

Transcription: Trisha Hildreth

Today is Tuesday, September 30th, 2014. My name is James Crabtree and this morning I'll be interviewing Ms. Trisha Hildreth. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Ms. Hildreth is at her home in Lenora, Texas. Ma'am, thank you very much for taking the time to let us interview you today. It's an honor for our program.

Trisha Hildreth: Thank you.

The first question I always start with is please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you entered the military.

Trisha Hildreth: I was born in New York, a couple of stops later I ended up in southern California, grew up there, in a very dysfunctional family, as they now call it. I left home when I was 15 and joined the military when I was 20.

When you were 20, OK. What was it that persuaded you to enter the Armed Forces?

Trisha Hildreth: At the time, a broken engagement, loss of the place I was living, loss of a job, everything all at once, and I did an unusual crazy thing, grabbed a phone book, took it by the short end, let it fall open and it opened to U.S. Government. It was one of the first things listed. So I called.

You called a recruiter's office?

Trisha Hildreth: Yup.

And where were you at the time? Were you in Texas?

Trisha Hildreth: California.

In California, OK. And so what year was this?

Trisha Hildreth: 1971. Actually 1970.

OK, so it was during the Vietnam War, a lot of people aren't exactly clamoring to enter the Armed Forces at that time. What was that conversation like with the recruiter when you picked up the phone and called?

Trisha Hildreth: Very pleasant, very enjoyable, and that recruiter I think for the time was very unusual. It turned out with my dealings with him over the next six weeks, he had a policy because he didn't know anything about women in the Air Force, of all of his recruits were required to send him letters back about basic, about tech school, about their military time, so he would have the straight skinny and he would share those letters with recruits. So we got a true picture of what was going on, not just the recruiter hype.

Exactly, because recruiters always have a mission. They've got to put so many recruits in every month or they get in trouble. So there's sometimes an incentive for them to shade the truth a

little bit. So as a female going in in 1970, were there at that point very many females in the Air Force?

Trisha Hildreth: I didn't think so, but a lot more than was known. The numbers comparative to today were very small, but at the time there were hundreds of them.

So when you called and signed up, said you want to go, how long was it then through the whole enlistment process before you actually went off to your basic training?

Trisha Hildreth: Three months.

And where did they send you for your basic?

Trisha Hildreth: Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas.

What are your memories about Lackland in 1970 and the basic training you went through?

Trisha Hildreth: Some of it was ridiculous because it was geared towards females. I mean some of the things, the usual PT, get up at 5 o'clock in the morning and be out on the walk at 5:20 was the first couple of days a little tough for 50 women. How do you get your room in inspection order and get your hair and your makeup done in 20 minutes?

OK, yeah.

Trisha Hildreth: You learn tricks the night before. Most of the stuff was good. Far too many classes in makeup and deportment as far as I was concerned. I was kind of a tomboy anyway. But that time could have been better spent with some other military training.

At that point did you know what your specialty was going to be or what you were going to be doing in the Air Force?

Trisha Hildreth: No, did not. Not until the fifth week.

And what was it they assigned you as your specialty?

Trisha Hildreth: Originally personnel. Ended up I had to do a few other things first. I ended up being part of the group that helps assign the maternity uniforms.

OK, how did you get put on that?

Trisha Hildreth: When we left basic and went to tech school, specialist training was a 16-week self-paced course. There were a few of us that already knew how to type. You had to type 32 words a minute to get through the course. I told them I already knew how to type because I'd been a secretary for years. They put us in a class to test us. And they put us in a class for testing with people who didn't know how to type, and the test was fairly unusual I thought at the time because we all started out on a 5-minute timed writing. As we were typing away, I noticed less and less other people typing. They got to the point where they all quit and watched me. And the instructor said get out of my class. You're disrupting my class, you type far too fast. They are too flabbergasted and intimidated, get out of my class. Good bye. Anyway I finished the course in four weeks. So it was what to do with her now for the rest of the time.

This was all still at Lackland?

Trisha Hildreth: No, this is at Keesler in Mississippi.

OK, so they had sent you there for your follow on school.

Trisha Hildreth: A bus ride for a day and a half, and anyway, a lot of training later – leadership, M-16 training, Morse code training, several other things. Then they were talking about experiments because the early 70s was a major time of change with the military for women. The Air Force was trying to, in the old days, the belief was if you were a female military, you only had one of two purposes, well three purposes actually. You were either gay, you either wanted to get paid for sex, which is about as polite as I could put it, or you were looking for a husband. And they wanted to change that image. These were professional women. They were here for a real reason, not just get in and get out. So about the time they decided, ah, we think we're going to let pregnant women stay in, OK, we need to design a military uniform for that. And then they said how about we take this little group of one-strippers and send them back to Lackland, as ___ for TI's because they just went through. Maybe they can relate to the other students better. We did that for six weeks. And then we got our first assignment, and that's when the fun started.

Tell us about that if you would.

Trisha Hildreth: Unfortunately I can't because the first assignment is classified. So I'll skip that one.

But you were assigned to Lackland at that time?

Trisha Hildreth: No, the first assignment was to go overseas to southeast Asia at the time, and you already discussed what time period this was. And it was classified, so skip all that. But the second assignment was a lot of fun. I was assigned as one of 25 enlisted women to be the first ever stationed at Lages Field, Tiserra Island, Azores, Portugal. Well, I lived in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The base, it had nurses, but they never had any enlisted females ever before. So they decided to send 25 of us there to see how it worked out, if these people could do the job. Well I guess the best story I could give you is trying to get there. I reported to McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey, at the designated gate time to catch my midnight flight to Lages Field. Unfortunately that night they loaded up my luggage, my duffle bag, and everything, and my grooming case, and said flight's full with mail, can't take any passengers. And they took my luggage and left me at McGuire. \$15 to my name and the clothes I had on my back. Ended up, was told no, you can't leave, no you can't go get a hotel room, no you can't go in visitor's quarters or anything else. If you leave the airport and a flight goes that we could put you on, you won't go. Three days in that airport.

Geez, that's horrible.

Trisha Hildreth: With \$15 to my name to eat on? Yeah. Luckily I made friends. I talked the guys into buying me food. Ended up on the third day all I wanted to do was get in a room, take a shower and go to sleep. They wouldn't let you sleep in the airport either. The only place you can possibly get away with it for a few hours without getting caught was on the floor in the ladies bathroom, because they didn't patrol that that much.

That's horrible.

Trisha Hildreth: So you're in the clothes for three days, three nights, you can't sleep, you've had very little to eat, and a foreign pilot who was in this country to be trained – we had different friends in those days – he was Iranian, he had a plane, he was flying back to his country. He had finished his training and he was going home. Well, he had to stop in the Azores for refueling. He was looking for someone to fly with him to keep him company. I put my little hand up. Let's go.

What type of plane was it?

Trisha Hildreth: I don't even remember, it's been so long. It wasn't very big, it was a two-seater.

Yeah, pretty small plane.

Trisha Hildreth: So I got on the plane, in the helmet, in the gear, and we took off. Seven hours later, I guess he radioed ahead and I didn't notice, but unfortunately got met at the flight line by the base commander who was a one star general. All the other women are already there. The base man, the honor guard, big pomp a circumstance thing going on here, and I climb out of this cockpit after having the helmet on my head, and after three days of nothing, and I still, the only thing I wanted was to get assigned a room, find a shower, get in it and crawl into bed. And here I have this welcoming committee.

Was he a dignitary of some sort?

Trisha Hildreth: No, it was because I was the last of the 25 to get there, and because this was a big deal to the base commander, this one star general that the women were being assigned under him, he decided that this was important. So then we proceed to go to the NCO club and get introduced around, to go to the officer's club and get introduced around, and have a sit down lunch. Please, can I just get a room? But we have to go through all the proper stuff. So finally I got assigned to a room. And our barracks there was fairly new. This was in 1972. At the beginning of 1972, then President Nixon and President Pompidou of France had a financial summit, sort of a precursor to the G7 on the island. Well, what they did was they built this new building for the press way out on the edge of the base close to a cliff, and the only thing around was the security police station. It was two- story. It was single room, bathroom, single room, with adjoining bathroom. So for the first time we were all getting our own rooms, and we were all excited. The closets were built into the walls and unfortunately the furniture was left over from whatever barracks on the base because they had at that time 10,000 Army, Air Force, Navy and Marines on it.

Yeah, that's a lot of personnel.

Trisha Hildreth: Yeah, pretty big. Well whatever male barracks had gotten new furniture, and whatever was left over got sent down to the WAF barracks.

Yeah, so I'm sure it wasn't very good.

Trisha Hildreth: The traditional military metal cot, a dresser sort of, which is more of a desk than anything, and pretty much that was the extent of the furniture in the room. So we got lucky in that our WAF commander was a first lieutenant, and in those days in the military, the women had to have a base commander, a unit commander, and a WAF commander. You had to have a separate one for just the girls. Well ours turned out, this nice lieutenant, was in charge of the class next door which is the liquor store on base. So what she did was when new shipments would come in, she would have her troops, most of them were men, unpack the bottles of alcohol and wine and beer and stuff, and she would save if there were any wooden boxes. In those days, Mateus rose wine, which was Portuguese wine, and was very popular there, came in these nice wood crates. I still have 12 of them to this day.

The crates?

Trisha Hildreth: Yup. They became shelving units. You adjusted how you put the boxes so that you made a shelving unit to put stuff in. Big furniture in the WAF barracks. But during our time there, between all the gentlemen callers, we decided we wanted instead of always eating in the chow hall or in the ____, we wanted to cook. So we convinced some of the guys we were dating and some of the girls, and this was ridiculous, some of the girls were having two or three dates a night. We were very popular. But we got some of the guys to come in and do a little remodeling upstairs in the barracks for us. They converted two rooms into one and made it a kitchen, and they got somebody to donate whatever, and we had stoves and sinks, refrigerators, so we could cook. Then a few months later we asked some of the boys, you know we really would like a patio so we could have some chaise lounges and lay out in the sun. So they built us a little patio and decided we needed a 6-foot fence because the security police kept coming out of the building and standing on the front porch all the time. So we got a 6-foot fence built and we got our chaise lounges and our chairs and we'd sit out there and sunbathe. But we also had our job to do every day, and at the time for me, I was the only female assigned to personnel there. The first thing right off the bat I ran into was you will come in 15 minutes every morning and make all the coffee pots so coffee is ready when we get here. And the second week in, they decided to change some offices around and they told us all to report on the weekend to move file folders and desks and chairs and stuff. I went to move stuff. And then it occurred to me, wait a minute, if I'm going to have to move the furniture just like you guys, why am I getting stuck making all the coffee? In those days I didn't even drink coffee, so I thought this is strictly "you're a girl" thing. So I raised Cain with the commander and said no, there's eight coffee pots in this building, big ones that had to be made. I said no, you men can make their own depending on which branch. At first I was in disciplinary action, and then after that, four months there, they transferred me to promotion testing, all in the same building for personnel. Personnel handles all this stuff for groups. So I said no, you guys can make your own coffee. I'm good enough to move furniture, I don't have to make the coffee. But no, it was an interesting time. We had a lot of fun. We enjoyed ourselves, and to my knowledge if I remember right, and keeping in touch with my sisters, every one of the 25 WAF left or married.

I can understand that.

Trisha Hildreth: There was a crop to pick from.

Now how big is the base there itself in the Azores? Is it fairly large? It always seems to me like it's a pretty small place.

Trisha Hildreth: Because there weren't that many vehicles, and you had to walk everywhere, it appeared very large. Coming from the United States, especially me who grew up in Los Angeles, so we drove everywhere, to a place where you had to walk everywhere. If you wanted to go into town, you walked there, very few cars.

Were there very many civilians, Portuguese citizens that lived there?

Trisha Hildreth: Yes, I'm trying to remember, Santa Maria is the main city on that particular island. The island is drop dead gorgeous. It's volcanic rock, black, not much for beaches. There's only one. But the ocean water comes up and filters through these black rocks and goes back out and it is the most turquoise blue you have ever seen. It is clear, it's beautiful, it's clean. The fun part of the island was going into town or once I moved off base and got a place off base, the island at that time was powered by a single generator that had been given to the Portuguese government during World War II. Well, it was a little old and tired by the 70s. So you had a schedule, four hours on, four hours off, rotating depending on your house number. Hard to plan if you were going to cook or anything else, when your four hours were going to be that day.

Yeah, that's a difference a lot of people probably wouldn't be used to, especially today.

Trisha Hildreth: Well I ran into that a lot in my military career and then being a military spouse, living overseas for 12 years. Young troops always had Thanksgiving and Christmas at my house. I invited the single troops over so they didn't have to eat in the chow hall. I'm watching them dump all the garbage in my sink and I explained to them no, we don't have garbage disposals. No, there's not a dishwasher. How do I open this can of corn? Ah, with this hand can opener. The younger ones were a little spoiled, you know what I mean? All of which was kind of a shock for them. But it wasn't too much of a transition for me.

When you were there, did you ever get a chance to leave the island and go explore continental Europe and that sort of thing, or were you pretty much stuck on the island for the duration?

Trisha Hildreth: I caught a flight to the Canary Islands for a week for a vacation, one island to another. And those were beautiful. Afterwards, my military time when I was a military spouse, my first husband was in Armed Force radio television. We spent 12 years overseas effectively. Europe to Asia, Europe to Asia to Europe to Asia. We never got where I wanted. When I got assigned to Lages Field, I had put in for Montana. Nobody wanted to go there, that should be easy, right? Nope. Then we kept putting in, I put in for it, he put in for Italy. Never got there. Got stuck in the wrong airport twice for 12 hours. Couldn't leave the airport. But lived in, after the Azores, was stationed at Clark Air Base in the Philippines. Then I got out. My husband went to Greenland and I went back to the States for the year.

Was there not an option to go to Greenland? Was it an unaccompanied tour?

Trisha Hildreth: Unaccompanied, always. Then we went to Libya for six weeks until Omar Khadafi showed up and we had to leave suddenly and leave everything behind. Grab the kids, the suitcase and go. Then we went to Turkey.

Were you at Insurlik?

Trisha Hildreth: No, I was at Karamashel, across the bay from Istanbul. And got to make a trip over to Athens, Greece.

Oh that's great.

Trisha Hildreth: Vacation for two weeks. I ran away from home. I'm still trying to get to Italy, and they sent us to Iraq, and the Shah was overthrown, so we had to leave there suddenly and leave everything behind. My whole life is leave everything behind.

So you did get a chance to do a lot of travel though I guess from that.

Trisha Hildreth: Yes.

And did you and your husband meet while you were in the Air Force?

Trisha Hildreth: Yes, the first husband. No more.

So how long ultimately did you end up serving in the Air Force?

Trisha Hildreth: Only two years.

Did you have any thought of reenlisting, or were you ready to get out at that point?

Trisha Hildreth: I was pregnant. I was going to have to stay where I was. He had orders to go someplace else, and I thought about it a minute and said wait a minute. Work, be a single parent with a newborn, or go with him. I'll go with him.

Sure, kind of limited though, your options at that point. Like you said, it would have been difficult otherwise.

Trisha Hildreth: Yeah.

Did you regret getting out when you did or was it something you look back on you were glad you did but two years was enough?

Trisha Hildreth: When I look back on it, I should have stayed in. I should have never got married and I should have stayed in. I would've been better off as it turns out, but you know, hindsight is always 20/20.

Sure, exactly. So then at some point you ended up in Texas. When did that happen, on down the road a little ways?

Trisha Hildreth: Yes. I was at ___ford Air Force Base in California. My first husband and I divorced. I was working for Martinberry Aerospace on the Shuttle 1 project out there when the Challenger disaster happened. And we were all told, we don't need to recruit but you're not out of a job, sort of, because there weren't going to be enough shuttle vehicles to use the second launch site. They canceled the project. But Martin took very good care of their people. Of the 3,000 on the project, only 6 got laid off. You were asked two questions – stay with the company or stay here. If you wanted to stay there and Lockheed who took over the maintenance contract, you could stay there. Or if you wanted to stay with Martin, you could go with Martin. Well I already had 8 years with Martin. I thought it was a good company. I was close to getting dusted. So several interviews, several places, ended up I got a transfer to Denver, Colorado. I bet my

Big Springs born husband to differ. After the oil bust of the 80s here, a friend of his he knew, he contacted while he was looking for a job, got him a job up there. I was a manufacturing engineer. He was a lab technician. We worked on the same part, we worked on the Star Wars satellite but different portions of it, and one of the requirements was a weekly team meeting they called it, in the classified buildings. I no longer had a classified access because of a family member, and Robert did. So Robert had to sign, there were three of us that didn't have the access, had to be signed in to the building for the meetings, and since he was coming from a different building, I mean he wasn't already in the building, they made him responsible for signing the three of us in that came from other buildings. So we started working on this team together. Things being what they do, I admired who and what he was. As sure he was of himself, confident, and lots of other things. Anyway we got married in 1994.

That's great.

Trisha Hildreth: And in 2003, Robert had never, was married before and didn't raise children. I did. My daughter and her husband and her grandson moved down here to get out of Denver because the cost of living was going sky high there. So because this grandchild, little boy, called Robert Grandpa, he was the Grandpa, and they had to live with us for a couple of months when my daughter came down here at first to find a job and a place to live. The son-in-law and grandson stayed with us. Well, my husband convinced me we have got to move back home. And I said wait a minute. At the time I was working for Western Union as a software administrator. It was really good money with really good benefits, and I kept saying give me a good reason to quit this job and give all this up. Oh no, my grandson needs me. My parents are getting older. We've got to go there. I've got to be there for my grandson. We can help take care of my parents. I said give me a good reason. Well after several months of him insisting we move back here, he finally told me I can retire. And I said OK. I started working when I was 12 years old, so I worked a long time. But we got here and it didn't work out, I can say retired. And because my husband had owned his own business in Denver, after he got allergic to the chemicals he worked with at Barton, got put out on long term disability, and his business didn't make a lot of money. It was a little hard sell down here. I obviously had the more current work record, so I had to get a job first. I went to work here at the only thing I could find, was an unhappy camper, and my health went downhill. And then in 2012, I quit my job. Filed for early retirement, quit my job, took my six months of early retirement, filing for disability and got that right away. But now I'm a disabled person, but I do a lot of volunteer work for Texas Permian Basin Honor Flight.

Oh that's great.

Trisha Hildreth: I do a lot of their computer work and stuff, and I go out to all the events and -

That's great. How did you come to get involved with Honor Flight?

Trisha Hildreth: I saw on the news back in February that they were looking for people to go on the Honor Flight, so I contacted the address they gave and asked if I qualified to go, and they said yes, and by the way we're putting you on the committee, because they had just started up here. So I ended up going to meetings and being part of the committee and signing people up to go on the Honor Flight, we just made our inaugural trip.

That's great, tell us about that.

Trisha Hildreth: Oh, it was phenomenal, having all those vets together, he got war memorials together. Wish we got a little more time at each one that we did. But I want to go back to them again. But I'll have to pay for my own trip because on honor flights, only one trip per veteran for free. Got to leave space for the next guy. There's too many others that need to go. So we were at, on the honor flight from the 17th to the 19th of September, and last weekend I was over at the Howard County Fair raising money for the next group.

That's great. How many folks went on that first flight?

Trisha Hildreth: Well we filled up a plane, 143 feet, 17 family members met us there, and there were 85 veterans, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. They ran our little legs off, or our wheelchair wheels in some cases. We had 43 wheelchairs. Loading and unloading the buses was kind of fun. Had three buses, tour guides, wonderful time, wonderful. Great speakers at dinners and breakfasts. But I was a little surprised. There is a Women in Military Service for America memorial at Washington DC. It is at the old, original gate to Arlington National. When we stopped there for lunch on Friday and I was trying to see my memorial and then I got whisked away for a photo shoot, because press and the photo shoots and getting the word out there that this trip's been made is very important. So I didn't get to see as much of my memorial as I wanted to, but when I got back on the bus I asked, because I've been a member for a while, and I asked how many on my bus, because there's three buses and I was only on one, but how many even knew that was there? Only two people raised their hands. I said got to get the word out because the women's memorial this year for the very first time, had to take out a loan to keep operating. So honor flight, ____ flight, raising money for them, my big thing now is helping the women memorial.

Yeah, that's great.

Trisha Hildreth: There's a lot of stuff.

Yeah, excellent.

Trisha Hildreth: So I'm sort of disabled and at home, but I volunteer a lot.

That's great, you're continuing to serve which is a great thing.

Trisha Hildreth: Well the veterans deserve it. They worked, they sacrificed, they suffered, they earned it, and that recent vote on cutting back pensions -

Oh yeah, it wasn't very popular.

Trisha Hildreth: Yup, I can't believe, did you see the list of who voted against it?

Yeah, it was a big surprise to a lot of people that I know that anyone would support such an action, so it was not good.

Trisha Hildreth: Well you can cut this part out of the interview, but I couldn't believe McCain voted against it. How dare he.

Yeah.

Trisha Hildreth: Because he's got a better pension now.

Yeah.

Trisha Hildreth: He no longer our friend. POW spokesman is no longer our friend.

Yeah, that was definitely an issue that got a lot of veterans' attention, I know that much.

Trisha Hildreth: Yeah, so excuse me. Liberals are in charge and we don't, all we can do is vote, vote, vote, like they do.

Yes ma'am. How did you learn about our program? That's another question I was curious to know, because you were able to send in one of the cards from our brochure and I was just curious how you were able to hear about us.

Trisha Hildreth: Honor flight. Somebody who has eyes in your organization somehow, got a handful of your cards. A big fistful of them. One night at one of our general meetings, handed them out and said I want these all sent in tomorrow so they're flooded.

Well that's good. I was just trying to figure out who it might have been.

Trisha Hildreth: I don't even remember now.

That's really good though because that's really how our interviews work is a lot of it is through word of mouth and it's through the different Legion and VFW posts, veterans service officers and programs like Honor Flight and that's how we get almost 99 percent of these interviews is either people sending in, contacting us, or their family members contacting us. So with you especially being involved with Honor Flight –

Trisha Hildreth: Send me a tassel of them.

Please encourage anybody that you know is a veteran, let them know we want to interview them, and a lot of times, too, they think well, I didn't serve in a war or I wasn't highly decorated, and the point we make is every veteran has a story to tell, so it doesn't matter if they aren't Ollie Murphy or Sergeant York, we want to record and save their story for posterity, and we have an archive here at the Land Office that goes back to the 1700s. We have the original Land Grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at The Alamo, and we have the Registro, this big huge leather bound volume that Stephen F. Austin kept in his own hand of the Anglo settlers that came to Texas. So what we're doing with these interviews is we're adding it to our archive in the hopes that 200-300 years from now, people can listen to these interviews, read the transcripts, and perhaps learn something from it. We want to interview every veteran in Texas that we can, so please let those folks that you know with Honor Flight know about us if you can.

Trisha Hildreth: Oh I will, if you have any more of those little things that we filled out?

Sure.

Trisha Hildreth: Send me some.

I will. I've got more brochures and I'll get 'em to you, and you've got my email address and phone number as well, so feel free to contact me at any time, but I will put some of those in the mail to you today and then like I said before we started the interview, in a couple of weeks we'll send you a package that will have your CD's and if you want more, just let me know, but we'll send you four CD's of this interview along with, it's in a commemorative binder, a letter and certificate signed by Commissioner Patterson. And so it's just a real small way of the state of Texas saying thank you to you for your service to our nation.

Trisha Hildreth: I appreciate that.

Sure, again ma'am, it's our honor and I appreciate you just taking the time to share some of these stories with us, and honestly, a really unique perspective having been a female in the Air Force in the early 70s in the Azores, there's not a lot of folks that are able to share that story. So we really appreciate that.

Trisha Hildreth: Also, on our Prairie ___ Honor Flight, I have to do a better job recruiting. I was one of two female vets.

Well, keep getting the word out.

Trisha Hildreth: 84 to 88, I'm not sure of the final number, female, I've got to work on that.

And you know, too, just statistically there were so many fewer women serving in the military for a long time, and so that kind of makes it difficult as well, but I'm sure if you just keep getting the word out, you'll be able to find more folks.

Trisha Hildreth: I'll try.

All right, well ma'am, really again I appreciate your service and appreciate you taking the time to do this interview, and we'll talk to you again soon.

Trisha Hildreth: All right, thank you very much.

[End of recording]