

Interview with Mrs. Vickie Kennedy

Veteran – Vietnam War

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Place of interview: Kinsley High School, Kinsley, Kansas 67547

Narrator: Mr. Jacob Burghart and Ms. Mikki Burcher

Transcriber: Jacob Burghart and Mikki Burcher

Narrator: This is Kinsley High School, 716 Colony, Kinsley, Kansas. Our guest is Mrs. Vickie Kennedy who was born February 20, 1953, at Perryton, Texas. My name is Jacob Burghart and I will be interviewing her along with the rest of the English Composition II class. Mrs. Kennedy served in the Marines in the Vietnam War.

Narrator: Why did you pick the Marines?

Kennedy: I admired the structure and discipline. They were well organized.

Narrator: Did you have to go through a boot camp?

Kennedy: Yes, it was a twelve-week boot camp. It lasted through Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year. Not like we got those days off.

Narrator: What kind of emotions did you experience in Vietnam?

Kennedy: I didn't actually serve in Vietnam. At that time I was just in air traffic control. I did request to be sent there, but I was denied. At that time, there weren't very many women in the service, and on top of that not many of them were married or pregnant.

Narrator: What was your main job?

Kennedy: Originally, I was in flight clearance. I wanted to get in air traffic control. You had to have 20/20 vision to do it. So basically what we would do is pilots would file flight plans with us. If for some reason, they didn't arrive where they were supposed to, we would dispatch a search and rescue.

Narrator: How did you stay in touch with your family?

Kennedy: Letters. Back then they didn't have the internet. It was the beginning of most new technology...

Narrator: Was there anything special you did for good luck? Any superstitions?

Kennedy: No, not really. I think it was the day-to-day surprise that got you through. It was very challenging physically and mentally.

Narrator: Do you recall any particularly humorous or unusual event?

Kennedy: Going into basic, I was under the height restriction. It took quite a bit of red tape for me to get into the service at all. To enter, you had to be at least five feet tall. It took about three months of red tape to get me through to the service. When they called to tell me it was OK to go, it was three days after everyone else. So I arrived at about three o'clock in the morning by bus. They gave us our bunk assignments and I was, of course, in a top bunk. At five o'clock, they came in and started banging trash can lids together. I woke up and rolled out of bed onto the floor, right next to the drill instructor's feet. I'm sure I made a good first impression. She was nice enough to ask if I was all right. (laugh)

Narrator: Was it harder for you to go through boot camp being shorter than everyone else?

Kennedy: Well, basically, that was part of the red tape. To get into the service I had to guarantee that my height wouldn't be an obstacle to whatever duty I had. I can't say that I had a new attitude because I had been short all my life. You make adaptations and usually you can figure out how to get things done. Like I said, being in the Marine Corp was very challenging. They play a lot of mind games in boot camp. Basically, they tell you that you are the scum of the earth. There were quite a few girls at the boot camp who didn't make it. Some tried to commit suicide. It was a real challenge. But the whole purpose of the Marine Corps is to find what your breaking point is.

Narrator: Were you discouraged that you weren't allowed to go to Vietnam?

Kennedy: Yeah, I was disappointed. I thought it would have been an interesting experience. It would have given me, what I feel like...a purpose...more time in the service. It was disappointing.

Narrator: What did you do for entertainment?

Kennedy: Well, as far as the bases, they had dances. Well, the bases were set up so you didn't have to leave them. There was a bowling alley and you know, uh, access to swimming pools. Because the bases were so spread out and you had to walk everywhere, it was easier to stay in shape. (?) That's pretty much the way it was.

Narrator: Are there any friends that you made that you still keep in touch with?

Kennedy: Yeah, I made a lot of friends there, but you know, with the Vietnam situation...I was on the road quite a bit.

Narrator: After seeing what happened in Vietnam, are you glad you were refused to go?

Kennedy: No, but the Vietnam War wasn't something that the military people chose. It was what the government chose. When we entered this war, we were against people who had been living a certain way for hundreds of years, and we weren't going to change that. (no understandable dialogue)
Somebody's got to be willing to step up and defend the country.

Narrator: What were your reasons for joining the service?

Kennedy: Well, I guess I always felt that all citizens had a responsibility to defend their country.

Narrator: Do you think the draft should be reinstated, or do you think it should still be volunteer?

Kennedy: Well, I would like to think that there would be enough volunteers. I think people should have the choice.

Narrator: So do you support the war in Iraq?

Kennedy: Yes, I do.

Narrator: What would you tell kids my age who are ready to go out into the world? Would you tell them to enlist right away or go to college and get a career?

Kennedy: Well, it depends on what you want. There are benefits for people to go into the service. You can get an education, specific training. You know, the military's not for everybody.

Narrator: Did you keep any kind of personal record? A diary or anything like that?

Kennedy: No, not really.

Narrator: So you were married in the service?

Kennedy: Yes, I got married while I was in the service.

Narrator: When you got leave time, how did you spend it?

Kennedy: Well, when I got a few days off, you know, I could catch a plane. I would ride in one of those huge planes that carried tanks. It was the only plane that it ever rained inside, because it was so humid. And we sat in these jump seats, basically these net seats, along the interior of the wall.

Narrator: Did anyone treat you different when you came back home?

Kennedy: Well, Vietnam wasn't a popular war. It wasn't exactly something you would tell everyone about. You kept it to yourself.

Narrator: Was it hard to leave your family?

Kennedy: Uh, no, I guess it was just normal. It was part of the job. I've always had a good, strong family.

Narrator: Do you remember your last day?

Kennedy: Yeah, I do. I wasn't really ready to get out. I enjoyed my time in the service and it meant a lot to me.

Narrator: What did you go on to do as a career after your time in the service?

Kennedy: I wanted to go into flight clearance on civilian bases.

Narrator: Are jobs easier to find with a military background?

Kennedy: Yeah, I think that since I've been in the service, frankly I think that piques people's interest. It wasn't that hard to find jobs, even as unpopular as the Vietnam War was.

Narrator: Were there more women in the service than you expected to be?

Kennedy: There really wasn't that many. I was stationed at an air base in Memphis, Tennessee. There were only a total of about 300 women, and there were about 60,000 men.

Narrator: How did your military experience affect your life?

Kennedy: I think it was a very positive experience. You become disciplined and really do learn leadership skills. It teaches you to be more assertive, more confident. I think it was a very beneficial experience.

Narrator: How did your military experience influence your political point of view?

Kennedy: Well, our government's certainly not perfect. It can be discouraging so see things that are a waste of money. I think that compared to other countries, we are so much better off.

Narrator: So you don't attend any reunions?

Kennedy: No.

Narrator: Which branch of service do you think is most difficult?

Kennedy: Well, the Marine Corps has a reputation for it. After we went through basic and were finished we were told that you could enter any other branch of the service that you want to. They would take you as is. If you were to go from the Marines into another branch, you wouldn't have to retake basic. But if you went from any other branch into the Marines, you would have to start over.

Narrator: What was your average day like?

Kennedy: I would get up at four o'clock in the morning and be on duty by five o'clock. You know, just one more routine. We had the evenings off. You know I think the thing that stands out the most was, you know, one day there was an expected category five hurricane and they had to evacuate all the aircraft off the base, and that was pretty impressive, as quickly as they could do that. Like I said, evenings were your own.

Narrator: Did you have any goals, that you really wanted, anything that you really wanted to do while in the military? Like, be a pilot?

Kennedy: Well, I definitely wanted to be on the aviation side. They gave me a battery of tests. They wanted me to go into data processing, and you know, this was in the 70's when technology was really starting to take over.

Narrator: Was it more or less difficult to be married and have a husband?

Kennedy: Yeah, it was difficult. They didn't go to any trouble to station us together.

Narrator: How often did you get to see him? Estimate.

Kennedy: Well, you know, pretty regularly. Our bases were only an hour and a half apart. He wasn't sent to Vietnam, surprisingly. It was kind of surprising because Marines are usually sent.

Narrator: Did you meet him in the service?

Kennedy: Yeah.

Narrator: How did you meet him?

Kennedy: Just at the club on base.

Narrator: So you were married while you were still in the service?

Kennedy: Yes

Narrator: So did you have the fancy wedding with the Marines holding the swords?

Kennedy: Well, yes. It was fun and interesting.

Narrator: What kind of things did you miss?

Kennedy: Well, we had no transportation on base, so you definitely missed having your own vehicle.

Narrator: Did you feel a lot of pressure or stress while you were in the service?

Kennedy: Oh, yeah. Well, no, it wasn't like that. After that time in the military, you become very disciplined. The things you take for granted here at home are a big deal in the Marines.

Narrator: How do you compare boot camp today with what you had?

Kennedy: The boot camp I went through was very by the book, and you answered orders without question. Today, it's not so much like that. If people get upset, they might write their drill instructor to tell them why they are upset. I can't imagine doing that...it's just bizarre. When I went through boot camp, people got teeth knocked out and they didn't make a big deal of it.

Narrator: What was your family's reaction when you decided to join the military?

Kennedy: Well, it was a little bit of a shock for them. It wasn't something I had discussed in great detail, but they were in good spirits.

Narrator: Did you discuss it, or was it a spur-of-the-moment thing?

Kennedy: It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. But, you know, I had given it some thought. I was excited. It was a new direction in my life.

Narrator: Did your peers respect you more?

Kennedy: No, they thought I was crazy. (laughs)

Narrator: Would you suggest that kids our age go into the military?

Kennedy: It's an excellent experience; many great opportunities. You could go to college, even if you couldn't normally go to college. It's not a bad life.

Narrator: How do you think the military today compares to the military you had?

Kennedy: Well, I think that society has become more involved. Society is more concerned about "self-esteem," and today's military has become kind of dumbed-down by it.

Narrator: What do you do now?

Kennedy: Well, I teach EMS classes, and have a home business.

Narrator: Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered?

Kennedy: No, I don't think so.

Narrator: Well, we thank you for your time.

Kennedy: Sure; glad to do it.

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