Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Ms. Virginia Griffith on the 29th of September, year 2001 at approximately 10:45 a.m. We are at the Winter [Sheraton Gunter] Hotel in San Antonio, and this oral history is for the Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. Ms. Griffith, would you please begin by providing a brief biographical sketch of your life beginning with when and where you were born and where you grew up?

Virginia Griffith: Okay, I was born August 23rd, 1943 in Conway, Arkansas. When I was eight years old we moved to Lake Charles, Louisiana. I grew up there and graduated from Lake Charles High School in 1961, and at that time I wanted to join the Navy because I thought they had the prettiest uniform of all the women uniforms. My mother was very much against it, “No, you’re not going to join the Navy,” and it took me a year to convince her that I wasn’t going to stay in Lake Charles and go to college. She finally consented to sign the papers. My dad had already said, “If that’s what you want to do, go ahead.” So they signed the papers and I was off to Lackland for basic training in late October of 1962.

SM: Was there much of a military background of people in your family as far as people that had been in the service?
VG: My dad had served in World War II. He didn’t talk much about it. About all he said was that he was in the Army, armored. He said he followed Patton all over Europe.

SM: But he would talk too much about that?

VG: No. He was pretty quiet, didn’t say much really about anything, but about all he ever said was he followed Patton all over Europe.

SM: How about brothers and sisters?

VG: My brother joined the National Guard out of high school, spent his six months on active duty, and then went five and a half years, two weeks every summer. My sister has no military. She went to college. She’s a teacher in Louisiana. Well, she’s a principal in the school now.

SM: What made you decide that military would be something you’d like to do versus going to college?

VG: I wanted to get out in the world and see what the rest of the world was like. I come from a lower middle class family. We didn't have that much money. I saw that the military is the best opportunity to get out and meet people from different parts of the country and see a little of what the rest of the world was like and the rest of the country, too.

SM: When you entered the service, did you think at that point that you were going to make that a career?

VG: Oh yeah.

SM: Oh, you did?

VG: Absolutely. Yeah, I was going to make it a career. Later on after I served a while, I was really gung ho, going to stay in, make chief master sergeant, stay in for 30 years and run the Air Force.

SM: You said that you were initially interested in the Navy but changed your mind. What changed your mind?

VG: I went to talk to the Navy recruiter and I couldn’t get any information out of him. I would ask him a question and he’d give me as short an answer as possible, like, “Yes, no,” that type of thing, and I got the feeling, “These people don’t really want me.” I was working part time for an insurance company, which was right across the street from
the federal courthouse where the recruiters were and a woman I worked for, her husband was in the Air Force. There was a base in Lake Charles at the time. She said, “We’re not busy. Why don’t you go across the street and talk to the Air Force recruiter,” and this was a Saturday, I didn’t know they weren’t really open. So, I go upstairs and I walk up to the Air Force recruiter’s office. The door’s open and there’s this guy sitting back there and he’s got on a flannel shirt, jeans, cowboy boots, feet propped up on the typewriter. I’m really uncertain; I stick my head in, “Are you the recruiter?” “Yeah, sure, come on in,” and he answered all my questions, he gave me all the information I could possibly want, he was telling me stories about when he was in England, and that’s where I want to go; not necessarily to England, but into the Air Force. They’re interested in me, they want me. I hadn’t considered the Army or the Marine Corps.

SM: Any particular reasons why you didn’t consider the Army?

VG: I was probably prejudiced - the reputation of women in the Army. This is 1962 we’re talking.

SM: When you say reputation, could you elaborate? What had you heard?

VG: Loose morals, also the qualifications for entering the Army weren’t as high as for entering the Air Force.

SM: Was it the same for the Marine Corps?

VG: I really had no interest in joining the Marines for whatever reason. I didn’t even consider them.

SM: And when you at that initial meeting with the recruiter, did you talk about potential jobs that you might qualify for in the Air Force?

VG: I can’t remember. Probably, but the first interview I remember talking about what job I might get was after we went to Lackland and went through, it wasn’t career counseling but they talked to us. I guess it was, too, career counseling, about what jobs were available. At that time you did not enlist for a specific career field. Depending on the scores that you made on the qualification tests, like I had real high in administrative and general, I think, with like 85 and 90 on those two, and electronics and mechanics, I was no way I was going to qualify for that. But at that time, women weren’t encouraged to take math courses and get involved in scientific area. I took general business and short
hand and preparing for a secretarial career, in addition to the mandatory high school classes that we had.

SM: Were you concerned at all about the proverbial glass ceiling, in the Air Force you’d only be able to get promoted to a certain level or anything like that?

VG: No, because at the time there was no phrase such as the glass ceiling or sexual harassment or anything like that. I just wanted to go and do whatever job I got.

SM: What did your family think when you finally made the decision that the Air Force was for you?

VG: Well my mother still wasn't terribly happy about it. She said there had been some…the small town in Arkansas that I was born in is about 30 miles north of Little Rock and she said there had been some military women in Little Rock during the war and I don’t know, I guess they had a reputation. In the military at that time, even in the early ‘60s when I joined, women were either homosexuals or in the minds of the public, we were one of two things, homosexuals or whores, for lack…or prostitutes, whatever word. She was concerned that that would rub off on me, that because I wore the uniform I would be considered one or the other.

SM: The label?

VG: The label, yeah, the stereotype. But once I came back from basic training and wearing my uniform and looked good, she’d see that I was still the same person. I hadn’t been converted into something that I wasn’t before. She was very proud.

SM: How about your dad?

VG: He didn’t say much. He’s not a very emotional person. He kept his emotions to himself, but from the look on his face he was proud of me, too; someone carrying on the military tradition in the family.

SM: Now at that point, the only presence in Vietnam had been advisory personnel. Had you heard much about Vietnam as you were going through high school and as you were thinking about this military career?

VG: No. I was concerned with 17-18 year old concerns, with school things, the normal teenager things, and Vietnam was half a world away and at the time I didn’t have much interest in world affairs, what was going on in the rest of the world. My world was Lake Charles, Louisiana.
SM: I’m very interested in the atmosphere you grew up in there in Lake Charles in terms of you mentioned Little Rock and of course there had been quite a bit of controversy surrounding some of the activities in Little Rock, integration issues and things of that nature. How much of that spilled over into your community?

VG: Our community was very segregated. You had one section of town up in the north side of the town and they stayed in their area and we stayed in our area. Of course no blacks went to…there was one black high school in town and there were two white high schools. We didn’t play each other in football or in sports. They played against black schools from other towns, we played against white schools, and I never really had any contact with black people until I joined the Air Force. As far as myself being prejudiced, I like to think that I wasn’t because I’d never had any contact with black people so how could you be prejudiced against somebody you’ve never met? Then when I came in after I graduated…well, no, one of our assistant MTI in basic training was a black three stiper, but she was in a position of authority and I had been taught people in a position of authority, like mom and dad and whoever else, you do what they tell you. So I didn’t have any problem with that. Let me just add that I think that I said that I didn’t have any problem with it, but I think that all of us, to some extent, have our prejudices. So, yeah, I had some prejudice but in that situation she was an authority figure and I didn’t have any problem doing what she told me to do.

SM: Was this the first black person that you worked with in the Air Force?

VG: Yeah, yeah, and then as I went along there were sergeants that I worked for and then as I attained more rank there were blacks that worked for me.

SM: When you went into the Air Force, of course there was a lot going on in terms of the conflict, the cold conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. How much of that was on your mind? How much of that was discussed in your home, for the Cold War?

VG: It wasn’t really on my mind or it wasn’t discussed that much in the home either. I wasn’t concerned about it as far as joining the military. I figure if I go in the military and there’s a war, it’s my job to go fight that war in whatever capacity I can. So, no, I wasn’t concerned about it.
SM: When events occurred of international significance, say a good example that you might remember, like the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, were those events discussed much around the dinner table?

VG: No, we discussed them at school in government or history or civics class or whatever, but no, our family didn’t discuss much at the dinner table. My father was very old fashioned; I don’t know what other way to say it, in that you came to the dinner table to eat, not to talk. So we didn’t discuss much around the dinner table. After dinner it was off to study and mom and dad watched TV or whatever.

SM: What did you think about President Kennedy? You were old enough to probably identify with him but not old enough yet to vote.

VG: I thought of him as very charismatic, a good leader, and what the country needed, and of course when he was assassinated I was a young airman out at March Air Force base in California and that, they always say that people who are adults and alive when Kennedy was assassinated remember where they were when they heard the news, and that’s a fact. I remember exactly where I was when I heard that he had been shot.

SM: Where were you? Why don’t we go ahead and talk about that?

VG: Well I was in the CBPO, the Consolidated Base Personnel Office out at March Air Force Base and I was walking from one section back to my duty section and one of the guys in the Morning report section which of course we don’t have anymore with all the computerized accounting of people, said, “Hey, did you hear, President Kennedy’s just been shot,” and I said, “Oh yeah, right, what was it, a hunting accident or something?” I didn’t even know he’d been in San Antonio and then was up at Dallas. At that time I obviously wasn’t following the news that much. They said, “No, I’m serious, he’s been shot in Dallas,” and then that’s when it sank in.

SM: How did that affect you? How did it affect the atmosphere on post there, on base there?

VG: We were sad because that was our country’s leader and he’d been shot down. He was so young, and I cant remember, I think that might have been on…the 22nd might have been on a Thursday that year because the next day we didn’t go to work. We were off work and glued to the TV like after the incidents of September 11th this year, just sitting there like, “This couldn’t really have happened,” and, “Why did this happen,”
and “Oh my gosh, what are we going to do now?” and concerned about what was in the
future for the country.

SM: Did anything change on base?
VG: You mean as far as what we were doing at work or the way people felt?
SM: A combination.
VG: Like I said that one-day we didn’t go to work and then it was the weekend
and then Monday we went back to work. We had a job to do regardless of what had
happened, we had to keep going.

SM: What were the discussions concerning why he was assassinated? Were
there any? What kind of speculation occurred?
VG: None that I can remember. When something like that happens there usually
are, “Gee, why and how, and who is this guy Lee Harvey Oswald and where did he come
from and where’s he been?” You ask the questions, “How did all this happen?” and,
“Why?”
SM: You mentioned in the questionnaire, I looked at it briefly, that one of the
things that became a focal point for you while you were a young airman was the Cuban
Missile Crisis, and of course you went to the service in 1962.
VG: Right after.
SM: Right after the Cuban Missile Crisis?
VG: Yeah.
SM: So where were you, what were you doing, and what kind of news were you
getting about the Cuban Missile Crisis?
VG: Well I’d already taken my physical, my enlistment physical, and processed
all the paperwork and I was waiting at that time females had to have a photograph taken
by the recruiter to go with the enlistment application. I guess they didn’t want any ugly
women in the Air Force or whatever, but that requirement has since been deleted, and all
the paperwork had been processed and I was waiting to hear the word whether or not I
had been accepted into the Air Force and I don't remember being concerned that I would
have to go to war right then because I didn’t know anything about the military. “Well
I’m going to basic training but the rest of the world can fight the war, I’m going to basic
training,” if accepted for enlistment. So I don’t remember being overly concerned about
the Cuban…the situation at that time.

SM: Were there any other events that stand out in your memory before you went
to the Air Force?

VG: You mean as far as world affairs and local affairs? No.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe your introduction into the Air Force?

VG: Introduction into the Air Force? Okay. I rode a bus from Lake Charles to
Houston where the swearing in ceremony was actually held and that was the first time I’d
been away from home by myself. I spent the night at a hotel in Houston; don’t ask me
the name because I have no idea. I don’t remember that. The next morning one of the
recruiters at Houston picked me up and I went to the recruiting station and I was the only
woman. There was a whole room full of guys. We took the oath of enlistment and they
put us on another bus over here to San Antonio and there was some folks from Lackland
that met us and the guys went this way and I went that way, and getting…I don’t
remember doing that much processing because it was, I don’t know, seven or eight
o’clock at night whenever we got in and they did whatever paperwork had to be done at
that time and then got me to the barracks that would be my home for the next eight
weeks. The way the WAF barracks were set up, you had a dayroom in the middle and
over in this wing you had a flight and over in this wing you had another flight. I go
walking into the dayroom and there were some of the girls from the other flight sitting
around just chewing the breeze like people do before it was time to go to bed and as I
came in one of them said, “Well, here comes the first of the rainbows.” I had no idea
what that meant, nor was I going to ask. I was rather shy and reserved at that time. I
found out later that rainbows were all the newcomers because they were dressed in all
different colors, not all dressed alike. So I went into my room. I had the whole wing to
myself because I was the first one from my flight to arrive. I go in the room, get in bed.
Things have slowed down so I’ve got time to think now and I’m laying there, “What have
I gotten myself into?” But the next day when the other girls started arriving and the
activity started to pick up again and we went to get our clothes and get the clothing and
then started…we kind of went into formation. Nobody knew anything about marching
then, but we walked in a formation instead of marching to get issued our clothing and
then in a couple of days the training actually started and there wasn't time to think. I no
longer felt that I had gotten myself into something that…well, I still didn’t know what it
was all about but I wasn’t concerned. I’m here to go through the training and then go on
to the next step.

SM: What did the training focus on?
VG: General military knowledge. We’re talking, this is 1960, we’re talking
almost 30 years ago. General military knowledge, of course we had drill everyday,
customs and courtesies, so we could learn how to spell Air Force or military, so we could
be military.

SM: A lot of PT?
VG: Not that I recall.

SM: Really?
VG: Yeah. At that time, the only quote “war thing” unquote training that I can
remember us doing was we didn’t have the obstacle course like the Air Force kids go
through now. The only thing we had, we went through the gas chamber. We put our gas
masks on, we went in, we had to take them off and hold our breath for a few seconds and
then go out the other door and there were some girls that panicked. I don’t know if they
couldn’t hold their breath long enough or just the idea of being there.

SM: They didn't ask you questions to try to make you breath in the gas?
VG: No. Training then, the Air Force was so much different than the Army
training. Now they might be a lot more because of the total integrated force concept that
they’re going to, but our TI wasn’t even allowed to yell at us. It was just a different
situation.

SM: This was all female?
VG: All female. There wasn’t integrated male/female training at the time. As a
matter of fact, there was the 3743rd WAF training squadron, which saw to the training of
females, the commander, the 1st sergeant, all the other people in the orderly room were
females and all the MTIs were female.

SM: Was the whole chain of command of your training unit female?
VG: The squadron where the 3743rd WAF training squadron was, yes, but then
the commander reported to I guess it was the training school commander, I’m not sure
exactly what the chain of command was. We just worried about the TIs and the training
officers and what have you.

SM: They weren't allowed to raise their voices?

VG: No, and certainly weren't allowed to cuss at us or tell us we were babies, and
I realize why they do that, to get people to wake up and do what you’re supposed to do,
but at that time it was a different story, maybe because at that time there were very few
places overseas that enlisted women could be stationed, like Hawaii, Japan, Germany,
and England, and it wasn’t until late ’71 or ’72 after Johnson had signed the bill taking
away the law saying that women in the military could only be 2% of the total force, and
then Johnson signed the law saying there would be no limitation, and bases had to open
up to women in all areas and the career fields were opening up at that time. When I went
through basic training, there were very few places that we could go overseas, Hawaii,
England, Germany, Japan, and the likelihood of having a war in one of those places was
so slim that we weren't prepared for one basically. We didn’t need that kind of training
because we probably wouldn’t go there.

SM: And how ethnically diverse was your training group?

VG: Oh very. We had black girls, and as a matter of fact I became friends with
this girl from – she was Chinese – from San Francisco, Hispanics, and I think that’s
probably…well of course southerners, northerners, Californians, from all over the
country. It was diverse.

SM: How well did everyone get along?

VG: We got along fine. If there were any problems with any individuals, I never
heard about them.

SM: How much of your training focused on issues like, I don’t know, Air Force
policies concerning fraternization, things like that?

VG: Probably not a lot, just in memory, I don’t know, I’m guessing here, but we
would have been exposed to the fact that officers and enlisted…you don't date an officer,
you don’t go to parties with officers. Enlisted have their place and officers have their
place, and never the twain shall meet.

SM: How about Air Force history? Was that talked about much?
VG: That was included in our training, but as far as going into detail as, “This
general did this, and that general did that,” or, “These operations were conducted during
World War II or Korea,” and stuff like that, no. I would say one or two hours during the
military studies portion of our training. We had classes every day after we got processed
in, but I just don’t remember that much about them.

SM: How about weapons training?

VG: We went to the firing range once and we weren't shooting…the guys might
have shot M-16s. I don't even know if the military had M-16s at that time, but no, I think
it was either an M-1 or an M-14, I’m not sure, but one of the older rifles. One day. And,
if some of the girls had been shooting since they were kids they qualified expert, but the
rest of us were lucky to hit the target. But, that’s all the weapons training we had.

SM: Was it a heavy weapon?

VG: I don’t remember it being exceptionally heavy, but never handled a rifle
before. Whatever an M-1 or an M-14 weighs. But I’d been physically active all my life,
played on the high school tennis team, so I don’t remember having any problems
handling it.

SM: And let’s see, anything else that stands out in your mind concerning basic
training?

VG: In basic training? Nothing except that at that time the length of basic
training was eight weeks, but they rushed us through in six so we could be home for
Christmas and still half the flight spent Christmas at Lackland in casual status because
they didn’t have orders either for tech school or their first assignment. I was one of the
lucky ones, I had orders for a personnel tech school, and I have to think that it would be
worse spending Christmas there in casual status rather than being busy doing the things
that we’d been doing. You have a busy schedule during basic training. There’s not time
to sit around and feel sorry for yourself. I would have to think it was pretty hard on those
gals who were left there.

SM: Did you lose anybody through the training? Did anybody quit? Anybody
fail?
VG: No, nobody quit, nobody failed, but we did lose one gal because she went to
the beauty shop on base and got a permanent and they left it on too long and burned her
scalp, blisters all over her head, so instead of setting her back she was discharged.
SM: Discharged?
VG: Discharged. At the time I didn’t know discharged from medical discharge
or the girl being taken care of, but all they told us was that she’d been discharged. I’m
sure they kept her – I hope they kept her – long enough to heal her up, but I don't know
because we never saw her again in the flight. She was gone.
SM: Of course during basic training, you had no contact with guys, or did you?

How much contact? Let me rephrase?
VG: No, really, we didn't because we had to stay in our squadron area. On
weekends we could go to and from the dining hall on our own. We didn’t have to march.
And we could go to the BX if we needed stuff, but we couldn’t leave the base until the
last weekend before our graduation and everybody headed downtown, “Got to go see the
Alamo!” or whatever, just go downtown and get away from there! But no, we didn’t
have contact with guys while we were there.
SM: Did you have access to civilian clothes? When you got that one weekend
off, did you have access?
VG: Had to wear the uniform. Yeah, it was uniform. We even had to leave in
uniform. We couldn’t wear civilian clothes to leave; go out and show the world what
sharp looking troops we are.
SM: So when you got home for Christmas, how was the reception?
VG: They were all glad to see me. It had been six weeks, and I spent I don’t
remember, it was probably about the middle of December when we graduated. It may
have been a little later but I spent Christmas at home with the family and then I had to
report to Greenville Air Force Base, Mississippi for personnel school.
SM: Now when you got home for Christmas, was that when your mom felt
differently about you being in the service?
VG: Yeah, like I said earlier, she realized that I hadn’t changed into a monster. I
was the same daughter that she had said goodbye to at the bus station a few weeks before.
SM: And what was the personnel training like?
VG: Well first of all, I didn't start training for a month. I was there for a month. They didn't have quotas for women or class phase or something and I really didn't care. I wasn't that concerned because there were three of us, and of course they had to put us doing something until we could get into class so we went over to the firefighter school that was also there at that time so we went over and we typed up lesson plans and we got to set in on some classes and got to take a ride on a fire engine one time and had our pictures taken, stuff like that. So we kept busy and then of course the personnel school was integrated. It was guys and gals in the same class. It’s like any school. Some instructors know what they’re doing and can impart it to you and others, you sit there, “Is it over yet? Can we leave now?” But, I thought it was good training. It teaches you the basics of all the different sections of personnel like Airman assignments. At that time it was Airman records because we had paper records. We didn't have computers, everything was on paper. I thought it was good training. They taught us a little bit about each section because we didn’t know where we’d be working when we got to the personnel office of whatever base we were going to.

SM: How long was that training?
VG: It started in February, late January, early February, and we graduated at the end of April.
SM: Three months?
VG: Three months, yeah.
SM: And this is 1963?
VG: ’63, yeah.
SM: Fully integrated training, men and women, living in the same barracks?
VG: No, no. The classrooms were integrated. We lived in separate dormitories. We had in our orderly room we had a female TI but the student leaders were the ones, we marched to class as females but the classroom was integrated. We lived in the separate dorms.
SM: And a controversial issue that’s been raised to my attention recently was that there were a number of women during this period who were discharged solely due to pregnancy. Did that happen at all?
VG: During basic training?
SM: Not basic, because that couldn’t happen during basic, very little contact.

VG: Tech training?

SM: Yeah, tech training.

VG: I don't remember anyone in tech school who was discharged because of being pregnant, but at the time that was the – I can't speak about the other service – but in the Air Force, if a woman became pregnant, if she was single or married, she didn’t have a choice. She was separated.

SM: When were you told that? Was that part of your initial briefing by the recruiter?

VG: No.

SM: Was that in the contract or was that for the basic training?

VG: As far as I remember, it wasn’t in the contract. We had the same basic contract as the guys had and took the same enlistment oath. I would have to say that it just became knowledge once I got to my first permanent party station. I worked my first assignment was in airman records, but you get to know people in other sections and you find out, well yeah, if you’re a female and you get pregnant you have to get out. I didn’t have any feelings one way or another about it at that time. I can see the reasons for it. I can also see the other side of the picture, why, because a man or woman either one is a single parent, or if they’re married with kids, why do they have to be out? But at the time, they were using the excuse that a woman with a kid is worried way more about the kid than she is about doing the job, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. As a matter of fact, at March, we had one of the older NCOs, she was a staff sergeant, but at that time there weren't that many women in the senior grades. The WAF first sergeant was a master sergeant, and the rest of the NCOs were staff sergeants and they were 15-16 years service, getting close to retirement, and this one staff sergeant within four or five years of retirement, pregnant; gone. Those were the rules.

SM: Is that one of the only incidents you’re aware of, of a woman getting discharged due to pregnancy?

VG: No, it didn’t happen in tech school but the gal who was my assistant student leader, when she got up to her permanent party base, single, pregnant, gone.
SM: Another sensitive issue with regard to pregnancy, just when you throw men
and women in the same environment together, these things are going to happen.

Incidents of rape, was that ever an issue that you were ever aware of?

VG: I don't know of any incidents of rape at any time during my…well, when I
was reassigning the enlisted women, I knew about one that happened in the Philippines,
but only because of where I was working that I heard about it. Others, no, I didn’t hear
about any others.

SM: Did the Air Force have any kind of training or counseling concerning rape
prevention reporting or anything like that to help women deal with these types of issues
or to be prepared?

VG: No. But, I would have to say that probably all of American society was the
same way. If it wasn’t a problem…it may have been a problem at the time but we didn’t
talk about it. Nobody talked about it so not everybody knew about it. It’s probably been
happening since the beginning of time but that’s one of those things you don’t talk about.

But, once people started talking about it and you hear more about it, you know about it.

SM: Did that change by the time you got out of the Air Force? Was it 1982 that
you retired?

VG: 1982, and no, I never…maybe with the young gals coming through basic
training they may have had something, but by that time I was an E8 and I don't figure I
needed any training on rape prevention. If I didn’t know by that time, then I had led a
very sheltered life!

SM: How about sexual harassment? Did that become more of an issue or
discussed more in the Air Force over the course of your career, probably not discussed
early on?

VG: No, early on, no, and as far as training, I cant remember ever going
through…well of course the equal opportunity in employment and race relations and all
of that came along when I was at the mid-NCO range, but as far as the sexual harassment
and rape, I never received any training on it and didn’t really discuss it amongst my
friends and female co-workers. I was never concerned about it. The guys I worked with,
although they may never have always been gentlemen, they never tried…they didn’t put
hands on me in an inappropriate way. We bantered back and forth with sexual overtones
but we always knew that we were just joking, and there was nothing serious about it. The
guys would say…I knew who was married and who wasn’t married and passing down the
hallway would make a remark like, “Hey, baby, let’s go out tonight.” “In your dreams!”
We would go back at them and it was…we all knew there was nothing serious about it or
they may have been serious but I wasn’t and it wasn’t going to happen, not with a
married guy.

SM: How about the health care that was provided to you and to other women in
the Air Force? Did you feel early on that it was adequate? Did it improve over time?
Was there room for improvement?

VG: I felt it was adequate. I never had any serious medical problems, but any
medical problem that I did have was taken care of without any problems.

SM: So was there anything in particular that was memorable about personnel
school?

VG: Yes, but only because of the location. After I’d been there for a while I
became assistant student leader. I was selected to be assistant student leader and then
student leader and we had to give a briefing to the new gals and part of that briefing was
to remind them where we were. In Mississippi, it’s not integrated. If you go into town
together, just beware that the black gals will be refused service and if you’re with them,
you too will probably be refused service. We weren't telling them they couldn’t go in
town, it was just giving them the information to be aware of the situation that they were
walking into, especially if they were from the north or California or whatever. We had
one white gal, very fair skinned, who was dating a black guy, and I don’t know that they
ever went in town. I never heard anything about them having problems. But, at that
time, if they had gone into town and if they were having problems it probably would have
been kept within the orderly room and the rest of us wouldn’t have known about it unless
she chose to tell us about it. But that’s pretty much the most memorable, because of
where we were and the times, we had to make the gals aware that your life could be in
danger. So, that’s one of the most memorable – the most memorable thing – about being
in tech school.

SM: Were there any problems within the tech school itself, given that interracial
relationship?
VG: None that I knew of.

SM: What was the response when you were briefing the newer people about the fact that here you are, you're in the deep, segregated south, if you've come from New England where everything is integrated or fairly integrated and race relations are fairly good, it's quite a shock. What was the reaction you received, do you remember?

VG: No reaction. Again, it could have been because of the times. People didn’t speak up as much then as we do now. Nobody said, “Well hey, that’s not right. We have to do something about that.” It was if they didn’t accept it, they didn’t say anything about it. It was just, “Okay, this is the situation, this is what we have to deal with,” because a small handful of women wasn’t going to change the situation over night, no way.

SM: Did that part of your briefing come down from the chain of command?

VG: Yeah, from the orderly room. We had a printed or typewritten, “This is your briefing, these are the subjects you will cover.” Yeah.

SM: And while you were there, you don’t recall any particular incidents involving race issues?

VG: There could have been some but if there were, I did not hear about them.

SM: Is there anything else?

VG: At tech school, no.

SM: When you got your orders for your first duty assignment, where were you going?

VG: I was happy. Well, at that time because there were so few bases where women could go, there were four women in our class and of course we got four assignments to bases where women could be assigned and at that time I was a big movie star freak. I read all the movie magazines and one of the assignments was for…let’s see, we had one for Shreveport and the gal from Arkansas wanted that one so she could be close to home. There was one for Offutt, where headquarters SAC, Omaha, Nebraska, where headquarters SAC is. We had a gal who was really ambitious, career oriented. She wanted that one; okay, fine. One other, and then March Air Force Base at Riverside California, which is about 60-70 miles out of Los Angeles. So we all worked it out and I wound up going to March Air Force Base, happy as a clam.
SM: Star struck?
VG: Yes, and as a matter of fact every year at March at that time they had a
celebrity golf tournament to raise money for the base recreational services, and stars
come down from Hollywood. Clint Eastwood, this was when he was doing Rawhide on
TV and wasn’t really a big star yet. Clint Eastwood, I don’t know if you remember the
singer Jimmy Rodgers, Bob Wilke, always played a bad guy in the westerns. Who else?
Oh, the guy who played Lieutenant Rip Masters on…what’s your age?
SM: 35.
VG: 35, okay, you don’t remember Rin Tin Tin on TV?
SM: Yes.
VG: Okay, the guy who played Lieutenant Rip Masters, Jim something, and
Dorothy Provines who was on the Roaring 20s, the TV series, lots of others, and Bob
Hope. So all us gals volunteered to work in the refreshment stands. We’d work our shift
and then we’d take our cameras and take all the pictures. I was working at a refreshment
stand between one…I’m not very golf oriented, but where you finish up, that’s the green,
right, because you start on the tee?
SM: Right.
VG: We were between one green and the next tee and I see Bob Hope walking a
little distance from us with some other people and he happens to look over and see the
refreshment stand so he comes over and you know me, trying to be so cool and not gush
all over him, “Well how’s it going today, Mr. Hope?” So cool, Gini Cool. He said, “Oh
fine,” and we chatted for a few minutes. I had my camera with me. Did I take a picture?
Did I ask him to pose for a picture with me? No. I didn’t even get his autograph. I was
trying so hard not to gush that I forgot to get his picture and his autograph! But that was
great.
SM: How about Clint Eastwood, did you get a picture of him?
VG: Yes.
SM: Oh good.
VG: He was signing an autograph for somebody else and I, “Click!” I took
pictures the first year and then the next year I took them back and got a lot of them
autographed, and they had a section in the program where you could get autographs. So
I’ve got two different programs with autographs. I’ve got Clint Eastwood’s and Jimmy Rodgers’ and there was some…oh gosh, the comedian who played…what was the series? I want to say he played…he was a short, kind of chubby guy. I can’t remember his name but I think he was on…he was the neighbor on “The Life of Riley”. But anyway, I got a bunch of autographs and I’m in heaven!

SM: How about going into Los Angeles or Hollywood and seeing stars there?
VG: I didn’t have a car at that time because at that time all the airmen didn’t have cars because we couldn’t afford them. As a matter of fact, I didn’t even have a driver’s license at the time. My father was very, very southern. My brother who is four years older than I am got his license when he was 16. He hadn’t had driver’s ed in high school. I had driver’s ed in high school but my dad didn’t think I was ready for my license; the old, “The boys are ready, but the girls? Why aren’t you doing cooking and cleaning and all that?” So I didn’t have a driver’s license, if you don’t have a license, why get a car? I was stubborn. I could have taken the test in California and gotten a California license, but I’m from Louisiana, I should have a Louisiana driver’s license, dumb things like that.
But we did get chances…the base had tours to various places and I took advantage of those when I could. I had an aunt and uncle who lived in Los Angeles at the time and I took the bus up and they met me at the bus, and they said…they were both from Arkansas, they had moved out to California, and they said, “Don’t talk to anybody! If we’re not there when you get off the bus, don’t talk to anybody until I get there!” They were worried that I would be picked up by strangers and God knows what would happen to me. But my uncle was an accountant and he had worked for the Fox West Coast company and he was retired from them. You know where the Fox Theater, Manns Chinese Theater, and a bunch of theaters out there, he had a lifetime gold pass to any Fox Theater, so we went to see a movie in Mann’s Chinese Theater and got to see all the footprints and autographs in the sidewalk. The movie showing at that time was Irma La Duce, Shirley McLaine, she was a French gal and flighty, the kinds of roles she played in her early career. It was a little racy, nothing compared to what they have today, just the language, certainly not the dress, and my aunt was afraid that I was going to be tainted. She said, “I hope this movie’s okay!” Yeah, I was 20 by that time, but they had been raised in Arkansas and women just didn't do things like that.
SM: Well the chauvinism that you had mentioned earlier with your father, did you encounter that much in the Air Force?

VG: No, I didn’t. The guys that I worked with in personnel, females had been in the personnel career field ever since they were WAF. They were used to working with women, and there were a lot of us because that was one of the few career fields that we could go into at the time. So, no, I didn’t experience any male chauvinism or if there was any, I didn’t take it as such at the time, having come from the atmosphere that I had come from. That’s the way things were.

SM: Good point.

VG: But I progressed ahead of my contemporaries and the bosses were men and they’re the ones who wrote the airman performance reports. I can’t say that there was any male chauvinism. I was put in for airman of the quarter, not in the WAF squadron but the male squadron, and then later NCO of the quarter and things like that. So no, I didn’t experience any of that. Now I’ve talked with other women who have, but I didn’t see it.

SM: Did it strike you as odd or awkward or did it strike you at all, this label “Airman,” and was there ever any humorous banter or even serious discussion, “Why isn’t it air-women and why isn’t it air-person?” That’s the kind of discussion that would happen today.

VG: Yeah, today, but at that time we weren't into person. No, it never bothered me that we weren't called airwomen. Everybody from the chief of staff on down was an airman. So no, it didn’t bother me.

SM: Well go ahead and if you would, describe your first duty assignment, what were your responsibilities, what did this involve?

VG: I was in airman records. We maintained the paper records of the enlisted people that were stationed at March and I think there were about 5000 at that time. Most of us, except for the NCOIC were females. He used to call us his bevy of beauties. At that time, that was considered a compliment. They would write, as a matter of fact, I have an airman performance report that says I’m in the top 1% of all females that he had supervised, rather than all people or airmen that he had supervised. At the time I didn’t question that; today, I would. You grow, you live, and you learn. But our duties
consisted of filing documents in the records as well as posting or typing onto an Air
Force Form 7 current duty station, courses that had been completed, decorations,
classification data, like your AFSC, Air Force Specialty Code, what your skill level was.
At that time the form for doing classification actions was an Air Force Form 1098. If
someone was upgraded to the 7 level you had to post what the skill level was and the
document and the date of it. You typed on these forms and when you got full you
consolidated and started a new one, and the old one was filed in the records but you
worked from the new one. We conducted records reviews which the individual…we
would do them individually or in groups. You’re sitting there looking at their record and
you’re going over with them what they have and is there something that’s’ there that
shouldn’t be, is there something that should be included that’s not, just so the individual
knows that they have a complete record so that when it comes time for the promotion
board to meet and the documents that would go forward in the promotion folder…we also
maintained and updated the promotion folders. We’d make sure that everything was
there so that they would have the best possible chance at being promoted. Basically that
was about it in airman records. At that time, the Air Force was just starting to get into
computers and SAC was the test air command. This was the old days where we wrote up
stuff on these 11 by 14 sheets. They had 80 columns across because that’s how many
columns the punch cards had. We would write data, certain columns for certain things,
certain cards for certain things. We would write the data on the cards, we’d send them to
the keypunch room, they would punch them up, and then they would send them over to
the computer. There was only one computer facility on base and it was rooms full of
these humongous computers with tubes and they would punch up the information and we
would get the printouts from them. Of course things have progressed quite rapidly since
then, but we had to fill out the data sheets and go back to keypunch.

SM: That’s an interesting perspective. The early computers, being very large,
cumbersome, tape driven, vacuum tube driven, and the various steps involved in
computerizing the data, how much did you work in the Air Force personnel system
before you started working with the punch card system?
VG: That was probably…they were probably in the test program when we got there and it would have been the initial assignment where we started working, they weren't doing it at the time I got there, but shortly thereafter that we started working.

SM: How much resistance was there to using this new technology? Was there any resistance at all?

VG: Not that I can remember. We had gone to briefings and they had said, “This will make your job easier, things will be faster, you’ll be able to retrieve information faster.” Of course everybody didn’t have a PC sitting on their desk at that time; there wasn’t even a computer in each different function. But we did it that way because it was the only way then. Some of the real what we called brown shoes because they’d been in the Army or the Army Air Corps before the Air Force became the Air Force, there was resistance from those folks because they had always done it a certain way. One guy says, “Know the book?” “Of course I know the book. I wrote the book,” with that attitude that, “We’ve been doing it this way; there’s nothing wrong with doing it this way, why do we have to change?” Human nature.

SM: How about grumblings to the effect, you mentioned during the briefings they said, “Information retrieval will be quicker,” but on the front end, a lot more work involved with getting information into the computer. So, was there much grumbling about that, the fact that the old system…

VG: You just go look at the record and there’s the information.

SM: Yeah, right, now all this extra work to get the information into this computer?

VG: Some resistance because you said you were going to be able to retrieve the information faster so the mind says, “Okay, we give them the information and we’re going to need it as soon as we need it,” but it had to go through all of these steps before it could be retrieved, and working in the system you learn that right now it’s not going to be as fast as we were lead to believe or as fast as we thought they said it would be. But with any change there’s grumbling and some people say, “Okay, that’s the way it’s going to be and we’ve got to work with what we’ve got,” and there’s others, “Mumble, grumble,” but that’s the way they are; they’re going to complain about any change, no matter what.
SM: Since this is your early introduction to the personnel system, did you see this as a neat step going on in the Air Force?

VG: Yeah, because in high school they didn’t teach us anything about computers because they weren’t accessible to the average person at that time. So this was, “Oh, wow, this is something new, something neat, something different to work with.” I have no problem filling out forms. I loved to fill out forms, or at that time I did. Today, I’m not so excited about filling out forms. But, “Give me that form, I’ll fill in those blanks!” So it was exciting for me to be able to use codes. We used codes, we didn’t use words. That was really exciting using codes! You could use one digit and it would mean all these words, and wow, that was great!

SM: But you’re young, still being introduced to the new technology.

VG: I was younger then, yeah. It was all exciting then.

SM: Were there any other memorable experiences there at March Air Force Base?

VG: I was there when President Kennedy was assassinated. I can’t remember if you went over that already or before you turned on the recorder? After the recorder?

SM: Yes.

VG: Okay, yeah. That was the only other one.

SM: Where did you go from March?

VG: Wiesbaden Air Base, Germany.

SM: Oh, first time out of the country?

VG: Yes.

SM: How was that?

VG: Oh, I loved it. I’d volunteered. That’s where I wanted to go. I’d had one of those hardship careers, gotten everything I asked for including Vietnam. But I really enjoyed it. I was able to get out and see some of the country; not as much as I would have liked to. The only thing I regret missing over there was going to Berlin to see the Wall. Didn’t get to make it to Berlin, but went to Paris, Vienna. I had friends who had cars over there and was able to go around Germany and see some of the things down there. I went down to…you know there really is a Frankenstein Castle in Germany.

SM: Really? I didn’t know that.
VG: Yes. I was disappointed because it was so small! You think of castles, Windsor Castle in England, but this was small and the road to get up to it was through heavily wooded area, kept curving around. It was up on the top of a mountain and with my vivid imagination I just knew that Frankenstein was going to come walking out of those woods at any second. But you get up to the top of the hill and there’s a parking lot and there’s this small…I don’t know how to give you a specific size, but small compared to the castles that you see in pictures and movies and certainly smaller than the visual perception I have of the castles in the Frankenstein movie, small. But there was a Baron Von Frankenstein or something. This was down in the Black Forest because that was the same day I went to the clock shop and I bought my coo-coo clock for 25 dollars. We also went down to Dachau and saw the recreated and preserved, as a museum, a portion of the concentration camp, the barracks, the long lines of barracks. They still have the ovens. Again, it might have been my vivid imagination but when we went in the building where the ovens were I smelled burning flesh, and you have a marker maybe three feet by five feet that had been a mass grave; no names because we don’t know who they were, but just this small marker over the site where thousands in a mass grave and it’s mind boggling that something like that could happen.

SM: And that our German allies are the ones that did it?

VG: Yes. Well, they’re our allies now.

SM: That’s what I mean, when you were in Germany you were serving on German soil.

VG: Yes, they were our hosts.

SM: How did that make you feel? Did your attitude about the Germans change after you visited?

VG: No, because it wasn’t…well, of course some of them were probably still alive. This was in ’63 to ’66 so there were still people alive in Germany who were there then and may have known about it and didn’t do anything. I don’t know that they were capable of doing anything because Hitler and his forces confiscated all the individual firearms, so how could you resist when you were going up against tanks and machine guns? You going to throw rocks at them? That’ll do a good job. But whether they were able to do something about it or not, I don’t know. But no, my feeling toward the people
in Germany didn’t change. I just felt that these weren’t the people that did it, it was Hitler
and his forces that did it, two different groups.

SM: How well did the German people and the Air Force personnel, yourself
included, how well did you get along?

VG: The times we would go to eat at restaurants or go shopping, I was always
treated nicely. Some people felt…when I first got there I felt insulted, but then I realized
that the Germans are brisk with everyone, not just Americans. So okay, that’s just the
way they are. They’re not trying to insult me. They’re just being themselves.

SM: What other interesting cultural experiences did you have in Germany?

VG: I didn’t mingle that much with the German people. At that time I was very
shy; if spoken to, I would speak, but I didn’t sweep into a room and say, “Here I am, I
have something to say,” but as you grow and gain experience and confidence, that
changes. So I didn’t…the only mingling I did was when I would go to a restaurant and
maybe speak with the people there just a little bit. I went to a conversational German
course so I could say, “Please,” and, “Thank you,” and ask directions and [?], I didn’t
drink beer, I never acquired a taste for beer, so, “Grosse cola,” that’s a big Coke. So I
didn’t really mingle that much with the locals, mostly kept with the Americans.

SM: What was your job there?

VG: I was, again, in airmen records.

SM: Was there anything different about the way records management occurred in
Germany compared to how it occurred in March Field?

VG: No.

SM: Were they computerizing there as well?

VG: I can’t remember if the test was still going on in SAC or if all of the
commands were doing it then. I don’t remember doing the worksheets in Germany so we
must not have been into the test program yet. I think they were just doing it in SAC to
see, “Okay, let’s work it. Let’s iron out the bugs,” and then it would go to all the rest of
the commands. But I don’t remember working with the computer system in Germany.

SM: Was there anything else that was different about the work environment?

VG: No, except that I think there were probably more civilians in Germany with
the status of forces agreement. We had to hire so many Germans to work for us, so we
had German military and civilians working with us in the CBPO and other places, too.

One thing that was different, there was an Army airborne…this is the first time I had
been stationed – well, this is the second airbase – but this was the first time I’d been
stationed where there were other services personnel. There was an Army airborne and I
don’t know if it was the 82nd, the 101st, or whatever because most of the time when I saw
them, even in the dead of winter, they had on T-shirts and fatigues and they were running
in formation, “Airborne, Airborne!” so I couldn’t see any insignia for whatever unit they
were assigned to, but I thought they were crazy running around in the middle of Germany
in the winter with just a T-shirt and fatigues, but more power to them!

SM: How about other country forces?

VG: I saw uniforms but did not work with any of them because headquarters
USAFE, or United States Air Forces in Europe was at Lindsey Air Station where the
WAF barracks was and then we took a bus out to Wiesbaden Air Base to go to work.
But, I did not work with any of the international forces but they were there because of the
command headquarters.

SM: Was there anything else that was memorable about your German
experience?

VG: Just the travel and being able to get out and see how other people lived and
the differences there might be between there and the States, and just to see that yes, there
are different ways of doing things out there. Oh, we rode the…a bunch of us took a train
down to Vienna, an American Express Tours is what it was, but actually we had to go
over to Frankfurt to catch the train down to Vienna and we toured down there and we got
to see the Lippizaner stallions in their home arena. I had seen the movie The White
Stallions, the Disney movie The White Stallions with Robert Taylor and oh, those
animals are gorgeous, just…I loved that! I was a horse lover when I was a kid so that
was a really exciting thing for me.

SM: So where did you go from Wiesbaden?

VG: To Randolph Air Force Base, the Air Force Military Personnel Center. I
had read an article in Stars and Stripes that the Air Force was now reassigning – this is
now late ’65 [*67] or early ’66 [*68] because I returned in April, March or April of ’66
[*68]– and I had read an article in Stars and Stripes that the Air Force was sending
women into Vietnam. So, I wrote a letter and I said, “Okay, here’s my qualifications, I
want to go. That’s where the war is, that’s where I think I’m needed most, and I want to
do my part.” I got a letter back from the airmen assignment folks there, a warrant officer, O.B. Downing, and one of the last warrant officers in the Air Force because they were phasing out the program at the time, and he said, “We can’t send you to Vietnam at this time because we’re only sending administrative and stenographic personnel to MACV.” It started out first at MACV and they lived in a hotel downtown or whatever and there hadn’t been a barracks or a hooch set aside at Tan Son Nhut for other women or any women. So I wrote the letter and I said, “Here’s my qualifications,” and I included copies of my airman performance reports for the last five years, that’s what I had in, and they sent me a letter back saying, “You can’t go now, but we’ve created this position in the assignment section to handle the reassignment of enlisted women,” because that was right after Johnson had signed the public law lifting the ceiling on the number of women in the military. It was being expanded as to where the bases that we could go to, the career fields that we could go into, and they said, “We need someone here to coordinate, to monitor, to select for reassignment, to be a focal point of the Air Force for enlisted women assignments.” Well my mother didn’t raise a fool; I knew where personnel heaven was! So, I accepted that assignment thinking I could always go to Vietnam four years afterwards, and four years later I was able to but I came back a month early because it was ’73, troop withdrawal, you can’t stay here anymore. But, I had 11 months.

SM: At this point you’d been in the Air Force five years?
VG: Five years.
SM: You’re obviously older, more mature, perhaps keeping up more with international events?
VG: Uh-huh.
SM: What were you reading about? What were you hearing about Vietnam?
VG: In Germany, the only English paper we had access to was Stars and Stripes and they were having stories on Vietnam but nothing about women being able to go there and then when the article came out that, “Yes, we’re sending women,” I wanted to go. Like I said, that’s where I thought the greatest need was and I wanted to help fill that need, do my job there where it was really needed.
SM: What did you think the United States was trying to accomplish in Vietnam at that point?

VG: I thought we were trying to drive the communists out, the party line. It had nothing to do with the defense of our country, but we were helping them to drive the communists out so they could be independent and have a government of their own.

SM: Okay, did you meet many airmen that had served in Vietnam and come back?

VG: There were some middle and senior NCOs in Wiesbaden who had been there and then gotten an assignment from Vietnam to Germany, but as far as talking to them about what it was like over there, what they were doing, no. I didn’t really. I just knew that that’s where I was needed and that’s where I wanted to go.

SM: How about for the next few years before you finally got to Vietnam yourself? Were you able to talk much with the airmen and women that came back?

VG: No, not really. Working at the Air Force military personnel center, I can’t remember. People were going from there to Vietnam and then to other bases after they came back, so there weren’t that many who had been who I could talk to to find out what it was like. I wasn’t really worried about what it was like. I knew it was a war zone, even though Saigon supposedly wasn’t part of the war zone. I had seen on the news where hotels were being blown up and things like this, but I really wasn’t concerned about that. When you volunteer to go to a war zone, you take what comes with it. If you’re too dumb to know what’s going on over there, don’t volunteer. Or, if you think you’re going to be afraid, if it’s going to affect your job performance, don’t go.

SM: Because at this stage it was still voluntary for women to go to Vietnam? I mean, you weren’t going to get orders to go; you had to ask to go?

VG: No, and I finished my four years…we haven’t really gone into what all we did there. Do you want to do that before we get to Vietnam?

SM: Yeah, absolutely.

VG: I actually did the selection of women for reassignment and after a while there was a counterpart established, a female counterpart established at each major command and also I would brief at that time Colonel Holm who was director of women in the Air Force up in the Pentagon. She would have a conference every year with her
major air command staff directors and I would brief them as to what the status of what
women’s assignments were and basically I selected the women for reassignment. Oh, I
also did the joint spouse assignments and at that time there weren't too many women in
the Air Force who were married to members of the other services, and we had a good
success rate as far as keeping married couples together. Other than reassigning WAF, we
called it a Manning book. I had administrative types, the printers, the band people, and
some other odds and ends. At that time, the personnel center was computerized but we
were still using microfiche.

SM: Microfiche?
VG: Yep. There were no computers at all in the office. We got our products that
we used for selecting people for reassignment; we got them from the computer room.
But if we wanted to look somebody up to find out where they were, we could go to the
computer and punch in their social security number and their name, we had to go to the
microfiche reader. The computer wasn’t doing the assignment selection, then, we were.
We had three different listings. First you filled your Vietnam requirements, then you
filled your other short tour requirements, this is for going overseas, and then you filled
your long tour requirements. You would have to hand post each one of these listings to
make sure that you didn’t select somebody more than once, or select them for more than
one assignment. It was time consuming, but that was the way it was done. That’s all we
had to work with.

SM: How many women were in the Air Force back then? Do you remember?
VG: Numbers? No, I’m sorry, I don’t.
SM: That’s all right. I’m just curious.
VG: Still, there were very few senior NCOs. If they were master sergeants, as
few of them as they were, they were probably a WAF squadron 1st sergeant and didn’t
have any choice in the matter. We have the squadrons, we need the 1st sergeants, and
that’s where we need to take you. I was trying to remember when I saw my first senior or
chief. There weren’t any in California. I think other than the 1st Sergeant in Germany
there was one other master sergeant and a couple of techs and quite a few staffs. I saw
my first senior master sergeant at MPC on my first tour, and then she got selected for
chief and she went to Vietnam before she put it on and I got over there. I guess she was
there two or three months after I got there and then she rotated back to the states.

SM: How long were you at Randolph?
VG: The first time was four years.
SM: You were there for four years?
VG: It was a controlled tour, one of the special assignments.
SM: And it was from that assignment that you got…
VG: That I went to Vietnam.
SM: …to Vietnam? So you did the same thing for four years?
VG: Yeah.
SM: You were in the same job position for four years?
VG: Yeah. It was interesting because in our airmen assignments policy shop, we
had an RAF exchange officer, a Squadron Leader which is equivalent to a major who was
the one that worked on WAF assignment policy. So I got to work with him. I went…two
different ones, Jones and Barrett. I guess maybe it was like a two year tour for them, but
both just their English accent and they were both always the proper British officer in
uniform. As a matter of fact, another thing that I did working with the women in the
directors, the support troops in General Holm’s office, was at one of the WAF staff
administrations. Where I gave a briefing, I was thinking to myself, “Gee, we ought to have
something like this for NCOs, have an NCO conference so we can put forth our ideas and
then present them to the WAF director and then let her farm them out to whatever agency
to take a look at them. I sent a letter to General Holm after one of the conferences and I
said, “We need to do this, and we would like to do this,” and she got her people working
on it and the conference was set up, and at that conference it was Squadron Leader
Barrett who was the RAF exchange officer at the time and I asked him if he would like to
meet her when she was there and he said, “Oh yes, I would very much,” because he had
been working the WAF airman assignment policy. So we were on coffee break, and she
was our keynote speaker. She had come to San Antonio to make a tour of basic training
or something and before hand we had made arrangements for her to be our keynote
speaker, and after her address there was a long coffee break so the girls could meet with
her and talk with her. I went down this long hallway and got the squadron officer and
he’s putting on his jacket and buttoning it as we’re going back up the hall and I
introduced him to her and that was something to take back to England with him. She had
just put on her first star at that time, and of course being the first Air Force female
general, that was a big deal. He was just smiling from ear to ear, made his day.
SM: That’s great. Based on your experience with the RAF officers there, or were
they NCOs or officers?
VG: Officers, squadron leaders.
SM: What was the state or the nature of their integration of women into the RAF
at that point? Did they talk much about that?
VG: Not much but from what little they did say, I have to assume they were in
the process of further integrating the RAF.
SM: And was there anything else that happened at Randolph or was there
anything else that you wanted to discuss concerning that experience before we talk about
Vietnam?
VG: It has nothing to do with the job, but I was a tennis player and I went and
played the base tournament and then went to…even though I wasn’t assigned to Air
Training Command it was an Air Training Command base so we went to Air Training
Command tournament and then from there to the Air Force tournament. At that time,
previously Arthur Ashe had been in the Army and his job was to play tennis and to be a
public relations guy, and when I was playing they had guys like Stan Smith and Charlie
Passerale and I can’t remember who else, but our Air Force guys that went in Air Force
and went to inter-service. They didn't have inter-service for women at that time but our
Air Force guys had to play these professional quality players, and we had some darn good
players, but when you’re up against the Stan Smiths and the others who were here for two
years to get their military obligation out of the way and then they go back to playing
professional tennis, they had a hard row to hoe. To be in at the same time that these guys
were and to have…although I never met them because women didn’t go to inter-service
at that time, it was an interesting thing that our guys had to play those guys. They gave
them a battle. They never won, but they knew they were in a battle.
SM: Did it seem odd to you at all, you mention that of course there was a
separate institution within the Air Force that handled women as part of the Air Force,
women in the Air Force, did that seem kind of odd to you that they had these separate
institutions to deal with just women in the Air Force?
VG: You mean the WAF director’s office?
SM: Yes.
VG: No, because each service had a Director of Women in the whatever service,
and women had been limited to 2% of the total force and the WAF director worked
directly for the director of personnel and the way I looked at it then, they were there to
take care of the welfare of the women, and I think that’s the way the Air Force looked at
it too. They said, “Okay, WAF Director, that’s a female problem, you take care of it,”
until they ran into Jeanne Holm and then she started slowly making changes like, “It’s not
a ‘woman’ problem, it’s not my problem, it’s your problem.” This was when she was
looking toward doing away with the WAF squadrons and really integrating the females
because WAF have been integrated in the Air Force since 1949 when there were WAF
simply because there wasn’t a WAF Corps like there was a Women’s Army Corps, that
was separate. So we were sort of integrated in that we had separate barracks, we had two
1st sergeants and two commanders who both could take disciplinary action over us, sort
of like double jeopardy. But, it was looked upon as this was a woman’s problem. The
guys didn’t even want to think about handling it. As I got up in rank before they did
away with the WAF squadrons, I had male supervisors say, “I’ve got a problem with so-
and-so, would you talk to her?” “No, I’m not her supervisor. You are. You need to
learn how to talk, counsel, discipline, whatever action is necessary because there’s going
to be many more women coming along after her and you need to learn how to deal with
it.” At the time I didn’t think anything about having the WAF director’s office. We were
still in the mind set of it was good in that, especially after General Holm, she was a
colonel, when she became the WAF director. It was good that there was somebody there
fighting to make changes for women, to have more women in the service, let us work in
as many career fields as we’re capable of working in. Why should we go to all of the
good locations and the guys have to go to Korea, Thailand, or some mountaintop in
Turkey? We all took the same enlistment oath. We get the same pay. We should have
not only the same privileges, but also the same responsibilities. So she was working all
of these things and it’s good that you had one person, especially someone with the
foresight that this woman has, who could look down the road and say, “Okay, what do we want to do five years from now? What do we want the Air Force to be ten years from now? Let’s get these things implemented.”

SM: When was that? When was she…?

VG: When was she director of women in the Air Force? I first met her at March. I don’t remember how long she’d been there and I don't remember if she was on a tour of SAC bases, but I know she was at March and of course we had a reception where we got off work and we dressed up and we all went to meet her and chat with her. So, that was between ’63 and ’66, and then when she made her first star she still stayed in the job. Then, when she made her second star she went up to work on the Secretary of the Air Force Personnel Council. That was in… I don’t remember when that was in, but it was sometime in ’65, probably late ’60s [the mid 70’s] when she put on her second star. She had said at her WAF director’s conference that her ultimate objective was to do away with the position of Director of Women in the Air Force and there was one woman to have the job after she did but it was more of a tying up loose ends. There really wasn’t that much to do when she left.

SM: Was this co terminus with the Equal Rights Movement and the agitation in the country generally that women shouldn’t be treated differently?

VG: I’m not sure if it was a result of that or if it was just the result of General Holms being a very visionary, forward thinking individual and saying, “Okay, this is what we need to do; we need to get our women more integrated into the Air Force.”

SM: Is there anything else that you’d like to discuss about your time at Randolph?

VG: At Randolph? Not that I can think of right now.

SM: Why don’t we go ahead and pause for the day then? Thank you very much.

This will end our first interview with Virginia Griffith.

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Virginia Griffith on the 9th of October, 2001 at approximately 9:20. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Mrs. Griffith is in New Braunfels.

VG: New Braunfels.

SM: I’m sorry, where?
VG: New Braunfels.
SM: Spell that please.
VG: Capital N-E-W Capital B-R-A-U-N-F-E-L-S.
SM: Okay, and let’s see, we are continuing the interview that we started at the Vietnam Women Veteran’s Reunion in San Antonio earlier this month. Why don’t we go ahead and discuss now your trip over to Vietnam and if you would tell us when you left and what the flight was going over there?
VG: Okay, well I actually left from New Orleans. My home town at the time was in Lake Charles, but my sister had just given birth to…I can’t remember if it’s my first or second nephew, but the family was over there. I left from New Orleans, flew to San Francisco, and then departed from Travis Air Force Base. I guess it was about six o’clock at night when we left Travis. It was in April of ’72, and we flew from Travis to Hickham Air Force Base, Hawaii. Then, from Hickham we went to…it was either Guam or the Philippines and then to the other, and then into Tan Son Nhut. The flight was about I think 19 hours. I thought my behind had grown into the airplane seat by the time we got there. Nobody had warned me that I shouldn’t wear my Class A uniform so I was in Class A’s, high heels, and after being on an airplane so long, on and off, I stumbled and almost fell down the stairs when we were deplaning at Tan Son Nhut but managed to catch myself. Of course it was April. It was very warm, very humid. I got off the airplane and it was like, “Oh my God, what am I doing in this?” At the time I didn’t have a polyester or the synthetic, not polyester, double knit uniform. I had the old partial wool and it was a little warm. Then we went through customs, got luggage, and there were two women from the WAF…you can’t really call it a detachment, just two WAF there to meet me. One of them I had known from before, and the other I didn’t. But, I sure was glad to see a familiar face when I got there. Then they took me on to the barracks, got me settled in a room. Well actually it wasn’t a barracks. It was the first living quarters we had was, oh gosh, I don’t know what you would call it, but we had semi-private rooms. There were walls, or actually they weren't walls, they were partitions because there was open space at the bottom and open space at the top, and that was on both sides. Then on what was the front was another partition and there was no door. We hung plastic streamers to get some kind of privacy. Everybody had a fan that we bought at the BX
because there was no air conditioning in the building. We had communal showers, toilets, that kind of thing. There wasn’t much space footage wise, x number of feet by x number of feet. I don’t know, maybe six or eight by six or eight, and we had a bed, an old gray metal bed and there was a dresser and a metal locker for our clothes and shoes, and that was about it. Then we had a small or a regular sized mobile home trailer inside the compound. There was a green fence around the compound and we each had a key to the lock and to let ourselves in for protection from our own folks I guess. Then there was the trailer in the compound that was air-conditioned. We had a TV in there to watch armed forces TV and it was like a day room where everybody could hang out if we wanted to. Then about a month or so after I was there, they moved the WAF officers into the 7th Air Force compound and the enlisted women moved into the barracks that they had lived in, which was one of the wooden World War II type barracks, two stories, three rooms on each side, upstairs and downstairs, with a latrine in between. We had a shower and a tub and of course sinks and toilet. Very few people used the tub. We mostly just showered. We had a day room that we shared with the barracks, the guy’s barracks across the way, and a barbeque pit. Just about every barracks or every area over there had a barbeque pit. The rooms were about 12 by 12. I had a bed, a dresser, a locker, and I managed to get a small refrigerator from somebody that was coming back to the states. I had a hot plate for cooking in my own room if I wanted to, and we had a mastason that cleaned our rooms, did our laundry. Thank goodness for that, because when I first got there we were working seven days a week, 12 hours a day. Working those hours, you don’t want to take time to clean your room and do your laundry. There isn’t that much time left over to begin with. But that was basically it for the living quarters. My room was upstairs. That was about it for the living quarters.

SM: Now did you know what your job would be when you left? Had you already been given that assignment?

VG: Well, I knew I would be working in personnel because that was my Air Force specialty, but what specific base-level job, no, I didn’t know. At that time, I don’t know how it is now, but at that time we were assigned from one base to another and then when you got to that base, you found out where you would be working, with the exception of Vietnam we had sponsors who would send a letter and a package of info on
the base and if they knew at that time what specific job you would have, they would tell
you, or it could change by the time you got to the base. But to answer your specific
question, no, I didn’t know what specific job I would have when I got there.

SM: I’m sorry, when did you leave again for Vietnam?
VG: It was April of ’72.
SM: Now what did you understand was happening in Vietnam when you left?
VG: You mean as far as how the war was going?
SM: Right.
VG: Yeah, from what I had seen on TV and read in the papers, the war was
winding down, or at least as far as we were concerned it was. That’s one of the reasons
we were working such long hours is that the troops going over, the number of troops
going over, had been reduced because we were trying to get the heck out of there. But,
Charlie didn’t get the word and he was still fighting the war. So, the same amount of
work was there but fewer people to do it.
SM: Since you knew we were winding down, this is of course during the Nixon
administration, Vietnamization of the war, did you have any expectations about what the
service would be like?
VG: No, actually I had no expectations except I knew that I was going into a war
zone and I guess I just kept an open mind that anything would be possible. So whatever
happened, I wasn't surprised. I just took everything with a grain of salt as being part of
the war zone and since I had no preconceived ideas as to what it was all about, I wasn't
expecting anything in particular I guess.
SM: Had you heard stories about service in Vietnam from other personnel in the
Air Force before you left?
VG: Actually, no. There had been people…well, I was at Randolph before I
went over but before that I was in Germany and there had been some people who got
consecutive overseas tours from Vietnam to Germany, but I didn’t really talk to them to
find out what it was about. There were people who had come back to the personnel
center where I was at Randolph who were in Vietnam but I didn’t talk to them either, as
to what they had seen or what it was like.
SM: Well, what kind of briefings did you receive when you arrived in terms of maybe some of the culture of South Vietnam, do’s and don’ts, rules that you should follow, things like that?

VG: Gosh, I don’t remember, Steve. Of course we had our incoming processing, but I don’t remember receiving any briefings about the culture. I know I have a small, oh, maybe four by five handbook on Vietnam that gives you their military ranks so that we would know officers and salute them when we saw them and tells the history of the country and the history of the conflict. But as far as any briefings on these types of things, I don’t remember any.

SM: Was there anything that you could have been told that you don’t remember being told that might have made your initial experiences easier?

VG: No, I don’t think so. Like I said, I had a pretty opened mind, no pre-conceived ideas as to how things should be. So, I just took things as they came and went with the flow.

SM: What were your initial impressions about the morale of the unit there, especially among the women that you were serving with?

VG: Morale was good. I saw no…well, there was one gal, as a matter of fact, one of the ones that met me at the airplane that I had known before. She was an admin type, worked in 7th Air Force Intel, so she was aware of things that the rest of us weren’t. She was a little more withdrawn than the rest of us, and I’m assuming because of things she may have known that we didn’t. But, she left. I got there in April and she left in June or July. So, she seemed a little depressed but the others, the morale was good. The women in the barracks and also at work, I didn’t see any evidence of low morale.

SM: Your specific unit of assignment was the 377th Air Base Wing?

VG: Yes, the Consolidated Base Personnel Office.

SM: Now shortly after you got there, the Easter or Spring Offensive of ’72 was underway. What was that like? What do you remember most about that?

VG: Well, as far as Tan Son Nhut was concerned, we didn’t get any hits. It was just business as usual. I read in *Stars and Stripes* about what was going on in the rest of the country, but at Tan Son Nhut, like I say, we didn't get any hits.
SM: How about the occasional mortar or rocket attack. Did that happen at all while you were there?

VG: Yeah. We had two. One was, let’s see, I’m trying to remember which order they were in. One was while I was on R&R...no, no, shortly after the Peace Accords in Paris and Kissinger made his address and we realized we were going home probably sooner than our tours would be up. And the other this one occurred, it was in the morning while I was still in the barracks, whatever time to go to work, I put on my helmet and my flak vest and went to work and we were wall walking around the CBPO in helmets and flak vests until we got the all-clear. Something that really struck me funny, actually, was the chief of the CBPO who was a lieutenant colonel happened to be coming through my section and I was sitting at my desk doing my job and he looks at me and he said, “Well Gini, what are you doing here?” like the guys should be there but I shouldn’t be. Maybe I should have been angry but it just struck me as being funny that he expected me not to be there, like I should have...I don’t know what I could have done over at the WAF barracks other than stay downstairs and behind the sandbags. But, I figured I was there and it was my place to go in and do my job, so I did it.

SM: Did they have bunkers for you to use in the event of attacks like that?

VG: No. Like I said, the WAF barracks was two stories. We had sandbags around all four sides up to a height of about four feet I guess, so in the event of attack, if it had happened in the middle of the night, if I was in the barracks and I needed to run downstairs to get behind the sandbags, because if anything hit they said, “Those on the second floor, don’t get under your bed because if shrapnel comes up through the floor, that’s the worst place to be, so get downstairs behind the sandbags if you can.” At work, I can’t remember if we had sandbags around the building or not. But no, there was no bunker for us to go to, either at work or at the barracks. Our best protection was the sandbags.

SM: In addition to the mortar and rocket attacks, were there any incidents involving small arms fire attacks against the base and against the area where you were living and working?
VG: No, not to my knowledge. But the second rocket and mortar attack, I didn’t
tell you about that one. It came about six o’clock on the morning that the cease fire was
to become effective at eight o’clock, so I guess Charlie just had to get in the last word.

SM: When was that cease fire supposed to take effect?

VG: Gosh, I don’t remember, Steve.

SM: This is 1973, though?

VG: This is in ’73 and I don’t remember…I left there in March of ’73 on the last
day of troop withdrawal. I’m trying to remember how long before I left that that
occurred. I really can’t remember. I’ve got my travel voucher but it’s not right here
where I am now.

SM: That’s okay. I was just curious. I assumed it was in ’73. But, those are the
two principal attacks?

VG: Those were the two rocket attacks. In October when I was on R&R in
Thailand, they had at first what they thought was a rocket attack but it was one of the
ammunition dumps went up and I’m not sure if it was a fluke, something that we caused,
or if it was…I don’t remember if it was an attack by the VC or whoever, but an
ammunition dump did go up and at first it was a rocket attack, but it wasn’t.

SM: Where were you on R&R?

VG: In Bangkok. At the time, that was the only place left where we could go on
R&R because everything was drawing down, and evidently the other R&R sites had been
closed, or maybe they were just too far to go. But at the time, the only place we could go
was Bangkok.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe what your duties involved and what
your average day was like?

VG: My duties were, I was NCOIC, Non-Commissioned Officer In Charge of the
manning section, when people came on base; it was our job to put them where they were
needed the most. In some instances there was no choice because of their AFSC. There
was only one place they would go. In other instances, like with administrative folks, they
could go anywhere on base and we would reassign them to whatever unit had the greatest
need. The day started early. When I first got there we were working seven to seven.
We’d get up around 5:30 or six, go to the chow hall for breakfast and then to work, and
get busy doing the things that needed doing. Then we’d break for lunch, go to the chow hall again, come back, and work until seven. I usually didn’t go to the chow hall for supper. I would either as a group go with some of the women from the barracks or with some of the guys that I worked with. We would go to the Vietnamese officer’s club. On the first floor, the dining area, anybody could go in there. Upstairs was for officers only. Downstairs they called the Snake Pit, and I never went there. I heard a lot of wild stories. We would either eat in the restaurant at the VNAF officer’s club or I would cook a can of something and have it over rice and eat in the room and write letters home, go to a movie, go to the tape center, go to the NCO club, just all kinds of activities that we could do.

SM: Now when you say you heard all kinds of wild stories about the Snake Pit, this was with American and Vietnamese?

VG: American GI’s and Vietnamese women.

SM: Okay. Were there any rules about fraternizing like that?

VG: No. Vietnamese women were all over the place. Some of the guys, the higher ranking NCOs and I don’t know about the officers because I didn’t hang out with officers, but some of the higher ranking NCOs lived with Vietnamese women downtown; married, single, it didn’t matter. They made no secret about it. It’s just the way it was.

SM: How about interaction with Vietnamese Air Force personnel or Vietnamese military personnel generally?

VG: Well I didn’t work with any Vietnamese military personnel and didn’t fraternize with any either. I stayed with Americans. Since I wasn’t working with any I really had no opportunity to meet any Vietnamese military. As far as I know, they kept pretty much to themselves or the officers may have associated with American Air Force officers. I don’t really know.

SM: How about Vietnamese civilian employees that worked there at Tan Son Nhut?

VG: No, didn’t fraternize or socialize with any of them either.

SM: Did your office handle just the enlisted assignments or also officer assignments?

VG: Just enlisted; officer and enlisted were separate.
SM: Did you have many opportunities to leave the base and go into Saigon or go into other areas of that part of Vietnam?

VG: Yeah. We could go off base anytime we wanted but like I said; when I first got there we were working seven days a week so there really wasn’t an opportunity. Afterwards, I took advantage. The USO in Saigon had tours in the local area, in Saigon, in the local area. We could go off base on our own, walking around Saigon, taking pictures. I did that sometimes. After we quit working seven days a week there was a group of us on Sundays we were working five and a half or six days, and on Sunday we started doing work in an orphanage up at Bien Hoa. We’d go up, somebody signed for a military bus and we’d go up and make improvements on the living facilities, play with the kids, spend time with them, even ate meals with them a couple of times because we’d take money for them to buy food and clothing, and once I went into the market with the woman that ran the orphanage and that was quite an experience, coming from America where all meat is refrigerated and to go to this market and you expect to see the fruits and the vegetables out in the open, but there was meat hanging in the open, unrefrigerated. Walking down the aisles of the market I’d look down and there’s this tub of live eels. It was a little bit of a culture shock. But, it was an experience I’m glad I had. I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.

SM: Were there any incidents involving critters on the base in the area where you lived and worked?

VG: In the area where we lived, no, there were no snakes. But, we had been given the warning about the two-step snake, the krait. If it bites you, you take two steps and you’re dead. No, I never saw any snakes on base or at the orphanage where we went. Getting back to the orphanage, one thing that struck me as being strange, where these kids lived was like a corrugated tin shed, both sides and roof. They slept on pallets on a concrete floor, what would be considered to us poverty conditions but yet about 100 feet from their living quarters was this beautiful new tile Buddha. The Buddha wasn’t tile but it was gold plated or whatever, but covered with this beautiful open-air roof and pedestals but it looked so new and shiny and then here they were living in the conditions they were living, but yet their Buddha was…maybe it’s something I don’t understand about their religion. It just seemed so strange that they would put all of that money into that shrine.
and then live in the conditions that they were living in, dependent on us for fixing up their
place and giving them money for food. It just struck me as totally strange.

SM: In the orphanage, were the children exclusively Vietnamese or were there
mixed ethnic children at the facility?

VG: To my knowledge, they were all Vietnamese or at least half Vietnamese. It
looked like some of them were Vietnamese and black. The Vietnamese, from what I was
told, didn’t want anything to do with the children who were half Vietnamese and half
black. That’s why they were in the orphanage and would probably never be adopted.

SM: Were you ever told why most of those children were there? Were they the
result of the refugee situation in South Vietnam with people being dislocated? Were they
there for other reasons besides the ethnic issue?

VG: No, we were never, or at least I was never told why they were there. At the
time I wasn’t curious. I didn’t ask.

SM: How about did you see many children with deformities there, cleft pallet or
others?

VG: Sure didn’t. They all seemed to not have any injuries or wounds as a result
of the war. There may have been some illnesses but they weren't evident to me, not
anything that was visible.

SM: Is there anything else that you remember about the orphanage, like how
many children approximately were there?

VG: Taking a guess I would say 15 or 20. It wasn’t a very large orphanage. One
thing that the guys did do was to run an electrical line from a pole that was not…they had
electrical poles running along the road, side of the road like we do here in America. They
ran a line from…I have to assume that they just tapped into it so that there would be
electricity in the orphanage and installed some lights. Before that time all they had was I
think they used kerosene for heating and cooking and also for lamps.

SM: Was there anybody that you knew that attempted to adopt any of those
children?

VG: Not to my knowledge, no.

SM: Were there any rules against that?
VG: No, not that I know of. I didn’t know anybody personally who had adopted a Vietnamese child. I had just heard about some people who did and that there was tons of paperwork involved. It was quite a long, drawn-out process.

SM: Well did you participate in any other civic action type activities?

VG: No, the orphanage was the only one.

SM: Now as the year 1972 drew on, were there any changes, significant changes, that you witnessed in terms of how things were running? Like you said, I guess they were drawing down. Did that pick up speed as your tour continued?

VG: It didn’t really pick up speed until the determination was made that yes, we’re definitely pulling out, and that there was going to be a final date as far as having the masses of us out of there, and things really started to pick up and I volunteered to stay until the last day, although there were no more people coming in, the NCOIC of the CBPO had had a civilian secretary but she left, so I volunteered to stay and fill in for her until the last day. When I had time, I would walk around the CBPO and see what was going on. There were lines of guys, and I say guys because there was only a small handful of us women and most of us had left by this time, either coming back to the states or going to Thailand or Taiwan to finish so they could get short tour credit. There were lines of guys processing out, so as far as people leaving, yes, it did escalate there toward the end.

SM: How about in 1973 after the Paris Peace Accords were signed and obviously the American POWs were slotted to be released by Vietnam? Did your office do any work with regard to those POWs who were going to be released?

VG: No, we didn’t. The only thing really to my knowledge is they flew from Hanoi into Tan Son Nhut and then from there on to the Philippines. So no, we did no work as far as the POWs were concerned. We just knew, and word got around that, “Okay, the plane is landing and they’re taking off,” so that was really the only contact I guess you would say we had with the POWs.

SM: So it landed and then took off? They didn't get off the plane?

VG: I’m not really certain if they got off at Tan Son Nhut or not.

SM: You don’t remember seeing them yourself?

VG: I’m sorry?
SM: You didn’t see them yourself?
VG: No, I did not. I was at work and sometimes the planes would come in during the day and sometimes it would be at night.
SM: Was there anything else that you wanted to discuss with regard to your time there in Vietnam?
VG: Well, the reason I went over was to see for myself what it was all about. I was also pretty darn naïve in that I thought I was going to go over there and win that war, and of course as we know it wasn’t won. I’m glad I went. I would not have traded the experience for anything. Even though I wasn't at a level high enough, I was at base level, and I wasn't at a high enough level to see the overall picture, I’m still glad I went. I would probably do it again although I’m not as naïve as I was then, thinking that not just my being there but that we would win the war. So, I’m disappointed in there’s some amount of frustration in that I feel we let the Vietnamese down. Instead of finishing it, we just ran out and left them on their own. We deserted them I feel.
SM: Did you feel that way in 1973 as you were preparing to leave, or was it later in 1975 when Saigon fell?
VG: It was later on. In preparing to leave, I was just glad that I was leaving in one way, but in another way I didn’t want to leave because we hadn’t finished what we went there…we hadn’t won, and if you’re going to fight a war you need to fight it to win and we hadn’t done that. Not that I wanted anymore of our people to be killed, but just to say, “Okay, we’re leaving now. It’s yours. We’re not going to help you anymore. We’re not going to fight this war anymore.” As far as I was concerned, it was not “Peace with Honor” as Nixon said. It was just walking out and deserting and leaving the Vietnamese to be overrun by the north and the communists and whoever all was fighting with them.
SM: Is that how you felt in 1975 when Saigon fell?
VG: Yeah, I felt bad because if we had stayed, if we had fought the military war instead of the political war, I felt there would have been a different outcome.
SM: Now while you were there, were there any problems with any specific illnesses or diseases for the women and the men you served with there at Tan Son Nhut?
VG: Not with the women, no, and the only problem with the guys was VD. It seemed that it was mostly the younger guys. Maybe they weren't taking precautions.
You could always tell who was having the problem because when we would go out to
dinner, either just as a group or having a going away dinner for somebody, if one of the
young guys who drank or at least drank soda wasn’t having liquor or soda, you know,
“Ah ha, okay, he had to go get his penicillin shot again!” Usually it wasn’t just once, it
was more than once. So, you would think they would learn, but I don’t know. Maybe
women think differently from guys, and this, like I say, was the younger guys, one or two
stripers. So maybe they thought they were invincible, I don’t know. Other diseases,
malaria or plague or anything else, no, there was not problem.

SM: When you returned to the United States, what was that trip like and how
were you received when you arrived here in the US?

VG: The trip wasn’t as long. I don't remember how many hours. We left Tan
Son Nhut on the last day of troop withdrawal. I was on the second to last aircraft. We
stopped in Japan at Yakota Air Base I think long enough to refuel and then we went on in
to San Francisco International, all of us in uniform of course. I did not experience or
know of any others that experienced any negative reactions like we had heard. There was
no spitting on us, there were no crude remarks. It was as if we were anybody else getting
off the plane at San Francisco International. The only problem was that half of us didn’t
get our luggage. It somehow didn’t get on the same plane so we had to fill out the claim
forms. I visited a woman and her family that I had been roommates with when I was at
March Air Force Base many years before. Then I went up to Seattle and visited with
another friend that I had worked with for a couple of days and then went to Lake Charles,
Louisiana where my parents were to spend my leave. My suitcase arrived I think…well I
had an extended leave. My suitcase arrived a month after I got to Louisiana or three
weeks, and then my hanging clothes bag arrived a week after that. So obviously I had
gone out and bought some clothes so that I would have clothes to wear when I was on
leave. My family was certainly glad to see me. I came home from the war safe and
sound, and the people I had gone to high school with, I had lost contact with them. So
my immediate family was really the only contact I had when I was on leave.

SM: Did you find that people were reluctant or hesitant to talk about the war, and
did you ever try to approach the subject with anybody?
VG: Yes, but I don’t know that they were reluctant to discuss it because I didn’t bring it up and neither did they, and I came from a family that didn’t talk about things very much. So, whether or not they were reluctant to specifically discuss the war or it was based on the old family reticence to discuss things, I couldn’t really tell you.

SM: How about later on? Did you ever encounter people who didn’t want to hear about your experiences in Vietnam?

VG: I can’t say that I encountered people who didn’t want to hear about my experiences because I never brought it up. At the time I didn’t feel the need to talk about it and other people never brought it up so it just never got discussed. As years went on, it just stayed way back there somewhere in my mind.

SM: Well what was most important for you personally and professionally about your service in Southeast Asia?

VG: Personally I would have to say working in the orphanage. My job was just the same thing that I would do in that position in the states, and that I felt wasn’t any great contribution toward the war, even though everybody has a job to do. I felt that those that were on the front or the pilots dropping the bombs or the grunts in the jungles and the rice paddies, those were the ones making the real contribution to the war. Even though I had a desk job, and it was the same as if I had been in that same position back in the states, I was awarded the Bronze Star for service in Vietnam. That’s not something else I normally talk about because it happened, it’s in the past, life goes on. But, I’m very proud that I received it and that it was awarded and I certainly wouldn’t turn it down. There are not that many enlisted women and line officers who were awarded the Bronze Star. A lot of nurses may have been, I don’t know because I don’t know that many nurses. But when people ask me what I received it for, the only thing I can tell them is that for doing my job, because that’s why it was awarded. I don’t know, I’m very proud of it but at the same time you see guys and pilots whose planes were shot up or pilots who were POWs, infantry guys who were shot at who received the Bronze Star, and I just kind of have to ask myself why was I awarded the Bronze Star when other people who were awarded it did so much more.

SM: Well, everyone had to contribute something.
VG: That’s true, and I have to assume since I got the Bronze Star and there were lots of guys working in the CBPO that only received the Air Force commendation medal, I have to assume that the supervisors and the folks at higher headquarters thought I did a better job than they did. So, there’s two sides to the coin. One, I’m very proud of having received it, and the other, less often, I ask, “Gee, why?” But like I said, I didn’t turn it down and I wouldn’t turn it down.

SM: What do you think are the more important lessons we should learn as a nation from our experience in Southeast Asia?

VG: If we’re going to fight a war, fight a war. Let the military do their job, keep the politicians out of it, and let the military do what they do best, fight the war, instead of Congress or President Johnson saying…oh, one book I read stated that Johnson was actually picking the bombing targets. To me that’s crazy. He’s sitting half a world away in Washington. I don't remember or not whether he had any military experience but he certainly wasn’t on the scene in this conflict, so what the heck was he doing picking bombing targets? Have faith in your military people that they know what they’re doing and let them do it.

SM: How well do you think the Veteran’s Administration and the government is taking care of its women veterans?

VG: I don’t have any personal experience in that area, Steve, so I really can’t answer that question because I’ve not dealt with the VA. I got an enrollment form when I was at our conference and I’m going to enroll, but at this point I can’t say because I have no experience dealing with them.

SM: Is there anything else that you’d like to discuss today?

VG: Gosh, no. I have some of the college and high school students contact Claire at our website wanting interviews for papers they’re writing and I keep copies of my responses to their questions and I was just taking a quick look at a couple of those to see maybe if there’s some things that they covered that you haven’t asked. Mostly what I remember about Vietnam, maybe it’s a self defense mechanism or maybe it’s a “I’m just not going to let the bastards get me down,” attitude, but mostly what I remember about Vietnam is the good times, the camaraderie among the women and the guys that I worked with. Every Sunday, well not during the entire tour but after one particular female officer
arrived at Tan Son Nhut, every Sunday evening was open house in the WAF officer’s quarters day room. We would sit around, talk, drink, one of the guys would bring his guitar and we’d sing songs. After a couple of drinks – I wasn’t that much of a drinker, so it would only take one or two drinks and I was feeling pretty good – I would launch into…I don’t know if you’ve ever heard the Janis Joplin version of Mercedes Benz?

SM: Yes.

VG: I would launch into that. Otherwise, I was normally quiet, not rowdy, but a couple of drinks and I would do my best Janis Joplin impersonation. My oldest niece, when she started doing the family history I got together my military history and sent her all of that and some photos and stuff and she asked me if I was scared while I was there. Maybe if I had thought about where I was and what was going on all around me I may have been scared, but I didn’t spend that much time thinking about, “Oh jeez, I’m in a war zone, I could be killed any second.” I figured if I were going to think like that I would probably drive myself crazy. So, I did my job, I did after duty things, and didn’t think about being [disk skips].

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Virginia Griffith on the 9th of October. This is CD #2 of our interview. All right, ma’am, if you would just back up one second and explain again when you worked with your niece and you gave her some of the materials concerning your history and she was doing some of the family history and she asked if you were afraid. Just go ahead and tell us again what your response was.

VG: Several years ago, well about five years ago I guess it was, my oldest niece started working on our family history and I worked up a booklet for her of my entire military career which of course included the tour in Vietnam, and after looking through that and my photo album she asked me if I was scared when I was over there. If I had thought about it at the time I might have been, but it wasn’t something that I thought about, “I’m here in the middle of…there’s fighting going on all around and Charlie could come charging through the gates of Tan Son Nhut at any time or the rockets and mortars could come in.” They did a couple of times, but I didn’t think about it. I felt that if I dwelt on it that it would probably drive me crazy or make me depressed as heck. So I did my job and life went on. So, no, I wasn’t afraid while I was there.
SM: You mentioned that through the Vietnam Women Veteran’s website you received inquiries from students who want to interview women who served in Southeast Asia. Can you give a range? Are these predominantly high school students, junior high, elementary school, mix, what kind of projects they’re working on?

VG: No, they’re mostly high school and college students. The majority are high school students, there have been some college students, and usually they’re female. They want the female perspective on what it was like to serve in Vietnam.

SM: And what are some of the more interesting inquiries you’ve received that you remember?

VG: Well basically they want to know what our job was, were we in combat, what were our living quarters like, why did we join the military, why did we go to Vietnam, did we have any contact with the Vietnamese people, what do I remember most about being in Vietnam, and things like that.

SM: You mentioned earlier that one of the things you remembered most were the good times. What were the harder experiences in Vietnam?

VG: The harder experiences were working seven days a week. Back in the states we worked five days a week and weekends were our own, and being so far away from family and friends. But then you make new friends or there are people that you’re working with or women in the barracks that you’ve known at other bases. But, just being so far away from home I guess was the worst and going into Saigon, and, “Gee, this is really different here,” but these are things you adjust to. You either adjust to them or they make your life miserable, so what choice is there?

SM: Well did anybody that you worked with have any particular difficulties coping with those aspects of your service?

VG: Not any that I worked with but there was one of the gals in the barracks and she was a staff sergeant so she had a few years in the Air Force under her belt, but she just…I don't know if it was being in Vietnam that was her problem. I had never known her before so I didn’t know what she was like before Vietnam. But, she was just in turmoil the whole time she was there. This is strictly personal opinion, I don’t know for a fact if this is what her problem was, but shortly after she arrived in Vietnam there was an article in the *Stars and Stripes* about her family. She and 11 or 12 other what the
Germans called Michlings, their mothers were German and their fathers were black American GI’s, and the Germans wanted nothing to do with them. So she and 11 or 12 others had been adopted, 11 or 12 other Michlings had been adopted by a black Army warrant officer and his wife, and I don’t know if her…she had a lot of anger, and it’s an assumption on my part that her anger resulted from the fact that she was half black and half white and just didn't really know who she was or couldn’t accept who she was, and she had a lot of anger and just not a happy person. That’s all I could say. I don’t know if it was her being in Vietnam or if it was her background that caused the anger. But no, she was the only one that really had a problem as far as I know.

SM: I might have asked this during our first interview in San Antonio, but just in case I haven’t, let me ask again; while you were in southeast Asia, were there any women that had to be sent back to the United States for any reason; for instance, due to pregnancy?

VG: No. I can’t remember if it was just before I got there or soon after I arrived, there was one gal came back to the states on emergency leave and never returned, but it was not for pregnancy or illness or anything like that.

SM: During your career in the Air Force, had you ever known anyone who was discharged due to pregnancy?

VG: Yes, I did. Right off the top of my head, I can think of three.

SM: Were these women who were married? Single?

VG: They were all single at the time.

SM: How did that affect them? Were they mad that they were being discharged or did they just accept it because that’s the way it was?

VG: Well at the time that’s the way it was. If a woman was pregnant, whether she’s single or [married] women, Air Force regulations stated that she had to be discharged. The one was in New York and I was in California and I wasn’t corresponding with her but I’d just heard through the WAF grapevine that she had to get out. The other was my roommate at the time out in California. She didn’t seem to be terribly angry because she knew the rules going in, she knew that if she got pregnant she would have to get out and she wound up marrying the guy. The other one was a staff sergeant and at that time there were so few senior NCOs that the staff sergeants, they
were pay grade E5, were older women and this particular woman had about I think 14 or
15 years in the service, so she was within five or six years of retirement and she didn’t
get to retire. She had to get out. She lived on the same floor I did and I knew her but I
had very little contact with her. I just knew that one day she was gone, and I thought,
“Jeez, what happened,” and I was told that she was pregnant and had to get out. I don’t
know for a fact what her reaction was but I have to imagine that she was pretty upset.

SM: Do you know if she was told of any options to her, for instance abortion or
adoption or anything like that?

VG: No, I don’t. I don’t know, but at the time the Air Force wasn’t going to have
a pregnant woman. As soon as your pregnancy was discovered you were discharged.
There was no choice as far as staying on, having the child, and giving it up for adoption.
That wasn’t an option. As far as abortion, I don’t know. There could be the possibility
that some women had abortions before the Air Force knew they were pregnant, and the
Air Force never knew they were pregnant. I don't know of any first hand, but it’s a
possibility.

SM: Were all these pregnancies the result of consensual relations?

VG: Yes, to my knowledge. There were no rapes.

SM: How about not necessarily pregnancy but rapes that occurred with women
that you knew?

VG: No, no rapes with women that I knew, or none that I knew about. None that
they talked about or that were talked about.

SM: How did your service in Vietnam affect your career, or did it have an effect
on your career do you think?

VG: This is just a guess because I wasn’t sitting on the promotion board that
selected me for… I was a tech sergeant when I was over there and of course the awards or
decorations have point values for promotion system. The Bronze Star was five points for
promotion so that’s five points that I would not otherwise have had and I don't remember,
I would have to go back to check to see if after promotion you get a printout showing
how many points you had for this and how many points you had for that and how many
points were needed to get promoted in your career field, total points and how many you
missed it by if you missed it. So I don’t know or remember if I made promotion or
missed promotion by fewer than five points. But, like I say, when it came time up
through E7 or master sergeant, a promotion is strictly based on points. From decorations,
performance reports, scores on the promotion fitness exam and things like that. But then
when you go up for senior master sergeant and chief master sergeant, you have those
same factors plus whatever score the promotion board gives you and I forget what
percentage of the overall total the promotion board score is. But when the promotion
board is reading, and I never sat on a promotion board so I really don’t know what effect
Vietnam service had on my career, it’s strictly a guess and an assumption that seeing a
female or an enlisted woman with the Bronze Star, I would think that would have some
weight in the minds of the promotion board members as well as service in Vietnam. Not
many of us women in the Air Force had an opportunity to serve in Vietnam. We don’t
know the exact number because the Air Force didn’t keep figures. But, it’s less than 200.
I think Claire has located…the last time I checked there was 175 or around 177 Air Force
women and she feels pretty sure that she’s located most of those that are locatable in all
the services. So it would be under 200 Air Force women who served. Maybe I’m over
emphasizing the importance of service in Vietnam, but I would think for an enlisted
woman it would have an impact on the promotion board.

SM: We’ve been talking for a little over an hour. Let’s take a quick break.

SM: Okay, we’re back from our break. Quick question; you mentioned earlier
that with your Bronze Star you have some mixed emotions about having received it; your
pride, and at the same time the other issues you discussed. I was wondering if you ever
experienced any kind of negative feedback from airmen, or the people you worked with,
in particular men. Did they receive that and try to minimize it?

VG: Yes. My next duty station after Vietnam was Peterson Air Force Base in
Colorado Springs and one of the guys who worked across the hall from me; it was a
really weird situation. He and I and another woman were standing around talking and
the other woman mentioned that I had been awarded the Bronze Star, and he goes,
“What? You got a Bronze Star?” No, he didn’t say, “You,” he said, “She,” as if I wasn’t
even there. He said, “She got a Bronze Star? I served a year in Thailand and I didn’t get
a Bronze Star.” Well, magic word, guy, Thailand! He wasn’t in the war zone, although
there were some people in Thailand who did get the Bronze Star. Some guy working in
the base personnel office didn’t qualify for a Bronze Star. It was crazy, like I shouldn’t have gotten it because he didn’t get it.

SM: Was that the only time?

VG: Well, when it was presented, I wasn’t the only one. It was a base award ceremony. The awards were presented by the wing commander. Afterwards there was like a reception or a tea or whatever, and there was a full colonel, who came up to me, and I don’t remember his exact words but it was something to the effect that, “I’m glad to see that the…” I can’t remember exactly how he phrased it, but what he meant was, and he said it in a sarcastic tone of voice, that other than combat troops are receiving the Bronze Star, and I opened my mouth to say something and before I could there was this other colonel who I had been talking to jumped in and said, “Well women aren’t the only ones receiving the Bronze Star, non combatants receiving the Bronze Star, men are too.” And that shut him up. It was just another one putting me down for being a woman and how dare I receive a Bronze Star. I didn't put myself in for it, and I didn’t approve it.

SM: You said it was a lieutenant colonel that jumped in?

VG: No, a full colonel.

SM: Another full colonel? Was this a male or a female?

VG: No, a male.

SM: So both? Okay.

VG: Those were the only two really negative. I’ve had people look at my ribbons and scrunch up their face and then run for the awards and decorations chart to see what that one was, but they never said anything to me afterwards, or they would look at my ribbons and you could see the look on their face like, “Hmmm,” like they recognized what the decoration was, but they didn’t say anything.

SM: You mentioned before you took your break that there was something else you wanted to discuss as well?

VG: Yeah. I can’t remember if we brought this up during the interview at the conference or not, but the one thing that we enlisted women and line officers have had to put up with ever since we came back is that people, civilians, assume that every military woman who served in Vietnam was a nurse. I have nothing against nurses, but it’s the fact that I want to be recognized for being what I am, for what I was. It really gets
frustrating every time somebody finds out you served in Vietnam they say, “Were you a nurse?” “No, I wasn’t a nurse.” It can get very frustrating. We just want to be recognized for being an enlisted woman or an administrative officer, personnel officer or intelligence officer or whatever. We just want to be recognized for who we were.

SM: Absolutely. Well, was there anything else that you would like to discuss today?

VG: Well yeah, one of the high school students had asked me what events over there was a big impact on me. Before I went over, Vietnam was something on the six o’clock news every night and you heard the numbers of body counts on both sides, and I guess it really didn’t sink in until after I got over there. I was in Saigon doing some sight seeing and up the street comes this flat bed truck, not a real long one, but a short flat bed with the wooden side boards, full of coffins draped with Vietnamese flags, and it wasn’t until seeing that truck load of coffins that it really sank in, that I really realized for the first time, that people are dying over here. It brought it all home to me.

SM: Along those lines, as the NCOIC of your office personnel, did your office not process the paperwork for airmen and other Air Force personnel who were killed?

VG: No, casualty affairs comes under the personal affairs section, and I was under…well, airman manning was under the assignment section. So no, the particular office where I worked we did not process any paperwork of the Air Force dead. While I was there, there was only one American Air Force death. It was during one of the rocket attacks and this guy wasn’t’ even assigned to Tan Son Nhut. He was TDY from one of the bases in Thailand. He was a helicopter mechanic with a rescue squadron.

SM: So I guess the way the system worked as far as personnel positions that would open, you would just receive word that there was a need in a particular unit? You didn’t know why that need all of a sudden existed, why a position was open?

VG: You mean if someone was…

SM: If someone was killed.

VG: Was killed?

SM: Right, and that position became vacant.

VG: Yeah, there would be a vacant position and the unit wouldn’t let us know.
SM: You said that the handling of the paperwork for deceased airmen and personnel was personal affairs?

VG: Yeah, the overall section is personal affairs and underneath that would be casualty assistance I think they call it. They’re the people that back in the states if there’s a death on base they are the ones that personally go and notify next of kin.

SM: Is there anything else you’d like to discuss today?

VG: Not that I can think of, Steve. I think the written questionnaires that y’all have on your website I filled out all three of those and sent them in in May of last year. So if there’s anything that we haven’t covered in the oral interview, it should be in those written ones.

SM: Actually, there is an issue I haven’t yet asked you about with regard to your time in Southeast Asia, and that’s the drug issue and ethnic issue. You mentioned earlier that there was that young lady of mixed descent from Germany that had some problems, but were there, as far as you could see, any drugs being used by personnel stationed with you at Tan Son Nhut and what was the ethnic makeup of your unit and was there any kind of ethnic factor?

VG: There was no drug use to my personal knowledge. Now that doesn’t mean that there wasn’t any, it’s just that I was not aware of any. But, that’s not something that I went looking for. It could have been around me and I just didn’t notice it. But like I said, I just didn't notice any. The ethnic makeup of the barracks, there was just this one – other than Caucasian – there was just this one half black, half white gal. Now at work we had black and white, or Caucasian, whatever. I’m trying to think if there were any Hispanics or Orientals. I just can’t remember. In my immediate shop, this is terrible that I wouldn’t be able to remember if we had any blacks or other than Caucasians, but I don’t remember any. There were in the CBPO, but in my section, I don’t remember anybody other than Caucasian, and as far as race problems, no, there were none in my section and to my knowledge there were none in the CBPO at all.

SM: How was the relationship typically between the enlisted personnel and the officers in your unit?
VG: It was on a professional level. We did not socialize. So, it was officer to airmen or NCO at work. There was no calling Captain Smith by a first name or Captain Jones by a first name or whatever. It was captain, major, strictly professional.

SM: Did your attitude change at all out of the Air Force or United States government from the time before you went to Vietnam and then after your service and in subsequent years?

VG: My attitude toward the Air Force didn’t change. My attitude toward the government did. I was very naïve and idealistic when I went over. I thought we were there to win the war, kick the communists back up north, kill them all, whatever, but free the Vietnamese. Once I came back, I was bitter about the way it ended and distrustful of the government, and still am to some extent, even though…well, not so much since the events of September 11th. The way our president and his staff are reacting to the terrorist situation is restoring my faith in government. But, I had really lost a lot of faith in government the previous eight years, also as a result of our pulling out of Vietnam the way we did. I was, like I said, bitter and distrustful of the government.

SM: Your cynicism or your distrust, did that continue and I guess perhaps expand with other operations since the war, like operations in Panama and Central America, some of the more recent operations, whether it be our missions to Haiti, Kosovo, Somalia? What were your attitudes while those events were unfolding?

VG: The events in Central and South America didn’t have too much effect on my attitude, but the Kosovo, Somalia, Haiti, what the heck are we doing there? Like Kosovo, that struggle has been going on for centuries and we’re going to change it all of a sudden? My view of the American military is to defend America and American interests. During the Clinton administration, we became the world’s police force and that’s not what I see that the mission of the American military should be. What is the United Nations doing? Why isn’t the United Nations in all of these places instead of American forces? So yes, there was more cynicism and distrust over that.

SM: Are there any lessons that we can take away from Vietnam that you think would be applicable to some of the more modern experiences like we just discussed?

VG: Well they say this terrorist thing is going to be long; it’s not going to be short term. I just hope that we can learn from it in that it doesn’t become a political war.
Let the military do their thing, and I would hope that we would not get bogged down like we did in Vietnam and just have to...if we could see into the future it would be a beautiful thing, we would know what would happen, but you don’t know what the result of something like this is going to be or how long it’s going to take. But, I would hope that we could use fewer numbers of people than we used in Vietnam, and like I say, that it not be such a political thing. If it is a war, and the president has said we are at war, then let the military do their thing and don’t get it all gummed up with a bunch of interference from the politicians. That’s what I hope we could learn.

SM: Is there anything else you would like to add?

VG: Nothing I could think of now Steve. While we were on our break I was looking through my responses to the interviews, and I think that about covers it. Like I said, between what we’ve done in the oral interview and the three questionnaires that I sent you, that should pretty well cover it.

SM: Well thank you very much. Let me go ahead and put an official end to the interview. This will end the interview with Ms. Virginia Griffith on the 9th of October. Thank you.