

LD: Meaning you never were actually posted in-country.

DD: No.

LD: Right.

DD: No, I wasn’t.

LD: Right.

DD: But I couldn’t deal with the casualties and the waste of life. And the
information I received was all from one side and that’s very common in the military.
That’s why you see these people in Iraq worshiping President Bush and saying, “We’re
doing the right thing, we should be here, this is right; we’re getting rid of the evil
dictator,” and so on and so forth. It’s the same bullshit that Vietnam was. And I even
applied to go to Vietnam. They opened up one billet for women officers in the Navy to
go and I applied for it and so did everybody I knew. And the woman who was selected
was the daughter of an admiral, which is predictable.

LD: Who was that? Do you have any idea?

DD: I don’t recall anymore. It was a long time ago.

LD: But that was how it went down?

DD: Yeah. And you might have known that it would be because it would’ve
been the single-most career enhancing thing a woman could do at the time in the Navy.
And I was in—actually, my period of service covered a very interesting time when women were their own separate entity, the WAVES.

LC: Yes.

DD: And then we were integrated into the regular Navy, supposedly. And prior to that, when I was still an ensign, they had opened up the grades for women to go from commander, which had been the top rank for a woman with the exception of a temporary captain who ran the WAVES. And they opened up captain’s ranks and there was an eye-opening, horrendous thing I saw firsthand with that, too.

LC: What happened there, Donna?

DD: Well I worked for a World War II commander and she had at that point twenty-six years of 4.0 fitness reports. She was a superb commander, and boy she taught me a thing or two, I’ll tell you. (Laughing)

LC: Who was this Donna?

DD: Her name was Camille Houck, H-o-u-c-k.

LC: And where were you when you worked for her?

DD: Commandant 12th Naval District.

LC: Okay.

DD: And she worked for a captain, who in turn answered to the admiral. Both the captain and the admiral were stone drunkards and the admiral hated women. He loathed them in his Navy. And he’d already gotten me. She gave me a perfect fitness report because I was good. I was really good. And getting a 4.0 out of her was a real honor and he changed it and gave me some mediocre mark saying that no ensign deserves a 4.0 fitness report. He would never have done that to a male, but he did and he had the power to do it and there was no appeal.

LC: It was just arbitrary.

DD: Yes, and there was nothing I could do about it, and there was nothing the commander could do about it. So I’m sorry to say that one day I was in there, he had complained about my skirt being too short; and it was I suppose. I had good legs.

(Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)
DD: I was beautiful enough to make strong men fall down on the ground and bite sticks and that didn’t bother me at all to make use of that.

LC: (Laughing)

DD: But anyway, she had been dressing me down because he said to. And I started to cry because I hadn’t really been able to internalize the unfairness of his changing my fitness report, which would be a part of my record forever.

LC: Yes.

DD: And harm my career forever. And she, I don’t know, she had taken to drinking a lot. A lot of those World War II women used to sit around the officers’ club at noon and drink martinis one right after the other and she had joined them. And she must’ve been feeling vulnerable or something, that she hauled out her fitness report and showed it to me. He had literally destroyed her career out of nothing more than hatred of women in his Navy. She had perfect fitness reports for twenty-six years and he gave her a mediocre one that immediately assured that she would never make captain. Because at this time, all commanders had kind of piled up in a log jam since they couldn’t go any higher and she was ultimately forced to retire when she reached the statutory limit for active duty as a commander. And later he finally went too far, I guess. He used to do the most childish things out of spite. I spoke Spanish, of course.

LC: Right.

DD: And he didn’t have a Spanish-speaking officer on his staff. And so he had no choice but to invite me to his cocktail parties and receptions for Spanish-speaking officers that came into port. Spain, Peru, Chile, whatever and they would make ports of call, courtesy visits. And he would—I would be in the reception line and he would pretend he couldn’t remember my name.

LC: Nice.

DD: Yeah. But he had no choice but to invite me because most of them either didn’t speak English or would refuse to speak English.

LC: Right.

DD: And ultimately in dealing with the Mexican authorities, which had to be done on a fairly continuous basis because of the border, I would have to be included. And he would wait until the last minute to have me sent for, trying, hoping for a miracle
from heaven that they would suddenly speak English. (Laughing) And of course they
wouldn’t.

LC: And it also caused you maximum upset though in terms of—

DD: Oh, yeah. Right.

LC: Right.

DD: Up three flights of stairs to the lair. But one of the funnier things that
happened was—well, I have two sea stories. Do you want sea stories or do you want to
skip those?

LC: Just go head and lay them on us Donna. Why not? (Laughing)

DD: Okay. I was involved with frequent meetings in Tijuana with the Mexican
general and the mayor and the chief of police, because I would go along as an interpreter.
Well, they all thought I was cute as a bug’s ear and they didn’t take me seriously, which
at the time I didn’t care. I was away from the office and having a good time and got a
free lunch. But the general truly did not speak English. The chief of police and the
mayor did, but they would pretend they couldn’t, just to be assertive I guess. Anyway,
the general showed up at headquarters one day with a whole bunch of armored jeeps with
soldiers hanging out all over with guns and bandoliers. The Mexicans are very, very
showy with their armaments. And I saw them, but I didn’t hear any word about going up
to the admiral’s office, so I just sat and waited. And sure enough a phone call comes,
“Get up here. The admiral wants you right away. Apparently Mexico thinks we bombed
them and they’re on the brink of declaring war.” (Laughing) So I go trotting up to the
admiral’s office and the general tells me this story. And what it really was about was he
had brought all the troops across the border to tell the admiral that he was terribly sorry
he couldn’t come to his barbeque because he had to take the troops out in the desert to try
to retrieve what was apparently a weather balloon that had fallen in the Mexican desert.

LC: (Laughing)

DD: And he wanted the admiral to know that he deeply regretted this. So that
served as fodder for one of my stories of how I averted war with the Mexicans.

LC: (Laughing)

DD: And then another incident, the Japanese training force came in and they
were on their way to Mexico. And they needed something, but no one could understand
this one officer’s English and he was their interpreter in Spanish. He was the only
Spanish speaking officer in the Japanese Navy.

LC: Okay.

DD: So I was invited to a reception onboard their ship to meet him. Well, I have
trouble dealing with numbers anyhow, and I was all excited about this, going onboard the
ship in my dress whites and so on. So I showed up shiny and gorgeous in my single gold
stripe and my white uniform and got piped onboard and greeted by the admiral, the
Japanese admiral. And there was a lot of consternation when I said who I was supposed
to meet. And after awhile, this officer hurries up to me and he’s kind of disheveled for a
Japanese—they are very, very tidy—and breathless and we conduct our business and I
leave. And I’m getting all these poisonous—well, first, I was allowed to cruise and graze
amongst the hors d’oeuvres and things and then I left. And I’m getting all these
poisonous looks from the admiral and his aid, my admiral, and I have no idea what I’ve
done wrong. I mean, I was supposed to find out what this guy wanted and I did that.
And so the following day, I got hauled up to the admiral’s office again and chewed out by
his aid, the admiral didn’t deign to do it himself. But that was not the cocktail party I was
supposed to attend. That one was for flag rank and captains and I was supposed to go the
next day to the cocktail party for the minions. (Laughing) I went the wrong day. And of
course, I stuck out like a sore thumb, I’m sure.

LC: (Laughing)

DD: I’m sure the admiral never got over the humiliation.

LC: Right, right. A terrible day for him. A black, black day. I can see that.

DD: Oh, God, yes. Yes.

LC: (Laughing) I can see that.

DD: (Laughing) Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. I’m quite sure he was glad to see the
back of me when I left, which I soon did. I didn’t spend a whole tour there.

LC: That’s right. What was your next place that you went to after that?

DD: Lowry Air Force Base in Colorado, the Navy unit.

LC: And what was the Navy unit doing there at the base, at the Air Force base?

DD: We were administrators for the Navy and Marine Corps attendees of the
various intelligence schools. We kept their records and we did the medical side of things.
We had our own corpsmen. Nobody trusted the Air Force to do anything with the sailors except teach them the courses.

LC: So you had sort of a separate little space, basically, which was providing services?

DD: Yeah, we had our own little building and our own barracks and the Marines had their barracks. There’s another funny sea story associated with that. And we then built ourselves a little recreation area, stealing everything from the Air Force without their knowledge because I had an old-time boatswain’s mate working for me. And those old timers knew how to get anything they wanted.

LC: He was a scrounger?
DD: Oh, no, a thief.
LC: A thief, okay.
DD: He would get a truck and drive up to where the Air Force had all these piles of gravel for the road.

LC: Right.
DD: And he would load up an entire truckload and take it back until he had enough gravel to cover this whole area for this little recreation kingdom he was building. He stole the wood to build the picnic tables. He commandeered barbeques. None of it was legal.

LC: Right.
DD: But he did a bang-up job. But those old boatswain’s were a breed apart.

They really were.

LC: Was that someone who had come into service during World War II or the Korean era?
DD: Probably Korea. He was in his forties and he was only an E3. And we became quite good friends and he used to tell me that all he needed was enough money to go get drunk and get laid and a hammock to sleep on when he got back to the ship and three squares a day and he was happy. And he was. And during his time, the regulations changed that if you didn’t change or didn’t move up, you had to get out.

LC: Yeah, right.
DD: And so he got promoted, of course. I mean, he knew everything there was to know about being a boatswain. He’d been a coxswain for some of the highest-powered admirals in the Navy. And he made it all the way up to first class and then he steadily descended into a morass of misbehavior and getting put up on report for drunk behavior, fighting, that kind of thing, because he didn’t want to be a petty officer. He wanted to be an E3 with just enough money to fool around with and have nobody bothering him because nobody bothers the leading seaman, nobody. And he wasn’t married; he didn’t have a family. As soon as he got promoted, he married a woman with some children and that didn’t go well because he just wasn’t a husband material, much less a father. And really it was rather tragic and I think the Navy should’ve left well enough alone with those men because they were of inestimable value. Have you ever seen the new version of *South Pacific* with Glenn Close?

LC: No, I have not.

DD: Well, it was on last night.

LC: Okay.

DD: There’s a character in there that’s played by, oh, I can’t think of his name. Anyway, he plays a boatswain like that who’s running this entire black market operation all by himself. And this is the kind of guy Billy Warden was. That was his name, Billy Warden. It just ruined him, ruined him. And I loved having him work for me. (Laughing) All I had to do was mention, “It would be nice if—” and it would materialize.

LC: He could make it happen.

DD: He could, he could. He was a real wonder. But there aren’t anymore of them anymore.

LC: You said that his last name was Warden. Was that W-a-r-d-e-n, do you know?

DD: Um-hm, yeah.

LC: When you were at Lowry there near Denver, were your attitudes toward the war changing? This was the early Nixon administration. Or had they already changed?

DD: No.

LC: It was still, you were still—?
DD: No, they never changed. I couldn’t afford to let them change, I think, in retrospect.

LC: Until you were—

DD: And again, I’m receiving one-sided information. The media was then as it is now very conservative and supported the war. I certainly wasn’t reading any hippie communications.

LC: Right.

DD: I didn’t know any hippies.

LC: Right. Not at Lowry, I’m thinking. (Laughing)

DD: No, no. One of the things you asked me earlier was about the music, which, of course, was a driving force in the anti-war movement.

LC: Certainly.

DD: And in the Navy, you didn’t hear that kind of music. What you heard primarily was country-western because there’s a very large percentage or was of southern people.

LC: Yes.

DD: And farm people, from the Midwest. So country western was what you heard in the bars and in the clubs and so on and so forth. And I didn’t even know who Country Joe McDonald and the Fish was. Although I’d heard the name, I had no idea what they sang. And I didn’t get to know him until a couple of years ago when we started talking on the Minerva List and I even wrote a couple of songs for him.

LC: Did you?

DD: Yeah. I don’t know if he ever recorded them. But he had asked me to see what I could come up with regarding the slaughter of the buffalo in Yellowstone. Country Joe is one of the few people who never sold out. He believed. He walked the walk and talked the talk and he still is. He’s still performing and he’s still very much into presenting material about politics and labor unions. And he’s particularly involved with women nurses from Vietnam and Florence Nightingale. He’s related to Florence Nightingale.

LC: Oh, is that right? Oh, okay.

DD: Yeah.
LC: And so is that the source of his specific and particular interests in nurses who served in Vietnam?

DD: Well, he was a sailor during the war and he’s married to a nurse.

LC: Okay.

DD: His songs were very, very anti-war. He was extremely famous back then in the ’60s.

LC: Oh, yes. Very much so.

DD: And he sang protest music, but I did not know that then.

LC: You were pretty much out of the loop on Dylan, any of the protests, folk music, all of that?

DD: Yeah, yeah, right. And my music was Delta blues, which I grew up on in Marin City and I’m still obsessed with it. So my own personal music collection, while eclectic, didn’t include folk music or protest music. I had Delta blues, a little country and western, flamenco, and are you ready?

LC: Sure.

DD: Chinese opera.

LC: Is that right?

DD: Yeah.

LC: Wow.

DD: I like Chinese opera.

LC: Well, as someone who studied a lot of China, a lot of Chinese politics, a lot of Chinese history, I can say I’ve never gotten into the Chinese opera, but um, I’m willing to give it another look. (Laughing)

DD: I love it. I love it.

LC: How did you come across that?

DD: I really don’t know. I used to go to Chinatown a lot when I lived in San Francisco and also as a child. And of course, that was always playing over loudspeakers in the streets.

LC: Yes.

DD: And I liked it. There’s just something about it that I like. I’ve got several tapes of it, including the soundtrack from The Last Emperor of China.
LC: Wow.

DD: And there’s something about the tone of it. I like music in a minor key, which is why flamenco appeals to me and the blues. And of course, growing up in Marin City, I didn’t listen to anything but rhythm and blues.

LC: Yeah.

DD: I was infuriated as a teenager about the usurpation of black music by people like Pat Boone who would get airplay and Fats Domino, from whom he stole his songs, wouldn’t.

LC: Right, the cover versions by white artists.

DD: Right, right.

LC: What about Elvis or Buddy Holly? What did you think about them?

DD: I didn’t have much interest. I thought Elvis had a beautiful voice, and I still think that. But I didn’t find his backing good, it’s not right.

LC: Yeah.

DD: I think he could’ve done wonders with a good Delta background backup.

LC: (Laughing)

DD: Or the Rolling Stones maybe. I like the Rolling Stones. Rolling Stones, Credence Clearwater Revival, and Roy Orbison are about as white as my music collection gets.

LC: Oh, okay. And that’s not all that white, really.

DD: No, no.

LC: Right, I got your point; I got your point. (Laughing)

DD: Well, Roy Orbison is unique. There was no one like him and there never will be. But he certainly had a blues flavor.

LC: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

DD: So that’s what I listened to. And I would say that I sailed along my entire career without anti-war sentiments piercing my armor.

LC: Did you see anything of that sentiment out there in Denver at all, either when you were on base or off base?

DD: No. No I didn’t.

LC: Nothing like that?
LC: Did you come across guys who were actually coming back from Vietnam? Was there chatter going on that you heard or were part of about in-country?

DD: Well, being in the Navy, the men I met mostly had been offshore firing onshore and then I met some brown water sailors, which were the riverboats and some SEALs. I had a SEAL (Sea, Air, Land) working for me, but they didn’t talk about it.

LC: Was the SEAL who was working for you one who had time over in Vietnam?

DD: Yes.

LC: And he just didn’t talk about it?

DD: That’s right, and I didn’t ask.

LC: And was that kind of a mutual respect thing or where did that come from, the fact that you didn’t ask, he didn’t talk about it, or was it more to do with you being a superior officer at that point?

DD: I really don’t know why. I knew what he had done. I was well aware of both what the sailors and the SEALs did. I didn’t question why they did it or if it was right.

LC: Right.

DD: And the Marines would’ve been more likely to have been a source of dissent, maybe, but I did not talk to the Marines. They disliked me intensely.

LC: They disliked you specifically?

DD: Yes.

LC: You? Mild-mannered, hawkish Donna?

DD: I know.

LC: Okay, why was that?

DD: Well, I was one of very few officers in the unit, so we all had watches and we all toured barracks for fire watch. And that means you go up and down all the passageways checking for any kind of fire hazard or anything that might indicate danger. And they deeply resented the presence of a woman in their macho barracks. And they complained several times to the captain and he told them, “Well, she’s an officer. She’s
not concerned about whether you’re running back and forth from the shower and so on.”
Their modesty was outraged.
LC: I see.
DD: And so one day, Billy Warden, Billy Jay actually, Billy Jay Warden and I had watch together. And we’re touring the barracks and all the Marines are out there, the braver ones stark naked and the rest of them with a towel or their shorts. (Laughing)
And this is obviously organized and they’re all out there in the passageway. And so I walked in with Billy and we’re walking down the passageway and I surveyed the territory and I looked at him and I said, “My they’re undeveloped at this age aren’t they?”
LC: (Laughing)
DD: And just kept walking and that really outraged them. I got taken off the watch bill after that.
LC: I’ll bet.
DD: Which I felt was stupid. That happened to me three times in three different commands that I was removed from the watch band or watch bill because the males felt that I shouldn’t invade their sacrosanct lairs and do my job. And I felt the command should’ve backed me up on this as my part of my duties and if you take me off the watch band [bill], then everybody else has to take up the slack and they hate me from the last movie. And they do, they’re very resentful that I’m not carrying my share of the load on the watch bill, which I wasn’t. And they don’t take into consideration—
LC: How you feel about it or—?
DD: Yeah, that it’s not my choice.
LC: Right, it just comes back on you regardless—
DD: Right, right.
LC: Right.
DD: And it’s one more reason women don’t belong in the military because they don’t have to stand watches and they don’t pull their share of the weight and we have to make up for them, yada, yada, yada. And I felt that the commanding officers should understand it, but they didn’t. So anyway, it did happen in three separate commands. But that’s the only time it was funny, there was anything funny associated with this. At least I got a laugh out of that.
LC: Right, you at least introduced some humor into the situation, or at least from my point of view.

DD: That time.

LC: Yeah, that time.

DD: Yeah.

LC: Where were the other incidents, where did they take place?

DD: Well, at Naval Sea Systems Command in Washington, DC, and this time it was not because I would’ve had to inspect barracks. There were no barracks involved. I don’t know why I was left off. I was the only woman officer on staff and I was never put on it.

LC: You just didn’t from the get go; you didn’t get put on?

DD: Right, right. And the other time was at Naval Security Command and barracks again, Marines were involved, the Marine guards. And I never—I started out on the bill but never stood a watch because the admiral decided the same thing, that a woman shouldn’t be in the Marine barracks. And this is a very common occurrence, or was anyway, that under the pretense of protecting women, commanding officers ensure resentment toward them and they have no say in it.

LC: They being the women?

DD: Yes. And it’s very poor leadership. You know, get over it. If you feel funny going to and from the showers, wear a robe; wrap a towel around your waist. But she’s not there to inspect your equipment; she’s there to look for fire hazards. And there aren’t enough or there weren’t anyway enough commanding officers willing to say, “This is part of her job. She will do it and you will adapt.”

LC: Right, you’ll have to deal with it, right.

DD: Yeah.

LC: And this is part of the invidious position that women, at least women in command positions, women officers were consistently put in during this period. Am I right in thinking that?

DD: Yes.
LC: Because, I mean, Donna, you were there and had, I think, in some of your positions supervisory responsibility for the integration of women into the Navy. Isn’t that the case?
DD: Yes.
LC: And so you’ve must’ve seen a number, you know, any number of incidents, not just ones involving yourself, but also, you know, other women in other commands probably where these things were coming up.
DD: I heard about them. In those days, there were only five-hundred women officers, so you knew all of them or you knew of them. And there were only five thousand enlisted women. So you heard things.
LC: There was some kind of informal like communications network?
DD: Yeah, yeah. And up to 1972, there was a position called women’s representative that was entirely responsible for everything regarding women. You were responsible for the barracks, for disciplinary cases, for dealing with anything that came up, pregnancy, whatever. So you knew an awful lot and we had periodic meetings with the other WRs and there would be a lot of exchange of information and bitching and you’d go sit at the officers’ club and complain; that kind of thing. And there was an even smaller group of women that was above us that did the same thing. They were responsible for us.
LC: Right.
DD: And then they answered directly to the captain of the WAVES. So it was a separate chain of command. It was small. It wasn’t like the Army at all because of the numbers involved.
LC: Who was the last commander of the WAVES?
DD: Robin Quigley.
LC: Did you know her at all or come across her?
DD: Yes, yes.
LC: What was your impression of her?
DD: (Laughing) She can’t sue me, can she?
LC: No. This is your personal opinion. This is an oral history.
Well, Admiral Zumwalt was then the chief of naval operations. Before I get started on Robin, can I—?

Sure, hang on. Go ahead Donna.

When I entered the Navy, the captain of the WAVES was Captain Rita Lenahan and we called her St. Rita. And she was and rightfully so, she was obsessed that Navy women be ladylike at all times. You would not go out of doors without your hat and white gloves or black gloves, depending on the uniform. You would not play baseball. You would not indulge in profanity. (Laughing) I never managed.

Yeah, that’s a difficult one, right. (Laughing)

But she was the last person to have the temporary rank of captain and revert to commander upon retirement. However, she stayed in long enough to retire as a captain after they opened it up. But up to that point, everybody retired as a commander, all the women.

Right. And by opening it up, you mean that it was a policy change?

They opened up the right to compete for captain to women.

Right, okay.

So she retired and Admiral Zumwalt had come in. Admiral Zumwalt was a remarkable man and I worshiped the ground he walked on. He was not military, he was too junior. But he put into effect some far reaching things that made life more amenable to human beings in the Navy than it had been. The Navy is without a doubt the most hidebound, tradition-laden service of all of them. And he had outraged all the old salts with what he was doing with equal opportunity and so on and so forth. And he himself had been a deep selectee, which means that he was very, very junior to be selected as the Chief of Naval Operations. Very junior, which outraged people who had been in line even more. So he selected in turn Robin Quigley, whom he had met and been impressed with at some point. Jeanne Holm in her book—Jeanne Holm used to be the head of the Air Force women.

Yes.

And then her book, *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution* talks fairly openly about this situation, which surprised me. Because I met Jeanne, too, and she didn’t strike me as a risk taker. (Laughing) Anyway—
LC: And what did she say, I mean, what does her book say about this?

DD: Well—

LC: Just roughly?

DD: Zumwalt selected Robin Quigley, who was extremely junior and made her the Captain of the WAVES, never dreaming that her intent was to do away with the WAVES as a separate entity. And he did not want this. And we were certainly not prepared for it. But she did in 1972 in fact, abolish the WAVES against his wishes and integrated us with no preparation for anybody. And it was absolutely disastrous because we had—as women’s representatives we had total control over the women right down to what they wore on the beach when they went on liberty. They weren’t allowed to wear jeans; they could wear nice slacks. They couldn’t wear those colored jeans.

LC: Right.

DD: They couldn’t do this; they couldn’t do that. We had the right to inspect their apartments if they lived on the beach, much less their barracks. And all of a sudden, this is done away with and no one is looking after the women because in addition to the disciplinary aspects of it, we were the ones they came to when they had problems. We were the ones that helped them and looked after their welfare. And suddenly there’s no structure for this.

LC: So the support network, as well as the sort of—

DD: Right.

LC: —disciplinary parameters had disappeared overnight.

DD: Overnight, overnight.

LC: With a vacuum resulting?

DD: Absolutely. The men had not been prepared, the male commanding officers, there weren’t any woman commanding officers then. They had no idea what to do with women and neither did the chain of command all the way down. They had never had to deal with a woman in tears. They had never had to deal with a woman that needed to be put on report. So they just kind of, in general, stood around with their jaw hanging open and hoped that the old WR would continue to do her job, even when she wasn’t supposed to. And I was put in a position, as we all were, of saying, “I’m sorry sir. I’m no longer WR. There’s no such position and I suggest that you have your first class handle it or
your chief handle it or whatever.” And as politely and respectfully as possible, say, “Go
away and don’t bother me. Buzz off. I’m not in charge anymore.” And this had an
everseful impact on the welfare of women, as well as the discipline of women. And
there were some pretty bizarre fallouts.

LC: Like what?

DD: Well, after I left the Naval Photographic Center, where I was when it
happened, I went to a division of the Naval Security, National Security Agency and there
was one woman. And miniskirts were in. Miniskirts were in. And she wore the shortest
miniskirts I’d ever seen. In Washington, you’ll only wear a uniform one day a week on
Wednesday. Otherwise, you wear civilian clothes in order to keep the enemy from
counting how many of you there are.

LC: Is that right? I didn’t know that.

DD: And presumably they’re off on picnics on Wednesday and don’t look.

LC: Got it.

DD: Like everybody wears the uniform on Wednesday.

LC: Uh-huh. (Laughing)

DD: But anyway, she wore miniskirts like these micro-minis they’re wearing
nowadays.

LC: Right, right.

DD: And that was well above the standard miniskirt for those days. And she
didn’t wear underwear.

LC: At all?

DD: Nothing! No underpants, no bra.

LC: Okay.

DD: And a lot of women were doing that. And she would run up and down the
stairs all the time because she was sort of a gofer and the men would cluster around the
bottom of the stairs waiting for her to go up and down. I mean, who could blame them?

LC: Right.

DD: And I was having a fit about her, but she wasn’t in my command. And her
commanding officer asked me to deal with her and I couldn’t because she wasn’t under
my command.
LC: Sure, sure.

DD: And we had our own little room with exercise equipment, the women did, and she would go in there and ride the exer-cycle naked. And of course, I didn’t want to ride it after she did. She’d been sitting on it buck-naked.

LC: Right, right.

DD: Things like that occurred and finally the uniform board, which moves with excessive slowness, came out and said women had to wear a basic complement of underwear. Which meant underpants, brassiere and at least a half-slip.

LC: Okay.

DD: Which helped.

LC: Okay.

DD: But this transition phase was a real mess. And there were cases that were so severe, I was the only one with enough experience to handle them. And I would just go ahead and do it even if the woman wasn’t in my command if the commanding officer asked me to.

LC: And they’re asking you to handle this, the command officers were because A: you’re the only woman officer around; B: you have experience as a women’s rep; or C: both?

DD: Both.

LC: Okay, okay.

DD: And I was considered an old war horse myself by then and there was nothing I hadn’t heard of, except that I have to admit that running up and down stairs without underpants was a new one.

LC: That’s pretty wild, yeah. I have to say, yeah.

DD: But because of this kind of thing and Robin doing away with the WAVES all together, the conflict between Zumwalt and Quigley was public knowledge. I mean, there was no way to cover it up. So all of us in Washington knew what was going on and Zumwalt had kind of stepped on his own sword in that he’d given her the power to do it and couldn’t realistically take it back. And she was not experienced. She wasn’t—I’m quite sure she had never had any interest in dealing with the WAVES anyhow. And she would do things. Like she showed up once at my command, at that time it was the Naval
Photographic Center in Washington, wearing dress whites and white shoes with little bows on them. Well coming from Captain Lenahan who would’ve had apoplexy at any officer doing that, here’s the Captain of the WAVES out of uniform. And how are you supposed to tell your women they will adhere to every single uniform regulation when the Captain of the WAVES is wearing these silly little shoes? So it was very, very difficult. It made it very hard to deal with certain issues, including the witch hunts and the lesbian issue, which has always been a real problem dealing with that within the commands.

LC: Right. And Donna, that’s one area that I want to ask you about. Before 1972, can you describe the atmosphere around the possibility or prospect of having lesbians, you know, in the WAVES structure? And any incidents that you remember, what was the treatment, what were the issues?

DD: Well, Captain Lenahan’s emphasis on ladylike behavior and what you could and couldn’t do even recreationally, was based on the fear that WAVES would be looked upon as lesbians, the old World War II whores or lesbians thing.

LC: Sure.

DD: And I had right from the beginning, investigations on-going about some of my women. And I made a decision—now I’m out of the Navy, they can’t do anything now.

LC: Sure, that’s right.

DD: But I made a decision at the very beginning that I was not going to cooperate in ruining women’s lives because of sexual orientation. Now, when I went in and this is true, I did not know what a lesbian was.

LC: Seriously?

DD: Seriously, I did not. We had Thursday, “Wear green, and you’re a queer,” day. But I didn’t know what a queer was and I didn’t know what a lesbian was. I didn’t know what they did. I couldn’t figure that out. (Laughing)

LC: Right, right. (Laughing) What would they do? Hm.

DD: I got to this command at the 12th Naval District and I did in fact have three or four and they were investigated. And I would not give them any information needed to the investigative service officer. And that was my first duty station, my first
introduction to the whole topic and it was very, very obvious that the men who were
doing the investigation were voyeurs, perverts, and they got off on this whole idea. I
mean, they’re supposed to be out catching communists. What do they care who’s going
to bed with whom? And they would stake out my women or any other women and
photograph them with long distance lenses trying to catch them doing things in cars,
through their windows. They would interrogate them endlessly. There’s an incident in
_Dee Six_, where one of these investigations is talked about. These things really
happened. And they had this idea that lesbians lived in nests. If you found one, there
were more of them. It’s kind of like cockroaches. If you see one cockroach, you know
you’ve got more. And they were convinced this was true. And so I just wouldn’t play
ball and because I would not give them information, they then accused me of being a
lesbian.

LC: Because obviously you were protecting other lesbians.

DD: No, it wasn’t obvious. I was more skilled than that.

LC: Okay. How would you be skilled about it?

DD: I just would say I didn’t know anything that was going on and yes, these
women work for me and I hadn’t seen anything untoward. They seemed perfectly normal
to me and I certainly had no information that they were lesbians. And—

LC: So at some point to this—

DD: Here we come to a difficult thing.

LC: Okay, okay Donna.

DD: I was when I reported pregnant as a result of rape and I did not know it, but
it became obvious. And I didn’t know how to deal with it. I panicked. I was absolutely
paralyzed with fear that my career would be ended before it even started because that
would mean plummeting back into poverty with no hope of getting out. And I did not
want a child that was a result of rape and I finally confided in another woman officer who
gave me good common sense information. Go to a civilian doctor under an assumed
name. Luckily in California, if you got two psychiatrists to say that you were going to
kill yourself if you didn’t get an abortion—and I would have I had it all planned—that
you can get an abortion, a legal abortion. And you can do it all over Thanksgiving
holiday, which I did. I did it all by myself. And I had the abortion and went home
without anyone being the wiser, except this one woman.

LC: Right.

DD: And later I discovered she was a lesbian and she was afraid I would give
some information about her and I talked to her. She started avoiding me and we’d been
friends and I said, “I’m not going to say anything. I owe you to begin with. I could get
thrown out from being pregnant. And I certainly am not going to say anything to you.”
And sadly it ended the friendship anyway because she was afraid. And she did go on and
complete a career and I contacted her many years later and she was very distant and very
cold and I always felt bad about that. But that’s the way it was. You really couldn’t
afford to have close friendships with other women because if you did, you were a lesbian.
And so we were set against each other. We were forced into an aggressively competitive
way of dealing with one another. We couldn’t trust one another and you never knew
when someone was going to betray you for some reason. But you would be accused at
some point in your career of being a lesbian, regardless. And when they accused me of it,
I laughed because as I mentioned before, I was really beautiful and I had men falling
down and biting sticks everywhere I walked. And I was dating a lot and I didn’t have
any close women friends. I mean, they couldn’t even get a toehold on me. And so they
gave up fairly quickly. But I know of other women that were hounded and hounded and
hounded until they would say they were just so they could get discharged and get away
with it or get away from it I mean, I’m sorry, even though they might not be lesbians.

LC: So some straight women who had this accusation coming after them for
whatever reason and based on whatever, you know, the intensity was such that they could
even be driven out of the service?

DD: Yes. They would be so abused by the interrogations. And when I was in
Washington, the barracks were mixed with all the branches of the service. And so if an
investigation was going on, they were in high rises with elevators, I would have to escort
my women sometimes because of the violence and hostility and fear. And I would get on
an elevator with one of them and be surrounded by Army women and I feared for my
physical safety. But I had to do it because I was an officer. It was part of my job.

LC: You were escorting someone who was under investigation?
DD: Yes.

LC: And the fear was coming from your anticipation of what potential—?

DD: Well they were afraid. I was an officer, I was the enemy and the investigation would spread out to all the branches, so it wouldn’t just be my people, it would be Army, Marines, whatever. And they would be—there would be a certain number of actual lesbians and they would be very, very hostile. And those who weren’t would be hostile because they were afraid of being labeled as such. And they thought of officers as being—well, officers are never popular to begin with.

LC: Sure, right.

DD: But they would think of them as being sources of information through the investigatory agencies.

LC: Right.

DD: And I more than once feared that they would stop the elevator and there would be me and the woman I was escorting, and maybe fifteen other women and I wouldn’t have any weapons, of course. They might. There was no telling if they had knives or whatever. Nothing ever actually happened, but you could feel it. It was palpable.

LC: And this was all being driven by the anti-lesbian witch hunt?

DD: Yes, yes. And they wouldn’t let go and they would get naïve, vulnerable young girls really, not even a woman grown and harass her and hound her. They were very sadistic. There was true sadism involved along with the perversion and voyeurism.

LC: What in the Navy, what branch or service was conducting these investigations?

DD: It would be a combination if there were other services involved. The Army would have its CID (Criminal Investigation Division) and the Navy would have its NISO (Naval Investigative Service Office), the Air Force would have its OSI (Office of Special Investigations). And they would all be in it.

LC: And were there any women investigators in your experience?

DD: I never saw one. It’s an interesting question. I suspect not. However, of two 1972, when the WAVES were done away with, the WR and this is one thing that saved
the WAVES to some degree. The WR had to be present during an interrogation. So they
couldn’t get as carried away as they would’ve liked to.

LC: Right, okay. The presence of the WR acted as kind of a governor during
some of these sessions?

DD: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

LC: Did you ever have to sit in on sessions as a WR?

DD: Oh, yes. Yes.

LC: Really?

DD: Oh, yes.

LC: I mean, Donna, if you can remember anything about those sessions, it’s of
enormous interest, of course.

DD: Well, it was a long time ago. They would harp and harp and harp and make
accusations. There were many times that they would give graphic examples. That so and
so said she saw you doing such and such, such as cunnilingus and such, you know, things
like that. And the younger women, the more naïve women wouldn’t even know what the
words meant.

LC: Sure.

DD: And they would come at it and at it and at it from a slightly different angle
over and over and over again. And they would just beat them down until they didn’t
know which end was up. And of course, there were some genuine lesbians also that
would be interrogated.

LC: Right.

DD: Age had a lot to do with how they stood up under it and how tough they
were in withstanding the interrogations. The men did not have the protection of an
officer in with them and they were subjected to even harsher treatment. Randy Shilts’s
book on gays and lesbians in the military is a real good source for that, although he gets a
little carried away, I think, in places.

LC: *Conduct Unbecoming.*

DD: Yeah, right. And he makes one statement that I’m sorry, it just isn’t true,
that ninety percent of Army women are lesbians. That’s not true, never was.

LC: Right.
DD: But they have because they have a larger number of women, they do have
more proportionally and it attracts lesbians because of the large numbers of women.
LC: Right, they also have a large number of red heads, presumably.
DD: Yeah, right.
LC: Just because there’s more of them anyway.
DD: Right.
LC: Donna, as a WR in an interrogation session like that, what responsibilities
did you have? What could you do?
DD: To make sure they didn’t go too far, that there was no physical intimidation.
LC: Okay.
DD: That they didn’t break a woman down to the point where she was non-
functional and tears, ill, physically ill, that kind of thing.
LC: But other than that—
DD: I could stop them if they got to that point.
LC: Okay, okay. But it had to reach a pretty extreme point?
DD: Yeah, yeah. And they would only wait and call her in the next day and do it.
So I couldn’t stave it off indefinitely, I could only prevent the more extreme abuses.
LC: Would there be a negative comeback or consequence for you having
intervened in an interrogation session and said, “Look, this is enough.” I mean—?
DD: Well, they could and did try to intimidate me, but I grew up in Marin City
carrying a switchblade and I’m not easily intimidated. And I had cultivated from an early
age, a very tough exterior. I couldn’t fight my way out of a paper bag, but everybody
was convinced I could. And I had a fast mouth on me and I’m extremely powerful as a
person. I intimidate people I don’t even mean to intimidate. And if I mean to, I am not
one to be trifled with in most cases.
LC: It’s pretty clear.
DD: Yeah. And they tended to back off if I told them to. But there were women
who just caved in and admitted it or the evidence was such that it was undeniable and
they would be discharged.
LC: And what kind of discharge, Donna?
DD: Bad conduct.
LC: Bad conduct, okay. And did any of this change? Obviously the WRs were no longer on the scene, but were there other changes from 1972 when the WAVES were abolished that you observed with regard to looking at, you know, hunting for lesbians?

DD: I would not be involved after that. As far as I know, nothing changed except the women didn’t have the protection. But one of the things that impacts on what I personally saw and observed was the commands to which I was posted often had no women after my first couple of tours or very few and they were all officers. And I left Denver and went to Washington, DC, where I put in several tours. I was the only one, the only woman at all in NAVSEA Systems (US Navy) until—oh, God—the admiral asked for and got a good-looking black enlisted woman to serve as his receptionist. And he got her.

LC: Was he specific as to both looks and race?

DD: Yes he was, yes he was.

LC: Okay, uh-huh.

DD: But other than that young lady, I was the only military woman there. And then I went to Naval Photographic Center. No, I went to Naval Photographic Center first, I’m sorry.

LC: That’s okay. Then Sea Systems.

DD: I was a WR there and that’s where the change-over happened.

LC: Right.

DD: And then I left not too long after that and I went to NSA (National Security Agency) and I was the only woman military. I had a lot of civilian, female civilians working for me. But no WAVES or women. Women in the Navy we were by then. And then I went to the Human Resource Management and Equal Opportunity Program from there. So I wasn’t really in a position with large numbers of women and certainly not enlisted women.

LC: During the time of the change over or the integration?

DD: After that, yeah, after that.

LC: Right, right.

DD: So I didn’t see too much going on. And most of the information I’ve had since then is from knowing in the sense that we’re friends via email.
LC: Sure.

DD: Miriam Ben-Shalom and Melissa Embers Herbert on the Minerva List who are both very outspoken and articulate lesbian Army types.

LC: They’re a source of information.

DD: They talk to me about it a little. I’m trying to start putting together a survival manual for women veterans traumatized in the military. And I’ve just yesterday, I’ve contacted them and asked if they’d give me some input on that aspect of things. But to my knowledge, nothing has changed in that area.

LC: Okay.

DD: There certainly don’t seem to be any indications that it has.

LC: Okay Donna, let’s take a break. Okay, go ahead Donna.

DD: I was not ever subjected to stranger rape, which is a blessing. I know a lot of woman who have been and I think I couldn’t have survived that very well. Mine were date rapes and there were several. I did not recognize them as rapes at the time because I didn’t think I could say no. I didn’t think I had a right to say no because for some reason I got the peculiar idea that since I was sexually experienced to a degree, that meant I had to give sex to anybody who demanded it and they would have to pressure me into it. But it wasn’t usually violent after the first one. And the first one took place in the time when I was in the reserves and not on active duty. And my commanding officer never knew about it. I never reported any of this. And I compartmentalized it, although it did impact my sexuality very negatively. I was very lucky it happened because my PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) stems from other things and the only thing the VA recognizes for service-connected disability basically is either combat experience like that of a Vietnam nurse or rape. So if I hadn’t been raped, I would not have been able to put in a claim, even though I’m so incapacitated by PTSD that I’m basically non-functional in many areas. And therefore, as strange as it may sound, it was a good thing I got raped.

LC: Because it allowed you to qualify under the VA for it?

DD: Right, right. And I didn’t really, even though I became very, very knowledgeable about domestic violence and rape and so on and so forth professionally, I didn’t apply it to myself. And it wasn’t until I entered therapy for PTSD after a complete and total meltdown that my therapist made me look at that fact, at that aspect because it
was safely locked away in this little compartment until I entered my doctoral program.

Now I have a large gap between my AA degree, my BA degree, and my master’s degree, and then my doctorate. And I started graduate school for my doctorate at the age of fifty-two.

LC: In the early ’90s then?

DD: Yeah, ’92, 1992. And one of the things we had to do—I went to a wildly non-traditional school. It’s the best present I ever gave myself; the most wonderful experience of my life. And one of the things we had to do was a personal growth project where you had to deal with something deeply personal.

LC: Go ahead.

DD: The project I chose was to make a little dress of white doeskin. (Gets emotional.) And it’s lined with white rabbit fur and it’s trimmed in ice blue and crystals. And I’m Indian and I identify very strongly with that part of my blood.

LC: Yes.

DD: In fact, entirely.

LC: Yes.

DD: And so I made this little dress and my equivalent of a dissertation, my school, the Union Institute & University calls it the Project Demonstrating Excellence was the academic version of *Warriors without Weapons: The Victimization of Military Women*. And I was doing my doctorate. I was going through therapy and I wrote some poems about what happened and the humiliating things I was forced into doing. (Gets emotional.) And the baby’s name was Raven’s Wing because I knew she would’ve been a girl and I’m well aware this is going to sound peculiar coming from a PhD. But I saw her when I was living in Virginia Beach. A fourteen-year-old girl gave birth to a child. She was our neighbor and I saw her baby and I knew.

LC: Did you know it was the same spirit, Donna, is that what you mean?

DD: Yes, I just knew it, and I’d seen any number of babies and I don’t have a lot of interest in them. But this one, I just knew that that’s who she was. And I felt glad that she’d decided to come back as someone else. And the parents were very supportive and I knew she would be raised in a loving home and I was okay with that. But that’s the only time or the only ways I ever dealt with the abortion. And I get livid with rage to the point
of hardly being able to control myself when I hear all these people who’ve never been there and have no idea what it’s like to live with the paralyzing horror of discovering you’re pregnant against your will. And when they talk about abortion and it’s murder, because it’s me they’re talking about and they have no idea what they’re talking about. And if their daughter got pregnant, they’d change their mind so quick. And a lot of the ones that are most outspoken have had abortions. And this is a political issue that really hits home because if I had had that child, I would’ve hated it because I hated the father. I’ve never thought I would be a good parent. I wouldn’t. In fact, I’d be an abusive parent. You can see the cycle of abuse all through my family. It’s emotional abuse. It’s not physical abuse. But there’s a book called Toxic Parents and I think it was written about my mother. And I know I would’ve been a terrible parent, plus I would’ve been totally rejected by my mother, I think. I think I would. And I would never have gotten out of poverty because I would’ve been relegated to minimum wage jobs. And the Navy offered me a way out. You pay a terrible price, but you do get out if you can stand it.

LC: Right, right.

DD: And so that was the story of my rape. And by the time that rape— that’s the only one I ever think about because of the pregnancy. But by the time I got out, I had pretty much compartmentalized it. Just like the woman you were speaking of and did not think of it very often until I had to confront it during graduate school and do that project and write Warriors. Writing Warriors was terribly painful. In fact, it took two years. Have you read it?

LC: Yes, I have. I’ve read it a couple of times, as a matter of fact.

DD: Well, it took two years to edit it. I first sold it to the University of Arizona.

LC: The press.

DD: Right. And I worked very, very closely with an editor taming it down and making it more reader-friendly because it was so filled with rage and pain. And I would fight her over every word. The poor thing struggled so much with me with that goddamn book to calm it down to make it readable. I see now, she was right and I was wrong, but at that time, “It’s my word, how dare you change it?” And my first book, too.

LC: Yes, you were double-dipping there in the stress category, yeah.
DD: Yeah. And the original of it I fought tooth and nail and it’s much worse than the book ended up. They did, my committee did let me be more open in it.

LC: Now by open, you mean more expressive about your own feelings?

DD: Right, right, and the rage and letting it come through more. But no one was ever going to see that except my doctoral committee and I’m sure nobody’s ever going to get it out of Anne Arbor where they keep them all. So that was—as long as I was properly academic and did all the little footnotes and things. That’s the painful price for writing a dissertation-like thing, they weren’t too fussy about that aspect of it. But as I say, two full years working with this editor. And then we were finally ready to go to press and the lawyers got a hold of it. And they said, “She can’t say that. She can’t say this.” She’s already talking about lawsuits because when I was told about their concerns, I said, “Well, let them sue. I can document every single thing I say in there. I can document every sentence, every word.” And they said, “She’s already talking about lawsuits. We don’t want any lawsuits. If she doesn’t take out all these things, all the negative talk about the Navy, and all the negative talk about the Department of Veterans Affairs,” in other words, gut it beyond recognition.

LC: Yes.

DD: “Then she hasn’t fulfilled the terms of her contract and sayonara.”

LC: “We won’t publish it.”

DD: That’s right. And it was ready to go to press.

LC: Now, Donna, these were lawyers for the University of Arizona Press?

DD: Right.

LC: Okay.

DD: Right. And I thought about it and I was already unhappy about having to take out as much as I had and I said, “No, I’m not going to change it. This is the truth. And if you don’t want to publish it, you go head and refuse to publish it, you cowardly bastards.” And went away in high dungeon and looked elsewhere for a publisher. But it in retrospect, it’s done enormous good. I hear from women veterans all the time who have found it terribly, terribly helpful and comforting to them to read it and find out they’re not alone. And on the other hand, I regret publishing it because it exposes too much of me to the world, but fortunately not very many people read it.
LC: Now go head and explain for someone who has not read it or may not have access to it how it exposes too much of yourself?

DD: Well, it talks about my story and what happened in Naples to a degree. While it doesn’t go very far even as far as it goes is terribly shocking to people and they can’t imagine that kind of treatment. And the reason it’s my story is I went to Boston in 1983 to a writer’s conference at the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Its Social Consequences at U. Mass, Boston.

LC: Right.

DD: And they had the first conference about women vets with women vets.

LC: With women vets actually there?

DD: Yes.

LC: Novel idea.

DD: Right. And they had an agenda and it was all neat and tidy. But the very first day, things got completely out of hand and out of control and we took it over, the women vets. And a movie came out of it that’s a real eye opener. But women from World War II, Korea, Vietnam started talking about what had happened to them, including women of color. And I met a lot of women vets there with PTSD, including some nurses from Vietnam with horror stories you wouldn’t believe. One of them was forced to have an abortion after a rape at gunpoint. So I went back to Boston with a list of women to interview for Warriors because I didn’t intend to say anything about myself.

LC: Right.

DD: And they all said, “Yes, yes,” and we scheduled times and so on and so forth, but then when I went to meet with them, they weren’t there. Not one of them was in a place where she could talk about it. So I had no choice. I mean, I had to finish the thing and graduate and I didn’t know how else to get a hold of any women who would talk.

LC: Right.

DD: So while I knew their stories, I didn’t have any permission to use any of them.

LC: Right, correct.
DD: And I was forced into using my own story or come up with a completely
different project than I’d already devoted so much time and energy to it.
LC: Right, that’s just almost unthinkable.
DD: Yeah.
LC: Yeah.
DD: What am I going to do? So that’s how I ended up in the book. But if you
read it, you can tell, I think, that what really destroyed me wasn’t rape. While it didn’t do
me any good, I’ll grant you that, it was what happened in Naples and everything that led
up to Naples. And I think that the particular betrayal of the Human Resource
Management and Equal Opportunity Program and then my own personal experiences in
Naples are what literally destroyed me and stole my soul. And the rapes pale in
comparison to that. Because what you’re really talking about in my career is an endless
series of incredibly abusive command situations. And for years and years and years, I
tried to put together a book of sea stories. Funny, you know, like the Mexican thing?
LC: Right, light, light.
DD: And I managed to make some pretty horrible things funny, but I couldn’t
come up with enough that I could make funny to turn it into anything long enough even
for a little book. There just wasn’t that much that was funny. And I look at my life and I
think, “Why,” first of all, “did I have this series of bad commanding officers and why did
I stay?” And my psychiatrist told me, “You stayed because it was just like home.” And
she’s right, it was. It was just like home. Whatever it was, it was my fault and I kept
trying and trying and trying to fix myself and I couldn’t because there wasn’t any fixing
myself to please them. And I probably never should’ve gone in the Navy in the first
place, but what would I have done? Who the hell knows? I always wanted to be a blues
singer, but I don’t have any ear for it.
LC: (Laughing) There’s always time for that, you can always start singing the
blues anytime.
DD: (Laughing) No.
LC: I think you’ve got a basis for it now. Who has a basis for it when you’re
twenty? No one does, you know what I’m saying?
DD: Yeah, yeah, that’s true. But unfortunately, I am tone deaf and even my cats won’t listen.

LC: Oh, well that might be an impediment, at least to success.

DD: Yeah.

LC: Donna, is some of what your therapist was talking to you about and some of what you asked yourself about at root, one of the problems? This is something that, you know, I as a professional woman have confronted. I know many other women confront in other professional capacities is just core issues around self-esteem?

DD: Um-hm, yeah. I was talking to someone that—well, we started out thinking that we were going to collaborate on this survival manual, but I don’t think it’s going to work for various reasons. But she grew up in much the same background as I did. I’m convinced, although you cannot as a professional diagnose your own family.

LC: Right.

DD: But I think my mother had a borderline personality disorder among other things and hers did, too. And she went into the Army and retired out of the Army with the same experiences to a degree, that constant denigration and assault on your very belief in yourself, your, as you say, your core self-esteem. They batter away at it until there’s nothing left and you have no confidence. In the end, my last tour of duty, I had no confidence that I could handle anything. And I remember standing watch and being terrified that something would happen and I wouldn’t be able to handle it right. Like a fire or a murder or there’d be a hurricane and the ships would break lose because I was at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Norfolk, Virginia. And the ships would come in and tie up and there was an incident where a ship tore lose at Norfolk Naval Station because it tore up the bollards. And I would sit and imagine all these things happening on my watch and I’d get blamed for it.

LC: So you were like, I don’t know, did they call it catastrophisizing? Just making up catastrophes and measuring yourself, I’m sure.

DD: Yeah. And my stomach would be in knots when there was a hurricane that something like that would happen. And I was forced to have the junior officer on the watch go down and check the mooring lines because I didn’t know anything about
mooring a ship. I was not trained to know those things, and yet it was my job as a watch 
officer. And so they were furious that they had to go do my job.

LC: Right.

DD: You know, just like inspecting the barracks thing, only worse.

LC: Yes, yes.

DD: And if a ship had torn lose, a nuclear submarine had dropped a nuclear 
weapon—that was another thing I was responsible for was forcing ships to offload all 
their nuclear missiles. If something happened on my watch, it was my fault.

LC: Yeah, absolutely.

DD: And yet I didn’t know that much about seagoing stuff. I mean, I was trained 
to shuffle papers and keep my knees together. And I had so little confidence that I 
couldn’t really differentiate between genuine likelihood and probability and my fears of 
failure. I couldn’t deal with normal conflict. I would evade it. I had one department that 
was run by this macho warrant officer who hated women and I dealt with it by not going 
down to his department. And I was the XO (executive officer) and should’ve been down 
there several times a week keeping an eye on him. And I can honestly say that there were 
aspects of my job I did not perform very well because of A: a lack of training; but B: a 
lack of confidence.

LC: But also, Donna, isn’t it the case that there’s also a lack of structure behind 
you such that you could have confidence, that you would be backed up if you had to 
make a decision?

DD: Well, during the watch, God help you if you woke the captain up. My 
captain was an alcoholic and drunk and he wouldn’t have been any use, anyway. He said 
something to me once though. He did trust me, oddly enough. And once it was a 
profoundly significant case. A black man had been in a fight with one of the Filipino 
cooks and used a knife and he could’ve been given a bad conduct discharge. And I talked 
to him and gained his trust because I’d lived in Marin City and knew where he was 
coming from.

LC: Right.

DD: And convinced him to go into anger management therapy. And I convinced 
the captain not to prosecute him at all and to let him get the therapy and the captain let
me do it and he ended up an admiral’s writer. A couple of years later, my husband saw him and he told me I saved his life. So there were moments like that. But anyway, the captain and I were sitting at the officers’ club getting drunk and he was talking about women don’t belong in the military. And I said, “Well Captain, I’m a woman.” And he said, “Yes, but you’ve had your uterus removed,” because I had a hysterectomy in 1972. And he said, “So that doesn’t mean you. It’s just this once a month they get completely unreasonable.” (Laughing) Jesus, Captain. What can you say? “Yes, sir. Thank you.” And so I don’t really think in some matters he would have backed me up. He told my husband—my husband was in the Navy, too. He got out as a captain out of the reserves. He told my husband that the enlisted people adored me because I would stand up for them no matter what and I didn’t care who I pissed off. And this is true. I pissed off some of the highest ranking, most important commanding officers in the goddamn Navy. And he said, “But the officers hate her.” And that was pretty accurate, that was pretty accurate.

LC: And the officers would hate you? Why?
DD: Well, I wouldn’t put up with any bullshit and I did the watch bill and if they got a holiday, they would be pissed. And I took most of the holidays myself so the people with families could be with their families, but there had to be somebody on watch with me.

LC: Right.
DD: And as I said, if there was a hurricane or there were hurricane warnings, the junior officer would have to go inspect the mooring lines because I didn’t know how. And I guess I was already incapacitated with PTSD.

LC: By about what year or what placement?
DD: I would say Naples.

LC: And you were actually in Naples for four years, something like that?
DD: Yes. Yeah.

LC: So at some point in there with everything that was happening to you?
DD: Yeah, and all the other things that had happened, but it culminated in Naples.

LC: And you just started to shut down on some levels.
DD: Yes.

LC: I mean, is that—I don’t want to put words in your mouth. Donna. Is that accurate? Is that fair?

DD: No, it is accurate. I did. I ceased being able to have relationships with most Americans. All my friends were Italians. I’m very fortunate in that I can pick up a foreign language very quickly or could, I can’t now. I spoke Italian fluently within two weeks of arriving.

LC: Wow, that’s amazing.

DD: Well, the first thing they did was ship my ass to Sardinia, where nobody spoke English. So in order to survive, I had to. But I had all Italians working for me and they had been a notorious group of people. I was given the job. Well, first of all, I went to Human Resource Management and Equal Opportunity and that’s where I blew the whistle.

LC: Right.

DD: And my long battle with the Navy began. And as punishment, I was finally removed from there and put into the housing office, which was all Italians. And that was a notorious office. None of the officers who had been assigned had been able to control the people. They had absolutely no influence over them. They didn’t speak Italian, so they had no clue what was going on when the people would speak Italian around them. And they were sullen and hostile and downright—what’s the word? They would throw up barriers, obstacles. Anyway, since I spoke Italian, I went in there and started relating immediately and made friends. And I didn’t hang out with any Americans at all except for two couples that my husband happened to know. The husbands were from where my husband lived as a kid and they’d known each other since childhood. So those two, and they both happened to be let’s say very, very unhappy with the Navy and rebellious. And their wives were the only Americans we knew.

LC: Now when had you gotten married, Donna?

DD: I got married in 1972. I was thirty-two years old.

LC: Okay. And you mentioned your husband was also in the Navy.

DD: Yes. I was a lieutenant, department head at Naval Photographic Center. I headed up the admin department and under it was personnel and maintenance and a few
other things. And he came in to work for me. He was at the end of the pipeline at the end of the Vietnam War. So he did not get a fleet seat flying. The only people who were getting them then were Academy graduates.

LC: Right, yes.

DD: So they were salting [assigning] everybody else anywhere they could find an open billet. And he came in to work for me and somehow we ended up getting married. We both argue about who asked whom. That’s never been settled in all these years.

LC: (Laughing) One of the great unresolved issues.

DD: Yeah, yeah. It’s never going to be settled, I guess.

LC: And did the Navy accommodate you as a couple to post you together then over to Naples?

DD: Yes, with quite a few months’ separation. He went first flying props out of Capodichino and I had to go to school for HRM (human resources management) and equal opportunity and also overseas diplomacy.

LC: Okay.

DD: So I had turned up later.

LC: And how long did that training last, any guess about that?

DD: Four months.

LC: Okay. And was all that in DC, your training?

DD: No, Memphis.

LC: In Memphis.

DD: Yeah, Memphis, Tennessee. And during that time there was a huge upheaval, complete and total chaotic upheaval. The training had been done originally by outside contractors from places like Esalen. So it was all first name basis no matter what your rank was and huggy bear kissy face.

LC: Touchy feely.

DD: Yeah, yeah. Warm blue fuzzies or warm yellow fuzzies or whatever they are. And this captain went through who was a ringer. All this had filtered back to Washington, DC, about all these uniformed hippies that were being turned out. So they sent this captain through and he wrote crabbed little notes in his little notebook and reported back to Washington on a nightly basis. And when my class reported, and they’d
already had problems. They already had problems because they didn’t deal with anything
except blacks and the race relations.

LC: Okay, okay.

DD: And the minority issues. And a friend of mine who was a classmate from
OCS (Officer Candidate School) had galvanized all the women to protest about women
not being included as minorities and no training being done around them. So they were
already licking their wounds from a feminist and then I got there. And I immediately met
a couple of people who had come in from drug and alcohol treatment and they were clean
and sober and functioning. And this upheaval happened over night where almost
everybody on staff was relieved and anybody with any kind of bad material on their
record such as drug and alcohol treatment was summarily relieved and sent elsewhere.
Now the way this was done was the first day of class when we’re all sitting in bleachers.
Have you ever heard the joke, “Everybody whose husband is in the Navy step forward on
this line?”

LC: No.

DD: “Not you Mrs. Jones, not you Mrs. Campbell. Your husbands are dead.
Please step out of line.”

LC: Oh.

DD: Well, it was done that way. We’re all gathered together on these bleachers
and they start reading off names and saying, “You’re not going through school. You’re
going to be stationed in Hong Kong, Mississippi, or whatever, Diego Garcia.”

LC: (Laughing)

DD: This is done publicly in front of all of us. These people had no clue this was
going to happen to them. They had already moved their families to Memphis and found
housing. And other families—you knew supposedly where you were going when you got
your orders to school. I knew I was going to end up in Naples. So a lot of their families
had been moved to wherever they were going in the end.

LC: Right, right.

DD: And now all of a sudden they’ve bought houses, the kids are enrolled in
school, they’re not going there. It was terrible. And this is how we started out with
“Love your fellow man.” And I went through causing all kinds of hate and discontent because I insisted Indians be added and organized all the women, too.

LC: Right. Now you insisted that Native Americans be accommodated and Native American issues and the issues that majority whites might have with Native Americans get accommodated within the curriculum that you’re developing around—

DD: Yeah. Indians and Mexicans, Asians, and women, you know all minorities. That blacks, in other words are not the only minority, in the Navy.

LC: And you were piping up about this and making yourself no doubt very popular.

DD: Oh, it depends on who you ask. (Laughing)

LC: I’ll bet. I’ll just bet. (Laughing)

DD: The other students loved me. The command structure didn’t. They tried to have me thrown out. And this first class instructor—they came in, the CO (commanding officer) came in one day and there was a lot of question-and-answer kind of stuff in class and I wasn’t saying anything. So he decided that he could throw me out for academic reasons. Well, the reason I wasn’t saying anything is I had a terrible sinus infection and couldn’t talk. So this first class says, “You can’t throw her out on academic reasons. She’s the best student I’ve got. She’s brilliant. So I’m not going to go along. You can do whatever you want,” and they did threaten him. “You can do whatever you want. I’m not going to do something unethical like that. She is my best student, she is not failing academically, and I won’t go along with it.” So that failed. I don’t know, I guess I’m a professional try to throw her out kind of thing.

LC: (Laughing) It just keeps coming up.

DD: Yeah, I know. (Laughing)

LC: Donna, in this case and correct me again if I’m wrong, this sounds essentially political that they wanted to keep this, you know, reform of the human resources, you know, sort of—

DD: Controlled.

LC: Yeah, targeted and—

DD: Yeah, and no more first name, huggy bear kissy face, slap on the ass kind of thing. We were also playing games with what we called counter-sexual harassment. And
I’m not going to defend it. It was fun and nobody cared, but it wasn’t right. We would go around patting men on the ass just to show them what it felt like.

LC: Right, to try to make a point.

DD: Yeah, they liked it.

LC: Yes, that’s the problem with it. It doesn’t work, yeah.

DD: (Laughing) But my CO-to-be in Naples was in that class.

LC: Okay.

DD: And the captain who was the ringer was the big boss and he had Naples, Rota, Spain; Kenitra, Greece under him and London. All four detachments under him. So this is what I walked into with my reputation already made. I’ve never really been terribly good at taking care of my reputation, I guess.

LC: And so the CO that you were going to report to had you basically pegged in a certain way.

DD: Absolutely. Absolutely.

LC: Okay.

DD: And to make matters worse, he was an alcoholic and stupid. I have no patience for stupidity.

LC: Right. And so this is someone that you were going to have to work with for the next, what, two years, something like that?

DD: Four.

LC: Four.

DD: Supposedly, but I didn’t make it through four. Things got so bad at the detachment. Westendorf, Captain Westendorf, was the one in London and he cracked down and he said nobody could go on leave for any reason. Morale was in the toilet and in a situation I have never ever heard of before, they had one-hundred percent request for transfer out of all four detachments and he would not forward them. He would not allow them to go on to Washington. They would just find their way to the round file. And some terrible, terrible things happened there and the tension and the stress was destroying people and culminated in my man committing suicide. And I walked in one day. They had punished him for not being able to do his job. The job required dealing with extremely hostile commanding officers that didn’t want to hear all this racial shit. They
wanted to steam around in circles. That was their job, and they certainly didn’t want a
bunch of touchy feely people coming onboard and talking race relations and stuff like
that.

LC: Right.

DD: So you had to be very verbally adroit to survive a meeting with one of them
about doing the required training. I mean, they knew it was required, but that didn’t
mean they couldn’t make your life miserable.

LC: Sure.

DD: Especially if you were enlisted. And this particular man was a black from
Detroit and his job in the Navy was as a barber. And he’d already been destroyed by the
previous racial awareness program. They had snatched up any and all blacks they could
get their hands on and forced them to do this racial awareness thing, which was bogus. I
mean nobody changed anything. And so the blacks came out of it very, very damaged
and hostile. And in many cases, spiritually and emotionally destroyed because they knew
nothing would change and here they were forced to go pretend it would.

LC: And Donna, can you just give, you know, a brief sketch of what the racial
awareness program was, what the content was if you know?

DD: I do know. I went through it. I guess the easiest way to describe it is
sensitivity training, cultural awareness, ethnicity training. The bottom line was the black
sailor next to you is a human with the same wants, needs, and desires that you have and
just because his music is different, he’s not the enemy. That kind of thing.

LC: Okay. From this distance now, 2004, that sounds pretty harmless.

DD: Yeah, but it’s not when the audience is hostile. And it was so futile. The
whole thing arose after there was actual sabotage on several carriers and race riots. And
all of a sudden the Navy said, “Whoops, we’ve got racial tensions. We better do
something about it.” So this was the Navy’s answer to it. But you can do all the training
you want, if people do not want to accept it, they won’t. And if the command doesn’t
back it up and prevent racially slanted numbers of disciplinary cases, say. You know, if a
black guy was accused of doing something, he would be convicted. If a white guy was
even accused, which he probably wouldn’t be, wouldn’t be convicted, that kind of thing.

LC: Right.
DD: And you know how subtle racism is anyway.

LC: Yes.

DD: So you take some poor kid like this from the streets of Detroit and you throw him in and you make him go forth and do it and he knows nothing’s going to change. He’s pretty damaged when he comes out of it.

LC: Okay.

DD: So rather than saying, “Okay, good job,” patting him on the head and letting him go back to being a barber, they said, “Well, you’re going to be in the new improved shiny Equal Opportunity Program’s specialist position and you’re going to be in the human resource management position.” And HRM was essentially administrative on dealing with different people, not so much racially centered as equal opportunity. They kind of melded them together.

LC: Right.

DD: And what you had to do was go aboard ships and shore stations and administer comprehensive questionnaire and then interpret the result, quantify and analyze and interpret the results, which is pretty complex for somebody with a bad education.

LC: Right, or very little or no education.

DD: Yeah, and dealing in a hostile environment. And the guy had a white wife, so there was a lot of flak there.

LC: Okay.

DD: There were several Black Panthers in the command that were very, very defiant and they were allowed to do their thing, which was corn rowing their hair and wearing the elephant hair bracelets out of uniform and that kind of thing. In other words, discipline wasn’t being enforced because the captain was afraid of blacks, especially militant blacks. So here comes this kid whose level of education is probably equivalent to the fifth grade, considering it’s inner city Detroit, and he can’t do the job. And instead of transferring him out and letting him go back to cutting hair, they exiled him to my little group of malcontents. And by then, I had been assigned every malcontent in the unit; as punishment. And I worked with him on a one-to-one basis until he got to the point where he could do a workshop with me.
LC: Where he could aid you, he could be an assistant to you?

DD: Yeah, and he would present it. He would co-present and facilitate with me.

LC: Okay.

DD: And we had really worked on this. And I didn’t know enough then to know, but the night before the workshop, he was really high. He was laughing. He was having a great time. He seemed so relieved and ready. I was really happy that things were going to go great the next day. And I didn’t know what that meant then. I do now. The next day I walked in and nobody had telephones in Naples. There was no communication unless a driver came out from the base with an urgent message, so I had no clue. I just walked in, fat dumb and happy and I went into the admin office to sign in and the yeoman chief said, “X killed himself last night. He blew himself away.” The captain says, “You better go down and do your workshop by yourself.” So I did.

LC: Donna, when you said that you knew, that you know now what that activity—

DD: That unusual display of joviality, the laughing, the relief—

LC: Like over the top.

DD: It means a man who is suicidal, or a woman, has made the decision to do it. And it was not normal behavior, but I didn’t recognize it. I don’t know what I would have done if I had been suspicious, but I wasn’t. And I just had to walk down and do the workshop alone and make an announcement I was sorry that my co-facilitator was not going to be present and if they would bear with me, we would get through the workshop with just me. And I did it and walked back and they’d taken his name off the board. We had a board we had to sign in and out. His name was missing and that was all they ever said. Then they had a Judge Advocate General investigation, which is always done in the case of serious injury or death. The case was assigned to a very junior white officer who was very naïve. And part of this is my fault. I never thought it was honorable to discuss my problems. So I never said anything to anybody else that was stationed there. So I suppose nobody knew anything that had gone on involving me personally. Anyway, this kid, is what he was, does this investigation and at the end of an investigation, a report is written and submitted to the powers that be. And I’ve done JAG investigations myself.
You know, you go out and you speculate what happened, you get as many facts as possible and so on and so forth.

LC: Right.

DD: Well, I managed to get a hold of the report. Oh, three days after X died, the chief yeoman had a heart attack and died from the stress. And every single person in that command was being seen at the hospital for stress-related problems, everybody, not just me. Anyway, I got a hold of the letter and the conclusion was that the suicide was my fault, that he had found out I—or no, he’d been told to keep a journal about all the things I was doing to him. And the XO had told him to do this because I was abusing him and discriminating against him. And actually, I was the only one in the whole command that helped him, that cared enough to help him and they blamed me for the suicide, officially. And that was the beginning of the end. And there had been some other incidents not involving me. The wife of one of the enlisted men on my team had had a miscarriage and panicked and came into the command and wanted her husband to drive her up to the hospital and she was carrying the fetus in a napkin because she’d been at a picnic. The captain wouldn’t let him drive his wife to the hospital. Now if it had been me, I not only would’ve sent her up there with him, I would’ve got a driver and car to take her. But he wouldn’t let the man go. So I wrote a letter to the chief of naval operations asking for transfer and I had pages of incidents why. And instead of sending it through the chain of command because I knew the captain in London would destroy it, I sent it direct to CNO (chief of naval operations) and if that didn’t cause nuclear fallout!

LC: Right.

DD: So that’s when they started really leaning on me with the IG (inspector general). And through the process—there was a woman officer in London and one in Spain that were being subjected to the same kinds of treatment and they sent the IG down. And there was a black commander and a white woman first class who actually did the investigation and both of them came out with I haven’t done anything. This is the worst command they’ve ever seen in their life. And they threatened this first class woman with hell, fire, and brimstone and she stood her ground. The commander called me into an office and he was crying and he said, “You know, your career is ruined. You know that. You knew that when you wrote the letter. But I have a wife and children. If I
go through and defend you and what you’ve done, my career will be destroyed and as a
black man, it’s hard enough.” And I looked at him and I said, “You do what you think
you have to do. I understand. I don’t blame you and I know if you did defend me, it
wouldn’t do any good because they’re determined to get me. So you go ahead and submit
whatever you want to, I don’t care.” And he changed his report. The IG gave him a
direct order to change it and he did.

LC: To change it from what to what, Donna?

DD: From none of this was my fault, this was the worst command he’d ever seen
to I couldn’t deal with authority. I was a troublemaker, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

LC: And this would’ve been sometime, I’m going to guess, ’79 or ’80.

Somewhere in there? Or no, actually a little bit earlier?

DD: That was about ’76 or there about.

LC: Okay, okay. Did you ever see this African American officer again?

DD: No, no.

LC: And no communication with him?

DD: No. And I never spoke to the inspector general, either. He didn’t even
bother to interview me.

LC: Okay, so this huge investigation of which you are one centerpiece, you said
there were other investigations of other women going on simultaneously or at least
around the same time. But this investigation of which you were the centerpiece never
included an interview with you?

DD: Not by the IG personally.

LC: Okay.

DD: Only by the black commander and the white petty officer.

LC: And how long did this process take to unwind, Donna, from the time of the
suicide to the time of this report? I mean, you know, a couple of weeks or much longer
than that?

DD: No, much longer than that. And without going through the records, I
couldn’t tell you. I’m very bad on time.

LC: That’s okay.
DD: And the whole thing between my submitting the letter and them finally getting rid of me took five years and three commands. Because what happened is that commanding officer gave me a ludicrously bad fitness report. They go A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I think. Well, nobody in history has ever gotten Hs. Well, I did; a whole fitness report full of them. And there were ultimately three fitness reports, I think, during that time and I went to the Board of Naval Corrections and asked for a review, which is supposedly the recourse you have. It’s ridiculous. I mean, they’re never going to—once you do something like that as an officer, your ass is grass and you do it knowing what’s going to happen and I knew. But I made them drag it out. I wasn’t going to resign. They could kiss my ass. They were going to throw me out and pay me the separation pay.

LC: You weren’t going to be run out then.

DD: That’s right. And it took them five years. Those fitness reports were removed, but when there’s a gap like that, the board, the promotion board looks at it and says, “Well, what happened here?” Plus I was the most famous naval officer in the Navy at that time because the captain in London among other things had written a letter. I was under psychiatric treatment, otherwise I wouldn’t have made it or I would’ve killed somebody. I was in fact hospitalized for three weeks on the verge of killing somebody, mainly the XO. And the captain in London had gone to the naval hospital and tried to force the psychiatrist that was seeing me to give him access to my records. Well, this was a wily old psychiatrist well versed in military shenanigans. And my record consisted of seen, seen, seen, seen. But the captain didn’t know this and he refused to let the captain see it. So the captain had written a letter saying that I was under psychiatric care, mentally unstable, and distributed the thing to the entire 6th Fleet.

LC: This letter about you?

DD: Every ship in the 6th Fleet and every shore station got a copy. So to say I was famous is putting it mildly. More people knew my name than Bull Halsey.

LC: Donna, why a tactic like that? What was the purpose of doing something like that?

DD: Discredit me.

LC: Just to dunk you in the you know what from one end of the 6th Fleet to the other?
DD: Yeah, right.
LC: Okay.
DD: Yeah, to discredit me so that there wouldn’t be a soul on my side in the entire United States Navy. And the more they did it, the more stiff-necked I got. And that was my only defense, that it was a gut reaction. And so when I got to my—well, first I was sent to the housing office. And the commanding officer of that, it was on the same physical base, but a different command, was very unhappy with me because of what had happened at HRM. And when I checked in, he told me, “I don’t want any shit from you.” And later he told my husband—my husband suffered, too.
LC: Yes, I was going to ask.
DD: He did not get promoted because of me because he couldn’t control me. And the captain told him that my standards were too high and I didn’t belong in the goddamn Navy. I always thought that was amusing.
LC: Your standards were too high?
DD: Right.
LC: That’s interesting.
DD: And I kept, when I was standing watch, the commanding officers on the ships would come in and use the telephone to call the States for free. And if I was told not to let anybody go topside to the area where they used the phone, I wouldn’t let them, no matter what their rank was. And you could imagine.
LC: Yeah.
DD: And they knew who I was from the last movie, so they would complain to the captain, yada, yada, yada. Anyway I left there and went to the shipyard and I walked in—
LC: This is in Norfolk?
DD: Right. I walked in to check in and the commanding officer, or my boss, not the commanding officer, my boss who was a four striper captain said, “I know who you are. I got a phone call from the Pentagon and another phone call from BUPERS.” Which is the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Chief of Naval Operations.
LC: Yes.
DD: “And I don’t care what you’ve done, I just want you to do your job here.”

But that’s how far reaching my reputation was. I mean, here’s this guy in Norfolk who’s getting phone calls from Washington about me, a piss-ant lieutenant. So they did everything in their power to destroy me. The entire might, and literally the entire might of the United States Navy was turned on me, one tiny spec in the ocean of the Navy, barely discernable to the naked eye and they had nothing better to do than to try and destroy me because I wrote a letter exposing some stuff.

LC: Donna, do you still have, do you have your own copies of all the materials behind this set of events in the late ’70s?

DD: I have a narrative of it and I have a lot of letters. I don’t have all the letters and I have copies of the fitness reports. I’ve never looked at them since I got out. I can’t stand it.

LC: Yeah, I believe that, I believe that. And for example, the letter that you wrote through the CNO anyway exposing some of the things that had gone on, can you give me a sense of what you actually included in the letter?

DD: I didn’t keep a copy of that because I had to hand write it. I didn’t have a typewriter. They didn’t have computers back then.

LC: Sure.

DD: And I didn’t have access to a typewriter, so I hand wrote it. But there was the refusal to let anyone go on leave regardless of the circumstances, including people who hadn’t been on leave for over a year. The sex discrimination and I gave some cases of specific incidents. The lack of discipline against the militant blacks just because they were black. The miscarriage incident. There was so much, I can’t remember all of it. It was on a daily basis, really. And I had several pages of line items and I regret in a way not having a copy of it. But in another way, what would I do with it? Just reading it would just upset me anyway. Like I say, I have never looked at it. But I put it all together and went to a JAG officer to go to the board of corrections. So I had quite a file. I also still have some letters from this one woman in London who was being terribly abused and she was a very sensitive, naïve woman. She had gone through training with me in Memphis and she wasn’t a very strong woman and she’d never been subjected to this kind of thing and she was totally unprepared for it. And I have one letter where she’s
suicidal and I’ve often wondered if she committed suicide, what happened to her, but I
don’t know how to find out. I’m not sure I want to know.

LC: Yeah.

DD: But she had gotten to the point where she would write me these letters that
no matter how bad things were for me, I felt terrible for her because I’ve been kicked in
the ass by experts and she hadn’t.

LC: And she didn’t really have any kind of tools.

DD: She didn’t have any defenses. Neither one of us had support systems. There
was no one I could talk to about this. There was no one to go to except the psychiatrist
and I never—I had two different psychiatrists during that time and I never knew if they
believed me. They were trained in the classical way of you don’t respond except, “Mm-
hm and how do you feel about that?”

LC: Right.

DD: It’s kind of a joke on professional training. But that was their training, so
they never—

LC: They were very distant.

DD: —said anything supportive.

LC: Right, it was just a place where you offloaded and vented or whatever.

DD: Yes, yes. And the one did hospitalize me. He told me to call him if I felt I
had really reached the end and I did one day and he hospitalized me that day. And he put
down that—bless his little heart—that it was weight loss thing.

LC: Okay, okay.

DD: Because I was starting to overeat by then and he didn’t put down it was for
psychiatric reasons because they would’ve really taken that and run like a pack of hounds
with it.

LC: Sure, absolutely.

DD: So I guess in the end, I would have to say that they did believe me, they
were sympathetic, but they’re between a rock and a hard place. They work for the Navy,
they’re Navy officers and that’s not anything they can do and get away with it. They
basically have a job of evaluating people for discharge for mental disease or unfitness.
That’s what they are supposed to be doing. And they do a little bit of therapy, but not a
lot. And the term, post traumatic stress disorder hadn’t been invented yet.

LC: Donna, when you actually left active service, what were the circumstances
when you actually left active duty?

DD: Well, after they took away those fitness reports, there was a cycle where you
come up for promotion periodically. And under normal circumstances, two passovers
and you’re out the following June.

LC: Okay.

DD: And because I had three years worth of fitness reports removed, I got five
passovers, which made me the most senior lieutenant in the entire Navy. All my peers
that were still in were by that time coming up for commander.

LC: Right.

DD: Having gone through lieutenant commander. And after the board of
corrections ruled, I was given “a new start” which is pretty laughable and given two more
passovers, which equal five years. And at the end of that, I was of course passed over.

LC: Right, right.

DD: Nobody would’ve thought otherwise, although I suppose in some little
cranny of my heart against all reason I hoped I’d get promoted. Ha, ha.

LC: Some tiny little piece you think still thought—

DD: They can’t really be this corrupt, you know. Just denial. They can’t be this
rotten. But they were and they did and I was given an honorable discharge in June of
1981. But during that time, being stationed in Norfolk as I was, I was able to go to
school at night and earn a master’s degree.

LC: And was that effort that you were making more or less, I’m sure, on your
own? I mean, part of what was, I mean, what role did that play for you during these last
couple of years that you were in the service?

DD: Well, it suddenly dawned on me, I was going to have to go out and get a real
job.

LC: Right, okay.

DD: And I didn’t know what the hell I would do.
And what plan did you have around the master’s degree that would answer
that question?

Well, I was going to get a master’s in counseling, which a girlfriend
suggested because I had always done a lot of counseling. It was part of the job, but I
went well beyond requirements because it interested me.

LC: Right.

And she said, “Well, why don’t you be a counselor?” And I said, “What’s
that?” So she told me, she told me, so I went to graduate school and I got an MSED
(Master’s of Science in Education) in guidance and counseling. And my thought was,
“Well, people will be knocking on my door, begging on bended knee to pay me large
sums of money to be a counselor.” Not having a clue what real life is like in the mental
health field.

So I’m taking that vision didn’t exactly pan out.

No, no it didn’t.

Okay, okay.

And in the end, I had—oh, I have to pee again.

Okay, hang on.

My ability to function was severely impaired as I mentioned earlier.

LC: Okay.

And I recognized the need for some kind of therapy. So I went over to the
naval hospital. Well, I had made friends with the physician’s assistant at the shipyard.
We were very friendly and I told him that I was having difficulty coping and getting to
work, getting out of bed, doing anything. And he decided that it was out of his scope of
practice to deal with something this severe. And I told him I would be willing to talk to a
psychiatrist. Having done that in Naples, I wasn’t as terrified.

Yes.

As long as it was a feminist. But by that stage, I was a rabid feminist. I was
involved in NOW (National Organization for Women), I marched for the ERA (Equal
Rights Amendment) and I wasn’t going to listen to any shit from some Freudian
psychiatrist. And so he said he found me one over at the hospital. So I go to see her and
she’s a Filipino woman. And after three sessions, she said, “Well, I can’t diagnose you. I
don’t know what’s the matter with you except you’re a woman in a man’s job and women
don’t belong in the military.”

LC: Okay.

DD: “You’re fighting against your natural instincts of being a wife and a mother. And that’s what’s really wrong with you.” And I had heard this already from one of the, no both, both of the psychiatrists I had to see to get the abortion had told me that.

LC: Okay.

DD: And I very politely said, “Thank you very much. I don’t think I can see you. I don’t think we’re compatible.”

LC: I don’t think this is going to work for me.

DD: (Laughing) Yes, and she said, “Well, I agree.”

LC: Okay. (Laughing)

DD: So then I ended up with a black social worker and he couldn’t relate to it either. He was a civilian and everything he saw was from a racial angle, which wasn’t my problem. Even though I was an Indian, I’m not Indian enough to arouse racial hatred.

LC: Okay.

DD: And so I didn’t get anywhere with him either. And then when I was discharged, I didn’t do anything. But you talk about nonfunctioning. But I kept trying. I kept trying to make it work. And I would go on interviews and I wouldn’t get hired and I never knew why because God knows I had the skills and the education.

LC: Right.

DD: And I now know I must’ve come across as hostile and too controlled. One of them I had to go before eleven people for an interview to run a domestic violence program.

LC: Sure.

DD: And that’s the kind of job I applied for.

LC: Right.

DD: And several of them said, “She’s too cold. She’ll never relate to our clientele.” And of course, to me, I was just professional.

LC: Right, but you were telegraphing without really seeing it.
DD: Yeah, yeah. And I finally landed the job paying minimum wage as a “psychiatric technician” in a residential program for chronically mentally ill. My training did not include anything on mental illness.

LC: Right, sure.

DD: I was trained for counseling normal people with problems, not mentally ill people.

LC: Right, these are completely different things.

DD: Right. And I had never even heard of the DSM3R at the time, but fortunately this job didn’t involve much besides keeping an eye on them and that’s about it. And I got hired away. Well, I worked briefly for Job Corps on graveyard shifts, which was keeping an eye on them, that’s all.

LC: Okay. And this is just minimum wage that you were being paid?

DD: Yeah, right.

LC: So this is kind of your nightmare in a way?

DD: (Laughing) Yes. And my husband’s in business for himself and he’s getting more and more dysfunctional and he’s not telling me the truth about what’s going on financially. We’d built this house way out of our price range and I didn’t know that he was hiding the bills and not paying them. We ultimately ended up losing everything, everything. Furniture, house, right down to the silverware they took away from us. We ended up—we would’ve been homeless if we hadn’t been able to scrape together enough money to buy an old RV. And anyhow, that’s getting ahead of myself. I ended up being hired away at a very tidy salary to run the service officer program for the Disabled American Veterans. I was the head of the state program.

LC: And were you still in Virginia at this time?

DD: No. No, we’d moved to Washington.

LC: Okay, okay.

DD: Which was another problem. There just weren’t any high paying jobs littering the landscape. We lived in a rural area and the agencies hired people with bachelor’s degrees because they could pay them seven dollars an hour and get away with it.

LC: Yup, cheaper.
DD: So I had a totally unrealistic idea of what counseling paid. And I just leaped all over this job to work for the DAV and Honcho, the state program providing assistance to veterans filing claims, and whatever else came up. And I landed myself in a scorpion’s nest.

LC: How so, how so?

DD: That was, if possible, worse than the Navy.

LC: What can you say about that situation, Donna?

DD: Well, I worked out of Bellingham, Washington, and there was another office in Yakima.

LC: Yes.

DD: Which is in eastern Washington across the mountains.

LC: Right.

DD: And the Bellingham office was until I got there being run by a woman whose husband was a Vietnam vet and had a tidy little drug-running operation going out of Vietnam.

LC: Oh, boy.

DD: Yeah. And he had all these disabled vets, and Vietnam vets are not the easiest people to deal with, mind you. And he had this little operation going and he was essentially running things, even though he did not work for the organization, his wife did. But he’d hang around there with his buddies and drink coffee and take all the office supplies and they weren’t going to listen to any goddamn ex-officer. I could go fuck myself. And they were overtly hostile. And about a week after I started the job, the DAV commander, state commander, asked me if I would go with him to Yakima to meet my office personnel over there. And so I said, “Yes.” And he wanted me to ride with him and I didn’t want to for various reasons, so I took my own car and drove over. And I met her and things seemed okay. I came back and the next day she called me in tears and said he’d tried to rape her. And she was all bruised. She had bruises, handprints on her thighs where he tried to pry her legs apart and so on and so forth. And all this had taken place after the business of the day was taken care of and I went to the motel and he apparently called her up and asked her to come to his hotel and she did at night and then he attempted to rape her. And then she told me that he had been accused of sexually
assaulting a couple of the DAV wives in the auxiliary, but nobody had done anything about it. So stupid me—

LC: I could see this coming.

DD: Yeah. I said, “Well, I’m not going to tolerate this. And I want you to report it to the police and get your bruises photographed and get a rape kit done.” And she said, “I can’t go to the police; my husband would kill me. He’d say it was my fault for going to the hotel.” Well, I can’t argue with that kind of logic. You know, I can’t force her to go, so I said, “Well, at least get the bruises photographed.” Which she did do. And I immediately wrote a report to the Judge Advocate General of the Disabled American Veterans and said, “I’ve received accusations of attempted rape, et cetera, et cetera.” And that started a saga that if I was destroyed before I started that job, it finished it. They began a program to make me back down. The JAG never did respond and after the state refused to respond, I went to national and they never responded. And they started doing things to me to make me quit my job. And the commander would call me up and threaten to kill me. And at one point, he came up to my home and he had a briefcase and he opened the briefcase and he had a gun in it. And I looked at him and I said—and I knew that he was almost blind. I said, “I’ve got guns everywhere and I can shoot the balls off a fly at a thousand yards, so don’t fuck with me with a gun.” And he backed off. But he continued to harass me by phone and he harassed her. And she was driving home one day through the mountains in the snow with three of her children in the backseat and she was forced off the road over a cliff. Her car rolled three times. But fortunately, it was an old station wagon and sturdy and her children were belted in, so no one was killed. But there’s no proving it, but I think that it was not unconnected.

LC: I see.

DD: And I continued to try to make the organization deal with this issue. And of course, I’m getting nothing but stonewalling from my staff in the office. And they had a meeting, a general convention.

LC: A national meeting?

DD: Yeah, or a state.

LC: A state meeting.
DD: And I was required to go to that, which I did. And I sat there in a room with all the officers and I’d already been to several meetings with these officers when they were trying to force me to back down and I wouldn’t. And they sat there and they had my records of the business that had been conducted, that so many cases had been conducted and successfully dealt with and so on. Statistics.

LC: Right.

DD: They had that in writing in front of them. And they kept saying that business had dropped precipitously since I took over. That I hadn’t been doing my job. I was incompetent, and I was the worst person they had ever run into in doing my job. Even though it’s in black and white in front of them that this is not true. So I was shaking with rage when I walked out. And they had the general meeting with the entire organization present, 250 people. And the commanding officer got up in front of them and he publicly fired me in front of all those people saying I was grossly negligent, incompetent, et cetera, et cetera.

LC: And was this the guy who made this announcement the same guy who had perpetrated the attack?

DD: The rapist, yes, yes. And I found out later that the other officers in the organization weren’t happy about it, but he had invoked the Masonic Oath and they were all Masons. So they wouldn’t do anything about it and they wouldn’t go against their Masonic Oath.

LC: Was this the first time you’d ever come up against anything like that, Donna?

DD: Oh, absolutely. My father was a Mason and I had no idea they were so corrupt in some cases. I know better now, but I didn’t then.

LC: How did you find about the Masonic Oath element of this?

DD: Somebody who was in the organization told me about it.

LC: And did that sound right to you? Did they sound explanatory for—?

DD: Yes, it does, they all wore Masonic rings. And yeah, there couldn’t be any other explanation. Then someone else I knew went to the national convention and they heard all these stories and people were laughing about this attempted rape. And she
ultimately took him to court, civil court, and lost the case because his wife testified he was impotent.

LC: You’re kidding me?

DD: No, I’m not. As though that would prevent an attempt.

LC: Okay.

DD: Yeah. So that ended up that I was a national laughing stock again. I don’t know why my books don’t sell better.

LC: (Laughing)

DD: God knows a lot of people know who I am.

LC: Know who you are, right. (Laughing)

DD: But I was fired. She was fired. And then every woman in the organization was fired, including the wife of that Vietnam vet.

LC: Who was in the local office in Bellingham?

DD: Yeah, yeah. So I had kept notes of every incident and I went to see an attorney who was a friend of ours and was the prosecuting attorney for the county. And he and his partner read that and they said they had never seen such an egregious case of sexual discrimination in their lives. But they wouldn’t take it because it was on contingency and they checked into it and the national disavowed connection with the state and the state pockets weren’t deep enough.

LC: Yeah, to protect—

DD: And without being able to tap into the national pockets, there wasn’t enough for them to do it on contingency. So I went to the, what is it, Office of Civil Rights or whatever that is.

LC: The State of Washington’s Office?

DD: Yeah.

LC: How’d that go?

DD: And they wouldn’t take the case because when the state was severed from national, there weren’t enough employees. You have to have X number of employees before they’ll take a case and there weren’t.

LC: It was too small of a shop for them to pursue.

DD: Right. So I had no recourse at all.
LC: Donna, where did this, when did this whole series of events sort of culminate? What kind of time period was this?
DD: That would’ve been probably 1983 to ’84.
LC: Okay. And so at the end of this, I mean, where were you left? You said that if the Navy experience hadn’t crushed you, this pretty much did.
DD: I was in a major clinical depression, although I didn’t know it, and too dysfunctional to work, although I didn’t know it. And I went into private practice. Oh, God. I went into private practice and I got myself a pretty little office and I made it all nice and comfy and safe and warm for my clients, all three of them.
LC: (Laughing)
DD: And I was highly successful with the clients I was willing to see, all of whom were adult children of dysfunctional families. Of course, what else would I deal with?
LC: Right, right.
DD: But I wouldn’t see violent men, which is where the money was.
LC: Now how does the money follow violent men? What does that mean?
DD: Court ordered.
LC: Okay. So you would be getting state funds to see, is that—?
DD: Well, they have to get, if the judge orders them for anger management or whatever, they have to go, either that or go to jail. But I wouldn’t see them. And I met— this is a never ending tale of stupidity or something on my part.
LC: I doubt that. I doubt that highly.
DD: I had become involved with a PhD counselor who became my “best friend.” And I was too sick to realize what she was doing to me. And she ended up with an office next to mine and she was raking in the shekles. And she told me that I needed to learn to deal with sexual perverts and violent men because that’s where the money was. And she would do sliding scale or even pro bono with abused wives. And I began to give myself credit. I began to feel very uneasy about some of her methods. She would hire some of her patients to clean the office or do her typing for her and have what I considered highly inappropriate relationships with them. She would take them to lunch. She would buy them clothes. And she would prey on them and turn them into abject
slaves to her personality. They would have no will of their own. And this bothered me
the more I saw of it. And of course, you know, professional ethics prevents you from
having that kind of a personal relationship with the clients anyway.

LC: Yes, absolutely. It’s way over the line, way over the line, yeah.

DD: And she would get me to do things that I wasn’t mentally well enough to
handle. She would have me see a child molester for the practice. And I wasn’t
knowledgeable in predation on children. I hadn’t had any training and I didn’t know how
to deal with that personality. And I really hated certain personality disorders, like
borderlines and narcissistic and she would refer them to me. And I was dumb enough
once to meet a violent borderline at night in an empty building and she pulled some
stunts. She got up, put her hands on each of the arms of my chair and put her face inches
from mine to try and frighten me. And of course I’d been frightened by experts, so I
didn’t respond, which was as it happened the way to deal with it. I didn’t know how to
deal with these people. You can read a book, but it’s not the same as doing it under
supervision and learning how. And she was supposedly supervising me for certification
during this period of time, but she wasn’t doing a goddamn thing except putting me into
more and more situations of danger. And I didn’t see it. I was involved very heavily in
the State Mental Health Association and became a member of the executive board. And I
had made some friends, all with PhDs; the president of the mental health organization,
the president of the school counselors, so on and so forth. And there was a meeting, a
convention and we’re all there and this woman pulls something in front of them. And I
had told them, one of the other things she would do was tell me I should go see certain
movies, like _Silence of the Lambs_.

LC: Oh, brother.

DD: Now you send somebody with untreated PTSD to see _Silence of the Lambs_
and they’re not going to come out of it very well.

LC: Right.

DD: And I didn’t and there was one even worse about a serial killer, Edward
something. And I had told them about this and so after they witnessed this thing happen,
they went into my room with me and shut the door and said, “Okay, listen. You’re being
manipulated. She is sadistic, narcissistic, and she’s feeding off you and you’re letting her
and you don’t even see it.” And when they said that, it all fell into place and I realized she was. So I went to a convention with her. I drove. There were abused women there and she did a workshop and I attended her workshop. And one of the things she did was have a volunteer come up and she would select the volunteer and she had the predator’s uncanny eye for vulnerability. And she had a woman come up that couldn’t see what was being done to her and she sexually assaulted her. She had her hands all over her crotch and her breasts, demonstrating—

LC: Yeah, quote/unquote.

DD: Inappropriate touch. And that got through. So on the way home, I said, “I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to turn you in for sexual assault to the state board. That was way out of line and you re-victimized someone who was already victimized and vulnerable.” And I turned her in and the state did not find her guilty, of course. And so that was the end of our relationship.

LC: I’m sure.

DD: And afterwards, I went through these issues with my therapist and she backed up everything I’d been told. You know, “Where were you, what were you thinking?” (Laughing)

LC: Right. (Laughing)

DD: And of course, in hindsight, I have to wonder myself, but I didn’t have any defenses against that kind of abuse any more than I had defenses against the other abuses that I experienced by the DAV and the Navy. I couldn’t defend myself. Plus I had major depression. And the whole nine yards, there were fifteen criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD. And that’s one thing working for the DAV did for me. I ran across a pamphlet that had just been issued with the new diagnosis of PTSD and what the criteria were.

LC: Right.

DD: I fit thirteen out of fifteen.

LC: And how many was the box score such that you would qualify as diagnosed, probably—?

DD: I think eight.

LC: Right, so you were like almost two X, the number—
DD: Yeah, yeah. I’m the walking dead. So I knew what was the matter of me, but I didn’t know where to go with it or what to do. And I had been seeing a civilian doctor and he would just look at me. He said, “I don’t know anything about it. I can’t help you.” And I’m getting more and more desperate. It’s a feeling, unless you’ve been there, there are no words for it. It’s a feeling that you’re in a—do you know what obsidian is?

LC: The material?

DD: Yeah, the stone.

LC: Yeah, the stone.

DD: It’s black glass.

LC: Right.

DD: It’s like being in an obsidian pit, that it’s all black and it’s glass sides and there are no handholds, no finger holds, you can’t get out. You just get deeper and deeper and deeper and there’s nowhere to go. And of course, my marriage is crumbling. Our situation is falling apart. We’re on the brink of losing everything. And then the Gulf War happened and I watched day after day, all the yellow ribbons and all the support our troops had and I thought, “Nobody ever supported me. Where were all these people when I was in the Navy? Why did I get spit on?” And I did, “And called baby killer when I hadn’t even been to Vietnam? What is all this bullshit with yellow ribbons and support the troops?” And I went over the edge. And my psychiatrist told me later that there was a tremendous spike in PTSD victims showing up at the VA for treatment when the Gulf War hit because we couldn’t stand it. And even though I wasn’t a combat vet, it had much the same effect on me. So I went initially to get some anti-depressants because I thought that would save me.

LC: And did you go to the VA at this point?

DD: Yeah, I did. I knew I would get nowhere with the doctor I was seeing.

LC: Sure.

DD: And I went to the VA, to the walk-in clinic and I said, “I’m suicidal. I have to have some anti-depressants.” So they let me see the psychiatrist on duty who turned out to be the one person in the world I needed to see. And she gave me the pills and she asked me if I wanted to go into treatment and I said no because I was so ashamed. I
couldn’t be mentally ill. I am a mental health therapist. I can’t be one of them. I cannot
be crazy. They’re crazy. I’m not. So I told her no, but she gave me her phone number
and she said, “Call me if you change your mind.” So I trundled on home and I changed
my mind when things got worse and I couldn’t go on. I just couldn’t function at all. So I
called her and she agreed to see me, thank God, because she was a very—I dedicated my
book to her, *Warriors*. She was a very experienced, savvy person who ran the treatment
program for PTSD patients. And normally the patients don’t see the psychiatrist, except
for medication management. They see psychologists in groups. Well, obviously I wasn’t
suited for a group, especially of male veterans. And they did have by then some female
groups. But as a mental health professional at the master’s level, I would just play head
games and I wouldn’t work on my issues. I’d just screw around with the group until they
did everything and I got to sit around being the expert and she knew that. So she saw me
privately for two years of intensive therapy. And I got through it and I got a PhD while I
was at it. But that was a really lucky break and I didn’t get very many lucky breaks. But
getting her that day probably saved my life because I was just going to kill myself.

LC: Donna, what’s her name? Let’s go head and include it here.

DD: Dr. Alexandra Ashleigh, A-s-h-l-e-i-g-h.

LC: And was she at the VA in Seattle or where was she?

DD: Yeah, yeah. And she’s still there. And she was perfect for me, absolutely
perfect. And I was willing to cooperate for once in my life. I’m not saying we didn’t
have our moments, but you can imagine how difficult a mental health professional in
denial can be.

LC: Yes, because you know too much, in a way.

DD: Yeah, yeah. And I can be very, very funny and that was my avoidance
mechanism. I would go in and I’d be making all these jokes and making her laugh and
finally she’d look at me and say, “Are you here to entertain me or to do some therapy?”

LC: Right.

DD: And haul me up short. But somebody less experienced wouldn’t be able to
deal with that. And I’m too articulate, too, because I can run rings around those people
verbally and never say anything significant.

LC: Right, never get down to it.
DD: So she really was perfect for me.

LC: Donna, can I just ask generally what role, if any, has your Indian identification played in your kind of recovery and you know, coming back to functional you?

DD: Well, quite a lot. I was very reluctant to make public claims about being Indian because I don’t “look like it.” But as a writer, I joined an organization called the Word Craft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. And some strange, very, very mystical things happened that I’d rather not divulge.

LC: That’s fine. That’s fine.

DD: But some things happened in contact with a few of the members and I went to a couple of gatherings and more things happened that were really odd. They’re still odd now. And several of them—well they all, there’s no such thing as an Indian without PTSD. And several of them were Vietnam vets, too.

LC: Okay, right.

DD: And Indians are so different. They’re totally accepting and they are very warm and loving and don’t backbite. There’s none of that. And while my contact with the group has been limited since most of the events take place in Oklahoma or New Mexico and I can’t go because of finances. I did get to go to Oklahoma once. And every time I’m in contact with them, I get this tremendous wave of acceptance washing over me. And I’ve met some of the most famous writers in Indian country and they’re all the same. They don’t care if you’ve never been published.

LC: Yes.

DD: And the last thing I went to was in Tacoma. Luckily we had a gathering in Tacoma and I got up and I read some excerpts from Deep Six and, my God, you’d think I’d written something greater than any book ever written on earth. They thought it was so great and everything I’ve ever read in front of them has been received that way. It’s not that they aren’t critical, but they like what I do. They like my writing and they would never question my ethnicity or my identity. And most of them are mixed breeds, too. And it’s the most healthy group I could possibly have contact with in the sense of being supportive of me. The Minerva List is great and I’ve met some, I haven’t met, but you know, emailed—
LC: Sure, sure.

DD: Contacts with quite a few people really. That’s been very positive. And I’m very reclusive. I’ve met a few people that have worked and worked and worked and worked to get close to me and I finally allow them in a little, but not much. And only on fairly superficial things like day-to-day life and husband-bashing and gardening and that kind of stuff. But my experiences, no. I never talk about it. But I wouldn’t have any problem talking about it with the Indian writers, none. They’re different. They’re different.

LC: It’s a different energy.

DD: Yeah.

LC: Yeah, way different.

DD: And if I go down to the local rez, it’s the same thing. They now embrace me with open arms if I’m willing to go down there and I think I can go to any reservation in the country and it’d be the same story.

LC: Well, all of that makes your willingness to participate here, you know, that much more important and my gratitude is even greater. Donna, is there anything else you’d like to add that we haven’t discussed or that I—?

DD: Well, we’ve certainly been around Robin Hood’s barn. (Laughing)

LC: Yes, yes we have. (Laughing)

DD: I guess I should say that it wasn’t all bad, that there were parts of my years in the Navy that were wonderful. And certainly my first years in the reserves in that all WAVE unit, that was great. I’m saddened by the loss. These women remained friends all these years and Vicki, the black woman, died of cancer a couple of years ago. And the chief petty officer died of cancer I guess, something about a year ago. And Tena’s in her late eighties and she can’t be expected to live too much longer and soon they’ll all be gone. And that happens in everyone’s life, I guess, especially if you have older friends.

LC: Right.

DD: But that part of it and getting to go in spite of the horrors of Naples, getting to go to Italy and traveling all over Europe, which I did and meeting those wonderful Italian friends, boy I’m Italian at heart I think. (Laughing) I just love the Italians and Neapolitans. That’s priceless. And maybe ultimately it’ll be worth it in my mind. I
don’t know, I’m beginning to fade memories, the bad ones. There’s really not much point in clinging to them. And as you get older, I’m sixty-three now. You get older. It’s easier to concentrate on the cool things. I wrote a version, I’m writing a sequel to Deep Six.

LC: Yes.

DD: And I wrote a version of it that unfortunately everyone hated but me, because what it really was was a love story about Naples. And I can see where the publishers hated it. But I loved it and I’m rewriting it to be what it’s supposed to be, but I managed to get an entire book out of what I loved about Naples and that’s saying something I think.

LC: Yes it is. Yes it is.

DD: Because it was a wonderful experience from that perspective. It’s just the ugly American intervention that made it bad. But it was a way out of poverty, even though I’ve slid pretty far back. And I developed a whole new broader world. I look at my twin sister who’s never been anywhere but Reno, here, and California, and she doesn’t know anything about the world and I do. And that’s thanks to the Navy and the opportunities I had to go and meet different people, do different things, be in different places. So that, I don’t want to slight that. I don’t want to make it sound like one endless list of complaints and God, as I’ve talked to you today, it sounds like nothing ever went right in my whole life.

LC: No, it doesn’t actually. It sounds like you lived a full life and a complicated one and that you’re able to articulate that, which not everybody can do. I’m sure you know that, too.

DD: Yeah, yeah. And I don’t know what difference it makes to others, but—

LC: Well, um—

DD: Hell, I used to ride with the Hell’s Angels.

LC: Did you?

DD: Yeah, you can’t beat that. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

DD: Oh, my commanding officer didn’t like that. (Laughing)
LC: I’ll bet. That probably was a wave and not of the kind that you remember fondly.

DD: Oh, she was not happy. She was not happy. But it was all great fun at the time. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

LC: Seemed like a good idea, exactly. Well, Donna, thank you very much.