Robert Tidwell: Okay. This is Robert Tidwell conducting an oral history interview with Mrs. Fern Kerr on September 24th, 2004, approximately 9:30 in the morning at the Vietnam Archive oral history room. Good morning, Mrs. Kerr. How are you?

Fern Kerr: Fine, thank you. Good morning.

RT: Let’s get started with where you currently reside. Where do you live now?

FK: I live now in Colorado Springs, Colorado. At Liberty Heights, it’s a retirement center.

RT: Okay. You had recently moved from California, correct?

FK: Yes, at the end of July. This year.

RT: Okay. Were you born in California?

FK: No.

RT: Where were you born?

FK: I was born in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada.

RT: So your parents were both Canadian or?

FK: No, they were both United States citizens, but my father had gone up there to Regina with his brother and several sisters to homestead. They all settled around Regina there. Then he was on a farm and the rest of them eventually, I don’t know. I can’t remember how soon went back to the States and went to California. Two of them went to Iowa and the other two sisters that were there went to Los Angeles. But my dad stayed there. He was married. He had a wife and two little boys, but she passed away up there.
Then my mother had gone up to the Regina, that area, with her father and mother, and her mother passed away. So my grandfather, Washburn, moved over to Regina. I don’t know ins and outs, but my mother ended up in high school there then. She met a cousin of mine, didn’t know the person, but it was a daughter of one of the sisters that was still up there. She went to Regina High School. She met this cousin. They chummed and she went home sometimes and stayed at the cousin’s home. There she met my father, who by this time was single and had the two little boys. They met and she took her to church at their church. That’s where they met my dad. So they fell in love and got married. There were three children. I was the oldest and then two brothers from that marriage. So that. I think I was twelve when we came down to the States. We probably came down in 1932 to stay here. But in the meantime, we had gone back and forth about seven times to California and decided to leave Canada and go back. So they were never naturalized up there either one of them. So we were what our parents were.

RT: Okay. So when were you born?
FK: February 7th, 1919. So I’m ninety-five.
RT: Wow.
FK: And a half.
RT: You said that your parents were both from the States? So whereabouts were your parents born?
FK: My father was born in Iowa, Morning Sun, Iowa. My mother was born in Minnesota. I forget the town now.
RT: Okay. That’s not too far apart then.
FK: No. They didn’t know one another until they met in Canada.
RT: Your relationship with the Frank E. Evans is that you were the mother of one of the sailors who was lost?
FK: Yes, right.
RT: His name was?
FK: James William Kerr. He was a seaman apprentice.
RT: Okay. I remember from a previous interview with your daughter that everyone called him Jimmy?
FK: Jim. Jimmy when he was little. Ended up with Jim.
RT: As far as yourself, what kind of educational background do you have? Where did you go to school? What kind of education did you get?
FK: Well, the last year I was in school was in Canada was the fifth grade. Coming down back and forth winters, we would be taken out of school up there as soon as the crops were harvested and spent the winter down in Los Angeles. So they put us in school there. Then sometimes—well, they usually put us back a half a grade, and most days it was either 6A or 6B. They put us back a half to check us out because we’d tell them what grade we were in, but we were really frustrated because they put us back a little. But they found out that what we said was true. Like one teacher said, “What were you doing in arithmetic?” I said, “Long division.” Whichever year that was, I can’t remember. She said, “Oh.” So they put me back anyway, but then the next few days I was put back up because I really had had that. So I went there up through the fifth grade off and on, and then from then on I was down in the States. We wondered one year in Iowa, they talked him into stopping there. My dad couldn’t find work. So we went out to California. So the rest of the time from then on I went through high school and one year of junior college.
RT: Okay. What did you study when you were in junior college?
FK: Well, the basics. Entry things. One language was French and I had botany and chemistry. I had never had chemistry in high school, so I didn’t last very long. I just dropped it because I wasn’t able to—they covered what I had, the little bit you get in high school, a smattering, what I didn’t have. They covered that anyway in the first two weeks, he said so. At sea.
RT: So altogether you had four siblings?
FK: Five. Four. I guess, I’m (inaudible). Two older brothers and two younger.
RT: Okay. So you’re right in the middle?
FK: Right.
RT: That must’ve been interesting to be the middle child there?
FK: Yes, it was. I didn’t think about it at that time.
RT: In fact, dead center. I mean, two older, two younger.
FK: Yes. So I was more or less a tomboy because there were no neighbors any closer than a mile. So I’d get together with girlfriends at school and we’d go back and
forth between our homes to stay, but mainly it was my brothers. The two older ones kind
of looked after us, although the oldest one worked in the fields with my dad, but the other
one kind of shepherded us around and did chores around and was real good to us. I had a
good childhood. It was different.

RT: So then whenever you moved back, your family moved to the States, or
returned to the States, rather, permanently. You settled in California. Did you pretty
much stay in the same area of California in that time?

FK: In the Los Angeles area. Yes.

RT: Okay. So when did you get married and have your children?

FK: I was married—I was engaged in 1938 and was married in 1939. Our oldest
was Geraldine, and she was born in 1943. Then Jim was born in 1950 and Fred was born
in 1952.

RT: Okay. Well, that’s not too far apart.

FK: No, just about seven years’ difference between Geraldine and Jim.

RT: Okay. So Jim was the middle child, just like you.

FK: Yes. It’s almost like he was a first child because it was such a gap, there for
a while, but he was the middle child all right.

RT: What sort of things did you do when you were younger, especially when you
were in high school? Did you have a job after school or anything?

FK: Yes, I did. I worked for—my mother worked at home for a handkerchief
factory. This lady and her husband started it. She got to where they produced pictures on
handkerchiefs and printing press. She had I think Oriental people as well as white people
hand-hemming these. Then she would give Mom a stack and she’d iron them at home.
She fixed up a little square ironing board and ironed these handkerchiefs and put them in
a dozen stacks. She taught me how to do it, so I did it for spare money. They also ended
up making towels. They were linen. So we’d have to pull a thread to cut them on the
two. Even my oldest, my brother next to me younger would cut those towels too. So we
made pin money that way, extra money.

RT: Did you have any other kind of jobs when you were in high school?

FK: Yes. I worked at Kress’s, K-R-E-S-S, Kress’s. Part-time, afternoons,
sometimes. Mostly on Saturdays.
RT: Oh, downtown there’s an old Kress store here.
FK: Oh, is there?
RT: Yes.
FK: There aren’t too many of those left around up there.
RT: So what did you do at the Kress store?
FK: I clerked.
RT: Clerked? Okay. Any particular department, or did they move you around?
FK: No, he’d move you wherever it got busy. You had to keep the shelves underneath stocked, just that kind of sales.
RT: So you were kind of master of all trades?
FK: Yeah. I had to work at different registers.
RT: So when you were younger, how would you describe your family? Was it kind of an average American family? Did you have—were you maybe a little richer or a little poorer, or kind of somewhere in the middle?
FK: I think we were just average.
RT: Just average?
FK: My dad went to California with no job in sight. He just stepped out on faith and took us. My two older brothers stayed in that one winter in Hopkinton, Iowa, where his two sisters lived, two of his sisters. They went to college at Lenox College there. Then they would come out in the summertime to LA. So my dad did some kind of survey work where they would take them out in carloads and put them out in a neighborhood. He did that. Of course he was a farmer. He didn’t like that kind of work. We went to the Reformed Presbyterian Church there in Los Angeles. One of the men asked my mother, she was at their home for a missionary meeting, if my dad had found work yet. She said, “No, not yet.” Well, she said, “He did, but he didn’t like it so he had to make an improvement.” He said, “Did he ever house paint?” She said, “Well, he painted our farmhouse before we sold it.” He said, “Well, tell him to call me.” So my dad did. He hired him to paint his house, this man. Dad did that, and then he did the interior. From then on he was never out of work until he retired. By word of mouth through the paint store, he was busy the rest of the time.
RT: Wow. Talk about serendipity. So you’re currently retired, then?
FK: Yes.
RT: So when you were married, were you mostly a homemaker?
FK: Yes. My husband was a schoolteacher. That first two years we were married, we lived in Kansas. Coffeyville, Kansas, is where he taught. His parents died when he was very young, his mother when he was six and his father when he was nine. So an uncle, the sister of his mother was married to and lived just a mile or so apart on two farms back there too. So this uncle and aunt took my husband and his sister, one of his sisters to raise. The other aunt in town took the twin girls that were born. The mother died when they were six weeks old. So that’s where he lived, was Olathe, Kansas. But he taught in Coffeyville. We were there for two years. He wanted to teach out in California. So that of course thrilled me, but I didn’t ask him to do that. That was just the way it worked out. He came out to California and went to summer school to get his degree for his credentials for California. Then he taught the first year in California at Reedley, which is just southeast about twenty-three miles from Fresno, a little town called Reedley. He taught high school shop and one year of college shop. So I think he taught drafting, too, in the high school part. He did teach one class of wood shop in college there. Then the next year, the summer we went down to Los Angeles and he applied in Burbank. They hired him there to teach print shop. So he taught print shop. I think one class maybe a wood shop, but from then on it was straight printing until he retired.

RT: So did your children go to the same school where he taught?
FK: No, because we lived in Burbank. Let’s see. We lived in Glendale when he started teaching. When he was teaching in Burbank, but we lived in Glendale so our children went—well, the first three, two grades I think Geraldine was in Los Angeles grammar school. Then we moved to Glendale and she started in third grade I believe it was there. Then our children all went through Glendale schools up to—through high school. Gerry went to Geneva College in Pennsylvania, a church college. Jim took a year off and traveled with a buddy the year he graduated from high school. He enlisted in the Navy at the end of that year. Well, it was 1969. Then Fred had one more year of high school. No, two years left after Jim.
RT: Well, when you said that your husband taught school, I thought, boy, the ultimate description of not being able to get away with much would be to go to school, the same school where one of your parents teaches.

FK: Right. No, they never did because they were in the Glendale schools and he taught at Burbank.

RT: But I bet they still didn’t get away with too much anyway.

FK: No. My brother, my youngest brother lived in Burbank. His boys went through school there, and so they had my husband for shop classes, his nephews.

RT: Wow. That is a small world.

FK: Yes. My oldest brother taught in Burbank also.

RT: Okay. Wow. That’s interesting, all these people teaching in fairly close proximity.

FK: Right. Gerry ended up teaching a couple years in Burbank after she and Allen moved out to California while he was in med school.

RT: Okay. Wow. It’s a family tradition.

FK: Right. I had a lot of cousins that were teachers.

RT: Wow. That’s incredible. That is really incredible. When your children, when you had all of them and they were growing up together, as a mother, how would you describe James?

FK: Well, he was a happy child, very happy, good-natured. Of course he was only fifteen months older than Fred, so he was the leader. They were fun boys. I enjoyed my children, all three of them. They were not problem children in any sense of the word. They were mischievous and they tried lots of things, like painting Geraldine’s playhouse one day red inside. They just were busy and had a good time. Jim was a very good-natured little guy. They all three were, but he was exceptionally a happy child. He just—and inquisitive. He’d take things apart and put them back together again.

RT: Like watches and that sort of thing?

FK: Yes. We had an old alarm clock. I put it in the playpen. It didn’t run. It didn’t work, but he loved that. He would play and toss and turn. My dad or my husband couldn’t get it to work, but he got his little fingers in there someway and got something going, and it would run. It would tick. So he had an inquisitive mind.
RT: Okay. So what, observing your children, what kind of relationship did they have with one another? Did the two boys tend to spend more time together just because they were boys, or did they all spend a fair amount of time together?

FK: Well, of course Geraldine was older. So she was in school a long time before they were at that point, but they played together well. They had a good time. Then they interplayed well with Geraldine. Of course she was older, so she could invent things for them to do and things. So they had a good relationship. It was a fun family time.

RT: So as Jim got older, when did he ever express an interest in going into the military at an earlier age?

FK: Not that I could remember. In fact, I was surprised that he did enlist. But he said he wanted to get it out of the way so he could—he wanted to be a dentist. He had gotten acquainted with a dentist. He worked part-time for a—well, full-time I guess for a dental lab. He would figure out whatever was necessary and they would bill him and everything. He would deliver the crowns or whatever they prepared in the dental lab. So he got to know the dentists real well. They told him that they would—if he wanted to be a dentist, they would back him, support him. Then when he was established, he would do the same for another young person. That was kind of a reciprocal thing that they had worked out. He was just going to do that.

RT: Kind of like taking on an apprentice?

FK: Right.

RT: So he decided to go in the Navy just because he figured everyone would go into the service?

FK: I think so. He was at the age—he was out of school where he could’ve been drafted if it had been a draft type thing. But I also think, we were having some difficulties in our marriage at the time, and were separated. So I think it was another avenue to get out from under the—because there was an effect on the children, of course, and regretfully so. But they handled it well, I thought. It was a better thing than some things that could have happened. So that’s how he ended up in the Navy.

RT: So how did he break the news to the family? Did he get all of you together, or tell you one at a time?
FK: No, he told his dad and his brother first, I think, then Geraldine and then he
told me. I was upset to think he was going. Yet, in another way I realized it was a good
thing, too. But no mother wants her child to go away from home into the service,
particularly a time like it was then. But you know.

RT: So what were your first reactions when he told you, “Oh, Mom, guess
what?”

FK: Well, he said—I said, “For two years?” He said, “No, four years.” I said,
“Why four years, Jim? That’s a long time.” “Well,” he said. “That’s what got me.” I
think he was connected to with the education plan, to get what he could.

RT: Oh, so he was planning on going in for the GI Bill when he was finished?

FK: Well, I don’t know. But the dentists that said they would support him. So I
think that this was why he went in for the four years. I may be mistaken because we
didn’t talk about it that much. But it was then, he enlisted in February and he was in boot
camp until May, I think it was. Then he came home on leave and got his sea bag all filled
up. He gave me a list of—I forget. I think it was thirteen pair of denims, the big bell-
bottom, the bottoms are—?

RT: Oh, yes.

FK: He had scrubbed those down in boot camp on those cement wash tables until
the threads had broken, and they needed re-hemming. I said, “Surely I will do that.” So I
re-hemmed those. I went around every leg twice on thirteen pair. It took me an evening
to do. Then he wanted a little patch, a white patch sewn on over the back pocket with his
name and his number, I think it was on it. So I did that. I got it all ready. He had that
sea bag stuffed. He could hardly lift it, it was so full of things. He bought a lot of new
underwear because he didn’t want to have to wash every day and the heat and humidity
and everything. So we did all of that and he had it all ready. Then when he came over to
tell me goodbye, he came to the front door and he had been at his mother’s, my mother
and father’s to tell them goodbye. He said, “Grandma really cried.” Then he looked at
me, and his face was kind of flushed. I said, “Well, Jim, I’m not going to cry.” I didn’t
until he left. But you know, it was hard for him to tell us all goodbye.

RT: So how did everyone take it? I mean, how did your husband react to the
news?
FK: You mean the fact of him going, or the fact that he was lost?
RT: Well, first whenever he gave the news to everyone that he was going in the
Navy?
FK: My husband didn’t say much about it. He seemed to think it was—he
accepted it okay. I didn’t brood about it or anything. I just, you know. It was the way it
was. It was a done thing.
RT: You hope for the best.
FK: Right. I just had faith that he’d be kept safely and okay.
RT: Okay. So he went to boot camp not too far away, did he?
FK: San Diego.
RT: San Diego. Okay. So you were able to see him from time to time?
FK: The first—I forget how many weeks it is. Six weeks that they can’t have
letters or phone calls or anything.
RT: That must have been tough on the family.
FK: Well, it was on me, but then we were allowed to write. I’d write letters and
he’d write letters back. He was so relieved to get past that—I don’t know what they call
it stage. Quarantine or whatever it is that they’re not allowed to be with anyone, family
or anything. So the first I saw him then was to go down to his graduation from boot
camp.
RT: Okay.
FK: Which was a great ceremony. That was wonderful. I was so proud of him.
RT: So did the whole family go to watch?
FK: Uh-huh.
RT: Okay. So when he first started writing letters when he was in boot camp,
when he was finally allowed to do so, I bet there was a flood.
FK: Yes. I got quite a few letters from him.
RT: What sort of things did he discuss?
FK: Well, he was glad to be out of boot camp or out of that first period where
they were kept away from everyone. But he was having trouble. His shoes didn’t fit and
he had a lot of blisters on his feet. He wasn’t too comfortable. But just the usual gripes
that young people have when they’re doing something that they’re not real excited about
yet. But he did well there and graduated okay. He was just—he took it really seriously.

I remember in that parade they have when they show them to arms and all of this. He
didn’t miss a trick. We could see him. But somebody dropped their gun and he saw. He
said, “Some of those guys just don’t care.”

RT: So he took it very seriously?
FK: He did, yes. He did everything he did, he did well.

RT: Okay. There was no halfway for him, I guess?
FK: No. No, he was in it. He was going to do it and succeed.

RT: That’s a good attitude.
FK: Yes. But you know his attitude in private and in letters, he was discouraged
at times, I know. But he met a fellow down there that he liked real well that was an older
seaman. He was I think a big help to Jim with encouragement and everything.

RT: Kind of showed him the ropes? Okay. So when he received word where he
was going to be assigned, you know that he was being assigned to a destroyer, what was
the reaction of yourself and the family?
FK: Well, I frankly was relieved he was in the Navy. I just couldn’t have
handled—I would have had a hard time handling him being in the infantry in Vietnam.
Everyone said, “Well, you know, that’s the best place he can be. It’s clean and orderly
and he doesn’t have to be out in the trenches and things.” I was thankful for that. I was
really grateful to God for his being in that branch of the service. He was home for a
couple of weeks there. Then he was to fly to Travis Air Force Base. I mean, he was
bussed up there to Travis and then flown to Hawaii and then to the Philippines to Subic
Bay. That’s where he worked for a couple of weeks loading the ship and scraping the
barnacles and changing the sides. I remember him saying he fell in once when he was
painting. I don’t what happened. He was doing all that maintenance, preparing the ship
for going out. Then I think he was in Subic Bay two weeks doing that and loading the
supplies in hot, humid weather. He said it was so hot. Then he had said in one of the
letters, I forget whether it was one to me or someone else that he had been out looking in
the evenings, a lot of the guys were in the bars drinking. Jim didn’t, so he was out
looking for, thinking about Christmas presents. Kind of shopping and looking at things
and the prices and so on. Then he boarded the ship. I think he was only on it—well, let’s
see. He came home—I think he left the fourteenth of May. Well, anyway, it wasn’t very long. He wasn’t on the ship for very long before the accident happened.

RT: So when he was in the Philippines, you said he wrote to you. Were there any opportunities for him to call home? Did he ever do that?

FK: I think he called once from Hawaii. I think he called his sister, Gerry. I’m not sure. It’s been a long time now and I forget what. But I hadn’t talked to him on the phone after he left the States.

RT: So mostly it was through letters that you were able to correspond?

FK: Right.

RT: The letters, what kind of things did he discuss in letters whenever he was actually at sea?

FK: Well, pretty much what he was doing aboard ship, and he talked about the heat and the humidity. Then also the duties that he was performing around over—about things, and much of it was explaining things about the ship. In one of the letters he sent to his sister, the paper got it wrong. They said it was to Tommy, my husband. But he was—let’s see, what was I saying?

RT: Oh, that in letters he would describe things about the ship?

FK: Oh, yes. About the ship. He had sent this one drawing to Gerry, and I think you’ve seen it. It was in her album of the ship. Like a cartoon, just a rough sketch of the ship. Where the different gun mounts were and where the waterline in his compartment where he slept was built. It was half above and half below the waterline and details like that, and the helo deck, the helicopter deck, just things and terminology. If it wasn’t clear, he just had a little explanation beside it. Things like that was what he wrote home about, mostly.

RT: It was like he was writing a manual for you.

FK: It was so we’d know what he was talking about.

RT: Okay. So you then received a pretty good description of how his week went and what sort of things he was doing every day?

FK: On watch. He was on in I forget how many—there wasn’t much time for sleep. He had a couple of watches, one morning and one evening I guess.

RT: Did he ever send any photographs home?
FK: No. If he took any, they had, they went down with the ship, but the drawing helped.

RT: So when you heard that his ship was going to be stationed in the area of Vietnam, what was your first reaction?

FK: Oh, just thankful that he was on a ship, not out in the woods.

RT: Not trumping around the jungle somewhere.

FK: He told us that they were on their way to shell the Mekong Delta. Shell Charlie, the Mekong Delta.

RT: What was your first—when did you first receive news that there had been a collision?

FK: My brother lived in—one of my brothers lived in Ventura, and he heard it on the news, something about it. He called my mom and said, “What was the name of Jim’s ship?” She said, “The Frank E. Evans.” He told her that it had been cut in two and half of it sunk, but we didn’t know. So then she called my husband, and he called me. Well, he met me after work and told me what had happened. I said, “Oh, not Jim. It just can’t be.” But it wasn’t definite. But in my heart, I kind of knew he was gone. I held out hope, but I just—

RT: So that was your first reaction?

FK: Mm-hmm.

RT: I believe your daughter had said the same thing, about her personal experience was that she hoped for the best, but that she had a feeling inside.

FK: Inside there was just a—I just kind of knew.

RT: So when it—I remember, I think when I had just spoken with you before, it was either you or it may have been Gerry who had mentioned that the family received a letter from him after news that he had—

FK: Well, that was the one that she got was after. I think he wrote it the second day of the accident. I got one too, but it didn’t have that on it. He just sent the one because he knew we’d circulate the letters.

RT: Oh, certainly.

FK: But I know I—like I got one that was mailed before the accident, and then not after that. He always, it was on the blue Navy stationary. So I went home from work
one day and in the mailbox—this was after the accident. It was after the memorial
service and everything. I saw this blue letter, envelope sticking up. I thought, oh, there’s
another letter from Jim. Then I thought, well no, it can’t be. Well, it wasn’t. It was an
ad from one of the department stores. It was just in a blue envelope. But even knowing
he was gone, I kept hoping there’d be something else come through from him. But
nothing came home. There were no effects at all. That made it very hard to realize that it
was true, even with all the ceremony and everything at the Mall. You know about the
Mall, I mean the Navy, and our church memorial service.

RT: So how long was it from the time of the accident to the time that it was
official that Jim was declared?

FK: Well, we heard it on a Monday, and they said over the news—of course,
naturally all of us turned the things on about papers and everything. They said that for
the lost, two men would come from the Naval department and notify us, anyone who had
lost anybody or was missing. They weren’t confirmed lost, but missing. I thought, oh.
But they came. It was either the next day or Wednesday, they came again to tell us that
he was definitely lost at sea.

RT: Did they come just to you, or was the family at the house?

FK: They came—we were separated then, and so they came to me. No. No, I
meant, we met at our house, that was it. They said they would be there. So I went over
to the house and they came and told us it was final. Then we were invited to a memorial
at the—they called it the mole, down at San Pedro. That was for all families of the lost.
There was a big group there. They had a uniformed memorial and presented the mothers
or the family members there with a flag, holding a flag, which I received. I since gave it
to Fred. He has it now.

RT: So what was the family’s reaction when—in the wake of the Navy
representatives coming to the house and telling you?

FK: Well, we got together as a family. My brother came over. My brothers and
my mom. It was just—no one knew what to say. I mean, we just couldn’t believe it. It
was just very hard to assimilate. It was like over a mile deep where the ship sunk and
eight thousand miles from home.
RT: So the memorial service, what was that like on that day? Did the whole family go? I assume that they did.

FK: Yes. My mom and dad did. It was—I think it was an invitational thing to the immediate families. So we were all there. Geraldine and Allen and Fred. Fred of course was a junior in high school. So we went down to that and it was a tearful time, a tearjerker. It really was.

RT: I would imagine so.

FK: Geraldine and Allen lived down at Long Beach because he was in the service. We met at their apartment and we went over to the service. It was just an upset time for a solid week there. Then, everybody goes back to work and things go back to “normal,” quote. It was just really—it was a difficult time in another way because no one knew what to say to us. The only people that—well, we had lots of friends, the boys did and we did. Friends and family and our church, but no one knew what to say. It was a hard subject. They didn’t want to bring it up and it was hard for us to talk about, but—and Geraldine and I both talked about this many times. It was like no one wanted to talk about it, so they didn’t. It was like Jim was never here, and that was very hard to take. I said, “I’d rather talk to people about it, not just pretend it never happened.” I didn’t blame the people. It’s hard to go up to somebody and talk to them at a time like that. But it was something we needed that we didn’t get right away. It was a while before people would even mention it other than to just say, “We’re sorry.”

RT: So did your church hold a service?

FK: Yes, we had a memorial service. We planned it and they sent the color guard up from the base. They played the Taps. It was a lovely memorial service and our minister gave a little message. Some friends did, one of the boys. What we did too, we asked his friends from high school, the ones he was closest to and from church, to be honorary pallbearers. Of course there was nothing. We had a picture of the destroyer, a little model of it and his picture sitting on a podium up at the front. There were of course bouquets and wreaths from family and friends, but we had—there were about twenty of these young men with a carnation seated together and they came down the aisle at the last. That was a nice tribute for Jim.

RT: Oh, and each one of his friends said something?
FK: No. There was one of them read a poem and one of the other read scripture. There wasn’t anything by any of them. I don’t think any of them could have done it.

Then when we walked into the foyer, there were two big pictures of his graduation, one for Tommy and one for me. That was very touching too. But I finally had to put that away, it was too—it was like, life-size, and I just couldn’t handle it up in the room for a while.

RT: Wow. It must have been very difficult for, not just yourself, but everyone else in the family, especially since as you said, Geraldine had received a letter from him that had been posted shortly before the accident. I don’t think I could imagine that, receiving a letter from someone who has been declared. I don’t know if I could read it.

FK: I don’t know just how long before, I think she said it was just two days before she got a letter. I think that’s the one she’s referring to because it was the latest. Yeah, it was. It’s hard to keep the order of things now.

RT: I’m sure.

FK: But it was really hard.

RT: So how did the family—and by the family I mean of course you, your husband, and your children. How did that affect the family? I mean, losing Jim?

FK: It just hit everyone. It was very hard. Of course each one was a different relationship. I was his mother. His dad went through a lot from the father’s standpoint, and the sister and the brother. I remember when my husband went to pick up Fred from school, he called the school and said it was final, Jim was gone. He wanted to pick him up. So he went up and got Fred. When Fred got out of the car, he says, “Mom, not him. Not my brother.” Same with Geraldine.

RT: She had described that her relationship with Jim was fairly close?

FK: Yes. Because he was older by that time. He and she—he could drive. So he’d go down and visit them. They had a good relationship. Tammy, his little new niece was only ten months old. She said when he went in to tell her goodbye, he was in uniform and going out to sea, she said he just stood and looked at her for the longest time. She was sound asleep, but that was the last time he ever saw her, of course.

RT: I remember Geraldine saying that Jim had a girlfriend at this time?
FK: Yes. He did. She went to the memorial service with us and a friend of
Jim’s, too, John Lang. Laurel Chadney was the girl.

RT: Did she spend time with the family afterward?

FK: Yes. I got to go out there with her afterward. Then also she later—let’s see. She graduated at the same time Jim, I think. She started a Montessori school. She went to college, that was it. Then after she was through college she started a Montessori school. She asked me to come and teach, do a little art class with the kids. So I did.

Then it worked into finally a full-time job as an assistant. I did that for several years.

RT: You began teaching.

FK: I wasn’t a prepared teacher, but I was an assistant there. So I ended up being a teacher, actually. I learned on the Montessori system. But it was a very hard time for friends and family.

RT: As you mentioned earlier, you and your husband were separated at this time. Then you lose one of your children. That had to be—

FK: It was very difficult.

RT: A lot of strain on both of you.

FK: It was.

RT: How did that affect your relationship?

FK: With him?

RT: With you and your husband?

FK: Well, of course we got together and we talked about it a lot. It hit him very hard in a different way. So he went back east and visited his sister back in New York I guess they were living then. He was gone a couple weeks. We brought the pieces home, some of the funeral pieces and left some at the church. He had those around the house for a long time. Finally I told him, I said, “You just got to get them out of there because of Fred.” So he did. He got rid of them, but it was hard for him.

RT: So you said that both you and your husband then got back together?

FK: Yes, we got back together. We were separated a couple years and actually divorced, but we talked things over and worked things through and we remarried.

RT: That’s phenomenal.

FK: It was some time after Jim’s death. It was a couple years. ’71.
RT: Wow. That’s amazing. I mean, you had problems between the two of you and then to lose one of your children, yet you come back together. That’s amazing.

FK: It wasn’t over people. It was over issues. So it was hard on everyone.

RT: I would imagine so. I would imagine so.

FK: To lose Jim. You never figure you’re going to outlive your children.

RT: Well, especially when one of your children goes into the service, granted, but he goes into a branch where everybody said, “Oh, well, at least he’s on a ship. He’ll be safe.”

FK: Yeah. Clean and a place to sleep at night and not in the infantry in the woods somewhere. I’m thankful for that. I know he knew the Lord. He’s with him now. I know I’ll see him again because I know the Lord as my savior too. My faith is the thing that really got me through it. I don’t know what I would have done if I hadn’t had that.

RT: Because there was so much going on in your family at that time.

FK: I know.

RT: So when did you first hear of the Frank E. Evans Association? Did you find out about it first?

FK: No. Fred I think found out about it first. Although I’m not sure whether it was that or if it was Tammy, my granddaughter that lives in Colorado Springs, and Rick, my grandson.

Unknown Person: It was Fred.

FK: It was Fred that found out about it first?

Unknown Person: He found out about it on the Internet somehow.

FK: The Internet, okay. So then anyway—

Unknown Person: He got in touch with Gerry and then she got in touch with Rick.

FK: That’s how they come to know it and went to—they were—okay. I wasn’t sure of that order. But Fred’s been on the Internet a lot about it. Of course he and Judy came down last year to Long Beach. I’m still talking like I’m in California, but they really got a lot out of it. We did too. It helped me a lot, because I found out that other people other than just their friends and family cared about those guys that were lost. That feeling of being part of a big family now that’s made it much better.
RT: Especially as you said that in that time shortly afterward, people just didn’t talk about it.

FK: Didn’t talk about it, no.

RT: That had to just make it even more difficult.

FK: It was. It was.

RT: Because I imagine there were a lot of things you wanted to get out in the open.

FK: Right.

RT: At least just talk about him to keep his memory alive.

FK: It was like he had never been there.

RT: Which would be even—

FK: It was just a void, which wasn’t.

RT: Which had to be even more difficult.

FK: Right. I could talk to people who didn’t know Jim easier than I could talk to people who did know him because I would have to start it. How would you start it with someone that doesn’t talk about it?

RT: Absolutely. So you were actually open to the idea of joining into the association and—?

FK: Yes. We’ve got a lot out of it, both Gerry and I and Fred. All of us felt better after. We felt like well, rather a different kind of a closure to it, knowing that these fellows got off, but they were mourning their friends who didn’t get off too. Not just a mother-daughter or mother-son or father-son, but they were buddies of a lot of the guys that died on that ship. So it wasn’t just a surviving parents or family that were grieving for these men, but some of their work mates, ship mates.

RT: Or other people that went through the same thing. Fantastic. So what other things can you think of that people might find interesting about Jim or other things that you would like to tell people about Jim?

FK: Well, he was, as I said, a very happy person. He enjoyed life and he—what seemed like a cutoff, short life to us was really a full life because he did live a full life and a good life. He enjoyed life. Not that there weren’t sad times, but he could handle them.
1 RT: Thank you. Thank you very much.
2 FK: You’re welcome.