Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mrs. Penny Freeman Choiniere on the twenty-eighth of September year 2001 at approximately 10:15. We are in San Antonio, Texas at the Vietnam Women Veteran’s Conference. We are staying at the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio. First, thank you very much for conducting this interview with me. If you would please begin by providing a brief biographical sketch of yourself and if you would talk about your early life. When and where you were born, where you grew up.

Penny Freeman Choiniere: Great. That’s the way it all started.

SM: When you decided to go into the military what was the response from your family?

PFC: Well like I said it was mother’s idea. They didn’t think one way or the other. But it was like, “Yeah, okay. Go ahead.”

SM: Was there any concern about the possibility of being put in harm’s way?

PC: Oh, no. Not at that time. I mean Vietnam was going on, but I didn’t know much about it. Besides women didn’t go into wars anyway. They were always in the support system and they were back on the States or maybe off in Germany or Japan or something like that. That never entered their minds; nor mine.

SM: Do you have brothers?

PC: I have two. The brother next to me just died this past February. But I do have a brother that’s older than him that lives in Texas too.

SM: What was his response?
PC: To me going in the military? Nothing. The response came when they found out I was going to Vietnam and stuff. I didn’t tell them until I was on leave and I told them at Christmas. Christmas Eve I told them. So that’s when they found out.

SM: Well, where did you go for your basic training?

PC: Ft. McClellan, Alabama. At that time that was the only place for women to go through basic training.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe your introduction to the military. What was it like and what did you think?

PC: I was terrified. I was afraid of anything that was above an E-1. There were a lot of those. As I went into the service on July the twelfth of ’65 and it was very hot in Alabama. Of course I had worn my little city girl suit and my little high heel shoes. Got a rude awakening once we got into uniforms and stuff. We got there just about in time to get issued our uniforms. No, in fact we went to separate nurse civilian clothes. A of course they all made fun of us. We were called rainbows. Because we had on civilian clothes and they were all different colors. They sang songs about us and stuff like that. It was the first time in my life I ever had thirty-nine sisters. I was the only girl and the youngest in our family. So, it was kind of difficult to adjust to having my own room to having a room with thirty-nine roommates. So it took a little bit of getting used to. We were all scared at some point. We kind of had that commonality that allowed us to bond with each other just out of preservation of our lives we thought. We learned quickly the ways of the military. Believe me, we learned quickly.

SM: The drill instructors were they mostly female, all female?

PC: They were all female at that time. They weren’t called drill instructors. They were called your platoon sergeant. I really liked our platoon sergeant. Her name was Sergeant Bondgers. Carol J. Bondgers. She had a German Shepard named Sarge.

SM: How about the rest of the chain of command in the training unit?

PC: I remember our platoon officer’s name was Second Lieutenant Jane McCoy. I don’t remember. I was talking last night to some people. Said, “Gee it would be nice to know who my CO (commanding officer) was.” But because my parents moved and stuff like that while I was in the military and mother—after I got back from Vietnam—mother was running out of room so she just took all my military stuff and kind of threw it away.
So I don’t have any of those memories anymore. Not tangible memories that I can touch and look at. Like my uniforms and stuff like that and the pictures from basic I don’t have anymore. I don’t remember who the CO was. I’m sure I could do the research and find that out too. Just never even thought about it until yesterday.

SM: What about higher up in the chain? The company commanders?

PC: The only thing I know was the director of the WAC training was Colonel Elizabeth P. Hoisington. She became later the director of the Women’s Army Corps. I believe, I may be mistaken; you may need to research this. I believe she was the first female general in the Army. She was the director of the Women’s Army Corps while I was in Vietnam. She did come on her official visits there.

SM: Now when you entered the military and then with this initial introduction seeing that the platoon sergeant, the other officers, all the way up the chain of command to the WAC commander they were all women. Did you feel or did you think at the time that the military was going to be a place where you could excel? That you would be promoted? That you would be treated fairly?

PC: Yes, I did.

SM: Did that bear up over time? Did you feel that continually through your career?

PC: No. I guess we need to make clear from the onset to my regret I did not remain in the service and retire. But of course hindsight is always 20/20. It would have been nice to say at thirty-eight I had retired from the military. But not as we became integrated with the men. Now in our basic training you didn’t see a man for eight of your nine weeks. It was eight weeks of training. So for seven of your eight weeks you never saw a man. You just didn’t. We used to have a running joke if a car honked outside or you heard the horn we’d run to the window and say, “I’ll be down in a minute honey.” Everybody would laugh because we knew good and well we didn’t have a date. When we’d been in seven weeks I guess it was probably an enlisted club or something. One Saturday afternoon we go to go to the enlisted club. We saw guys for the first time in seven weeks. It was like so bizarre. It was like, “Oh god, men.” (Laughs) But it was certainly a learning experience. Since things were always not real communicative I should say—in my household I was always led to believe that I was fat and I wasn’t
really bright and all that stuff. I was very surprised to learn that I had excelled enough to
finish second in my platoon for basic training as far as the educational part—the classes
and stuff like that. We learned about drill and ceremony. I found out that I was pretty
good at that. We would play kind of like a Simon Says thing. We had to do whatever
they did. If you messed up then you had to step out. I was usually fortunate enough to be
one of the last ones left that was still doing the right face and the left face and the oblique
marches and all this stuff. I enjoyed that a great deal.

SM: What else was involved in your training other than the standard drill and
ceremonies and things of that nature?

PC: We learned first aid; we learned history, military history. A lot about the
military code of justice. We learned about that. We learned about the behavior issues,
the chains of command. How you behaved, what you did in certain instances and stuff
like that. Physical training, we called it PT. We had that. Toward the end we had one
week that we went on a field march, which is nothing compared to what they’re doing
nowadays. When I was in basic training we did not fire weapons. The first time I fired a
weapon in the military was in Vietnam. They took us to a rifle range and we fired M-2
carbines. It scared me to death. I just well that’s another story.

SM: Wait, there was no weapons training in basic training?

PC: No, not when I was in there.

SM: When you finally did get some weapons training in Vietnam it was with an
M-2?

PC: Carbine, yes. Somebody had set it on semi-automatic. I pulled that trigger
and scared the bejeezes out of me. (Laughs) I was like “Ah! I don’t think I want to
handle one of these. Let somebody else shoot for me.”

SM: What did you think about the training? Did you feel like it had prepared you
as you went on?

PC: Because I didn’t know what to expect, I didn’t know if it had or not. I think
the AIT; the Advanced Individual Training as they call it was the worst. Because
everything I asked for from basic to go to school, because I went in without a promise
was medical. I want to go to four team. I want to be a medic. I want to be an x-ray tech.
I want to be anything. But the one thing I despised in high school was typing. They gave
me my orders. First of all I didn’t get to leave Ft. McClellan. That was the bad news.
The second bad news was it was clerical training. In clerical training they could not give
you eight hours of typing a day. They could however give you seven and a half. There
were a lot of times when we just—and there were no electric typewriters. You got to
remember this is 1965. There were times that many of us wanted to throw those
typewriters out the window. Since we were on the second floor it could have done some
damage. But we did have fun there. We were next door to the officer candidate regiment.
But we got to eat first. But because we were still trainees and the officers were still kind
if trainees, the wannabes at that time, or gonnabes I guess you could call them. When we
would leave the mess hall, they’d be coming in. We were required to salute them. We
were defiant little rats so we would normally salute left-handed. They were so stupid
they returned the salute. We thought we were really getting something over on them.
SM: Now would they return left handed?
PC: No, they’d use the right hand. (Laughs) They didn’t notice. We thought that
was pretty cool though.
SM: When you say officer candidate school this is for men and women only?
PC: No that was just women, just women. One of the platoon officers when I was
in basic training she was a platoon officer for Company C, Platoon Five. So C-5 would
come to play a role in my life later on in my military career. But I only knew her as a
platoon officer when I was in basic training for another platoon. But that was clerical
training. At least when we finished clerical I just asked for everything around the South
because I kind of wanted to stay in the South. I did get stationed at Ft. Sam Houston in
the WAC Company there. I was assigned as the receptionist for the cardiology clinic at
Beach Pavilion, Ft. Sam Houston. I got there the day before Thanksgiving.
SM: Throughout the training in both your basic training and your AIT, how much
was discussed concerning fraternization and relationships between female WACs and
male soldiers and male officers?
PC: Obviously in basic training you learned you couldn’t fraternize with officers
period, male or female. Male soldiers they really didn’t care. I mean we had a lot more
passes and stuff on the weekends. So we could see the guys on the weekends and date
and stuff like that. During the week with curfew you really didn’t have a lot of time.
You had your typing and all your correspondence that you were learning how to do the proper way. So you didn’t really have a lot of time for social activities except on the weekends. You didn’t fraternize with your cadre. That was a no-no. A woman that was for several of us, our supply sergeant when we were in clerical training we go to know. We would kind of like sneak around and visit with her and stuff because she was really such a cool person. I found her in ’68 when I came back from Vietnam and then have since found her again. She is one of my friends in Washington State now. Oh, no they let us know up front you don’t fraternize. It was just part of the rules. You’re looking at some serious penalties for fraternization or impersonating an officer. So you just didn’t do that.

SM: In AIT were there any male instructors or was it all female?

PC: No, it was all females still. None of our training involved men. None, not in 1965.

SM: To your knowledge while you were in training were any of those rules broken? (Laughs)

PC: Like I said there were a couple of us that fraternized with the supply sergeant. We would be down there in her supply room talking to us and somebody would walk in and she’d say, “Well that item you need is over there on the shelf, go get it yourself.” So we basically knew what to do.

SM: What was going from training into the real Army like for you, going from training to Ft. Sam Houston?

PC: Exciting because I knew I was going back where I knew I had family. An aunt and uncle that lived in San Antone. So they made it kind of cool for me. Like I said it was a very lonely Thanksgiving that year for me because they had already made plans. I was at a post that I didn’t know anyone having only arrived the day before. I remember it being very lonely and being the very first Thanksgiving that I ever ate something other than turkey. I had a hamburger in the snack bar. That was the first thing I really remember. But it was nice. I was so impressed. I finally had a room of my own because they had a lot of medics. That’s where the medics took their AIT. Well I’d already done mine. You know I was PFC (Private First Class) by this time. I had my own room. I was very proud of the fact that I was the PFCIC (Private First Class in Charge) of latrine
duty. By golly I tell you we got merits on our latrines because I made them polish the marble walls with pledge. Of course it was kind of slippery when you got in the showers. But they looked good for inspection. I had wanted to go overseas. I was married at the time. I had gotten married. I wanted to go overseas. At that time all women went to Europe. Clerk copiest went to Europe. I thought I’ll volunteer to go overseas. So I put in for overseas. One day I was called in to report to the CO and I figured I had done something wrong. I wasn’t sure what it was, but I always had this guilty conscious I guess from childhood. I reported to the CO and she spoke very rapidly anyway. The gist of the conversation was I had come down on orders for Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, not Tent City B Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, Saigon, South Vietnam. I made the mistake of saying, “Huh?” Because I couldn’t quite understand it. She kind of jabbed me for responding in that manner. I quickly apologized. I said, “Excuse me ma’am, I didn’t hear you.” She said it again. I said, “Are you kidding me ma’am?” She said, “No, I’m not.” She was very serious. We were given the opportunity at that time to refuse those orders without repercussion. I wasn’t that stupid. I didn’t know for a fact that would be no repercussion. So I accepted the orders. A number of people once they even find out that enlisted women were in Vietnam think that we all volunteered. The first three increments of women that went to Vietnam were hand picked by Colonel Hoisington who was by this time the director of the Women’s Army Corps. She had gone from what we are told to the 201 files, the personnel files and chosen the women. Now whether it was because we were real good or real bad none of us had figured that out yet. We don’t know if we made the Army angry or if we had made them proud, but anyway we were chosen to go to Viet in that first increment. I think after that it was usually volunteers that went over to Vietnam.

SM: What did you think or what had you heard was going on in Vietnam?

PC: There was some fighting. I wasn’t really interested in a lot of the history and stuff like that of battles even though I was military. It may sound very juvenile or stupid not to want to know everything that’s going on the country, but I really wasn’t. I was nineteen years old, I didn’t care. I was just turning twenty. I got the orders when I was nineteen and would go to Vietnam when I was twenty and then would turn twenty-one in Vietnam. It was nothing that I really followed in the news. I was more interested in
entertainment and reading and stuff like that. I liked to read fiction so it was not
something that I was terribly interested in. But I knew there was a war going on. I knew
our men were going there because a lot of the men that had served invite and had been
badly burned and stuff of course came to Ft. Sam Houston which is known for its burn
centers. So, I knew about it. I had seen some of these men in the mess hall and stuff,
had seen the results of it. It never occurred to me I’d be going there.

SM: Was your husband?
PC: He was Air Force. I asked him if he would go with me. He said, “No I’m not
going over there.” I said, “Okay.” He was, like I said, Air Force so we went on the thirty
day leave and that was when I told my family I was going to Vietnam. Now we went
home for Christmas and I told my family then that I was going to Vietnam. Then when
we came back he was on orders for Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. So he said, “Really it’s
fine, do what you got to do.”

SM: How did you family respond when you told them at Christmas that you were
going to Vietnam?
PC: Mother actually went ballistic. She was like, “Oh my baby, my baby.” It was
like, “You know who you’re talking about here?” We were not particularly close. But
one of my brothers who was really her pet said, “You know mom, why are you crying?
You ought to be proud of her. She’s doing something that Billy Joe and I can’t do. We
can’t go back in the service.” Because they had already served. In fact the one that had
been medically discharged was the one telling her this. “She can represent or family and
our country in Vietnam.” That just shut the tears off right away. It was like, “Okay.” I
had told my daddy, I just couldn’t keep anything from him. I had told Daddy and he
knew in advance what I was going to be saying to the family. But I made him promise
not to tell my mother. So went on leave and my aunt and uncle, my favorite aunt in the
whole wide world, her husband and then another uncle took me to the airport here in San
Antone in February of 1967and I got on a plane for Vietnam. Me and my little duffle bag
and a couple of suitcases and away I went.

SM: While you were in San Antonio, what was the atmosphere like for women
who served?
PC: Right, it was fine. There were no real issues. I didn’t see a lot of—there were always guys that would hit on you. The only time it really made me nervous was if it was an officer and there were a couple people. There was a dentist, even if I wanted to tell you their names, which I wouldn’t, I don’t remember them. Those are just things that I blocked out. You didn’t really say anything then because you were an enlisted person. The chances of you being believed over an officer were very slim, very, very slim. Yes.

SM: While you were at Ft. Sam did you encounter women who weren’t so lucky as you?

PC: Not that I was aware of. If they did they didn’t come to me.

SM: How about women discharged due to pregnancy? Did you know any while you were at Ft. Sam?

PC: You know I don’t remember if I did or not. But it was no big deal if they were, whether they were married or not. That’s just one of the rules unfortunately.

SM: How about later on? Just while we’re on that issue, of say during your stay in Vietnam?

PC: There was a woman that was pregnant when she got there. They discharged her from there for pregnancy, yes.

SM: Do you remember how she responded? Did she not?

PC: She was pretty glad to be going home.

SM: Oh, she wanted to.

PC: Yes, she didn’t really want to be there anyway. But again she was one of the ones that came down on orders. Why she didn’t refuse those orders I don’t know.

SM: Did she know she was pregnant before she got to Vietnam?

PC: She wasn’t sure. But her test there came back positive.

SM: Go ahead if you will describe the trip from the US to Vietnam.

PC: Oh, it was hilarious. It was eventful trip. We go to Hawaii and when we got back on the plane it was night. I insisted on sitting by the window for some reason. The next leg of our flight to go to the Philippines then to refuel and then go on to Vietnam. I insisted on sitting by the window, why I’m not sure. There wasn’t a lot to be seen, but I
fell asleep. A while later someone said, “Penny, Penny, wake up. Wake up!” I said, “What?” They said, “We’ve landed.” I said, “Where?” They said, “Hawaii.” I said, “We just left.” They said, “Oh, my God, you’ve really been asleep. One of the engines caught on fire; we’ve been dumping fuel over the ocean for two hours.” (Laughs)

SM: Oh, no.

PC: On this plane there were fifteen WACs and a hundred and fifty warrant officers. So there were 165 people on this plane. Well the warrant officers when we landed and we found out we weren’t leaving they rushed out and got the hotel rooms. So we were stuck in the airport. Well, when it looked like we weren’t going to be getting out of there, one of the women that had driven for Colonel Hoisington at Ft. McClellan knew that at that time she was in the Pacific visiting or doing a tour or something. She called her, because she had stayed in touch with this colonel because she had been her driver. She said, “Let me make some phone calls.” When we found out we were going to have to be there another night, because the plane still wasn’t ready. As a side note you need to know because it plays into it later, the plane that we’re flying on was Braniff, the one that dumped the fuel. The colonel arranged with the Hilton hotel there, the Princess Kaiulani, that we would have rooms in that hotel that night. So we all had rooms in the hotel. They said, “We won’t be ready until about six in the morning.” Of course we don’t want to unpack too much of the duffle bag, that’s kind of tough, but you’ve got to get your iron out because you’ve got to iron that uniform for the trip. We got out shorts and stuff like this. We went to the beach, we walked on the beach. They said, “You’ll probably get a wake up call around six, pick you up at 6:30, get you out to the airport around seven then you’ll leave.” At 4:30 in the morning the phone rang, they were ready for us. Some women were just walking in the door from having been out all night. So it was like, “Ah!” We’re like throwing things, ironing those uniforms throwing warm irons into our duffle bags, which was really a disaster. Could have been but it wasn’t. Got back on the plane and flew on into Vietnam.

SM: What were your first impressions when the plane landed in Vietnam and the door opened?

PC: When the plane landed and I go to the doorway, we were in winter uniforms, so we were in wool. The first thing I truly remember is the heat hitting me in the face.
Well, being from southeast Texas it’s not that the heat is that bad, it’s just not that bad in February. They were really herding us off the plane and there’s all these men standing around this bus. It’s got all this wire on it and on the windows. These men have guns. It’s like, “Oh, my god.” We’re like, “They’re really rushing us into this bus.” We’re saying, “What’s the wire for?” “Well, so the hand grenades can’t get through.” We’re like, “Oh my God what have I done? What have I done to get this?” We landed in Long Binh or something because anyway we had to take a ride in the bus—or Bien Hoa, somewhere around there. Then when we got to the WAC detachment they had been expecting us and they were all lined up according to rank and we came in our cadre. First we met the mail clerk, and we met the supply clerk. Then we met the supply sergeant. Then we met the field first, then we met the first sergeant. Then we met the CO. So, we’re going through and meeting everyone. “Hi, how are you?” The first sergeant, Maryann Crawford turned to introduce me to our CO and I looked at her and she looked at me. She looked at them and said something to the effect of, “You know, pack your bags, the war will be over in two weeks with this one here.” When I was in basic training during field training we went on a night march and of course you were done according to height and obviously I was at the end of the line. The platoon officers, unbeknownst to us had made bets with each other that they could infiltrate each other’s platoons and not get caught. So, since there was no talking your platoon leader, which was one of your own enlisted soldiers there would come down. If something was amiss she’d tap you on the shoulder and you’d take care of it. She tapped me on the soldier and I didn’t know why. But she pointed over my shoulder and there was somebody behind me. Well, there wasn’t supposed to be anybody behind me. So, she gave me the sign that I needed to go get this enemy. So, then enemy turns and starts running. Well, I turn and start running after the enemy and the enemy just stops. I had so much momentum built up that I jumped on the enemy and I’m choking it. The platoon leader comes back, takes the enemy off to camp or detention, whatever. Well, that night we finally go to sleep in an open thing instead of our shelter halves. I’m standing at attention at the foot of my little cot. This person walks in front of me and gives me one of these “I know who you are and I know what you did,” look. She got like these really angry marks on her neck. Her name at that time was 1st Lieutenant Peggy Ready. Maryann Crawford turned and
introduced me to Captain Peggy Ready in Vietnam. That was how she had remembered me. That could be a little nerve racking. But yes, she was my CO in Vietnam.

SM: She remembered you but obviously she didn’t hold a grudge?

PC: No, obviously not. She felt that they were relatively safe now that I was there. Unfortunately her dream didn’t come true that we would be out of there.

SM: Not in two weeks.

PC: Right.

SM: What kind of briefings did you get after your introductions to the chain of command?

PC: They gave us a little history lesson about the morays and cultures and the customs that we were coming into. They had only had peace in maybe five hundred years in the entire time of their existence. They were a very hard working people. These types of things. We more or less had to adjust to that culture. They told us about, “Don’t eat the food, you don’t eat this, you don’t do that. You take your Malaria pills; you drink only water that we have. You know you can’t drink. Be careful on the economy. Be careful riding in an open jeep.” Of course that was the main means of transportation for us. It wasn’t so much from enemy as it was like the little kids that would run up and grab your packages, which did happen to me unfortunately. Just basically that. It was a little frightening but we were so young, we still thought we were invincible and nobody would ever hurt us. We had our little—I keep losing my words—drills as they were alerts, practice alerts. Where we would go to the bunkers and stuff like that. Now in Saigon we wore our Class A uniforms. Our heels and everything. We had this really awesome drill team. You may have seen some of the pictures in the memory room of our drill team and stuff. Of course I was a part of that, because I just loved doing that. Once again I was always on the end, because I was the short one. But we enjoyed wearing those uniforms. The drill team had the opportunity to go to Independence Palace, when Premier Ky was still living there and tour that palace. I think our first public performance was on May 14, 1967, which was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Women’s Army Corps. So, it was very nice for us. Yeah, we really enjoyed that.
PC: I think there were like eighty-five at a time, if I’m not mistaken. It was a very small detachment. There wasn’t room for jealousy or racism or anything like that then. Because we were all in this together. I mean we were just there.

SM: How ethnically diverse was the detachment?

PC: It was pretty good. Probably a fair number of each. We had Hispanics, Hawaiian. We had Afro-Americans, we had Caucasians. We had a nice little group there.

SM: What were the instructions again concerning or were there any special instructions concerning fraternization, things of that nature?

PC: No officers.

SM: Just no officers? You could date enlisted men?

PC: Yes, we could date enlisted men. We had our curfew.

SM: Oh, really?

PC: Yes, we had a curfew definitely.

SM: What time was that? Do you remember?

PC: Seemed like it was like ten or something like that. I mean you were in a war zone. We needed to be accounted for by a certain time. So yes, we would have a curfew.

SM: How well was that controlled or enforced?

PC: It was very strict, very, very strict yes. Most of us didn’t argue with it because we knew how important it was. Yeah.

SM: What about other women that served in Vietnam, but weren’t necessarily part of the WAC detachment like Donut Dollies—?

PC: Didn’t really have a lot of contact with them. No, not really.

SM: When did your husband go to Thailand?

PC: Thirty days after I got to Vietnam.

SM: Wow. Were you ever able to arrange to meet with each other?

PC: No, we really didn’t want to. It wasn’t too pleasant. He told me just before I left he decided he didn’t love me anymore. I said, “Okay.” So we went our separate ways before I ever went. Obviously I couldn’t divorce him, I didn’t have time. That’s still the law in Texas. I guess ninety days or something. He was from Houston. No, it was not a problem. I didn’t talk to him. I called him when I went to Bangkok on R&R
(Rest and Relaxation). I called him and wished him a happy belated birthday. He wished me one. Asked me when the divorce would be final. I said, “Well, one of us has to be in the States. So, I guess it’ll be me that gets it.” He said, “Okay.” That was the last time I ever spoke with him. But that’s okay. That was life. I remember them doing, I think there was a small article on us in the *Stars and Stripes* because his brother was Marine, he was Air Force and I was Army. We had our picture taken for his mother in our uniforms. So then you had three branches of the armed forces. Actually the Navy too, as far as that goes, because the Marines fall under that. You had those three branches of the service. We had the photograph and they used that.

SM: This will end the interview with Penny Choiniere.