

DEBRA FUNDERWHITE

Our Neighbors, Our Heroes: Forest Park Veteran's Oral History Project

NC: OK, today is January 24, 2018 and I am Nancy Cavaretta for the Forest Park Historical Society Oral History Project interviewing Debra Funderwhite. Hi Deb, how are you?

DF: I'm great, how are you?

NC: Great! I'm going to ask you just a few very basic personal questions for our records.

NC: And what is your current address?

DF: Forest Park.

NC: Thank you. And in what branch of the military did you serve?

DF: United States Army Reserve.

NC: And, what was your rank?

DF: E4.

NC: And where did you serve?

DF: 130th Chemical Company in Johnstown, PA.

NC: Very Good. And for how long did you serve Deb?

DF: 6 years.

NC: 6 years. And last basic question: you said before that you had some family members who also served in the military? Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

DF: Sure. I'm one of 9 children and 7 of us were in the Army. I was the only one of the 7 that was a reservist.

NC: So, 7 of the 9 were in the military?

DF: All Army

AC: That's incredible! All in the Army.

NC: All in the Army. OK, question about were you drafted, did you enlist, tell us a little bit about your experience. I know you've got kind of a unique journey into how you got into the military.

DF: Well when I was 15, my mom had passed away and at that time two of my older brothers and a sister were active duty in the Army. My older sister Maria was very instrumental in my decision to enlist in the Army. She had been to stationed in Germany, Korea, Hawaii and had visited many other countries. She seemed to love the life that she was leading and write letters telling me of all her adventures. She was very patriotic, proud to be a soldier and made it seem like the military was glamorous. I wanted to be like her, see the world and go to college. I knew that the only way I would be able to go

to college and make a difference in my life was to join the military. I signed up when I was a junior in High School for a split option program. Between my junior year of High School and my senior year, I went to basic training at Fort Jackson, SC. and after I graduated from my senior year of High School, I went to AIT in Augusta, GA. at Fort Gordon.

NC: Fort Gordon?

DF: Fort Gordon, Georgia

NC: In Georgia. And what High School did you attend?

DF: United High School in Armagh, Pennsylvania

NC: So, by the time you were ready to go to boot camp what were some of those experiences like for you?

DF: I had a good idea I thought what basic training was, because my brothers and sister filled me in. You had to be able to do certain things in order to get through basic training and one was push-ups, the physical part. I thought I prepared but when I entered basic. I couldn't even do 2 pushups! But, I was able to do 17 perfect push-ups at the end of the 8 weeks of basic training. There was the emotional part of leaving too. My mom had passed away only a year or so earlier. I had two younger brothers and sister still at home with my father. Life was challenging financially and emotionally during that period in all our lives.

NC: We can move on to the next question!

DF: All right

NC: Do you remember anything about your instructors during boot camp?

DR: Oh yes! They were all men and they were intimidating. They were just really intimidating from the point in which you got there. I know that things are different now, but they would call you names.

NC: How old, you were 17?

DF: I was 17. I had to have my father's signature and he didn't want to sign the papers for me originally. I said, "Dad, if you don't sign them, I'm going to do it myself," so, he signed them for me. I turned 18 on May 31st and I was gone the next week.

NC: Let me ask you this? How many women were in training with you?

DF: It was all women!

NC: Oh.

DF: The women were separated from the men. There were male barracks near us, but all training was done separately. We did all of our PT individually. There was no interaction; there was no air conditioning. It was in the summer and it was extremely hot. The drill sergeants would wake you up between 4:00 and 4:30 AM to do your PT in your gear but you would do it in the sand pit. We were hot, but we couldn't shower afterwards. That was Tank Hill. Then, you would go change your clothes, into your fatigues, and then you would go to the mess hall. You would eat your 3 courses. Everything was very fast.

NC: Were you able to keep in touch with your family during that time?

DF: Yeah. Back then there was no e-mail, or anything like that, there were letters and very few phone calls.

NC: Right.

DF: And I remember I got 3 letters on the same day.

NC: OK Deb, more about basic training.

DF: I think basic training for me was one of the best things I could have done during that time period because I was pretty shy and not confident. When I completed training I thought, “I can do anything! I’m invincible!” I thought after basic training that I would love to be a drill sergeant. But, I got over that. The military programs you. I could have if I would have stayed in it and not done the split option program like I did. I’m pretty sure I was brainwashed enough that at age 17 that I could have been a drill sergeant, because, I became obsessive. I gained 10 pounds in 8 weeks because we ate 3 times a day. I would take things from the mess hall and stick it in my pockets and eat it later, which was not permitted but I got away with it. But, there were a few times when I was caught, and the drill sergeant would say to me, “Private, private what do you got in your pockets?” “Nothing drill sergeant.” Of course, I did have things in my pockets and then at night I would to eat it randomly. But, I did have difficulty at basic training with my push-ups. So, every time the drill sergeants had the opportunity to make me get down on the ground. I would have to do push(-)ups. The drill sergeants would have nicknames for all the trainees that had difficulties with the physical training. They would call you a

rock. "Listen Rock, get down on the ground. Give me 10." (meaning pushups) That was just their way of getting you to pay attention. No one wanted to be isolated or considered an outcast. If you were an outcast, they could create havoc for the rest of the platoon. You had to work together, so, it was interesting. I mean, you are pushed beyond your normal limits, and so most High School students aren't like that, so for me, that was a good thing. I almost did decide to quit at one point. I called my sister, Joyce, who was older than me, and she was in college and she said, "No Debbie, don't quit! You can do this" so, I did stick it out. And then once I got through that, I'm like, "I'm OK!" I went back to High School, finished my senior year, and then I went to Fort Gordon, GA for my MOS which was a 36 Kilo. It was predominantly a men's field. I was a communications specialist but it was interesting because the products that we learned on were used in the Korean War, and this was in 1984, so you learned how to set up switchboards and phones that you might use in the field.

NC: So, it's for communication purposes?

DR: Communication purposes in field situations, so that was interesting.

NC: So, did that become a specialty area for you then?

DF: It was.

NC: And, it's for those listeners who don't know what MOS is for, it's Military Operations Service.

DF: Yes, it's your occupation basically in the service. The schooling was 8 weeks. So, I completed AIT and I went to college. I was part of ROTC. I did that for 2 years and thought I wanted to become a commissioned officer. I decided after my sophomore year of college I didn't want to become an officer, so I just finished my enlistment at the reserve unit I was assigned to. The unit that I was attached to was a chemical unit. So, I took classes at my actual unit which was a chemical unit, I was a smoke generator operator unit. Our job was to produce smoke with generators, so that when there was a threat of an aerial attack, the smoke would cast a film across the field to cover the troops when they were in open land areas.

NC: So, it was a protective device then?

DF: It's a generator that you might see. You know when we lose our electricity, for example, you might have a generator. Well this generator produced smoke. So that's a 54 Charlie- a smoke generator operator, so I had 2 MOS's. I'm sure with all the advances in technology and everything that that MOS probably doesn't exist anymore. I think that the most interesting thing for me at that time was the unit that I was assigned to. There were maybe 120 people assigned to the unit, but there was only 10 women that were part of the chemical unit. Most of the fellas served in the Korean War and Vietnam War. It was interesting being attached to a unit that was really infantry-based almost 35 years ago. Nowadays, it's a lot different. Women can do certain things and are received better than they were then. I don't know in the Vietnam era if, what women did in the military was unless they were nurses in the medical fields. You know, I don't know. But, how you

were received in a unit back then was interesting. Your officers seemed to be more educated than your enlisted, and that's a generalization, but usually they had a degree.

NC: Yes. So, you were there for how long then?

DF: 6 years.

NC: 6 years in that unit. So, your MOS was the same throughout the 6 years?

DF: I was in communications. So, let's say this unit was deployed, OK? All of us would go, but we would have different roles. I learned how to run a smoke generator. I got the secondary MOS as a 54 Charlie. Each year we would have to go 2 weeks out in the field for military training. You would set up your tents, trucks and everything and our job was to establish communications throughout our space in our field section, like MASH.

NC: Where did you go for the field?

DF: Once a year we would go different places in Pennsylvania. I remember Fort Ticket Picket. I went to BNOC school, that's Basic Non-Commissioned Officer Course in order to be promotable to sergeant. I don't remember exactly where that was.

NC: So, your unit was never deployed into combat?

DF: No, but it was during Grenada conflict. We're always in war time somewhere.

NC: So that was Grenada time? Yes?

DF: Yes. There could have been the possibility, they talked to us about it, but we weren't deployed.

NC: I see.

DF: Whether or not they would have me anyway I'm not sure, you know, things are different now.

NC: So, you were there in the Reagan years then?

DF: Let me think, yeah, 80's.

NC: Yeah. The 80's.

DF: I'm trying to think of any of my brothers. I have 2 brothers who were retired from the Army, but my oldest brother is deceased. He passed away at a young age. He served 21 years I think. But he was in Desert Storm. I have another brother too. There are twins who are older than me, Joyce and John. John joined in National Guard High School and then he went active duty and he served 22 years. He was an E7. Now Joyce went to college and got her degree first in business, then enlisted. All right, so she's like 2 ½ years older than me and anyway she was in for 5 ½ years. I talked to her yesterday and asked, "Why did you get out of the military?" "She said, "Well, why did you join the military?" "Well," she said, "because I couldn't find a job once I got my degree." I said, "Well when you got out, what was your rank?" She said, "E5, promotable to E6." And her husband was in the military. I have another sister who's in the military. "Why did you get out?" "Because I was pregnant." Do you see the difference?

NC: Yes. Yes.

DF: You know, so again, we're dating this, things now may be different. Yes.

NC: Yes. I'm going to ask you to roll back a little bit, you said at one point you were promotable to become a commissioned officer, but you changed your mind.

DF: I was in the reserves, and I was at college in the ROTC program for 2 years. At the end of my sophomore year of college I decided not to continue in the ROTC program. I could have been a commissioned, a 2nd Lieutenant at the end of my senior year of college. I would have had to extend my enlistment for several more years if I was commissioned and I decided it wasn't right for me at the time.

NC: How long was it at that time? How much would you owe them?

DF: I don't know. I think maybe 4 years because the military would have paid for your education.

NC: Exactly.

DF: I think coming from such a military family and hearing this, "Commissioned officers are really idiots, commissioned officers are this and that." You're very vulnerable when you are young. In hindsight, would I go back and redo it? Perhaps I would. I would have become an officer because at this point, I would have been retired.

NC: It's really interesting. It's so interesting because of the option program and being a woman, and it's really unique.

DF: Yes.

NC: So, I wanted to ask you about your return to civilian life. And you said that probably it was more drastic after the boot camp than after your 6 years of service.

DF: Absolutely, you're sleep deprived. You've been told what to do. You're very regimented and at no point in my life had that ever happen before. You watch these drill sergeants turn other people your age, or older, into like mini robots. You're programmed. I was 17. You are very impressionable. Would I highly recommend boot camp for any parent to send their kid to, absolutely! Would I recommend that they send them to the military? Well, no. I think every child needs to go to boot camp, you know if that makes any sense.

NC: Are you happy that you had your military service?

DF: Yes. I mean for me it was a very good thing. It built my confidence.

NC: Right. So, when all is said and done, what message would you like to leave for future generations who are going to hear this interview?

DF: I think that if you have the opportunity to serve in the military, or in any way, wow, do it! I mean, everybody wasn't meant to be in the military. If you have a desire, it's a good thing. Don't let anybody knock you for your desire to do it. If it weren't for our military, we wouldn't be the country that we are. It's a life choice, and we need it! And if it works for you, do it! And, God bless America!-because we wouldn't be sitting her otherwise.

NC: Absolutely, enjoying our coffee in peace.

DF: No, we wouldn't! So, I think that it's done great things for my family and I'm really proud of all of them for their service. And now 2 of my nephews are Marines- that's a tough one!

NC: Yes. Wow!

DF: My father was in the Navy and my grandfather before him was in the Navy.

NC: A legacy military family. Yes.

DF: Yes, there's just no Air Force in there. If I would have to go back and do it again I would have tried the Air Force because I was told they have the best food!

NC: Yes.

DF: They're treated the best, and the basic training is the easiest.

NC: Yep.

DF: But I always thought the Marines was the hardest.

NC: Well Debbie, thank you so much for your, your candid comments, and, mostly for your service to our country. As you know I have a child in the military and it means a lot. It means a lot to all of us.

DF: Well, thank you for doing this. I think you'll learn a lot from a lot of different people and that's a wonderful thing.

NC: Absolutely! I'm very proud of our, our Forest Park residents and everything they've contributed. I'm very proud!

DF: Yes. You're welcome!

NC: One last thing I'm going to ask you: on the lighter side. Music-do you remember like when you hear any songs around the time you served in the military, do you ever like associate different songs with that time?

DF: "Proud to be an American, you'll live and die for me!" I absolutely love that song.

NC: Yeah, I think you're right! Yeah.

DF: I can sing it. Do you want me to sing? No? That will be my next career.

NC: OK! After the photography!

DF: Yeah.