Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins at the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University initiating oral history interview with Helen Hegelheimer. Today’s date is fifteenth of June 2004. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock, Texas and Helen is speaking to me by telephone from California. Good morning Helen.

Helen Hegelheimer: Good morning.

LC: We’ve already been speaking a little bit, but I wonder if just by way of starting for the interview, you could tell me where you were born and when?

HH: Oh, I was born in Fontana, California in 1944.

LC: Okay. Go ahead Helen.

HH: In September and I was born, I, my dad on the grounds of the Kaiser Steel Mill.

LC: And how did that come about?

HH: My father worked at the mill during the war.

LC: Okay, and did they then have a clinic for family members?

HH: They actually had a hospital on the ground. It’s the first Kaiser Hospital.

LC: And that would be the origins of the Kaiser Permanente group?

HH: Yes, yes.

LC: That’s really—
HH: That my father worked for up until his retirement actually.

LC: And what did your father do during the war at the plant?

HH: Um, personnel and labor relations as I understand it.

LC: Did he ever tell you much about what happened during the war that he was involved with; like any labor disputes or was there—?

HH: No. No, there were none. He was adamant against union organizations.

LC: Okay.

HH: Because he spent most of his career negotiating on the management side. I mean, he respected good union organization, that’s for sure. But, no, there wasn’t any, there wasn’t any. My mother still has—my father is no longer alive. My mother still has a paycheck of his, which is really interesting because it has victory taxes on it.

LC: No kidding.

HH: Yeah, yeah.

LC: Wow, that’s great.

HH: Yeah.

LC: And your mother is still with us?

HH: Yes, yes.

LC: And what about her during the war? Did she have employment outside the home?

HH: No, she took care of the kids.

LC: And how many kids are we talking about?

HH: I’m the youngest of three girls.

LC: And your older sisters are separated from you in age by how much?

HH: Six years. My oldest sister is six years older than I am, and my middle sister is two years, only two years older.

LC: Okay.

HH: So we’re essentially the same age.

LC: And all California natives? Your sisters were born there as well?

HH: No, my middle sister was born in San Diego. That’s when my parents first came out.

LC: Okay.
HH: My older sister was born in Indiana where my parents originate from. They came out because there was employment in California during the war. They worked in the—my father worked in the plants, worked for Convair in San Diego first.

LC: Okay. So he had come out specifically during the war for the—

HH: For jobs.

LC: Yes, for defense industry stuff.

HH: Yes, because, you know, they’d gone through the depression and there were—they said placards all over in Indiana saying go to California because there’s jobs there and they did.

LC: And did they pick up together and leave together, your parents, or did your dad come out first?

HH: My father came out first and then the rest of the family followed. He had several brothers; my father was from a large—both my parents are from large families.

LC: Okay.

HH: But my father eight brothers and sisters and nearly all of them came out and nearly all of them worked in the steel mill.

LC: And did they stay after the war, like your folks apparently did?

HH: Yes.

LC: They did?

HH: Yes. Yeah, a great deal of my family lived in Fontana for years until the younger generation, my generation eventually moved out and my father’s generation passed on really.

LC: What kind of a town was Fontana when you were growing there?

HH: Armpit of the world.

LC: (Laughing)

HH: It is still the armpit of the world.

LC: A lot of people say that about Lubbock.

HH: (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

HH: It is, you know, it’s in the Los Angeles basin.

LC: Yes.
HH: And it is right on the edge of the desert and it’s dry and has lines of Eucalyptus trees and gets hit very hard by the Santa Anna winds. And it’s hot and it’s dirty and it’s just not a nice place. It’s a steel mill town only on the west coast.

LC: And did your dad work in steel mills back in Indiana?

HH: Um, I don’t know. I know that he was in the CCC (Civil Conservation Corps) during that time.

LC: Okay.

HH: I think he did anything that he could.

LC: Oh, I see.

HH: You know.

LC: Yeah, you pretty much had to during the depression.

HH: Yeah. He left school at the tenth grade. He didn’t get his high school diploma until he was sixty-two I think.

LC: What made him go back and do it?

HH: Uh, pride.

LC: Was that pushed by your mom at all or just was it—?

HH: No, no, my parents were divorced at that time.

LC: Oh I see, I see.

HH: My mother has a high school diploma though.

LC: And so it was just his own wanting to have that accomplishment?

HH: Yeah, when he wanted to do it, he checked with his high school back in Indiana and they gave him life experience and said the only thing he really had to take was government, and so he took a government history class in night school and actually had a young teacher and my dad did most of the lecturing because my father had lived through most of the history they had to learn. You know, about the labor movement, and the depression, and things like that, and so he turned out and which suited my father quite well.

LC: Why do you say that?

HH: My father was very arrogant. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) Oh okay.

HH: But that arrogance served him well through life.
LC: (Laughing) What was the Kaiser plant making while he was there, do you know?

HH: It’s a steel mill. It was just making steel and for the war.

LC: Cheap steel? Okay. Cheap steel, that kind of thing?

HH: Oh yeah.

LC: And did he continue working in the personnel and labor administration area?

HH: We moved back to Michigan and he worked for Kaiser Autos.

LC: Okay, and that would be in Detroit in the—?

HH: Um, Ypsilanti and Lansing.

LC: Okay. (Laughing)

HH: You know those places when those were really lovely towns. And then we moved to Atlanta, Georgia, St Louis, and then back to California where he went into—after the Kaiser cars were finished, you know, when they shut those down, and he worked for Kaiser Aerospace. It was Kaiser Aircraft in those days and he was in labor relations.

LC: And did you spend any time in Michigan growing up?

HH: Yeah, I went to kindergarten in Michigan.

LC: In Ypsi or—?

HH: Um, I think it was actually Lansing.

LC: Okay.

HH: But I’m not sure, I’d have to check with my mother. It was either Ypsilanti or Lansing.

LC: Okay. Any memories of living up there?

HH: Um, it was cold.

LC: (Laughing) Yes.

HH: We were very close to the college, to the University of Michigan.

LC: Yes.

HH: And that’s about all I remember is you know, bits and pieces like that. I remember it being cold. And then we moved from there to Atlanta.

LC: Yeah.

HH: Right, and where my mother refused to tell us about—this was late forties, maybe ’49 or ’50—my mother refused to explain to us what the colored signs were and
why we had to sit in the front of the bus when the back of the bus was empty or stand in
the front of the bus. She would not explain that to us and since I was the youngest—my
two older sisters were usually in school—I got her into a lot of trouble because I was
always going to the wrong—walking into the wrong bathroom or using the wrong
fountain and always wondering why we couldn’t sit down in the bus. She refused to get
what was then known as a mammy, a maid. So, the black community didn’t like her and
they certainly didn’t call it the black community because they felt like if she’s out there
hanging her own clothes in this sort of condo—what would now be referred to as a condo
community that we lived in—that if she was hanging her own clothes, then she was
taking away the job of a black maid. My mother refused to have a maid. Now, oddly
enough, again, you have to remember the times. This is the late forties.

LC: Absolutely.

HH: Very late forties. Our neighbors were Jewish immigrants from Europe,
having survived the war.

LC: Really?

HH: And their little girl had been born just after the war, probably in one of the
relocation camps. So, here’s the northern white family and the Jewish family, right. And
we were obvious outcasts.

LC: Yeah.

HH: In the Atlanta, Georgia of 1949 or ’50, right.

LC: Yes.

HH: And so we kept really close together and I still remember that little girl
when we moved away because I felt like we were abandoning her. She was about my
age, and you know, they no more understood the rules and regulations of the south in
those days than we did quite frankly. So we were both very much outcasts.

LC: That’s interesting Helen, do you have any notion of where in Europe they
were from?

HH: No, no I don’t. You know, things like that were not spoken about in those
days. You know, I wish I did, you know, because I certainly have never forgotten that
family. My mother wouldn’t even mention the fact that they were Jewish because then
that would imply that there was something different with them.
LC: Now, she wouldn’t mention this to you kids?

HH: No she wouldn’t, we just knew that they were from Europe.

LC: Okay.

HH: Because they had an accent, you know, but later my mother, of course, explained to us that they were Jewish and that was why they too were so odd.

LC: And did you—go ahead Helen.

HH: In that community, so it was a very interesting southern experience for me.

LC: How long were you there?

HH: Not very long, but I’ll tell you what, I remember nearly all of it. I didn’t like it and because my mother would not explain why these rules were, you know, and I was certainly old enough to have understood, well, that’s for other people or something like that, but she refused to. She refused to teach us anything that had to do with prejudice and she would not explain any of it to us.

LC: Now, was this—you knowing her now and all of this retrospectively thinking about it, was she trying to prevent you from picking up these coded signals and therefore keep you from absorbing some kind of prejudice view as well?

HH: Oh yes, absolutely that was what she was doing.

LC: And do you know whether she had had any experiences with African Americans up in Indiana?

HH: She lived in Gary, Indiana, the melting pot of the world.

LC: So she absolutely had experience.

HH: And she loved it, you know, she said it was very different then because everybody was first generation. She wasn’t, her family came from England and I think she was third generation. But she said in Gary, you walked around the neighborhoods just to smell the food, you know. Everybody, the Polish were in one neighborhood and the Czechs in the other, it was very—that sort of Slovakian, you know.

LC: Sure.

HH: In Gary, Indiana, and you went to their celebrations, you know, and had fun with them. You enjoyed sort of everybody else’s culture because it was so different from yours and so her memories of growing up in Gary, Indiana—also a steel town by the way.

LC: Absolutely.
HH: Um, you know that it was fun to do.

LC: Wow.

HH: You know, that you sort of celebrated everybody’s different, you know, foods and celebrations and things like that.

LC: When you were in Atlanta, did you have African American friends? What kind of school were you going to?

HH: Oh, absolutely not.

LC: Really?

HH: No.

LC: Okay.

HH: No, we were—

LC: What school did you go to?

HH: I don’t remember the name of the school; I’m sure my mother probably would remember it, but it was a very white neighborhood. We were in a suburb of Atlanta.

LC: Whereabouts, do you remember?

HH: Um, no, because I really don’t know Atlanta that well.

LC: I see, that’s fine.

HH: But I know that it was away from the city and it was a newer in those days—

LC: Area.

HH: You know, a newer area that was popping up I’m sure. I remember Atlanta as being a relatively small town.

LC: (Laughing)

HH: Having also lived in, you know, in the Detroit area and St. Louis.

LC: Right.

HH: You know, of course it’s not that way anymore.

LC: No. (Laughing)

HH: But, you know—

LC: But that’s great to remember it that way.

HH: Well, and I remember everything was named Peach Tree Street.
LC: Well, that’s certainly still true.
HH: Yeah. When we first moved there, we stayed in a hotel on Peach Tree Street. So, you know, probably it was a Peach Tree Manor, you know. So, then that was always fun staying in hotels. Every time my father was transferred, we would stay in a hotel until we found a house to live in.
LC: And that was fun for you?
HH: Um, it got tiring after a while; it got tiring after a while. Once we got to California—by the time I was in the second grade, I think I had attended about four different schools, and so that was pretty much enough.
LC: Yeah.
HH: I think it was probably enough for my mother as well.
LC: Yes, I’ll bet, with three kids.
HH: Yeah, there was a joke that every time she put the draperies up, she hung the draperies, my father would come home and say, “I’m transferred.”
LC: And did he have any choice in these transfers or—?
HH: No, he was moving around the United States closing down Kaiser facilities.
LC: Okay.
HH: Kaiser Automobile facilities.
LC: Okay.
HH: So, I suspect, although I’ve never asked, that they knew that they were going to be doing this transferring until they finally came back to Oakland, which, you know, was Kaiser headquarters and then that’s when he ended his career in Oakland.
LC: Okay, in Oakland.
HH: Yes.
LC: Let me ask a little bit about him specifically. Can you just give his name?
HH: Fred Wesley.
LC: Okay, and his last name was Tennant, is that right?
HH: Tennant, yeah.
LC: Okay, how is that spelled Helen?
HH: It’s T-e-n-n-a-n-t.
LC: And what was your mom’s name and her maiden name?
HH: Um, Helen Taylor.

LC: Okay.

HH: I’m named after her and my middle name is even Taylor.

LC: Oh, is that right?

HH: Yes.

LC: Now, what about your sister’s older names or your older sisters?

HH: My sisters have beautiful names. I have Helen Taylor; my oldest sister is Kathryn Eileen and Lola Michelle.

LC: Are those family names also?

HH: Um, my mom and dad, as a family story goes, my father was to name all the girls and my mother was to name all the boys.

LC: Okay.

HH: Yeah, right.

LC: (Laughing)

HH: So, she lost out, and my father named us all after one of his sisters.

LC: Wow, that’s nice.

HH: My oldest sister, Kathy, is named after a sister of my father’s that died shortly after birth, before he was born actually. And my middle sister is named Lola Michelle and her nickname is Mickey. I still call her Mickey because we have an Aunt Lola that lives up here in the Bay area and is still alive and is very close to our family because she has no children. And my mother’s name is Helen, and I had an Aunt Helen. I had two Aunt Helen’s as a matter of fact.

LC: No kidding.

HH: No.

LC: So that was a pretty safe call then. (Laughing)

HH: It was. And so I’m still, I am still known as Baby Helen, and my father called me Junior, and which I hated as an adolescent, but I absolutely loved as I got older.

LC: Yeah.

HH: He always called me Junior.

LC: It’s pretty cool, yeah.

HH: Yeah.
LC: Especially when your dad calls you something special.
HH: Yeah.
LC: That’s kind of nice. Um, let me ask a little bit about the rest of the family. Helen, you and I were speaking earlier about your uncle. Where does he fit in the family tree?
HH: My Uncle Bob is my father’s youngest brother.
LC: So, is his last name Tennant as well?
HH: Yes it is.
LC: Okay. And Bob served during World War II, but you mentioned that you had another uncle who also served, his brother.
HH: Yes, my father is the second eldest in the family and my Uncle Bob, my Uncle Frank, and my Aunt Helen were the three youngest in the family and they entered the war in 1943 at the urging, as the story goes, of their mother, my grandmother because then she could get their allotment because they were all single.
LC: Wow.
HH: Yeah, yeah, so they did. They all entered in 1943. My Uncle Bob, who is the only surviving of that three, was only seventeen. So, she had to sign for him and fortunately, Uncle Frank and Uncle Bob entered the Army together and served all the way through to VE Day, which I just think is astounding.
LC: They were both then in the Seventy-fifth Infantry Division?
HH: Yes, the 275th—no it is 75th Infantry Division, 275th Combat Engineers. I have to get that right or he’d not be happy with me.
LC: Right. And let me ask first about your aunt who was also in the service.
Which branch was she in?
HH: She was in the Army.
LC: Okay.
HH: The Women’s Army Corps.
LC: Sure. What do you know about her service, anything?
HH: What I know is mostly from my cousin who is my generation.
LC: Sure.
HH: And a photograph of her standing next to an airplane in this really disgusting
dress that was known as their khakis.

LC: Yes.

HH: And actually she—all three of my aunt and my two Uncles are registered on
the World War II database on the Internet with photographs.

LC: Okay, good.

HH: You know, that are also, by the way, at the memorial at the kiosk, which
was a great delight to my uncle to be able to punch in Tennant and have their
photographs in there.

LC: That’s interesting.

HH: Yeah, he was very happy with that.

LC: Yeah, that’s a thrill that had to be a thrill.

HH: Yeah, that was a real thrill. That was the last night that we were in DC
when we went back for the dedication and it was sort of as if, okay, it’s here forever, so
now I can, you know—

LC: And the reference there is to the dedication of the World War II Memorial,
which happened here just like two weeks ago.

HH: Yes, and we were at the kiosk, the information kiosk where you can type in
someone’s name in the computer and this wonderful photograph comes up that I had
entered in several months ago. And all the photographs were taken while they were in
the military, so you know they’re era photographs. They’re very good.

LC: Right.

HH: But she was apparently a photographer and as my cousin would say, she
learned how to swear in the Army, she loved it, and apparently went up in airplanes and
took photographs of the practice bombing runs of, you know, whether they were good or
not for the pilots.

LC: No kidding.

HH: Yeah.

LC: Wow.

HH: Yeah.

LC: Any idea where she was assigned?
HH: I have no idea; I have no idea. I only know that it was from 1943 until VE Day.

LC: Did she—I don’t know whether you know this Helen or whether your cousin might have told you, did she identify in later years as, you know, strongly with having served during the war?

HH: No. As a matter of fact, I have always known for some unknown reason that both of my uncles had been in the Battle of the Bulge during the World War II, but only knew about my aunt and actually, I was rather close to her because you know, I’m named after her.

LC: Yes.

HH: I’d only known about her because my mother has this wonderful photograph collection. She seemed to be the family, you know, archivist and I recall seeing a photograph of her in this dress and asking my mother about it or it was written on the back that it was her and that she was a photographer in the Army. And never asked her when she was alive about it and I never heard her talk about it. Although, apparently she certainly did to her daughter.

LC: But she had the sort of expression that came from her when she did talk about, was that she had enjoyed doing this and—?

HH: According to my cousin, she really enjoyed it, learned how to swear, and then loved the Army, and that she was the best damn photographer there was in the Army. So, clearly, she took pride in it.

LC: Absolutely. (Laughing)

HH: You know, I would’ve loved to have heard the stories and as I say, I was very close to her and wish I had asked her when she was still alive.

LC: Right.

HH: About it, you know.

LC: Well, you’re clearly an oral historian at heart, so, I think it’s completely apropos that you’ll be interviewed yourself. Let me ask you a little bit about your Uncle Bob and the experience that you had at the dedication. You took him to Washington DC, just whatever, a couple of weeks ago during Memorial Day Weekend.

HH: Yeah, I shamed him into going.
HH: He didn’t want any part of it.
LC: And how did you persuade him Helen?
HH: I eventually, I actually talked to him for the better part of the year and finally—and he seemed to think that he would be going back there and hearing a lot of war stories and he’s very much protected himself. He won’t watch war programs, never watched Band of Brothers, won’t do any of that because they’re clearly—as was displayed to me when I was in DC—they’re clearly memory triggers and he doesn’t want any part of it. So, he thought that if he went back there, there would be reunions and people would talk about old war stories, you know, and having been around enough Vietnam veterans in my time, I knew that that wasn’t really necessarily the case. So, I kept talking to him about it and he, you know, he’s a grumpy kind of a guy, a real sweetheart, but you know, has this sort of, “Grrr,” you know, growl to him and I for some reason been not at all afraid of that. You know, not very effective with me. So I finally said to him, “You know, you’re going to regret not doing this and you should do it for your brother and your sister who are no longer with us. And you’re healthy and you can afford it and you should do it.” Then I left it at that and he called me probably two or three weeks later and said, “Well, have you made arrangements yet?”
LC: (Laughing)
HH: (Laughing) So, then as we got closer, he was really excited to go.
LC: Is that right?
HH: Very excited to go, and I think this notion of not, you know, I think that he’d put into perspective that there wasn’t going to be a lot of conversation about, you know, battles and the things he did not want to remember, you know.
LC: The difficult parts.
HH: Yeah. You know, I’m not sure that anybody that has experienced combat really wants to remember them and I’m suspicious of those that do. But, as we got closer to Memorial Day, there was more and more conversation about World War II and things like that and the dedication, you know, coming up on Memorial Day. And he was hearing new stories and there were going to be a lot of people in town and he was getting more and more excited about it.
LC: Well, you mentioned that you went with him to Union Square or to the
Union Station, I’m sorry, and that there was a display there.
HH: Yes. You know, I was trying to get my uncle’s daughter and his first wife,
have both passed away, he has remarried. So you know, just for everybody’s knowledge,
you can remarry at seventy-five and be happy.
LC: There you go.
HH: Disgustingly happy as a matter of fact, they were just too cute for me.
LC: (Laughing) Too cute, huh?
HH: Too cute at times. So, his wife is dead and so is his daughter. My cousin
died a couple of years ago, and I have been curious about his service, and so we went to
Union Station because it’s just one of my favorite places to have lunch. We had just been
to the World War II Memorial. Our first full day there, and we had visited it and in
Union Station, the AP, Associated Press had this wonderful display of World War II
photographs and we were looking at it, he got very upset at a battle scene that was in the
Pacific if I’m not mistaken on Iowa Jima. And apparently said to no one, but to everyone
that could hear in sort of this bellowing voice, no matter how good the photograph is, it
doesn’t really show what combat really is like. No one, that can look at these
photographs all they want, but no one, you’re still not going to know what it’s really like.
And so I could tell he was obviously upset. (Laughing) And you know, when no one
said anything to him, you know, because the World War II people ruled that town, I’ll tell
you so.
LC: I’ll bet you. (Laughing) I’ll bet.
HH: (Laughing) So I took him over to another photo that was of American troops
in Paris, obviously liberating Paris, one of those pictures I think all of us have seen, and
took him over to that one and asked him if he had been one of those guys and he said,
“No, but I was in Paris after the war ended.” And I asked him innocently enough what
was VE Day like and he couldn’t recall and didn’t know and I said, “Oh come on Uncle
Bob, you have to know what that was like.” And he couldn’t remember anything about it
and I said, “Well, do you remember the battle—the war sort of winding down?” And he
said, “As soon as we crossed the Rhine, the war started to wind down.” And he said, “I
can remember being on our side of the Rhine and watching an artillery barrage,” and then
he broke down. And so then we waited for him to recuperate from that. And then he said, “Once we crossed the Rhine, then things did wind down, but I don’t remember VE Day.” So I decided that maybe VE Day was a lot more exciting for us over here than it was for him. Since he had the potential of rotating to the Pacific, because that war was still going on.

LC: Sure, absolutely.

HH: But then the rest of the day, I would catch him and he’d be thinking and I said, “You’re still trying to figure it out.” And he said, “I’m trying to do a timeline and I can’t figure out where I was.” Now, my uncle was injured in a—he was on KP (Kitchen Police) duty, after the end of the war, at least at a period where he was standing down.

LC: Okay.

HH: And so we don’t know if it was actually VE Day or just before, and there was a kerosene stove that they used and he was actually very truthful about this. He said, “You know, you had to take the kerosene stove out and if you didn’t empty it, it was going to blow up. It was as simple as that and I forgot to empty it.” So, it blew up.

LC: Yikes.

HH: So, it was entirely his fault. By the way, he receives a small amount of money from the military for his burns that he received. And then was taken to a hospital some place, but he doesn’t know where or even in what country.

LC: But these were quite severe injuries.

HH: Very severe burns, yeah.

LC: Okay.

HH: Very severe burns. He has very remarkable scarring on his chest, not his face though, and parts of his arms. And VE Day was in May of ’45, he didn’t return home until February of ’46. So, he was in the hospital for a long time.

LC: Absolutely, wow.

HH: And came across on a hospital ship and then went to a VA Hospital (Department of Veteran Affairs) in Indiana close to his hometown.

LC: Wow.

HH: During our stay there, bits and pieces of his little timeline that he was trying to place together would pop up, but what really got it was running into another guy at the
World War II Memorial with literally a cardboard sign that he’d made himself around his
neck that said seventy-five, the seventy-fifth. It only said seventy-fifth; it didn’t say ID
(Infantry Division) on it, because I don’t think that they used the designator of ID. They
called it all out, the Seventy-fifth Infantry Division.

LC: Yes, I think that’s right.

HH: And I think that’s something that’s new that the guys call it these days. But,
I grabbed the man with this thing and said, “Wait.” And yelled at my uncle who was a
head of me a few steps and they started to talk and that was just an amazing thing to be
able to witness that.

LC: What was the content and tenor of their talk together?

HH: They were just saying, you know, “Where were you when—” And that kind
of thing. Apparently, the entire Seventy-fifth ID was in the Battle of the Bulge, so that
sort of almost went without saying. They asked each other when they had gotten to the
front and they both had been at the front within days of each other, so they probably
traveled even from Fort Lennonwood together. But he, what a nice gentleman, that was
very animated and he said, “I was in the cigarette camps.” And I had never heard that
expression before and that really, my uncle really lit up when he heard that expression.
And because my uncle lit up, you have to really know him to know that he’s lighting up.

LC: (Laughing)

HH: The man said, “Do you remember the cigarette camps? They were named
after cigarette brands.” And he said, “I was at Lucky Strike.” Well, that was the camp
where my uncle was injured and that piece together, a huge piece of his timeline that he
kept trying to figure out, and he knew he was there, he knew was standing down, waiting
for VE Day to happen, so apparently, he had quite a bit of knowledge ahead of time. And
that’s where he was injured and we’re guessing he might’ve been in the hospital when,
you know, VE Day actually happened, which was what, May sixth?

LC: Right, when the champagne corks were popping in Paris, he was probably in
the hospital somewhere.

HH: Yes, yeah. And that’s why he doesn’t remember it and still didn’t as we left
DC, he still did not recall the day itself that he now understood. But he never
remembered, he had not remembered until that man said that, where it was that he was
injured. It was just someplace where, you know—

LC: Stored away somewhere.

HH: Yeah.

LC: That’s quite remarkable, and also you went over to Arlington.

HH: Yes we did, because in my travels to DC, I had discovered a plaque right
across the little—I call them lanes, they’re not really very large roads are they in
Arlington.

LC: That’s right.

HH: Right across from the tomb of the unknowns and the amphitheatre, is a
plaque dedicated to the men and women of the Battle of the Bulge, and I wanted to make
sure that he saw the plaque, and it’s a modest plaque. We had just seen the change, you
know, the guards and he and my aunt were sitting at a bench and I said, “Why don’t you
guys sit here and let me go find that plaque again so that we can walk directly to it.”

LC: Right.

HH: And it didn’t take—it took me only a second to find it because it was
flanked by four very good sized wreaths and so I took him over to it and the wreaths were
from Belgium and Luxembourg, and there were four of them. Belgium, Luxembourg and
these were—and Holland. Belgium, Luxembourg, and Holland, and then the fourth one
was from the Belgium Veterans Association; and he was stunned that after all of these
years, these wreaths would come from foreign countries. And the writing on the ribbon
on the wreaths, were—I could make out that one was Belgium, one was Luxemburg, and
one was Holland, but it was in their native language. And he was very taken with that
and I have a very nice photograph of him standing, you know, amongst those wreaths in
that plaque. So, it’s quite nice.

LC: And it was very moving for him?

HH: He was surprised. You know, if I had to say one word, it was surprised. He
completely did not expect people to thank him, and people would walk up to him because
I made him buy a World War II hat the first day we were there.

LC: And you probably made him wear it too.

HH: Well, actually he wore it proudly.
LC: Oh did he?
HH: He did.
LC: Yes.
HH: Really kind of got into it and I thought I was going to have to have a real conversation with him, you know. But he also got a polo shirt, you know, World War II polo shirt, and he wore that as well without me having to nudge him.
LC: Okay.
HH: And he was stunned at the people that would walk up to him and thank him and people didn’t just, you know, sort of hesitate in their—wherever they were moving to and say thank you. They’d actually stop and shake his hand and ask him what theatre he was in and what years and thank you very much and had these long conversations with him. And around the memorial, one might expect that a bit, right. But when we would go to Alexandria or to dinner, anyplace, or to breakfast, it continued. It was all over. And we went to one striking place; my uncle is a very religious man. My aunt and uncle are very—go to church and the church is something that’s very important in their life. So, I wanted to make sure that they saw the National Cathedral, and then walking out of the National Cathedral, this man, forty-something walked up to him and of course, my uncle had his World War II hat on and shook his hand, asked him where he was from, where he served, what years, was quick enough to know that when he said Belgium and Holland, that that meant the Battle of the Bulge and asked him if he was in the Battle of the Bulge. And shook his hand and, “We really appreciate you being here,” and “We really appreciate you service.” I mean really lengthy appreciation. He wasn’t used to that and he was, you know, a private first class and proud of it and people were saluting him. You know they would walk by and salute him and that sort of unnerved him. He said, “I don’t know why they’re doing that.” I think he liked them saying thank you better than he did the salutes and I said, “You know, they’re saluting your service, not what rank you might have been.” And I said, “So you have to take it in that spirit.” Well, then he kind of got—he kind of liked that. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing)
HH: So, if I had to say anything, he did not expect, after a memorial that was
dedicated in his words, far too late, that he did not expect people to actually thank him for
his service. That really, really stunned him.
LC: And these were younger people?
HH: Yes, yes. And when I took him over to the Wall, the Vietnam Veteran
Memorial—
LC: Yes.
HH: They were all—you know, nobody knows how to thank another vet better
than a Vietnam vet, and they were all over him. They would walk over to his bench and
talk to him for a very long time. You know, it was Rolling Thunder, there were these sort
of long haired kind of guys around and initially, I think he was shocked that this long
haired guy was coming up to even talk to him. (Laughing)
LC: Sure, sure. But they have something in common.
HH: Yes, and actually, my uncle finally, quite quickly said, “We all had to do
something.” And so that was his response to everybody thanking him. “Well, you know,
we all did something.” Which is pretty true, even if someone was a civilian during World
War II, they did a great deal.
LC: Or in your case Helen, a civilian during Vietnam era.
HH: Yes.
LC: Yeah.
HH: Yes, he was—I could tell that the Vietnam vets that came up to him were
very pleased that a World War II was acknowledging their service as well, you know.
LC: Did you have any conversations while you were there at the Wall?
HH: Did I have—?
LC: Yeah, did anybody come up to you and say, “Helen, what did you do during
the Vietnam Era?” And you said, “Well, I was a civilian—”
HH: Well, actually, a Vietnam friend of mine passed away of cancer and I won’t
be convinced that it wasn’t Agent Orange related.
LC: I see.
HH: A couple of months ago, and so I had taken some white carnations on Memorial Day. My aunt and uncle left on Memorial Day, and so I was at the Wall for the services on Memorial Day by myself.

LC: I see.

HH: And they have a new “In Memory” plaque.

LC: Yes.

HH: And I thought that I should probably put some of my bouquet of flowers for my friend at that plaque, and some went to the Apex, and I was just doing what I do most of the time around the Wall, and that’s just sort of stand there. And some people were coming up to the plaque and a couple of Gold Star wives came up. I’ll try really hard to get through this conversation, but for whatever reason, we struck up a conversation. Probably the first time I’ve ever talked with Gold Star wives. I’ve had conversations with Gold Star mothers, but not Gold Star wives. And there was one gal in the group that I—it was three women, two of them were Gold Star wives, the other was just a friend. And this one gal, it was her first time, she had never been there before, and she told the story about—she was only nineteen when she found out that her husband had died. And she was from a small town in Pennsylvania. I just really kind of clicked with her. And I finally—they finally asked what my connection was and I explained to them and they—I’m always kind of surprised that anybody thinks it was much of anything. But I explained to them what it was and they thought—they were very interested in that. They thought that was pretty fascinating.

LC: Yes.

HH: And I finally said, “Well, you know—” She said, “That must’ve been very hard.” And I said, “It was.” And I said to her, “But you have to know, there was me or someone like me at the top of that ramp when they went into war and we did it good.” So, I had a chance to finally tell one of the wives that there was someone there. So, she and I both cried by the way, so—

LC: And I’m sure that—

HH: That was huge for me.

LC: And probably for her too. Probably for her too Helen.
HH: Well, I would hope so. I’ve always wanted to be able to let them know that they just didn’t go into war without someone there that would have said goodbye like they would’ve.

LC: Yes.

HH: So, I didn’t expect that opportunity. That would’ve been my last thing that I would’ve ever guessed that I would’ve had an opportunity to talk to a Gold Star mother [wife]. She was very nice. We exchanged emails and I hope to hear from her.

LC: Helen, let’s talk a little bit about you as a youngster, you were moving all around and you had told us some details of that, where did you actually go to high school?

HH: In San Leandro.

LC: Okay.

HH: We moved to San Leandro. My father worked in Oakland. San Leandro is a small—was a small town back then in the fifties right next to Oakland. Charming town, great town to have grown up in.

LC: Did you graduate there?

HH: Yes. I went all through school. I think I entered the second grade having been at so many other schools. I think I entered the second grade in San Leandro and graduated from high school there.

LC: What was the ethnic composition?

HH: White.

LC: White-white?

HH: White, yeah. Back in those days, you know, you really could have the real estate; the real-estate agents really did have this gentlemen’s agreement, not to sell to anybody of—I think there was one Asian gal that I went to school with. And you know, if anybody was ethnic, it was, you know, the couple of Jewish kids that we had.

LC: Okay, no Hispanics though and African Americans?

HH: No, no. But you know what it was, San Leandro was founded by the Spanish and Portuguese and it was a land grant back in the days of when the Spaniards ruled California. And so there were a lot of Portuguese and Spanish kids in our school
that we thought—I was terribly upset that I didn’t have a Z in my name when I was
growing up.

LC: (Laughing) Oh, is that right?

HH: Well, yeah.

LC: That kind of marked you out a little bit.

HH: Oh yeah, sure. I had this really English, Scotty, and English name: Tennant.

LC: That’s right.

HH: I didn’t have an S or a Z in my name, so you know. And nobody was my
cousin because they were all second cousins or something like that.

LC: Oh okay, so a lot of family relations, second and third generations living
there.

HH: Yeah.

LC: And probably even deeper than that in some cases.

HH: Yes.

LC: What year did you graduate?

HH: Sixty-two.

LC: Okay. And how often did you get into Oakland and San Francisco?

HH: Oh, a lot. Oddly enough, we could save our money and take the bus into the
train terminal. In those days, the Bay Bridge had a train on the lower deck, and with my
girlfriends, when we were about eleven or twelve years old, and we could go into San
Francisco all by ourselves shopping all day.

LC: Wow, that’s amazing. Now, did your older sisters, had they been doing this
also?

HH: Oh sure. Yeah, you know, I mean, I’m reading Tim Russet’s book, Big Russ
and Me, and he does a wonderful job of bringing the fifties back to you and the things
that we used to be able to do. But, sure, it was not uncommon for us. That was a big
outing for us girls to go into the city and go shopping in the big department stores. We
went into Oakland all of the time. You know, in the summertime, we would go out and
play and the only restriction we had was be in by sundown. It’s not like today.

LC: How is it different Helen?
HH: Well, you know, I have grandchildren, you know. I wouldn’t let them two feet from the house without being accompanied.

LC: And why?

HH: Because it’s just dangerous today. It’s not safe like it used to be back then. You know, I’m sure things must’ve happened, but not like it is today. Not like with, you know, people picking up kids right and left and stealing them away. We were never afraid of that and neither was my parents and my mother was a—what they now call a stay at home. She was just a fifties mother. You know, women stayed at home, they didn’t work outside of the house. She was very involved in PTA (Parent Teacher Organization) and she had her women’s groups and things like that.

LC: Sure.

HH: So she was not certainly at all idle. She was very productive, but she was a fifties mother. You know, there’s no question about it and she always knew where we were, who we were hanging out with.

LC: And she wouldn’t allow you to take on, you know, some unnecessary risks?

HH: Absolutely not, always ask.

LC: Yes and these outings weren’t seen that way?

HH: Oh, absolutely not, no.

LC: That’s amazing.

HH: I know.

LC: It really is different in the world.

HH: I know, to a major city like that.

LC: Different world, eleven year old girl, that’s just unbelievable really.

HH: Yeah, and it was really a lot of fun for us. It was quite an adventure.

LC: Oh absolutely, I’m sure that it was.

HH: And I never remembered being at all afraid. You know, there was never anything that happened. San Francisco was an incredibly glamorous city then and it still is. It is my favorite city by the way. It still is a beautiful city and it just seems to get more and more beautiful, but there weren’t homeless people and people dressed up when they went into the city back then. You know, you didn’t go in Levis like I would today.

(Laughing)
LC: Right, right. (Laughing) Absolutely, it was an outing.

HH: Yes.

LC: Yeah. What were you like as a student Helen?

HH: You know, my mother saved all of my report cards.

LC: Moms do that kind of thing.

HH: Yeah. My memory is that I was not a very good student because I really struggled with a couple of subjects, but her saving my report cards proved me wrong. I was actually a very good student. And I did go onto college, which was not common. Only wealthy girls went to college.

LC: Where did you go?

HH: I went to a junior college and then stupid me got in an argument with my father and I quit school and got a job.

LC: What was the argument about?

HH: Um, I’m not sure.

LC: Really?

HH: No. I think he called me a freeloader and that was it for me.

LC: You were living at home then I take it?

HH: Sure.

LC: What about your older sisters, had they gone to college as well?

HH: Yes.

LC: Both of them?

HH: Um, yes, my middle sister went to what we would now call a business college. It was a private secretarial college.

LC: Sure, yes. She was looking to get a job with that.

HH: Well, you either went to nursing school or secretarial school or you became an airline stewardess. Those are your options. If you didn’t get married right away, which by the way was the preferences. Get married as soon as you graduate from high school. You know, my oldest sister graduated in 1956. She went onto a private four-year college and lasted, I think two or three years. She didn’t get a degree, and that was considered a very big deal.

LC: The fact that she had not completed?
HH: No, no, that wasn’t—no, no.
LC: Okay, okay.
HH: No, no. Women completing college back in those days was not that big of a deal.
LC: So the big deal was that she had gone.
HH: That she had gone to a private school, a private college. It’s now the University of Pacific, but it was the College of the Pacific then; and a Methodist college, if I’m not mistaken.
LC: I think that’s right.
HH: Yes, because we were Methodists.
LC: Okay.
HH: And you know, it was very Ivy League and I mean, you know Ivy Brick and all that. It could’ve been any place in Massachusetts. So yeah, she went there, but no, not that she didn’t finish. There was no shame in that for women you know, but she had the audacity to wait till she was twenty-five to get married.
LC: Well, yes, that was—
HH: That was pushing it.
LC: That was pushing it. (Laughing)
HH: That was really pushing it. And my middle sister got married first at nineteen.
LC: And what kind of dynamic did that set up, any problems between the two of them?
HH: Sure.
LC: Okay.
HH: Yeah, there was, and it wasn’t between them, but I remember my older sister actually being referred to as an old maid because she had not married.
LC: At like twenty-four?
HH: Oh yeah. I guarantee you that was not going to happen to me. You know, I remember that.
LC: Well what lesson did you draw from all of that?
HH: Well that you had to get married. I mean, that was the lesson; you had to get married. When I became a stewardess, that was a little bit of a diversion and you know, there was some toe tapping, you know, a year into that, like, “How long is this going to go on?”

LC: Because you need to be getting married.

HH: Oh yeah, absolutely.

LC: Where was that coming from, your mom, your dad, or both?

HH: Um, I don’t remember them actually saying that. There was just an incredible amount of social pressure to get married, you know. You were just supposed to get married and once you’re married, it didn’t stop. Then when is the baby—when are the babies coming? It was very truly like that. That was what you were supposed to do. It didn’t seem like there was any other option.

LC: And how did you negotiate that Helen, I mean, with your personality and so forth, how did you react to that, you know, that—?

HH: Well, I became a stewardess, you know, which my father had been a traveler, you know, with business.

LC: Yes.

HH: And he was the first to point out to me that all you really will be is a cocktail waitress at thirty thousand feet.

LC: Did he say something like that to you?

HH: He said exactly that to me. And that was when I was in training, and by that time, I had a pretty good idea that that’s pretty much what I was going to be doing. You know, I mean, you were a waitress at thirty thousand feet. You know, that was part of what you did. There were many other elements to it, you know.

LC: Well, how did that make you feel though?

HH: I’m not sure that it made me feel bad. It probably should’ve, shouldn’t it have Laura?

LC: Well, you can certainly read it that way if you wanted to.

HH: You know, it’s the times.

LC: Yeah.
HH: You have to always put things in perspective of the times and certainly I had not come into myself to allow him to make that comment to me and to sort of degrade the choice that I had made. Because, becoming a stewardess in the early sixties when I did it, or it was the sixties when I did it, that really was a career choice. I’m not kidding when I say, secretary, nurse, teacher, and those are your choices and those are your career choices. That’s it, period. And stewardess was a fun thing that wasn’t an option open to a lot of people. So, you know, nurse, secretary and teacher, you know, just not a broad selection there.

LC: No.

HH: If you don’t fit into those molds, which I clearly didn’t, then boy, the stewardess way certainly was appealing.

LC: Why did those other apparent routes not appeal?

HH: Just absolutely did not appeal to me.

LC: Just left you cold?

HH: Absolutely did. There just had to be more fun.

LC: Okay.

HH: I always wanted to travel, I don’t know where I got that from, always wanted to travel. Places around the world were almost mythical to me, and the notion that I would be able to see them was, you know, that was almost a little bit too much for me to get my head around.

LC: Yeah.

HH: You know, so—

LC: Well when—go ahead Helen.

HH: And that proved to be true when I would go into a new country. You know, it was sort of like, you know, I really didn’t really believe this existed. But now I’m here, you know. So, it took me really several hours to get used to a place.

LC: The fact that it really was there and you could actually go there and—?

HH: Oh absolutely, yeah.

LC: There were people walking around on the ground and—

HH: We would have to find Big Bend in London the first time. We would have to find the major, you know, thing that we had seen in photographs in order to really get
our minds, at least I did. I don’t know, maybe it was easier for the other girls, but you
know, when you grow up thinking foreign places are sort of these mythical places, this is
long before the jet era, you know.

LC: Sure.
HH: And the way that we’re able to travel around the world these days, you
know. Flying in an airplane were for people that had a lot of money, you know.
LC: Right, very exotic and kind of unattainable.
HH: That’s right.
LC: When did you actually decide that this is what you wanted to do? What
were you doing for a job when you decided to go out and become a stewardess?
HH: I was a secretary; I was a clerk probably.
LC: Okay, where were you working?
HH: I was working in a little company. When I put in my application, I was
working for a little company that supplied some food goods to military commissaries,
oddly enough.
LC: And this was in the Oakland area still?
HH: Yes.
LC: Okay.
HH: That’s when I gave them my application, that’s not when I—
LC: Okay, tell me about that process.
HH: When I wanted to become an airline stewardess?
LC: Sure.
HH: No, you really cannot laugh at this, all right?
LC: Okay, I promise, or I’ll cut my mike, one of the two.
HH: Huge, huge, absolutely huge fan of the Mickey Mouse Club, and I don’t
know if you know anything about the Mickey Mouse Club. The original Mickey Mouse
Club, but every once in a while, they would have these programs on these different jobs
that people did and one of the them was about an airline stewardess and these lucky kids
that were my age were shown around an airplane and this one little girl actually went
through the training process and they filmed all of this.

LC: Awesome.
HH: And she got a wing at the end of it and I was jealous and I wanted to be that.
That’s what I wanted to be.
LC: So you sort of had this filed in your head somewhere that—
HH: Absolutely.
LC: Okay.
HH: I always wanted to be—ever since I saw that program, that’s what I wanted
to be was that airline stewardess because that seemed like that was like the cat’s meow.
LC: And how did you come to actually put in an application and was it with the
airline that eventually hired you?
HH: Yes it was. It was the only airline that I ever applied for because it was in
Oakland, based in Oakland and I didn’t want to—I looked into TWA (Trans World
Airlines), which the training was in Kansas City and you know, who know where—and
United, the training was in Chicago. And you had to work your way up the seniority line
in order to get, you know, you’d be flying DC-6s from you know, from nowhere
Nebraska to you know—but World Airways was out of Oakland, I didn’t have to move
and they flew only international flights.
LC: And, so did they advertise at some point or did you—?
HH: I don’t know. You know what, that’s a good question. I don’t know, I don’t
know how I found about them.
LC: This would’ve been in 1965 if I’m correct?
HH: Could’ve been ’64.
LC: Okay, ’64.
HH: Sixty-four, sixty-five. I know that I applied, probably didn’t get anyplace
and for some reason, I guess I had left a job, no doubt gotten fired, I was always getting
fired from jobs back then.
LC: Really?
HH: Oh yeah, please, you know. “What do you mean I have to be here at exactly
at eight o’clock?”
LC: That wasn’t working for you.
HH: Ha, no. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing) Okay.
HH: And so I went to a temp agency, you know, kind of like Kelly Girls.
LC: Right.
HH: Only this was called Western Girl, and she had an opening in the office at
the airline and I said, “I’d love to, but will you tell them that I have applied to be a
stewardess and find out if that’s going to make, you know, if I should not take the job
because of that or whatever.” And they said, “Oh no, actually, that might work to her
advantage.” And so I actually worked in the office of operations, which included the
airline stewardesses, for you know what, nearly a year before they put me in a class.
LC: No kidding?
HH: Yeah.
LC: Okay, so you were already an employee?
HH: Yes, temporary employee.
LC: But you were getting some idea of whether this is where you might like to
be.
HH: Yeah, and more importantly, they were getting an idea that I would make a
good stewardess.
LC: Okay, so there was something happening then on both sides that was
probably good.
HH: Right. It was very interesting.
LC: Were you living at home?
HH: Yeah.
LC: Okay. And what kind of pay were you making; any remembrance around
that?
HH: Oh, I don’t know.
LC: Enough to get by?
HH: The temporary?
LC: Yeah.
HH: Um, yeah, I think I was probably doing pretty good for those days. We were
paid very well for those days, the stewardesses.
LC: Well yeah, yeah.
HH: So that money—but you know, it was never about the money by the way.
LC: Sure.

HH: But, you know—

LC: Yeah, I think that will be clear to anyone listening to you, yeah.

HH: But it really was, it wasn’t about the money, it was really about being able to travel.

LC: Let me ask you a couple of timeline questions just to sort of to cement in people’s minds what was going on. Just recently, the president had been killed and Helen, I wonder if you remember where you were when that happened?

HH: Oh yeah, I was.

LC: What was going on for you?

HH: I was playing hooky from work. (Laughing)

LC: Okay, this would be leading up to one of those firing things you were talking about. (Laughing)

HH: (Laughing) My sister called me and I was at home and she said, “Turn on the TV set, President Kennedy has been shot.”

LC: And was this upsetting to you, how did you feel about it?

HH: Oh please, that’s my generation.

LC: Yeah.

HH: It still upsets me.

LC: Okay.

HH: Maybe not because of, certainly, nobody likes to see a president assassinated, but he had instilled oh such promise for us. I mean, he was talking to us and I saw him, you know, when I was a senior in high school.

LC: Oh really?

HH: He spoke at UC Berkeley and they let us out of school to go see him and it was spectacular.

LC: Do you remember what he talked about?

HH: He talked—at that time Jackie Kennedy was in India and I think it was Chancellor’s Day at UC Berkeley, and so he talked a great deal about her getting more press than he was because she was on the elephants in India.

LC: Right.
HH: What I remember about that is he was far better looking in person than even on TV.

LC: Wow.

HH: And I’m in a football stadium and the charm, you know, you just immediately fell in love with him.

LC: Is that where it was then, at the football stadium?

HH: Yes, yeah.

LC: Where were you in relation to him?

HH: Oh, way across the field and up high, but the guy in front of me had binoculars and I kept stealing them from his—I would pull the binoculars from him so I could see him jerk his neck. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) And a—

HH: It was just amazing. It was a huge thing. You know, it was huge to see Jack Kennedy.

LC: Absolutely. Did you have political interest at that time or was there other—?

HH: Well, you know, I was in high school during the sixties campaign and it was, you know, made—and the debates, which were the first debates I think. First televised debates, were they not?

LC: Yes they were.

HH: So we all had to study those, so whether we liked it or not, we became, you know, we kind of took sides.

LC: I see.

HH: But, you know, I mean, who wouldn’t pick Kennedy over Nixon?

LC: (Laughing)

HH: Kennedy was just good looking. I don’t think politics had anything to do with it.

LC: I was just going to say, what were you, sixteen or seventeen years old probably?

HH: Right.

LC: It was probably Kennedy, yeah.
HH: Yeah. So then, it was this Irish Catholic, you know, Kennedy. This was very cool. And I mean, and it was so useful because we all thought of politics as being this old man’s game, which you know, heaven knows, it probably still is. But, you know, he was young and youthful and talking to us, you know, that’s what I think anybody of my generation would say. And there are those of us that, you know, would’ve loved to have had him lived and maybe the Vietnam War wouldn’t have happened, you know.

LC: Do you think that’s probably the case?
HH: You know, I don’t know if I believed that on fact, I want to believe that.
LC: Okay.
HH: I think there were a lot of things about Kennedy, had he lived that you know, would have been good for my generation.
LC: And the day that you were playing hooky and your sister called—
HH: Yeah.
LC: Did you pretty much kind of stay wrapped up in what was happening on the television?
HH: Yes.
LC: For the rest of the weekend and all that?
HH: Yeah, yeah, didn’t move, didn’t move. My parents knew what was going to happen because they had lived through Roosevelt’s death. So they knew that there would be no TV in, you know, no radio except official news and things like that. And I think I must’ve asked my parents a few questions about what it was like when Roosevelt died. But, you know, they seemed to know how it was going to go, you know, the mourning period would go.
LC: Well, I wonder how much you knew in or paying attention to the news in 1964 and ’65 when President Johnson, who had come into office, began to send troops over to Vietnam, were you paying any attention to that at all?
HH: I don’t think so, I don’t think so because I knew as a stewardess that we were going to go to Vietnam, but I didn’t—my recollection and I try to protect my memory as much as I possibly can. I know that I should’ve known more about Vietnam, but I got those wings and really did not know what Vietnam was. I sure as hell didn’t know where it was. So, I don’t think that I was aware of a war then and I don’t think
anybody was aware of a war then because it was not a war. There were just troops over there. So, I think now we know that the war was going on and to what extent because we can look back and we can study it, but at the time, I don’t recall anything about that. I don’t recall reading about it. I don’t have a memory of that and that just seems odd, doesn’t it?

LC: Well, it was below your radar anyway in terms of what you were—

HH: Absolutely below, and I didn’t know anybody that was there and there wasn’t a draft.

LC: Right.

HH: None of the young men that I knew were concerned.

LC: When did you actually get your wings Helen?

HH: In ’66, early ’66.

LC: Do you remember the month at all?

HH: Um, January.

LC: And during the training that you had in the period prior to that, had Vietnam come up at all?

HH: No.

LC: Nothing during the training?

HH: No. I’m told that changed, but it never—the only thing related to Vietnam in my training was the knowledge that we had military contracts and we had to memorize all ranks and all insignias, so that we could determine, you know, a ranking officer.

LC: So you knew that somehow that was going—that interface with military personnel was going to be part of what you would be doing.

HH: Oh yes, yes.

LC: But you are not seeing some larger strategic picture or anything like that?

HH: No.

LC: And what kinds of aircraft were you being trained on?

HH: Seven 0-seven. I was actually triple qualified, a DC-6, a Connie, a Super Constellation.

LC: Right.

HH: And a 707.
LC: And which of those was your favorite?
HH: Seven 0-seven.
LC: Okay, why?
HH: I loved 707s. I loved the smell of them. You know, they’re the best airplane around. You just ask the pilots. It’s just a great airplane. I’m still partial to Boeings. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing)
HH: I mean, I check out what aircraft I’m going to fly when I take a trip. I wish 707s were around more. They aren’t in this country, but I know they are in other countries.
LC: What was the capacity, do you remember, full of?
HH: On our military flights?
LC: Yes.
HH: One hundred and sixty-five men and women.
LC: Okay.
HH: But there were very few women. One hundred and sixty-five. It was called out by the military contact that we had. There had to be x amount of inches in the aisle way and there had to be x amount of inches between seats, you know, legroom. So, it was only 165. They capacity of a 707, if you really wanted to jam the men was approaching two hundred.
LC: So the configuration of the seats and everything was set by a contract?
HH: Yes.
LC: Wow.
HH: Yes, because I flew civilian contracts with more than 165 people.
LC: I’m sure regularly.
HH: Yeah.
LC: What about the women and I presume that these were all women who were going through the training with you?
HH: Yes, we didn’t have men then.
LC: Okay, how big a class was it?
HH: You know, there were about twenty, or twenty-five.
LC: Okay, and were they Californians largely?
HH: Oh no, not necessarily. As a matter of fact, we had a couple of girls from Europe. We were trying to recruit girls from Europe.
LC: Okay.
HH: With foreign languages.
LC: Oh is that right?
HH: Yes.
LC: Do you remember any of those women?
HH: Um, I remember one very well. I see her at reunions. She was a senior steward, German. Typical German, you know, short, cute, blonde with long blonde hair that was braided and kept up, you know, exactly the—
LC: Yeah, the image.
HH: The image, right? And she was a real tough senior stew, and I flew with her a lot and I see her at reunions.
LC: What’s her name?
HH: Can’t remember.
LC: Oh, okay.
HH: Try not to ask me about names, I can’t remember names.
LC: Oh okay, I’ll avoid that.
HH: I have such a terrible thing about names.
LC: (Laughing) Let me just ask you about this term, which this is part of culture change, you know this better than anybody. The term, stewardess, was that something you called each other? Was that what you were called?
HH: Absolutely. I still call myself that. Flight attendant came later when stewardesses became unionized and then there were things that they, you know, according to the union contract, they didn’t have to do anymore. Stewardesses did everything that they needed to do. We weren’t regulated. The FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) did not regulate cabin crew, so they could fly us until our legs flew off, you know, I mean dropped off. We did not have times in the air like the guys did. They could fly only so long and then they needed to have eight hours block time. Block time being literally when they put the block in the front wheel to take in the block away from
the front wheel. They had to have eight hours block time. We weren’t regulated like that. They are now. The FAA doesn’t regulate them, but the airline does and the subsequent lawsuits and you know, this, that and the other thing, that, you know, their unions. I didn’t belong to a union and we weren’t regulated at all and we cleaned the airplane if we had to. I was in Dublin, Ireland. We flew in there with an empty plane to pick up passengers and I had to, in uniform, full uniform with high heels by the way, go down the ramp under the belly of the airplane and bring up those containers that the meals are in and bring them up the ramp all by myself and put them inside the galley. We were switching out our meal thing. There was no one around to do it, and so I had to do it.

LC: And you could be put on just basically any task at any time?

HH: Yeah, and you know, we didn’t think anything of it.

LC: Right.

HH: I mean we were an airline that flew a lot of very unusual places and if they hadn’t found somebody to contract something, then we did it and so what, you know. We could empty garbage.

LC: Right.

HH: And we often did.

LC: And it’s just part of your job.

HH: Right, and because we had that attitude, you know, going into Vietnam, you don’t want anybody else in the bathrooms you know, in the airplane where they can sabotage it. You know, you want to take your own garbage out.

LC: You’re saying civilian Vietnamese—

HH: Right.

LC: Who might be, obviously working for the enemy.

HH: Right. So, you know, we were used to that.

LC: What was your first flight as a stewardess?

HH: To Japan, Tokyo.

LC: Do you remember that?

HH: Yes.

LC: Can you tell me anything about it?
HH: Yeah, I was scared to death. I was scared to death. I literally said to myself, "I have no idea what I’m supposed to be doing. Somebody’s going to catch me.”

(Laughing) I mean, I’d gone through training and everything, but, you know; now I’m on this airplane and I’m like in charge. And we were really, really instilled with emergency procedures. I mean, if you had an idle second on that airplane, you were to be sitting in your jump seat reading the emergency procedure. You know, we had a big book onboard.

LC: That’s amazing.

HH: Yeah, that’s exactly what you were supposed to be doing. There was no coffee break or anything like that, not like what you see today and it just absolutely drives me crazy.

LC: Yes.

HH: And it was not unusual for the senior stew to walk in the back of the airplane and throw emergency questions at us. That was not unusual at all.

LC: Just to keep you guys razor sharp, that kind of thing?

HH: Yeah.

LC: What kind of emergency procedures are we talking about in the event of what?

HH: Of a ditching.

LC: Okay.

HH: You know, or what do you do if somebody dies or you know, where are the oxygen, you know, where’s the oxygen?

LC: What kind of medical training had you had, how much of it, and what sorts of things?

HH: We went through Red Cross Training.

LC: Okay.

HH: And so we could do—we also went through Fire Training too. We knew exactly what an AB and AC and exactly which thing that we would use on which kind of a fire.

LC: Okay.
HH: Because we had several of those onboard too, fire hydrants, that’s what they are.

LC: Yeah, the extinguishers.

HH: Yeah, extinguishers. I have a son that’s becoming a fireman. He’ll kill me if he heard me.

LC: Oh okay, well we’ll—(Laughing)

HH: And so we had all of that. We had a lot of emergency stuff. As a matter of fact, I think I was certified by the—for those days, you know, this is the days before EMTs (Emergency Medical Technician) and paramedics, then I think I had a pretty high Red Cross thing that I had to earn during the training.

LC: So the certifications were coming from outside the airline, but you had to obtain probably.

HH: Yes. The military required that we have a food handler certificate, which meant we had to be screened to make sure that we didn’t have any kind of disease or parasites or anything like that.

LC: So you had to have some physical—

HH: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Very extensive physical as a matter of fact; and all kinds of shots.

LC: Yeah.

HH: The only thing that was optional was the Black Plague, and I opted not to have it.

LC: Not to have that shot?

HH: Yes, not to have that shot, which kept me a little bit antsy when I was in Vietnam. But we had very good training. We also had a weeks worth of aeronautical training, so we could answer questions about the airplane to passengers.

LC: Like what kinds of basic things probably did you learn?

HH: Oh you know, what are those things on the wing? You know, those things sticking up on the wing, their ailerons. I can hardly say that word. You know, it helps the wing lift. So we could tell people, you know, “No, the wing isn’t broken, that’s a flap.”

LC: Okay, right. (Laughing)
HH: Because people didn’t know these things. You know, it’s not like today where we get in a jet and it’s just common. People would be—nearly everybody that was on my airplane, it was the first time they’d ever been in an airplane, let alone a jet airplane and that included the military. So, you know, this was a jet flight and it was almost ninety percent of the time, the first time people had gotten on an airplane. So they had lots of questions.

LC: Yeah, so there were lots of questions.

HH: Listen, they though the little dishes we used to serve the meals were cute. “Can I take these home to my granddaughter?” We got that all the time. “Oh yeah, please, do take them.” (Laughing)

LC: And in those days, you could with no—?

HH: Oh absolutely.

LC: (Laughing) With no problem.

HH: Yeah.

LC: That’s just amazing.

HH: They were just really taken with the little plastic—this is before, you know, TV dinners and stuff. You know, but they were taken with all the little plates and the miniature this and that that we had on the trays. We were very sophisticated. We were very above that, you know. (Laughing)

LC: Absolutely. (Laughing)

HH: We really weren’t, but you know—

LC: I was going to say, no towels or so for anything flying out to the—

HH: Well actually, we could not pilfer from the airline.

LC: Okay, and what did they tell you about that?

HH: I mean a piece of soap, and they would fire you on the spot.

LC: No kidding?

HH: Oh, very, very strict. Two things, moral turpitude—

LC: Okay.

HH: Which, you know, this means—

LC: Did they explain that to you what that means?
HH: Well, no, because they wanted to be able to interpret that any way they wanted to.

LC: Got it.

HH: You know, so there was moral turpitude and pilferage, and that will get you fired on the spot. And the captain is god and the president and everything. And he had the ability to fire you and leave you in Timbuktu and say, “Get home on your own.” You know, he was the word on that airplane.

LC: That’s authority.

HH: Yes, and it was often used.

LC: Can you tell me any stories that come to mind around that?

HH: You know, it was just what they said went. And most of the time, most of the time, they kept us in very good—most of the time they protected us very, very well. They told us only what we needed to hear. Sometimes when I think about the information that they kept from us, so as not to upset us was really incredible.

LC: Things that they’ve done were sort of carrying by themselves?

HH: Yes.

LC: Like what Helen?

HH: You know, our pilots, my airline was a little bit unusual because our pilots were all World War II and Korean pilots. They were all military, every single one of them. And they had either fought in combat in the Second World War, or had just gotten their wings when the Second World War ended and were reactivated for Korea. But these were all experienced fighter pilots, which caused them a certain amount of difficulty going into Vietnam unarmed. They never did get used to that, but they were very good pilots and crusty guys. I thought they were ancient, you know, they were only in their forties, late forties or early fifties. I thought they were ancient. A lot of the girls dated them, I didn’t. They were the same age as my father, I just couldn’t—

LC: You weren’t going there?

HH: No, no.

LC: Yes.
HH: And, it was a bit of a trick to—there were girls that dated, there were girls
didn’t date and there were the unknowns, and I managed to stay an unknown through
my entire career.

LC: Now, what’s the distinction between girls who didn’t date and girls who
were unknown?

HH: Well, they hadn’t determined yet whether or not they would date them or
not. You know, if you didn’t date or if you didn’t date the cockpit crew, then they
wanted nothing to do with you. They would rather you work the back of the airplane.
That was my feeling anyhow. Things might’ve changed as time progressed, but you
know, you have to remember, it was ’66 and ’67. The women’s movement really hadn’t
gotten into full force. Women really weren’t nowhere near equal, you know. So, they
would just assume have you in the back of the airplane and not have any contact with
you.

LC: If you were unavailable.

HH: That’s right.

LC: And so did things go easier with the gals who would date? Was it easier for
them or was it just different?

HH: Sure. I think that it was easier because they were more friendly, you know.
It wasn’t that they didn’t get along. I think that the guys considered it, “Oh, well if you
don’t consider us, you know, you don’t want to date us—” It wasn’t whether you date or
you don’t date, the ones that said, “No, I don’t want anything to do with them,” then
they’d say, “Fine, we don’t want anything to do with you.” So, it wasn’t necessarily
strictly on the lines of dating.

LC: Okay.

HH: But I just managed to stay an unknown and they very much did like to
classify you. So I was always proud that I stayed an unknown during the entire eighteen
months that I flew.

LC: And so you were up by the cabin then most of the time?

HH: I would work the front of the cabin. On trips to Vietnam, I certainly did.

LC: Were there tensions among the setup amongst the gals?

HH: No, I don’t remember any tensions. Isn’t that amazing?
LC: Yeah, it is.
HH: Five women on an airplane, you’d think, right?
LC: Well, you think, yeah.
HH: I don’t remember any; if there were any—you know, to work a forward part
of an airplane or the back part of the airplane was very different, so sometimes if
somebody requested, you know, “I want to be in the forward,” or somebody said, “I want
to be in the back,” it could’ve been because they were trying to stay away from one of the
other gals. But, I never remember any of that, any difficulty.
LC: So the crews consisted of how many people and what positions?
HH: Of the girls?
LC: Yeah.
HH: A senior stew.
LC: Okay.
HH: And she worked the forward part of the cabin, and then another stew who
worked—there were five positions—who worked the galley, in the forward galley. And
then three in the back. One worked the galley, and the other two did various other things.
LC: And how many crew up on the flight deck?
HH: Four. Captain, a pilot, co-pilot, and engineer, and a navigator.
LC: So nine of you all together?
HH: Yes.
LC: Okay. And were you at full strength for the time that you were flying with
World Airways?
HH: What you mean full strength?
LC: In other words, the crew of nine was always fully staffed. You didn’t
have—
HH: Oh absolutely.
LC: Okay. Was that a reg that you had to have that many people onboard and for
say by the contracts with military or—?
HH: Well, you had to have the four guys, that’s for sure.
LC: Yes.
HH: And the military flights, yes, they required five stewardesses. It was a number of stewardesses per—you know, there was a ratio there.

LC: Right, per passengers.

HH: Yeah.

LC: You’d have like a ratio of like one to twenty-five or something, one to thirty.

HH: Something like that.

LC: Okay. And let me ask you about the first time that you had a flight that was carrying troops.

HH: Yeah.

LC: Do you remember that?

HH: Yeah, that was my first flight.

LC: Okay, so there were troops on that flight to Japan?

HH: Yes. The flights to Vietnam, it was at twelve, approximately a twelve-hour flight into Japan and then there would be a crew change and then a five-hour flight to wherever you were going to in Vietnam. And that crew would turn the plane around and come back to Japan. There would be another complete crew change and then it would go back onto California.

LC: And for you, which legs did you fly the most often or did you fly all different pieces of that?

HH: Well, I got stuck in Japan flying the turnarounds for quite a long time from Thanksgiving of ’66 all the way through till after Christmas of ’66. I was in Japan picking up the turnaround flights.

LC: Now, by turnaround, you mean which element?

HH: The Vietnam turnarounds. That’s the five-hour—we pick it up in Japan and take it to Vietnam, unload passengers, hopefully load passengers for the home trip and then take it back to Japan. And then I’d stay in Japan and another crew would pick it up and take it to California. So, I don’t know how many—I did a lot of both legs of it.

LC: And you did this from starting in late ’66?

HH: Yes, until the end of ’67.

LC: Okay, so at least fourteen months or so.

HH: Yea, I think it works out to be about eighteen.
LC: Okay.
HH: Closer to eighteen.
LC: Okay, on the first flight that you took then from Japan into Vietnam, was the plane full?
HH: Yes. They were always full.
LC: They were always full. You wouldn’t fly unless it was full? Is that about right?
HH: No, I can’t say that.
LC: Okay. But it seems, most of the time—
HH: There just weren’t—you know the military; they fill up an airplane.
LC: Surely, yeah, absolutely. Um, let’s take a break for a minute. Helen, can you give me a sense of the flights when you would be leaving from Japan and going down to Vietnam? What was the mood on those planes?
HH: Quiet. It was quiet from the stateside, you know. The only kind of noise that might’ve had happened or activity, I think I can best describe it as nervous, nervous energy. On occasion, there was a troop that might—I think was probably more nervous than he realized and you know, there was some bravado.
LC: Okay.
HH: But you know, you could see right through it. You know, he was more scared. It was more like he was trying to convince himself than he was me. But really, the flights were very quiet. They were well aware of where they were going you know. Well, they were well aware that they were going to war. I still say that they really didn’t know what that meant until they got there.
LC: And what about you Helen, did you have any idea when you started this?
HH: No, no, I had no idea what I was in for. I had none. I remember, on my first flight to Vietnam, you know, I’m sure you’ve in doing all of this; you’ve heard people talk about them shutting their emotions down.
LC: Yeah.
HH: I actually know when it was shut down. When we were about an hour out, this is my very first flight, and when we were about an hour out from Vietnam, the senior stew came in the back, I was working the back of the airplane, and she looked at me and
there might’ve been someone else with me that was new, but I don’t remember. I just remember that she was talking to me and she said, “You’re new?” And I said, “Yes.” Because this might’ve been only my second flight. She said, “You’ve never been into Vietnam before?” And I said, “No.” And she pointed her finger at me, had it right next to my face and she said, “React to nothing. I don’t care what you see; do not react to a thing. Do you understand me?” And I said, “Yes.” And so, I didn’t react to anything, and she never explained what she was talking about or what she meant by that. You know, I had no idea what she was—I had no clue what she was talking about, but the message was very clear because we had been taught to always make sure we kept control of our emotions. We were the calming effect in the airplane. Right, that was the whole deal about stewardesses in an emergency.

LC: Yes.

HH: So, to have somebody come back and say, you know, very much in a threatening way, “Don’t react to anything you see.” And honestly, for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out what she thought I was going to see. You know, I just said, “Yes, of course.” You know? I wanted to be a stewardess; I’m going to do anything they tell me to do.

LC: Sure, absolutely.

HH: But I had no clue what she was talking about.

LC: And over time, did she—?

HH: Oh, I learned the first—you know, she actually did me quite a service because boy, I’ll tell you, you know as soon as they start to deplane that airplane, you know that they’re going into a war. You know you’re looking at dead men, you know. She knew exactly what she was saying to me. It was very difficult to watch that. You know, and some couldn’t. The gals would just disappear. Well, they were hiding in the bathrooms in the back. They wouldn’t watch them get off the airplane.

LC: And you were standing where typically?

HH: That first flight, I was in the back because that would be my position.

LC: Okay.

HH: Subsequent flights, I was always at the front door. I was a bargain. They’d ask for somebody to take the front door because the gal that was supposed to take the
front door would be the senior stew and the gal working the forward galley and they’d
ask somebody to take the front door.

LC: Because—?
HH: They didn’t want to—they wanted a volunteer.
LC: They didn’t want to look at the guys?
HH: No. It wasn’t that they didn’t want to; it was a really hard thing to do.
LC: They couldn’t.
HH: Right.
LC: It was something inside them—
HH: They couldn’t. So, some did well and some didn’t do so well, so they would
just ask for somebody to take the front door and you stayed with the same crew until you
went home and so somewhere along the way, somewhere along the way I made the
bargain, “I’ll take the front door in Vietnam if I can have the bottom of the ramp at
Travis.” So I got to be the one that welcomed them home and I stood at the bottom of the
ramp.

LC: And did you say, “Welcome home.”
HH: Yes I did, I actually said, “Welcome home.” Me, just me, you know. Me,
this twenty-three year old stewardess, you know. That, I’ll never forgive this country for
leaving that, welcome home to just me. I wanted the parades and you know, it’s Travis
Air Force Base; it had a SAC wing (Strategic Air Command). What in heaven’s name
were the military wives, you know, the officer’s wives doing? Why didn’t they meet
those planes? You know, why wasn’t there something?
LC: Color guard?
HH: There was nothing, there was nothing. And you know, I was relentless.
You know, I was raised on World War II movies. You know, and Victory at Sea and all
of that footage of these guys coming home, I was—every single time, we landed at
Travis, I expected something to be there and I was disappointed every single time. So, it
was just me. It was just me welcoming them home. You know, that was terrible. It was
a very ungrateful nation leaving it up to a twenty-three year old stewardess at the bottom
of a ramp and that I’ll never get over. Especially since their lack of a homecoming
continued for decades. You know, so that it really was, you know. Now I do understand
that as the war progressed, because I was there in the early part of the war, as the war
progressed, it’s my understanding that Gold Star fathers and Gold Star mothers and some
Donut Dollies that had done a tour in Vietnam. They did organize at the various bases
that the guys were coming home from and they did try to meet the airplanes and
apparently did a pretty good job of it.

LC: Right, but early on, in these days—
HH: Yeah, nothing. There was nothing.
LC: What about protestors?
HH: Oh, outside the gate all of the time.
LC: At Travis?
HH: Yes.
LC: Okay, can you tell me what that looked like from where you were?
HH: I hated it. I hated it because they went through it too. They had to go
through it too. You know, understand that a lot of the guys that I brought home in ’66
and ’67 had gone to Vietnam in ’65 and early ’66.
LC: Right, yes.
HH: The world as they called it was very different. Certainly there were protests,
but not like there were in ’67 when they came home, you know, when it was really in
full, you know, when the summer of love was going on and all of that.
LC: Right.
HH: So, in my case, because of the timing, there was I think a greater change
than later on the war when guys went over to Vietnam having seen several years now of
demonstrations. These guys truly were shocked, truly disappointed. I can only imagine
what they were thinking to get off of that airplane, after serving their country in a combat
zone in combat most of them or a good portion of them only to have protestors outside
the gate.
LC: And this was completely visible from the bottom of the ramp where they
were coming down?
HH: No, no, no. No, no, the terminal at Travis is well inside the base.
LC: Okay. So these—
HH: Outside the gate of Travis Air Force Base. I’m sorry, that’s what I meant.
LC: That’s fine.
HH: When I say outside the gate, outside the base gate.
LC: So after they’ve come through the terminal, then the guys would be seeing these protestors as they emerge.
HH: No, because the terminal is well into the base.
LC: Okay.
HH: So they’d have to get on a bus.
LC: Oh I see I’m with you now; I’m with you now.
HH: In which they had to because in order for them to go wherever they were going, wherever home was, they had to get to the San Francisco Airport. So there was always a bus waiting for them to take them to the airport so they could catch a flight. And of course, in those days, you know military standby was alive and well.
LC: Yes.
HH: And in some cases, you know, the airlines would really make an effort to get guys coming back from Vietnam on an airplane. You know, the airlines were wonderful because you know, a lot of the airlines were flying over to Vietnam, so they were partial. They’d treat them really well, but they had to get to San Francisco.
LC: And so at the base gate, then there—
HH: The base gate, yes.
LC: There would be protestors.
HH: Yes.
LC: And did you get out to that gate then? You must have on a number of different occasions and see all that is going on.
HH: Sure, I had to go through the gate as well.
LC: And because you were staying where when you would be, you know, coming back from a flight?
HH: Yeah, I’m not sure if you know the geography, Travis is north of—is east of San Francisco and Oakland.
LC: Yes.
HH: Okay, so we would pick up, we would check in for a flight at Oakland at our airport, you know, at our building and get on some sort of transportation that they supplied and drive to Travis.

LC: Some kind of a shuttle or something that they organized.

HH: Yeah, it was about an hour, hour and a half in those days. So yeah, we had to go through the gate.

LC: And just, Helen if you can remember it, describe the protestors. How old, how many, what were they doing?

HH: Oh, they were just there protesting with signs, not a lot. It seemed to be a constant rotation. You know, sort of the same people although I didn’t—you know, I can’t tell you how much they disgusted me, so I—

LC: I see.

HH: You know, other than the fact that I had to see them both going and coming, you know. I think probably what bothers me more is—what always bothers me—I lived in the Bay area; there were notorious demonstrations.

LC: Sure.

HH: In parts of the Bay area, but I never understood why a military base, why do you want to protest the soldiers, and I’ve had this argument with a lot of people that were in the anti-war movement and did a great deal of protesting that always say we never protested to soldiers. Well, if you’re protesting a military base, yeah you are and you’re protesting both the ones that are going and the ones that are coming back.

LC: Because that’s who will see you.

HH: Absolutely. I mean, quite frankly, those are the only people that are really being affected by the protestors. You know, we weren’t being affected by them, it wasn’t stopping us, but this was their last look at the US and their first greeting in my mind of what unfortunately during my time, these guys were going to see. You know, there were a couple of guys that for whatever reason, maybe emergency leave or something like that or whatever they were doing in Vietnam, they were a little bit more attuned to the demonstrations and they would ask me about how bad they were going to be and did they need to get out of their uniform. And I would tell them that they could afford it to get out of their uniform before they got to San Francisco. And that was hard.
LC: Yeah and how did the men who might be up on events enough to ask you that, how did they take that response, do you recall?

HH: You know, they took it a lot better than I would have. You know a lot better. I must say, I don’t know if it was because they were just trying to decompress from everything.

LC: Right, right.

HH: But I would have been—I was angry having to tell them. It still stands to be the hardest thing that I had—that I’ve ever done is to tell a troop to get out of his uniform if he can afford it. Of course he could afford it because they all had their money from twelve months in Vietnam. They just didn’t want to be bothered at San Francisco. You know, they were willing to take their uniform off because they didn’t want to be bothered. That was definitely the sense I got.

LC: Okay. Let me ask you a little bit about your own flying in to and out of Vietnam. You mentioned in the material that you provided to us before the interview that the airplanes were a target.

HH: Yeah.

LC: Can you talk about that?

HH: Yeah. We were always assured that it was just to—kind of a harassment you know; not to worry about it. But they also, before we got, when we were about an hour out of Vietnam, they’d ask for somebody else to sit in the cockpit and I would always volunteer for that. There was a jump seat right behind the captain that also had a set of earphones and they wanted another pair of eyes and at the time that we were flying into Vietnam, there were South Vietnamese in the tower, you know, giving us messages and even though they use English as the international, it was sometimes very difficult to understand them. So going into Vietnam, they wanted an extra pair of eyes to watch for what was going on on the ground and to listen to the control tower telling us what was going on, what the traffic was, what might be happening on the ground that we should try to stay away from or be aware of. It wasn’t unusual to hear the captain say, “Did anybody get what he just said?” (Laughing)

LC: Okay, just because it was unintelligible.
LC: In English?
HH: Yes.
LC: And what about ground fire? How often did that actually occur?
HH: You know, in my memory, it seemed as if every time we went into Vietnam, it was at night and there was ground fire all of the time. Now, there were these red and green tracer fire.
LC: Yes.
HH: Now, I was pretty naïve. You know, in my mind, I just didn’t think trace fire was live fire. Nobody had explained this to me and when you see tracer fire at night, it’s very easy for your mind to tell you that that’s the only fire that is happening because that’s the only thing that you see. It was literally, literally, I’m embarrassed to tell you how many decades passed before a Vietnam vet explained to me, you know, that tracer fire was live fire and that it was the seventh one. I’m not sure I understood that at the time. And that came up because I said, “That’s why I don’t like fireworks because the tracer fire, the green and red tracer fire reminds me of fireworks and I don’t like them.” And this Vietnam vet said to me, “Did you see green and red?” And I said, “Yes.” Which I thought was a pretty dumb question. And he said, “Well, then you saw a fire fight.” And I said, “Well, I don’t know how you know that.” And he said, “Well, because we had green and they had red,” or visa versa. I’ve never gotten it straight. And my comment was, “Who in this world sat down and decided that?” You know, who decides what color, you know.
LC: What color their ammunition is going to trace?
HH: Yeah. Who decides that? That’s the most ludicrous thing in the entire—it never occurred to me that that’s what I was witnessing was a firefight. And certainly, the guys, our pilots didn’t narrate for us. They knew what they were seeing and they knew why I was there. They weren’t going to tell me that that’s what we were seeing and that was quite dangerous on approach because that meant there was live fire you know. I can remember asking one of the pilots, “But a bullet can’t go through the airplane?” And he said, “Yeah, you’re right. It can’t.” (Laughing) Okay. He was just out and out lying to me.
LC: To protect you.
HH: Yes, and I’m grateful that they did. I really am grateful.

LC: Really?

HH: Sure, we were—you know, I may have been twenty-two, twenty-three years old, but you know, by today’s standards, extremely naïve and unworldly and it wasn’t that they were trying to not inform us, they really were trying to protect us from the dangers that were there. I was never afraid going into Vietnam, never. I should have been, but I was just too damn young to understand that I should’ve been afraid. It was a very scary deal. It was not at all—anything could happen. It wasn’t at all safe at all going in there. Vietnam airspace just wasn’t safe. I was far more afraid years later when I realized, you know, when you get some age behind you and you realize what you did.

LC: Yes.

HH: You know, it’s in retrospect, and I appreciate the fact that they kept us very naïve. I really do. You know, I don’t know what I would’ve done if I had really known what it was we were doing. You know the full impact of it that I now know today. I can connect the dots today.

LC: Sure.

HH: You know.

LC: But you think it’s better that you just didn’t have a full, you know 360 degree view on what was happening?

HH: Yeah. I know that’s difficult, you know. That’s even difficult for me because boy, I’ll tell you, I control my world today. It’s even difficult for me to say, but you know, it was the times. This was the way women were treated back then and as I say, they weren’t doing it to demean us or they didn’t do it because they didn’t think that we couldn’t handle it. They did it to protect us. That’s a very, very different distinction. They were doing it so that, you know, to protect us. It wasn’t because they didn’t think that we wouldn’t be able to function with that knowledge. They just—why was it necessary, you know, for us to know.

LC: Right, would it have changed anything for the better for you, that kind of thing?

HH: Right, absolutely. You know, it’s something that isn’t done nowadays, is it?

LC: No, that’s right.
HH: Women have to know absolutely everything because we demanded it. Back in those days, it was very nice to know. In the end, if we had a particularly difficult situation, it was very nice to know that those guys were taking care of us. It was very nice to know. And I’m still indebted to them. To me, these guys were very, very ballsy. You know, they absolutely—they took a passenger airline, these are die hard fighter pilots, they took a passenger airline in, made sure their crew—everybody got in safely and out safely and they desperately wanted to be armed. They desperately wanted to be armed. You know, they didn’t like it. I mean, it wasn’t going against all of what they had been taught too. They were great men.

LC: They are unarmed in a big target.

HH: Right, but it is a Boeing 707.

LC: True.

HH: And it is a very maneuverable airplane, but they had to keep it level for the souls onboard, you know.

LC: Well, that’s also true and I wonder if you remember any times when either coming into Vietnam and I’m thinking you were coming into Tan Son Nhut, is that right?

HH: Tan Son Nhut sometimes.

LC: Okay.

HH: Long Binh, Bien Hoa.

LC: Okay.

HH: Da Nang more times than I would’ve liked and Cam Ranh Bay only once. Cam Ranh Bay was the only secure base in Vietnam in my day, you know, when I was flying. It finally got overran in ’68, but Cam Ranh Bay—they’d say, “You’ve got a Vietnam turnaround.” We’d say, “Can Ranh Bay, right?” And they, “No, Da Nang.”

(Laughing)

LC: And what the difference? What was about Da Nang for you?

HH: Da Nang was just very; very not at all—Da Nang was rather far up north.

LC: Yes.

HH: And you just never knew what was going to happen there. It was just not a stable place.
LC: Was that where you had some of the more intensive experiences in terms of
taking ground fire or—?
HH: I’m not sure.
LC: Okay.
HH: You know, I’m not sure, but that would be a good guess, although you
know, they really did like blowing up the ammo depot at Tan Son Nhut.
LC: There was that, yes.
HH: Yeah, they did that several times and actually, something blew part of the
ammo depot when we were on final approach. The guys on the ground later told us, the
guys that we were taking home, they said, “We thought we lost our flight home.”
Because they could see us coming in on approach and then an explosion right in front of
us and I remember that one. It looked I’m sure a lot worse from the ground than it did
from where we were, and we were on final approach and committed, and so he went in.
And it was some sort of an ammo depot that had blown and they said they were stunned
to see us come through the clouds or whatever it was. I’m sure it was a far more
magnificent sight from the ground than it was from where we were.
LC: Did you feel anything, do you remember Helen?
HH: No. No, except being surprised. You know, we flew over it pretty quickly.
LC: Yes, yes.
HH: That was how it seemed for us, but it was the guys on the ground and I
mean, can you imagine. I mean, this is sort of the quintessential, you know going home.
You know, “I’m at Tan Son Nhut, there’s my airplane that’s going to take me home. Oh
my god, it’s just blown up.” (Laughing) I mean, I can imagine how they felt and a
matter of fact, I teased those guys all the way to Japan because they talked so much about
the airplane and I said, “Oh, so you didn’t care about me? You just cared about your
airplane.” And I absolutely rode those guys all the way back to Japan.
LC: And I bet they loved it.
HH: Oh sure, yeah, yeah, because they were still scared. You know, the notion
of, “I’m not gonna ever get out of here,” you know, really was strong.
LC: And you picked that up from them or is that something that you know now thinking back on it that the guys were—you know, they had this sense that something could happen, they may not get out of there, even though they’re already on the plane?

HH: I think that those guys that told me that, you know, that said, you know, that one incident, I think that probably brought it home. Other than that, I can’t say that I had that feeling except when you take home troops after being in war for twelve months and see what they look like as compared to the ones that you just dropped off. It’s all over their face. I mean, it’s absolutely all over their face. Everything that they’ve been through—I used to look at them and wonder what kind of hells did they see to have that look on their face. Long before, you know, PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) some fancy name that they’ve now put on it, all you had to do was look at these guys. They weren’t going to home to their ’55 Chevy and their girlfriend. They weren’t going to fit in. It was all over their faces; couldn’t tell how old they were.

LC: You described them in what you wrote for me, for us, as, young old men.

HH: That’s exactly what they were. You know, we used to guess ages on the way over because they seemed to be getting pretty young going on the way over, you know, eighteen, nineteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen even. We knew only a year had gone by and could not guess their ages. I mean, they just—it’s just a cliché that the war was all over their faces. It was written in every single line in their face. No one could look at that and not know, you know. It was enough to keep me from starting a conversation with them until they were a little bit more relaxed.

LC: How long did that take? I mean, was it an hour, was it almost to the end of the flight up to Japan?

HH: Well, certainly, there was a big difference between the leg from anyplace in Vietnam to Japan and the Japan to California leg. Okay, there’s a big difference between that.

LC: Okay.

HH: Now, you know, I’m sure you could probably interview a lot of guys and a lot of other airline stewardesses and they’ll tell you that as soon as, you know, wheels up, there was a roar in the aircraft. I never heard that.
HH: Never. Absolutely never heard it. As a matter of fact, it was very, very quiet, but you know, this is Vietnam airspace. You know, I wasn’t exactly happy. On occasion, because from our jump seat, it was a one-class cabin, you could see from the back all the way up to the front door, to the pilot’s door. And on occasion, you might see on wheels up, an arm reaching across the aisle shaking a buddy’s hand. But most of these guys didn’t know each other. The only thing that I could tell that happened in that airplane is as soon as we cleared Vietnam airspace, the pilot would come on and he would say, he’d simply say, “Gentlemen, we’ve just cleared Vietnam airspace.” Period, that’s it, nothing more, nothing less. And there was sort of, I don’t know a collective exhale or something in the airplane and then you’d see some moving around a little bit and guys would start to get up and walk around and you know. Just knowing that you’re out of Vietnam airspace and nobody’s going to launch anything at you, I think it was more of that, that relief.

LC: Relief.

HH: Yeah, oh sure.

LC: Helen, let me ask you about the flights over there with the young men who haven’t been through their twelve months or thirteen months for Marines. Did some of those guys try to connect with you in any way and I’m not speaking necessarily sexually here, but maybe give you their address or did that kind of thing happen?

HH: Yeah, actually I’ll speak sexually.

LC: Okay.

HH: Neither going or coming, everybody always seems to assume that. I don’t know, even the Veterans, really these guys were so busy, they were so busy going to war or coming home from war, you know, it wasn’t in their minds. I’m not saying that they didn’t flirt and actually, more accurately, we flirted. I mean, we knew what we were, were a diversion from where it was that they were going or where they were coming from.

LC: Okay.

HH: And we absolutely used that. There’s no question about the fact that we used it. You know, we flirted as much as we could. We were, you know, we used as much of our sexuality as we possibly could, but you know— and I would’ve loved to have
had a beer with a couple of those guys, there’s no question about it. But like I say, there
were busy either going or coming, you know. There were two things that happened a
great deal. There were soldiers that asked if I would write to them and I never turned
them down, and we had cards because we were so impressed with ourselves, we were
airline stewardesses, you know.

LC: Right.

HH: We actually had cards with our names and address on them and we’d give
them the card.

LC: No kidding?

HH: Yeah. And I wrote to more GIs, then I can even tell you what their names
are and by the time I’d get a letter, I didn’t know which GI it was, from which they would
say, “You met me on the plane.” My roommate and I both did that and neither one of us
could remember, you know, and we always felt guilty that we couldn’t put the face with
the name. We’d go down and when the *Playboys* came out, this is 1966; nice women do
not pick up *Playboy* magazines. We’d go down to our local liquor store and buy out the
entire supply and have this sort of mass mailing and send these guys *Playboy* magazines,
everybody on our list. Everybody we were writing to. And apparently, really made them
hot stuff in Vietnam.

LC: Undoubtedly.

HH: Because they were, you know, at the time, it honestly didn’t occur to us.

We just thought, “What can we do? We have enough guts. We’ll go down and buy out
all the *Playboy* magazines.” First of all, this guy hated to see us come every month, you
know, because we’d buy out his supply and he’d get angry at us and we were women and
you know—

LC: What was up with that?

HH: Yeah. And I don’t think we ever said, “We’re sending them to Vietnam.” I
don’t think we did that. That would’ve somehow cheapened things, but we might’ve,
who knows. We kind of liked the idea that we were doing that, you know, and that other
women weren’t. So, you know, you can see the different sides of the sixties, right. In
some ways we were pretty gutsy, and some other ways, you know, we let the men protect
us. So, it was all about walking that fine line back in those days.
LC: Right, a lot of conflicting—you know, winds of change going on.
HH: Yeah.
LC: Yeah.
HH: And so, we would send those things out and these guys would absolutely
love it because they were getting a *Playboy Magazine*, which we thought was very cool,
but they were getting a *Playboy Magazine* from an airline stewardess. Now, we didn’t
appreciate that part of it, you know, that they were getting something from an airline
stewardess, you know. On what I later learned, were the Freedom Birds. That
expression never came to my mind; it never came to me until 1993. I never heard the
expression when I was doing those flights. It was never any reason for them to call me a
Freedom Bird, because they were on my airplane. It was something they referred to
when they weren’t on it. I never heard it until 1993.
LC: What happened in ’93 that you heard this?
HH: That was when I went back for the Women’s Memorial.
LC: Oh okay.
HH: And I thought that was a Hollywoodism, Freedom Bird, until the guys
convinced me that, “Do you know that that’s what we called you?” And I said, “No.
Why would I know that? When you were on it, you didn’t call it that. You didn’t refer to
me that way. You referred to me as, ‘Ma’am.’”
LC: Right, right.
HH: So—
LC: And the Freedom Bird was not just the plane, right?
HH: Well—
LC: I mean, was it your understanding that it was beyond the plane, it was also
the stewardesses?
HH: It was a trip home. It was really the trip home. The Freedom Bird was that
airplane that’s going to take me home. It was their way of talking about when they were
going to DEROS (Date of Expected Return from Overseas).
LC: Yeah, yeah. And tell me if you can about 1993. How did you come to be in
Washington?
HH: Oh yeah, you asked me—let me just finish this one thing though.
LC: Sure, of course.
HH: So, the guys would ask about writing and we would do it, and you asked about whether or not we would see them or something?
LC: Yes, contact and so forth, yes.
HH: So, there was—oh, the other thing that they asked us to do was to read the letters that they were writing home to their wives, and they would ask, “If you got this letter”—their wives or their girlfriends—but a lot of them, their wives. They had gotten married just before they shipped out, and they would, you know, some troop from some holler in Tennessee would write a letter—although it wasn’t just southern boys—and say, “Would you wait for me if you got this letter?” Well, you know, I read one or two letters and then I learned not to read them. You know, and I would act like I was reading them and of course, I always would tell them that it was a great letter and of course, and, “Don’t worry, because she’ll wait for you.” That was the other thing that they would ask us to do amazingly a lot. They were beautiful letters, absolutely gorgeous letters.
LC: Why did you learn to not read them?
HH: Oh, please, talk about tear at your heartstrings. You know, by that time, I knew what this troop was going to look like when he rotated home, if he was lucky enough to rotate home. It was just hard. I also knew a lot of the guys on the plane home got Dear John’s. So, you know, in the constant world of the airline stewardess, you don’t read a letter like that and be able to not keep your emotions in tact, I just stopped reading them. I just made like I did, you know. And it seemed awfully personal to me.
LC: Absolutely.
HH: It seemed very personal and I’ve never been able to get over the fact that they could ask a strange women to read something as personal as that and as private as that and be so secure that we would give them the right feedback, you know. And that’s where; somehow, somewhere along the way we stepped into this sort of mother/sister/wife role, that wasn’t obvious to me until things like that would happen. You know, we were clearly that. You know, the guys can say, I can remember the most beautiful girl was the girl on the airplane home, you know, the stewardess on the airplane home. I don’t really think it was that. I think we were their mother or their wife or their
girlfriend. That’s exactly what we represented and I think that’s why we didn’t get more sexual advances, you know.

LC: Because there were a whole bunch of different roles that you were kind of stepping into.

HH: Well, they put us into them.

LC: Yeah, yeah.

HH: It was not us, they put us into them.

LC: Yeah, that’s right.

HH: For a young man to have me read his love letter home to his wife, you know, something that will make her wait isn’t that something that you would show a mother or some surrogate something or rather?

LC: Absolutely. “Do you think this will work?” You know, yeah.

HH: Yeah. So, we were put into that role and it was kind of a strange role, you know, to be put into. So that’s when I realized we were representing different things to these guys, you know.

LC: Well, we’ll come back to that other, to the 1993. There’s a couple of other things I just thought maybe we could still pursue while we’re talking about your flights. What was your relationship with the other gals? Did you talk to the other stewardesses about these things that were happening and this is so intense, I mean, so much of this is so intense?

HH: No. (Laughing)

LC: Really?

HH: No, didn’t talk about it at the time. There were occasions when we left Vietnam empty and there was dead silence on that airplane. Nobody talked to anybody. Nobody talked on the bus ride into our hotel. We would just button up our coats and walk into the bar and drink. We never talked about it, never talked about it. I do not ever remember, and I don’t remember have wanting to talk about it. The empty flights out of Vietnam were unbearable, because that’s when—you know, if you take 165 in and you bring 165 out, you really can fool yourself that they’re not dying.

LC: Okay.
HH: But when you come back empty, it’s right in your face and it’s just an unbearable—it was always silent, and we were not silent.

LC: Right.

HH: You know, we’d get in the bus and chit chat and talk about different things, that’s when we’d learn about any mechanical stuff that went wrong or you know. But we’d walk right into the bar, because in Japan, you know, you can drink all around the clock or at least you could back in those days.

LC: Sure. And that was part of coping?

HH: Yeah, we drank heavy.

LC: Really?

HH: Very heavy back then, yeah. That was getting—and especially the flights, especially the empty flights. Those were terrible. Now oddly enough, even when I go to reunions, my airline has a reunion every two years, it is never spoken. I mean, there is so little conversation about Vietnam that it’s really a shame. Just very little conversation. I mean, we tell the funny stories and stuff like that, but rarely is it about that. I remember thanking Ken Healy for some of his flights one time, one of my favorite pilots. I believe he’s been on a panel down at the University of Texas.

LC: Okay.

HH: And he was the pilot out of the World Airways flight that was the last flight out of Da Nang.

LC: Okay.

HH: When the war was ending.

LC: Yeah.

HH: And he also was the pilot that got—piloted a lot of the orphans home. And he was just always a really great guy and it’s always nice to see him at a reunion. So I can remember thanking him about some of the flights that he did. But that’s the extent. I remember my roommate telling me, “See if you can bribe the scheduler to get you off the Vietnam turnarounds, because it’s really getting to you.” So, which was something that we of course could not do, you know.

LC: That someone was observing that you were—
HH: Yeah, she did. And interestingly enough, she denied the effects of Vietnam. She said, “I know I flew there because my log book says I did, but I don’t remember anything about it.” And she did that for decades, literally, until she just crashed and burned and it all came up at once with her.

LC: What kind of time period would that have happened, in the nineties?

HH: Oh, long after I dealt with it. I’d say the mid-nineties.

LC: Okay.

HH: The mid-nineties. And then, you know, she flew a lot longer than I did. And so then a lot of the memories came back and she came to grips with it.

LC: And Helen, for you, when did you actually kind of go through your own coming to grips period with what had happened?

HH: You know, I really successfully put it out of my mind, immediately after I stopped flying and got married and had kids, you know. Except for when my son was born, and when the doctor said, “It’s a boy!” I was shocked that the first thought I had was, “He will never go to war.” And then I sort of buried that, but that was—it wasn’t, you know, “Is he healthy?” It was, my first thought, and I didn’t speak it, but my first thought was, “He will never go to war.”

LC: When was he born Helen?

HH: Nineteen seventy. I didn’t get my wish by the way. He was in the Navy during the Kosovo thing.

LC: Oh was he?

HH: Yeah.

LC: And he went overseas then?

HH: Yes, he was in the Adriatic.

LC: For how long?

HH: About six months.

LC: That must’ve been extremely difficult for you.

HH: Yes it was. Him in the military was extremely difficult.

LC: I’ll bet it was.
HH: You know, I really did not want him to have to run into a surrogate woman like me. That’s what I didn’t want. But anyhow, he came through that very well and I’m actually very proud of his military service.

LC: Is he still in the active service?

HH: No, no.

LC: Is he in the reserves?

HH: No.

LC: He’s left the service?

HH: Yes.

LC: Okay, but he had a safe tour?

HH: A safe?

LC: Yes, in the sense that he wasn’t wounded.

HH: No.

LC: Okay.

HH: No, he was on a guided missile cruiser, so he watched them launch the guided missiles at Kosovo.

LC: Well, that’s also something to deal with.

HH: Yeah.

LC: No question about it.

HH: And he’s done very well with that actually, with his, you know his dealing with that. He’s done very well with that. And he’s very proud of his service as well, so that’s good.

LC: And your own experiences after 1970, you sort of kind of banked it again and didn’t go there.

HH: Yes, absolutely did not go there and then when they started talking about—I remember, I remember when the Wall was dedicated and thinking kind of attached to it, but you know, not really. I just didn’t let it in very much. But when I started hearing about the Women’s Memorial, that’s when I started—I just started trying to come to grips with it and started kind of said to myself, “Probably a good year before the dedication, you’re going to go to DC. You know, you have to do this.” I’m not too sure. I’m not too sure why. You know, “China Beach” was on around that time.
LC: Yes, the television show.

HH: Someone and I don’t recall who; I had done some literacy training at the VA Hospital and ran into Vietnam vets around that time period, so there was little connections here and there.

LC: Okay.

HH: And someone told me about a book called, *A Piece of My Heart*, and I read that in one day.

LC: Wow.

HH: And a matter of fact, I have never finished the last two stories because if I finish it, then I—as long as I don’t finish it, I know that those women are still there. But that was the first place, in the back of *Piece of My Heart*, he lists all of the civilian women, and there was World Airways, you know, and I was stunned that anybody knew, that it was actually in a book. (Laughing) And so I just decided that I would go to DC. I horrified my family because I was going to go to DC all by myself, but I can’t imagine doing it any other way. And I planned the trip for at least a year and went back there and it was very emotional, very emotional.

LC: This is in 1993, the dedication.

HH: Of the Women’s Memorial, yes.

LC: Absolutely.

HH: There was a candlelight ceremony for civilian women that had died in Vietnam and I did not know until I went to that candlelight ceremony, that civilian women had died in Vietnam, and I literally lost it. Just decades of tears. There was gals on either side of me saying, “Are you sure you’re going to be okay?” I don’t think I’ve ever cried hysterically like that, either before or since. I just didn’t know that civilian women had died and I was stunned by it, and it was a beautiful ceremony because relatives of these civilian women lit the candles and it was just a beautiful ceremony, albeit Helen, you know, babbling in the background. I did not know, so I not only went back there for my own Vietnam to recognize it, but I also recognized the other civilian women that I just didn’t know, you know, that had been there. I didn’t know that there had been so many of us. I ran into a Pan Am stewardess and I buddied up with her most of the weekend and that was real interesting.
LC: What did you learn from her?

HH: Well, she had retired from Pan Am, so one of the conversations we had were the difference between when I was flying in and out of Vietnam, and later on in the war when things changed and it was different she said and the drugs were obvious. You know, if any of the guys I carried were under the influence of drugs, I’m not quite frankly sure I would’ve recognized it. I mean, I didn’t know what any of that looked like. But I certainly didn’t have any difficulty with anybody, but she said it was very difficult because some of these guys were really coming down from their drugs on that long trip home. So, that was a good way for me to learn that this is my Vietnam and not everybody else’s Vietnam. So, this is the time I flew for this airline and this is what it was like for me as a stewardess and it may not have been the same for anybody else. You know, their experiences may have been different and that’s, I guess, when I learned the real definition of, you know, my Vietnam. And I always tried to tell people, this is my Vietnam, this is my experience, this is the way I saw it and it may not—you could talk to another stewardess even from the same airline and the same time and they may see it differently.

LC: Right, every story is unique just because every person is telling it will be unique.

HH: Yeah, but you know, I mean I can remember the first time in talking with Vietnam vets and them talking about the Olympic sized pool at Bien Hoa. Well, when I was at Bien Hoa, it was tents; of a photograph of it, I sent it to you. So, the photograph of Bien Hoa, that’s tents and the notion that that turned in a couple of years later to hard walled buildings and you know, sort of the greatest place to be if you’re going to be in the rears—

LC: Right.

HH: That’s foreign to me, you know, that’s not the Bien Hoa I saw. So, those are things that taught me to be very careful with my memory and you know, to kind of hold it pretty close to my chest.

LC: Yeah, you mentioned that before that you sort of kept these things in some way kind of not necessarily just private, but you don’t take them out and review them all the time.
HH: No.

LC: Or hold them up next to somebody else’s and—

HH: I don’t talk about it very much. I mean, this is a huge step in November, because I think this is an appropriate way, but I won’t talk about it. I’m on a list with Vietnam veterans, and I rarely mention any of my things about the guys, like the letters, you know, writing letters to them. I just don’t do that and I think one of the reasons is because I just want to make sure that my memory is memory and I don’t want it diluted by Hollywood or things I hear from other people.

LC: Right.

HH: And it’s easy to do, and frankly, people aren’t necessarily interested.

LC: Well, I think people who do have an interest will be glad that they can find a way to, you know, hear what you experienced.

HH: Yeah. I think that guys are not necessarily as interested because of that position that we were put into.

LC: Yeah.

HH: And every once in a while, I might have to make a point with them, you know, if you witnessed what I witnessed. Now, they lived it, but I watched it. I guess that’s the best way, you know, to put it. And I’m not too sure they want to be reminded of what it is that I saw in them coming home. I don’t think that they want to be reminded of that, and if I were them, I don’t think that would be—the fun conversations I have with them is when they get confused about how they went over or how they came back, and I know the routes. It’s so funny because most of them think they went over non-stop. Well, then I have to gently say to them, “Think about it, planes didn’t have that kind of capability back in those days. You had to stop several different places.” And then that triggers their memory for them. I mean, if they tell me that they refueled in Alaska, I can tell them what time of year they went to Vietnam, because you only refueled in Alaska in the wintertime.

LC: Why was that?

HH: Because of the jet [stream] winds.

LC: Oh okay.
HH: Were stronger, and you couldn’t make it from Travis to Japan without refueling in Alaska.
LC: So it would take more fuel to actually go the same distance.
HH: Right.
LC: Because of head winds.
HH: Because of the head winds, yeah. And conversely, on the way home, you’d get home a lot quicker.
LC: Helen, tell me if you can, a little bit about your own sort of recovery after the 1993 incidents in Washington that you witnessed and were apart of. How did you kind of get yourself like put back so that you were okay with, you know, up to and including talking about it, talk about your experiences with the oral history project here.
HH: Yeah, I think the talking took a lot longer, you know. I mean, I did realize when I went back in ’93 that that’s where—to be among the Vietnam veterans was where I felt the most comfortable. You know, it was not just finding my generation. They accepted me just wonderfully. You know, all of the veterans that I met back there and talked to and would tell them what I did, they were absolutely wonderful and so they just pulled me into that, you know, that I was sort of one of them.
LC: So not drawing some distinction between you having been civilian or you not having actually like served “in-country.”
HH: Yeah.
LC: That just was artificial.
HH: No, and I’ve never had that problem actually, and absolutely never had that problem.
LC: That’s interesting.
HH: Yeah, it is interesting because I certainly know that the Donut Dollies have had it and the USO (United Service Organizations), you know, that they’ve had it, but I’ve never had that problem. Maybe it’s because we participated in the coming and the going. I’m not exactly sure why and never really wanted to ask them, but they always make me feel like, you know, I’m sort of one of them and they always acknowledge, “We know you didn’t have to do that.” Which is true, you know, I didn’t have to do it. So
then—I remember leaving DC and in the cab on the way to the airport, this sounds so
dramatic and I’m so not dramatic. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

HH: But I remember, I cried on the way to the airport, and I promised myself I’d
be back the next year, and I have returned every year since. It is, being back there with
them is the most comfortable I feel. I feel like I’m amongst my own. They have the
same idiosyncrasies that I do. They’re grouchy, they’re bitchy, they don’t listen to, you
know, somebody saying they have to be at work at eight o’clock either. You know,
they’ve had more marriage, more divorces than I have and more jobs than I’ve have. So,
I feel comfortable around them and that’s why I go back. Someone said and I agree with
this, it’s sort of my annual fix, if I’m away from Vietnam veterans for longer than a year,
it would probably start to get to me. The effects of Vietnam would take its toll on me,
but I get to go back there and remind myself, “I’m not the oddball out. There’s all of
these people.” And we talked the same language, and we have a lot in common that we
really don’t have a lot in common. You know, it’s a huge thing to have the Vietnam War
in common. It’s huge. And, I don’t know, I understand them, and the Wall is now the
most comfortable place that I can be, you know, and there’s a bench at the Women’s
Memorial that I sit at and I could spend hours there. I would love to have my ashes
spread right behind that one bench. (Laughing)

LC: Really?

HH: Oh yeah, absolutely, absolutely. I know a lot of Vietnam veterans who
would love to have their ashes scattered at the Wall and there is absolutely no doubt in
my mind they have been.

LC: Have you ever seen evidence of that when you’ve been there?

HH: No, no, but I know enough Vietnam veterans to know that—

LC: That’s happening.

HH: Oh you bet.

LC: Helen, did you, when you were flying or subsequently have a clear picture of
why the United States was committing troops in Southeast Asia?

HH: No. No, I absolutely did not and then afterwards, I think I deliberately—you
know, I’m really a very intelligent person.
LC: That’s clear.
HH: Yeah.
LC: That’s clear.
HH: But I have never formed a political view about Vietnam. I just never have.
LC: Have you tried or invested time in understanding what it was about?
HH: Oh yeah, absolutely. I read as much as I possibly can, you know.
LC: Really?
HH: Sure. Some books I have to throw across the room like McNamara’s book, you know. I have yet to get all the way through it. I’ve read the Pentagon Papers, and you know, I don’t know which one I tossed further. I mean, those are tough books to get through, you know, to hear what was going on and how things could’ve changed. But I still have never formed a political opinion about it and I think it’s because the only thing about Vietnam, I mean, it’s so overwhelming, are the men, you know, the boys, who are still my boys. And that is such a powerful thing with me, that it doesn’t make any difference. You know, it doesn’t make any difference. Beyond their country called them and they served. That’s as far as I can get, you know, and I think people really forget that. You know, their country called them and they served, and it didn’t make any difference what their political feelings were. So, I think that I just don’t think that I want to go there with developing any kind of opinion on it. Now, if you ask me, do I have an opinion about war, oh, absolutely I do.

LC: And Helen, what is your opinion about generally?
HH: Yeah. I’ll tell you what, war is where we send our youngest and our brightest, you know, to die. War is ugly; it’s an absolute ugly, ugly thing. When recently, the things that came up in Iraq about the prison, you know, that goes into my category of, you know what, war is hell. Everything about it is hell, and it’s not nice and if you think it’s played by Parcheesi rules, it’s not. It’s ugly, and that’s why it’s called war and I don’t think we should have wars. I think it’s the worst thing that humanity does to itself is to have wars, and I think the last justifiable war was probably the Second World War, just because there was a crazy man trying to get rid of an entire race of people. You know, that’s the only thing that I can see, but you know, things that happen in war are absolutely ugly and no one should ever be shocked when they hear about it.
You know, I just kind of shrug my shoulders and say, “Shame on you. What the hell did you think war was all about?”

LC: And you say this, you direct that at people who have some reaction like, “Oh my goodness, I can’t believe the United States service personnel would be involved in something like Abu Ghraib.”

HH: Absolutely, absolutely.

LC: And what about the command structure, do you have feelings around how the issues have been handled?

HH: There’s good command, there’s good command and there’s bad command. We found that out in Vietnam, we’re certainly finding that out in Iraq. You know, that’s just the way it is. You know, I don’t like war. I think probably if I was running the world and people were listening to me, I’d do everything I could to avoid it. And I’m not too sure that there’s been a justifiable war.

LC: Even World War II, since—?

HH: No, since World War II.

LC: Oh okay. So your thinking is that there are cases, or there could be cases, and maybe cases where, you know, introduction of military force just stops something or to prevent something probably necessary.

HH: I think it was necessary in World War II.

LC: What about Kosovo, where your son was committed with ethnic cleansing and arrest?

HH: Yes, yes, I think that was justifiable.

LC: Okay, so you think that President Clinton made good decisions there about committing US troops?

HH: I’m not too sure that he made good decisions about committing US troops. I think that someone needed to stop the ethnic cleansing.

LC: Okay and it may not have had to have been the United States?

HH: Well, actually, my son was under a NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) flag.

LC: Okay.

HH: And I was proud of that.
LC: Were you?
HH: Yes.
LC: Why particularly?
HH: Because I think that that’s the way it should’ve been. That was ethnic cleansing and we don’t want that anywhere in the world, and so I think it should’ve been a NATO.
LC: In other words, a collective response?
HH: That’s right.
LC: Okay.
HH: Yeah. And it’s one of the medals that he has that I think I’m most proud of is the NATO and I know that that goes against the grain of a lot of people, but that was a collective force that stopped that. You know, it wasn’t just our agenda; it was the world saying, “No, we have to stop this.”
LC: And do you have some similar parallel views about the United States involvement in Iraq and whether we’ve created the right coalition and—?
HH: No, I don’t think we created the right coalition, and I see too many parallels to Vietnam.
LC: Like, can you name a couple? You talked about commanding structure difficulties.
HH: Well, because we’re arguing about it here, not quite to the same level that we did during the height of the Vietnam War protest, but we’re pretty much doing—we’re still arguing about it.
LC: Okay.
HH: I think the current administration is in jeopardy. I think, in fact, Bush may be voted out simply because of his actions in Iraq. Saddam Hussein was a horrible, horrible man and that he is out of power certainly has to make things much better, but I don’t think we did it the right way. And when you don’t do things the right way, it’s very difficult to get out. I think we learned that in Vietnam. During World War II, men signed up for the duration and they clearly knew what the duration was. It was the end of the war, preferably that we win the war, you know. That was clear to them, what their objective was, was to stop. I think they all knew why they were fighting that war. I don’t
think that you can say that. I don’t think people know, including the soldiers in Iraq,
know exactly what it’s all about. They took Baghdad, why aren’t they all home. I think
that’s what most of the troops wonder, and we saw that in Vietnam. We saw the puppet
governments in Vietnam. I just think there’s far too little—there’s far too much that you
can parallel. Not all of it certainly, but you know, it’s beginning to get ugly and anytime
it gets down to the soldier level, then my Irish gets up, you know. I’m very much for the,
you know, my country sort of right or wrong, they committed the troops, so now they’re
there, so I’m not going to say too much about the politics except because I know the
troops are there and I hate that they have to be there. I hate that families are losing their
sons and daughters. I hate that. I’ve seen it.

LC: Yes.
HH: Didn’t Roosevelt say that? You know, “I’ve seen war and I hate war.”
LC: Yeah.
HH: I’ve seen it and it’s ugly and it’s horrible. You know, nobody gets out of a
war without something. You know of course, that there’s a large element of Vietnam
veterans that say that the lucky ones are the ones on the Wall.
LC: Yes, I’ve heard that.
HH: Yeah. And that’s because they haven’t had to live through the crap that
most Vietnam veterans had to live through, you know. My son doesn’t walk around
saying, “Yeah, I was in Kosovo.” But when he got home, he certainly saw bumper
stickers that were against it. He knew they demonstrated, you know. He didn’t like it.
He knew that they didn’t much care if he was out there or not.
LC: Right, right.
HH: That’s what we do I think too often in this country nowadays is that we—
you know, it’s always someone else’s kid that has to go. You know, as if the military is
some lower level, you know, and that’s a shame that we think that way. I know when my
son was in the military, far too many people, “Well, why?”
LC: Right, like it’s the second best or something.
HH: Right.
LC: He’s doing that because something else didn’t happen for him or he couldn’t
achieve something else.
HH: Right.

LC: That kind of feeling.

HH: Yeah, “Why did he do that?” You know. I would get really upset with that and say, “Well, who do think is in the military?” You know, especially the civilian military, I mean the—

LC: Volunteer.

HH: The volunteer military. These are very well educated kids. You know, they’re very different from my day.

LC: Yeah, the distinctions between the volunteer military and the draft, not just in terms of numbers, but in terms of the accomplishments of these people who were serving the country just as the kids who were drafted did.

HH: Right.

LC: Just under different circumstances. Helen, let me ask you a little bit about Vietnam now. Were you aware of or did you have a reaction to, if you did know about it, the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States in 1985?

HH: Yeah.

LC: Did you pay attention?

HH: In 1985?

LC: I’m sorry, ’95, yes.

HH: Oh good.

LC: I’m sorry about that.

HH: I thought, “Wow.”


HH: No, actually, I sent an email to Clinton.

LC: Did you now?

HH: Yeah.

LC: What did you say?

HH: I told him what my status, you know, why Vietnam made a difference to me. And actually said to him, “I really don’t know was the right decision, so I’m going to— what I want you to know is that I trust that you’ll make the right decision.” So—
LC: Do you think that it’s played out to the advantage of both countries?
HH: Yeah.
LC: Why do you think that?
HH: You know, I was in Starbucks on Sunday and you know, I’m a firm believer, if you’re in a coffee house, you should chat with everybody.
LC: Okay.
HH: (Laughing)
LC: That sounds very Californian. (Laughing)
HH: So, there was a couple sitting close to me and they had a stack of tour books, you know, travel books.
LC: Sure.
HH: And one of them was Vietnam and I leaned over to her because I don’t know, I don’t know where my head was. Maybe I was getting ready for this interview, but I don’t know, I certainly wasn’t in 2004 necessarily and I looked at her and I said, “Is that really a travel book on Vietnam?” And she said, “Well yeah, why?” You know, in her typical California attitude.
LC: (Laughing)
HH: And I just blurted out, which is very not like me, I said, “Because I was in Vietnam during the war,” and I said, “It just seems a little strange to see a Vietnam tour book.” And her significant other, the fellow that she was with asked me when I was there and I told him and he said, “You know, it’s quite a destination these days, Vietnam. We have lots of friends that have visited there.” I mean, quite a destination? You know, and I said, “Is it?” “Well, it’s a beautiful country.” (Laughing)
LC: And what were you actually thinking though?
HH: Vietnam was yesterday to me, you know. It is, in situations like that; it is so hard to remember that you know—it was a lot of years ago now. Well over thirty years that I was there and the war ended in ’75. It’s nearly twenty years since, you know, thirty years since the end of the war.
LC: Right.
HH: It’s very difficult to believe. To me, it’s still; it was yesterday. It’s very much in my active memory.
LC: Yes, yes.
HH: And I never thought I’d see a book that is a tour book of Vietnam and here’s someone saying, “It’s quite the destination.” You know, my generation, there was people that went to Canada. It just doesn’t seem like enough time has gone by. But I understand—you know I live in a valley with a very large Vietnamese population. I’ve worked very closely with Vietnamese and currently work with a man that is significantly younger than I am, but was a child in Vietnam and his father died in the war. So, it’s not as if I’m not around Vietnamese or anything and don’t understand that the normalization of Vietnam is very good for them and their families. I mean, that they can go back and visit and things like that.

LC: Right.
HH: And I’m for that. Keep in mind; I was in Japan only twenty years after the end of the war, World War II.

LC: Right.
HH: And I was treated very well.

LC: But it’s funny how memory kind of telescopes things.
HH: Yeah.
LC: Something’s very far away and something’s just right up close.
HH: Yes, so Vietnam is always up close. Surely you’ve heard that before.
LC: Absolutely, yes.
HH: To me, it was yesterday.
LC: Yeah.
HH: You know, it was so clear, it’s so clear in my mind and the things that I did, you know that’s so clear in my mind.
LC: Would you contemplate going back Helen? Have you thought about it?
HH: You know, my answer to that question has been no consistently and for some reason, I don’t know why. I might consider it, I might consider it.
LC: What’s changing?
HH: I don’t know. I honestly don’t know. You know, I’ve always had the saying, as an airline stewardess, I flew to many different countries. I was all over Asia and you know, the Far East, the Pacific, what they now call the Pacific Rim. And you’re
up in London and you know, they were wonderful. I saw countries, you know, really wonderful and so I sort of have developed—I’d love to go back to London, but I’ve sort of developed this notion that, you know, if I went back to Milan, it wouldn’t be the same Milan that I saw back in the sixties, and so why ruin it. And so I justified that and I think that a certain amount of that, you know, might still prevail today. And mind you, all I saw were airports or the tarmac side of a base. You know, we weren’t let out.

LC: Sure.

HH: So, there’s not a lot for me to see there, and once I heard that Tan Son Nhut had been rebuilt, that kind of hurt, you know, that they had built a new airport. That kind of hurt and you can’t get on the base at Bien Hoa because the Vietnamese use that as a base. And those would be the two places I’d really want to go. I have been up at Travis for anniversaries. I was up there for the Twenty-fifth Anniversary at the fall of Vietnam, and that’s—you know, walking out on the tarmac, that was the first time I’d been on that tarmac since my last flight.

LC: How did that go?

HH: Oh, I took my grandson with me, and I had to stop him and say, “Just give your grandmother a minute here.” And he didn’t understand. You know, I hadn’t really told him, and I did explain to him better, but there was a C-5A that he could climb onboard, and so he wanted to go get on that.

LC: Sure, right.

HH: I was having trouble, you know, looking at the yellow line on the tarmac.

So, it was tough.

LC: How old was he when you went?

HH: This is my grandson.

LC: Yeah, how old was he when you were there together?

HH: It was in ’95, right?

LC: Yeah.

HH: That would’ve been the thirtieth, and he was born in ’88. He was twelve or something like that.

LC: Okay, so he was being a young boy.

HH: Yes.
LC: All excited.
HH: Sure.
LC: And you were just trying to like maintain vertical or just kind of stabilize.
HH: Yeah, and you know, I hadn’t really told him.
LC: Yeah.
HH: Now, after that, I realized that I had not explained anything to my grandchildren, of which I have five. And I took them to the California Vietnam Veterans Memorial over Memorial Day Weekend, right after that, the fall of Saigon, remember, was in April and so over Memorial Day Weekend, I went and took, I think all of them. All five of them up there. Maybe the youngest one didn’t go because he was pretty young then, and we spent a lot of time and I told them that I had been there and the California Vietnam Veterans Memorial has a wonderful inlay map on the ground and I showed them all of the cities that I had been in and explained to them what the names meant on the memorial there. And they all found that very interesting.
LC: What did you get out of doing that Helen?
HH: I just needed to tell them. You know, it’s much like this interview. It is incredibly comfortable to make sure that this information doesn’t go with me. But, for my own grandchildren, I’d learned some time ago, it is my children and my grandchildren that I really want to know the stories. You know, I really want them to know. It’s, I don’t know, their birthright, something like that. Now, and let me tell you how, very quickly, how I learned that. They asked me to speak at the Women’s Memorial in ’97. You know, they have an oral history thing there on Veteran’s Day.
LC: Yes.
HH: My son was in the Navy and his ship was at Norfolk, and he came up to DC, and he was in the audience when I spoke and I really didn’t know what I was going to say until I got there and it was strange for me to be telling, speaking to Vietnam Veterans and telling them what they already knew, you know, their flight home and things like that. But anyhow, I prevailed, and what I realized then was, what I had really wanted was for my son to hear it.
LC: Okay.
HH: And my daughter, because of some publicity and things like that. I ended up on the front page of the *Washington Times*, and that got her attention, you know.

LC: Yeah.

HH: You know she’s busy; she’s got five kids. You know, mom’s got to be on the front page of a newspaper before she’ll pay attention. So, they both, in sort of their own ways, even though my daughter wasn’t there, that’s when I realized that that’s why I would get frustrated when I did speak, that I didn’t feel like anybody was listening. I was talking to the wrong audience. I really needed to have my children know, and through them, my grandchildren. Maybe not as detailed as this, but—

LC: Well, but in the years to come, they will always, of course, be able to hear this interview with you.

HH: Well, the thing is, is that, nowadays, kids study Vietnam in school. You know, who would’ve thought, you know.

LC: Yeah, right, right.

HH: So, they needed to have some perspective, and they just needed to know it. You know, I realized I hadn’t explained anything to my grandson when I took him to Travis, except there will be airplanes there, right. And he needed to understand why I had gotten upset. I needed to tell him. So, and that was very comforting that they all knew and they all understood.

LC: Yeah, and that you had the chance to actually say it to them as you wanted to say it.

HH: Yes.

LC: Helen, is there anything perhaps that I haven’t asked you about, but that you would like to include here in the interview?

HH: Yeah, you know, the only thing that I really, really want to make clear is that there were a lot of women like me. There were a lot. At one of the reunions, someone had done some research and discovered that there were at least twenty commercial airline companies that transported troops to Vietnam during the war. So, there were a lot of women like me and it’s not something that is usually counted and you know, I think what is thrown around is twenty thousand civilian women in Vietnam, well that excludes the airline stewardesses.
LC: Yes.

HH: So, what’s really important to me is that people know that there were hundreds of us, if not thousands of us throughout the war doing that, and I understand, even within my own airline, as the war progressed—and we didn’t have bidding, we just got a telephone call and somebody would say show up at such and such time for this flight. We’d find out where we were going when we got there. But later, even my airline had bidding and I found out that the senior gals bid all on the Vietnam flight.

LC: Now by bidding, can you explain what that means?

HH: It means that they selected that flight.

LC: Okay, and they were doing that why? What was the—?

HH: Because they wanted to, they wanted to. They wanted to take the guys over. So, the senior gals that had been doing it since my day, for instance, they bid all of the flights and I know this because I talked to someone that had been with the airline from about 1970, through the late seventies. And it was a fellow, because they had started hiring guy stewards, and he said, “I never could get a Vietnam flight because they were always bid by the senior stews.” So, of all of the flights that they could’ve taken, and you know, the more senior you are, the easier you make your, you know, your flight, they were picking the Vietnam flights, which is a long flight.

LC: Yes, they’re not taking it because it’s the easiest thing.

HH: That’s right.

LC: Yeah.

HH: Absolutely, and that sort of made me proud of those gals because given the chance to bid, they bid the Vietnam flights.

LC: And as you say, there were a good number of women who were doing this.

HH: Absolutely, that had, you know, I’m sure fascinating experiences. I didn’t fly—right after I quit flying; they started doing R&R (Rest and Relaxation) flights. I didn’t have any of the R&R flights, and I understand from my roommates that the R&R flights were just a kick and a half because they were taking these guys to Australia for R&R.

LC: Yeah.

HH: And Hawaii and they were just so excited going.
LC: So pumped.

HH: Yeah. And they’d be on the ground with them and so they’d have a chance
to, you know party with some of the guys and stuff like that—was completely different
than mine.

LC: Sure.

HH: You know, mine was all them going and coming home. The R&R flights
were something in the future. So, I never saw any of that, and they really had a kick out
of that. They said that was really a lot of fun to see the guys like that.

LC: Oh yeah.

HH: But then you have to take them back in again.

LC: Yeah, there’s always the other piece of this.

HH: Yeah, and I’m not too sure, you know—there was a lot that I didn’t
understand then that I understand now. There just were a lot of women like me, and for
some unknown reason, we don’t even talk at our own reunions, and I’m not sure why we
don’t do it, but we don’t, but we’re a pretty tight airline. We have a lot of reunions, we
have a lot of luncheons that we can go to, we have a website, we exchange emails. You
know, it’s interesting.

LC: Yeah, and that you guys have kind of maintained the contact even though the
airline is gone and you’re not doing this anymore and you have other lives.

HH: Yeah, actually the airline isn’t gone.

LC: Okay.

HH: It still carries troops actually.

LC: And is it still called World Airways?

HH: Yes, it looks different, but it’s still called World Airways.

LC: Okay.

HH: And it’s based out of Hartsfield.

LC: Oh okay.

HH: It was based out of DC for a long time. The owner of the airline, Ed Daley
died, and the airline was taken over by some former CIA (Central Intelligence Agency)
agents, and they took it over and they have been flying flights into the Middle East for a
long time.
LC: And they’re based out of Hartsfield, Atlanta?

HH: Yes.

LC: Okay. Well Helen, I want to thank you very much for your time and for participating in the oral history project.

HH: Well thank you.