Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins at the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m beginning an oral history interview with Colleen Mussolino. Today’s date is the 3rd of June 2004. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech in scenic Lubbock, Texas, and Colleen is talking to me from Bushkill, Pennsylvania. Good afternoon, Colleen.

Colleen Mussolino: Hi.

LC: I want to thank you for taking some time with us this afternoon to participate in the Oral History Project.

CM: You’re quite welcome.

LC: First of all, I would like to just begin with some general biographical data on yourself. Where were you born and when?

CM: I was born in Portland, Oregon in 1946. August 9th.

LC: Ok. Can you tell me a little bit about your family? Let’s first of all talk about your mom. What was her name?

CM: Well, her name was Myrtle Elizabeth Remington. That was her maiden name.

LC: Remington?

CM: Yes.

LC: Ok. And was she from the far west? Was she an Oregonian?

CM: Yes. She was actually born in Pocatello, Idaho, but her family came from The Dalles, Oregon originally.
LC: And had she gone to school? What did she do before she was married to your dad?
CM: She actually did light housekeeping for a while. She married at a very young age.
LC: How young is young?
CM: Well at that time, let’s see…she was about nineteen, twenty? Which is considered young for that age at that time.
LC: At that time, yes it certainly was. And how did she meet your father?
CM: She was actually taken in by my father’s mother because there were eight kids on my father’s side, and my mother was doing light housekeeping and ironing and that kind of thing to pay her way to go to high school.
LC: Oh, I see.
CM: And so she lived with my father’s parents.
LC: And there were eight children in the family?
CM: On my father’s side, yeah.
LC: That’s a lot of work to do. No doubt your grandmother needed some help.
CM: Well, there were five boys and three girls. So…
LC: Yeah, that’s a handful. That’s a handful. Now your dad’s name was what?
LC: And he went by Ben?
CM: Yes.
LC: Ok. And where did he stand in the tribe of eight? Where was he?
CM: He was the oldest.
LC: Ok. Had he also gone to high school or lived in, I guess it would be Portland for some amount of time?
CM: Yes. He was actually born in Moline, Kansas, after I believe…I don’t remember how many children were actually born at the time before they moved to Portland, Oregon.
LC: Do you know what caused the move? What was the reason?
CM: Tell you the truth, I really don’t know. It was so long ago; my father was born in 1910, so.
LC: He was born in...oh, 1910.
CM: Yes.
LC: Ok. Was he then subject to any kind of military service at any time?
CM: No.
LC: Ok. During the war, he would have been how old then?
CM: Well, during World War II, his younger brothers went in. Two of them went in, and the others were older and my father worked for the Portland shipyards and so did my mother at that time. They were married. And they, my father...let’s see, what did he do? Oh, my mother was like a riveter or something like that, and my father read the blueprints or... It was such a long thing. There’s a big huge write-up and stuff of things on my father, but it wasn’t all that clear as to what he actually did.
LC: But they were both working in a war industry then, it sounds like.
CM: Yeah, they were working on building the ships.
LC: Did your mom ever talk about her experiences doing that with you, or how she felt about it?
CM: No, they were pretty quiet about it. The only time they mentioned anything was during the times when my father got his picture in the paper where he was clowning some. My father was a clown, I mean he liked to do funny things and he had this mop on his head and doing some clowning around in the shipyards, and they took some pictures of him doing that. But my family was also very well known in Oregon.
LC: And how did that come about?
CM: Well, my father also owned a restaurant and two taverns.
LC: And these were in Portland?
CM: Yes.
LC: Ok.
CM: And his brothers also owned some taverns, so we came from a very well known family.
LC: Ok. Highly visible?
CM: Extremely.
LC: And your, you said that you had a couple of uncles on your dad’s side who served in the military during World War II.
CM: Yes.

LC: Did you hear much about that when you were growing up?

CM: No.

LC: The family wasn’t tight in that way such that you would hear that?

CM: No, as a matter of fact my one uncle came and told me about it only when he found out that I was joining the military.

LC: Is that right?

CM: Yes.

LC: What did you learn from him then at that time?

CM: He told me then that he had been a Medic in the military. In the Army.

LC: What theater? Any idea?

CM: The European theater. He was over during D-Day and all of that too, but he never really said much of anything about it.

LC: Why do you think he was telling you that when he found out you were going into the military?

CM: I think he just wanted me to be prepared that I was going to be a soldier.

LC: Wow. What was his name?

CM: His name was Eugene Adams.

LC: Colleen, you had provided us with some information, and that will drive a couple questions that I have. You were a bit of a musician as a youngster, is that right?

CM: Yes.

LC: Tell me a little bit about that. How did that arise? How was it recognized that you had some talent there?

CM: Oh, geez. I don’t know. My mom started me in all kinds of things as a young child, from drama lessons. I mean, I was very young. And she had heard of a method called the Suzuki method in playing music, and so she started me off at age five? No…yeah, a little bit younger than that, playing violin.

LC: And you took to it?

CM: Yeah.

LC: Do you have memories of doing that as a youngster, practicing and all that?
CM: Oh yeah, I studied for many years. I had a scholarship for voice and violin when I was in college.

LC: So you continued with it as a youngster and then into your early adulthood, then?

CM: Yes.

LC: Ok. Were academic studies also something that you put time into?

CM: Yes. Yes, I did.

LC: Tell me how you did as a student; let’s say in junior high and then high school.

CM: Well… (Laughing). That's the funny part, because I got lazy when I got to school. In high school. Actually, I found out much later that I had a reading disability and didn’t know it at that time. It wasn’t diagnosed until many years later after actually I got out of school.

LC: Now is this dyslexia or something else?

CM: It’s dyslexia.

LC: Ok.

CM: Yes. But that came about because I went to a parochial school and was changed from being left-handed to right-handed.

LC: Ok. Can you tell us a little bit about that? You know, young people today are almost sure that these kinds of stories have to be like urban legend, that no one would ever do this. But it did happen?

CM: It happened in parochial school when I was in kindergarten and first and second grade. But even before that, just was one of those things that they just didn’t believe people with the left hands were like the left hands of God and right-handed people were the right hand of God, and lefties were evil and right were good, and so they changed you.

LC: And what kind of measures did they take to do that? Do you remember this or can you tell us?

CM: Yeah, I can tell you that. If we were caught with a pen or pencil in our left hand and trying to write with it, it was grabbed out of our hands, put into our right hands;
we were smacked with pointers, those old-fashioned wooden pointers that they use for
pointing on the blackboards across the knuckles and that kind of thing.

LC: Ouch.

LC: Yeah. Did this affect your musical playing? I mean your finger work?
CM: No, actually, I’m a very stubborn person and I refused to give up my
abilities in my left hand. Even though I write right-handed to this day, I can still write
left-handed.

LC: That’s amazing.
CM: And I write also with my right hand from right to left. In other words, I can
write the words…I can write backwards.

LC: Really? (Laughing) That’s amazing. That’s not a skill that gets called for a
lot. That’s pretty amazing.
CM: I do it on greeting cards to certain friends of mine. I write the mirror image
just for the fun of it.

LC: So they have to run to the bathroom to read.
CM: Yeah, or to a mirror, and they go, “Oh no, here she goes again,” one of
those things. Yeah, it’s kind of like a signature thing. It’s only to close, certain friends. I
do that.

LC: You cause them that kind of pain, ok.
CM: (Laughing)
LC: Colleen, you said that you were lazy as a student, but I’m sort of thinking it
was a combination of other things that were going on that you know, you were kind of
getting shifted away from your natural use of your left hand and you had the reading
problem, the reading disability, and I wonder if that was part of what may have…
CM: It could very well have been, but you know, I don’t even look back at it that
way because by the time I was in high school, yeah I did have problems reading only
with English and that. But I was very good with math.

LC: Really?
CM: Yeah. And when I took my SATs for school because I took all college prep
courses, and when I took my SATs, I did extremely well in math and of course very low
in the English, and they couldn’t understand it so they made me take it a second time. I
only went up one point on the score.

LC: Now who suggested that you take it a second time? Was that at school?
CM: The nuns at school, yeah.

LC: And what high school did you attend?
CM: I went to four different…uh, three different high schools.

LC: Ok. How did that …why, first of all?
CM: Well, the first one that I went was a coed Catholic high school my freshman
year, but they didn’t have the kind of music program that I really wanted and needed. So
I was trying to get into this other Catholic high school, but in the meantime on the
waiting list, I went a public school for two years.

LC: For two years?
CM: Yes. And then my senior year, I went to a Catholic high school.

LC: And where did you actually graduate from then?


LC: Ok. You had moved then to Seattle at some point?
CM: Yes, we moved to Seattle when I was eleven.

LC: Did your dad start a new business up there, or how did that move come
about?
CM: Yeah, he went up, he had given up the restaurants about a year or so before
we moved up there. Gave them up. Well, sold them, actually. And then we moved to
Seattle and he was looking for a different opportunity, and he got into real estate.

LC: Was that something that emerged as a good decision?
CM: Yeah. Yeah, it merged something good. Well, my father was a go-getter no
matter what.

LC: Oh, really?
CM: Oh yeah, he was always successful in everything he ever did.

LC: Wow.
CM: And just before he passed away, he was getting into the political field. He
was working to get in with a couple of the senators that were in Seattle.

LC: In terms of, what was he looking to do?
CM: In the political field, I don’t know exactly. He was waiting for an appointment of some sort, and the appointment came. We got the letter approximately maybe about four days after he died.

LC: Which was what year?

CM: In 1964.

LC: Ok. And did your mom then stay in Seattle?

CM: No, we left and we moved back to Oregon.

LC: Ok. And you have one sister, is that right?

CM: Yes.

LC: Is she older or younger?

CM: Younger.

LC: Ok. How much younger?

CM: Two and a half years.

LC: Ok. Did she go to a series of different high schools as well there in Seattle, or did she not have the same music…?

CM: She didn’t study music. As a matter of fact, she’s an LPN (Licensed Practical Nurse).

LC: Oh, ok. So she’s very practical and directed in medical stuff.

CM: She wanted to be a nurse and since was…oh, geez, I think four years old.

LC: Really?

CM: Oh, yeah. That was something that she always wanted to do. As a matter of fact, my mother made her a complete nurse’s uniform with the cape and the hat and the whole works when she was little.

LC: Wow. That probably was a big thrill for her, to get like the uniform and everything.

CM: Oh yeah.

LC: And when you actually got to the Holy Names Academy, did that school then have the right music program for you?

CM: Yes. Well, so did Lincoln High School. The public school that I went to. Because I was in the orchestra, the band, the choir, and just about anything musical I that I could be in. And then when I got to Holy Names Academy, I was also studying before I
went to Holy Names, I studied voice lessons on the side at another academy outside the
academy.

LC: Colleen, without being too modest, how good were you?
CM: Not that good. (Laughing)
LC: Oh, I wonder.
CM: I can sing, but I don’t do it much anymore. I sang mostly like light opera
and I think it was more my parents’ dream than it was mine, but I went along with it.
You just did that in those days, you know. And during the time when I was in high
school, I was also taking…I took electricity, technical drawing, I took math, sciences,
physics, that kind of thing too.

LC: Were those things closer to your heart do you think?
CM: Yes. I really personally wanted to become an electronical engineer.
LC: Seriously?
CM: Seriously.
LC: Did you have a clue what that might mean? Did you have any models or
information or…how did you come to that conclusion, do you have any idea?
CM: Just from my own things that I wanted to do. I liked to…I would take
radios apart and put them back together and all kinds of mechanical stuff or whatever it
was I could take apart and put them back together with no problems, and it was always
fascinating to me. And I loved technical drawing. I loved it when I was in electricity
class, and I loved it when I took physics and math and all of that. That was my kind of
thing. Still is.

LC: Yeah, and your SATs certainly confirm that, but that seems to have
completely confounded the school administration.
CM: Yeah, well. My parents wanted me to be a musician. They thought I was
talented enough.
LC: Well, you clearly had something going on because you did get that
scholarship.
CM: Yeah, I know. I mean, well I had some talent. I guess maybe I’m being
modest about it, but I just didn’t feel, it just didn’t feel right to me, and so I just didn’t go
on with it.
LC: Yeah. And…
CM: I played for Seattle Philharmonic Orchestra for a while, and then I got tired
of that only because they kept switching me. See, I played a number of instruments, not
just one instrument.
LC: Ok, what else did you play besides the violin?
CM: Oh, I played the cello, the violin, the viola, the piano, the bass viol. You
know the big string bass.
LC: Ok, you’re talking to somebody who has no talent in this department at all. I
know the instruments but I’m just, you know.
CM: Only because…
LC: I’m basically in awe.
CM: That too started out when I was in high school. I was again, I get bored. So
I started learning about the different instruments.
LC: Right, picking up other instruments.
CM: Yeah. And started learning them on my own.
LC: Now when you were with the Philharmonic, did they kind of move you
around?
CM: All over the place.
LC: And that’s a little disconcerting, I suppose.
CM: Yeah, because by the time the concert would come, I would have no idea
what section I would be in. I didn’t know if I was going to be playing the big bass or the
cello or the violin or viola or…and you know, I just didn’t know.
LC: And these were what years?
CM: That was…
LC: You were in high school?
CM: No. It was after high school. Was it after high school? Yeah, it was after
high school. It was…oh god; I think that was even after I came out of the service.
LC: Oh, is that right?
CM: Yeah, when I came out of the service, I did that.
LC: Ok. So that would be after ’67 I guess?
CM: Yeah, that was after that. That was more like around ’68, ’69, something like that.

LC: Ok. Yeah, because I was thinking you pretty much have to be some kind of prodigy.

CM: Well, I was in…in high school, I played for all-city orchestra. Ok and I did that for three years.

LC: Yeah, so…well, I’m thinking that somebody listening to this can make up their own mind that you were probably pretty good.

CM: Not anymore, not anymore.

LC: Well.

CM: I don’t play anymore and I really don’t sing anymore but around the house.

LC: But you have other things too that I’ve seen closer to your heart.

CM: Too many other things.

LC: Yes, absolutely. Well, it seems that you were always thinking then of going to college.

CM: Yes, I did. As a matter of fact, I did for a while.

LC: And your parents were pushing that as well? They were very pro the college plan for you?

CM: Oh yeah, oh yeah. And as a matter of fact, the college that I went to was one that my father in his early, early, early years helped build.

LC: By helped build, what do you mean?

CM: In construction.

LC: Is that right?

CM: Yeah.

LC: Because it’s located where?

CM: In Oregon. It’s in Marylhurst, Oregon and it’s called Marylhurst College.

LC: Now is it a church college?

CM: It’s a Catholic college.

LC: Catholic college, ok.

CM: Women’s Catholic college.
LC: Ok. And how did they find out about you? Was there some kind of a feeder track between Holy Names and Marylhurst?

CM: Well, my father’s sister was a Holy Name nun.

LC: Is that right?

CM: Yes.

LC: And was she actually at the school?

CM: Yes.

LC: Aha.

CM: But she didn’t teach there, but was only…see, that was also the school, the college was also a convent and it also had an orphanage with a farm, and it was a unique college. Let’s put it this way. It wasn’t real big.

LC: About how many students, any idea?

CM: Seven hundred and fifty students, approximately.

LC: And this is just my not knowing the west coast very well, but is it still there and still going?

CM: Yeah, it’s still there, and as a matter of fact, it’s grown. It’s much larger now.

LC: Is that right?

CM: Yes.

LC: Wow. I’ll have to…I will spend some time looking at it, one that I did know about.

CM: The last time I was there, I saw so many more other buildings and dorms than when I was there. I mean, there were only…let’s see, I’m trying to count them. One, two, three, four, maybe five dorms?

LC: Oh, uh huh?

CM: Altogether.

LC: Yeah, that’s close. When you…first, I should clarify. When did you graduate from Holy Names?


LC: Ok. And that was probably in the spring, I’m going to guess that you graduated on the normal program?
CM: Right, yeah.

LC: And the previous fall, in November of 1963, the President was assassinated, and I’m always interested with people that I’m interviewing to get their reactions to that. Do you remember the assassination?

CM: Oh, I’ll never forget that day.

LC: Can you tell me about what you were doing?

CM: I know exactly where I was and what I was doing. I had just come into my physics class, and we were all sitting down waiting for our teacher to come in, and when she did, she had on the saddest face I had ever seen that woman have, and then she told us, and of course we all were just in shock. And then we left that room and went to a study hall area where there was a TV and we started watching it for about a little while to watch the news, and of course then they closed the school and they sent us home, and I went home. I had to walk down this big hill from the school and then get on a trolley and then from a trolley I went to a normal bus to get home. And that ride was the most quiet ride I have ever taken in my whole life.

LC: Nobody was talking?

CM: Nobody was making a sound. You could hear a pin drop.

LC: How did you feel about the President? I mean, you’re a young woman, you’re smart, you were heads up I’m sure.

CM: Well…

LC: Obviously he was a Catholic President. I don’t know if that made him special.

CM: Yeah, well my parents were real strict Irish Catholic Democrats, of which I am neither.

LC: I see. (Laughing)

CM: I was the total opposite.

LC: Ok.

CM: Strict, maybe. But…

LC: Democrat, no.


LC: Ok. Did you notice your parents having a reaction to this news as well?
CM: I think that was…yeah. It was. We just did not turn off that TV. It seemed like it was on 24/7.

LC: Really. Did you continue to watch all the way through Sunday of that weekend, that long weekend when Oswald was shot?

CM: Oh yeah. We watched I think every moment of everything. It was I think time in which my parents and our families and neighbors were just frozen in time. I think we were. It feels like a time in which we were. We were just like, nothing else was going on.

LC: Everything else just kind of stopped.

CM: Everything stopped. It was just; it was such a strange thing.

LC: It’s certainly a turning point in American history. I think it’s an interesting thing to revisit and to include in the record. Your further education was going to be aided by this scholarship that you won, and I wonder when you found out that you were being offered a four-year scholarship? I mean, that’s just incredible.

CM: Well, there were tryouts. And I remember taking the train from Seattle down to Portland and then catching onto, oh who was it that picked me up? One of my family members was an aunt and uncle or somebody picked me up from the train and took me to the school. And because most of my family was still in Oregon. In Portland. And so they took me to the school and I did my tryouts. Then end up coming back home, and then we got the letter that I had the scholarship.

LC: And had you similarly done any tryouts elsewhere or applied to other colleges?

CM: Yes I had, but I didn’t try out for music. I applied first at Seattle University because I wanted to go into engineering.

LC: What happened?

CM: I got accepted at Seattle University.

LC: In engineering, a pre-engineering program or something?

CM: Correct.

LC: So was this a difficult decision, or could you not leave the money out of the equation?
CM: There was no problem with money at that time. It was just a matter of what
my parents pushed me more into, and they felt that I needed to be more into the music
field than I was into the engineering field, and they wanted me to go to the Marylhurst
College rather than Seattle U, which also was a Catholic university, by the way.

LC: Yes, that’s right.

CM: And they, I don’t know. It was just one of those strange things. And then
of course just thirteen days before I was to go off to school is when my father died.

LC: And so that made things even more I’m sure difficult.

CM: It was. It was very difficult and my mother, we ended up having to move.
We sold the house and moved back to Oregon because that’s where the whole family
was.

LC: And just to ask a little bit more about the Seattle University option. Had you
been basically the one who had made the decision to apply to them and kind of keep that
other option open?

CM: Yes.

LC: Ok. That was sort of your…?

CM: That was my thing.

LC: Ok. Did you feel any sadness about not being able to pursue engineering, or
did you think you might be able to come back to it or pursue it some other way?

CM: Yeah, as a matter of fact, I was kind of upset about it and it was quite a
discussion with my family in regards to which school to attend and then of course, they
said, “Well, you should really go there, you’ve got a lot of talent,” and of course I just did
not have a lot of self-confidence at that time in those days.

LC: Did the issue of you being you know, female and going into engineering and
that doesn’t quite jive, did that come up?

CM: No, that had nothing to do with it because my father was the type of person
that when he brought me up, the way he brought me up was like as a tomboy and I played
football with the boys. And as a matter of fact, when we had moved to Seattle I wanted
to go play football with the boys and they wouldn’t let me, and I came crying to my
father, “I want to play football. They won’t let me.” So he came out and he talked to
them and he said, “Look. Let her play football, and if she gets hurt, she gets hurt. But if you get hurt, I don’t want you crying to me either.”

LC: (Laughing) I like him. He sounds all right.

CM: And so then they let me play and then they got hurt and they went crying to him.

LC: And he said…?

CM: And he said, “I told you.”

LC: “We’ve already discussed this.” He sounds pretty good. He sounds like a good guy.

CM: Yeah, well when I was six years old, I’ll never forget this. One Christmas, my father gave me a whole set of real tools.

LC: No kidding?

CM: Oh yeah, I had a toolkit. I mean, tool chest and tools and…I mean, real stuff. Not toy stuff. I mean a nice saw and a drill and hammer.

LC: It sounds like you know; your folks did try to encourage lots of different things.

CM: Oh yeah. We were well educated in many ways. Not just in normal schooling, but we were given all kinds of opportunities. Well like I said, my family was pretty well to do and we had all the chances that they could give us.

LC: Yeah. And it sounds like a pretty good childhood.

CM: Yes.

LC: It sounds very nice, actually.

CM: It was.

LC: Colleen, were you happy that first year? This would be the academic year, ’64-’65 I guess at Marylhurst?

CM: I was doing ok. I was doing good in school, but I started to lose myself, I guess. I had a lot of doubts with a lot of things. I ended up cutting my theology class and ended up going to the golf course that we had there at the college and was playing golf with the other priests, instead of going to theology class.

LC: And was that just…what was your relationship with this priest?

CM: Nothing, just the fact that we liked golf.
LC: Ok, so no heavy theological discussions on the green?
CM: No, we just played golf. (Laughing) My father was an avid golfer and I loved golf. I loved sports of any kind. I’m a real sports enthusiast. And well like I said, I was close to my father and he was excellent in almost everything he did. I mean, he belonged to the hole-in-one club, he would bowl three hundred games, I mean he was just good at whatever he did. And so then I tried to model myself after him.
LC: Sounds like you had a little bit of that going on for yourself.
CM: Yeah.
LC: You could play the violin, you were good at golf, you know. Yikes.
LC: Well we can see about that as the interview goes on, but you know I’m getting a fairly good sense that you were about trying things and being actually quite out there. Did you join in with group activities or any clubs or anything like that when you were at Marylhurst?
CM: Oh yeah. I was…let’s see, I played on the field hockey team and of course I was in the orchestra. I was in the choir. I even did some student teaching while I was a freshman, which you don’t normally do.
LC: At all, right.
CM: But being that I also boarded at the school, the nuns every once in a while would call me up and have me substitute for them at a class of a child or someone that they were teaching.
LC: Ok.
CM: And so then I would run into the classrooms and help substitute.
LC: So it sounds to me like your freshman year was actually going pretty well?
CM: It was. It was very sad, but…
LC: Yes, because you had just lost your dad.
CM: Yeah. But you know, I’m kind of like the type of person, I’m like a chameleon in a way. I guess I just adapt to anything. I adapt very quickly to situations. Kind of can bounce back real quick on things. I mean, I guess if you continue on with
the interview and you find more out about my life, that’s just the way things do. I just
down the punches and get back up on my feet and keep on going.

LC: Well, were you paying much attention to some world events that as we look
back now were clearly turning points with regard to the United States and its military
commitments in ’64 and early ’65 during that year, or were you not paying too much
attention to the news?

CM: As a matter of fact, I was paying attention to the news.

LC: Is that right?

CM: Yeah, being in the dorm gives you an opportunity, at least in our type of
dorm where we had an area where we would have TV where we’d all go around and sit
down and watch the news or stuff like that. And we would kind of discuss it, things that
were going on.

LC: Do you remember for example the Tonkin Gulf Resolution?

CM: No. When you come to exact specifics, it’s very blurry for me.

LC: But you were keeping up with current events and had an interest in that as
well?

CM: Yeah as a matter of fact, because when I… I only did the one semester at
college and then I left.

LC: Right.

CM: And I went and actually went to work and right outside my window of my
job was the recruiting station with his lights flashing.

LC: Now what job was this that you had?

CM: I was working as a… no, I wasn’t a salesclerk, I was behind the scenes for a
junior miss in a department store.

LC: Ok. And why had you actually left college? Why had you made that
decision?

CM: Because I was bored.

LC: You were just bored?

CM: Oh yeah.

LC: Wow.
CM: After studying music for so many years, it seemed like I was doing the same stuff over and over and over.

LC: And that just wasn’t going to work?

CM: And I just felt like I wasn’t learning anything new, and I have this quest or this unusual thirst to learn stuff, and I didn’t feel like I was learning anything.

LC: Was this kind of tumultuous for your mom to find out that you were going to…?

CM: Oh, she was very, very mad at me. For a long time she was mad at me.

LC: How did you get a job? What did you do, just walk in and apply various places?

CM: Yeah. I went down, there was one of the largest department stores at that time that I went to and was called Myron Franks, which then changed over to May Company. Yeah, I went down and applied to the store and I got a job. It was a union paid job and I got paid a whole dollar eighty-seven and a half an hour.

LC: Wow. That racks up pretty quick.

CM: Oh, and that was good money.

LC: Yes. Yeah, it probably was. But, so you’re having to walk past this recruiting station or you could see it?

CM: I could see it out my window. And with Vietnam going on and a lot of guys and people were being drafted and stuff, I just kind of had this urge to… I felt like I had to do something.

LC: And this would be in the summer of 1965?

CM: It was actually just before the summer of. It was in the spring of ’65. And it just kept aching at me. You know, like I’ve got to do something, I’ve got to do something, I’m not going to stay in this job forever because this is not what I really want, and it just wasn’t giving me a personal gratification, I guess you could say. And so I went over to the recruiting office and sat down and first went to the Navy recruiter.

LC: And what happened there? What was that like?

CM: It was nice. I mean you know, there was no problem with me joining the Navy or anything. The only thing they kept saying to me was, “Well, with your musical background, we have no band.” I said, “I don’t want to be in the music business. I want
to do something else.” And I said, “I have four years of math, I’ve had electricity and
technical drawing and that kind of stuff and science. I want to do something else.”

LC: Did they try to snap you up?
CM: No.

LC: What happened?
CM: They kind of discouraged me.

LC: Any…can you tell me any more about that?
CM: It’s very hard to remember because it was so long ago, but it was like…I
don’t know how to say it exactly, but it was kind of like, “Well, we kind of really don’t
want women.” Women in the Navy was a little bit odd at that time.

LC: So it just seemed kind of beyond the pale in a way?
CM: Yeah. So then…but I still wanted to join the service.

LC: So undeterred, you…
CM: So then I went to an Army recruiter the next day. Or a couple of days, I
don’t remember. But I went on my lunch hour anyway. And I went over to the Army
recruiter, which was across the hall.

LC: And how did that go?
CM: That went very well.

LC: Ok. Did you give them the same kind of…?
CM: Yeah. She said, “Oh, we can put you in, no problem. We can get you into
aviational engineering.” I said, “Oh, great. That would be great.” So she said, “Well,
come and take the test on Saturday.” I said, “Ok.” I took the test. There was four
hundred of us. I aced the test.

LC: You’re kidding.
CM: No.

LC: Ok.
CM: Well, it was kind of an easy test. Compared to the SATs, it was very simple
and when they had things in there, knowing whether there’s a Philips screwdriver or a
pair of pliers or a hammer, I knew what they were.

LC: Right, you could handle that.
CM: Yeah, that was no big deal to me.
LC: So you aced this test?

CM: Yeah. So then we found out, we found out the grades and so then this recruiter grabbed me. I mean, literally grabbed me by the hand, grabbed me into the office and signed me up immediately.

LC: And were they still talking about…first of all, was this a female recruiter that you were speaking with?

CM: Yes.

LC: Ok. And was she still telling you aviation engineering? That’s what we’re talking about?

CM: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

LC: And did you get anything more concrete than her saying this?

CM: No. I mean, I was eighteen. I didn’t know.

LC: Of course. Of course, yeah.


LC: That’s right. Do you remember her particularly?

CM: Not very well, other than the fact that she was maybe about 5’8. I would say a fairly good-looking woman. Not real pretty, but a good-looking woman.

LC: Sure.

CM: And she had a nice personality. That’s about all I can remember.

LC: Ok. And so you got signed up to this?

CM: Oh yeah. The only problem that we had was that a recruiter, that one of the Army men that was there, Army recruiters, had to get my mother’s signature because I was eighteen. I wasn’t twenty-one.

LC: Right and this was specifically to do with women that there was this regulation?

CM: Yeah.

LC: So how did your mom feel about this?

CM: Oh, she couldn’t have been happier to sign me to go into the service.

LC: Really?

CM: Yeah.

LC: Where did that come from? Because she was mad at you?
CM: It came from the fact that she was mad at me for quitting college.
LC: So she thought well, at least here’s a way you’ll be fed and clothed and housed or whatever.
CM: No, we had been fighting. Arguing back and forth for the longest time. And I think it was a portion too where my mother just really had a hard time because with Dad’s death and everything, it took a big toll on her. And my sister of course was trying to go off to, she was in high school and Mom was trying to figure out how she was going to pay for all of this. Of course social security stopped because I quit school, but I was giving her the money that I was earning, which was better than what social security was giving her.
LC: For you as a dependent? Or whatever, a college-enrolled dependent.
CM: Yeah. But we had fights about me going out, me dating, and oh it was just a big mess.
LC: Right. So there was at least some meeting of the minds over, the Army might be a good idea.
CM: Yeah. And then she regretted it afterwards, because then when I left and I joined, I went three thousand miles away from home.
LC: Right. Way far away.
CM: Yeah. And then she said she would send me a letter, or when I’d call her and talk to her she said, “The toaster broke and I don’t know how to fix it. I wish you were here.”
LC: So you could fix the toaster.
CM: So I could fix the toaster, yeah. That kind of thing.
LC: I see. Yeah. And how soon after you signed on did you need to report?
CM: Within ten days.
LC: And where did you have to report to?
CM: I ended up right there in Portland. I had to stay at the Y for the first day before we actually left. There was three other girls that were staying there also. We all joined together. And they sent us off to Fort McClellan, Alabama for basic training.
LC: How did you get all the way to Alabama?
CM: They flew us.
LC: Ok. Out of Portland?
CM: Yeah.
LC: And thinking back to that time, can you tell me if you were excited or looking forward to this or apprehensive or some of both?
CM: I was ecstatic.
LC: Really?
CM: Yes.
LC: Wow.
CM: I was thinking, “Oh, this is going to be cool. I’m going to be a soldier,” you know, “I’m going to learn how to fight and how to be like a…” What can I say? How can I put it into the right words? I just thought I was going to be just basically a soldier.
LC: Cool, huh? It was cool?
CM: Yeah, it was cool. I was going to be a soldier. Yeah.
LC: And what about the gals that you were traveling with? Were they also pumped?
CM: We were all the same.
LC: You guys were all pumped?
CM: Oh yeah. We were excited, we were happy, we all went through basic training together and we were in the same company and everything, and we had a ball.
LC: And how long did basic actually last for you?
CM: Eight weeks.
LC: What do you remember about it?
CM: (Laughing). One of the most funniest times in my whole life.
LC: Really?
CM: Yes. Compared to what the girls or the women go through now, what I went through is a piece of cake.
LC: How so?
CM: Oh, please. We got…first off, when we got there and after everybody arrived at the barracks and we filled up our particular company area, we were all marched over to the supply area and we were issued uniforms. Now these, our regular uniforms that we wore every day or what we called our PT (Physical Training) uniforms were Air
Force rejects, that we called them. They were a light blue blouse, light blue shorts, and a light blue a-lined button down front skirt.

LC: Ok.
CM: That had to be starched like it was a tepee.
LC: Oh boy. Like it was a tepee.
CM: It was an a-line skirt.
LC: Ok, I’ve got a picture.
CM: Oh yeah. It literally could stand on its own.
LC: What was it made out of? Wool or what?
CM: No, it was kind of like a cotton. All cotton.
LC: But heavy.
CM: Oh, well, between liquid starch and spray starch? Believe me, it stood on its own.
LC: Wow. (Laughing)
CM: We came out of that supply room with not only that, with two sets of that but with two sets of fatigues, two sets of summer uniforms, two sets of winter uniforms, our winter jackets, coats, hats. Our arms were…well, you couldn’t even see over the top of what was on your arms. It was actually quite funny because they just piled everything on you. And then of course, you had to get measured for them, make sure the hems were the right length on your skirts and everybody’s hem had to be the same length off the floor.
LC: And there were regulations about this, I suppose?
CM: Oh yeah, so that when you walked in a group, everybody had the same hemline length.
LC: Ok.
CM: Didn’t matter how tall or how short you were.
LC: So it wasn’t the length of the skirt, it was how far it was off the floor?
CM: Yes.
LC: Ok and that…thus the length of the skirt would vary by individual.
CM: Yes.
LC: Ok, how tall are you, Colleen?
CM: I’m 5’6.
LC: Ok, so you were probably right in the middle?
CM: Yeah, just about. It came to just below my kneecap for me.
LC: Oh boy. And did you guys have to hem them yourselves?
CM: No, no, no. That was done for us specifically.
LC: Ok. Because that would avoid introducing error probably into this.
CM: Yeah, it was everybody was measured and everybody got lined up and they
would make sure that everybody…mine was very lucky. I didn’t have to have anything
hemmed. Because like you said, I was in the middle so everything was fine. And they
issued us our shoes and our boots and our socks and the only thing that we actually had to
have from home was our underwear and nylons.
LC: And other than that, they gave you everything.
CM: Yeah.
LC: Now what about, this is a matter of curiosity to me. What about the shoes? I
mean…
CM: Yeah, we the granny shoes, the pumps. The boots.
LC: Did they fit? I mean, everyone’s feet are different, what if they didn’t fit?
Was that kind of tough?
CM: We pretty much got fit close to what we were.
LC: Ok.
CM: The only thing was is like; I had a problem with a blouse that they gave me.
The two blouses that they gave me with the PT uniform. I’m not extremely endowed, but
I do…had a good amount.
LC: Ok, I’m following you.
CM: When I stood at attention, the top button would come undone all the time.
LC: That’s not good.
CM: No. And so then I tried, I’m telling you funny stories, because I tried to sew
up the button hole a little bit and I got in trouble for sewing it.
LC: Because you had modified the uniform in some way?
CM: Yes, and it was an unauthorized sew. Sewing job. Like you said an
authorized part of the uniform.
LC: Some kind of alteration that hadn’t been Ok’d.
CM: Yeah.
LC: And how much hot water do you get in for that kind of thing?
CM: Well, it’s what they called a Government Issue Gripe. A GIG.
LC: Ok.
CM: Ok? And everybody gets GIGs when they go through basic training, and the amount of GIGs that you have at the end of your basic training can be quite a lot. Ok?
LC: Ok and you ended up with a lot, or…?
CM: Well, I had four hundred and some.
LC: Ok.
CM: And I wasn’t the only one, so…
LC: Ok.
CM: Most of us had an average between three to six. So…
LC: Ok, so that kind of frames it for us.
CM: Yeah. I mean, please. They go through and they find a hair in your curler. That would be it. Or some bug decided to die under your bed when you were away. I had a locker, these tall wall lockers and everybody was issued two of them and you put all your clothing in there and you had your uniforms on one side and civilians on another, and they would always go through the, you had to open up the lockers and you would get, they would go through and check everything. And my one locker was a little bit off balance, so if you…if it got hit a certain way, everything would go off alignment.
LC: Yeah.
CM: Ok. And so I thought, “Well, I’ll be wise about this thing.” I took a rolled-up matchbook and put it underneath the leg of the thing and got in trouble for the matchbook.
LC: So you were problem solving, but that didn’t go down according to regs?
CM: Right.
LC: I’m with you. And behind all of this, apparently picayune attention to minutia, did you think there was a purpose to this or was it just…?
CM: It was like being home with my father. He did white glove inspections before I even went into the military.

LC: Ok, so this was not something that was a big shock to you?

CM: No. No, I just, I just kept thinking to myself, “Gee, this is like living at home.”

LC: Yeah, right. Only more so. Only more of the same.

CM: You’d swear up and down my father had been in the military, the way he raised my sister and I. (Laughing)

LC: Wow, that’s amazing. And did you and the other members of the class kind of club up together around this stuff? Around all of this being picked on and combed over and looked over?

CM: Well, we all tried to help each other out because we made it; it was kind of like a buddy thing. Everybody kind of suffered for everybody, so we all tried to help each other out. And some were a little bit more like Gomer Pyles and some were not, you know. We had a couple. We had one girl that was from Maryland, and every time we’d have to fall out for line up in the mornings or for breakfast or whatever, she was always running out carrying her shoes or trying to tie her shoes at the same time. It was hysterical.

LC: And was there kind of collective action against everybody because of one person not showing?

CM: Not every time, but every once in a while, because we kept trying to encourage her. “You’ve got to get your butt in gear.” I’m still that way.

LC: You’re trying to help people get their butts in gear?

CM: Oh, please. You can ask any one of my friends. I’m always early. I’ll sit there and wait for you, but I give you a certain amount of time, and then I’ll start beeping the horn. I mean, you know.

LC: So you have patience, but it has an end point.

CM: Yeah, it does. But I have a lot of patience. I mean, I’ve learned over the years to be a lot more patient than I had been back then.

LC: Well, basic lasted for you said eight weeks? And this is all happening at Fort McClellan?
CM: Correct.
LC: And this is in the middle of summer, I’m taking it?
CM: Yes.
LC: So it’s hot down in Alabama.
CM: Oh yes.
LC: Did that affect things like your ability to follow the hair regs and that sort of thing?
CM: No, because I kept my hair real short. I went to the barber every week for fifty cents and got my haircut.
LC: Ok. What about the other girls? Did they have trouble with that too?
CM: Some of them did. Some of them would keep their hair up because they were used to long hair. Me, I had short hair at the time. I don’t now, but I always kept it short. Through high school, too, because I was on the swimming team and sports and stuff and it was…
LC: Very active.
CM: Yes.
LC: Can you give me a sense of an average day in basic? What did you actually have to learn while you were there?
CM: Well, let’s see. The very first four weeks were mostly school.
LC: Like classroom stuff?
CM: Classroom stuff. Learning all the ins and outs of the military and your military protocol and things like that. But to give you just kind of an average day, we’d fall out at 6:00 AM in the morning, get inspected, go to the mess hall, have breakfast, come back to our barracks and press our skirts and then put them back on, fall out again, go to school, come home from…leave school and go to lunch, come back to the room, iron your skirt, go back to school…
LC: There’s a lot of skirt ironing going on.
CM: A lot of ironing period with these particular uniforms. It’s not like now today where they’ve got everybody you know, in the fatigues and stuff. We wore our fatigues when we went out on bivouac.
LC: And that happened later on during basic?
CM: Yeah, about our, I think our fifth week, something like that, we went out on
bivouac. And that’s when we really started getting the more serious training.
LC: Ok. And was that bivouac exercise an overnight? Or did that come
eventually?
CM: We spent three days out in bivouac and we did guard duty, we learned about
camouflaging our tents, we learned how to march. We marched at night. We learned
about survival. We learned…in between all of this, we were also learning hand-to-hand
combat and a few other things.
LC: Ok.
CM: How to protect ourselves and all.
LC: Weapons training at all?
CM: No.
LC: Ok.
CM: You could get weapons training after you got out of basic, and you had to be
in a special MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) to do that.
LC: Ok. But you had some self-defense training?
CM: Yes. It was what they called hand-to-hand combat. So you learned how to
take care of yourself and you learned how to fight, you learned how to fall. You learned
especially how to dive for cover without hurting yourself. We learned how to for night
marches and we learned map reading; compass reading, which to this day is how I get
around. I’ve lived all over the country, so that’s how I get around is maps and
compasses.
LC: So that actually turned out to be a worthwhile investment of some time there.
CM: Yeah. Everything that I had in basic was actually worthwhile.
LC: Ok. And tell me if you remember anything about your instructors?
CM: Sergeant Shipley. I’ll never forget her.
LC: Ok. In what way will you never forget her, I wonder?
CM: She was a very good sergeant. Very good training sergeant, drill sergeant.
She knew what she had to do; she got us to do it. As a matter of fact, by the time we got
close to graduation of basic training, the government filmed our unit for training
purposes.
LC: Oh, is that right?
CM: Yeah.
LC: Do you remember a film crew showing up at some point?
CM: Yeah. They were showing how the proper way to march and the proper way to do certain things.
LC: Have you ever seen that film?
CM: Yeah, as a matter of fact I had caught it oh, a few years back when they were showing some of the early recruiting films.
LC: No kidding. That must have been…
CM: And I looked at it and I went, “Oh, good, here’s my company.” (Laughing)
LC: That’s amazing. You don’t have a copy of it, do you?
CM: No, no.
LC: But wouldn’t that be wonderful to have a copy of, though?
CM: Eh.
LC: “Eh,” she says. I’d like to see it.
CM: It’s in my head. I remember every moment of that. It’s like it’s there, as if I can see the movie.
LC: Did Sergeant Shipley or any of the other instructors that you came into contact with, this is during basic now, talk to you about the buildup in Vietnam? Or was that not really what was on the agenda at all?
CM: It was discussed in our schooling. It was, we were taught about what was going on and I think most of our training was taught because of that, because we had no idea where any of us were going to be going.
LC: Ok, nothing about your future postings was being intimated to you at that point?
CM: No, No.
LC: Ok. Was there any discussion or were you still thinking that this aviation engineering thing that you heard about back in the recruiting station was going to actually happen for you? Are you still thinking that?
CM: Yeah, I was hoping. As a matter of fact, when we were waiting to get our
orders after we had all graduated, when they started handing them out, we were all
hoping for what we wanted. And some got what they wanted and the majority didn’t.

LC: And you were where in that?

CM: I was in the majority that didn’t.

LC: What did your orders tell you?

CM: I was going to cook school.

LC: And that was going to be at Fort Dix, if I’m correct?

CM: Yes.

LC: And what did you…how did you feel when you got that?

CM: I was very upset. But looking at it, at that time, I think I was upset for
maybe about a couple of hours, and then like I said, I adapt. That’s what my orders told
me to do, and so I did it.

LC: This is part of the bounce back thing that you were talking about.

CM: Yeah.

LC: And did you sort of go at it then, once you turned that corner, with the idea
that you’d just make the best out of it and see what could happen?

CM: That’s exactly what I did.

LC: And anybody from your class go with you up to Fort Dix?

CM: No, actually, we were all sent four different ways.

LC: Really? Were there some gals who got postings that you might have liked to
have had? Did you guys talk about this?

CM: Yeah, some went to California, but we realized after we all got to talking
that from whatever hometown area we were from, we all got sent miles away from our
homes.

LC: Do you think that was purposeful?

CM: I think so.

LC: What was behind that? Any idea? Any speculation? Obviously, probably
you don’t have a…

CM: Well, because one of the first things they tell you when you go into military
when you’re very first recruited and you’re there in the barracks waiting for your sergeant
and everybody else to get there, once everybody’s assembled, they tell you, “I am your
teacher, your father, your preacher.”

LC: Do they literally say that kind of stuff?

CM: Yes.

LC: Wow. That’s interesting.

CM: “We are your family now.” We are everything. That’s exactly what they said,
and so we all very naïve people sat there and went, “Ok.”

LC: Right. Well, there wasn’t a lot you really, they weren’t asking for your
approval, I think probably. They were just telling you this.

CM: Yeah. And we all just said, “Ok.” And went with it. We all went with the
punch.

LC: What if anything do you remember about their instructions to you on the
issue of gender relations? I mean, did they talk to you about relating to male service
members at this point? Or civilian males? Were they talking about that? Or was that not
something they were bringing up at this point?

CM: They didn’t really bring that up. The only thing that they did, I remember
them saying was that we are here to service the men. And I don’t think they meant it in
any bad sense.

LC: No. Right.

CM: But there to be able to help them so that they can go and fight.

LC: To aid the war effort by aiding the men who were going to fight the war,
essentially.

CM: Right.

LC: Yeah, this wasn’t about sexual issues.

CM: No, but that’s the way they worded it.

LC: Well, it’s an interesting phraseology. They could probably work on that.

CM: I think they have since then.

LC: I’m sure. I’m sure. But your sense was that what they were conveying, and
of course correct me if I’m not getting this accurately. That they were saying that the
Women’s Army Corps was a secondary and supportive institution to the wider US Army?

CM: Yes.
And you got that very clearly?

Yeah.

Tell me about going up to Fort Dix. Do you remember that trip?

Well, I remember being flown there, and that was interesting in itself in one aspect, because we had to go from Alabama to Atlanta, from Atlanta to... where was it that we landed? Oh, Newark.

That sounds right.

I'm just trying to think if it was Newark or Pennsylvania that we landed in and then drove across. I think it was Philadelphia that we landed it, and then we drove across to Fort Dix.

Ok. And obviously Fort Dix is huge. What was your first impression of it?

Well, Fort McClellan wasn't too far behind that as far as being in size, so... it looked like just about any other fort to me as far as I was concerned, at that time it looked a little bit more spacious than McClellan did.

What did you find in the way of barracks and the accommodations you were going to be living in?

Well, we had what they called the women's barrack, which was one big huge building, and then behind the women's barrack was a little courtyard and then behind that was another identical little building, but it housed men. And then there was another courtyard and behind them was another building that was with men. And those two buildings were men that were going through radio school.

Did you see those guys?

Yeah, I worked in the second one in the kitchen.

So you would see the guys on, basically on the base and in the nearby barracks all the time?

Oh yeah, and at that particular base we weren't allowed to go to the EM Club, which was the Enlisted Men's Club. We ended up going to the NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer) Club. The women were sent to the NCO Club because they didn't want the women to be in the Enlisted Men's Club.

And why was that?
CM: Just something political I guess with them. They wanted us to be more in
with the non-coms because of...I don’t really know. I’m trying to think as to why they
said it, but they just didn’t want us with the recruits and the people that were going
through school.

LC: In any kind of like leisurely or sort of that kind of environment, rather than
something else.

CM: Yeah, it was bad enough they were behind us and could see in our windows.

LC: Could they see in the windows?

CM: Oh yeah.

LC: Did they look in the windows?

CM: Oh yeah.

LC: Do you remember that, too?

CM: Oh yeah. (Laughing) There would be a whole floor totally dark.

LC: No kidding.

CM: Oh yeah. And then every once in a while, we could look down and see the
ones on the first and second floor, because I was up on the third floor. And we could
look down and see the guys, what they were doing when they were on the first and
second floor, and that was fun to watch, too.

LC: What kinds of things could you see, Colleen?

CM: (Laughing) Well, naked bodies going through and...

LC: Ok. This is actually quite extraordinary that...I mean, the image one has is
that there was complete separation and that they’d, the military did everything they could
to keep the guys separate from the women. But it sounds like...

CM: Only during basic.

LC: Ok.

CM: Only during basic.

LC: So once you were at advanced or beyond, that wasn’t going to operate as
completely?

CM: Right, because we had men come into our barracks, and they were supposed
to yell, “Man on the floor,” but a lot of times it seemed like they whispered it. Or,
because of my odd hours as a cook, I would come into my particular end of the barracks
and walk down to my area and strip my clothes, put my robe or something on and walk out of my bay area, and notice that there was a man on the floor. I mean…

LC: Right, you just turn around and boom, he’s right there.
CM: And went, “Oh.” And then go on in and go take the shower and come back. I mean, you know.

LC: And so there was visiting going on then?
CM: Well, they weren’t supposed to be visiting. They were supposed to be working.

LC: But you know, off the books, outside of regs, there was some visiting going on?
CM: No, actually there wasn’t.
LC: Ok.
CM: Ok.

CM: No, they kept to the thing. It’s just that they’d quietly be very quiet in the corner there and did not say anything because…and it’s only those of us that were in cook school that had the odd hours. Everybody else was 9:00 to 5:00.

LC: Now how strange were your hours? What kinds of hours did you have to pull?
CM: Well, sometimes they were from 3:30 in the morning until 10:00 in the morning, and then they would be from 10:00 in the morning until 6:30, 7:00 at night.

LC: How much of what you were doing in cook school was actually hands-on with the equipment and all of that? I mean, was that a big part of what you were doing?
CM: That was the majority of it. The first couple of weeks were more going into how they went about preparing things, how they read the recipes and how we put things together and then learning how to make certain things from…like how to make mayonnaise from scratch and a lot of things from scratch and that kind of thing. But most of it was just learning how they prepared the food.

LC: And of course the objective here is to be able at least to prepare food on a huge scale.
CM: Yes.
LC: Right. I mean, we’re talking about institutional-sized preparations and products, basically.
CM: Which actually carried on later on in life too, because I learned that you
don’t have to, you know when they tell you a teaspoon of this or a half a cup of that and
how people sit there and they put these half-cup measurements and then they scrape of
the top so it’s just exact?

LC: Yes.

CM: Well, you don’t have to do that.

LC: Ok, you can just wing it a little bit?

CM: Yeah. A little bit less or a little bit more is not going to make all that big of
a difference.

LC: Ok.

CM: And that was just some interesting things that we learned.

LC: Were there other things that interested you that kept your interest and focus?

I mean, was this enough to keep you interested?

CM: Oh yeah. Everything was all interesting. It was just interesting to learn at
all. I enjoyed it.

LC: And how long were you actually at Dix?

CM: Let’s see, I arrived at Fort Dix I believe, when was it…was it somewhere
the first part of October. And I was there; I arrived back at Fort McClellan, Women’s
Army Corps headquarters on December 9. So I was there for at least a good eight weeks.

LC: Ok. And when you got your, when you had completed the cook school and
you got your orders to go back to Fort McClellan, how did you receive that news?

CM: I was not too happy. (Laughing) I was like, “Oh, no. Back at McClellan?”

But when I found out it was headquarters, I was a little bit relieved. At least it wasn’t
back in basic training.

LC: Now what did you know about headquarters such that it made a difference to
you?

CM: Permanent duty personnel. People that were going through clerical school
and also the officers. Feeding the officers.

LC: Ok. So this was actually, in the scope of things, probably a pretty good
posting? Or you came around to feel that way?

CM: Yes, it was a very good posting. Yeah.
LC: When you got back to Alabama, you had now completed your advanced training, and where were you billeted?
CM: At the headquarters area.
LC: Ok, and can you describe that area?
CM: Well, it was the same as basic, only just at a different section.
LC: Ok.
CM: And I was put in with another girl. We shared an area. A bay area and the bay areas were actually divided by dividers and curtains.
LC: Ok, and there were two women in each bay then? Is that fair?
CM: Yes.
LC: Ok. And then with a common, like bathroom and shower area down the…?
CM: Down the hall, yes.
LC: Ok. And how many bays on…I mean, this is just if you recall. How many bays on a hallway? Was it long?
CM: On one side, I believe there were like six of them. The other side there were six, approximately.
LC: So you got maybe twenty-four at full complement then? Twenty-four on a hallway? Something like that.
CM: Yeah, approximately about twenty-four women per area. I mean, per section.
LC: And you were, when you first arrived back there you were sharing your bay with who? Can you tell us her name?
CM: Oh, I don’t remember her name anymore.
LC: Ok. And what was…?
CM: I think her name was Susan, I think. But I don’t remember her last name, it’s been so long.
LC: That’s ok. Any idea where she was from?
CM: She was…where was she from? She was from the south. Where was she from? I know she was a real Southern Baptist.
LC: Ok.
CM: I think she was from like…she was from Georgia. Something like that. I
think she was from Georgia.

LC: Had you come across any, speaking of the south and of course this is 1965,
the Civil Rights movement is an important feature. Had you come across any instances
of racial tensions or anything that had that kind of edge on it so far?

CM: Yeah. Oh yeah. (Laughing)

LC: What had you seen? If you can tell us.

CM: I can tell you because I made such boo-boos.

LC: Ok. Well, all right. If it’s you telling about you, that’s fair.

CM: Well, what do you want? I was considered a Northerner, you know.


CM: Oh, yeah. I was going home on leave and I was traveling by bus and we
were going through Mississippi. And the bus stopped at this little place so we could get
you know, something to eat. And I got off the bus and I walked into the restroom. I saw
where it said women. And I walked in there, and I saw a lot of colored people, didn’t pay
any attention. They were looking at me kind of funny, but I figured, “Well, I’m in
uniform, you know. Maybe that’s why they’re looking at me.” And all of a sudden, this
girl that I was on the bus with came in and grabbed me. She said, “You’re not supposed
to be in here.” And I said, “What do you mean I’m not supposed to be here? It’s the
women’s bathroom.” “Oh, no, no, no, no, no, it’s the colored person’s bathroom.” I
went, “What?” She said, “You got to go where there’s whites.” And I said, “Oh?
Where’s that?” So she took me to it. I didn’t know.

LC: So you were clueless about like segregated facilities?

CM: Totally clueless. Totally clueless. I, you know…it just never, ever, ever
dawned on me. I wasn’t brought up that way, and I had no idea of what it was like down
in the south and to me it didn’t make any difference.

LC: What did you come away from that incident thinking? I mean, you just
discovered that in Mississippi at least at that time, you didn’t you know…there was one
room for black people and one for white. You know, what did you come away from in
that situation?
CM: I was in shock. I never, ever...I guess maybe because I was raised in a
different area. You know in Oregon and stuff. I was never...it never dawned on me
about this racial stuff, you know? And I couldn’t understand it. I couldn’t understand
why they were being treated like that. And it just was something that I just couldn’t
comprehend.

LC: Did you feel like you had to kind of, you know, fall in as it were and do what
was done? Just not to upset?

CM: I never fell in and did what was supposed to be done. (Laughing)

LC: Ok. So...

CM: Not in that. Not in that. I was like an outspoken person.

LC: Ok.

CM: Because I complained. I complained to this girl that was dragging me from
one bathroom to the other.

LC: Do you remember anything of what you said?

CM: I don’t want to repeat what I said.

LC: All right.

CM: My language was not all that nice.

LC: Ok.

CM: Because I was very upset over the fact that people were being treated like
that. And at that time, of course in the military, you learned all kinds of language that I
had never learned before.

LC: So this was an opportunity for you to just exercise those new words.

CM: Oh yeah.

LC: And it sounds like you did so.

CM: Oh, I did. I did. And loudly, where people were looking at me.

LC: Yeah, I bet that drew some attention.

CM: Yeah, well, I’m still known for that.

LC: Ok. Ok. But this was at some point in 1965, then? This was during that
time period?

CM: Yeah. I think if I had been more wise about the...I found out, of course,
more later on about the segregation and stuff, but it wasn’t that way in the military.
LC: And you didn’t see any edges on comments or anything like that that made you think, “Wow, what’s that about?”
CM: No. We would just tease each other about northerners and southerners and westerners and easterners and about the accents and stuff, but never once thought about the race issue.

LC: Had there been any African-Americans in your basic class?
CM: Not in my basic class, no.
LC: Ok. What about in cook school?
CM: There were, mixed with the guys. But it was only white women that I was with at that time, but there were black and white men in the school, too.

LC: Any Hispanic women?
CM: Oh, lots of Hispanic women.
LC: Ok. And in your basic class, do you remember anyone? Not necessarily their names, but just whether there were those women there.
CM: Yeah, there was a couple girls from Texas.
LC: Ok.
CM: Yeah.
LC: So, and you didn’t pick up on any problems that they were encountering?
CM: No. Nobody paid any attention to it.
LC: Yeah, that’s interesting.
CM: Nobody cared. We were, actually I think we were more concerned about being soldiers than we were concerned about who was black, white, green, yellow, or indifferent. Like I said, we would tease each other about our accents or about where we come from a little bit, but it was just all in fun type of thing. It wasn’t anything to be nasty or to be segregating or anything like that.

LC: Yeah, and you know, even if we think back now, it’s almost hard to imagine that kind of world because things have changed so much with identity politics and all the rest.
CM: Oh, this politically correct thing that drives me nuts.
LC: Well, I’ve made a note that I should ask you about that later on, too.
CM: (Laughing). Look, I think my father had a good word for me when I was a kid growing up. I’m a rebel-rouser.

LC: Shaking the tree, huh?

CM: Uh-huh.

LC: Well, I’m sure he knew you very well. It sounds like he probably hit it right on.

CM: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I still am. I still am to this day. I mean, I don’t take any kind of crap from anybody. I didn’t then, I don’t do it now. I stand up for not only my rights, but I’ll fight other people for someone else’s right. And I’ve done that before, too.

LC: Are there any instances that are coming to your mind right now about where you had to go out on a limb for somebody?

CM: Oh yeah. I went out on a limb for my sister, got into a couple of fights. I was fourteen years old and I ended up putting a girl in the hospital because I got into a fight because she did something to my sister.

LC: You put her in the hospital?

CM: Yeah.

LC: What happened to her? I shouldn’t say that in the passive voice. What’d you do to her, Colleen?

CM: I beat the crap out of her. Let’s see, I kind of smacked her in the jaw a little bit, and I’m being…you know…

LC: You’re being nice at this point.

CM: Yeah. And a few ribs and kind of like really just beat her up pretty good. Well, she really did a nasty thing onto my sister. She really took her fingers and her nails and scratched right down my sister’s face from the forehead all the way down.

LC: Ooh.

CM: And it really set me off, of course, and I went after her.

LC: Wow. I bet that never happened again to your sister. I bet that never happened again.

CM: No, I always came to defense for family, sister, friends. I’m just that way. I’m…if someone is being wronged, I’m going to step in.
LC: And that was, you feel that was as you’ve suggested, that was always your
nature?
CM: Yeah. Always my nature. I came out east, and I’ll never forget. I was in
the Newark airport as a matter of fact and I had just arrived out east, and I was being
picked up. Well we’re heading towards the baggage claim area when some guy was
running down the runway area inside, you know, and he had grabbed someone’s
pocketbook. And I stuck out my foot to trip him.
LC: Did you really?
CM: Yes. And the guy I was with grabbed me out of the way and he said, “You
don’t know if he’s got a knife or not!” I said, “I don’t care.” He stole a purse; I was
going to stop him, let a cop come and catch him. “What’d you stop me for?” I got mad.
LC: You got mad at the guy you were with?
CM: At the guy I was with, yeah.
LC: “Don’t tell me what to do,” that kind of thing?
CM: Yeah.
LC: “I’ve got this handled, don’t help me.”
CM: Exactly. “I know what I’m doing.”
LC: Colleen, let’s take a break for a minute.
CM: Sure.
LC: Colleen, in a few days after you arrived back at Fort McClellan, you had
gotten settled into your new place? Your new bay there with Susan, I guess?
CM: Yes.
LC: You had a pretty horrific experience, and I wonder if you want to tell me
anything about that?
CM: Sure. It was just after Christmas and I was very, very lonely. It was kind of
like right after Christmas. As a matter of fact, it was my sister’s birthday. And I decided
I didn’t want to be alone, so I went to the Enlisted Men’s Club, the EM Club. And met
some people that I had met while going to a couple of the service clubs, and we were
playing pinball and having a few beers and dancing, carrying on, having a good time.
And this one guy, his name was Mike. I had known him through the service club, and I
was sitting with him and we were you know, having a nice time. And the club was to
close around eleven o’clock and we had to catch the bus to go back to...that would take us back to our barracks area. But also that EM club was not too far, really from my own barracks. And it’s warm, it’s down south, it wasn’t real cold at that time, and so we decided to walk instead of taking the bus. We were going to walk back to the barracks, and to tell you the truth, I really don’t remember whose idea it was first to walk, whether it was mine or whether it was his. I think it was more his than it was mine. Anyway, we started walking after we got down maybe oh, maybe about six hundred feet or so from the clubhouse, from the club, when a couple of guys, two or three guys came up from behind and with Mike’s help, they jumped me and they pushed me off into the woods.

LC: Mike was a part of this then, it was clear to you?

CM: Yes. Yes. It was a setup. And I remember of course screaming and fighting them and being hit in the jaw and knocked down to the ground. I remember them raping me and then I also remember them knocking me out again. This time, I was out for quite a while because I don’t remember what happened other than the fact that it was all over with and I had come to. And I was of course extremely hysterical.

LC: Were you alone?

CM: I was alone. They were gone. I was not conscious really of my own body. I was just kind of conscious of knowing that it had happened to me and I was very hysterical about it and I remember through my hysteria, I ran towards the road and as I did, I ran literally into the side of a Volkswagen Beetle and bounced off the car and in there were three MPs (Military Police). I think I scared the hell out of them of course, after bouncing off the car, and they stopped, they picked me up, and took me to the hospital.

LC: Were they in uniform and on duty, do you know?

CM: They were off duty.

LC: Off duty, ok.

CM: Yeah.

LC: Did you let them sort of take over there for a minute and just take care of you?

CM: Yeah. Yeah. Well, they told me that they were MPs and at first, they weren’t quite too sure what to do with me, but yet they knew I was all messed up. I
mean, I was a mess bodily. I didn’t know that I had black and blues and a black eye and
all this other kind of stuff you know, all over me. I had no idea that I was hurt.

LC: Sure.

CM: And so they took me to the hospital and I got there and they took me into an
examining room and the doctors examined me and took down my testimony and put it in
my medical records, and then I was given ice packs and I don’t even remember half the
stuff that went on, to be honest with you.

LC: Sure, of course.

CM: And then the next thing I remember is about somewhere around 1:30 or so
in the morning, my CO (Commanding Officer) came down and she was very angry with
me. And I remember her statement to me was, “I got called down here because of this?
In the middle of the night?” And I kind of like, I just looked at her and felt very
strangely. I still wasn’t thinking straight. But I just looked at her like, “Well aren’t you
supposed to help me?”

LC: Right.

CM: “I thought maybe you were supposed to be like on my side.” But the
realization of that kind of like hit me more the next morning as to, “Gee, she’s not going
to help me. Now who in the hell am I going to get to help me?” So I called my uncle.
The one that had been in the military, and I said to my Uncle Gene, I said, “What should I
do?” And he told me I should go to the JAG (Judge Advocate General), and well, I never
got a chance to get there because this was of course over the weekend. That following
Monday, I was taken and picked up by the CID (Criminal Investigation Division).

LC: And this was on Monday?

CM: This was on the following Monday, yeah. I was picked up by the CID and
taken in for questioning, and that was from 7:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the
afternoon with no breaks in a small room with a light shining in my face and two men in
suits just, I barely could figure or see who they were. And I admitted, I told them that I
knew two of the men that did it and from what company they were, and I was then
escorted over to the company, went through a lineup. The guys, the four guys admitted
to it after I identified two of them. And the next thing I know, I was taken back for
interrogation and then they released me back to my barracks around 4:00 in the afternoon
and then they picked me up again the next morning, and this went on for six weeks. It was interrogation.

LC: So every business day basically? Is that fair?
CM: Yeah.

LC: And the same interrogators or the same CID?
CM: Same ones. Over and over and over with the same questions, with threats, with threatening to throw me out of the military if I didn’t sign a paper saying that I wouldn’t prosecute, and of course I was stubborn and I stood my ground and I refused to sign the paper. And they kept on until I finally did sign the paper. I gave in and decided…I’ll never forget what I said to them. I said, “You may not want to punish them.” I said, “But the man upstairs will. He’ll take care of them for me.” And that’s all I said and I signed the paper and they took me back to my barracks.

LC: And Colleen, how much time, how many weeks? Any idea?
CM: About six weeks.

LC: And what’s going on for you in the evenings and at night? Are you sleeping? Are you talking to anybody?
CM: I wasn’t allowed to talk to anybody. I was ostracized. After being ostracized from everywhere, I was taken out of my one area of my barracks and put down into a private area. I wasn’t allowed to associate with anyone. I wasn’t allowed to really go out for a while. I couldn’t do anything except go to my church or go to…

LC: Ok, go ahead, Colleen.
CM: Alright. So anyway, after I was moved down to the other barracks, the other area of the barracks and I was called into the CO’s office and was told by her that anything that looked like the outfit that I had on that night, cowboy boots, any kind of boots. At that night, I had on those old go-go boots at that time. Shorts skirts I wasn’t allowed to wear anymore.

LC: Did you?
CM: And if I went out, I wasn’t allowed of course to go to the EM club. I could only do…anything that I wanted to do, I could go off post to do it, but I wasn’t allowed to go do it in a service club or any of the other things on post.
LC: Colleen, let me just stop you there for just a moment and ask if first of all, can you say the CO’s name?
CM: I don’t remember her name.
LC: Ok.
CM: It actually blanked out of my mind.
LC: Any idea what her rank was?
CM: Yeah, she was a Captain.
LC: Ok. And were you sort of gleaning from what was going on that orders had been issued to other personnel to stay away from you?
CM: Yeah, I knew of them. I knew that they were, that people were not allowed to associate with me.
LC: Ok. They were just supposed to stay away.
CM: Yeah.
LC: Did anyone…?
CM: Disobey it?
LC: Yeah.
CM: Yeah.
LC: Ok.
CM: I had a girlfriend that did disobey it, and she and I used to hang out together, but off post. We didn’t hang out together on post; in fact, she and I went out to the bars or to other places in Anniston, Alabama.
LC: Yes. Did you ever have a sense that when you were off post that you were being observed?
CM: No.
LC: Ok.
CM: No. If I was, I wasn’t paying any attention to it. I just did what I wanted to do anyway. When I was off post, I was off duty, so what the heck?
LC: Ok. Colleen, can you tell me a little bit more about the administrative restrictions? You talked about the clothes and restrictions on your associations. What about your movements on the post? Anything around that?
CM: Well, I just basically wasn’t allowed to do anything but other than to do my job, of which about a year later I ended up getting removed from. But I kind of just started doing my own thing and going off post.

LC: Were you…you know, were you given any kind of support at all? Counseling? Anything?

CM: Nothing. No. I wasn’t given any kind of support at all. Even with all of the interrogation and everything that I went through, no one came to my aid at all. For anything. I was just left on my own.

LC: And did you know at that time or did you learn subsequently anything about the disposition of the case?

CM: I didn’t find out about anything until years later.

LC: Like how many?

CM: Oh. Actually, I found out more when 20/20 did their investigation than I knew about anything else.

LC: So this would be 1995, ’96?

CM: ’96, yeah.

LC: What did you find out?

CM: Well that’s when…because I knew that I had been interrogated for a long time. I lost a couple of months as far as awareness, but I wasn’t sure how long the interrogation actually lasted until 20/20 did the investigation, and they’re the ones that found out it had been six weeks.

LC: So they had been able to unearth some paperwork or something? Some documents?

CM: Yeah. They were able to delve into it a lot deeper than I was able to. I was lucky though in one aspect, because my medical records had been…the incident had been written down.

LC: Yes, you mentioned that the night that it happened, the physician that you saw wrote something down.

CM: Right. He wrote down a couple of pages into my medical history.

LC: And how did that end up being a good thing?
CM: Well, it was advantageous because, for proving what happened to me when I went for my disability, I had it in black and white.

LC: Tell me, can you explain something about the disability issue, the process that you were involved in? And when was this? Was this in the mid ‘90s or late ‘90s?

CM: No, this was actually in the mid to late ‘80s.

LC: Ok.

CM: It was just a very funny thing; because when I got out of the service, we didn’t have…women at that time didn’t get any benefits from the military.

LC: Any benefits?

CM: None whatsoever.

LC: No access to GI Bill, no access to housing?

CM: No. Absolutely nothing. Absolutely nothing until 1973. And so I never knew that I could get benefits from the VA (Department of Veteran Affairs) until I was out fishing with a World War II veteran, disabled veteran, and we had become close friends. We called him Pops. And he and I, he had come over to my house one day for dinner, and we were just talking about military stuff, and I kind of told him what I had happen to me in the military. He was kind of like a confidante. And he said to me, “Do you know you have a case?” I said, “A case for what?” He said, “You have a case for disability.” I said, “I do?” He says, “Yeah. Did you know you could use the VA?” “No.” So anyway, he kind of took me in hand and introduced me to the right people, the DAV, the Disabled American Veterans, and they helped put my case in.

LC: Really?

CM: Yeah. And so luckily when we got…also too at that time was Congressman Molinari from Staten Island.

LC: Yes.

CM: And he got my records for me. And from there, it just went, we went through the process, and they gave me ten percent.

LC: On the basis of what kinds of injuries or…?

CM: For Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

LC: Ok, PTSD.
CM: Yeah. And they acknowledged the fact that I had had an ectopic pregnancy from the rape and I had the surgery. So they gave me zero percent for female problems and ten percent for PTSD, and I started getting therapy then. And I knew that there was something wrong with me prior to all of this, but didn’t know exactly what it was because I was just becoming not what I was. I was becoming extremely violent. I was becoming very jumpy. I would come off the wall too easily. Too easily, my temper would be set off too easy. And I didn’t like the type of person that I was becoming, but I didn’t understand what was wrong with me. I just knew something wasn’t right, but I didn’t know what it was. And then when my friend spotted it and said that I really had a good case and that I could help, medical help. And so I jumped at it. And we pushed on and pushed on, and eight years later, I got my hundred percent. And now I’m considered permanently disabled.

LC: So when was that one hundred percent finally actually reached?


LC: Ok. Was that the end of sort of a long struggle for you, or was it sort of a moment of victory or was it just like, “Well, it’s about time.” What was your response when you finally got that determination?

CM: It was more like, “It’s about time.” I had one psychiatrist ask me, now that certain laws have been passed, would I want to go back and prosecute and all that kind of stuff and I said, “No. I don’t want to do it. It’s too long ago and it dredges up just too much stuff, and I don’t want to go through it again.” And so I left it.

LC: And do you still feel that way now?

CM: Yeah. Yeah. I’m kind of more like, I’m turning everything that was bad for me more into a positive thing and I look back at it as, if this and that and the other hadn’t happened to me, I wouldn’t be where I’m at now. And so like I said, I always try to look at the positive side of things. I may get down for a while and it may hit me pretty hard with things that I go through, but again, I can get back on my feet and try to see positiveness out of things. I think it’s also because of my belief in God. That helps me a lot, too.

LC: And has that been constant, or what?

CM: That’s been constant all my life.
LC: There were no times when that came, you know, was shadowed, or…?
CM: No, never.
LC: Really?
CM: Never. Never shadowed about it, although I’m not a practicing Catholic anymore. I stopped that in college. But it’s more just like, I believe in my heart and I believe in a god, and I believe that He’s always there for me. He’s always helped me; no matter how far down things have gotten, it’s always helped. I just leave things to Him. And like I said, it’s just a very strong faith that I have. I think that helps a lot.
LC: Yeah. And it seems that that’s you know, energized you to pursue things that are for your own good, like the disability process and so on. You know, that you’re stuck with that, too. I mean, eight years is an awful long time to, you know to go through any administrative process.
CM: Well, I also feel like I was kind of like breaking ground, so to speak.
LC: What do you mean by that?
CM: At the time I was doing that, they didn’t think women could get PTSD.
LC: Now was this from the VA generally?
CM: Yeah. And I think because I pursued it a little bit more and then later on, in with the organization, it seemed to like, be more acceptable.
LC: Now by organization, you mean what?
CM: With Women Veterans of America.
LC: Right.
CM: So it was just…like I said, it was a stepping stone.
LC: And also as you’ve said, paved the way for…
CM: Others.
LC: Other women.
CM: Yeah, because I’ve helped other women to get their percentages and to make them persevere, to continue no matter how hard it may seem and no matter how small of a percentage that they get at the very beginning, I said, “It’s your toe in the door. Just keep on pursuing. Keep all your records, keep on, and just don’t give up.”
LC: And Colleen, you mentioned to me earlier that in addition to the PTSD, you also have some lingering physical problems.
CM: Yes.
LC: From the attack.
CM: From the rape, yeah.
LC: And you also mentioned briefly that you became pregnant from this, but it was an ectopic pregnancy.
CM: Correct.
LC: Ok, so you had to have some kind of surgery at the time during 1966?
CM: Right. And it wasn’t noticed until almost nine months later.
LC: Wow.
CM: I almost had the gangrenous in the tube from the pregnancy.
LC: Were you being monitored or followed up with medically after the attack?
CM: Yeah, I kept going back and forth to doctors, because I kept telling them there’s something wrong, and I knew something was wrong, but I didn’t know what it was. I had erratic periods, I had pains and stuff, and they kept telling me it was PMS, and “Oh, you’re just a female.” And then they told me that I was like…then they put me down in my records as someone who wanted to become pregnant, and…
LC: Ok, that was actually written in your record at some point?
CM: Yeah.
LC: Because you came in and said, “Look, there’s something going on, and I don’t know what it is, but can you help me?”
CM: Yeah. I took all kinds of pregnancy tests because I kept feeling like I was pregnant, but I was getting my period. I didn’t know what was going on. And the test would come out negative and they would do a second one and it would come out positive and they would do another one and it came out negative…
LC: So they decided it was negative?
CM: Yeah.
LC: Did you ever have an opportunity; were you ever given an opportunity to see a female medical worker besides a nurse? I mean, did you ever see a female physician?
CM: No.
LC: And was that ever offered to you as a possibility?
CM: Not at that time, no.
LC: Ok. So you had to have, was it more or less emergency surgery then?
CM: Yes, it was.
LC: Ok. And how long were you hospitalized?
CM: Ten days.
LC: And was that surgery conducted...did that all take place at Fort McClellan?
CM: Yes.
LC: When did the surgery happen actually? Was it August or September or
something?
CM: July 30.
LC: Ok.
CM: As a matter of fact, I had married my first husband on July 15, and I was on
my...I was just getting to the end of our honeymoon. (Laughing)
LC: That’s lovely.
CM: We were at a motel outside the fort, and my husband was to be stationed at
Fort Eustis, and so we were there at this hotel, and in the middle of the night I woke up
with severe pains. Now he was a Medic, so he called for the fort ambulance. They came
and got me, and then they put me in the hospital, and then two days later I was operated
on emergency surgery.
LC: Were they essentially doing exploratory surgery or did they by that time...?
CM: Yes, exploratory. They had no idea what was going on.
LC: Wow. That’s scary. I mean, it’s scary for you, and probably no doubt was
scary for your husband. Now he had been in Vietnam, was that right?
CM: Yes.
LC: Was he returned from a tour?
CM: Yes. He was sent back. He was shot out of a helicopter and he was then
sent to Germany for recovery. From Germany, he was shipped back home. He was to be
stationed at Fort Eustis, Virginia and when he got home, I didn’t know...we were high
school sweethearts.
LC: I see, ok.
CM: And neither one of us knew that we had joined the service because we had
broken up.
LC: Sure.
CM: And when he got home, he called my mother, and my mom said, “Oh, no, she’s in Alabama. She’s in the Army.” And he called me where I was and got in touch with me. I was lifeguarding at the pool and I realized I still cared for him. I thought I loved him at that time, because like I said, we were high school sweethearts.

LC: Right.
CM: Well, he came down and a couple months later, we got married.
LC: Was he actually able to stay in Alabama during that interim period?
CM: Yes, he was on a special leave at that time, and so he was able to stay with me. And I’ll tell you, it was good that he was with me, because when they went to put the IV in me, they couldn’t find my veins, and he grabbed it from the nurse and put it in.
LC: He handled it himself?
CM: Yup.
LC: Wow. That’s worrying, actually. That’s quite worrying.
CM: (Laughing) Yeah, but he grabbed it because they couldn’t…well, I have trouble getting things and finding the right spots anyway, half the time. And so he just knew what to do and he grabbed it instead of them poking me and he just grabbed it and hit my wrist with his fingers and up popped the vein and in it went.
LC: Right.
CM: (Laughing)
LC: He must have been…I mean; it must have been that he was playing some role of supporting you during this time period.
CM: Yeah, he did. Oh yeah, he was a great support. It was kind of ironic, too, because when we got married, both he and I were considered society’s catch, back in Seattle and in Oregon, so there was a big huge society page about our wedding in the military.
LC: Really?
CM: Yes.
LC: How did that make you feel? Was it strange?
CM: No. It’s something I grew up with all the time.
LC: Ok.
CM: So it didn’t make me any more strange. I just… I mean, Jimmy was like, nonchalant about it, I was nonchalant about it. We really could care less. That was his mother’s doing and my mother’s doing.

LC: Oh I see, right, that was their thing that they were doing.

CM: Yeah. We were in Alabama. Nobody else was there but us and a couple friends.

LC: Did you have to get permission from the CO or anything like that?

CM: To get married?

LC: Yeah.

CM: Yeah.

LC: How did that go down? I can only imagine.

CM: I had no problem at that time, and…

LC: Was this the same CO?

CM: No, it was a different CO.

LC: Ok.

CM: And I had no problems about getting married, and the only thing that was kind of funny was because my… Jimmy was only twenty at the time. I was only nineteen, and he had to get written permission from his parents in order to get married.

LC: And I presume that really wasn’t an obstacle? They were fine with it, because they had at least known you or known of you, certainly.

CM: Yes. Yeah. We were, we went to Blanchett High School together.

LC: Ok, so you were…?

CM: His sister was a freshman when I was a senior at Holy Names Academy. And that’s when we hooked back up again.

LC: Ok, so there was a long history there?

CM: Of our families? Yeah. Yeah. Oh yeah. Jimmy and I went to the prom. I mean, you know. It’s just all those kinds of things. We were very serious in high school.

LC: Ok and it probably was no surprise to anybody that you decided then to get married?

CM: No, it was none whatsoever. No surprise at all. It was just that, it was the talk of the town.
LC: You were the toast of the town, even though you weren’t there.
CM: Right.
LC: Well Colleen, let me ask you. When did you talk to your mom about what had happened in December? Did she know about it?
CM: No.
LC: Ok. Did she ever know about it?
CM: Not for a number of years.
LC: Were you protecting her by not telling her? Or why didn’t you tell her?
CM: I had a hard time with it at that time myself. The only person I could talk to at that time was my uncle.
LC: Ok.
CM: Because he had been in the military and…
LC: Yeah, that’s interesting, yeah.
CM: And I asked him for advice.
LC: For help, yeah. You asked him for help.
CM: Yeah, and I called him. And I didn’t know what to do at that time, and he was the only one…he said he personally couldn’t do anything, but he told me what to do. And of course like I said, I never got there.
LC: Right. Right. And did Jimmy know about it, then?
CM: Yeah, I told Jimmy about it.
LC: And after you got out of the hospital then, did things seem to be looking up? I mean, did you feel more positive, or not so much?
CM: Well, I did for a while. Jimmy went back to Fort Eustis, and I had applied for a compassionate transfer to be with him. There was a spot for me at Fort Eustis as a cook, and we were waiting on…well, Fort Eustis was waiting on the paperwork, and it never got there.
LC: Any idea why?
CM: The 1st Sergeant.
LC: This is the woman who had come into the…?
CM: No, this was just the 1st Sergeant, but she had been there in the office all this time.
LC: Through the whole thing?
CM: Through the whole thing. And it never left her desk. And I put in what they called a transfer. I put in and for a while and I waited and waited and didn’t hear anything, so I put in for another one and waited and waited. I put it in three times.
LC: What was her motivation? Can you speculate or do you know?
CM: I really don’t know what her motivation was, other than the fact; I don’t think she liked me too well.
LC: So she would rather keep you at McClellan?
CM: I don’t know, really, truthfully.
LC: That’s just weird.
CM: It just was one of those things, and finally I had told my husband, I said…well, I talked to my roommate. My ex-roommate. She worked for clerical training. She worked at headquarters. And she looked up my records and found out that when I originally entered the military, I had signed a paper, and it was the last time that year that they ever offered this type of thing, that if you got married while you were in the military, you could get out on marriage. Get an honorable discharge. And in all the papers I had signed going into the military, that was one of them I had signed.
LC: But you just had no memory of having done that? It was just one of the thousand things?
CM: Yeah, who knew, you know? Sign your name, sign your name, sign your name. I signed my name. You know, who knew? Anyway, she looked it up and she found out that I had signed those papers, so I could get out on marriage. Well being that I wasn’t getting the compassionate transfer, and we had…my mess sergeant and I weren’t getting along too well.
LC: You mentioned that she actually harassed you. She was…
CM: She harassed me because I was married.
LC: Really?
CM: Yeah.
LC: What was that about?
CM: Well, she was gay.
LC: Ok.
CM: And she was proud of her being gay, but she took it out on anybody else who wasn’t.

LC: Ok.

CM: And of course that I was married, she wasn’t too happy over that, and there was just a number of little petty issues.

LC: Ok.

CM: And I don’t know if it related to what happened to me or what, I really don’t know.

LC: She had come into the scene after the attack though, correct? I mean, she had not been there?

CM: Yeah, it was after. I believe it was after. I’m not positive. Yeah, it was after, because I remember I had Sergeant Brown before her. And I had Sergeant Brown for like about six months or so, so the yeah, this other Sergeant came out. She had…I’m not going to mention her name.

LC: That’s fine. Can you…and I don’t know whether you would want to do this either, but how did you know she was gay? How did you know she was a lesbian?

CM: Well, she was very open about it.

LC: In what way? I mean, did she actually say to you something?

CM: No, no. It was just a way of knowing. It’s hard to pinpoint, but I know when someone’s gay and when they’re not, and it’s just from being around it, you know

LC: It was apparent to you?

CM: Oh yeah. Very apparent.

LC: Ok.

CM: And she was…she had her own little clique.

LC: Ok, so there were other women involved that probably more or less hung around with her or…and if they weren’t gay, they were at least friendly toward her?

CM: Yeah.

LC: Ok.

CM: She had her own little clique, and if you weren’t part of it, it didn’t matter. I wasn’t the only one she harassed. But she did pick on me a lot. And I think because I stood my ground more than anybody else. I didn’t back down.
LC: That sort of inflamed the situation?
CM: Pardon?
LC: That might have inflamed the situation or made her dig in as well?
CM: Well, yeah, because she called me in her office one day and she asked me why I joined the military and she was trying to figure out, I guess trying to figure me out. And I’ll never forget this one part, she said to me, she said, “You know Adams,” she says, “You make me laugh.” And with my smart mouth, I turned to her and I said, “Sergeant, people who laugh at other people are ignorant.” And then she stood up and she told me to get the f out.
LC: Did she really?
CM: Yes. Told me to get out of her office.
LC: That didn’t go very well.
CM: No. And then two days later I was called into the CO’s office and I was removed of my duties.
LC: And what did they then have you do? What did the CO place you?
CM: They had me sitting in front of the 1st Sergeant’s desk, twiddling my thumbs from 7:00 till 4:00.
LC: Now literally, they gave you nothing to do? What did the CO place you?
CM: Absolutely nothing.
LC: Just sit in a chair?
CM: Just sit there.
LC: And what? Stare at the wall? I mean…
CM: I guess. They wanted me to stare wherever. I started doing my own things. I would…I’d bring in pencil and paper and I’d start figuring out…I’d do mathematical equations and problems and try to figure out things just math. I would do a lot of mathematics while I was sitting there. Strange stuff.
CM: What kind of strange stuff?
CM: Well, I would take the capital letter I, you know, and then I would put it in three dimension and I would draw it three dimensionally and then try to figure out the degrees of the angles and then try to figure out, “Ok, well if this line is so long and the other is so long and then there’s this angle…”
LC: So you were sitting there, like being geometry head and technical drawing
girl and whatever else and just entertaining yourself?
CM: Yeah.
LC: And they had no purpose except to…
CM: Harass me.
LC: Ok.
CM: That’s all it was. Harassment. And that’s when I finally made the decision
to put in to go to leave the service.
LC: Was it your sense that…was she a 1st Sergeant?
CM: She was a Master Sergeant.
LC: Ok, she was a Master Sergeant. Was it your sense that she was pretty much
pushing the CO to like get…?
CM: I have no idea. I have no idea.
LC: Just wondering who was like, leading this charge to basically piss you off?
CM: I figure it was my mess sergeant and probably her. I really don’t know. I
do know that this one Lieutenant, they had me in her office before they called me into the
CO’s office to relieve me of my duties, and she told me quite candidly, “When you go in
there, do not smile.” And so I said, “Yes ma’am.” And this woman was a very nice
woman. She had been in the Navy for several years and then transferred to the Army,
and she was very nice. And so then after I was seen by the CO and given my orders that I
was to be relieved of my duty, I was sent back to the Lieutenant’s office, and so I asked
the Lieutenant if it were possible if I could go and pick up my personal items from the
mess hall, and before I could even ask her that actually, she said to me, she said, “You
can smile now.”
LC: Really?
CM: And then she let me go over and get my personal things, and when I went in
there, I let out a big, “Yippee!” Threw off my hairnet because, “I’m out of this place!”
LC: How long did it take for them to respond to what I gather you must have put
through as paperwork for a discharge?
CM: It didn’t take them long at all. I think I put that in, in probably, I think it
was in January, and I was out by March 10.
LC: And Colleen, thinking back on that time, did you have mixed feelings about what you were doing? I mean, you had been so...to use the phrase, jazzed about being in the Army. You had a very, very, incredibly difficult time being in the Army, but was there a sense of loss anyway?

CM: Yeah. I really and truthfully, when I first went into the military and when I went to the school before anything ever happened to me, I really wanted to make a career of it.

LC: Yeah.

CM: I had all intentions of trying to do my twenty-five years. I really wanted to do twenty-five years. I felt I was good for the military, I felt I would be an excellent soldier, all of that. But when I started getting these people just constantly fighting against me, it was like hitting a brick wall. And I said, “Well, I’m not going to butt my head against a brick wall anymore, I’m going to end up just doing more damage to myself, so I might as well get out.”

LC: And was that really the thought process then?

CM: Pretty much. Pretty much the thought process. And I said, you know, I said it’s just...like I said, “I’ll just start over doing something else.”

LC: Did you know what it might be?

CM: Nope.

LC: Did you talk to Jimmy about it?

CM: Actually, when I told him that I was putting to get out, he put to get out also. And he got out a week after I did. He got out on a medical discharge.

LC: Because he had been wounded.

CM: Yeah. So he got out, and he came, he drove from Virginia to Alabama, picked me up. We sold the car, we got some extra money from his father, and we packed our bags and jumped on a train and headed home.

LC: And what was the feeling during that trip? Were you both of you looking forward and thinking of possibilities, or was there some overhanging...?

CM: Yeah, we were looking forward actually of building a family maybe and having a good married life. He had a good job opportunity with his father because he could take over his truck business.
LC: What kind of business was it?

CM: His father had a trucking outlet for United Van Lines.

LC: Oh, he had a franchise?

CM: Yeah.

LC: Wow. Ok. So there was potentially an opportunity for him to move into, then.

CM: Yes.

LC: And what about you? What were you thinking?

CM: That’s when I was, when we went to Oregon, we got out and I figured I’d continue with my music.

LC: Ok and this is the point at which…?

CM: When we went to Seattle is when I went to play for the Seattle Philharmonic.

LC: Yeah, you began to get back into the scene, even to the point of working for the philharmonic, which is actually pretty…to step back into that is, well, I already said, that’s pretty awe-inspiring, really.

CM: Well, I had my violin with me in the service. I had it later and I played the violin for, at that time, a Lieutenant Colonel Hoisington, who was leaving to go to the White House area, to go to the Pentagon, actually. And so for her final going-away party from those of us on permanent duty in the offices and everything, I played at her reception.

LC: What was your impression of her? She’s quite a famous speaker. You know, that you knew her or knew of her. I get that she was a Lieutenant Colonel, so there was a lot of space there, but what was your impression of her?

CM: Well personally, I didn’t like the woman.

LC: Why is that?

CM: Because she didn’t do anything for me when things happened to me.

LC: And she was at the top of the food chain, basically?

CM: Yeah.

LC: Ok. And can you be certain that she knew?
CM: Of course she knew. She knew what was going on. Everybody kept saying to me, “You’ve got to keep things quiet. Try to keep things hidden, you know? Don’t want too much noise because Lieutenant Colonel Hoisington’s up for a promo.”

LC: Really? Why did you agree to play, then?

CM: I was ordered to.

LC: No kidding?

CM: Yes. But no, I didn’t have any choice.

LC: Who would have been between your CO and her? Do you remember any of those officers?

CM: My CO was directly under Lieutenant Colonel Hoisington.

LC: Ok, so it is inevitable that she knew?

CM: Oh, of course.

LC: Can you speculate or you know, based on your experience at the time or things you’ve learned subsequently, why would, aside from the suggestion that it might have screwed up her promotion plan or whatever that was, can you speculate on why she would have been just immobilized around taking care of this situation? Backing you up at least to any degree? I mean, even to the smallest degree?

CM: Oh, she didn’t want to make waves. You didn’t make waves in those days.

LC: Ok and this would have been upsetting to who?

CM: It would have been upsetting for her promotion because she couldn’t control her women.

LC: Ok. And you know, gender relations on the base, you know that kind of thing.

CM: Yes. All of that. Yeah. It was just one of those things; you know you just don’t create waves.

LC: And so just, as it were, stuff it?

CM: Suck it up. That’s it.

LC: Colleen, if you’d like, I wonder if we could just kind of jump forward to the 1980s when you decided to pursue the disability process because you had learned that it might be something you could have access to. What was your initial impression of the
Veteran’s Administration when you first started to make contact with them and put yourself forward as someone who had a claim?

CM: Well…

LC: And where were you living, actually at this time too?

CM: I was living on Staten Island at that time. And my third husband had passed, and I had met my fourth husband.

LC: And you had a couple of little kids at that point?

CM: And I had my children, yeah. And I was also, it was the normal workforce for me was starting to, I would say get to me.

LC: What were you doing?

CM: I was in the jewelry business for ten years.

LC: And were you an appraiser? Am I correct?

CM: Yes, licensed gemologist, and I was working at a store in Manhattan and my original company that I started with had sold out to another company and they brought in these people that were “their people” and they tried to make all kinds of changes and actually, they caused the company to really go downhill rather than make it better, and I always opened my mouth to things that they were doing, but that was just me anyway, and to bring attention to things that I already knew had been a tried thing and didn’t work.

LC: Yeah, so you’re trying to help them not reinvent the wheel or actually…?

CM: Right. I even came up with some ideas on certain types of sales tickets and combining them, and I drew them up and presented them to the company that I thought would be a better way of doing something.

LC: An innovation.

CM: Yeah. And they used part of the idea, but every time I’d go to a meeting, they would look at me like, “Let’s try this Colleen, before you pooh-pooh it.” And I would go, “Yeah, ok.”

LC: Right. Go along, go along.

CM: Yeah, “Alright, I’ll go along, we’ll see what happens.” I just, I happen to be very, I think lucky in having a natural-born business sense. I don’t know where it came from, it just happens to be one of those things, way of thinking.
LC: Ok, right.
CM: And can tell by working with the customers and knowing how customers
are and how they respond to things, and that was where I got my ideas and I would
present them and sometimes they were accepted and sometimes they weren’t, and
sometimes they’d take part of it. But then when the company sold out and things started
changing more and they started replacing those of us that had been there for a long time, I
knew my time was coming close to an end, and that’s what happened. They ended up
letting me go after ten years.

LC: Ok, and did you sort of go down swinging, or did you just say, “Yes, I’ve
had enough.”
CM: Oh no, I went down swinging. Because what had happened prior to me
being let go, they were coming down. It was for Christmastime, to get raises, and they
were evaluating everybody for raises, and they were going to give me a seven percent
raise and I fought with them on it because I said, “That’s not enough, I want a thirty-five
percent raise.” And they went, “What?” And they said, “Well no woman in your
position is getting that kind of raise. We only give twenty, twenty-five percent to the
guys.” And I said, “Well, I’m doing the same as the guys and the same title, so give me
what they’ve got.”

LC: And just to clarify, what year was this?

LC: Ok, that’s just…I mean, extraordinary. Ok, uh-huh.
CM: And so they ended up, because I was wanting the thirty-five percent raise,
they did give me the twenty-five percent raise, but then they let me go three months later.

LC: Right, that’s one way to handle that.
CM: Of course. Because they knew, you know. But I looked at it again on a
positive side. I said, ‘You know what, they did me a favor. They did me a favor. I was
collecting social security death benefits for my children, and I figured, “You know what?
I’ll stay home with my kids and I’ll collect social security.”

LC: And what ages were they at this time?
CM: My oldest I think was let’s see…he was seventeen. And so he didn’t collect
anything anyway. But my youngest one, he was…well, it was ’84, so he was seven.
LC: Ok.
CM: So I figured what the heck? I'll stay home.
LC: And what were your sons’ names? What are your sons’ names?
CM: My oldest one was George and my youngest one is Donato.
LC: And what was George’s last name?
CM: DiPasquale.
LC: How do you spell that?
LC: Ok.
CM: And Donny’s last name is different also.
LC: Ok, and what is that?
CM: And his name is Donato, D-O-N-A-T-O, Sambucci, S-A-M-B-U-C-C-I.
LC: C-C-I, ok. And you’ve lost George?
CM: Yes.
LC: Ok, and that was…can you say anything about that?
CM: What would you like to say?
LC: You can just tell…
CM: I actually adopted George.
LC: Ok, you adopted him?
CM: Got him when he was five.
LC: Ok, where did you get George?
CM: His mother was my husband’s stepdaughter.
LC: Ok.
CM: And George and his younger brother, I had both boys for a while because they were taken away from their mother, and then the courts appointed us legal guardians.
LC: Ok, and you went forward then and adopted him?
CM: We were in the process actually of adopting him when my husband passed.
LC: I see.
CM: So I just say we adopted him because I had him since he was five, you know.
LC: Right, he’s yours.
CM: He’s mine.
LC: Right.
CM: Yeah. I raised him.
LC: And I know that you lost him and that was on September 11, is that right?
CM: Right.
LC: And he was a…?
CM: Fireman.
LC: A fireman in New York City.
CM: Right.
LC: Ok. I just wanted to make sure that we just said that, but I also want to return, if you’re agreeable Colleen, to the VA and to your struggle with them for PTSD and PTSD acknowledgement, anyway. In the late ’80s, did you find that there were physicians and healthcare workers in the VA system that you were working with who were acknowledging PTSD as a real issue?
CM: My psychiatrist did and of course my therapist did. Luckily, the mental health facility at the Brooklyn VA is an excellent, excellent area. At that time, and I don’t know about now because I’m not there, but up until the time that I left, it was one of, as far as I was concerned, one of the best. The Brooklyn VA and the Manhattan VA, both of them are excellent VAs.
LC: Ok.
CM: As far as acknowledging and the fight that women had to go through, they were very innovative in accepting women and helping us to get our benefits. And when we started our organization in 1990, they were helpful in getting it going.
LC: Were they?
CM: Yeah, they still are.
LC: Now is this institutional, do you think, or does this rest on the shoulders of particular people who happened to be there who were sympathetic?
CM: I think it rests on the shoulders of the people that were there.
LC: Ok. Any names? Any particular people who were helpful?
CM: Well, our one person who unfortunately has long since passed was Dr. Frank. She was my psychiatrist, but she was an extremely great woman. Claudia Mitzeliotis, who was our therapist who also helped us to co-found the organization, she was very much of course, she had women’s groups, was the first one to do it in that hospital, and it was actually was her husband’s idea that decided to do that, that we should do the…that we should make an organization.

LC: Now was this based on a women’s group?

CM: Yeah. Hold on a minute, the doorbell’s ringing again.

LC: I was asking about the basis of the formation of the Women Veterans of America. It grew out of…

CM: It came out of a therapy group.

LC: Ok. And you said this was one of the first ones? Maybe the first?

CM: Well, our organization is the only one of its kind for women veterans.

LC: Yeah. Go ahead and profile the organization, because I think this is a matter of great interest.

CM: Ok, well, there were five of us, and it was a couple of years before the Gulf War even was thought about. This was back in ’88. And we were meeting as a group and we all felt like something was incomplete with the fact of us in our serving. We all felt like there was something more we could have done. So when the idea was given to us about become a women veterans organization, we had first started out as the Women Veterans Support Group.

LC: Ok, there’s basically a nucleus here of five of you?

CM: Yeah. And we first named ourselves the Women Veterans Support Group. And when we were marching in a couple of parades, people thought that we were not women veterans, not women who served, but just women who are supporting veterans.

LC: Veterans. Yes.

CM: And when we would have to announce that we were veterans, and I said, “This is ridiculous.” My head’s constantly thinking, I mean even in my sleep sometimes, and my mind is just going a hundred miles an hour, so when we got back after one of the parades and we were sitting around, and I said, “You know, I think we have to rename ourselves. I think we need to name ourselves Women Veterans of America. How’s that
sound?” And everybody said, “You know, that sounds good.” So then I proposed, I said, “How about we’ll come up with an idea for a logo?” So they all said, “Ok.” So we all did drawings. I did a drawing up and they all voted on my drawing. And so I said, “Ok, that’s cool.” Then we applied to get an EIN number. We applied for non-profit organization and we were awarded it in 1990 and we grew from there. We became officially Women Veterans of America September 19, 1990.

LC: Colleen, as a matter of record, would you go ahead and tell me the names of the other women who were there at the beginning of this initial…?

CM: Sure. There was June Panzeri; she’s a World War II veteran, an Army nurse. Let’s see, there’s Millie Cipolla, she’s a Korean War veteran. She was in supply in the Navy. Kathy Mossen, who was a Vietnam veteran and nurse. Actually, a Medic. And…

LC: In the Army?

CM: In the Women’s Army Corps. In fact, it was kind of ironic as we look back over it, we both had the same training sergeant, we were both in the same company, and we were just a few months difference in timing.

LC: Is that right?

CM: Yeah. And then there was myself, and then there was our therapist, Claudia Mitzeliotis. That’s a mouthful.

LC: Yes it is. How do you actually spell Claudia’s last name? Do you remember?

CM: M-I-T-Z-E-L-I-O-T-I-S.

LC: Ok.

CM: I think it’s that way. I’m trying to picture the whole thing, and it took me a long time to pronounce her last name.

LC: I can well believe that. Now she had been working with you individually as well as with the group?

CM: Yeah. She worked with each one of us individually and as a group.

LC: And what was her background? Can you tell me anything?

CM: She is a nurse practitioner with…in the psychiatric field, and oh, she has a whole list of initials after her.
LC: Oh I’m sure, I’m sure. I was just wondering if, what was the source, if you know?

CM: Oh, she was a clinical nurse specialist, that was her main title, and then she has all these other things after her.

LC: Right. A bunch of letters. Alphabet soup after her name.

CM: Yeah.

LC: So indicating that she’s of course highly qualified. What was her special interest in women veterans’ issues? Where did that come from, any idea?

CM: I think just with the fact of dealing with Vietnam veterans and women Vietnam veterans at the beginning. I don’t really know. She had been…she’s still practicing. She’s been practicing for many years.

LC: She is still practicing?

CM: Yes.

LC: Ok. And is she still in New York City, as far as you know?

CM: Yes.

LC: Ok. Is she still active with your organization?

CM: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

LC: Ok. So tell me a little bit about the structure. Do you have chapters? Is there a board of directors and all that?

CM: We have chapters. We have state reps and national reps and of course there’s chapters around. We’re not that large, to be very honest with you. We’re a rather small group because a lot of women, they will come and they go, they come and they go. And a lot of times, they’re with families, so a lot of things take more precedence rather that, you know joining the group.

LC: Yes.

CM: But the numbers that we do have are strong and what I mean by that is that we have a lot of very dedicated souls.

LC: So you have some core people, not just at the center of the organization but also now in chapters?

CM: Yes. As a matter of fact, I just got an email from a lady that wants to open up a chapter in West Virginia.
LC: Brilliant. That’s great. How many chapters right now?
CM: We’ve got about fifteen. Like I said, we’re small, we’re scattered throughout the United States, but we’ve accomplished in our fourteen years of existence, more in that short amount of time than I can think of any other organization when it comes to issues especially for women.
LC: And in fact, this won’t surprise you, that sort of “word on the street.” I was just at a meeting in Washington DC, where your organization’s name came up in a discussion about focused groups and…not focus groups, but focused organizations who have been effective in moving litigation, who have been effective in moving administrative change, who have been effective in getting rural changes and that kind of thing. So you know.
CM: Oh, that’s nice to hear.
LC: Yeah, that actually came from someone in the Vietnam Veterans of America.
CM: Yes. Thank you.
LC: So you know, they know who you are, that’s for darn sure.
CM: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, Washington DC does know who we are.
LC: Yes, absolutely. He’s a lobbyist for VVA, and I mentioned that I was going to be speaking with you, and he said, “Oh!”
CM: (Laughing)
LC: No, in a good way I think, actually, Colleen.
CM: No, I know what you meant.
LC: Yeah, “Women Veterans of America.” “Oh ok, yeah.” He sort of sat up straight. “Well alrighty then.”
CM: Yeah, they know my name because I’m also a member and I’m vice president of a local VVA chapter here.
LC: Ok. Does it have a chapter number?
CM: Yeah, 678.
LC: Ok. Well no darn wonder.
CM: Oh yeah, I keep myself busy. I’m involved in so much stuff it’s ridiculous.
It does keep me occupied and keeps me out of trouble.
LC: Now with Women Veterans of America, you’re the national vice commander right now?
CM: Correct.
LC: Have there been other positions that you held over the years?
CM: Actually, when we first started, I was commander, well actually, I wasn’t. I was vice commander of our first chapter and then commander of our first chapter and then when I gave up that position, they weren’t very happy, but being national was even better. And…excuse me, I’ve got the hiccups.
LC: That’s ok.
CM: Anyway, it just…just blossomed. That’s all I can say, it just blossomed, being as a cofounder and…although my position will be an elective position eventually, but for right now because it’s still in the very early stages of our organization, it’s not an elected position at this time, but I’m hoping to…I’m pushing for other people to be able to come in and take over type of thing.
LC: Oh sure, absolutely.
CM: And you know, getting them in training and seeing who can do what, when, and where type of thing.
LC: Absolutely. You need to groom the next group.
CM: Yes, because that’s what I did when we left, when I left Brooklyn. I had groomed them there and then look, you know, “Guys, you got to learn.”
LC: Yeah, so it doesn’t fall apart when you know…
CM: Exactly. And that’s what I told every one of them. I still say that to every one of the women, is that you all have to learn the ins and outs of what’s going on because there will come a day when you just might be where I am.
LC: Right. If you had to say in one or two sentences what the mission of the organization is, what would you say? That’s probably a tough one, because they do rather a lot.
CM: Yeah. I guess mainly, to sum it really in one sentence actually because that would say it all; we are an advocate for women veterans, period.
LC: Ok. And in implementing that mission, are some of your key points of contact elected officials? VA administrators?
CM: VA officials, representatives, congressmen, senators, I don’t care what position they’ve got. They know I’m around.

LC: I’ll bet they do. How many women veterans are there in the United States who have served in the US military?

CM: Who have served in the US military? Over, I would say maybe close to…over a million, at least. Maybe close to two million. I mean, there’s just in the state of New York, there’s almost seventy thousand.

LC: I’m sure that Texas is also up there.

CM: Yeah. I have a paper that kind of lays it all out, but there’s various estimates of women veterans throughout the country, and if you just start adding up the numbers, it’s quite a lot.

LC: Yeah, I’m sure that it piles up.

CM: Because you got to take in, you know, from World War II on up.

LC: Absolutely. What are some of the key issues that are out there right now for women veterans? If you had to name two, what’s at the top of the heap, as far as you’re concerned? Things that need to be changed or…

CM: Well, these are things that we’re still working on, but it’s going to take hold one of these days for sure, and that is changing the UCMJ Laws, Uniform Code of Military Justice Laws.

LC: Yes.

CM: In regards to domestic issues and assault, sexual harassment issues and sexual assault issues. Those are the three main issues, because the way it’s stated in the UCMJ Laws is that a man is not allowed to do certain things, but it’s ok to do it to the wife.

LC: Yes.

CM: Ok. Also with allowing of women to go to have prosecutions against the perpetrators, whether it be domestic violence or harassment or sexual assault issues. That’s another thing that’s in UCMJ Laws because it’s left up to the commanding officers of each post as to how they want to deal with these issues, and a lot of times it’s a slap on the wrist. There is not necessarily a court-martial that goes on. Women are not necessarily allowed to prosecute. One of the…it’s fortunate but yet unfortunate things
about being in the military is that you are property of the US government and therefore
certain rights or civil rights that you would normally have as a civilian are not there.
LC: Yes.
CM: So that’s why we need to change those laws so that women have, or even
men who have been assaulted also, have the right to be able to take their perpetrators to
court and have them court-martialed or put in jail or whatever.
LC: And getting that codified in some way so that it’s not left up to the discretion
of individual commanders?
CM: Correct. That’s our main focus right there, because once we’ve come over
that particular hurdle, we will pretty much have solved a good percentage of issues.
Some of the things are already starting to take place when it comes to the harassment
issues, when it comes to your DIs, Drill Instructors because of the coed situation now.
We’re trying to make it so that they don’t bring sexual harassment into the training.
That’s another very big issue. And again, we’ve also got to change the good ol’ boy
network idea of the machoism of the military.
LC: How does that operate against women? I mean, I could probably offer a
general answer, but I’d like to hear yours.
CM: Well, the main thing is that there’s so many men in the military that believe
that women don’t belong in the military. They think that we should be the weaker sex,
that we should not be given weapons that we should be doing homebody type of things as
if we were wives rather than being out in the front. And yet, when someone gets
wounded or something happens, they look to the women to help them. The nurses. They
look for certain things, you know. But one of the problems that they still can’t get it into
their heads is that we can be just as tough and cold and deadly as a man, if not more so,
because it’s more in our nature to be more protective than actually a man is, naturally.
Because we protect our families, we naturally will protect our children, our homes, and I
believe anyway that with women, our mentality has been so pushed back over the
centuries that we have forgotten and a lot of women have forgotten that we are actually
very strong. Mentally and physically we are strong. I mean, you know, you hear men,
“Oh, I wouldn’t want to go through having given birth to a child.”
LC: Right. You hear that one often, actually.
CM: Yeah, well.
LC: Figure it out, right.
CM: That’s why we have a higher pain threshold than men. We don’t coddle ourselves like men do. And you’re laughing, I know, because you know it. I’m sorry, I know this is going on the record, but it is funny. I mean, every single one of my husbands, if they got a cold, “Oh, please, could I have some orange juice?” Well I didn’t raise my boys to be that way and they’re not. In fact, their wives get a little bit annoyed because they have to force them to go to a doctor.
LC: They won’t go, right.
CM: It’s because, well, they don’t coddle themselves, you know. So…
LC: Well that’s a small step forward right there.
CM: Yeah. Yeah. Well it’s true. It’s like, I do. I made sure that my boys, when they got sick or something, I would never tell them if they had a temperature. Never. They would say, “Do I have a fever?” “No.” “Oh, ok.”
LC: So the thinking there was what, not to give them a place to hang their hat in terms of feeling sick?
CM: Well, then they would start feeling better, and the temperatures would break.
LC: Ok.
CM: And then they would…if they really needed coddling and loving, they got it. They really got it. They got a lot of love and they got a lot of coddling in many ways, but when they were…if they were really, really sick, then of course they were really given all the things that they needed.
LC: Right. But we’re talking about steps way forward from there.
CM: Yeah. And the same thing, too. If the school nurse would call me and say, “Well, George was not feeling good.” And I would say, “Is he throwing up?” “No.” “Well then leave him in school.”
LC: Yeah, he wasn’t getting many day passes out of there, I’m thinking.
CM: No. None of them were. None of my kids were that way. You know, it’s just…I wasn’t one to let them take a hold of them. In other words, you had to do part of your own healing yourself, too.
LC: And it also sounds like you were trying to avoid some of the kind of
preplanned gender programming that gets you, you know, built in to children’s experience,
certainly.

CM: Exactly. And I think that also due to the fact that I worked, but also too
then, I was home for them and I just didn’t want them to be raised where they would
think that women would be maybe so-called inferior and I didn’t want them to get the
macho attitude, and I raised my kids mostly on my own.

LC: Right, it was down to you.

CM: Yeah, it was down to me, and when it came down to talking about sex and
that, it was me.

LC: Right.

CM: And I explained things to them. I was very straightforward, honest, open,
and very forthright with them, because I said… I even told them, I said, “Look, if you
happen to go out and you ask a girl to have sex with a girl and she says yes, you respect
her. If she says no, you respect her even more.” Because the fact is, if she says no, that
means no.

LC: Right.

CM: And so I said, my daughters-in-law one day when we were over at one of
my daughters-in-law’s house, they said, “We just have to say, thank you for the way you
raised your boys.”

LC: That must have been nice.

CM: It was.

LC: Yeah, I bet that was.

CM: Because at age seven, I started teaching them how to do their own laundry,
how to cook for themselves, how to be independent, and how to know when you go
shopping for a good bargain.

LC: And these are skills.

CM: How to stretch the dollar.

LC: Yeah, these are life skills. These are not gender-specific things. They’re just
skills that it’s better to have than not to have.
CM: But it’s also things too that I told them, I said, “Look, I’ve got to work. If you don’t have clean clothes to wear to school, it’s not my fault. You know how to do the laundry.”

LC: Right. Go to it.

CM: Exactly.

LC: Colleen, let me ask you just another couple of questions, and these have to do with the contemporary political situation with so many women deployed to the Middle East and women are actually dying in combat at this time. Do you see the commitment in Iraq as any way accelerating what it is you’re trying to do in Women Veterans of America?

CM: Oh, that’s a hard question to answer.

LC: Certainly the number of women veterans is going to grow.

CM: Oh, of course.

LC: That’s very clear.

CM: Oh yeah. That’s definitely a clear thing. I see that even from the first Gulf War to now, that there has been a lot of changes for the good in the way the men are respecting the women, in the way the upper echelon in the military are treating the women. Because in the first Gulf War, women had the weapons but they didn’t give them the ammunition. They were given weapons without ammunition and told to go sit in the foxholes.

LC: And certainly that’s not happening now, or at least all reports are to the contrary.

CM: Right. Things are much better now in many respects. I had a friend of mine who would tell me these things because she was in the Gulf War, and she had to do all kinds of wheeling and dealing in order to get ammo, because she said, and I’ll quote her, “I’ll be damned if I’m walking around with a weapon and have no ammo to protect myself.”

LC: Was she in the Army?

CM: She was in the Air Force.

LC: Air Force. Can you tell me what her MOS was? What were her duties?
CM: She was in the medical field and unfortunately, her job was dealing with the dead.

LC: Ok. But she’s obviously in a theater of conflict with a weapon that couldn’t fire? Ok, that’s a concern.

CM: Yeah. Yeah. And it wasn’t just her that I heard it from, but she just kind of confirmed it when she came back. That’s frightening, really.

LC: Yes, it is. And you know, the thinking behind it is I’m sure what you’re interested in changing.

CM: Yeah. Well, that’s part of that macho crap.

LC: Right.

CM: And I’m being very nice about what I’m calling it, because I don’t put up with any kind of machoism from any man. And it’s not because of just from serving in the military. It’s from the way I was raised, too. I just didn’t put up with it. Never did and never will. I feel like I’m on equal grounds as you and I’m not going to be put down or under someone’s thumb or having to walk ten paces behind because you think it’s the thing to do. I wasn’t raised that way and I don’t think that that should be…you know, I’m very, very strong opinionated, but that’s just the way it goes. You know.

LC: Well Colleen, I want to thank you for participating in the Oral History Project.

CM: Oh, you’re quite welcome. If you want to do any more questions or anything like that, I’ll be glad to answer them. One of the things that we thought of when we formed the organization was that we knew that we were going to be putting or leading the way for other women that were going to follow us, that we were going to be the forerunners, and we felt that we’ve been through a lot of the red tape already, we’ve been through a lot of stuff already and we just kind of knew all the ins and outs and how to get them involved in getting their healthcare and getting their benefits and just setting them in the right path.

LC: And so avoiding you know, each new group of women veterans having to relearn?
CM: Exactly. Exactly. It just was like, “Ok, we’re going to be the forerunners. We’re going to take the ball, we’re going to run with it, and we’re just going to leave a wide open path for the rest of them just to be able to follow with our example.”

LC: You said that there had been a number of accomplishments by the organization? Can you name one or two that you’re especially proud of?

CM: Well, we’re very proud of first, being the very first all-women veterans’ organization that encompasses all of the services. And it doesn’t matter whether they were in a war or not. Whether they were peacetime or whatever, we are the only women’s organization out there, veterans’ organization that does that.

LC: Yes.

CM: And that in itself is an accomplishment. I believe that’s a very good main accomplishment. The other ones are is just being leaders in the field to stop some of the old ways of thinking and trying to produce new ways of thinking so that our women in the military today don’t have to go through all of the stuff that we went through, and I think we’ve pretty much accomplished a lot of that in getting benefits for women in the hospitals to recognize that there are women that are going to be coming into the VA system and that they have to have certain special needs met, privacy issues, that have to be dealt with. Having interviews when they come in for a medical problem that needs to be dealt in private rather than open and public where everybody else can hear. It not only has affected the women, but it’s also affected the male veterans so that they too have the privacy and the respect.

LC: Yeah. And it works both ways.

CM: Yeah. So we’ve kind of like opened a lot of doors for both the men and the women who have served and are still continuing to do so.

LC: Thank you for adding that, Colleen.

CM: You’re welcome.