

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, NEWPORT, RI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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NO. 71
JEAN LAIDLER KESNER

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1998

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THE HISTORY OF THE MARINES (WR)

INTERVIEWEE: JEAN LAIDLER KESNER

INTERVIEWER: EVELYN M. CHERPAK

SUBJECT: THE HISTORY OF THE MARINES (WR)

DATE: NOVEMBER 4, 1998

EMC: This is the first oral history interview with Jean Kesner, who was in the Marine Corps, Women Reserves in World War II. Today's date is November 4, 1998. I'm taping the interview in my office at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. Jean, I'm very pleased that you came down to Newport today for the interview. We're pleased to have you here and to add your reminiscences to our collection of Marine Corps ladies who served in World War II. I'd like to begin by asking you where you were born and when you were born.

JLK: April the 18th, 1923 in Providence, Rhode Island.

EMC: What did your father do for a living?

JLK: He was a bus driver.

EMC: And your mother?

JLK: A housewife.

EMC: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

JLK: One sister, one brother--both older than I.

EMC: Did you spend your growing up years in East Providence?

JLK: Yes.

EMC: Where did you graduate from high school?

JLK: East Providence High School in 1941.

EMC: What were your plans after high school? Did you have any specific career goals?

JLK: My father and mother were first generation immigrants from England, and the thought was that boys got an education but girls would only work for a couple of years and then get married. So there was never very much in the way of emphasis on education for the females. Even though I made better grades than my brother and sister did in school, there was never that thought. So I went nights to a secretarial school, and immediately upon graduation from high school went to work in the Hospital Trust Bank in

Providence.

EMC: Yes. Oh, that's great. Were any of your friends or your relatives in the service during World War II?

JLK: No. No, I can't imagine why. I often think-- My children ask me, you know, why did you decide to join? I don't know. I had no friends, no female friends who were even slightly interested. But I was always a tomboy.

EMC: Oh, really?

JLK: And yes. I was the different one in the family, you know, the one that was climbing trees when my sister was playing flappers.

EMC: Yes. And your brother wasn't in the service then.

JLK: No. He had been badly injured in an automobile accident. And so he had an arm that was defective-- I'm saying defective, you know. He just wouldn't pass a physical.

EMC: Right. Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked, and do you remember what your reaction was to that event on December 7th, 1941?

JLK: I don't exactly remember where I was December 7th. Probably at work. No, that was a Sunday.

EMC: Sunday--yes.

JLK: That was a Sunday.

EMC: Sunday--right.

JLK: Yes. But it was complete shock--the reaction to it. I don't think we in the United States ever knew how much damage was done at Pearl Harbor. Later when I talked to my ex-husband, who had been at Pearl Harbor when it was bombed, he told us about the water surrounding the area being red with blood. And it had been planned for a Sunday because the servicemen were on leave, and they all had been out drinking. So you had no organized rebuttal to anything that went on then. So I think after the fact we realized how serious it was--how many ships were damaged and stuff. But at the time you didn't get much news, you know. You just got the bare nec--what they--the only thing they had to tell you, you know, the bare facts.

EMC: Right. How did you hear about the Marines? Do you remember how you heard about them?

JLK: Well, I had been in the Civilian Defense Corps.

EMC: Oh, what was that?

JLK: In Rhode Island. We had our white hard hats were issued to us. And I learned to drive a six wheel big vehicle in the Armory on North Main Street in Providence, riding round and round and then finally went out on the road. But that was the first step, you know. You were preparing for anything that might happen to the East Coast, because they were--they were frightened of the East Coast being bombed. And then I guess I felt I wanted to do something more. And the Marine Corps was formed in February of 1943. And all we heard was the advertising--"This is the Best." They had a lot of publicity, you know. This is the best, you know. And so I figured well, if I was going to do anything, I wanted to do it in the best outfit. But I had to wait till I turned 20. Because the age limit at that time was 20.

EMC: Right.

JLK: Yes.

EMC: Right. And you were 20 in 19--

JLK: 'Forty-three.

EMC: 'Forty-three.

JLK: April, 1943. So I went down on my 20th birthday.

EMC: And where did you enlist?

*JLK: I went to Providence to the recruiting office. And they took the information, and told me I would be processed in Boston. So they made an appointment. I went up on the 18th of April to Boston. And then that's when I had my physical and the mental exams they gave me--intelligence exams, I guess. And we were sworn in two days later.

EMC: Oh, okay. So that was April 20th, 1943.

JLK: Right.

EMC: Wow! You didn't waste any time there.

JLK: No. That's very true. I evidently had my mind made up.

EMC: Oh, yes.

JLK: But when I think of it, I really don't know what propelled me there. None of my girlfriends were doing anything like this. I

*I have recently received my service records and was able to correct a few dates, etc.

don't know.

EMC: You were more adventuresome I guess.

JLK: I guess so.

EMC: Yes. How did your parents feel about your decision?

JLK: Well, my mother had died when I was 15.

EMC: Oh, yes.

JLK: And my father-- I think he never quite could figure me out, you know. I think he was kind of thrilled to have a daughter-- If he didn't have a son that was going in the service, then he had a daughter who was going in the service, you know. It was kind of exciting for him.

EMC: Oh, yes. So he approved.

JLK: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. There was no problem there.

EMC: Great. Was there any publicity about your joining the Marine Corps?

JLK: Not that I ever remember.

EMC: In the newspaper or the bank?

JLK: No. That was after the fact.

EMC: Oh, that was after the fact--the notice from the bank. Do you remember when you left for basic training? Was it shortly thereafter? Or did you have to wait a month or two?

JLK: Alright. When I was sworn in in Boston, they had very few women Marines. So they kept me in the recruiting office. I never went home again, you know.

EMC: Oh, you just stayed there?

JLK: Yes. Just stayed there. And they issued us a uniform--the four of us that they had working there. I was working in the recruiting office. And I was issued a uniform and sergeant stripes. So I immediately became a sergeant with sergeant's pay.

EMC: Wow!

JLK: And that was great.

EMC: Yes.

JLK: Now my father could say well--I have a daughter who's a sergeant in the Marine Corps. He got a big kick out of that.

EMC: Yes. That's great. What did you do in the recruiting office?

JLK: Mostly typing. I don't remember going out. I think we were just there to be visible.

EMC: Yes.

JLK: So if anybody came in-- And we were assisting all the males that were there. And I think it might have been a combined Navy-Marine. It was on Causeway Street.

EMC: Causeway. Yes, that sounds like a combined outfit.

JLK: In Boston.

EMC: Because that's where the other gals--

JLK: So I think we were just being visible. That was a big part of it.

EMC: Yes. Right.

JLK: And then as girls got trained in Hunter College (had gone through boot camp), they replaced us. And then we went to boot camp. So I was in recruiting anywhere up to six weeks.

EMC: Oh, okay. And then you were sent off to Hunter College.

JLK: Then I went to Hunter College for boot training.

EMC: Right.

JLK: Lost my stripes. Had to turn in the uniform. Off we went to New York.

EMC: Off you went to New York. Had you ever been to New York before?

JLK: No. Never even had been to Boston before enlisting.

EMC: Well, you went to Hunter. And can you describe your impressions of the college when you first got there and the naval training station, which it was at that point.

JLK: It was huge. And we shared many of the places with the WAVES who were being trained there at the same time. Well anyway, we were billeted in apartment houses. I remember there were four bunk beds to a room. I don't remember too awfully much about

that.

EMC: Were you only billeted with Marines?

JLK: Oh, yes. We were all women Marines.

EMC: Oh, okay. Okay. You were kept together then.

JLK: Yes. From all probably the East Coast. But anyway, it was a mix. And it was the first time I had ever really had experiences with people from different areas, you know. We lived very close at home. We had our neighborhood children. But you never really got acquainted with too many other people.

EMC: That's true.

JLK: So it was interesting. The food was good. The thing I remember most was marching. We were on a hill--a steep hill down to the Hunter College. And we marched down there. We also marched on, you know, drilling--

EMC: Parade grounds. Yes.

JLK: Well, in the streets. And we marched down to Hunter College for our classes and for our meals. And it seemed like we were always going up and down the hills. It was rugged. At least it

seemed it to me.

EMC: Yes. Did you like the marching and the drilling?

JLK: Oh, it was a lot of fun. Yes.

EMC: Did you sing while you were marching?

JLK: You chant. They had the different chants that--

EMC: Right. Which is good. Do you remember anything about the classes that you took there and what you thought of them--whether they were difficult or easy?

JLK: Nothing was ever that easy. It was Marine Corps history. I remember that. I can't remember too much else, to tell you the truth.

EMC: Yes. Right. It's been awhile.

JLK: Policies-- Things, you know, things relating to the Marine Corps.

EMC: Right.

JLK: One thing my grandchildren ask me too. We never touched

guns or anything like that. Today the girls--women are in--do the same thing as the men.

EMC: Right.

JLK: But they never expected us to do that.

EMC: Oh, no. Not at all. You were still more or less protected.

JLK: No. We were in to "free a man to fight."

EMC: Exactly.

JLK: So they didn't expect us to fight. We were just relieving them.

EMC: Yes. Exactly. What did you think of the discipline of military life? Did you adjust easily to that?

JLK: Oh, that didn't bother me. No.

EMC: I think people were more disciplined in those days than they are today.

JLK: That's the truth. Yes.

EMC: Did you have any leave in New York?

JLK: No. We had like a day. But I remember one time we had a weekend leave, and they wouldn't allow us to go home. And I remember crying in my bunk. Because I was so close to home, you know. New York is what--four hours from Providence.

EMC: Correct.

JLK: And we weren't allowed to go home. But outside of that, we went through Central Park. We met some English--I don't know what they call them--girls in the service.

EMC: WRENS, maybe.

JLK: WRENS. Yes. We had our photo. In fact, one of the photos I have is with some of the WRENS. And we rode through Central Park in a--

EMC: Hansom cab?

JLK: Yes. Right. I couldn't remember the name. We had a lot of good times.

EMC: Good. Great.

JLK: A big part of it was having a good time. It was very enjoyable.

EMC: Yes. All the same age and with the same goals.

JLK: Right. Yes.

EMC: So that was very nice. Did anything amusing or noteworthy happen during your training period? Anything outstanding that you can recall--funny or serious, whatever?

JLK: I remember there was one girl that came in that had evidently led a very sheltered life at home. And she had had a maid who--her personal maid. And she didn't even know how to wash her hair or do any of these things. So some of the other girls were showing her how to do this. I also remember at the recruiting office we were sitting there all taking mental exams, you know, I don't know what you call them. And there was a girl sitting next to me who had graduated from college. And I thought whoa, you know, I'm going to have a hard time competing with this. Here I am a high school graduate. She flunked the test. So she didn't get in. So they were very fussy at that time. They hadn't had-- I won't say they hadn't had-- There had been some bad experiences with the WACS. And a part of that I think was that they enlisted them at an earlier age. And their standards weren't quite so high. So that was one of the reasons, I presume,

that the Marine Corps had a 20 year old enlistment criteria.

EMC: Right. So did the WAVES.

JLK: Right.

EMC: A little more mature by that time.

JLK: That's true. Yes.

EMC: So they had less problems. Well, when you graduated or after six weeks at Hunter College, where were you sent next?

JLK: My assignment when I graduated was to NCO school in Camp LeJeune.

EMC: And what is NCO?

JLK: Non-Commissioned Officers School.

EMC: Okay.

JLK: Because the Marine Corps Women's Reserve was still so new, they didn't have enough non-commissioned officers. And there wasn't time to promote them through the ranks. If you did that, ordinarily the men would serve a two year term before they would

ever see PFC, you know. So they wanted women with rank. So there were some of us chosen to go to NCO school. So I went through NCO school at Camp LeJeune. And I think that was probably about four weeks long--four to six weeks long. And graduated as Corporals. And then I was assigned to Headquarters Company, Women's Reserve Schools at Camp LeJeune.

EMC: Yes. What did you learn in NCO school? Was it more Marine Corps history and procedure or what?

JLK: It was more management skills, you know.

EMC: Oh, okay.

JLK: Also drilling, you know, how to be a--

EMC: Oh, a DI--a drill instructor?

JLK: Right. Because I had to do that later on with the platoon women, the group of women that we had in the offices. Because even if you worked in the offices you were expected to be able to turn out _____ stuff. I mean so you had to keep up with your skills.

EMC: Yes. I'll bet. Well, you were in an entirely different environment in Camp LeJeune, North Carolina.

JLK: That's very true. Yes.

EMC: And how did you react to that base and the South? Do you remember how you felt about being there--whether you liked it or didn't, or what was unique?

JLK: Well, I remember it being very damp in the mornings when we had to get up. And if you ever put your hair in curlers, by the time you got to the mess hall everything had, you know, all your hair straightened because of the difference in the temperature. The one great thing that was there too was for every woman Marine there were probably 500 males, you know. So it was like being turned loose in a men's college, you know. I mean every female was desirable. I guess it was fun. Yes. It was fun.

EMC: Yes, that must have been quite something.

JLK: The temperature was kind of like New England summer all the time. I remember being there when they had snow in December. And they got perhaps an inch of snow, not even that much. And everybody panicked. And it was so funny. And they were so excited about seeing snow. But Camp LeJeune in itself was a beautiful spot. It was very--very much by itself--nowhere any cities. On the water. The New River ran through it. So there was water nearby and woods. And yes. It was very nice. The women were off

in one separate area.

EMC: They were?

JLK: Oh, yes. Very much so.

EMC: Tell us about your barracks. How were they set up for the women?

JLK: Yes. Well, we had wooden bunk beds. And there were many girls in a barracks room. Later as I got promoted we went into rooms with maybe four people in. But everybody had a locker box and I believe a locker. I won't swear to that. I think a locker. And you were responsible for naturally keeping your area spic and span. And also I remember when we had showers and we had a bathtub. And absolutely nobody used the bathtub, because if you do you had to clean it.

EMC: Yes. You had to--

JLK: So nobody was going to be responsible for cleaning that except the person that had to do it like once a--once a week or so, you know.

EMC: Yes. Right.

JLK: So that was a funny one. Nobody ever got in the bathtub.

EMC: Did you have white glove inspections?

JLK: Oh, yes.

EMC: So you had to pass muster. And everything had to be ship shape at that time.

JLK: Polishing our shoes was a big thing--getting that spit polish on your shoes. So we spent a lot of time polishing our shoes.

EMC: Now what were the shoes like? Do you remember? Were they those clunky heels and ties?

JLK: Yes. They were an oxford with a rounded toe. I remember using the polishing cloth on the toe. And I don't know if clunky heels. I mean they were comfortable walking. Yes. They certainly weren't pumps.

EMC: No. They weren't pumps. That's for sure.

JLK: Yes. Although I think we could wear pumps for dress-up.

EMC: What about your uniform? You must have had a summer uniform

by that time.

JLK: Yes. We had a seersucker striped--white and green striped--uniform. And we wore our emblems on the collars and your rank on your sleeve. That was a skirt and an over-blouse that was a little bit longer than the waist. They were comfortable, especially in that area, you know. I don't know how they would be if you were in different climate than what we were. We were in a warm climate.

EMC: Oh, yes. With no air conditioning.

JLK: That's true.

EMC: Just fans.

JLK: Never even thought about that.

EMC: So it was entirely different. And your winter uniform was different too.

JLK: Oh, they had a lot of publicity about the winter uniform. It was supposedly designed especially by--

EMC: A designer?

JLK: Yes. It was a designer uniform. It was very comfortable. They made sure that they were fitted to us. I never had any complaints about them. It was a skirt and a jacket and a hat and--
- When I was in we never had any dress blues or comparable to the dress uniform of the men. We just had our winter and summer uniforms.

EMC: Yes. That's what I would think. Well, can you tell me what you did in--as part of your responsibilities in your job at Camp LeJeune?

JLK: Alright. When I graduated as a Corporal from NCO school, I went to work in the Sergeant Major's office in Company Headquarters down there. And I was a clerk typist stenographer, along with--perhaps there were six or eight girls in the office. And I worked there until I was promoted to Sergeant. And somewhere along the line I was promoted to Staff Sergeant. And I don't know whether I was--

EMC: Is that a higher rate?

JLK: Yes.

EMC: Okay.

JLK: And then I was assigned to the Camp Headquarters--Camp

LeJeune File Department. And I remember I went to replace a man to fight, you know. "To free a man to fight." That was the slogan. He wasn't very happy about that. I remember him sitting behind a desk. And he was kind of a pasty white person--a little bit plump, you know. And I thought this isn't my idea of a typical Marine. And he was not happy at all about me coming there. So anyway, eventually he was shipped out. And I don't know where. And never heard anything of him again. Later I was in charge of the camp file section. And I had a group, a staff of perhaps ten people--all females.

EMC: So you kept all the files on--

JLK: Yes. Actually, at that time they were just files in drawers and--on everybody in the camp--all different kinds of things.

EMC: Yes. So it was a totally female office.

JLK: That's true. Yes.

EMC: And the head of the office was?

JLK: I can't remember.

EMC: Yes. It wasn't a man. Did you work with Marine Corps women officers there? Did you ever encounter any at Camp LeJeune?

JLK: I remember more men than women. There were a few women. And the officer training was still brand new too. I remember Patty Berg, the golf pro. She was nationally known. Came at that time to go through Officer's Training School. That was the big thing that was Patty Berg was there.

EMC: Oh, yes.

JLK: But then she went out recruiting. So she didn't do any real work at Camp LeJeune.

EMC: Right.

JLK: But, yes.

EMC: Did you make any lifelong friends--women friends at Camp LeJeune?

JLK: I met many, many really nice people from all over. And I think that was one of the most rewarding experiences that I had. I had led, you know, kind of a sheltered life--New England, Rhode Island, you know. We're a pretty small group. And to find women from California and the Midwest and the South and everything--they were all pretty much the same as we are, but really great people. Unfortunately, because I married a Marine, and then we

traveled, then over the course of time I had six children, I kind of lost contact with all these people. And I would love to be able to get in touch with any of them today.

EMC: Well, I think probably the best bet is the Marine Corps Association--Women's Association, the National group.

JLK: Well, I keep looking at their roster. I'm in that. I'm a member of that.

EMC: Yes. Right.

JLK: And I keep looking in their magazines they send out every month with the new people that belong and the people that belong. And I haven't found--I found one woman's name, Etah Diefenderfer. How could you forget that name?

EMC: Forget that. Right.

JLK: And then when I wrote her I got her sister. Etah had died. So I felt bad about that.

EMC: Oh, but that--that's interesting.

JLK: But I would love to be able to get in touch with some of the other people that I've lost contact with.

EMC: Yes. Right. Well, what did you do for recreation when you were at Camp LeJeune? What kinds of activities did they either offer or did you participate in?

JLK: They had dances every couple of weeks for all the boys that were shipping out. Constantly the boys were shipping out into combat. So they'd have a farewell dance for them. And I was born with two left feet. I am a clumsy person. Not really, but dancing--yes. I can do anything sports-wise, but not dancing. And I learned to dance on all these poor fellows who were shipping out. I figured I would never see them again. So no matter how embarrassing it got, I could learn to dance. We had some good times. I met some good dancers. Some of the people were there for awhile. So you made acquaintances. And it was good. And let's see. What else did we do.

EMC: Movies?

JLK: We went into Jacksonville, the nearby small town at that time. I don't know what it's like now. And I remember having steak--great steak. Because at home we never had that. Things were rationed. I don't know really how they had it, to tell you the truth, down there. But we did. We had movie houses also on the base--many movie houses. And there would be entertainment where they would bring in people--stage performers.

EMC: Anybody prominent? Popular at the time?

JLK: I can't think of any now. I wrote some on the back of those cards that I had when I was telling my father about it. But I can't think of them now.

EMC: And did you have any sports activities like swimming, or tennis, or--

JLK: Yes. I remember going swimming. We also did a lot of walking, and after all the marching. I can't remember anything else.

EMC: But you had--

JLK: It's very possible we played softball and things like that too. They didn't make an impression to last.

EMC: Did you have a lot of dates? Was there a lot of dating going on?

JLK: Oh, yes. I was the belle of the ball.

EMC: Oh, really?

JLK: We were down there, you know, one woman to every 500 men. So you were constantly in demand.

EMC: I guess.

JLK: Yes.

EMC: Yes. And you said you met your husband there?

JLK: That's very true.

EMC: Now what was he doing there?

JLK: He had come back from overseas. He had been at Pearl Harbor and then gone to many of the smaller islands on the invasions that they had or were trying to take them back. And he had come back from overseas for rest and recreation. And luckily they kept him there for awhile.

EMC: So he was there for rest and recreation.

JLK: Right. Well, also he was an instructor. He was an instructor there.

EMC: So how did you happen to meet him?

JLK: Went on a blind date. I saw this fellow coming toward me. I thought oh, he's ugly. But actually he wasn't. But that was the first impression. He did have a good sized nose. But I guess I got used to it. I don't know. But he kind of grew on me.

EMC: Oh, I see. So you eventually were married at Camp LeJeune.

JLK: That's true. I married in Jacksonville, North Carolina, just outside the gates in Camp LeJeune.

EMC: Yes. And what year was that?

JLK: That was December of '44.

EMC: Yes. So you had been there probably a little bit over a year.

JLK: Yes. And I had known him for three months. And when I tell my children that they say, "You knew him only three months?" But times were different, you know. Men were shipping out all the time. And there was always this feeling I want to get married. I want to leave a child here. Because I want part of me in case I'm, you know, something happens to me, I want part of me to be living on. So, yes. There were many marriages and many early pregnancies.

EMC: Yes, as a result of that.

JLK: Where now today, you know, they'll last--three or four years and you're thinking about maybe having a child. That didn't happen then.

EMC: That's true. It was entirely different. Did you get married in your uniform?

JLK: Yes. We were both in uniform.

EMC: Yes. Did you continue working on the base after your marriage?

JLK: Oh, yes.

EMC: Now where did you have to live when you were--

JLK: I lived-- Luckily I was working in Camp Headquarters. So I got my name on the list for camp housing. And I was provided with half a bungalow in Midway Park, which was for dependents--for NCO's. And actually we had two bedrooms. And you didn't live in two bedrooms. You lived in one bedroom, and then the other bedroom you had another GI and his wife in. So we had another friend of my husband's who had recently gotten married--he and his wife were in the other bedroom. And then we kind of shared

the living room and the kitchen.

EMC: Oh, for heaven sakes. So two families in one house really.

JLK: Right. Yes. But that's the way everybody did because housing was so short.

EMC: Oh, yes. It was scarce in those days.

JLK: They were nice little cottages.

EMC: Yes. Oh, that's great. Well, back to your work. Did you find your duties challenging or routine?

JLK: No. They were challenging. There was enough there to do. It wasn't routine, you know, it wasn't menial work.

EMC: Yes.

JLK: There was a lot of it, and especially overseeing the other people. And I was a drill instructor for the people in that building, the women in that building. So I had a platoon of maybe 20-25 people.

EMC: Oh, that's fantastic.

JLK: Maybe a little bit bigger, larger than that.

EMC: Oh, that's great. What did you have to do as a drill instructor?

JLK: We went out regularly to practice. And my joke was that I marched them into the ditch and out of the ditch, you know. It was an experience. It certainly was. And it was a challenge. It's not easy to step from being part of a group marching to leading this group that is marching.

EMC: Oh, that's true. That's true. And formation and everything. Did you have to ever have drills in front of the head of the base?

JLK: Well, if we were drilling in front of the base, it was as part of larger groups--never as a small group.

EMC: Right. I meant but part of a larger group that would have a drill in the parade grounds. Did you get any special instruction for being a drill instructor?

JLK: Oh, at NCO school. That was part of our training.

EMC: Yes. Right. You did say that. Yes. Well, you stepped into that and--

JLK: That's the truth. I mean I certainly got in at an opportune time, when people needed to be upgraded fast. And that happened. And just about the time I was thinking about getting married, I was approached to go to OCS school.

EMC: Oh, good for you.

JLK: Well, not really. Because I was going with an enlisted man, you know. So you have to make a decision there.

EMC: Right. Where was OCS school held?

JLK: It's a Camp LeJeune School.

EMC: Right at the camp. Oh, okay.

JLK: And also at that same time they were thinking about sending women Marines overseas. The first place they sent them was Hawaii. And my family joke is I should have gone to Hawaii, you know.

EMC: Well, there's a fork in the road. You take one or the other and you wonder what would have happened if you had done the other thing.

JLK: Right.

EMC: Well, that was an opportunity. But you got married instead.

JLK: Well, I finally did get to go to Hawaii recently.

EMC: That's good. And it's still a nice place.

JLK: That's true.

EMC: Did you ever have to work rotating shifts or weekends on your job?

JLK: Oh, I imagine there were times when we had. Because I was in an office atmosphere most of the time, I have a feeling it was probably Monday through Friday. Or if they had Saturday, then people were there Saturday. I don't remember working Sundays.

EMC: No. I don't think anybody ever did. Was there anything you didn't like about your assignment?

JLK: No. It was a great time.

EMC: Was there any pressure in your billet at all? Did you ever feel pressured?

JLK: Now what do you mean by that? Explain that a little bit.

EMC: Well, you know, harried or had to work terribly hard, or--

JLK: Oh, no. No.

EMC: Okay.

JLK: No. I had been trained as a stenographer, as a typist, as a clerk. So many of these things carried on and so it was no great-

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EMC: No stress.

JLK: No stress. I think it was a challenge. It was an opportunity for growth. And that was a big part of what happened at Camp LeJeune. Also, I had left a job at a bank where it was very, very mundane, you know--the same things every day. So it was exciting to be doing all these different things, being exposed to all the--the different thoughts, and the people, and the activities that I would never have come in contact with.

EMC: That's right. Did you keep up with news about the war during your assignment at Camp LeJeune--about the battles and what was going on with the setback?

JLK: I probably read the newspaper. But I wasn't avidly pursuing it. No.

EMC: Did you write to your father or your friends regarding your experiences?

JLK: Oh, yes. Yes.

EMC: Do you have any of these letters?

JLK: No.

EMC: That's unfortunate.

JLK: I had a card that I had sent my father.

EMC: Right. But the letters just vanished. They would have been a great record of your daily life there. Were you still in the service...

JLK: I can check with my sister and see if she has any.

EMC: Yes. Maybe she does.

JLK: I don't really think so.

EMC: Yes. You were still in the service on VJ-Day, were you not, in August '45?

JLK: Yes.

EMC: Do you remember what your reaction was to VJ Day and how you celebrated?

JLK: Oh, it was wonderful. It was the end of the war. And I was still in the service. Wait a minute. Was I or was I not in the service?

EMC: This was August 1945.

JLK: I think I was out in May '45.

EMC: Oh, okay.

JLK: So I was home. I was very pregnant. And I thought this is wonderful, you know. My husband will be able to come home. We'll be together. And it was just great because in every neighborhood you knew boys that had been killed in the war. And just the thought that it was finally over, you know, the rationing-- everything that was connected with it. It was just a very, a big time to celebrate. But no real celebration. Just in your mind, you know.

EMC: Yes. And you were in Providence then I assume.

JLK: I was in East Providence. Yes.

EMC: East Providence. Right. You had left the service in May of '45 you said.

JLK: Right. Yes.

EMC: Because of pregnancy obviously. You said they didn't want pregnant women in the service. What was the highest rate that you achieved in the Marine Corps?

JLK: Staff Sergeant.

EMC: Yes. Did you ever meet Ruth Chaney Streeter, who was the head of the Women Marines?

JLK: Not enough to shake hands.

EMC: No.

JLK: But she probably was down at Camp LeJeune.

EMC: Yes. Did you receive any medals for your service? American

Campaign?

JLK: It's funny. Because I had recently written to Washington, Everett, actually, and said send me a copy of my service time, and asking them if I was entitled to any ribbons or medals. I think at one time they had sent me some type, probably for participating during wartime.

EMC: Yes.

JLK: I don't remember because--

EMC: American Campaign or something--Victory Medal.

JLK: I became a housewife. And my husband didn't want anything to do with uniforms on me, or medals, or anything else. So, yes.

EMC: That was that. Were you happy or sad to leave the Marine Corps when you mustered out in May '45?

JLK: Sad to leave friends. Because you knew you probably never would see them again. And that was very true. You lost complete contact, you know. But on the other hand, I was pregnant. And that was exciting. And I knew that, you know, I was going into a marriage--a whole new life. So no, it wasn't a sad time.

EMC: Yes. Do you think you would have stayed in if you weren't in the circumstances that you were in?

JLK: Well, we had enlisted for the duration and six months. That was what I had enlisted for, and that's what everybody enlisted for in Boston. So I certainly would have been in through the end of the war and perhaps a little bit longer. I don't think I could have ever made a career of it. Enlisting was the thing to do at the time. But there were too many other things that I was interested in too, you know.

EMC: Yes. Absolutely.

JLK: I can't exactly see myself as ever-- But then again, I might have. I mean I liked the life. It was nice wearing a uniform, being noticed when you went places and stuff, you know.

EMC: How did civilians react to you when you were in the service? Did you ever have any contact with them and their reactions?

JLK: In most cases, very favorable. Because, as I said, this was wartime. I remember when we finally transferred to being Army people that that was a little bit different situation. It was after the war. And sometimes you'd find a little bit of bias and discrimination against service people. But everybody's son,

everybody's daughter--or everybody knew somebody in the service, you know. So there was a lot friendlier feeling towards you during the war.

EMC: Yes. Did you find that the Marine Corps, Women Reserve had a strong sense of esprit de corps?

JLK: Oh, very much so.

EMC: Yes. The Marines are noted for that. Did you find that the Marine Corps, Women Reserve was a smoothly run organization? Any glitches? Any things that happened?

JLK: Not too awfully bad. Of course some confusion at the very beginning. And it probably got smoother after awhile. But I don't remember any big foul-ups.

EMC: Yes. Did you know anyone who was discharged for disciplinary reasons? Did you ever run across anybody who was?

JLK: We had one girl in our barracks I remember who was discharged. Because evidently she was a lesbian. And then they had one poor girl I remember. She came in. And she was a very, very petite little girl. And she had come from a home where she was very sheltered. And the next thing, she was pregnant. And this had happened while she was in the service. I remember the

Marine Corps sending her to a maternity home or rest home or something.

EMC: Could be.

JLK: Yes. They took care of her until she was discharged and able to take care of herself. They wouldn't send her home, because she couldn't go home in that condition. So they really were concerned about the girls that were in. Yes, we had a few interesting-- I remember one other girl. I don't know if she's in the Motor Corps. But evidently she wore fatigues all the time. And she checked into sick bay and said she had pains in her stomach, and had a baby the next day.

EMC: Oh, for heaven--

JLK: Plus this was in the times when you didn't do things like that, you know, people didn't do things like this.

EMC: Right.

JLK: I also remember when we were down there that there were some boys, Marines, who got into the photo lab and took some alcohol. And evidently the alcohol that they use in photo labs is almost pure. Well, they mixed it with Coca-Cola. Because on the base you could get Coca-Cola and you could get beer in what they

call the slop chutes, the NCO clubs (the clubs they had available). And they mixed this alcohol with Coca-Cola. And then they went on a date with these girls. And the girls drank from the bottles, not realizing what it would do. And there was at least one girl that died. I don't know whether any of the boys died. But there were about four to six of them I remember that were involved in this.

EMC: Yes. I can imagine.

JLK: That would be horrible for a family to have your daughter enlist and then pick her up--she's dead, you know, from drinking poisoned alcohol, or poisoned drink.

EMC: Yes. Terrible. Did the Marine Corps experience change or redirect your life in any way?

JLK: Oh, very definitely. I went from being single to married, and married with a child, and then went into military as a dependent--into military life. I think it certainly helped in my maturity, too. I mean I had been a very sheltered person at home. I was the baby. And yes. It was a time of great growth.

EMC: Yes. That's great.

JLK: It was certainly a positive experience.

EMC: Yes. Good. Did you feel that what women were expected to do and to be changed when the war was over? Do you think women tended to retreat to the home, or do you think they were inspired to pursue careers of sort?

JLK: Oh, I think World War II was the thing that changed most of our lives more than anything we can ever think about. Women for the first time, whether they were in the service or whether they were home, found that there were things that they could do that they never had been given an opportunity to do--in factories, in shipyards, in all kinds of things. And they found this was kind of nice, you know. It's great taking care of a house and children, and having a clean house. But the next day it's going to have to be cleaned again. There was a lot of satisfaction in being able to accomplish all these other great things. I found that later when I went to work for the post office. It was a good feeling to feel that you could accomplish these things.

EMC: Yes. Absolutely.

JLK: And that you had the opportunity. Of course, the men didn't like it. And I remember when the men came back from the service the women were immediately fired. All of them were let go from these jobs. Whether they were good, bad or indifferent in them, they were replaced by men. And that was good in a way. But it

left a lot of frustrated women.

EMC: Yes. I think you're right. Well, you-- As you mentioned, you continued on in military life. You were an Army wife for awhile. So you maintained your connection with the military, but then went on to have a career of your own in, as you say, the post office and supervisory positions there. Did you belong to any Marine Corps organizations then or do you belong to any Marine Corps organizations today?

JLK: Today I do. I have been in the Roger Williams Chapter Association of Women Marines, which is a national Organization. I was approached when I was working in the post office in East Providence by a woman who was a member of the Marine Corps Women's Association here in Rhode Island. And at that time I was supporting my six children, and I was going to college nights. So I had no time for any activities outside of that. But later when I retired, I was approached again. And I did become part of this group. And it has been very interesting. Unfortunately, I didn't find anybody that I had known before or knew--or was in at the same time I was. I won't say a project--our cause is to go to the Bristol Veteran's Home once a month or so, it's probably five times a year, to visit the women veterans there. There are no women Marines there at the present time. But we take them cookies, and we have soda and coffee and just talk to them. And they just like having somebody there to talk to.

EMC: Oh, sure.

JLK: We send a packet at Christmas. We used to send a little packet with a lot of little things. And then we decided maybe it was a better idea to send a card and send money, and then they could have their hair done or something like that.

EMC: Yes.

JLK: So I told my children if anything ever happens to me, you know, send me to the Veteran's Home and I'll chase around all the old men veterans. Actually it's a wonderful place.

EMC: Oh, good. Yes, I've heard of it.

JLK: As rest homes go, you know. Currently I think they have about ten women there normally--nurses, WAVES, WACS--no Marines.

EMC: Yes. Interesting. Did you settle eventually in East Providence after you left the Army?

JLK: We traveled to many different places. We lived in Germany, and New Hampshire, and Massachusetts, and Michigan. And we went back to Ohio. And I came back to Rhode Island with my children-- at that time I think I had three--and stayed with my sister for a

short while. And then my husband came back. And things didn't work out. So he eventually left. At that point I stayed in East Providence. So I had been there now--oh, let's see--Peter was born--40 years.

EMC: Did you go to work immediately?

JLK: When my youngest was a year and a half.

EMC: Yes.

JLK: I went down. They gave the entrance exam for the post office. And my brother-in-law was working there. And he said, "Take the post office exam. They won't call you for two years." And I thought well, that's pretty good, you know. Peter will be pretty well grown by then. Because my two youngest were only a year apart. So I had two babies at one time.

EMC: Yes, literally.

JLK: And I took the test, and two weeks later I got called. I went in. I had this testing. And it was the first time the test had been opened in we'll say seven or eight years, and the first time ever it was open to women. And I remember the classrooms were filled. And they filled them three times.

EMC: Oh, my word.

JLK: Thousands of people came to take this test. And I'm sitting there and I'm thinking I've been out of school all this time. And all these young kids are around me, and all are versed in this thing. And what they did at that time was give you a general intelligence test like--

EMC: Continue.

JLK: So I went and took this test. And I thought well, I had said a little prayer, you know. You've got me here. And whatever happens will happen, and it will be because it was supposed to. And two weeks later I get called. I had had the highest mark of any woman that took the blooming test. And so immediately they wanted to hire me.

EMC: Sure.

JLK: Which was horrible for me because I had these two--two small, plus four others--two small children at home. And my oldest was 12. Let's see, Butch was 13 at that time. And then I had Bonnie who was 11. Bonnie was a big help. Butch had his head in a book all the time--nose in the book. But Bonnie was a big help. Even at 11 years old you can't do, you know, that awfully much. But I went to work for the post office. And for the first

year I worked days--a ninety day trial. They said at the end of every ninety days they would let us know whether we were being renewed or not. And I'd say well, you know, let us know what's going on. Because I had gotten myself off welfare now.

EMC: Yes. Sure.

JLK: And now you worried about, you know, you've got these children to support. And they said, just don't buy anything "on time." That was a big help. So after that the main post office in Providence opened--the first automated post office in the United States. And I was hired, full time as an LSM operator--letter sorting machine operator. And we were given a choice after training of the hours that we would work. And I chose tour one. And they were aghast. They said who chooses tour one. This is the first woman that--well, the first woman--

EMC: Tour one is what time?

JLK: Twelve at night till eight in the morning.

EMC: Oh, wow! Yes.

JLK: But I figured when I was working those hours the children would be sleeping. On the other hand, I had somebody take care of the two little ones during the day. But I found that over the

years, because I required a lot of sleep and I worked six days a week for years, that I was saying yes to my children for an awful lot of things. They'd come in and ask me things when I was asleep. Can I do this? And I'd say, "Yes." And then I'd wake up and I'd say, "What did you do that for?" "Well, ma, you told us we could." "Uh huh, okay." But we all survived. And as time went on, then after ten years I got a day job.

EMC: Good.

JLK: So that was nice. But then after maybe three or four more years there I was given the opportunity to go back as a supervisor in the main post office. And that meant going back on nights again. So that was a big decision--another big decision to make. By then my children were fairly well grown. And I went back working nights because it would mean more money when you retired.

EMC: Sure.

JLK: You know, the more your pay is, the more retirement, eventually.

EMC: Yes. I'm going to turn this over. Right.

JLK: So now that they're grown it's great.

EMC: And you spent thirty years in the post office?

JLK: Well, I had my two year service time.

EMC: Oh, that's right.

JLK: That counted toward it.

EMC: Yes. Did you ever finish your college? You mentioned you were going nights.

JLK: No, no. I managed to get two years' credit.

EMC: Great. Where did you go?

JLK: URI extension. By the time I got into that my children were going to college. So it was a matter of taking out a loan to pay for them, and then paying that loan, and then taking out another loan to pay for the next semester. When my oldest son went to college, he went to Northeastern. He was the first one to go. And the reason we chose Northeastern was it's a work/study college. So you pay your own way through. But there were times when he would call, and the two girls worked as waitresses after school. Everybody would take their tip money--all the spare money in the house--and ship it off to Butch for books. But he's a professor today. So it paid off.

EMC: Where does he teach?

JLK: He teaches at Indiana University in Pennsylvania.

EMC: Oh, great. What's his field?

JLK: Zoology. Actually he's into mice. He's a mouse man.
Comparative anatomy.

EMC: Yes. Oh, so he went on too.

JLK: Oh, yes.

EMC: For further education after that. Well, that's great. They sound very successful.

JLK: Yes. I have two children-- One, he has his doctorate. And I have two children who have Masters. And then one who was graduated from URI. And then two have not quite managed to graduate. But hey, they were given the opportunity. And maybe they'll go back and finish anyway.

EMC: Did you ever talk about your Marine Corps days to your children?

JLK: Oh, sure.

EMC: Did any of them ever join the service?

JLK: No. But I think times are different too. You know, it's funny. Before World War II the only people in the service were the people who couldn't manage to survive on the outside. And this was kind of a--

EMC: It was a way out for them.

JLK: Yes, a way out for them. And then you got to World War II and everybody's son, everybody's daughter was in the service. So there was a whole different thought about being in the service. But now we've come full circle I think. The service is not that inviting, unless it's-- Many children I know go in now as a way to pay for their education. That's the big attraction there.

EMC: Yes. On the enlisted rates to get training in something.

JLK: Yes. I was amazed though what they had to go through, and other things we've heard about people being sent overseas. Women who were in the service were aghast that they were going to be sent into combat zones or over--away from their families. When you join you know that this is part of your enlistment, your duties.

EMC: Right.

JLK: I couldn't understand that at all. I mean they felt they should be home taking care of their children. Well, of course, we were never allowed to have children when we were in the service and still stay in the service.

EMC: That's right. Well, how would you sum up your Marine Corps experience if you had to sum it up in a couple of sentences--how you felt about it, what you learned, how it broadened you?

JLK: Oh, it was a very positive experience. It was a time of great growth. I encouraged my children to go into the service. I think it's great. I wouldn't discourage any of them. None of them have ever picked up on it. But as I said, I think the times were just completely different.

EMC: Oh, they were.

JLK: I don't have any regrets about having spent my time. I don't ever feel it was lost time. From this experience I had six children and great children. And yes, it was a good time. It was a time for seeing different parts of the country, and meeting people from all over, and doing a lot of things that I wouldn't have had the opportunity to do.

EMC: That's true.

JLK: Perhaps for many, many years.

EMC: Right. From a limited existence to a broader--broadening experience.

JLK: That's very true.

EMC: Oh, that's great. Well, thank you very much, Jean, for coming in today and recounting your time--two years in the Marine Corps Women's Reserve. We'll have this transcribed and give you a chance to edit it as well.

JLK: Fine.

EMC: Thank you.

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