Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins in the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m beginning an oral history interview with Susan Kramer O’Neill of the U.S. Army Nurse Corps. Today’s date is the 15th of March 2004. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech and Sue is in Andover, Mass. Is that right Sue? 

Susan O’Neill: Yes.

LC: Okay, good morning, how are you?

SO: Good morning, I’m great.

LC: Super. So, I just want to start by asking a couple of questions, general biographical data. Where were you born and when?

SO: I was born October 19, 1947 in Ft. Wayne, Indiana.

LC: Sue, can you tell me a little bit about your folks?

SO: Oh goodness. Interesting, my father just died like a month ago and it’s been really tough. He worked at a factory; worked in succession of factories, being Midwestern and prey to whatever the economies were. He was originally a toolmaker and is now or was when he retired, oh god, probably twenty years ago; he was a tire maker at BF Goodrich. He started out initially as a tool and die maker. My mother was and still is I guess pretty much self classified as a housewife and mother. She worked intermittently during the Second World War; she was one of the folks who went into the
factories. She worked in General Electric. Ft. Wayne was quite factory rich at the time.

She’s now a recent widow, which is not an easy thing for any of us and is living alone in Ft. Wayne in a little tiny ranch style house that looks like kind of a slight miniature of what I grew up in.

LC: Is it near where you grew up?

SO: No, it’s across town, but it’s in the same city.

LC: And both of your parents were from Ft. Wayne, is that right?

SO: I think and this is, it’s one of those funny things because now I’m finding out more about it, but I’m pretty sure that my father initially was from the Chicago area. Mom was born and raised in Ft. Wayne, had been there her entire life. Her grandparents, there was something published by the historical society out there fairly recently that highlighted her grandparents and told me stuff that I had no idea that they were relatively monied owners of land at a farm until they had just slipped [divided the land] things among their five billion kids and I guess they went by Napoleonic laws, did just that which made them somewhat land poor and money poor; the family. I remember my grandparents on that side being…my grandfather, I guess, he had a succession of jobs; lived through the depression and at that point in time, I think he was working as a maintenance man or something for one of the schools and therefore luckily had a job. He was French by extraction; French Canadian actually I believe by extraction. My grandmother who married him when she was sixteen and had her first baby when she was like seventeen with Irish, with some Scottish. My mother used to say, heavy on the Scotch. Scotch Irish, heavy on the Scotch.

LC: From Canada as well do you think?

SO: No, she was not. He was from Canada, but it was way, way, way back when. It wasn’t him so much as it was his family I believe and they still considered themselves, you know, they were French. It’s how you are there. You are what your ancestors were, even though you’re really kind of polyglotted and on the other side, it was German that dated back, goodness…one of the grandfathers, Grandpa Ainger I guess dated back to the, they still have discharge papers when he was with the Indiana Militia in the Civil War.

LC: Oh, is that right, yes.
SO: Yes. So, his side of the family evidently was not originally from Chicago. I don’t know how it works, but Chicago connection’s there, but exactly where, I’m not sure.

LC: Now, your father served the country during World War II, is that right?

SO: Yes, he was in the Navy in World War II and I was asking. You know, it’s funny, when he died; I had known very sketchy things about him. He had not bothered to fill me in on much of that. When I’d ask him about, you know, ‘What did you do in the war daddy?’ I got basically, ‘Well, I didn’t do much of anything. I floated around, when the war ended I was on the boat and they said the war had ended and I turned over in my bed and said, ‘Oh that’s good.’’ (Laughing)

LC: Really?

SO: But my uncle said something about when I told him that at the funeral that, ‘God, all those stories, I was just finally learning something about him and all the stories have stopped now, that they’d just started.’ And he said that dad was on some manner of boat that evidently dealt in maintenance and he said that they measured the amount of fuel left in the war, more war direct boats and that was part of their function, but he couldn’t really tell me what the nature of the thing was.

LC: Now was this your dad’s brother that was telling you this?

SO: Yes.

LC: Had he served in World War II?

SO: Yes.

LC: Okay.

SO: He had, he was also in the Navy I guess.

LC: Do you know what he did?

SO: No I don’t. There were actually, I think three of them at one time serving in the Navy because there was an old newspaper clipping saying that they were going in.

LC: I take it that you clearly didn’t hear much about this when you were growing up?

SO: No, he really didn’t have much to say about it. I do remember him coming back. The same uncle, Uncle Bob, talked him into joining the Reserves because it would be easy money.
LC: This is after the war?
SO: After the war, yes. So, they called him up in the Korean Conflict and he was not in the fighting, but he basically took somebody’s part I guess so that they could go off to the war. He was, at that point, he had a couple of us kids, so he went off to Norfolk, Virginia I believe, but I remember him coming back which he did periodically. You know, just every few months it seemed and I was a little kid at the time.
LC: Oh yes.
SO: He’d bring us gifts. I was only maybe, I’d say three or four. I can’t remember how old I was, I wasn’t that old, but my brother and I were the only two of us five who were at that time alive and I remember my mother just crying. She’d get the Kleenexes, the big boxes and she’d go through the entire box when he would come home.
LC: Oh dear.
SO: And then you know, he’d stay for a while and go away and when we were looking for things for the funeral, for the picture board that they happen to have, we found a big trunk with a lot of stuff in it and his engagement picture to mama or it must’ve been shortly after he was married or something. He’s dressed in his full Navy gear.
LC: Really?
SO: Yes, there are several pictures of him in the Navy. It looked like he really enjoyed himself there; probably more than he did at home. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing)
SO: He had this kind of Brando look about him; it was really kind of neat.
LC: Yes, and you had not seen that photo before or not in memory?
SO: No, I had seen the one photo somewhere along the line. I don’t know whether it used to be in the house way back when I was young. You know, it’s been supplanted by other photos or what, but there are some, you know, directly from the Navy things that I…there’s one more. He’s lying there with a bunch others and their heads are touching. It looks like they’ve been drinking like crazy or something. They’re lying I’d say on the deck of the boat and everyone’s just laughing like crazy. He just looks so young and carefree there that I was saying, ‘Jeez, maybe it wasn’t all that bad.’
(Laughing)
LC: Yes, maybe there wasn’t much to tell that he could tell you when you were young. Who knows?

SO: (Laughing) Exactly.

LC: It’s great that you found those photos.

SO: It is, it’s really neat.

LC: Go head Sue and tell me his full name.

SO: Okay, he was Frederick Joseph Kramer.

LC: And that’s with a K?


LC: Okay, and you mentioned that your mom worked in the factory during the Second World War.

SO: Yes.

LC: Do you have any idea what she did?

SO: No idea. It was probably some manner of assembly line situation. I think that’s pretty much what they did. It was one of those things where she said when the men came back, they left and I could understand how that works. At Ft. Wayne, I still had an uncle not long ago, well, may he rest in peace. Most of the uncles have been passing away at an enormous rate, but who used to say something about, ‘Well, yes, that woman, she worked in…’ wherever it was that he worked at the time, probably GE also or Magnavox, he said, ‘and she’s in there taking a man’s job.’ And that was very much even into the ‘70s an ‘80s; very much the attitude that at least my family had about such things and I think it came from the time during the war when they were in there doing the men’s job and then afterwards they came out and the men went back in and that was considered perfectly normal.

LC: Right, and that feeling and thinking kind of persisted with that generation.

SO: Yes, it’s a funny, weird thing.

LC: To us, it’s strange, yes.

SO: Yes, well you know, when you consider that most of these women are probably raising families on their own which I mean which applied down there.

LC: Absolutely. There’s a job a lot of people, men and women don’t want.

SO: Exactly.
LC: If they know anything about it anyway.
SO: Exactly, it’s not easy.
LC: So, you grew up in Ft. Wayne then, was that safe to say?
SO: Yes.
LC: Okay, and can you tell me about the schools that you went to? Did you go to public school or?
SO: Well, I went until…I was trying to figure this out the other day, I think it was eighth grade I went, I switched over to the public system. I had started out…you know how you have to write your name at the beginning of a paper and write the names; in Catholic Schools, you had to write your name, you had to write the nun’s name, you had the write the school’s name at the top of the paper and I remember in second grade struggling with St. Hyacinth, Sister Stanaslavs.
LC: That’s rough.
SO: Yes, it was. I started out in my very first experiences, I went to kindergarten at a public school because they were the only ones that had kindergarten and I was relatively young and I didn’t make it all the way through the year because I was, believe it or not, allergic to the sun somehow or other.
LC: Really?
SO: Yes, I broke out in hives when the sun hit my skin for some reason and after a while, they said, ‘Well, you know, you take that walk to school’ because we had to walk of course and it wasn’t that awfully far, but it was a little distance and she said that it just makes it worse and you don’t really need kindergarten anyway.
LC: So they sent you back home?
SO: So, my mother did, yes.
LC: Oh okay, your mom decided that wasn’t worth it.
SO: Yes.
LC: Now, she had five kids you said. Are you the oldest?
SO: The oldest girl, I’m the second to the oldest.
LC: Okay and your older brother’s name is…?
SO: Mike.
LC: And did Mike kind of look out for you?
SO: When we weren’t beating each other up, yes.  (Laughing)
LC: Okay sure, that’s how I was too, yes.  (Laughing)
SO: He was three years older than I was.
LC: Right, exactly, same as me.  So, when he wasn’t pounding the you know
what out of you.
SO: Exactly, exactly.  When I reached the stage where it finally occurred to me
that if I cried, it worked; that he stopped, but he was bigger and more powerful than I
was, so it was not a very fair match.  But yes, after kindergarten, I of course, had to go to
school and I love school anyway.  I remember even loving kindergarten and going there
and thinking how neat this was.  I must’ve been kind of bereft when I couldn’t go
anymore.
LC: Sure.
SO: But after that, I was in the Catholic system for a million years.
LC: Okay, until eighth gradish?  [I think it was actually seventh.]
SO: Until eighth grade and then I prevailed upon my mother; I was having some
major adolescent problems dealing with this provinciality, I guess with the Catholic
Church, the smallness of it.  The fact that there were so many cliques and I always felt
like an outsider and stuff, even though I wasn’t.  At one point, I had a nun who got us all
outside and we were being kind of tortured by them and it turns out, it was kind of a
turning point in my life in terms of empathy because the meeting’s with all the girls in
my I think sixth or seventh grade class and everybody was in tears talking about how they
felt outside even though they were the insiders and stuff.  It was weird.
LC: Interesting, interesting.
SO: Yes, so I have the nuns to thank for that which actually was a very good
thing.
LC: It was good for you how?
SO: Yes, it was good for me in that I realized, it got me out of my self and I
realized that everyone has problems in the world, so after that, I noticed little things that
I’ve done that like when I was in high school.  I noticed that the popular girls were
always the ones who were the cheerleaders and one of them was Italian and had a lot of
body hair and she even shaved her arms, which just amazed me that she would do that
and I thought, ‘Wow, she may be very popular, but she has some pretty major issues.’

(Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) Right.

SO: It got me thinking me about how other people have to deal with the same
garbage that I was dealing with when I wasn’t unique in my adolescent age.

LC: And was your transition kind of to get to maturity aided by getting out of the
Catholic schools and into public schools?

SO: Well, there are those who would argue I never did quite make it there.

LC: (Laughing) Okay that was presumptuous. Okay, go head.

SO: (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

SO: But yes, somewhat. I mean, it helped my sanity a lot. I was on Librium and
stuff when I was going through the first throes of adolescence. I was just having trouble
with it physically. I remember my heart rate was outrageous; it was up there in the
hundreds plus and I don’t know, I just had a problem with a lot of the raging hormones,
trying to get them under control. And of course, what you do in that case if you’re a
good god-fearing Midwesterner, you drag your daughter off to the family doc who says,
‘Oh, we’ll put her on a tranquilizer.’ And I remember the tranquilizer really evening me
out and it felt very good, but then I thought, ‘Ah, this doesn’t feel like me’ so I don’t
think I spent long on them before I just said, ‘Shit, I can’t do this.’

LC: Did you get some say?

SO: What’s that?

LC: Did you have a say over whether you could do it or not?

SO: Well, they couldn’t make me take it, but actually, my mother was not
unreasonable. If I felt that this wasn’t appropriate, she wasn’t unreasonable. She was
only unreasonable if I questioned her authority, but that was the thing at the time I think
more than anything, you know, it fairly upset her. But yes, it wasn’t too bad, but it was
this succession. I had like three different Catholic schools under my belt at the time and
not because I was having trouble with the schools per say, but because they redistricted
and we were in kind of the new area. It wasn’t really Ft. Wayne when we first started
out, we were kind of the suburbs being annexed and by the time we were, there were new
Catholic schools built up around us and we were switched off to them.

LC: And did you go to a public or a catholic high school then?
SO: No, public.

LC: Okay. What school was that?

LC: And is it still there?
SO: It is in much changed form.

LC: How’s that, new building or?
SO: Much larger. I mean, I drove through New Haven not long ago and just
couldn’t believe the size of the place; it’s outrageous.

LC: Really?
SO: Yes, and we had over three hundred in our graduating class; go figure. It
wasn’t small to begin with.

LC: And how was high school for you? Did you kind of settle into it or were you
again sort of feeling a little bit on the outside?
SO: Oh, I loved high school.

LC: Really?
SO: I loved it because unlike the catholic schools, I had a lot of choices of extra
curriculars and I kind of put up with the curriculum in order to get to the extra curriculars,
so I was having a great time. I’d get into absolutely everything I could and it was great
fun. I was a huge fan of concert choir. We had the second best in the state.

LC: Wow.

SO: And was a member of that for all four of my high school years and my junior
high in fact; my last year in junior high and I was also big in what they called, what was
the name of that, it was like declaration. You had to go to speech tournaments.

LC: Debate.

SO: Sort of, only not really. It was drama, comedy, and that.

LC: Oh, like extraneous speaking and that kind of thing.
SO: Yes, but it wasn’t really extraneous. There was actually a club name for it and I can’t remember it. You know, at my age, if you can’t remember, it usually comes back when you don’t need it.

LC: Sure, exactly. Well, we can let it go. I think we got the idea. Did you travel around the states to competitions?

SO: Yes.

LC: And how did you do?

SO: Oh, I was state ranked in both dramatic interp, humorous interp. Well, actually and also one year, for some reason in the poetry-reading thing, it was one of those weird things. It was all interpretation of course; none of it was original. But yes, I was state ranked in actually three fields at one point.

LC: Wow. Now, was this something that you did because it was a blast and you had fun with it or was there something else driving you? Was it competitive or…?

SO: Oh I always had. No, actually, I’m not a very competitive person. My kids would probably laugh at me for that, but I really am not. It was because it was great fun and I really liked acting and it was the closest I could get to acting. I was in some of the school plays, but that was like what, they do one a year.

LC: Sure, that wasn’t enough, huh?

SO: And this was a chance to do a lot.

LC: Yes, to go a bunch of different places and to do this.

SO: Yes, it’s been great after publishing this book. I find myself doing dog and pony shows and it just kind of falls right in line with high school. (Laughing)

LC: It’s old hat for you now. (Laughing)

SO: Well, the other thing was that after I started my own family, I started doing stories and music for kids because it was one way for me to, very selfishly speaking, I could get my own kids in on folktales and folksongs, that sort of thing and it was really very close to a chip, telling a story, it was very close to a chip from what I had done before only it was more…you know, you make it up on the spot or you interpret on the spot and don’t memorize the thing.

LC: Yes, it’s interesting how these kind of themes sort of come back over time.

SO: Yes, what you are when you’re young.
LC: Yes.
SO: It kind of haunts you.
LC: I know, it’s spooky isn’t it.
SO: Yes.
LC: And how were you as a student academically?
SO: (Laughing)
LC: Or were we avoiding that topic?
SO: No, no, it’s funny too because when I went through the trunks for the pictures, my parents had saved all our grade cards, so of course, there’s a lot of harassment. We picked them up, you know, like I’d laugh at my sister and said, ‘Look at this, see in kindergarten, you had trouble keeping attention and you interrupted just like today.’ But the real eye opener thing was I looked at my own stuff. In high school, I was kind of a mediocre student until I got to the last year and then I was actually a member of National Honor. I’m not quite sure why that happened, but I always had that…you know, I didn’t want anything to do with history, or geography was always the C plus to D.
LC: Oh really, and what were the strong areas?
SO: Oh, anything to do with English, anything to do with choir. Of course, it was always an A plus and there’s not an easy one actually. He was a pretty tough guy.
LC: What about science or math?
SO: Science and math is always exceptionally mediocre. I actually did well in math as far as mastering it, but I have kind of this dyslexic thing about when I write something down and it’s a number, I inevitably screw it up unless I double check and triple check it and that would work against me whenever we had tests where they wrote something on the board. My sums would be right, but they would be off because I had copied the number wrong or something like that.
LC: Oh okay.
SO: So, there was a lot of problems with that, but at the time, it was just one of those things you laughed at. These days, they’d smash you into Special Ed and have you do some kind of weird things.
LC: Test you out for it.
SO: Yes, but I could do that stuff, but it wasn’t really my interest and I find that if wasn’t really my interest, I just kind of didn’t spend a whole lot of time on it.

LC: Did what you had to do. You not know what you were keen about.

SO: Yes. So, I might end up with a B just because I could float through on that, but the things I really, really worked hard on had to do with English almost inevitably. It’s funny, I have a kid who’s exactly the same way and he went through Phillip’s Academy and made A’s and D’s.

LC: And that’s the private academy there in Andover?

SO: Yes.

LC: Yes, and is he going to college?

SO: Yes, he’s kind of on the god knows how many year plan. (Laughing)

LC: Sure, okay. (Laughing)

SO: Well, he’s bipolar. He kind of flipped out in the middle of it all and ended up taking time off. We didn’t know he was bipolar, we found out the hard way and he did.

LC: Okay, and where is he studying now?

SO: He’s at the New School in New York City.

LC: Sure, very good school. What about you, were you thinking towards going to college or how was it looking for you when you were in high school late in the latter years of your high school experience?

SO: I would’ve really loved to have gone to college in something to do with acting or one of those practical fields, but we didn’t really have the money for that sort of thing because I was not an A student by any stretch. I knew that I wasn’t going to get much in the way of financial help and my parents with five kids and dad making a fair amount of money where he was, but it was nothing extraordinary at all and in our particular caste and our particular time, it was not usual for folks to go to college; no one in my family had. Not my immediate family as far as like…I think I had one uncle who went to Loyola for a while or something like that, but nobody had graduated from college ever.

LC: So there wasn’t an expectation that you were going to go graduate?
SO: No, it was pretty much, my parents said, ‘We can help you financially. We can put you through school and would love to, but it would have to be a trade school. some sort or it would have to be some two year endeavor that was not an expensive match.’ The object was to get us on our feet and I respected that. I thought that was very good.

LC: Sure, okay.

SO: So, I was, being the oldest girl, I was not tough of stomach, you know, I was not bad of stomach. I could take blood and I could certainly take the fact that I had this sister who would puke on command and I would end up being the one to clean it up; it would happen at night and stuff, so I figured of all the things, I’d make a truly horrid secretary, so probably I should be a nurse.

LC: What were the options for you given that you were looking at maybe a two-year; as you’ve said, a trade school, something that you’re going to go out and make a living as soon as you get your degree; what were the possibilities?

SO: Well, within my skill set, I suppose that I could’ve been a secretary or a nurse. A teacher would take longer.

LC: Sure, yes.

SO: That, at the time, we didn’t have a four year campus in Ft. Wayne, so that was not possible. They could’ve give me the first two years, but they couldn’t have given me anything beyond that because that would be matriculating at; IU or Purdue which were the two campuses there. Purdue of course would be out of the question anyway because it wasn’t public, but for some reason, they are a combined campus even today. I’m not quite sure how they do that.

LC: I don’t know either. I’m from up that way and I’m not sure what the background to that is.

SO: But anyway, so basically it was that or there was keypunch, which was just starting, but really, that was not big. That came along really in force when my younger sister was in.

LC: What year did you actually graduate from high school?

SO: ’65.
LC: Okay, and where did you decide then to take yourself for your training that
was going to get you a job?
SO: Well, since I knew at that point that nursing school made a lot of sense.
LC: Yes.
SO: Nursing school was very cheap. The three-year courses that they offered
were extremely cheap because they were…they don’t exist anymore for the most part.
They were service oriented in that you spent a lot of time actually working for the
hospital and therefore your tuition was minimal relatively speaking to any other type
schooling. So, that was an option for that reason alone. You couldn’t work at the same
time that you went to school as a nurse, nursing student for the fact that you were
inevitably going to be working nights, working all kind of odd times from the first year
on and the first year was heavily academic. They got all the academics out of the way if
they could that first year to get you on the floor working.
LC: In some kind of practicum situations or?
SO: Well, practicum is a lot more formal than what it truly was. What happened
was after the first year and a little bit of practice here and there learning how to give bed
baths and whatever. You might find yourself, like I did when I went in my…we did our
pediatrics at Riley in Indianapolis. This was a great school in that it sent us all over the
place within the state and at one point, outside the state to Louisville, Kentucky for our
Pysch training with the Catholic School, but when we went to places like that, we would
end up staffing floors at Riley Memorial, the pediatric which today, you know, you just
couldn’t do that stuff. You’d be sued in an instant and at one point, I was actually in
charge of a whole floor with kind of a floating supervisor who went from floor to floor,
so if I really needed something that was really not in my legal round to do, I could pick
up the phone and call her.
LC: But otherwise you were kind of it?
SO: Yes, that was at night. I mean, nobody cared about the night shift really and
it was a chronic ward that wasn’t anything…you know, people were on ventilators and
stuff like that. It was nothing that they expected anything too excited about, although
sometimes things happen.
LC: Now Sue, was this a two year or three year program?
SO: It was three year.

LC: Okay, and where were you housed?

SO: The first year, they had us at, actually it was headquarters in South Bend, Indiana and so the first year we were there in a little dormitory that was across the street from the hospital. It’s called Holy Cross School of Nursing and it was the Holy Cross or it was the Notre Dame nuns up there, but it also affiliated with Holy Cross, various Holy Cross nuns. There are a variety of nuns in different habits and so forth at the time; they were still in those floor length things and so we were in the dorm. You spent the day at the hospital or in the classroom, which was in the hospital for the most part and then came to the dorm to sleep. Went down the road to Notre Dame to enjoy yourself.

LC: Okay.

SO: And after the first year, Holy Cross split people up into three different campuses. One still being South Bend, one being Kokomo, Indiana, which is the smallest campus, tiny little place I guess. Only about eight kids I think went there and one being Anderson, which it has to be probably the most boring town in Indiana and that was where I went and my group.

LC: Okay, you were in Anderson?

SO: Anderson, Indiana; yes.

LC: Okay, was Anderson University there at that time, the college?

SO: Yes, well Anderson College we called at the time, but it was Church of God operated. You know, those folks couldn’t even dance.

LC: Right, so it wasn’t like going down the road to Notre Dame.

SO: No.

LC: It was a different set of cards that you were playing.

SO: Absolutely. And then from there, they would break us up again to send us to various affiliations for specialties and that was where we went to Riley Memorial in Indianapolis in part of the IU system for pediatrics and did our thing there. And then had specialty classes and worked on the campus in the hospital and then to Our Lady of Peace Mental Hospital, which was a private thing, Catholic owned in Louisville, Kentucky for that. Back to South Bend for three months for neonatal and anything surrounding birth.
LC: Was there a specialty as you were going around and getting all these different views on the structure of medical care that called to you? Was there a particular specialty?

SO: I really enjoyed the Psych, but it wasn’t something I really acted upon. At that point, specialties were specialties. I mean, you had to kind of eventually figure out what you might be working in, but Psych I thought was good. It wasn’t until a couple of years later that I realized that there’s a vast difference between being in a private mental hospital as a student and working in a State Mental Hospital as a real worker.

LC: Yes, working on the wards, yes.

SO: Yes, yes; different element entirely.

LC: Sure. How did you fit with the whole role of being a nurse? Was it something that worked well for you at that time? Was it something you thought you could do, you can have fun with?

SO: I knew I could do it. I knew that it was…the skill set I could and I certainly had the empathy for it and I had the abilities. I was not a particularly good nurse mentally. There are people who actually are dedicated. (Coughs) Excuse me; who had kind of a dedication to that sort of thing. They’re the nurse social worker types who would get in there and that’s their nature with what they do and that was not me.

LC: And could you sense that difference at that time?

SO: Oh I knew and I used to kind of joke, I’m not a real nurse. Because I had some friends who really were real nurses and then I had a lot of other friends who were in the same general boat in that they were just kids who were looking for a cheap education and this is something that they could do well, but it wasn’t also they were not dedicated nursing types.

LC: It wasn’t their life. I think you mentioned on the forms that you sent in that, at some point you were becoming a little more politically involved and aware; were you watching what was happening with regard to the anti-war movement as it escalated in ’66, ’67?

SO: Yes, you know, initially, I was not at all that interested. You know, I signed up to vote my first year that I could just because my family always voted. My family were kind of renegade in that they generally voted democrat in presidential elections and
in Indiana, that’s kind of like throwing a vote in the toilet; just like voting republican in Massachusetts.

LC: (Laughing)

SO: God bless the you know…the system leaves them out to be desire I’m finding it, but any rate, so they were political in the sense that they would go to the polls every time there was a major election. That is what they did, so I kind of fell in place in that and I remember my first election, I believe it was between, god, who was it? Was it Humphrey and Nixon? I can’t remember.

LC: That would be ’68.

SO: Pardon me.

LC: That would be ’68.

SO: Yes, it was two candidates that neither one of which I particularly cared for and so I ultimately voted for, I wrote in Mickey Mouse.

LC: (Laughing)

SO: It’s funny because now he’s taking over the world. (Laughing)

LC: That’s right. He’s become at least an ambassador. I’m not sure that’s an elected office, but yes, totally. That’s plenty…so your first legal vote was for Mickey Mouse…good.

SO: My first vote was for Mickey Mouse and I looked around and I was kind of like, ‘Eh, what’s going on?’ It came home to me bit by bit, as when I was in South Bend, there was a lot of activity on campus. It was kind of a fun time because there was all this stuff going on and I thought, ‘Wow, I want to get to know what some of this is about.’ So, I started to pay attention to when the weatherman came on campus and at some point, they occupied, the students of Notre Dame occupied the Administration building for about three seconds until the administration told them, ‘We’re going to kick you out if you don’t get out of here’ and they left like good catholic boys and I kind of played around mentally with that until I ended up in Anderson with nothing real to do and my guitar and I was at that point playing out. It started playing folksongs and it ended up drifting more into protest songs as I happen to think that people I knew were getting drafted and this is not particularly good, and then I got the word that a kid I knew in high school who’s actually a couple of years ahead of me and was a n’er-do-well and joined
the Marines to straighten himself out according to my family and his I’m sure, was the
first Ft. Wayne death in Vietnam and that was really a sobering thing to think and
brought it home. So, when I was down in Anderson, I joined up the ‘come clean for
Gene McCarthy’ campaign.

LC: In Anderson, Indiana you did this?
SO: Yes, there actually was one; amazing.

LC: I was going to say…you and who else? (Laughing)
SO: (Laughing) We had kids from Anderson College, it was kind of funny.

LC: Really? Interesting.

SO: Yes, there was this really hot kid named Warren who I really had a crush on.
Unfortunately, I was really pretty dumb. I didn’t really bone up on the fact that I was
kind of there and I liked the sentiment, but I didn’t really read much about what was
going on with the candidate and two of us went out at one time to canvas houses about
the election and stuff. It was always whoever I was with that’d do most of the talking
about McCarthy’s record and so forth.

LC: Sure.

SO: For me, it was ample that he was against the war, which I had begun to find
to be really troublesome to me on a whole lot of fronts.

LC: Can you talk about that for a minute Sue? What did you know about it?

SO: I knew that people were being killed or did you know more than that?

LC: I knew that people were being killed and I really couldn’t see a whole lot of
sense to it and I had at that point, pretty much given up Catholicism. It was one of those
things that I started reading outside stuff when I realized that every religion had created
its own gods and that as of people, we had too and I was starting to turn and if you’re a
Catholic, that’s a real catch point during my era because it means essentially you’re going
to hell if you don’t do it the way they tell you to do it. So, you have to decide whether
you actually believe in heaven and hell and all this other stuff. It becomes a real
interesting…oh gosh, there’s a FedEx person at my door, let me get it. So, another thing
I was doing at the time when I was down there was I played my three chords on guitar
and I could sing at that point in time. I sing a lot better than I can play and I was
frequenting the coffee houses. I had started up at Notre Dame; there was one there where
I played every now and then. You know, just a member of a whole group. Everybody played guitar in those days. I had started doing that at Ball State University down there in Muncie, which is very close to Anderson.

   LC: Yes.
   SO: In doing so, I became enamored of the lyrics to stuff by Bob Dylan for instance. You know, the funny thing is now; if he started playing half the shit that he played down there at that time, probably you’d be considered anti-American in the extreme because of masters of war and stuff like that.

   LC: Right, things shift.
   SO: Yes, there’s a slight difference in the world now, but any rate, so I really got to know and to appreciate that kind of stuff and once again, it was listening to a lot of people speaking against the war. It was pretty much agreeing with the whole thing, so I was kind of the rare beast at my nursing school because nobody else was doing anything political at all.

   LC: Yes, I can believe it. Were you aware of your brother’s susceptibility to the draft? Was that something that was on your mind or was he not eligible?
   SO: He was not eligible. In fact, he had, my brother had huge allergies, still does and his doctor figured he was doing the family a big favor.

   LC: Okay.
   SO: He gave him a deferment because supposedly his allergies could turn to asthma. Well, they never have, but I don’t think if I were assigning someone the bush, god knows I certainly wouldn’t want them sneezing every time he came across something green, but who knows, but then he might have been deferred anyway even if they hadn’t said that. He to my recollection was quite relieved, as was my family. Now my mother, getting somewhat revisionist, has said that it would’ve been good for him, it would’ve made a man out of him and I kind of look at her like she has two heads and say, ‘It would’ve killed him.’

   LC: Yes. Maybe literally.
   SO: Yes. But any rate, so I knew that he would be not considered one way or the other.

   LC: Okay, and did you have younger brothers?
SO: I had a younger brother, but he was ten years younger than I was.

LC: Okay, ten years younger, okay.

SO: So that wasn’t even an issue.

LC: Okay, so you were just kind of exploring these ideas and thinking things through on your own kind of without family pressures around it.

SO: Yes, there was no family anything about it. If anything, my father, I’m sure had enjoyed being in the Navy, but he would never press to have people go into the Military because my parents were not leery of the war because the government backed it and they must know what they’re doing, it’s the government. And that was very much the time and place for that. I mean, their generation did that and felt that way and I could understand it because it had never really been challenged before; not even in Korea, which is amazing when you think about it. I mean, what did we know about Korea? Virtually nothing. Even now I know little about it except when I read. But at any rate, and I actually lost an uncle there.

LC: Oh you did? On which side?

SO: On my father’s side. It was his third to the youngest brother. There were six kids in his family and the kid was just below the middle and was the one kid who had actually done some college and was relatively…he was a smart kid. I remember him only vaguely from when I was very young because he died. They think he died, they never accounted for his body. He was MIA, KIA, but I remember my grandmother just as almost kind of a side thing. I don’t remember, in the main part of my mind, it’s like a peripheral vision thing of her sitting and watching T.V and something coming up about people in the Korean War. When I was very young, she lived with us and she said, I remember her making a remark, something like, ‘Well, he was always reading books and he probably went over to the other side.’ She sounded so disgusted about it, but I think there was a glimmer of hope when I looked at it through her filter. I think I was only in like first grade when I remember her saying that.

LC: That’s interesting, wow.

SO: Yes.

LC: That’s amazing. That’s amazing that she said anything like that, it’s amazing more that you remember it.
SO: Well, I remembered because I remember the time trying to figure out what would’ve happened to him and I don’t even know where Korea was in the first grade and stuff and why was my grandmother…my grandmother was a hypochondriac and stuff and I always used to wonder. I remember wondering as a very young kid, what made her…I’d go to school and they’d tell you, you could get anything you wanted by praying so I kind of prayed that she’d be better and then I’d come back and she’d complain about her aches and pains and stuff like that and I think jeez you know. Nothing got better and then I remember sitting in front of that tiny little T.V set. Well, it was a huge T.V set, but the screen was tiny and having her watch that and I remember thinking, ‘Well, you know, mom and dad said that Uncle Gene died in the war.’ That must feel really weird, then hearing her say that is like whoa.

LC: Kind of galvanized all that strange.

SO: Yes, and at a very young age I just remember that. I remember thinking, ‘Well, is that possible? Was he communist?’ Because communist was the catch phrase; the big catch phrase. ‘Did he become a communist and would that be worse than dying’ and then I thought, ‘No it wouldn’t be worse than dying. Would I become a communist, yes’, in the first grade thinking this shit through?

LC: (Laughing)

SO: You know, if I was going to die, maybe I would. (Laughing)

LC: What a busy little brain.

SO: Oh yes.

LC: That’s really interesting.

SO: Well, it’s weird.

LC: Well yes, a little.

SO: All this weird shit going on, what is this about. Is that bad that he did that?

LC: Yes, and fraught and there’s just stuff unresolved there; questions that you had and clearly it sounds to me when you were younger that you were also questioning what this policy was, another war, another sort of strange set of circumstances, again people going missing and dying?

SO: Yes, well, I always thought that we were always kind of told that communism was the thing to avoid at all costs and I remember all that ‘Better red than
dead’ stuff and I remember thinking at some point, would it be better to be, and then the
catholic thing was always, the martyrs and the saints and how you want to aspire to be a
martyr rather than betray your faith and stuff and they used to give us all this stuff about
all these holy martyrs who…the one I really remember was we were talking about, I think
there was something like thirteen of them or something who were maroon. These were
people insistent upon being catholic in spite of the fact that they were going to die for it
and some authoritarian probably Roman stuck them out on a frozen lake naked and of
course, in the Catholic Church, I’m sure they had something on. (Laughing)

SO: So, they’re all out there on the lake and I remember trying to get my mind
about round that I was a kid and one of them decided to at the last minute to recant the
catholic church and they brought him back and put him in a nice warm bath and one of
the centurions went and stood in his place or something like that and died there and the
other guy died in the warm bath or some such thing. I remember thinking, ‘Wow, that’s
heavy shit.’ (Laughing) Not in those words.

SO: Of course I wouldn’t, but, ‘Wow, that’s pretty heavy.’ I mean, you come
back and you die any way. Well, God’s saying something there. (Laughing)

SO: So, early on, I remember pondering the idea of are there things to die for and
I was very young, you know, I thought, ‘Jeez, it’d be great to die for the catholic church’
because that was what we were essentially told. It wasn’t until later when I started
thinking, ‘That’s a little weird to die for the Catholic Church.’ You know, you do the
mental exercise and you say, ‘Well, can’t you say immediately that you know…’ I know
I’d say I wasn’t a catholic and then they’d let me alone and then after I’d go to
confession, I’d be fine.

LC: Right, there is an out isn’t there? (Laughing)

SO: Yes, I mean, you have to come down to this? That’s why I laugh to this day;
I laugh when I see the license plates in New Hampshire, which have ‘Live free or die’ on
them.

LC: Yes, there’s a choice.
SO: Yeah right. There’s no gray. (Laughing)
LC: Right, exactly. (Laughing)
SO: So I pondered shades of gray when I was very little.
LC: Yes, and it strikes me from the material that you sent in that you’re still pondering shades of gray all the time.
SO: Yes, it’s what you live by.
LC: Yes.
SO: As things get grayer, the older you get, not just hair. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing) I would agree, I would second that. At some point, you visited a recruiter.
SO: (Laughing)
LC: Can you talk about how this came up? Last time, we had you in the coffee bars in Muncie.
SO: Right.
LC: Okay, and somehow you found your way to a recruiter station. How did that happen?
SO: Well, I think it had a lot to do, what happened when I got there had a lot to do with the idea of…when I acted, I enjoyed playing against type and in life, that was kind of fun too. I loved the irony; always just wacky about irony. In fact, the first and it never got there story in my book was about how the Lieutenant, the character who’s just called the Lieutenant got to Vietnam and it was a lot about how I got to Vietnam and it was about irony and they didn’t think it was an exciting enough story to begin the book with, although people who’ve read it which was published in David Wilson’s little Vietnam War Generation Journal as a piece of fiction of course. Anyway, people who’ve read it have said that really should have been included, but you know, it’s a big publishing house, they don’t know what will sell or wont, so they go on the conservative side.
LC: Sure.
SO: But any rate, mostly the reason for going there was boredom. I mean, I was living in Anderson, Indiana, which admittedly had a little more than Delco Remy and the Church of God to recommend it, which is quite a combination.
LC: Yes, and I’ve been there and you’re right.

SO: Why have you been there?

LC: Well, I’ll tell you later, but yes.

SO: Amazing. So anyway, there was nothing there only if you like basketball.

You couldn’t schedule community theatre which I was part of on days that they had high school basketball.

LC: Okay, yes, that’s where it runs; it runs the road up there.

SO: Yes, so there was this, but it was pretty boring there and a friend of mine was going up to Chicago. It must’ve involved a weekend and possibly a Friday because we got odd days off if we were working shifts. At that point, we were not doing much academically. We were mostly working and doing practicum and when we weren’t doing practicum in a specific area, we working as part of the slave labor thing that fueled our school and this girl who I knew pretty well who I still actually…I saw her a couple of years ago in fact. She was really a hot ticket, but not a person you would want to trust particularly.

LC: Okay.

SO: She was known for having gone when we were at Notre Dame, gone out with two boys at once, but at different times and decided she didn’t like being at the first party, so she crawled out the restroom window and went with the other kid or something like that.

LC: She was making her own way.

SO: Yes, but her family was loyal, kind of right winged. Kind of.

LC: (Laughing)

SO: Very right winged, extremely military; long gray line type of thing.

Everyone had been in the Military and she wanted to join so she asked if I wanted to make the trip with her and I believe it was to make the trip us and then I was going to stay and take the train back down or something like that. And I said yes, I got nothing better to do, what the hell, why not. So, I jumped in the car with her and we drove up to Chicago. She went into the recruiter, I went in with her because you know, I didn’t have anything better to do and I knew it wasn’t going to take terribly long. She filled out all the forms and then they held a mirror under her nose to make sure she was breathing;
that’s kind of what you had for your physical and while they’re doing this with her and
she’s signing everything, the recruiter turned his eyes on me and says, ‘How about you?’
I said, ‘Yeah.’ And he said, ‘No, seriously, I mean, you can earn money for this whole
year as a student and you only owe us two years after that and you could go to all these
great places.’ And he started to tick off names like Hawaii and Germany and Japan and
all this stuff and I thought, ‘You know, I’ve never been out of the United States’ and I
really, really like to travel. My great aunt had taken me to Florida twice when I was in
my formative years and I’d actually seen their mountains because in Indiana, there’s no
such thing there, couple of molehills and that’s it and you consider that high elevation.

LC: Sure, sure, right.

SO: A couple of mole hills and that’s it and you consider those high elevations,
so I talked to the guy and he said, ‘Well, you can go to all these places and that.’ I
thought, the money thing really caught my attention because at that point, my parents
were still paying for things because I couldn’t do it and I thought, here I am, I’m no
longer really officially a Catholic, though I’d never tell them that, but I feel like a
turncoat. I really want to be on my own and this is a chance for me to be on my own, so
that might be kind of neat, but then of course, I raised my little hand and I said, ‘But what
about Vietnam?’ And the guy looked me in the eyes, to this day, I remember his words,
he said, ‘You don’t have to worry about that, there’s a waiting list a mile long of nurses
who want to go to Vietnam. You couldn’t go if you wanted to.’ I said, ‘Okay, for two
years I put up with the saluting stuff and that and I get sent to someplace really nice and I
get money for this and all that and it’ll get me out of Indiana because I really have a fear
that there’s something in the air here that’s going to hold me here after I get out of
nursing school; kind of bung my blood up or something and I’ll be stuck here. This is a
guaranteed out of there and so forth, so I said, ‘What the hell?’ If I don’t have to worry
about going to Vietnam, yes, I’ll do it, what the hell.’ It’s a chance to travel, it’s money
and I can pay back my, at least my last year of nursing school. So, I signed on the line.

LC: On the spot?

SO: Yes.

LC: In the office?
SO: In the office. It was warm weather, there was a fan going, you know, one of
those floor to ceiling fans, very noisy, peeling paint on the walls. The guy was
substantially overweight. He was a sergeant and he had sweat patches underneath his
arms. I remember this and a paunch; the guy strained it in front of his uniform. And the
reason I remember all this shit is because, you know, a year later I was at Ft. Sam
Houston, Texas in a big auditorium there and I swear to god, a clone of this man; I don’t
know, central casting must have a bunch of them or something. They sent this guy in,
he’s walking across the stage and it’s a hot day in San Antonio and of course, there’s no
such thing other than that, and hot and muggy and he’s up walking on the stage and he
says literally, ‘You may have heard there’s a waiting a mile long to go to Vietnam for
nursing. Well, that’s not so anymore and before the end of the year, half of you will be
there and the other half will be on orders.’ (Laughing) Whoa.

LC: Yes.

SO: But anyways, so at the time, I was laboring under the illusion as I did for the
next year as a student that I didn’t have to worry about that and I like the irony because I
could tell people that here I was, the only political active person at Holy Cross School of
Nursing in Anderson, I had joined the army. Wasn’t that a hoot?

LC: Okay.

SO: You have a certain authority to play my guitar in the coffee houses.

LC: Yes, that’s true, that’s right.

SO: I mean, there’s that irony thing again. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) Oh yes, you’re the mole as it turns out.

SO: Really stupid when you’re a kid, aren’t you?

LC: Um, yes. Well, I don’t know how stupid it was, but it was surely a bolt.

When did this actually take place? When did you visit the recruiter and sign?

SO: Well, let’s see. I got out in ’68, so it had to be in ’67 because they had the
whole year; ’67, I got a stipend every month.

LC: And when did you tell your folks?

SO: I told them, I called my parents from Chicago because I thought it’d be a
hoot, and my father picked up the phone, my father and there was a silence on the end of
the line and after I told him, he said, ‘Well, I guess you know what you’re doing.’
(Laughing) And I thought, ‘No I don’t, but it’s too late now.’ (Laughing) So, it was kind if interesting, but I think he was kind of proud in a sense because I was doing this traditional thing. I was this mouthy kid who he always expected to do kind of stuff that would be useless like maybe act or something like that, act or sing, none of which would make a living for me or anything like that.

LC: Sure.

SO: And here I was doing something practical.

LC: Were they in any way thinking that you needed to get married or I mean were they pressuring you to do anything such that going in the Army was this like complete reversal or was it just like the next thing that you were going to do?

SO: No, they didn’t worry about people getting married then. The thing was, the whole college thing in those days, a lot of the protests against a woman going to college even if she had the money for it in my generation was that you’d just get married and be useless anyway, which is one reason that they glommed on the idea of nursing school because wow, nursing school. You can always have that, as my mother would say, to fall back on, though I’m not sure where I was falling back from.

LC: I know.

SO: But it was good, so that was a good thing and joining the Army shook them up a little which I thought was kind of neat, but ultimately I think they were both rather proud at the fact that I was going to do it and they had no beef with Vietnam because it was something that they thought was good.

LC: Sure.

SO: And I had never really told them, I never really pushed the protest thing because kind of like Catholicism and getting out of that, it was one of those things that kind of might have branded me as a communist in my parent’s eyes. (Laughing)

LC: Well, at least if you’re going into the Army, that was probably off the front burner as a worry.

SO: Yes, they don’t have to worry about me straying too far there. I wasn’t going to be one of them hippies.

LC: Right, exactly. How long did you have between the time you signed away in Chicago and the time you were to report?
SO: Well, in those days, unlike now where you take your nursing boards or almost any boards and you do it on computer and you know within two weeks what it was; you’d probably know within the day what you had done because when the computer shuts off, but in those days, it took three months for you after you took your boards to find out about it, what it was that you had done, whether you passed or not. And the military wouldn’t take us in officially until we passed.

LC: Oh really? Okay.

SO: But they gave us a stipend at a three level or a 0-1 level; I can’t remember. It was a very low stipend, but it was enough that I was able to spend a little money here and there on clothes and stuff and also pay off my last year in nursing school which was the cheapest because it was mostly service and not a whole lot of class and that’s how they pro-rated it. So, there was that for nearly a full year or actually a full year. I received the stipend and was on their payroll. It was kind of funny because they kept sending me these forms and they were about what…I don’t even remember what the object of them was, but periodically, you had to report by filling out forms in triplicate and I said to myself, ‘I’m not going to do this, this is crazy.’ So I’d sent the forms back with a little note on them saying, ‘I don’t understand this.’ And I never saw the forms again, I don’t know if they ever used them for anything. I had a feeling that they never did. So, I figured I’d be okay; I’d be sending them back, but I think they just got filed somewhere. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) And perhaps not even looked at.

SO: Yes, very possibly not even looked at and that was fine with me because why was I going to spend all my time filling out all these stupid things and it wasn’t something that was germane. They weren’t asking me where I wanted to be or anything. It was asking me all this official shit that made no sense to me, so there was that.

LC: Go head Sue.

SO: I was not a great soldier from early on.

LC: (Laughing) Right. You just weren’t falling in.

SO: Yes, right.

LC: So, let me get this straight, the Army was sending you a small stipend for the year to continue toward your boards, is that right?
SO: Yes. It was one of their recruiting things in those days. If you were a three-year nurse, I think even if you’re a four year nurse, but you got out as a 1st Lieutenant or something, instead of the 2nd Lieutenant like we did, but they’d pay you with a stipend that was descent enough to function with during your last year of schooling and then you only owed them two years of service and that seemed, considering all the neat places they could’ve gone, that seemed like a really good idea. So, part of me was playing against type and the other part of me was saying, ‘Well, it’s my ticket out of Indiana.’ It’s a real possibility to do this and that.

LC: So you continued on more or less as before; were you still playing at coffee houses and doing your own thing and having a good time?

SO: Oh yes, and they had no say in that. It wasn’t anything that they had dealt with.

LC: Did you tell people, ‘I’m going into the Army’?

SO: Oh yes, just for the shock value.

LC: And did it have that value?

SO: Sure.

LC: Did it scare people or were they like, ‘Oh my gosh. What are you doing singing Bob Dylan songs and going into the Army?’

SO: Well, you know, the times had a true sense of irony too and most of the guys who went in didn’t want to go in so it put me on a par. The unusualness of a girl going in period was worth the price of admission to me. And once again, playing against type. Nobody knew that women actually went and it also was a good preposition for some interesting discussion and stuff. I found it to be a really strange thing to do, but kind of fitting because people couldn’t get their minds around very well why the hell I, of all people, would be doing this. So, it was good for me that way.

LC: Sure, it made you an object of even greater interest.

SO: Yes, exactly.

LC: When did you finish then with the nursing education element?

SO: I was done with that in ’68. I graduated in ’68 and right after graduation, right before graduation actually I think it was, we took our two day long boards and just sat around and marked all these things with a pencil and started to go cross-eyed on them.
After that, I had signed up, once again wanting to get out of Indiana. I took my very first plane ride and went to the east and went to Newfound Lake in New Hampshire up by Berlin, New Hampshire and where I worked as a camp nurse in a Jewish girl’s camp.

LC: Now how did that come about?

SO: In the back of our nursing student, they had some manner of magazines they sent out. There were always want-ads for places where you could work and I figured for summer, it would work fine because it’d take me that long to get my boards back.

LC: Okay.

SO: So, it was a chance for me to get out of Indiana and they paid my flight and stuff like that.

LC: Did you make a little bit of money, too?

SO: Yes, not much. I mean, the pay was relatively terrible, but you get your room and board and it was a chance for me to go out and see the east because I’ve never been out there at all.

LC: Okay, and did you get a chance to get away from the camp?

SO: One day a week we would do that and we would hitchhike and go in groups usually and go to places like, I went to Boston and that was the farthest we went. We went to Manchester to prowl through the mills and buy second hand stuff, or not second hand, but irregular stuff.

LC: Sure.

SO: And it was educational because it was the first time I’d really spent anytime in an area where there were mountains and lakes. I remember thinking when I looked down into Newfound Lake, which was this glacial lake, which I didn’t think about glacial lakes in Indiana; there’s nothing like that. They’re all muddy little places and the three rivers that Ft. Wayne sits on are brown. I always thought that water was supposed to be like that, so I was just knocked out to look down and actually see fish and stuff like that. I said, ‘Wow, this is really amazing.’ So, that part of it was kind of neat and then when I got done, I actually did get my boards and I was assigned to Ft. Sam Houston and that must’ve been in September.

LC: Of ’68.

SO: Because it was right after…yes, to do my basic and then off I went.
LC: Do you remember that trip?

SO: The trip to San Antonio, not particularly well. I remember that I went on a Braniff plane because out of the Midwest, that’s kind of how you did it. Braniff had all kinds of different colored planes. That was their big thing and other than that, I don’t remember much about it. We didn’t have uniforms yet to travel on, but you could travel stand-by somehow or other. If you were not uniformed, I think if you showed your credentials and stuff, you could do that. I believe I probably did, I don’t remember that for sure, but yes, I remember getting down there and thinking that this was a really different place. It’s hot and muggy and stuff; it was kind of neat, a lot of Spanish spoken. It was very exotic.

LC: Culturally yes, very, very different. What about your actual sort of arrival on the base and the first couple of days? Do you remember that?

SO: Not so much. I didn’t know anybody there. I remember that assembly where we were in our brand new uniforms. I remembered standing in line for everything and getting all of the equipment that we needed to have and getting our quarters and so forth and I was completely strange there. I mean, I didn’t know…my friend was not there. I think she didn’t pass her boards the first time, I can’t remember what happened.

LC: Now was this the gal that you went to the recruiter with?

SO: Yes, there was another girl in our nursing school who actually was there, but she was assigned to a whole different BOQ in the Women’s Officers Quarters and I don’t know, I kind of lost track, we didn’t hang out very much together anyway.

LC: Right.

SO: She didn’t live in Anderson, she was from I guess the South Bend or Kokomo area, I think the South Bend. But any rate, I was down there essentially by myself and I got to know some folks fairly quickly because everyone else was in pretty much the same situation and found myself at Women’s Officers Quarters which was not a bad situation, it was the first real apartment type living that I’d ever done and I was there with other people and so forth. And it was interesting and then they laid the bombshell like about the second day about going to Vietnam, I was in somewhat of a panic because I was down, as I think I said it before, my years at nursing school coincided with Medicare coming in and most of our patients were old folks. A lot of them were farmer’s
kind of dying slowly of various cancers; usually to do with lungs because everybody
smoked like a chimney at that point in time or in a couple of cases, rampant skin cancer
from having been out in the sun forever as farmer, so there were a lot of other issues, but
none of them had to do with youth and trauma. There were very few trauma cases; the
occasional because Anderson had a raceway and we got the occasional guy who’d come
in, idiot who’d come in having been all bunged up in his stock car and would lie there in
ICU and say, ‘As soon as I get better’ as he’s kind of suspended from the ceiling, ‘As
soon as I get better, I’m out there in my car again.’ (Laughing) But no war wounds and
nobody shot anybody in Anderson, it just didn’t happen.

LC: Is that why you were in shock because you thought, ‘Oh my god, I’m not
prepared’?

SO: Yes, and I don’t know anything. Not only am I not a real nurse, but I’m not
a real nurse. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

SO: This was not going to work.

LC: And did you think, ‘Well, somebody better tell me what to do’?

SO: There was that distinct feeling and I went down to the education center,
which they happen to have and I said, ‘I know that I’m probably going to get sent to
Vietnam and it’s going to be horrible for anyone I try to take care of. What can you give
me that I won’t have to pay back time on that will help me at least learn a skill if I go over
there?’ And they said, ‘Well, we really desperately need people in the operating room.’
And I happen to think back, a flashback to when I was a student and I was a little clumsy.
I mean, I tended to drop things and stuff like that, but I wasn’t hopeless and the operating
room was kind of interesting, it wasn’t like real nursing. So I thought, ‘Yes, I can do
that. If you guys are going to train me, I could do that’ so I signed up for the course
which automatically meant I was definitely going to Vietnam, not passing go, not
collecting two hundred dollars, I would be there, but I would be there knowing what the
hell I’m doing and since the chances were pretty good I would be there anyway, I’d
rather go that route. So, they sent me to the course right after we finished basic training
and they kept me at Ft. Sam Houston for it, it was very good.

LC: Basic lasted how long?
SO: Oh goodness. You know, I can’t recall how long it did last because I went right into the other one.

LC: Right, right, you didn’t transition to a different base or anything. Everything happened for you at Ft. Sam.

SO: Yes, and I think I remember still being in Basic at Christmas, but I wouldn’t swear to it. I think it was, I think people tell me, if my husband were home, I could ask him because he went to the same Basic.

LC: Oh really?

SO: Yes, though he wasn’t a nurse. The medical corps did that stuff too.

LC: Did you meet him at that time? Did you meet him at Ft. Sam?

SO: No, I met him at my last assignment actually.

LC: Oh okay, in country.

SO: But he knew all the numbers because that’s what he dealt with, you know, numbers and statistics and that.

LC: Right. During Basic, were you required to meet the same kind of hurdles that enlistees did?

SO: Oh no.

LC: Okay, can you tell me the ways in which Basic was a little moderated?

SO: Well, you know, they really didn’t want us to quit, so they kind of went out of their way. You had to do all the performance. You had to salute, you had to do this, you had to do that, had to march which was always kind of funny to me because I really didn’t see a whole lot of relevance in marching, but they had us doing all this stuff that they did in a very superficial way. We didn’t do any of the courses, or run through the obstacles, they didn’t even care if we were fit or not, just as long as we were breathing.

LC: Really, so PT was just not, it wasn’t on the burner really?

SO: Yes, wasn’t a biggie. They had us doing an orienteering course at Camp Bullis, which was this big piece of Texas wilderness out near San Antonio which I understand, somebody told me that they now live in a housing complex right across from it. And I said, ‘How incongruous. I saw my first armadillo there.’ You know, there’s nothing out there and they had orienteering, they gave us…we had a team of nurses and a couple of compasses and we were supposed to go from point A to B and I was just
freaking hopeless. I’ve always been directionally challenged, so I remembered they picked us up at the end of the day; they sent in a helicopter and picked us up because we were so far out in the field. (Laughing) Our group was, but nobody cared, it wasn’t like you failed anything and we all knew, it was one of the first times that I’d heard the expression that I heard constantly throughout Vietnam and that is ‘What am I going to do?’ If I screw up, what are they going to do, send me to Vietnam? They’re going to send us anyway, so there was that and they had a shooting [range]; they had kind of a course for rifles and stuff where they took us out, but a friend of mine at the time was this very serious woman who was really dear. I still keep in touch with her. She was married and she was a consciousness objector. Her husband was also a consciousness objector and was working in the states in some hospital capacity and she refused to handle a gun and so rather than kick her out, they said, ‘Well, nurses won’t have to handle one then unless they want to’ and I really didn’t want to. Anyway, what they did mostly on the course that did relate to us was they showed us, they had like this gelatin mold or something in a can with a bone stuck in the middle of it and they showed us where the bullet entered the can and where it left the can and what the entry and exit wounds looked like and then they showed us the bone inside and how it shattered and became its own missile and stuff like that. It was kind of interesting; it was a real education in the intention of weaponry* because the intention we were taught was not to kill somebody. The object was to injure someone badly because if you killed somebody, you killed that one person they left alone, but if you injured somebody badly, it took up staff to get him out, get him out in a helicopter. It caused a lot more engagement of troops with something other than the fighting.

LC: Right.

SO: So, that was rather sobering. Then they had another thing where they had us, supposedly were teaching us how to do a Cricothyroidotomy which is kind of an instant Tracheotomy in case of chocking if someone really needs it and there’s a little area between your cricoid process and your thyroid or something like that, hence the name, where you could make a quick incision in there and no vessels around and you could insert, say the barrel of a pen or you could insert something and just kind of hold the
thing open and a person can breathe through it and then you correct the damage and stuff when they get into the hospital.

LC: Okay, so in the field you could do this?

SO: Well, that’s the theory, yes, but they had us practicing on a goat and they only had one goat for one team of people and they had maybe five, six people in a team, nurses, and the first one actually got to do it on the goat where you were supposed to, the rest of us were just kind of turning this poor goat’s throat into a piccolo in various places and seeing how it felt to go through the trachea and that sort of thing. I felt bad because the goat died of medical intervention, you know, poor thing. That bothered me a lot, but at any rate, it was kind of an interesting process; it was a little weird, but an interesting process.

LC: Were you encountering this training and they’re showing you about the effects of bullet wounds and so forth and the goat, were you encountering this as kind of an intellectual process? Were you journeying this with your brain, but not really like anticipating what was going to happen?

SO: Oh yes, I tend to intellectualize things. I mean, even as a little kid, I remember doing stuff like that. I remember actually sitting in like first grade and looking at the person next to me and saying, ‘Why can I think in this body and I can’t think in that one?’ Trying to send my thoughts over to them and reach shit like that, kind of scary.

LC: (Laughing)

SO: But I actually, yes, I could look at it intellectually, but somehow only the gelatin thing stuck with me. That really hit home because I thought in terms of, wow, if that’s true, and the whole intellectual exercise of why one commits war and what the object of this move or that move is, I never really put it down to what I would be dealing with personally, what I would be looking at, what the wounds would actually be because I figured I would have that covered by doing the operating room thing. And to an extent, well, to a very large extent, I did and I think I have that to thank for an awful lot because if you do tend to intellectualize things, then a lot of the bodily stuff hits you afterward in a way that you can’t process very well, but intellectualizing the loss of someone you’ve actually spoken to whose name you know, whose face you know, who you’ve visited in
the hospital is a lot different from losing somebody on the operating room table. And I really think that the way I'm strung, it would've been very bad for me to work on a ward and get to know the people who were dying or who were as badly damaged as they were; it was more like a body shop exercise.

LC: Okay, have some kind of a relationship with them is different.
SO: Yes, yes.
LC: Different order of magnitude maybe?
SO: Right. So, that training really helped me out a lot that way. I didn’t have to look at it too as in terms of my own failures as a nurse I mean, because I wasn’t a real nurse. I wouldn’t have to look at what I did wrong and say that I caused somebody pain or somebody ultimately to die who wouldn’t have. There’s a whole lot of things I could thank that training for because it was very good and because it did help me out a lot. It played definitely to my style.

LC: Yes, that’s a fortunate thing considering what you were up against later on.

Your OR training overall, could you assess how expert it was and how well it prepared you?

SO: Oh, it’s hard to say enough about it. It’s just so good; it was so good. My instructor was wonderful. She, Darlene McLeod, I guess she retired as a Colonel, was retired I came to find out afterward, primarily because she was found to be diabetic and stuff and she was kind of bitter about it after, still is I think.

LC: She was retired because of this?
SO: Well, I think that had a lot to do with her being retired. The woman gave up a lot to be part of the military thing. She was married; she spent a year in Vietnam. In fact, I met her at my last assignment when she came in and was the head [O.R] nurse there. She’s a fine woman, good sense of humor, very dry, but any rate, she’s also one of the better teacher’s I’ve ever encountered of a practical art and she was our instructor and gave us quite a bit. One of the things that I thought was almost surprising about it because it didn’t fit in the battle mode so much, but they had us do things like do before [TET] and after operation visits to the patients to tell them what was going on and you knew that they had and asked them after if they had any questions and stuff. At that point, I knew that they had doctors visiting them, I knew that they had anesthesiologists
visiting them, but they still always had questions they would never ask those people and
that’s kind of stuck with me after in dealing like with my own parents in that you realize
that there’s a reverence for these certain levels that they felt that they could tell the nurse
and ask the nurse about these things and that’s often the case of people of our generation
and above one of these things. But they did give me that and it was really eye opening.
They also were just very, very good about giving us practical experience and you’re left
with no illusions about what you’d end up with over there even though we didn’t work
with trauma at Ft. Sam Houston, we also spent time staffing like the Amputee Ward and
that sort of thing, and so you saw what happened afterward. That was a tear Your Heart
Out sort of thing because we had triple amputees on the ward and people who were going
through profound depression because they’ve gotten back to the states in this kind of half
state. I mean, here they were, they’ve lost half of themselves or what they perceived as
half of themselves and were being told, ‘You’re in the military hospital, soldier on,
soldier’ and it was really tough. I think the one thing that I noticed after, I might’ve said
that in those forms was that when I was in Vietnam, I had the feeling that everyone back
in the states who was male and of a certain age would be badly injured, would have
something horrible happening to them and when I go back, it’d be a room full of people
who had one leg or two legs missing or an arm or something like that because it just
seemed like there were so many of them. That whole feeling started at Ft. Sam Houston.
I was in a ward up there.

LC: How was the ward organized? How many guys were actually there at a
time? How big was it?

SO: I couldn’t tell you how big it was, but I know that there were, I would say
and this is just off the top of my head because my memory of this time is not that precise,
but I would say we probably had as many as eighteen people in various rooms on the
amputee ward. It might’ve been much bigger than that and I’m sure there were more
than one ward of the two, but I do remember some certain specific patients, not by name,
but by the injuries that they had and how they were treated and stuff.

LC: Right.

SO: There was no doubt about in my mind when I left, we are doing wonderful
strides in the treatment of the patients, the physical treatment of some pretty horrendous
wounds and it was because of the training like this that we were able to do it and it was kind of a first time in war because it was not as good as that in Korea and it was certainly not as good as that in World War II. A lot of the stuff at Ft. Sam Houston did because they had a burn center, quite a large and advanced burn center. A lot of what they did with their patients was very innovative and made its way to the population at large and you found it in other hospitals a couple of years later, but they pioneered it. It was done first. So, it was an impressive place to work and it was an impressive, impressive training to go through. I felt really at an advantage to having done that.

LC: Wow.

SO: So, hello. (Someone came in)

LC: Do you want to continue or take a break?

SO: No, go head.

LC: Okay. How long did that OR training actually last?

SO: I believe and I’m not sure about this, and once again that leading into that whole thing, I went in May so, I think it was about four months, I’m not dead certain on that.

LC: Okay, sure. And you were saying that you actually left for Vietnam in May of ’69?

SO: Yes.

LC: Does that sound right?

SO: Yes.

LC: At some point in there Sue, you tried to get some information on Vietnam itself.

SO: Yes.

LC: Some language training. Can you talk about that?

SO: Oh, that was during Basic training actually and I went down to the education center and I talked to them about, wouldn’t I be needing something that gave me kind of a linguistic grasp of who these folks are and stuff like that, and the guy there kind of said, ‘You know, you’re not going to need any of that as a nurse because you’re not going to be dealing with Vietnamese for the most part, so I wouldn’t worry about it.’ And I persisted a bit and said, ‘Yes, but I’m sure that there must be patients and what have you
and it would be a good thing to have.’ And he said, ‘No, you’re not going to need it at all. It’s a very difficult language and you’d be spending a lot of time on it for absolutely nothing.’ And to this day, I kind of wished that I had taken something about, it would’ve been a good time to do it back when I was young and able to master a language a little bit better and it would’ve been tremendously helpful, but I didn’t know. Once again, I kind of took their word for it and went, ‘Okay, why complicate my curriculum, okay, I guess I wont.’

LC: Did you have any opportunity at Ft. Sam to learn anything about Vietnam itself, about the people, the culture?

SO: Well, they had cultural training. Mostly what the thrust of it was more like the enemy, but they did cover a little bit of beliefs and stuff, but there was nothing in depth I didn’t think. There was a class on it, but I didn’t come away from the class knowing much of anything that was helpful. A lot of the time was spent talking about the Vietnamese weapons, what they would use to, you know, the punji pits, that sort of thing, how wildly they were in that way. There was a certain respect for them that they emanated as a military power, but it was very little to my recall and I may be wrong on this because I see there’s definite blank spots in my memory, but I recall very little about the people themselves that was helpful culturally.

LC: Did you notice that as like missing for you at that time or later on?

SO: At that time, I felt it was kind of blatantly missing, but then, once again, I wasn’t sure of how it worked when you got there. I guess I left with the idea that we would probably not be dealing much with Vietnamese and that we would end up being somewhere out in the boonies in some manner of hospital that was just serving [G.I.s] and that Vietnam would be kind of an interesting side light to it all. We would essentially be removed from it.

LC: Right, but what you were going to encounter might as well happened anywhere; it wasn’t special.

SO: Yes, and that was not the full thrust of it and I kind of looked forward to the idea that when I was there, I could probably find out more about the Vietnamese as a culture and that was a fascinating concept. I really wanted to know about that. I knew that they were Buddhists in the place, but that was not the emphasis because we were
actually on the side of the Catholics, you know, I could understand which kind of drove me a little crazy in thinking because at that point in time, I was not too keen on Catholicism. But as far as the actual...they told us a couple of things that you’d want to know that you are modest, but you don’t pat people on the head or whatever which actually was somewhat more appropriate to the Cao Dai than it was the actual Vietnamese-Vietnamese. You know, the standard, meet them on the streets Vietnamese, stuff like that. They’d tell us little oddities about various and sundry things, but they did not really give us a whole lot to go on as far as who these people actually were.

LC: When your course came to an end, you knew that you were going directly out to Vietnam, but did you have a break such that you could go back home?

SO: We had, as I recall, enough time to get ourselves together in order to go, a little bit of time. I can’t remember how much time they gave us, a couple of weeks I suppose.

LC: Did you go back to Indiana?

SO: Yes.

LC: Were your parents, how were they feeling about your actually now being sent to Vietnam?

SO: They had very mixed feelings about it from what I could tell. I know that they were kind of proud that I was going to be able to serve in the Military, but I don’t think that there was...they didn’t think that Vietnam was wrong by any means. This was not something they wanted to process I’m pretty sure because it was a, ‘My country right or wrong thing’ for their generation except perhaps the folks who hung out at Universities which they most emphatically did not, but it was kind of one of those weird things in that they were concerned about my safety I’m sure, but they really said very little about it. I think a lot of it was that if you don’t say anything about it, then don’t worry, nothing bad will happen.

LC: That sounds all too familiar.

SO: Yes, it was kind of a funny thing. I have to admit that their reaction’s not high on my list of priorities, they were my parents and so, what’s the big deal, it’s your parents. But from what I could detect, that was basically it and there was a fascination with it too because nobody in the family had really gotten much out of Indiana.
LC: Oh really, okay. How did you actually proceed on your way over to Vietnam? What was your route?

SO: I believe, I’m pretty sure I left from Texas, but I’m not sure how that works. Moved out from Texas to California to...no, maybe I left from Indiana to California. I know my port of call or my port of exit was out of, what do you call it, next to San Antonio there or next to San Francisco, Oakland.

LC: Yes, Travis? Might have been Travis?

SO: Must have been, but anyways, so it was out of there and I know I flew to there and I stayed for a little while, just a couple of days in the San Francisco area just to see what it was like and stuff. I don’t remember much about that time, I remember more about coming back and staying at that point in time, but saw some hippies. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) I’m sure, the spring of 1969, I believe it.

SO: Yes, it was kind of fascinating. We had people panhandling at the end of the street every now and then; it was kind of neat.

LC: Now were you walking around in civvies?

SO: Yes.

LC: And was that policy or was that your choice?

SO: Actually, they didn’t really care as long as when you left, you left in uniform.

LC: Okay.

SO: You know, if you did something official, you did it in uniform.

LC: But you had some time on your hands such that you could kind of tour around a little bit?

SO: Yes, I arranged to have a little time on my hands that I recall.

LC: Okay.

SO: I don’t remember much about how it went, that trip truthfully, except that I did actually stay at kind of a flop house downtown because the Military had certain things that you could get a discount on, certain hotels and it was the Powell Hotel which it still exists I found. My daughter lived in San Francisco for a while and I went up to visit her and the Powell was still there; it’s a little more upscale. It’s right downtown. At the time, it was a pretty shady place right downtown. (Laughing)
SO: So, I got to see my first transvestite.
LC: Okay.
SO: It was kind of a shocker. Here, I was this little kid from Indiana, I was on the elevator looking, and there was this couple opposite of me and the woman appeared to be very tall and skinny and really ugly and the man was kind of short and he was dressed in a sailor outfit. I don’t know if it was one of those ‘Village People’ type sailor outfits or what. (Laughing)
LC: Right, real deal or not. Who knows?
SO: Yes, but as we got to the floor, I said, just kind of ‘Bye’, and the tall woman said, ‘See ya.’ [Imitating male voice] I thought, ‘Oh Jesus, what’s this?’ (Laughing)
So, it was a little shock to my system.
LC: Yes, so you’re getting your eyes opened before you left there. (Laughing)
SO: Yes, it was real interesting. But, I did see a different part of the culture.
LC: And a different part of the United States.
SO: Right, and a lot of folks hanging out in Golden Gate Park in very pretty clothes in kind of a floor length clothes just like the hippies you’d expect from the movies or something, but they didn’t really have movies about them at that point.
LC: Right, yes, it was real. (Laughing)
SO: Yes. And it was kind of neat, people sitting around and singing.
LC: How were you feeling at this point? Did you kind of feel more in sync with those kids hanging out in the park?
SO: Oh yes, I knew my heart was there, but my head was definitely knowing where I was going. I was apprehensive about it only from a point of; this is something new. I was actually kind of looking forward to it because I had been assured by people who’d been there and that it was a pretty safe situation as far as nurses don’t tend to get killed a lot over there and all this other stuff, so that would free up that peace of mind to say, ‘Well, then this is going to be a really interesting culture experience because I’ve never been in a foreign country.’
LC: Were you thinking also about, were you apprehensive about the wounds that
you would see and how you would handle that or did you feel pretty much up to speed
and ready to…?
SO: I figured I’d probably…I thought, I didn’t know if I would be skilled when I
got there. I was putting a whole lot of faith into the idea that they would orient me
somehow.
LC: Okay.
SO: I figured I could probably handle it. I felt that I’d really gotten a lot out of
the training, so I did feel like I had something in my arsenal and I also noted while I was
training that I was not the most skilled human being in the class, but I was certainly far
from the bottom of the course too.
LC: So you had some confidence.
SO: So, I’d be going over with people who basically were at the same level I was
and if they could certainly be competent and I didn’t see any reason I couldn’t be.
LC: Do you remember flying over?
SO: Vaguely I remember. I remember that the movie on the plane was Bullit.
LC: Really?
SO: Yes, it’s one through the streets of San Francisco with somebody; I can’t
even remember who it was.
LC: Steve McQueen or somebody.
SO: Yes, I think it was the Steve McQueen vehicle. But I remember thinking,
‘Esh, I don’t think I’d want to send somebody to Vietnam watching this.’ The name
itself is bad enough when you have to watch people shooting at people. Duh, it’s really
dumb. But, I do remember that I was in that stupid uniform that they had which was kind
of this sear suckerfish thing that was the summer uniform and it was just hellish to sit
there for like twenty four hours, that’s a long flight, stopped over in…I think we stopped
over in Hawaii, but it didn’t matter if you did or not because you couldn’t really see it.
And this was like two o’clock in the morning or something and we didn’t stay long, but I
remember just being sweaty and stinky and having the damn skirt always riding up on me
and the shoes were terrible uncomfortable and how awful it all was and I wished that I
could just magically place us wherever it was we were going because the flight sure as
sucked.

LC: Or at least let you wear a pair of jeans or something.
SO: Yes, plus I had a little bit of Dramamine in me, so I was getting cranky
because my first flight away from home, the one east, I had used the little white bags. I
don’t do motion very well when I’m motion sick, I tend to get that way. So, I slept
through a lot of it, but I was also very cranky.

LC: So who else was on the plane? Was it all nursing corps people?
SO: No, it’s mostly guys.
LC: Okay, and where were you seated? Were you seated separately from the
guys?
SO: No, actually I was seated next to a couple of guys as I recall.
LC: Really?
SO: It was kind of throughout the plane, it was one of those things. A bunch of
us did go over or a couple of us did go over at the same time, but we were scattered
throughout the plane.

LC: Okay. Did you talk to those guys at all or were you just kind of…?
SO: No, I remember talking to them, I don’t remember what all I said, but yes,
there were some of that and I slept a lot.

LC: Do you recall actually arriving in Vietnam and where did you come in?
SO: We came into Long Bien and that’s the Ton Son Nhut Airport I believe
which now is kind of their main airport. I mean, it seems like most of the places that we
had there have become kind of eaten by their infrastructure. And I remember it just
being, I somehow recall it being dark at the time, but I’m not sure that my memory’s
good about this, I’m really not. I know that there was some reason that they kept us, they
stuck us on some buses and we couldn’t go because it must have been because it was
dark and they wanted the light to come up first because they were afraid that we would
get shelled if we rode at night, you just didn’t when the country didn’t belong to us at
night. So, I remember sitting in this relatively airless bus and I remember that the
window next to me was kind of stuck at half mast and it was very hot in there. There was
a feel to it that was very like San Antonio, but kind of drier. It was a very tropical strange
type feel and a smell to it that wasn’t flowers, but it was kind of different. It was like the whole country was an exotic place and here I was in a bus in the middle of the tarmac of some strange airport and there was no real reference point. I could see palm trees which was kind of different and I could see when we were in the building itself, there were these fascinating little colorless lizards that skittered up the wall that I really found, ‘Whoa, that’s really neat.’ Very exotic, very different, but I didn’t see much in the way of people who were different or anything, I just saw mostly darkness and tarmac and a lot of us kind of pooled out beneath the plane and then filed onto buses and sitting there and sitting there and sitting there. I got that itchiness you get when you sit there and get kind of claustrophobic because I don’t do small places well; not the run out, rip off your clothes and scream at the top of your lungs type version, but I just don’t do small places well and I remember there was very little air there and it was just driving me nuts to be on the bus. I was afraid I was just going to go crazy, I was just itching everywhere and finally I just kind of leaned back and said I’ve got to let go of the whole thing and I did and it was peaceful at that point. I just kind of snoozed and waited for the buses to move and then they finally did.

LC: Where did you end up going?

SO: They processed us out through Long Bien. There were a series of huts that they sent us through a headquarters and the guy gave us our assignments and he assigned me to Phu Bai and I had no clue what that was of course because I didn’t know any of the individual places and it seemed very small. If they said Da Nang, I would’ve understood that at least that was a name I’d heard, so I got my assignment and I had to wait until there was transportation to go there which was a helicopter because that’s how you went everywhere except to Long Bien obviously. So, I remember I was all by myself in this transitory hut kind of trying to get my act together, get some sleep, real sleep, it wasn’t kind of just half assed; I had been doing very unrestful. I was in there all by myself in the middle of…it had to have been the day because I was totally turned around, there came another person and she ended up kind of across from me and she was a Captain and she said that she was in town because her husband had been stationed in Vietnam, she was a newlywed and she was going to be there to be with him. She was from the south somewhere. I remember her as being kind of a freckled face, kind of farm girlish looking
person older than I was who had been like six or seven years working in the states in a
civilian capacity and had joined to be with her husband who was I believe enlisted rather
than a doctor or an officer and they were going to try to place them as close as they could
together and that was the company line at any rate. So, the thing I remember about her is
they got me for the transport because after I had fallen asleep and I kind of staggered out
with my duffel bag and the whole nine yards, and there she was fast asleep on her cot and
they really were just cots and she had her thumb in her mouth and a little piece of flannel
in her hand. (Laughing)

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<td>LC: Wow.</td>
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<td>SO: So, that became part of that first story that never made it in the collections.</td>
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<td>LC: (Laughing)</td>
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<td>SO: Whoa, this is really bizarre, there’s something surreal about this.</td>
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<td>LC: Yes indeed. (Laughing)</td>
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<td>SO: Yes.</td>
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<td>LC: And the helicopter was coming just for you?</td>
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<td>SO: Yes.</td>
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<td>LC: Okay.</td>
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| SO: Evidentially, they were waiting I guess for something that was going up to
Phu Bai and stuck me on this helicopter, so there I was, my first helicopter ride and it was
fascinating. I mean, we went rather low over places and I’d never seen a rice paddy
before and that seemed to be what there were from horizon to horizon. We flew all the
way up to, I don’t know if we stopped or not, I can’t remember, probably did to refuel
somewhere along the line, flew up to the Phu Bai area which is up near Hue and there
was more topography up there. There were hills and stuff and I thought, ‘Wow, this is
really neat. I’m glad I’m not stuck in the flatlands.’ That was too close to what I lived
with. |   |
| LC: Could you appreciate at that moment the country that you were seeing and
how different it was and beauty if there was, if that’s what you saw? |   |
| SO: Yes. Well, I had been fascinated on the bus ride. You went past fields and
there were all these people on bikes going on the highway and they were these delicate
little people who looked almost like dolls and they wore these funny hats, these coned |   |
hats, which we had seen. You know, they’d shown us that at Ft. Sam somehow or other, pictures or whatever, but it just really looked kind of weird to see it there and they actually did wear them, and the Ao Dai, the slit up the side the skirt thing, you’d see people riding bikes with that trailing out behind them and stuff. People leading goats and stuff like that and you look over in the fields and there’d be these monster water buffalo with little kids on their backs. I’d always see them, there was a little kid there with a switch, you know, kind of whacking the side of the thing if he felt like that. It was just totally fascinating. It was like the other side of the moon, so to see it all from the air too is something else. It was once again a whole other experience in something that I had not really been prepared for the impact of it. Fascinating stuff; fascinating stuff.

LC: And were you actually flown directly to Phu Bai?

SO: I don’t know if we stopped off or not. As I say, we might have stopped off to refuel or something, but we did end up in Phu Bai and came on to the helo-pad. It was also kind of a shocker because the hospital itself was made of rubber. It was inflatable, not the smartest move in a place where you have missiles flying through the air and shit, but you know, who knows.

LC: But as you said, it was the other side of the moon, so.

SO: Yes, it was the other side of the moon kind of fit. That was just the people themselves, but we ended up in this little place with this inflatable hospital and stuff and they kind of let me hang out and showed me where my hooch was, which was, there were, I believe four of them, four individual quarters kind of butted up against each other in one building made out of plywood. So, we all had individual entrances and we didn’t see each other once you were in. They were relatively small, they were each the size of a descent semi-sized bedroom and they were right next to the Officers Club, which was convenient.

LC: Wow.

SO: And just down a short walk from the bathroom, which was where we showered. I don’t think there were regular latrines, flushed toilets or anything with a shower. I’m pretty sure that the latrines were separate, but it was kind of interesting.

There was actually a shower in it. I don’t remember whether there was any heat to the
water. I think it was cold, but I’m not sure. It was kind of like superimposing a summer
camp on this other side of the moon.

LC: The other gals that were living in the other parts of the same building, did
you come to meet them right away? Were they nurses or were they med techs or what
was the range?

SO: There were nurses and techs. The nurses were the women and yes, I met
them fairly quickly and as soon as the haze of being new and being there after flying and
stuff like that was off, they assigned me to somebody who had been there for a few
months and she and I walked through several surgeries until I was able to be on my own.

LC: And that process of walking through, did that start right away?

SO: It was pretty quick. It was like the next day type thing.

LC: Really?

SO: They oriented you to the post and let you see where you ate and all this other
stuff, so with that time taken, but there was like a day to do that and get your stuff in gear
and move in and then the next day I believe it was I was there with her in the surgery.

LC: What was that officer’s name? Do you remember?

SO: I just remembered her first name was Bernadette. She ultimately I believe
married a tech and I don’t know that he was one of our techs, but I think he was assigned
to some other ward or something like that. She ultimately married him and settled in the
Boston area because we saw them once after when we were living in Boston, but what
happened after that, I have no clue.

LC: Okay. Now, all the nurses were women. Were all the med techs men?

SO: Yes.

LC: Okay.

SO: The only women personnel in any of the places that I was were nurses. I
guess in some of the larger places like maybe Saigon and stuff like that, maybe there they
had women clerks. As I recall, David tells me that he had wacs as clerks and stuff back
before I was ever there and I think he was in Long Bien. Long Bien was huge. It was
basically a sorting center among other things and a headquarters, so they’d have stuff like
that, but we didn’t.

LC: Okay, so the only women on the base were the nurses?
SO: Yes.

LC: And approximately how many were there?

SO: God, you know, I don’t know that. God, Banigan would know that, I’m trying to think of the woman who went over at the same time I did who I knew in nursing school. Oh, do you have her down?

LC: No, actually, but I’d like to include her, yes.

SO: Yes, you should because she has the stats. She has a lot of the memory too, but she has stats to absolutely everything in her computer to what she does. She’d kind of the computerized answer to David Wilson.

LC: Oh okay, I see, okay. Well, we’ll have to contact her then and see if she might be interested.

SO: Absolutely.

LC: Yes. Maybe you can help me with that later on.

SO: Sure.

LC: Okay.

SO: It was a small facility; I couldn’t tell you how many of us there were there.

LC: How many OR’s were there?

SO: Just maybe, I’d say maybe three, four maximum. There weren’t very many.

LC: Okay. And inside this inflatable building, there were the OR’s and what other kinds of rooms, store rooms?

SO: Actually, the inflatable buildings, the wards were inflatable as I recall. The OR itself I believe was more of a medal type thing. Let me get one of my picture books. I might be able to help with that because that would help. There’s another thing I found some of when I was digging through that, I found a picture of our hooches.

LC: Really, fabulous.

SO: Yes.

LC: I’d like to see that too.

SO: They’re white and they have a little, actually, what I could do is I could scan some of that for you.

LC: Okay.

SO: God, so much stuff, but not as helpful as it should be. (Laughing)
LC: That’s okay. (Laughing) You’ve got it, that’s the important bit.

SO: Yes, well I kept, you know, I had a little brownie camera type thing during the first time and that was a long time before I got to...

LC: Did you take your camera over with you or did you acquire one when you got there?

SO: I took one with me, and then I acquired one later on. Okay, correct that thing about going by helicopter from there to Phu Bai. I actually, I have a picture in here that says on May 21, 1969, I bordered that great speckled bird to Phu Bai in the Central Highlands and it shows, it’s one of those transport planes, so probably that took me to somewhere near Phu Bai possibly, I’m not sure where and from there, maybe Da Nang. I remember on my first helicopter ride was then, but it wasn’t all the way up the country I guess.

LC: Okay, so you went partly by a transport?

SO: Yes. Part of this thing was in tents. I mean, we had like a mess tent, was where we ate and actually was a tent and I remember the motor pool was a tent and that it was halfway over a grave. Phu Bai was built right in a graveyard. It was a Buddhist graveyard and around the graves was kind of interesting.

LC: So on the base, you’re actually trying to negotiate around the grave markers and so forth.

SO: Well, it’s not just grave markers. The Buddhist graves were kind of round and they had walls around them. They were very short walls. Some of the more ornate ones had very fancy little carved cement and stone, that sort of thing. Others were left though when they were just circles with a very small rock rim around it, but I remember that the motor pool particularly because I just thought that was terribly arrogant. The motor pool particularly was half over one of the one’s with the larger rim to it, so you would’ve really had to displace and you brought the jeeps and they were right next to somebody’s thing there. But I recall the OR as not being inflatable, but we had air locked doors and that might not be the case that might not be dependable on that.

LC: Okay, that’s okay.

SO: Once again, that’s something Banigan could tell you because she was stationed in I Corps above us near the DMZ in an inflatable hospital as well. She has all
the stuff on file, but at any rate, the wards were all inflatable for sure and everything was air locked doors. You walked in and you went through a two-door system because they wanted to keep the pressure up and the inside was cooled by an air conditioning, which was never quite enough. It was impossible to air condition against Vietnam in those days by the technology that we had. It was very noisy because these generators that ran all that would make a lot of noise.

LC: Yes. About what was the capacity of the wards that you had there?
SO: You know, once again, I couldn’t tell you that.
LC: Okay. I was just wondering how many patients could you accommodate before they were moving on to somewhere else?
SO: I don’t know, it was a fairly quick deal there.
LC: Okay.
SO: They didn’t stay long there.
LC: Well Sue, tell me how a patient would be processed in. Let’s say he had severe injuries, but not life threatening, he would come to the OR, receive the attention that he needed, and then what would happen?
SO: Well, if there were a number of them, they’d be triaged first and that would fall to whoever was in charge of the ER like the emergency room type thing, the receiving that they came in which was, I recall, this was a pretty rudimentary process there unlike other places which were bigger. And it would be decided who would be operated on the first and who would be last and then there was another category for expectants and that was someone who would be expected to die, frankly, and so you kind of put them at the last of the list since it was probably not worth trying to save them, but whoever would come through, they would show up at the side of the OR on a gurney with a chart under the head. We’d go, we’d take a look at the chart, see what’s going on, push them through the doors, get them into a suite, one of the…somehow, I only remembered like three our four, but I tend to think maybe three suites that had kind of eye level walls between them and you kind of clean them up and do whatever you need to with them in a little receiving area if there was a line, and then take them into the suite proper and make sure that they were ready for surgery. It would mean shaving the area if you could if it wasn’t just massive to the point where there really wasn’t much you could
do preparation wise. Draping it, one person scrubbing in either the tech or the nurse and another person usually a nurse circulating, being the one who made sure all the stuff was ready and uncovered the instruments, got them ready to go and that. At the time, the anesthetist would be there working at their head and one of us would have to put in usually some kind of I.V to make sure that they had water or not water, but saline running so that we could attach blood if they needed it through out the surgery. Also, usually the anesthetist would have a line of his own running because he’d be starting them, though we’d be working on the other hand. In my case, preferably after they were asleep because I was really terribly finding veins. You’d go from there almost like you would stateside, the surgery, you just kind of do what had to be done. The doctor would dictate things. The big difference was that most of the operations because they had to do with fragmentation grenade or something with that sort would really destroy a lot of tissue. Often times, the nurses would be doing stuff that nurses would not do stateside. We would actually be wielding tissue scissors, what they call Mayos, the heavy Mayos, often with the curve blades and we would be cutting out tissue and you’d cut out anything, you’d cut down to whatever would twitch because everything else was dead and in the mean time, the doctor might be working on a belly wound or something like that where one of us would be working on a leg or one of us would be handing instruments to him, depending on the complexity of things. After we were done with the more coarse wounds in the dense tissue that didn’t involve opening the abdomen, we would pack in, we’d wash it all off with saline and we would pack in gauze and kind of fluffed up gauze in an open wound. We would wrap it afterward and tape big bandage on and then we would probably, if we were to get this person if he wasn’t stable enough to fly out to get him back in a day or two, we’d go through the process again of putting the guy out and then you’d have to pull all…because you had to put him out to do this, it was just too painful, then you’d pull all that tissue off and some of it would adhere; some of the dead tissue would again adhere to the fluffy gauze that we’d put in and then you go back through the debridement-process. It was called debridement and you would once again, cut down anything that looked like it was dead until you got to the point where everything you were looking at was fresh tissue and it was either capable of oozing blood which meant that it was fresh or it was, if you touched the muscle, it would twitch. And
once again, repack the thing. It was only after process of a couple of times of going back
and re-debriding and re-cleaning the wound and that, that they were able to actually close
them up and we seldom closed wounds except like belly wounds where you had to. We
seldom closed large tissue wounds at the hospital, at that particular hospital because
usually by the time that they were stable enough, they would be evaced out to somewhere
else.

LC: How would you establish their stability? Would that be based on vitals or
what else was going on to make that judgment?

SO: Yes, that was a doctor’s judgment call and it would be based on, were they
able to travel, were they in good enough shape to do that, was there reason for them to
travel. In a few cases, if it were fairly minor wounds, they wouldn’t want to send them
somewhere else, they’d want to just tend to the minor wounds and get them back in the
battlefield which often happened. And, what was their general state, would they be able
to withstand a trip say to Japan or to Okinawa, you know, where further more
complicated surgeries might be accomplished. So, it was kind of one of those things, it
was judgment on their part and vitals and the state of the wound and the state of potential
infection. Everybody was hit with just amazing amounts of, I think Keflex was the
biggie at the time. The new generation antibiotics because it was a given that anything
that they received out in the countryside would become infected if they didn’t…

LC: Were you delivering that Keflex by I.V primarily?

SO: Yes, that was generally started; it was started with surgery and from then
depending on the state of the guy, they’d often keep his I.V running throughout his stay
and would keep a regimen of Keflex or whatever the drug of choice might happen to be
going through it.

LC: Would the very most seriously wounded guys who may have lost a leg or
something on that kind of order of severity, would they be staying in country for a while
or was the plan to get them out to Japan…?

SO: The plan was to get them out as quickly as one could and make way for other
casualties in country. The 27th Surge or 22nd Surge Phu Bai where I was, was one of two
hospitals up there and it was ultimately closed up, so they were, at that point, putting the
other one more into practice than we were, but we were still relatively busy. It was one
of those kind of funky things that we’d get sporadic. I don’t know that we got the
overflow from the other place, but we just definitely got…we got a lot of stuff, but it
wasn’t a madhouse.

LC: What was the other place? Do you remember or where was it?
SO: Yes, I can’t remember. It was also in Phu Bai, but I never really went there.

It was in a different part of it, I can’t remember what it was.

LC: Was it Navy; was it a different, was it not?
SO: No, it was Army.

LC: It was Army, okay. And how long were you actually at Phu Bai?
SO: I was only there a couple of months because they closed it up. Oh goodness,
maybe I have it here, I don’t actually. Oh okay, August the 22nd.

LC: Very good. Good note keeping.
SO: I had it written down; otherwise I couldn’t do it.

LC: There you go, yes. So, you were there until nearly the end of August. Were
you actually there until it closed down?
SO: No.

LC: Okay.
SO: I was there until shortly before, I think it was probably around September by
the time it was completely out of there.

LC: And your relocation was to what unit?
SO: I was relocated to the 27th Surge in Chu Lai.

LC: When you went to Chu Lai, did anyone from Phu Bai go with you?
SO: No other nurses did.

LC: Okay, any personnel that you recognized at Chu Lai?
SO: I think there were, but I can’t remember who it would be. I think we
probably got a couple from down there, but I couldn’t tell you who it was.

LC: Where did most of the nurses go from Phu Bai, do you know?
SO: Kind of all over the place. There weren’t that awfully many of us, it was a
very small hospital of hospitals, so we kind of were dispersed wherever they needed us.

It was kind of what they did when we consolidated.
LC: You talked about Colonel McLeod back at Ft. Sam and that you saw her
again, you saw her later in your tour though, is that right?
SO: Yes, I didn’t see her until I got to Cu Chi.
LC: Oh, at Cu Chi, okay. So, I’ll ask you about her again later on. Let’s go head
and take a break here for a moment.
SO: Okay.