

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler



Cara: This is Cara, of the Ashland City Library, and we are interviewing Mary Mishler through Humanities Kansas in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read Project. It is March 4, 2023. Mary, when was your birthday?

Mary: July 14, 1952.

Cara: What type of work did you do during the Vietnam era?

Mary: I was a computer operator. I was stationed after boot camp and everything at Alameda, California, Naval Air Base. Which is no longer there.

Cara: Mary, what was your maiden name?

Mary: Mishler.

Cara: Where were you born and raised?

Mary: I was born in Independence, Kansas, and we moved here when I was in first grade in 1958. September 28, 1958. That's what my dad always says.

Cara: Very specific!

Mary: Yes, I remember.

Cara: What did your family do when you moved here?

Mary: My dad started working for Cleo Bliss in the plumbing business and then he bought half of Al Siedel's business. He took over the plumbing part, bought it out, and we moved over where the bus barn is now. Then, I don't remember how many years it was that we moved next door to where we are currently. We used to sell appliances and do plumbing, heating, air conditioning and electric. Now we don't do appliances quite so much, because everybody can go to Home Depot.

Cara: What is your educational background?

Mary: I had two years in business administration at Dodge Junior College, got my AA and then, after I got out of the Navy, I finished up at Pittsburg State University and got my BA in business administration. But what I have mainly worked in was something like computers or accounting or something like that, the whole time. I did work at the library when I was at Dodge JUCO.

Cara: And those were good times!

Mary: They were! I loved it.

Cara: What is your current occupation?

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

Mary: I'm office manager of Mishler Service Center.

Cara: And your current address?

Mary: One nineteen West Blackford Avenue, here in Ashland.

Cara: At the time, were you in a relationship, were you married or were you single?

Mary: I got married in July before my discharge. But we don't need to talk about that.

Cara: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

Mary: Well, they weren't drafting females back then. I don't think they are yet, but I enlisted on purpose. To me, it was kind of ridiculous that they were drafting the guys and not the girls too. I wanted something that would help me to be able to travel and something that would help to get me out of here. I started looking into the different services and I settled on the Navy. I don't know if it was because of where they were doing bootcamp and everything then, or what it was. I didn't want the Marines because I read they really put the girls (from what I read, which I found out after I was in, was maybe 50% lies) they put them through about the same kind of boot camp as they did the guys. I wasn't sure I was able to do that because, you know, girls were not treated to be as strong as guys. The Air Force and Army, I just... I don't know. I was going between the Navy and the Air Force because I liked the uniforms! I didn't like the green and I don't really know, unless it was because of the chance of being able to be stationed in California, I'm really not sure why I chose the Navy, but I did.

Cara: And when did you enlist in the Navy?

Mary: It was November 30th of 1972. It was considered my first day.

Cara: And you joined because you wanted to get to go to California.

Mary: I wanted to get out of Ashland and I wanted a chance. I had gone to the American Baptist Assembly grounds in the summer of '71 and worked up there. They took two kids from each state to work up there every summer. So, I got to meet people from different states, and that helped me to realize that it was something I wanted: a chance to be able to meet people from different states. Being in the service, I felt like I was a better chance. My parents couldn't really afford that much on college even back then. I worked while I was at Dodge Junior College and I got grants and everything to make the tuition and everything like that.

Cara: The military didn't help pay for your college?

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

Mary: The military helped pay for what I finished up in Pittsburg, but it did not pay for what I did then and I took one class at Golden State University in San Francisco and I think they paid for that. I can't remember if I did or if they did, but that was computer technology too.

Cara: Well, what was bootcamp like for a business major?

Mary: Bootcamp would have been like that for anybody. First, being from Kansas, you went to the Armed Forces Service Induction Center up in Kansas City. I went up there in July of '72 and that's when I had all my physical and everything like that. I met a girl from Kansas City and a girl from Dodge City. The one from Dodge City, her dad happened to be one of the radio people on KGNO out of Dodge City at the time. We both passed okay. The one from Kansas City, she was just a little bit overweight and so they told her to have nothing but water and bananas for the weekend and to come back in on Monday. She lost two or three pounds and was able to get in.

Mary: And we all three met in Kansas City on November 30th. They put the girls up in what was called the Holiday Inn Towers. No, the guys were in the Holiday Inn Towers and we were in the Holiday Inn Gardens. We got a plane from Dodge City to Kansas City, then we got picked up in a taxi. The taxi drivers were used to people coming in, the guys coming in, so they took us to the towers. We had to get across a four-lane street with our suitcases to get to the Gardens. The guys were bussed up. They were picked up the next morning in a bus to take to AFSIC and we were picked up in a taxi.

Cara: But there were only three of you.

Mary: Yes, I don't think we had any others that day that went. Then we flew down after we got all checked in and made sure we hadn't changed any of our physical stuff. They took us to the airport and we took a plane down to Orlando, Florida, and by midnight we had to... We were sent on a bus from the airport to the base and we checked in.

It was probably close to midnight before we got into our barracks. They were like dorms. They looked like dorms on the outside. There were three floors and you used the outside stairway and there were like three sets of bunks and I think one single. So there was about seven of us in each cubical, which was bigger than this office is, and there were about, I don't remember if it was six to 10 cubicles.

And then we had a Recruit Company Commander, who was actually only a petty officer. I, at the time, was 20. One of the girls was going to go into nursing and she was 21 or 22, somewhere in there. We were the oldest ones and there were some that had just gotten out of high school.

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

Our recruit commander was only 25 and she reminded me of Jane Shreve. She was short but she was just like Jane Shreve. She could let you know what you needed to do. We opened our bags, got in our p.j.'s and got in bed, and it was a rude awakening about 5:10 the next morning. They didn't play a bugle, they played a recording of the bugle playing Reveille. That was how we woke up and you had to stand outside your cubical and then we got to wear, of course, our civies. That day, the first day, we went and got fitted for the uniforms, which were dungarees. At that time, what we got in boot camp was light-dark blue polyester slacks and a chambray shirt. And then the hats. I can't remember if I've still got one of those hats or not. I know I've got the dress hat. So for probably about a week, we were wearing our regular clothes because we didn't have the uniforms.

They had to be tailored, mine had to be... my skirts and slacks had to be tailored twice because with all the walking and marching, I lost some weight. I always say I need to go back through boot camp for about six weeks, but it was a rough awakening and of course you've got somebody yelling at you. We had some girls who thought they'd do great because they were raised in military families and it was a rude awakening for them.

There was one girl. She ended up being our head recruit and she was only 18. I don't have contact with any of them, which I wish I did. I've tried to find her on Facebook but Jerri, she had a basically good upbringing, but she was strong. I decided after about two days, I saw one of them who thought she was going to do okay, because she was from a military family, who almost decided to go out. They had one who they found out was pregnant, so she got her discharge, and different ones like that got whittled down from probably about 35 to maybe 30. I decided that I had signed up for this and I was going to do the best I could and if that wasn't good enough for them, they could give me my discharge. I made it through. The best part of the whole thing in boot camp was the church service because even though we were in uniform, we got to sing and talk. They called the guys, "trees". A lady does not talk to "trees", but that was one place you could talk to the "trees".

Cara: So the social aspects were a plus!

Mary: That was the only time we interacted with the guys. When my brother went in four years later, I found out it had completely changed. I had hoped to go to boot camp in Banbridge, Maryland, but that summer they had closed it and the only place for females was in Orlando.

I liked the history and I wanted the chance, hopefully, to be able to see some of the historical stuff. But you weren't really allowed off the base that often. The girl from Dodge, her and I were able... one weekend we got leave and her brother picked us up. He lived in... I don't think it was Orlando, but it was close around there. He picked us up and we got to spend the week-end at their house and then the last weekend, if we

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

had done good and everything, we got to go to Disney World, but we were in our uniforms. It's kind of hard to get on and off those rides when you're in an A-line skirt. And they had... our list of stuff was we had to have girdles; we had to have hose. We had to wear lipstick. My mom had a red lipstick that she hadn't used and she gave me that because I didn't wear lipstick and you had to act like a lady. For those who smoked, they had a place outside where they could smoke. You did not walk around with a cigarette in your hand. Ladies did not do that. That was the frame of mind that they had for us, was that this is what a lady does. We had our classes. There was some of the girls that they ended up having to stand at the back in the classroom because they were caught sleeping. That's when I found out it was nice to have glasses; the light glares off them! I could take like five minutes naps and I'd be just fine. But we learned about ships and I used to know the ranks from each one of the military services. I can still kind of get them.

Because I had had two years of college, when I got out of boot camp I was an E1, which is a recruit, up to E3, which is three slashes. The pay was a little better, but the pay wasn't fantastic. It still isn't fantastic. But part of the reason I decided to go in too, was there was one lady at Dodge JUCO that worked in the kitchen, at the lounge where we could get our sandwiches and stuff, and she said it was something that she had always thought about and never did. She said, "You don't want to regret it."

She said it had changed from when she would have gone in. It was basically nurses and she said any other women in the service had a bad reputation because the men put it on them, as this was why they were there. But I never heard any of that and the main thing we heard was that there were some of the men (who would have been my parents' generation) who didn't think women belonged in the military. There was a lot of stress put on Jerri and I can't remember exactly what it was now, but it was the weekend before we went to Disney World, that our Company Commander took her off the list as Lead, because there were some that were complaining about her. I don't know why. See, there were two companies that went in before us. They were in through Thanksgiving. We went in after Thanksgiving but we were there during Christmas.

Mary: The ones that were in there earlier, they got a choice. If they wanted to go home for Christmas, they would let them go home and then they didn't graduate until we did, which meant they were in there like two weeks longer. So, there were like four companies that graduated when we did. After New Year's, there were tons. They had our whole barracks filled, all three floors were practically filled by the end of January when we graduated because women were coming in.

Cara: Then, all of a sudden, they were more acceptable. What had happened? What changed?

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

Mary: I don't really know what it was. For some reason, women had decided that they wanted to go into the military, if it was because of the educational idea or what it was, but we had anywhere from two to four companies coming in every single week. The only watch that I ever stood while I was in boot camp was at another company's area for four hours, and that's loads of fun because you learned how and who you were supposed to salute. Then you've got somebody that comes in the interior door and you're sitting right there and you have to stand-up. You have to know whether you're supposed to salute these people or not, because they're not officers and officers are basically what we were supposed to salute. But they were trying to get us used to all this stuff and it was lots of fun. And when Jerri was... when we got in trouble, it was raining that last week. We had snow down in Orlando. It wasn't much, of course, but that last week we had rain and we had to stand outside the main door. I think it was eight hours, if it was four or eight, but you stood at attention, then your commander came out about every 30 minutes and would let you be at ease. But we had got in trouble for something. I can't remember what it was, but the rain that week, our shoes got to looking terrible. The water on the sidewalk was like at least an inch and you had to have them shining.

It cleared up by graduation. There were two or three of them who really could do a spit-shine on our shoes and they were busy that night. Spit-shining. You had two pairs of shoes and you had one pair that they were working on. You worked on it and then they worked on it and put the spit-shine on so that we all had spit-shined shoes for graduation. You marched in review. I've got a picture of all of us, which was done long before graduation. It was after we'd got our uniforms, of the whole company and everything.

You had to have a company. 3020 was our number, and we had to have that on everything-- our foot locker, and uniforms, and everything. You had your name tag that said your name on it. You had your dog tags, which I got very upset because I told them I was American Baptist and they put Baptist Orthodox on there. Somebody read it and said, "Do they know what Orthodox is?" I said, "Probably not." But I ended up getting some that said, "American Baptist."

Do you know what the little chink sort of is in a dog tag? There's one dog tag that had it. For the guys, I think they were in plastic too, but the little chink, that was for when they died in the war. They put that in their mouth and that little chink was to seat their teeth because they'd go like that and see it.

Cara: You got that too?

Mary: No, we didn't get that. They didn't put that on ours. We had two dog tags, though you had the one that was on the long chain and the other one that was on the little chain.

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

Cara: Was it because at this time women did not expect to be put into combat situations?

Mary: Hospital ship was the only place they went that was even close, but we had to wear our dog tags all the time. I have a cousin that was in (he's two years older than me) and he was in and at the time he said you had to wear your uniforms, even when you were on leave. Well, when I left boot camp, they told us we had like two hours to get off the base after graduation. So, we were in uniform. But I didn't have to wear my uniform when I went to California, but he had to wear his. He was very upset because he was over six-foot and the bunks on the ship were not for a six-foot person.

So it was not comfortable for a lot of people, but boot camp was something else. You got to talk to the guys at church service. We were around the guys and of course the guys, they were trying to hit on anything they could when we went to Disney World. They were trying to make passes at you and everything they could think of. In fact, I never saw any of those kids again. The girl that I went in with from Dodge, she ended up getting engaged and I think she went to her first duty station. She was supposed to go to school and she was out within a year. Back then, you could be married in the service. Which one girl, I can't remember, I should have brought my album. She had a fantastic voice; she was going to go to D.C. and join the navy choir and the band and everything. She ended up getting married. She did do her time, but there were several of them that didn't. They either made it through boot camp and got married or they decided, for whatever reason, they got depressed or whatever it was, and got their discharge from boot camp.

Cara: Were you trained to do anything while you were in boot camp?

Mary: No. What you were trained for in boot camp was the ships, aircraft and warfare class. You were trained in the... like I said, you had a Bluejackets Manual which, I've got one now that is not the same one I had then because, well, for certain reasons it got disappeared. But you had to study that because you had to know what the insignia were, what the ranks were, and everything like that, and just different classes like that.

But when you left, boot camp, well, when you had gone in, you had taken the test as to what it was you were looking for, what they felt like. I found out they wanted me to go into computer technology because they could have got me for two more years. The recruiters get a certain amount of points. Computer technology is to repair the computers. That's not what I wanted to do, but like nursing, office work, there was one girl I went to boot camp with, she was in San Diego with me at computer school and ended up not doing so good. So, she ended up going into the kitchen or food. I can't remember what they called it, but she changed schools and ended up going to D.C.

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

There was one girl that did go into computers and she ended up in Spain, but you took the test to see what it was you were intellectually... you could do, and because of the job that my family did, I knew a lot of tools. In fact, the recruiter told me that I did better on that test than a lot of guys do or did at the time. But you did take school for your choice until you got out. That school was in San Diego, which is why I went to San Diego, and I chose to go home for two weeks. My luggage did not make it to Dodge City with me because we had a changeover in Atlanta and the luggage did not make it. So, we had to go back up later and get my luggage.

It was loads of fun, the plane from Dodge... I haven't ridden in a small plane like that in a long time. I didn't even want to be on plane again for a long time. It's been probably about 14 years now since I've been on a plane. Then, when I went to San Diego, I had to pay for the cab. You had to call in. Your leave started like at 12:01 am, so you're usually up the day before your leave starts so that you can call in as soon as possible because they have to write it down in the log books. You call in to the duty officer and it's the same thing when you get back.

So, you have to make sure that you are where you're supposed to be at 12:01 am on the day your leave ends. I had my foot locker and I had several bags when I left, but it was fun. Yeah, they put us on buses and we had to get to the airport. You had two hours to get out of Orlando, was what they told us. I don't know if it was true or not. But the one from Dodge, she went to her brother's, so she didn't have to worry about that, and then we met up... No, she didn't go to San Diego. San Diego was just one of the girls that I'd been in boot camp with. And then she was the one that ended up in the commissary, for the food prep and everything.

She ended up getting stationed at the Pentagon. I heard from her a few times and then she stopped answering, so I figured she was messing around and whatever, but that was boot camp. Are there any other questions about boot camp?

Cara: What did you do after boot camp?

Mary: I went home for two weeks, then I went to San Diego. In San Diego, we were probably half a mile or so from a IHOP (International House of Pancakes). One of the girls was in night classes, so usually on Friday nights we would wait until she got out of class and then we'd go down to IHOP, which was open 24 hours, and we'd have pancakes. You don't want the chocolate chip pancakes unless you're really a chocoholic! On the weekends, we would take the bus and go to Sea World and go to the zoo and to strip malls to see what they had and stuff.

One of the guys I was in class with, who was from Florida, his wife got mugged in a shopping center. So, he wanted to get back to Florida. School was where you put down... They gave you what they called a "wish list" and you made three choices as to where you wanted to be stationed. My last choice was in Florida. I had San Diego and I had Alameda for my other choice. His first choice was Florida, where he'd grown

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

up, and then he had San Diego and Alameda. We were told later that they had some new guy who was filling the wish list. He decided, "These people don't have any idea what they want." So, he flipped everybody and you got your last choice instead of your first choice. This kid got Alameda and I got Florida.

The name of the town... It wasn't Orlando, but I can't remember, and then his wife got mugged. We still had about a month at least left in school and we put in to switch our orders. The last day, we still didn't know. We sat in the office, we were supposed to catch our planes and finally, they sent us home. I took my leave. I should have gone straight to Alameda, but I took my leave and went back home. We finally got our orders. They went back to Florida and I went to Alameda. And then when I got to Alameda, they didn't know I was coming! They knew he wasn't but they weren't told I was. But your "A" School is where you learn about your chosen field. You take your classes for all the computers and everything.

Back then, they had the computers that were the big things with the big magnetic tapes. So you learned how to take care of those and all kinds of different stuff. Cobalt, that was a class I took in San Francisco. It was a Cobalt programming class (which I've never used). You learned computer language and all that kind of stuff. I had one Chief, I can't remember his first name, but he looked like Clark Gable! He even had the split between his front teeth like Clark Gable. He was fun. We had a good group of teachers and of course we were with guys in there too. They didn't have any restrictions like that, but they had their own barracks.

There were still about two of us in each cubicle. You had the bunk bed and then you had the lockers which were wood-paneled on the outside. They weren't metal. You had enough room to put everything in there, supposedly. But there were at least two of us in every room. One of the girls was from Colorado and she married a black sailor.

Part of the reason, she even told us she did it, was because her father was a bigot. There was another girl who was from Colorado. She had been in the company in boot camp before us but graduated the same time because she was one of them that chose to go back home for Christmas. She ended up marrying somebody and then she found out she had pancreatic cancer and she passed away back in... I think it was '79 or '80, left her husband and little boy. She found out when she got pregnant that she had cancer. That was the only one I had really been in touch with. One of the other girls, the one that did night school, she got stationed in Hawaii and she said, "Unless you know some of the locals, you're going to be blowing a lot of money." She said you could not find any place to live off-base that was worth it. And I knew somebody who'd got stationed in Japan and they said apartment, probably about this size, went for \$500 to \$1,000 a month. And Hawaii was just about as bad. But we got to go to the beaches and the other attractions and stuff. On weekends we didn't have to wear uniforms and as long as you got your work done, you were okay. It was a fun time.

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

Cara: After your training was finished, what did they do with you next?

Mary: That was when you got your station and I got stationed in Alameda, which is not there (now) either. At San Diego, they still have the base, but Alameda was turned over to the City of Alameda. The way I understood it, they have condos there now. But where Alameda was, you went by a tunnel highway from Oakland into Alameda. We had two-person rooms. They were remodeling the room. The barracks were set off over here and it was two floors. By the second year, or maybe even only six months, over where the cafeteria was and the chow hall and things like that, was sort of like a horseshoe shape. They had fixed up one section of it for the girls. Unless you were getting money to live off base, you had to have a room there on base. I ended up getting one of the girls who had a apartment off base, so I basically had my own room, which was nice. I even had a five cubic foot refrigerator. The lockers were about like what they were in school but we didn't have bunk beds. We had single beds. I got a high-fi record player. I got a cassette player. I had a tv.

I got a little upset when my roommate come back. No, it was a new girl that they put in there. She didn't even ask me if she could have access to this stuff. She just did it and so we didn't get along too good and she ended asking for her own room. And then the last probably year, the first girl I had roomed with had gotten her discharge. She was a radio operator and she and I got an apartment off base. And so I didn't have to worry about the barracks anymore. It wasn't within walking distance. But it was difficult back then. Two guys could get an apartment together off base, but we confronted this one manager at this one place, but no, two girls were not going to live together. We ended up getting this place, it was maybe about \$350. It was really nice, had two bedrooms and a real nice little kitchen and everything. It was really nice. When she moved, that was what my husband and I took over while I was still in.

But we worked on the computers. I was on day shift, until I learned how to keypunch the punch cards. Of course, I learned that in A School, too. But you learn what all those numbers mean. That's part of the computer language and everything. They had programmers, and two of the guys that I had been in A school with were there, stationed there as programmers. So I got to know them even more, and one of them was married. No, both of them were married and I didn't see the one as much as I did the other one, but I don't know if it was because him and I were Christians or what, and of course, it was our first interaction really with civilians.

And I had gotten these stickers that had a cross on it and a finger pointing up and said, "One way." My supervisor, civilian supervisor and I... boot camp, and everything was well, when I was up at the American Baptist Assembly grounds, there were some black people there, but you know Ashland didn't have that many back then. So the Navy was the first place I got to interact with them. Beautiful people. I don't know what some people's problem is, but I was talking to my supervisor and we were talking about it and she said, "Why don't you put one over here on the door."

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

One of the other ladies did the stuffing, folding and stuffing envelopes. She said, "Mary, you've got to watch it around here. You don't want to let them know that you're a Christian." I said, "Why not?" She says, "It's just not going to go right." I talked to the one guy I'd been in San Diego with because I knew he was a Christian and he said, "Well, that doesn't sound right to me." I said, "That's what I thought." Within about two weeks, everybody that I came in contact with knew that I was a Christian and they knew that he was a Christian, and this lady even changed her attitude after that.

So I felt like somebody was doing something in there, but we learned how to key punch. We learned how to print whatever letters it was we were doing. We learned how to stuff the envelopes and everything. Then I got moved downstairs to the tape library.

Cara: I don't know what that is.

Mary: Your computer tapes. They were at least 12 inches, like an LP record. But the first ones were an inch to three quarters-of-an-inch magnetic tape. I had to log them in. We had them where they stayed in the library for a certain amount of time, if needed, and then they were cycled out. I got them to the operator and I got them back in. They put me on swing shift, which meant I went in about four o'clock in the evening and worked until about 7:00 or 8:00 in the morning. I tried to leave before 8:00 so I wouldn't have to stand as they raised the flag. But you either leave before or after 8:00. I would have to stay late if we had our company meetings, which we had usually on Fridays. I believe it was. I was doing the tape library and I had been doing it for over a year.

I went in to talk to my chief and said, "I signed up as a computer operator. I have not operated the computers yet." So finally, they put me into the computer room. They realized that that was right. They put me there and I was just kind of like stuck because I had so long... I was upstairs in the key punch and all of that stuff and then they moved me down and I'd been there about two years and it was time for a change. It was getting to be old hat and so and one of the evaluations I got was he made the comment there was something about my attitude, that they weren't sure I understood the attitude of rank. And when he read that, I was in his office and I said, "It's kind of hard to show that if everybody is kind of joking around and everything during the day." I said, "Is there any time that I have not shown you the respect that you deserve?" And he said no, but he'd noticed on one of the others. I said, "Well, that's probably because I went to a party, a company party, and I said, "It's a little difficult to show respect to somebody that when you see them drunk, they're not acting respectfully." He understood that.

And I proved to them I was not going to follow tradition when I did the course and passed the test to make it to and E4. Now the tradition is that you go to the club and

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

you buy a keg for everybody. I bought bubblegum cigars and lollipops, Tootsie Roll Pops. They said, "So when are we going to the club?" I said, "I don't care when you go to the club." I said, "I don't drink, I don't smoke. You get bubblegum cigar, you get a Tootsie Roll Pop. That's it." That changed a few things, too, as far as our department went.

I debated. By the time it came from me to re-up, I was married and I think I really would have liked to stay in. But part of my thing was that I worked with... there were almost more civilians than there were military. The civilians got away with a lot. If they didn't feel like coming in to work, they called in and said they were sick. We had to go to sick call. You had to prove you were sick. We were allowed an hour lunch until our last commander. He was coming close to just getting out, hitting his 30 and he didn't want any black marks on his record, so he cut our lunch to half an hour.

Cara: How was that not going to get him a black mark?

Mary: Because the civilians got a half-hour. Civilians complained about us getting a longer lunch. But he unfortunately got this one kid, who was black, I'm not saying that had anything to do with it, but he had signed up for the reserves. He did not go to meetings. He was signed up for the Active Reserve. See, I found out when I signed the paperwork in July of '72, when I went in in November, they said, "Did you realize you were in the inactive reserve for all this time?" Well, they called it the cash program. I don't remember what that stood for, but I even had a pin. But I could have stayed in the inactive reserve for the whole time. That means you don't have to go to the meetings or anything. If for any reason, they needed to activate the inactive reserve, they would have called me. But they didn't tell me that until November, after I'd signed the papers to go on active duty! Well, this kid signed up for active reserves but he wouldn't go to the meetings, didn't have to. Yes, active reserves, you have to go to a meeting once a month. You have to do the two weeks of training every year. He wouldn't do that. So they put him on active-duty in our company, which the commander did not like. One thing I remember is this kid put a dime in one ear, I have no idea why, but he did whatever he wanted. If he didn't feel like showing up to work on time, he'd maybe not get there till 10:00. As far as he was concerned, if they wanted him there, they could deal with it.

Cara: There was no way to punish him?

Mary: They could try and make him do things, but he wanted his discharge. And so that he wouldn't have a black mark, our commander, finally, after about a month... I think he had been transferred to us and then I'm not sure if they transferred him or gave him his discharge. I thought they should have put him on a ship, because we did have a ship that we knew the data processing group of the ship. We'd even had picnics and played ball games and stuff with them. I don't think he would have survived on the ship.

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

One thing, in Alameda I did get to tour the USS Enterprise, which is like a city unto itself because they had stores and everything on there and they just had to watch out for the planes when they're loading and everything. And we got to see how they took planes up from the hangar deck. My uncle loved it. It was on a family weekend and my aunt and uncle from down in Santa Barbara, they came up and my uncle just loved it. He'd never been in the military and he got to see how they folded the wings up and lowered the planes and everything. They had this one that was a satellite that had this big round circle thing on it. He just loved it and it was really fun. But we got to do whatever we wanted. There was one or two times that we did end up having to stand watch because somebody had complained because data processing was not standing watch.

Our watch was at the barracks and then once or twice it was at the department. I got upset because I had a real nice dungaree jacket, insulated, that I wore to and from work. The computer room was inside our department and was a punch code to get in, so nobody could go in there. But I had hung my jacket outside on a coat tree, had done it for years, for days, months. I came out one time to go home and it was not there. So I had to get a new I.D. and everything because I had my I.D. folded in the pocket. So I learned not to do that. I took it in the computer room with me. But it was fun.

Cara: How long were you in service?

Mary: I was in-service for four years. My discharge was December 1, well, November 30, 1976.

Cara: So you were actually discharged after Vietnam was over.

Mary: I was in boot camp. Well, that was when the President died. I was at Alameda, I believe, when the Peace was signed in '73. I was at bootcamp when Johnson and Truman both passed away. We had the day off, we didn't have classes or anything these days. I can't remember now if Truman passed away first, but when we went to Disney World they had the Hall of Presidents, and I can remember some of us were sitting in it, and it was so neat because they had a robot or figure for each one of the presidents, and Lincoln was the only one that gave any kind of a speech. The others were, you know, it was like they were talking or something. I can remember I said to the girl that was sitting next to me, "Do you realize out of the former presidents, that Ford (and I believe it was Johnson at the time,) are the only former presidents..." Well, Nixon. Then we heard like the next day that Johnson had passed away. So our last week about and we ended up with a day off. I think it was on Thursday that week because of his funeral and but yeah, there wasn't really anything special done that I can remember. I don't remember any special day off or anything like that when they signed the Peace.

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

Cara: So, your life really didn't change because the war was officially over?

Mary: Not really, no, except that there were some of the guys that were coming back. The Enterprise was stationed there at Alameda until they sent it up to Bremerton, Washington, for raising it up and getting the barnacles all off and stuff like that. But other than maybe some of the ships coming back in and then our department would have had something to do with that. But I don't remember that anything... Nothing really changed that much, except for more sailors being around. But whenever one of the ships came in you had more sailors and so on. So no, there wasn't really anything in school or in Alameda, either one.

Cara: So, it was business as usual. Do you recall the day that your service ended?

Mary: Yes, because well, we didn't do it on that day. But for the Friday before, we had been in a bowling league and one of the guys had gotten discharged. He'd been in for several years. He ended up going into the Army. You have 90 days (I think it was 90 days) from when you get your discharge that you can go back in and get the same rank. He felt like he got a better deal from the Army when he went back in as far as bonus and place to serve and everything. He decided he was tired of the Navy, but he had gotten out.

One of the girls that had been there when I got there, had gotten her discharge. The last party that we had the year before for Christmas. I'd won a door prize of a bottle of champagne and I had not opened it. So we decided we were going to have a party and we had it at our apartment and we had my bottle of champagne. Everybody was supposed to bring some and we made a rule that we were not going to discuss the department-- any problems with it, nothing. We were just going to have fun. There was probably maybe six to 10 of us from the bowling team, which was all from the department. I had never (other than having wine coolers before) I had never had any alcohol.

We figured out that I had drank about a bottle of champagne on my own and about the time that I realized we started discussing the department, I said, "That's it." The next day, when I woke up, my husband was nice about that. He gave me a big glass of water and he gave me a couple of aspirins and he said, "You're going to take that." I had a dull headache all day, but that was about it. But that was our celebration. It was not on that day, but it was that week. We waited for the weekend. Your last year, you have what you call a "short-timers calendar." I had one of those up. Really, some of the civilians, if I could have gotten a job on-base to still work, I would have loved it, but I never did.

And I didn't really do too much until later. I did several different little jobs and then I worked at the Army base, Oakland Army Base, for about six months as a temporary keypunch operator. They were still doing keypunch. I was there when Elvis Presley

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

died. I enjoyed that.

Cara: You were there when Elvis died?

Mary: Yeah, that was '77 because it was before my daughter was born.

Cara: Did your husband remain in the military?

Mary: Oh, he was out before I was. So it was partly his discharge party, too. He had been out. He was selling insurance to military people. The insurance that military people got was called SGLI. But the thing that nobody pointed out was most of this insurance that they were selling military people had a little-bitty clause in it that said, "Will not pay if killed in war."

Cara: Made it kind of worthless?

Mary: He was being trained by this man who had been in the military and it was a group that had been set up by ex-military and then they had got this insurance set up and it was to cover, of course it cost you because the SGLI was through the military. So this would cost you. It wasn't very expensive really, but it would cover no matter where you were killed and he was selling that insurance and I met him in 1976 and then we were married in July of '76. I'm not sure he enjoyed being a spouse of a military person really, other than having the I.D., but that might have part of the thing because if I had stayed in I most likely would have been transferred. I would love to have gone back to the East coast.

And I had a chief who had gotten transferred to D.C. and he said, "If you want to work where there's only military, you want to come some place like that. He said, The Pentagon, any of the bases around, most of them are 90% military." I would have loved to have gone. But I don't regret it as much as I think I would have if I had not been in the service.

I was very happy that I went, but yeah, as far as Vietnam there wasn't really that much of an impact on anything that I did.

Cara: Did you use the GI Bill to go to college after discharge?

Mary: You have 10 years to use the G.I. Bill when you get your discharge. I moved the kids to Pittsburg and took the bill. Let's see, we moved there in '83. Steve was just a little thing and I took my junior and senior years. I even went to school during the summer to make sure I could finish and get everything that I needed for my degree and I finished up in December '86, which was when I was done. I basically was supposed to be done in November and I had a grant, the Pell grant and Abell grant. That helped me to finish up that last month. Basically, I graduated because of the G.I. Bill. I'm the only one of my family that had any college really. Well, my mom had had college, a little bit. She was a teacher for a while but I had my four-year degree,

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

which I guess I use it pretty much now more than what I did, because it was in accounting, business and stuff like that, which I've always loved.

Cara: And you might not have completed the bachelors if you hadn't gone to the military.

Mary: I don't believe so, no.

Cara: So it really did help you.

Mary: It helped me then and now it helps because Marge McCarty kept telling me I needed to sign up for the medical and I never really saw any reason to until about 2013. They started the deal to where you didn't have to go, like to Wichita or Dodge City. Sometimes I still have to go to Dodge, but you can see the people at your home clinic, which makes it easier on the big hospitals and everything. I get my medical prescriptions and anything like that through the V.A. I still have Medicare, but that's basically just in case they get somebody in there who decides that if you didn't serve more than this long, then why are you getting medical? I mean our representatives in D.C. serve, if they're lucky, four years and they get full benefits, full retirement. We aren't going to get into that. That's one of my sticking points.

Cara: Some people live the life.

Mary: Yes.

Cara: Okay, so are you a member of the V. A.? The Veterans Administration?

Mary: Well, I guess you could call me a member. I use the health benefits. There is one group that I joined, in fact I've paid for a lifetime membership, that's called Together We Serve. I haven't been able to find anybody else that I served with that is on it, but it's called Together We Serve. You sign up for whichever service you were in. I don't even think my son-in-law signed up for it yet; he was in the army, but you can look for people. In fact, what I received this morning was "look for your boot camp photo". I'm the one that posted my boot camp photo! I couldn't find mine anywhere on there, and so I finally downloaded my boot camp photo to them and said, "This was us!"

Cara: So everyone that was in camp with you will be on there too?

Mary: Hopefully, if I knew how to get a hold of them. That's what I said. I've looked on Facebook, I've looked through this all the time and I can't find anybody that I served with.

Cara: And the women in this photo will have changed their last name.

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

Mary: Well, most of them will have their name they served under and then their married name, too. Usually, if you put in the time of your service, you fill it out for the time you served, where you served, like boot camp and everything, and it's supposed to try and connect you with people.

Cara: It isn't working for you.

Mary: No, it's not working for me. Every time I get notified of somebody, it's somebody that was maybe stationed in Alameda, but they weren't in my department or anything like that. So, I'd love to be able to talk to someone again and we haven't had any reunions.

Not that I'm aware of anyway, which I know some of the guys that served on ships or served back in World War II, there's been reunions, but I don't know of anybody that's handled anything. I have a feeling that since Alameda is not there anymore, that maybe somebody kind of slipped up. I don't know.

Cara: Some records were lost?

Mary: Could be. Either that or there's just not somebody that wanted to take charge of it and I wouldn't have any idea how. But it has changed. I know my brother told me when he went through bootcamp, that they were allowing the boys and the girls to sit at the same tables. At that time, this was two years later, you had to keep your hands above the table so they knew what was going on. You could pass notes, but just don't get caught, and they were even in the classes together.

That didn't mean you could necessarily talk, and you'd better not touch. I didn't ask my grand-nephew if any of that was going on. I was shocked enough to find out that they don't have boot camp at Orlando anymore. He said boot camp, I checked online, and boot camp is only up there at Great Lakes.

Cara: Is that because there's fewer people now?

Mary: Maybe. I don't know if it's that or they just decided. I think it's probably because there's fewer people now, then what there was. Because they closed down Bainbridge, Maryland, in '72 and then they only had the one basically for the women. As far as training facilities, I don't know. I know he is in the Navy and he's stationed at Camp Pendleton, but it's because he's taking medical training and that's where the medical training is. They don't have the training center at San Diego for the Navy the way I understand it. So they maybe are trying to do like with his, trying to combine the different services and everything. I don't know. One thing, the way things have changed. When I was in Alameda we had a racial seminar. It was 8 hours and you had to have this, and what I remember is they split us up. "You're purple and you're orange..." and then they set different situations. Then it came up to where, probably

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

the late seventies, early eighties, if you remember the Tailhook Scandal. So they started this sexual seminar. I was glad I wasn't there for that.

Cara: That would have been no fun.

Mary: But I can understand what some of these women went through and everything. I was just lucky I did not have those kinds of commanders. Even though they were men, they had been in for long enough and everything, but they were not that kind of people to where they were going to use their position.

Cara: And you were still being expected to be a lady.

Mary: That was through boot camp. I never heard that phrasing after I got out of boot camp, so that was what they were trying to impress upon you.

Cara: Is there anything else that you would like people to understand about what it was like to be a woman in the military in the early seventies?

Mary: It was interesting. It was a learning experience. I really told them at the school when I got my honor quilt, I was one of the few that spoke. Someone thought I was eager to because I went up and took the microphone, but get it done and over with! But I don't mind telling anybody about my experience. It's something that I really still think it would not hurt for everyone, when they graduate, from high school, or for two or three years after college, to go through at least two years of the military. Because then you would have a frame of reference and it would be a different kind of experience than even college.

I really think it's something that everyone should go through, male or female. I'm not saying a draft, but I know now, because of what my son-in-law has told me, that they serve with women. I know that women are allowed on about any of the ships, I think now, because they figured out how they had to have them segregated. As far as I know, they're segregated living quarters. I know a ship like the Enterprise, any of the aircraft carriers, there would be enough room that they could do that instead of having it like the different departments having their space. They could have the women and then the men. I'm not saying they'd be able to keep them apart. There's a lot of cubby holes on those things.

I'm glad I went in when I did; I'm glad that I served when I did. I look at the way things are now just in life, let alone in the military, and I'm not sorry that I went in. I was very glad to. I was very happy with the time period that I was in. I told my children, especially the boys, because there was a possibility of the draft resurging when they hit 18, that I thought it would do them good. But I was not going to say, "You have to do it." I don't really think there should be a draft unless it really comes down to the nitty gritty. I wish there were more that would accept the fact that I know some of them from here did it because they would get the education and you get to

Vietnam Era Memories, Mary Mishler

travel and everything. I didn't take advantage, maybe, of the travel as I could have, like the one girl I knew that got to go to Spain and different things like that.

But I think it was worthwhile and I'm very happy that I was able to. I'm very happy that I was healthy enough to.

Cara: Well, you got healthier while you were there!

Mary: Yes! And I made it through bootcamp. Yeah, I made it through bootcamp and I was a lot healthier when I got out of bootcamp! In fact, bootcamp with all the walking... I didn't mind doing the walking when I was at San Diego. Like I said, we walked down to IHOP, we walked around SeaWorld, around the zoo, and even now I have people that say, "You mean you walked over here?" Yes, I just go to the bank. By the time I walk across the street and get my vehicle started and I could have been half-way to the bank.

I don't see what some people's idea is about walking. I was going to walk up here this morning but I was running short and then when I come out and saw that wind, it was like, boy, I'm glad I didn't. I walked over to my dad's while ago. It was cold enough.

But I wish everybody could have experienced it. I still wish my kids had experienced it, but after what my brother went through with somebody trying to get him into submarines, I'm not sorry for those that don't go into it and I'm not sorry for the ones that get through boot camp and then get a discharge for whatever reason. It's a good experience.

Cara: You're glad you had it.

Mary: I'm very glad I had it. I enjoyed it. I met a lot of different people, even if I'm not still in touch with them, and it was experiences I wouldn't have had otherwise. I was in Florida, I was in the airport at Atlanta, I was in San Diego, in Alameda, I was down in Ontario, where my aunt and uncle lived. I was at Santa Barbara. I got to see the beach in California. I don't think I'd want to be in California now. There's too many earthquakes; I've been through enough earthquakes. I was through an earthquake that was a residual of when Mount Saint Helens blew up in 1980 and it hit all the way down to Fresno. Well, I would wish I had been able to go to the East Coast, like I said Bainbridge, because that's history, but you can learn history wherever you're at and everything.

Cara: Thank you very much for your service!