

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
DIANA L. DONALD  
Sheet Metal Fabricator, U.S. Navy  
2019

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**Donald, Diana L.**, (1967– ). Oral History Interview, 2019.

Approximate length: 2 hour 3 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to the original recording.

**Abstract:**

In this oral history interview, Diana L. Donald, from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, describes her service with the U.S. Navy from 1985 to 1989 including her service aboard the USS *Gompers*. Diana Donald grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Nashville, Tennessee. She graduated from North Division High School in 1985 and joined the Navy. Donald explains that she wanted to join the military so she could become a firefighter.

Donald went to basic training in Orlando, Florida, in 1985 and discusses developing teamwork, graduation day, weapons training, and a swimming lesson. She was selected to be a fireman and after training and was assigned to the USS *Samuel Gompers* in Alameda, California. For four years, Donald was assigned to the USS *Samuel Gompers*, a destroyer tender. She describes multiple deployments, traveling, living conditions, free time, and sheet metal fabrication work.

In 1987, Donald was aboard the USS *Samuel Gompers* when it was called to tow the USS *Stark*. She relays details of the incident and explains that she was previously aboard the USS *Stark* and how it felt oddly personal.

Donald discusses sexism and racism that regularly occurred on her ship and that she felt there was no way to report or change the status quo. When she was sexually assaulted aboard her ship, she describes the pressures, the barriers to reporting it, and the difficulties of remaining on the ship with the assailant. Donald recounts experiences on shore, including living in Oakland, California, and shopping in Sasebo, Japan.

She left the Navy in 1989 and stayed in Alameda, California, working for a contracting company called DynCorp and as a base security officer. In 1991, Donald moved back to Milwaukee to raise her daughter and be with her family. She outlines working at the Zeblocki VA Medical Center for fifteen years, her current position at the Veterans Benefits Administration, and the work she did as an advocate for women within the VA.

At the end of the interview, Donald reflects on her military service as a negative experience that expanded her horizons.

### **Biographical Sketch:**

Diana L. Donald joined the U.S. Navy in 1985, and served as a sheet metal fabricator aboard the USS *Gompers* on multiple sea tours. Donald was discharged in 1989 and lived in California before returning to Milwaukee to raise her daughter. Donald has worked for the VA Medical Center and the Veterans Benefits Administration and advocates for women veterans in the VA system.

### **Archivist's Note:**

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript, if possible

Interviewed by Ellen Bowers Healey, 2019.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Service, 2019.

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Abstract written by Rachelle Halaska, 2019.

**Interview Transcript:**  
**[Beginning of OH2159.Donald\_access.mp3]**

Healey: Right, today is Saturday, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019. This is an oral history interview with Diana Lynn Donald, who served with the United States Navy from 1985 to 1989. This interview is being conducted at the Zablocki VA Hospital in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I am the interviewer, Ellen Bowers Healey. This interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Program, and there are no other people present at this time. All right, did I get your name correct Donna?

Donald: That is correct.

Healey: Excuse me, Diana.

Donald: Diana, you did get it correct the first time.

Healey: All right. Diana, tell me where you were born.

Donald: I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1967. I was the oldest of four, the oldest daughter. I have two younger sisters and a younger brother. We lived between here, Milwaukee, and Nashville, Tennessee, up until the age of about nine or ten.

Healey: Okay, and you say you lived between here and Nashville, Tennessee. What do you mean between here and there? That's a long distance.

Donald: It is, but we bounced back and forth. We lived, you know, here for a while and then we'd move to Nashville and live there for a while. My father was from Nashville; he loved Nashville. But my mother was from Milwaukee, and she loved Milwaukee. So, we, you know—they just bounced back and forth.

Healey: Okay, good explanation. And you've mentioned that you have three siblings and a mother and father. And where did you get most of your education for elementary school and high school?

Donald: So, elementary was spent mostly in Nashville. Then, in between the bouncing back and forth, the most memorable was the junior high, high school here in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I attended Roosevelt Middle School and also North Division High School.

Healey: Okay. And you still have relatives in the Nashville area?

Donald: I do have relatives there. I have my father's family, my aunts, and uncles are there, and they're doing well. And I have one who's moved off to Alaska, even. And, let's see—oh, they've kind of, scattered by now. Some are in Arizona.

Healey: And do you have relatives in Milwaukee area?

Donald: Yes, my mother's side of the family is here, and I'm pretty much—I'm closer to them. So, I'm here, my aunts, my uncles, my sisters and brothers, everyone is here, yes.

Healey: Okay. And did you graduate from high school?

Donald: I graduated from North Division High School in 1985. At that time it was a different school, but—because it's changed quite a bit, but it was a fun place to be. A lot of school spirit, a lot of sports. We were known for our sports and our activities, and our bands, and, yes.

Healey: What activities were you involved in?

Donald: I was, actually, in the modeling club. [laughs] Now, I think about it. I was in the modeling club. I tried for music, but it didn't work out very well. I just couldn't catch on to the piano very well.

Healey: Okay.

Donald: Yeah.

Healey: And in 1985, when you graduated, what did you have in mind to do? What were your plans for your future?

Donald: Actually, it started when I was sixteen. I came out of the bathroom one day, and my mother yanked me, and we rushed outside, and that's when I found out that the house was on fire. And with the house being on fire—my brother found a lighter and he was playing with the lighter and put the house on fire. And I only had on a towel, and I'm like, "I can't be out here like this." So, I ran back into the house to get some clothes, and when I got in there, I couldn't see anything in front of my face. The smoke was so thick it was black. I saw flames of orange in some areas. And, so—but I made it to my room and got my clothes, and I also got the dog. So, we had a dog, I saved the dog. And when I got out of there—well, I will

say, while I was in there, just the rush, the adrenaline, the, just, heightened awareness, I mean, it really—it struck something in me.

**[00:05:01]**

I mean, wow, I mean, I was—I'd never felt like that before. It was just, wow. And, so, at that point, I wanted to become a firefighter. And, so, being a firefighter was not something that women did at that time. And, so, that's what sparked me to go to the military. I wanted to be a firefighter, and I didn't want to mess my life up before it could happen. So, I found the military just to be a safer place to be, you know, with the structure and the guidance, and you know, stuff like that.

Healey: How old were you when you graduated from high school?

Donald: Seventeen.

Healey: Okay.

Donald: Yes. So, I already knew. Sixteen is when I figured it out, seventeen I graduated. I spent, maybe, the summer, and then went in in October and—

Healey: Were you still seventeen when you went in?

Donald: I was seventeen. My family did have to sign permission for me to go. My mother didn't want me to go, but my father said, "Oh, let her go." And because he has two people, two brothers, on his side that went to the Navy, also. And my mother has a brother that went to the Army. And, so, yeah. So, I—they let me go.

Healey: Okay. Describe your contact with the recruiters and recruiting station.

Donald: The recruiters actually came to our school. And they came to our school and they were giving the—I think it was called the ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] test? So, I took the ASVAB test, not really to get in at that time. I didn't take it serious, I just wanted to get out of class. So, I took it. But then, when I passed and they called, I was like, "Well, sure," you know? And I asked them about the firefighting and everything. "Oh yeah, you could be a firefighter if that's what you want to be. Yeah, they'll train you, they'll send you to school," and, yeah, the whole fluff thing. [laughs] So, of course, I fell for that. And then I said, "Well, when I go in, I said, I don't have to be on a ship, do I?" "Oh, no, you

don't have to be on a ship. They don't even have women on ships." I'm like, "Oh, okay." So, yeah, when I got there it was totally different story. [laughs]

Healey: All right. So, can I assume you went in on an open contract?

Donald: Yes.

Healey: No guarantees?

Donald: Right. I was promoted to E-4. I don't know how that happened. Or E-3—I think it was E-3 at that time. So—

Healey: Kind of automatic promotions?

Donald: Automatic, yeah. So, I'm not sure what that was about at that time. I can't remember, but—so I thought, "Oh, wow, this is going to be all right." And I only had to do four years, because I was just trying to stay out of trouble until I turned twenty-one, so that I could come out and become a firefighter.

Healey: So, that was your plan.

Donald: That was my plan.

Healey: Did you look at anything other than the Navy, or not?

Donald: No. I had an aunt, actually, who was also in the Navy. None of my family ever talked about being in the service, but, you know, we've seen pictures and whatnot. And she actually inspired me. I was like, "Oh, women can go to the Navy?" And, you know, when I found out that they could, that was the only place I wanted to be. The Navy.

Healey: Okay. So, you signed up sometime during the summer of your last year of high school, and went on active duty in October of 1985. And where did you start your active duty? Where was your first training or duty station?

Donald: Okay, so, we actually had boot camp in Florida. That was my first time being in Florida. It was the first time being away from my family. So, it was different. I was excited and scared out of my mind all at the same time. Boot camp was—it was a bit scary because I was afraid of—I'd seen what it was like on TV, you know, with the yelling in your face, and the making you get down and do push-ups, and—but it wasn't like that. And it turned out to be a really good experience,

because that's where I learned how to get along as a team. You know, you stop thinking so much about yourself. And one good example of that was that we were instructed to put on pins. And I showed this lady how to put on a pin, she changed the pin, and then we all had to go to one of those IT [Intensive Training] workout classes, so we all got in trouble. And, so, that really instilled in me teamwork.

**[00:10:01]**

You know, we all have to work together to get it right.

Healey: What does IT stand for?

Donald: Intensive training.

Healey: Okay.

Donald: Yes.

Healey: Now, where in Florida were you? Where was the boot camp? Orlando?

Donald: Orlando, Florida.

Healey: Okay.—

Donald: Uh-huh. And I actually experienced a hurricane there. That was the first. Though we weren't anywhere near the water, I had water roll across my feet. And I'm thinking, "Where did that come from?" and for years I had just thought that was, like, a miraculous thing I didn't know. Because, you know, we only have tornadoes, you know, so that was quite the experience. It was all so, just, life-changing, it really was. The people, the, just, the scenery. It was all really life-changing.

Healey: Before you went to the recruiters, did any recruiter prepare you for what you were going to experience?

Donald: Not at all. Not at all. I—they told me what I wanted to hear. Basically, everything that I told them that I wanted to do is what they repeated back to me, so [laughs]. "Oh, you'll be doing this, and you'll be doing—" I said, "Well, you know, I want to be someplace nice and warm, you know, maybe, like, California, or something." So, I did make it to Alameda, California, but it was closer to the Bay—or it was, actually, on the Bay. And, so, I didn't get to San Diego, or



anything like that. They told me that women would never be on ships; my first duty station was, actually, a ship. And, so, yes, I got seasick, of course. And—

Healey: Is that why you didn't want to go on ship? Or why? You said you had asked about going on ship, and got assurances you weren't going to go. Why did express some hesitancy about being on ship?

Donald: I can't swim. I can't swim, and the idea of being out in the—an ocean, and all of the oceans that we were on really scared me. It really scared me because I was afraid—I'm afraid of deep water. I still am, you know. So, anything I can't see through or touch the bottom of, I won't do it.

Healey: Okay. Your physical training at boot camp. What did it entail? What were you expected to do, and how did you achieve that, or how did you do that?

Donald: Well, funny thing, I thought I could prepare myself before. I wasn't a very active person, before I went in. Just the typical things that kids do, but not physically active. And, so, when I went in, I had to work myself up with the running. We did—I think at that time they were called—not lunges. What are those—mountain climbers. And those—I don't they do them now, or even let them do them now—but those were the hardest. And, honestly, it works you out. It actually does work you out. I was at the end of the—what was it, eight weeks, or whatever it was? My body had totally changed from the physical activity; the running and the exercising, getting up early in the morning. We'd get up, it's still dark outside. And I think it was maybe, like, three, four o'clock in the morning we would get up. It's just amazing what you can do at that time of the morning. I don't think I've ever gotten up before that. And we would be up, and dressed, and have breakfast, and working, all by six or seven o'clock in the morning, and it was, just, amazing. So, yeah.

Healey: Any particular instructors stand out in your mind?

Donald: I can't remember their names, but our company commander, that's what she was called. I forgot—it was a lady, it was a female, and I was shocked that it was a female. And, so, she was really tall, and she didn't say a lot, but when she spoke, it was it, that was all. And she just carried herself like she shouldn't have to repeat herself. And I thought, "Wow, I really like that." You know, because I was afraid of her, but at the same time I had such respect for her. You know, there was nothing to be afraid of, I was just intimidated, more than likely. And—but definitely, that's when I found that—discovered, really—that when you find

something in somebody, and that's part of you that you want to be, just take that part. You know, you don't have to, you know, be everything negative.

**[00:15:00]**

You know, they say, "Birds of a feather flock together," and, so, when somebody's doing bad, everybody does bad. But, no, you know, if you just take bits and pieces of the good things, it can really change your structure, your character. And that's when I started collecting—I would call it collecting—character, because I really admired that about her. Can't remember her name, but she was tall, thin, and didn't say much, but when she spoke you heard it, and that was it, and that was all.

Healey: Were all of your instructors Navy?

Donald: Yes, yes.

Healey: Okay. And when you went to boot camp, was there anybody that you knew?

Donald: I actually joined on the buddy team—the buddy system—with a friend of mine from high school. I talked her into going, "Oh, what else are you doing? Oh, come on, let's go." And, so, we were on the buddy member—whatever that thing was, the buddy team—up until about boot camp. After boot camp we were separated. I went on to be a fireman, and she went on to be a seaman, and, so, that changed our duty stations. So, but it was good that it was someone from home, it was someone from high school, it was someone that I knew, and we got through boot camp together. So, that kind of took the, you know, the edge off of, you know, the new place, new people, new things.

Healey: Do you know, did she get the automatic promotion to E-3, or not?

Donald: I don't know if she did. I don't know if she did. And, as a matter of fact, I think I got it because I got her in, so I think that's where that came from. Right, yeah, because I got her to join, too.

Healey: Right. So you went to bootcamp as an E-2? E-1?

Donald: Uh-huh.

Healey: Oh, E-2, while you were there?

Donald: As a E-2, and then when I left there, I was automatically a E-3.

Healey: Were there other E-2s there in training, or were you pretty unique?

Donald: I don't think we talked about it at all. I don't think it was ever mentioned. However, I do know, when I left the MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Station] Station, I was the one in charge of all the orders. They instantly put me in charge. And I thought, "Well, oh my gosh," it was like carrying gold, because, you know, you can't let these things out of your sight, you know? And that was my first taste of responsibility and how the military handles rank.

Healey: Okay.

Donald: Mm-hm.

Healey: When did you find out that you were going to be in—you said fireman—did they tell you during boot camp, or did you know before boot camp?

Donald: I knew before boot camp. They—because they called me fireman, and they kind of categorize your fields. So, but what I didn't know is that my title as fireman just put me in a different field of, maybe, those particular jobs. And, so, to be a fireman, meant that you could be a sheet metal worker, a boiler tech, [laughs] just all these other random things, or occupations. And, so, yeah—no, I never did get to fight fires [laughs].

Healey: Okay. Other than the person you went on the buddy system to boot camp, are there any other—did you make friends while you were there? And have you kept any of them from boot camp?

Donald: I did, I made some really nice friends. Some of which we were friends during the military, probably stayed friends for a little while after the military, but most of them are just Facebook friends, now. Good thing for Facebook. But I did—the one that I joined with on the buddy system—we did meet a couple of times after that. And probably, maybe, about ten years ago at the post office.

Healey: Oh, was she still in the Milwaukee area?

Donald: She was, yes. I don't know where she is now, but we talked a little bit about our experiences once we separated, and what we were doing at the time, and it was pretty—it was pretty nice to catch up. Mm-hm.

Healey: Okay. And in 1985, when you went to boot camp, did you have any time for liberty on your own, or was that eight weeks or so—was it pretty much structured and you stayed there all the time, or did you get off on Sundays? Or what was the system?

Donald: No. We were—we had to stay on the base for the whole entire time.

**[00:20:00]**

I believe it was right before graduation, we were given a day of liberty, and we snuck off and got a hotel room and bought civilian clothes. We bought some blue jeans and t-shirts, and that was so much fun. Sleeping in a bed, taking a bath. It makes you appreciate it. So, that one day of liberty was exciting and well worth it, because, afterwards, we had to throw the clothes in the garbage, take anything back. You know, we bought everything, shoes, everything. And all of it went to the garbage because we couldn't take anything back, but it was worth it. So, we went out—I don't think we were old enough to drink, but sitting in a restaurant, I think we had pizza, and that was the best pizza in the world [laughs]. So, yes, it was, just, such a break from the military food, the cots, the three o'clock in the morning getting up, and it was definitely a treat, that one day. And then, after that, we did another week, and I believe we graduated after that.

Healey: During your graduation, did you have—were any family members—were they able to come, or not?

Donald: No, no family members came, and that didn't bother at me, being that I was in Florida and they were in Milwaukee. But my main thing was that when the families were out there, looking at their loved ones, my only thought was, "Don't drop this weapon. Don't drop this weapon." And then we couldn't hear what they were saying. You know, so everything command they had for us to turn this way, or turn that way, or whatever, we couldn't hear. So, after a while, we were all kind of in and out and turned different ways and different directions, until we got back on. But it didn't bother me at all that no one from my family was there.

Healey: What kind of weapon did you have for your graduation parade?

Donald: I don't remember the name, I just remember that it was a big, big, long gun, with—the base was wide, and you carry it like this, so, I don't remember what type of gun it was.

Healey: During your boot camp in Orlando, did you have any weapons training?

Donald: We did. We [laughs] were taught then how to use—I believe at that time it was a .38 or a .45, and that was exciting because I'd never, ever seen a gun, much less held a gun. And I remember thinking, "Oh my gosh, it's so heavy." You know, on TV they make it look so light, but when you actually hold it for the first time, it's actually very heavy. And when you shoot it, the kick, you know. So, it all was a new experience, it really was a new experience. So, learning that there was a way to use a gun, and then learning how to use a gun properly. I was like—that was like—I was just soaking it all in. I mean, I don't know when I would ever need this, but, wow, I held a gun.

Healey: Did you fire for score, or was it familiarization training?

Donald: I think it was just for training. Yeah, I don't think—it was shooting at the target, but not so much trying to get it in the hole, but stay on the target, because you'd be surprised. A lot of people just could not make that target. Because when they tell you to look and they're telling you how to look through the scope, and you just can't line that thing up. And, so, the target was never where it looked like it was.

Healey: Okay, all right. After boot camp did you go directly to your next duty station, your next training, or did you take some leave?

Donald: I went straight to my next duty station, which was Alameda, California, on board the *USS Samuel Gompers*. When I looked up and saw this big ship, I was a little—I was very intimidated by the ship. The only—

Healey: What kind of a ship was it?

Donald: It was a destroyer tender, and that was another thing, *destroyer tender*, that sounds intimidating also. But then, what I found, was it was basically like a big warehouse, you know. It's like where all the workshops are, and, basically, what we did was just repair other ships.

**[00:24:58]**

We were a floating store, gas station, warehouse thing.

Healey: Is that were you took your training, on the *Gompers*, or did you have training before you were on board the ship?

Donald: I actually didn't have training in-between that. I just went from boot camp to the *Gompers*. You know, some people did go off to school, but those were people that chose a field, and I didn't choose a field, so.

Healey: So, what you learned, you would say, was on the job training?

Donald: On the job training, yes. And, so, that was for, like, every job that I had. I actually had a few jobs while I was in there, so that was good, too. That was good experience.

Healey: How much of your four-year tour was spent on the *USS Gompers*?

Donald: The whole four years.

Healey: Oh, okay.

Donald: The whole four years, yes.

Healey: All right.

Donald: So, I probably would have reenlisted if I could have gotten shore duty, but we couldn't choose. So, I left.

Healey: All right. Tell me, when you got out to Alameda and were assigned to the *Gompers*, on a daily basis, where were you quartered? Were you—did you live on the *Gompers*, or did you live somewhere else?

Donald: I did live on the *Gompers*. I shared—it was like being in a basement, actually, the—it's not even a room. It was—what do they call that? I forgot what they call those things, but our rooms—but it was, maybe, like, almost one hundred women? Over one hundred women. And we slept in bunks of three, but there might be twelve in an aisle, and, so, there would be all these women just constantly in and out of the aisle, and walking past your rack, or your bunk. And it was never, really, quiet, you know. Lights would come on because there were different shifts going on, and, you know. But all the women together.

Healey: Okay, so, about one hundred women. So, how many were aboard the *USS Gompers* all told?

Donald: Um, I'm not sure how many altogether, all the women. I had heard, at one point, that it was, like, twelve hundred. That was a long time ago.

Healey: Twelve hundred sailors?

Donald: Twelve hundred, yes, twelve-hundred people. And, so, maybe, like half may have been women, or a little less than half were women.

Healey: Oh, okay.

Donald: Mm-hm. And it was funny because being on the ship, even though you don't actually meet everyone, when you're out in public, you know that they're from your ship. And it's so weird how that works, but you know people. And you feel a little bit safer because whether or not they knew you or not, they got your back. You know, if something happened, or you were in a place that you shouldn't be, or someone was talking to you in a way that they shouldn't, that person would step in, you know. And it's funny, because as big as the ship was, eventually it got really small. And even as small as it was, you didn't meet everybody. It was very interesting.

Healey: I didn't ask you, but how many people went to your high school? Do you remember what the population was there?

Donald: I don't recall at all.

Healey: Fairly large?

Donald: It was very large, yes.

Healey: So, I would imagine, to some extent, there were people that you recognized in the halls, but may not know—

Donald: Right.

Healey: —their names.

Donald: Right, right. It was, yeah, pretty much like that.

Healey: Okay. Now, you mentioned that the recruiter said, "You're not going to go on ship, women don't go on ship." Now, was that ever a topic of conversation on the ship? Did other ladies seem to know that they were headed for ship, or was it a surprise to them?

Donald: It was a surprise to a few. Some had, actually, asked for it. And I was just shocked because I thought women weren't on ships. And here I was with a lot of women [laughs], you know? So, we did talk about it. I don't recall what the conversation was, but we did talk about how our recruiters said all these things about getting into the military and being able to do all these wonderful and fantastic things, and that's not what happened. Yeah, I was like "That should be illegal," you know?

**[00:30:01]**

Healey: How long were you was the ship on shore before the ship left the shore?

Donald: We would spend about three to four months docked, and then six months out to sea. And during that six months it may be a month, or a month and a half, just sitting in the ocean. And after that—because that's, like, when other ships would come by, we'd refuel, or go on to other ships. Other ships docked alongside of us, and, so, we would go on their ship, fix things, or they would restock their supplies, or we would be getting restocked. And, so, we would be docked in the middle of the ocean, and as other ships were passing by they stopped by to get stuff from us.

Healey: When you were in dock, on a day to day basis, what were your duties? What did you do?

Donald: I was, actually—I started off, I believe, as a sheet metal fabricator? I believe that was my first job. So, I learned, on the job, how to measure and cut sheet metal. It was my first time using a tape measure, and drills, and tools, and whatnot. That was exciting, because I worked in the metal shop. We made, I didn't even know, things that you could make with sheet metal. And I learned how to read blueprints, and I learned how to work saws, and, just, things that I didn't even know existed. I mean, I knew people did stuff to make things happen, but I never had any idea. And, so, that's how I think that it broadened just my—gosh, just—I realized how small my world was before I went into the military, because I just didn't know. So, these tools—and I loved these tools. I loved working with my hands, I loved cutting the sheet metal, I loved measuring. My first few projects weren't very good, but I actually went on to become very good at it, and I took a lot of pride in my work, because that was something that you could start with with just, like, a blank piece of paper, and the next thing you know, you have a structure. And, so, I admired that. I even admired myself that that was something I could learn to do, you know?



Healey: Who were your instructors in terms of what were their ranks, were they E-4, E-5, [crash] chiefs?

Donald: They—yes, we did. We had a chief that was in charge. The chief was in charge in our group there were two, gosh, first class. There were two first class, the chief, [background noise, rattling] the second class was in charge of us, and then the rest of us were just firemen. And, so, it wasn't a very big group, but we got a lot done. It was just amazing to me that the way worked, even together, to get things done was just, again, really strengthened that team thing, you know.

Healey: On a daily basis, did you go to work at the same location?

Donald: Mm-hm. Yeah, it was because we were on a ship. You know, you have, your get up in the morning, you eat your breakfast, and you go to work. Which is, like, down the stairs and down the hall, and it was the same place all day, every day.

Healey: Now, I take it, as a sheet metal person that you worked regular daytime hours, or did you work night shifts?

Donald: We worked regular hours, probably about eight o'clock for muster. So, we'd muster for quarters at eight o'clock, we'd get our detail for the day, and then we worked all day. And then, at the end of the day, we were off and able to do whatever we wanted to do for liberty, except if you had duty, and you had to stay on. You probably then start your four-hour shift on duty, and, so—yeah, then you weren't free until after then. But usually on duty days you couldn't leave the ship at all. You were on call.

**[00:35:00]**

So, even if you didn't have to actually do anything, you still had to stay there.

Healey: Did you section work weekends, or not?

Donald: We did. Actually, I think Sunday was the only day off. Sunday was the only day that we got all the time—the whole day off. Saturdays was probably just a shorter workday, but we did work on Saturdays. At sea, you worked just—it was every day, you worked every day. But when docked, we were off half a day Saturday, then off all day Sunday.

Healey: When you were at sea—well, let me go back. Besides having a pay grade per rank, what do the Navy people address you as a fire—are you Fireman Daniel?

Donald: Donald.

Healey: Donald.

Donald: I was fireman—petty officer, because I finally made—I was first Fireman Donald. And we only referred to each other by last names. So, it would be amazing that you would talk to somebody for two or three years, and only know their last name. So, then I went on to make E-4, then I was addressed as Petty Officer Donald, and yeah, that was exciting.

Healey: What sort of things were there—when you did have liberty, and you were at sea, what type of things could you do on the ship?

Donald: Okay, so, after work, because it was, like, over one hundred degrees outside all day, and you'd be hot and sweaty, you looked forward to that little three-minute shower that you get, where basically you just step in, wet yourself down, soap yourself up, rinse yourself off, get out. And there was usually a line, so you had to move quickly. Then you put on your clean coveralls, and your boots, and a t-shirt, fresh t-shirt, and the women wore boxers underneath their suits because it was just so hot. You didn't want stuff sticking to you. You didn't want your clothes to stick to you. So, we wore boxers a lot. And then you'd go up on deck. You'd go up to the cafeteria, and there would be people there playing cards, or just sitting around talking. You could go outside up until a certain time. As long as there was light outside, you could go sit outside. Sometimes I'd just look at the trail that the ship is leaving as we're just moving along, or watch the whales, or something like that. So, but I didn't spend a lot of time outside, again, afraid of that water, so, not a lot.

Healey: Did the Navy make any effort for the non-swimmers to teach them swimming, or not?

Donald: In boot camp we, actually, did have to jump into the water, because they showed us there how to use our hats as a flotation device, our pants as a flotation device, and how to survive water, if we were ever in that situation. However, didn't do a bit of good. It doesn't do a bit of good if you're scared, so, you know. But they did, and the instructor that I had had to have noticed the panic, because when you jump in—they teach you how to jump in, and you cross your arms and you jump in feet-first. And when I jumped in and I was coming up, and I was swimming—I thought I was swimming—I just remember doing this, but I didn't know if I was up or down. So, there was a fear that I was going to bump my head if I was facing

down. But then, also, if I'm going up, I need to hurry up and get out. And, so, I was doing this so hard, paddling so hard, that my body popped out of the water, just, like a balloon, you know. Just popped out. And I was, like [gasp], so happy, then I went back down. And, so, then, [laughs] the instructor, actually, came in and he helped me. You know, helped carry me apart, and he was telling me how to do my arms, and whatnot, but he basically carried me to the other side. And that was all that I ever got for a swimming lesson, and whatnot.

And, actually, I chose to not learn how to swim, and it's kind of scary reason. Because I was afraid of the water—and not so much the water, it was what's in the water—sharks, whales, whatnots—I didn't want to go through that. So, I figured if I ever was in a situation and was at sea, I would just want to drown. I would just want to drown.

**[00:40:00]**

I didn't even want to be on the water for days trying to make it to shore. No. that was it. It was a decision that I made, and I stuck to it. Luckily, I never had to actually experience it, even though when we had ship fires, that was the first thing that came up. So, we were always told, "Never let anyone else wear your shirts, or your clothes," because they had your name on them. At that time, we didn't have dog-tags. So, we only had our shirts with our names, and even our underwear had our names in them, that's in case if you're ever lost at sea, or any other incident, that's how they identify you.

Healey: Let me follow up on the dog-tags. Did you ever get dog-tags?

Donald: Never did, never did. For whatever reason, they stopped making them at the time that I went in. I heard again that they started back making them, but no, we never did get dog-tags. It was just our nametags that were on our clothes.

Healey: Tell me again; you said you spent your entire four years, other than your boot camp, assigned to the *USS Gompers*. How much of that time did you spend at sea, and how much of the time were you in dock?

Donald: We'd spend, like, three to four months docked, and then, six months. And during that six months, we would spend a month on the water, and then after that we would travel. So, six months of we were gone, and we went to Hawaii—

Healey: Was that your first travel?

Donald: Yes. That was my first time traveling. We went to Hawaii, Japan, Singapore, the Seychelles, Hong Kong. Now, this was, like, within a couple of tours. So, they have a ceremony where you cross the equator. So, I became a shellback. The first time over it was really funny because when we crossed the equator they did the quarters alarm. You know, the alarm, like, when the ship—something is getting ready to happen to the ship, and they would say, “Brace for shock, brace for shock!” And you’re thinking, “Oh my gosh! What’s getting ready to happen?” And then, after it was over, it’s like, “You have now crossed the equator.” You know, [laughs] you’d think something was getting ready to really happen, and what was funny about it was, it was, like, the next day and it was still light outside, it was like it never got dark. And that was funny to me. I didn’t think I could ever explain that to someone [laughs].

Healey: So, when you crossed the equator, where were you going that time? What did you—did you stop anywhere south of the equator?

Donald: Well, we crossed the equator—I’m not sure where we were going at that time. Because at that time, things like that didn’t matter to me. You know, they were saying we were going somewhere, and we just went. I could just remember where places that I’ve been, I couldn’t tell where we were going.

Healey: Well, let me ask you, did you get off out of Hawaii? Were you allowed off?

Donald: Yes, actually. So, Hawaii, I’ve probably been there seven times, and that’s the going and coming. But Hawaii—because we couldn’t go everywhere we wanted to go, they would tell you certain places to go, or that you could go, places that you couldn’t go. And because there were a lot of the cultural differences that we were unfamiliar with. It’s not like you got any training on how to, I guess, be culturally sensitive to other people in their country. The only thing we were told was about Seychelles—no, I’m sorry, Singapore. Is in that in Singapore you can’t smoke and walk, you have to sit down and smoke. You can’t litter. And that was just something that a lot of people just did. It was nothing you thought about. And, but being told that you can’t smoke, I think, at that time, I started smoking. Yes. The military I start—oh, well, I won’t go back to that, but those were definitely opened my eyes up to cultural differences.

Healey: Mm-hm. And you say you were at the Seychelles. Where are those located?

Donald: You know, I wish I could tell you.

Healey: Okay.

Donald: I've never heard of them since. It was a beautiful place, it looked just like Hawaii.

**[00:45:00]**

I believe it was off of Singapore, though. And, you know, the beautiful beaches, the sand, very tropical. Again, I believe it was just an island.

Healey: Did you and your unit get off and get to go on see shore and sand?

Donald: We did, we did. We got to get off, but it was, like, just a day trip, we couldn't get a room or anything like that. We weren't there that long, but it was enough to stretch your legs, breathe some air, stop moving.

Healey: When you got off at these various places, did the Navy have organized chores, or did they just say, "Okay, you can go and get yourself a taxi," or whatever?

Donald: Right, you can go. Just, there was nothing that prepared you for being in these different places, but so you can go pretty much on your own, except they would just tell you where not to go.

Healey: Did the ship, or the Navy, does it have morale and welfare recreation planning to have—

Donald: Not planning.

Healey: —trips planned, or anything?

Donald: Nothing.

Healey: No?

Donald: Nothing like that at all. You—

Healey: Aboard ship? Maybe I've got the wrong term, but if you want a basketball, or a backgammon game or something, do you have to go to MWR [Morale, Welfare and Recreation], or where do you get those type—or books—where do you get those type of things in the Navy?

Donald: We did have a ship library. Which people just used to sit and conversate, basically. We had a weight room. We didn't have, like, plan—well, we did have

some planned things. We had the planned occasions where we had barbecues, we had our ceremonies, which then we had celebrations, and we were allowed—only at sea though—a beer, a Budweiser. And you were allowed two Budweiser's, which tasted like formaldehyde, it was the strongest Budweiser. I'd never had Budweiser, but I'm sure it wasn't supposed to taste like that.

Healey: Had you, before that, did you drink beer?

Donald: I had drank beer before, but, yeah, it wasn't Budweiser [laughs]. So, during the ceremonies we did have barbecues, cookouts, we had movie night. Not a lot of outside activities at sea, because we can't be out there at night. Something to do with the light, and that they could see the light, and we were supposed to stay in total darkness. But docked at other ports, there were not really tours. People kind of made those up, "Hey, let's go do this," and they did that, but nothing that the ship planned.

Healey: Okay. Now, you mentioned smoking, and you were going to tell me about smoking in the military.

Donald: So, smoking in the military is funny because before I went into the military, I tried smoking. And didn't find it too appealing, so it wasn't something that stuck. But then after, when I went into the military, I found that the only people who really got a break were people who smoked. You know, when it was smoke break, it was, actually, smoke break. Whereas, if you didn't smoke, you still had to work. And, so, I would get a cigarette, and I would sit outside with the ladies, and we're just—they're smoking, I'm just letting my cigarette just burn. And, so, finally, when someone caught on to that, they said, "If you're not going to smoke it, you can't take the break." So, they'd look at my fingers, "You can't take the break." So, then, I started doing a little puff here, a little puff there. It was hard at first. But eventually, I was a pro, and that's when I took on smoking because it was the only time. If you didn't have a cigarette or coffee in your hand, you had to be working. And that was both boot camp and my duty station. And, so, that's how I took up smoking. And to this day, I fight that habit. It should be service connected, but [laughs] it was, like, the only time that you could just not do anything.

Healey: Did they ever use the term *smoking lamp lit*?

Donald: Yes, yes they did. So, and that was the time you could go out if you had cigarettes. Eventually, I had to buy my own, because you know, people got tired of me borrowing cigarettes from them. And, so, I think at that point, when I had to

spend my own money on it, it was like, “I’m going to smoke these, you know, not let this go to waste.” And, so, I took on full-blown smoking at the time [talking in background].

**[00:49:59]**

Healey: In your oral history request, and your writeup, you made mention about being, I think, in the Arabian Gulf, or in the presence of the *USS Stark*.

Donald: Yes.

Healey: Tell me about that, and what you recall.

Donald: So, the *USS Stark* had, actually, come to Milwaukee, and my father had taken me aboard the ship, and that was the first time I learned about how ships looked on the inside. Because before that they always looked like pleasure cruise ships, but this was just, like, stark metal. A lot of [talking in background] metal, a lot of hard surfaces and whatnot, so, that was the first time I saw it. So, then again, the next time I saw it was after it was—after it was shot. And it was, actually, blown into. Our ship, actually, went to go get it out of the water. And it was—it was touching to me because I felt like, “Oh, we’ve met before. You know, I’ve seen you before, and now, this is how I’m seeing you.” And it was very sad to me because to see the hole that was burned into it, and, just, the carnage from it was just—it was devastating to me. It was devastating. Because I felt like there was a personal connection.

Healey: Okay.

Donald: Yeah. And, so—

Healey: Did your ship have to go quite a ways to go get it, or—

Donald: Not really, we were—I think the reason that we had to go get it was because we were probably the closest to it. And at that time the women could not fight, technically, so, as a ship, we had to stay so far from the shore. So, we could see things—we could see the firing going on, we could see the flashing lights going back and forth, we could see the airplanes going—you know, flying overhead. But we weren’t actually engaged.

Healey: When you were seeing the airplanes over head, and the firing overhead, was there anything on the announcements that indicated what was going on? Did you have an idea what was going on?

Donald: Not really.

Healey: Okay.

Donald: We were kept in the dark quite a bit. Sometimes even where we were going, you know? I guess the thing was, is, they didn't want us to talk to our family, because you talk to your family, and, eventually, word gets back to whomever it is that they didn't want to know. So, a lot of times, we didn't know where we were going.

Healey: You say women had to stay out of combat, but did the *USS Gompers* actually go get the ship and bring it back in?

Donald: Yes. And at that time, they weren't in combat, we weren't in combat. That was actually a sneak attack, and we were not in a warzone—well, technically, not in a warzone, we were, like, off-limits. So, what scared me about it was, is that we were so close to it. And I'm thinking, "Well, we're not supposed to be in war, we're not supposed to fight. We don't even have the equipment to fight." You know, we have our guns.

Healey: And you were destroyer tender.

Donald: Right. So, we didn't have the weapons, we weren't equipped.

Healey: Now, when you say you had your guns, what do you mean by guns?

Donald: For guns, we had, like, you know, shotguns, .45s, we had regular, standard issue, standing duty, you know. That's all that we had. And it's not like we had, like, a gun locker full of guns for people to take arms if we were attacked, or anything like that. You know, no missiles, no none of that. So, that's one of the things that made me feel safe about, "Oh, nothing's going to happen to us. You know, we're off-limits." So, when they blew up the *Stark*—and I honestly don't even remember where all that took place. We were out at sea at that time, and then we were called in to come pull them in.

Healey: And do you remember, or do you know, where the *Stark* was pulled into?



Donald: No. I just remember the closer we got to shore, is when we saw the firing and whatnot. Because then someone, other boats, came and took it from us. Yeah, so we just pulled it in from the ocean. And, I think, right after that, we just headed right back out. And it was scary because we had, like, a lot of tanks on our ship.

[00:54:59]

Healey: Tanks?

Donald: Well, like, oxygen, you know, stuff for welding, and stuff like that. A lot of flammable explosives, and that was scary for me because, just, looking at how the *Stark* was hit, I think that if—when you see it up close and personal, a TV just misses a lot of the small details. Because ships aren't that thick, they really aren't. They're just layers of metal, and the layers may only be one inch thick, but there would be several of those layers. So, it doesn't take a whole lot, you know.

Healey: When the *Gompers* picked up the *Stark*, was the *Stark* just sitting in the water, or was it able to make any movement on its own?

Donald: I don't believe it was able to move on its own, it was, at that point, kind of sitting in the water, but it was, like, at a tilt. After that—yeah, I don't think it could move on its own, because we had to send out our divers to hook it up. And we were, actually, not even able to watch them do that. They made us—if you didn't have anything to do with it, you couldn't even watch it. So, we all had to stay inside while they went out and worked. It was almost like they didn't want us to tell that story, either, you know. They were very secretive, you know. So, my first glimpse of it was that when you're pulling up on it, everybody runs up to go see, you know. But once we actually did it, there were no people on it. So, I don't know, I guess, at that time, all the people had been pulled off, and it was just—it was just a shell of a ship. And—

Healey: Had the people come aboard your ship? Or some other ship? Or do you know?

Donald: I don't know what happened to the people, we didn't collect the people. So, I guess they were taken care of before we got there.

Healey: Okay.

Donald: Mm-hm. And it's scary. Ugh, it just burnt, mangled metal, you know. It was—and it still had a smell, it still had a smell. And, so, it was very touching to me because I had been on it. I'd saw it before this had happened to it, so. Yeah.

Healey: Well, now, you've indicated you were tender and you do sheet metal work, and other ships would pull upside of you and get refueled, or resupplied, restocked. When those occasions happened, did you go aboard other ships, or did they come and get the supplies, or how did that work?

Donald: We usually had working parties. So, if you were part of a working party—which is just a group of people sent to either work on something—because they sent their work orders over to us before we got there, so, we made sure we had the supplies together. And whoever was going to do the job were the only people who went over. So, we usually go to their ships. Very rarely did they come over to our ship, because there would be our ship and, like, this netting bridge going over to their ship. And, so, I didn't go on other ships, I didn't. I never wanted to be a part of that. I'm not sure why. But I think just the case that on the other ships, they were just all male. All male sailors, and whatnot, and some Marines for the carriers. And I don't think I just wanted to deal with the men, you know. Them being out at sea for long periods of time, I'm sure they're going to, "Hey girl, what's going on?" you know. I just didn't want to deal with that. You know, so, I stayed on my ship.

Healey: Okay.

Donald: I did work on projects for their ships, but I never went on. Yeah, I never went over to the other side.

Healey: You never had to go over there to do any sheet metal work?

Donald: No, no.

Healey: No, okay.

Donald: Yeah, so that was probably the main reason. Because we had that on our ship, too, but like I said, it wasn't—I don't think I could've taken, like, that number of men, always just in your face, you know.

Healey: Okay.

Donald: Mm-hm.

**[01:00:00]**

Healey: Well, now you've brought up the topic of men, and men in the military, and close proximity of ships. And you also said almost half of your tender was female. Did that include the officers, too, or not?

Donald: Yes. There were officers, female officers. Of course, they didn't bunk with us, so they bunked in another part of the ship. And, but dressed in civilian clothes you don't know who's who. They don't want you to be addressed as officers out there. When they are somewhere, I never knew why, so you just treat them like regular people.

Healey: You wear civilian clothes aboard ship?

Donald: Oh, not on the ship. When we docked or something like that. Yeah, they were pretty low-key, unless they went to, like, the officer's club. And there was no fraternization. There was not supposed to be any fraternization between the men and the women, of course, but then there was also not to be any fraternization with upper rank. And, so, but, of course, it happened. And that was just something that I was like, "Oh, well, you know, they're higher rank. You know, I'm not supposed to do that," and, so. I never dealt with them personally, but we had just as many women, yes. And, yeah, they were—though you thought you could look to them for, I guess, a little bit more guidance, they were hard. They were as hard as the men sometimes. And I think it was because it was a male-dominated structure.

And women were not welcome aboard the ships. The ship that I was on, men did not have a problem telling you that women should not be aboard ships, that they shouldn't even be in the military. Some were just very open about that, and they almost challenged you to do things. You know, "Well, if you think you can do it, if you think you can work like a man, you'll work like a man." And they had you picking up engines, and just impossible things that not even a man would do as a one-man job, you know. But women did a lot to, just, not meet that stereotype of what they thought. And, so, the officers were probably ten times more. So, they were tough, they were hard, and they were not friendly, they were not—they were not, no, they were not friendly. Yeah. [laughs]

Healey: And you said you heard from a number of men that women didn't belong in ship, women didn't belong in the military. Did that come from all ranks, or—

Donald: All ranks.

Healey: —where did you hear? Okay.

Healey: All ranks. Even the officers. They didn't mind sharing how they felt, and, of course, as a lower-ranking person, there wasn't anything you could do or say. You know, fear of retaliation, or just them coming—or making you work harder, or do things that they wouldn't send other people to do, or whatever. You'd get stuck with that low job, and you didn't want that. You know, hanging over the side of the ship painting or something like that. Didn't want to do that. So, you just take it, you know.

Healey: And was that true in your work section, too?

Donald: Mm-hm. Yes. So, our chief, as a matter of fact, did not like women in the military, and, luckily, we didn't have to deal with him as much as we did our first class, but he didn't like women in the military. So, it was like he just—whatever he could get away with, just the border of, just, making our life miserable, he did. He'd walk into a room, be totally disgusting, cursing, saying whatever he felt about women, you know. It was terrible. It seemed so unfair to have to sit there and take that.

Healey: And no one said anything about it.

Donald: No one said anything.

Healey: Male or female?

Donald: Male or female. And it was that way as far as racially, as well. They'd say whatever, and there's nothing you could say, nothing you could do.

**[01:04:58]**

And, it's just, as a woman, you're sitting here taking this, and then when you hear racial slurs being thrown out there, it was even harder, because you don't—there just wasn't anyone you could go to and say or report to. Because, after all, you're on this ship, and everybody knows everybody, so, you just—you don't want to get in that kind of trouble.

Healey: So, they didn't have any signs around that said *equal opportunity*, or anything like that?

Donald: Not at all.

Healey: Or where to report?

Donald: Not at all. Even—we had police on the ship, but even they weren't safe, because it was a ranking thing, you know. If you say something about someone, you'd have to prove it. And if you didn't have witnesses, you'd have to prove it. And then, if you had witnesses, and they don't want to talk, you still have to prove it. And you just didn't want to get caught up in that circle.

Healey: Okay, so, you're indicating that the proof problems are difficult, and that you didn't want to get caught up in that. So, did you experience anyone trying to take on the establishment regarding sexism, or racism, and that they did not have positive results? Or how did you get this feeling and attitude?

Donald: There was an officer, a female officer, and I do believe she did try to stand up. And she was fiery, and a go-getter, and we had lots of drills because she thought things should be a certain way. And, so, she was just a real go-getter, at first. But then, as she spoke up, after a while, you saw her demeanor change. She started to—you know, not as many drills, she became more low-key. So, I don't know what she actually went through, but it was enough that it was breaking her down. And you just saw the change in her. And that's, I think, to me, was, like, the real sign. If she can't do it, what makes me think I can do it? And, so, that goes on to the actual military sexual trauma that I experienced.

Healey: Okay.

Donald: That—when that happened—there was no one to tell. You know, when I was actually raped aboard the ship. And there it's not like you can go fill out a police report. There's no one to tell, because you have to prove it. And then how do you prove that it's not consensual? And then, if you prove that it's not consensual, there's no fraternization. So, it was almost impossible. And then, it was difficult, even more so difficult, because not only can you not tell, you don't want to say anything because you don't want the stigma. You don't want to deal with the retaliation and then the embarrassment of going through the court system. Their so-called court system. And, again, without that proof, you're just someone who had sex, and now you're just—you're yelling rape, you're just—you're yelling rape. And, so, I think, though, more than the experience itself was, for me, what was difficult was the betrayal. Like I said, you knew, even if you didn't talk to them, the people in ship, you knew them. So, it's, like, the last thing you expected. And, but then, you know, you have to deal with it, looking at the same person every day, all day, you know. Knowing what they did, and just—we're both, just, walking around, like nothing ever happened. It just becomes that secret

that you, just, keep, and it just—it just—it just gets bigger and bigger, because you're looking at this person and they're having fun. And they're talking to other women, and they're talking to people like nothing ever happened, and I'm like, "But you know what you did," you know? But it was nothing. Yeah.

Healey: Was this early on, or later in your Navy experience?

**[01:10:01]**

Donald: I would say midway through my experience, it was.

Healey: And were you at sea at the time?

Donald: We were at sea, and there was—it was after working hours, and it was a guy who would—I had been talking to. And he invited me down to his workshop, which was common among people, and that's where it happened. In the workshop. And it was—what was scary, or even scarier about it, was there were people on the other side of the room, and I could have yelled out for help. However, then you still have to spend time with these people, and you still have to go through their court system, and there's that stigma, and you still have to fear retaliation. Because the one thing about reporting things like that is that the captain doesn't want that on his record. So, they're saying is, "Not on my watch." So, that's where the big coverups came from. You know, no one wanted to be known for that happening on "their watch." So, you don't report it, it never happened. You know, if you reported, then, "Oh, it was a misunderstanding." You know. So, a lover's quarrel that went bad, or a relationship that went bad, or you get kicked out for fraternization. So, you know, that's how that cycle went, so we usually just went without saying anything.

Healey: Now, prior to that, or anytime during, were there ever any training sessions or speeches, or lectures, that talked about fraternization, that talked about sexual harassment, about appropriate conduct, group training?

Donald: At that time, sexual harassment was not a big thing, they didn't say much about that. They just talked about the fraternization and how that it was policy, and that was, kind of, taken on during the time of your orientation, when you come aboard the ship. But then, of course, after you've been on there you see that, obviously, that no one's taking this serious. You know, because there are legitimate dating couples. And, so, you don't know what to think of it, you know? You actually did have petty officers marrying officers, and people that were higher rank and lower

rank dating, or people just in a relationship. And, so, I think no one took it serious, no one ever took it serious enough and was ever said about it after that.

Healey: Okay. And yet, when this incident happened to you, you took the approach that, "Better not report it, captain wouldn't like it, not on his watch." You'd have to go through the court system. Where did you get all of that information from that gave you that mindset?

Donald: Okay, it's going back to that officer. When I, kind of saw her, like I said, like the light just going dim in her, I thought to myself, "She's an officer, and if she can't do it, what makes me think I can do it?" And, so, she requested transfers, and whatnot. First, she was denied. She was denied quite a few times. And then, finally, she was let go. But by the time she was let go, I had seen, just, a tremendous change in her, so I have no idea what she went through, but whatever it was, definitely changed the person that she was when she first got there. And so, I thought, "That's it, if she can't even talk to another officer about it, I definitely can't talk to anybody about it."

Healey: Did you talk to nobody about it?

Donald: Nobody.

Healey: Did you ever, maybe, say to someone of equal rank to you, whether you were E-3 or E-4, say, "You know, you better watch out about Petty Officer so-and-so, or Chief so-and-so," in a general way, just not a safe person, or, "Better watch your back when you're dealing with him?"

Donald: No.

Healey: No?

**[01:15:00]**

Donald: No. No one ever said anything.

Healey: I wondered if you ever said anything.

Donald: Oh, I never said anything either, no.

Healey: Because you indicated that you saw him later, around, and he was having fun, he was having relations, or talking with other women, and that sort of thing.

Donald: No. I did not speak up. I did not. Fear of retaliation, fear of then having to explain myself. And then, of course, as time goes on, it almost feels like you lost the opportunity to say something, you know? So, when you hear things about other people, you don't know on what terms they met. So, you don't want to interfere with that.

Healey: Okay. Any other experiences or places that you went in the service that stick out in your mind, or—no? Tell me when you got promoted to E-4.

Donald: When I was promoted to E-4, it was so funny because a lot of people were promoted to E-4, and I think, at that time—I don't think it was given to us because of we passed the test. I think it was just given to a certain number of people.

Healey: Did you have to take a test?

Donald: We did take a test. So, I'm not sure, exactly. Even if I even passed the test. They don't even say pass, fail, they just give you the rank. Either you stayed a E-3, or you were E-4. And so, we were just so happy and elated, you know, everybody that I knew, we all became E-4s, and that's pretty much where it stopped. I never wanted to be in the higher ranking, because I didn't want to be in charge of anybody. I just wanted to do my time and get out. So, I wasn't interested in making rank. So, but when I did, I felt really proud, I was really proud of it.

Healey: How old were you at that time? You came in at seventeen, how old? Or what year did you make E-4.

Donald: I would say—let's see, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen—had to be, like, nineteen or twenty. Nineteen, I think I was nineteen. And yeah, I thought I was just too young to be in charge of things, and so much I didn't know, so I just didn't want to take that on. Yeah, to me, I was still too inexperienced. And hadn't pulled enough good things from people to really know how to use it, you know. I was very shy, very quiet. I mean, even when I spoke, people couldn't hear me. And, which is so funny now, my voice carries. But I was just known for, just, being very quiet. I was more of a people-watcher, not—never hung with, like, big crowds, but always knew the popular people, you know. So, very shy, very quiet, reserved.

Healey: Okay, so, you spent a lot of your time at sea. So, what do you do with the money that you're getting? Because you can't go to a mall and spend money. So, how did you, during your four years, what did you do with your money?



Donald: I, actually, I think I—well, it was funny because at that time we didn't have direct deposit. So, you just have a bunch of checks. When I, actually, pulled back in, I got an apartment. It was my first apartment, it was a studio. I think the rent was like 575, for a studio apartment.

Healey: This was in Alameda, California?

Donald: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Actually, I lived in Oakland. And so, which is, like, fifteen minutes away. And it was a nice apartment. It was my first, I really enjoyed it. I learned how to cook spaghetti for the first time. I really felt like I was—I was really growing up, I was really heading in the right direction. But the money goes fast at 575 a month, and we really didn't make that much. I think, probably, maybe fifteen thousand dollars a year? You didn't make that much, really, but it's a lot when the ship takes care of everything. We at there, we slept there and everything, so to leave and then start paying rent, and then I had to get a car. It was my first car. The money went fast. But I enjoyed it.

Healey: So, you had your studio apartment by yourself?

Donald: Yes, yes.

Healey: Did a lot of other enlisted personnel aboard ship do the same thing? Go out and get their own apartment, or a shared apartment?

**[01:19:58]**

Donald: They did, and I think that's what inspired me. There was always a person—it was always competition, and that's how we looked at it. You go out and get a car, oh, I'm going to go out and get a better car. And, oh, you get an apartment, I'm going to get a better apartment. And so, that's really, basically, what's kind of set your goal for what you wanted to do, because, actually, I hadn't thought about it. I mean, I hadn't thought about any of that stuff. So, basically, it was like a copycat game, but I'm going to one up you, you know.

Healey: So, what did you do with your car when you went out to sea?

Donald: Oh, wow. If you couldn't find anywhere to park it—yeah. What did I do? Because I know I left it with someone, once, and yeah, when I got back I had no car. They wrecked the car. So, yeah, that was the end of that. So, then, after that, the next car I got, I was about to get out of the service anyway, so I was able to keep that one, but you'd have to leave it with a friend, park it at a lot, or something like

that. Which then, they'd say, you know, "Well, we're not responsible for what happens to it," and yeah.

Healey: And while you were at sea did you still have to pay rent on the apartment?

Donald: Oh, yes.

Healey: Yes. So, the lease didn't end.

Donald: No, you had to—your bills were still due. Going to school—I almost tried to go to school, but the going out to sea, because you're still required to do the homework and whatnot, and they didn't have the online stuff, so you would have to come back to, like, everything. You know, they would allow you to go to sea, but you would have to come back and do everything that they had done while you were gone to catch up. So, it wasn't as easy to go to school as they say. "Oh, join the military and go to school." It is not that easy. It's probably easier, now, but then, it was not at all because you were expected maintain a certain grade level and everything, and it was almost impossible. Yeah, being out at sea, no instruction, no one to ask questions, and stuff like that.

Healey: You did mention you got to Japan. What do you recall from your shore duty in Japan, and where were you ashore?

Donald: We went to Sasebo, Japan, and I liked it. Although, I didn't know, at the time, they were—the Japanese people in the area that we were—I don't know if that's all over, but they were pretty racist. They would have little signs, no black people allowed, and so there were places that we were allowed and places that we weren't. And as far as, you go to the market and whatnot, and do the shopping and that was fun, but everybody just act like, even if they could speak English, they wouldn't, you know. So, you basically have to know just recognition. Recognize this sign is here on this street, and this sign is here, and you have to remember everything by landmarks if you don't speak the language, because it was hard to get a ride, you know. They had those little taxis—well, not even taxis. The people who run with the little carts and stuff, they had that. But if they didn't want to give you a ride, they wouldn't, you know. So, but they didn't have laundromats, so we couldn't wash our own clothes, so we had to send them to the laundry. And when we sent them to the laundry, that was really nice. We would get them back all nice, and starched, and ironed, and they would be folded all nice and neat, and—

Healey: From the Japanese?

Donald: From the Japanese, yeah. And they would be packaged. You know, wrapped in the brown paper with the string around it, and that was beautiful. That I enjoyed very much.

Healey: Why did you use Japanese to do your laundry? I assume aboard ship, you'd use the ship laundry?

Donald: Oh, funny thing, the ship only had four washers, for all those people. So, it was constantly in use. You'd be lucky if you could get to it. You know, we actually had a sign-up sheet, and you could be number thirty on the list, so getting to wash your clothes didn't happen very often. Then there was the water restriction, so, there were times when we didn't get to wash—no one got to wash at all. So, then when you get to shore, yeah, you want to wash all of your clothes so you'd have them available.

**[01:24:58]**

Then, when we went to Japan, and we asked for the laundry, "There's no laundry, no laundry." So, you had to—I think the ship even worked with one of the laundry people so we could send all of our clothes to them. So, you'd put all of your dirty clothes together, put a tag on it, and just send it out. And then, you know, they'd wash and iron, and then send it all back. And that's how we got our clothes in Japan.

Healey: Okay.

Donald: Mm-hm. So, the shopping was good.

Healey: Shopping was good?

Donald: Shopping was good, yes. But then, every time you get something, "Oh, I could have done better." You know, so you always feel like, "Aw, I could have gotten a better deal." But then again we were limited in space, so it wasn't like we could do a lot of shopping. Sometimes it was just being in the hustle and bustle of the marketplace, it was fun.

Healey: Communication, back in '85 to '89, when you were on ship, and you mentioned communication because when you were out at sea and the *Stark* needed assistance, you were not allowed to observe that. What type of communication did

you have back home? How, when you were aboard ship, how could you communicate?

Donald: We only had letters, and we were just able to write letters. We did get incoming mail, not very often, I would say. But so, the letters came in—or the letters that went out, were probably just as few times as they came in. So, we didn't get a lot from home. And then I just didn't have a big letter-writing family, you know. So, mostly when I would get to shore, it'd be the phone call. You know, you could call someone then, but then you're talking long distance, so you're constantly filling the telephone machine with money, and stuff like that. And so, you didn't get to talk for a long time, because, yeah. But mostly the letter writing. And with that, though, I think that because we weren't allowed to tell a lot of the information about where we were, or what we were doing, we weren't given a lot of information. But, at the same time, when the letters came from my family, or we'd talk on the phone, I'm hearing something totally different. You know, they would say, "Oh, there was an accident at a training." And there was no training, yeah, something really happened out there, you know? And so, they were getting a different story at home, is what I found, than what we were getting out at sea. So, that's when I was, like, "They're lying to us," you know. And, "Where are you?" I really don't know where I am, I don't know, I couldn't tell you.

The funny thing about the Philippines though, when we get to the Philippines, they knew everything. They knew everything. They knew we were coming, they remember your name, they know when you're leaving, even if you don't. They knew when other ships were coming. They knew everything. And I was amazed by that, but then understood why we weren't told certain things, because they knew everything. [laughs]

Healey: Okay. When in your career did you decide, or maybe you knew from day one, that you were going to be doing a four-year tour? When did you make up your mind that you were not going to reenlist?

Donald: Well, at the time that I signed up, I signed up for four years. And then, after my second tour—what do you call—WESTPAC [Western Pacific], after my second WESTPAC, I didn't want to do the water anymore. I didn't want to be stuck with these people anymore. And so, I had asked—and I'm not even sure who I asked, we had somebody we talked to for orders—and I asked for Germany, as a matter of fact, or just shore duty in general, where could I go? And it was like, "No, if you were enlist, you stay here, on the ship." And I didn't want to do that, and so, I cut my career. And like I said, I think I only cut it because I couldn't go anywhere. But my intention was to get out and become a firefighter, but I would

have stayed in longer if I could have gotten something else. Because I didn't want to base my whole experience off of that one experience. So, I was going to try to do a little bit more.

**[01:30:00]**

Healey: Were they going to actually keep you on the *USS Gompers*?

Donald: Mm-hm.

Healey: Okay.

Donald: Yeah, and that was another thing, I didn't want to stay aboard the *Gompers*. And then, at that time, by the end of my tour of duty, women were getting on other ships. They were getting on carriers, or they had been there, and were starting to increase the numbers, and I didn't want to be on a carrier. And so, which is much larger, and I didn't want to be on the smaller boats either. So, and I thought to myself, "Let me get out before we have to do subs." [laughs] I just didn't want to do it at all, so I said, "Just let me go."

Healey: So, about halfway through, at least, or toward the end, you had made up your mind. You were going to go back home.

Donald: I was going to go back home.

Healey: And where were you—where did you receive your discharge?

Donald: In Alameda, California, I was in the *USS Samuel Gompers*. After being discharged, I stayed in California, in my apart—well, by then I had moved to a one-bedroom apartment in Oakland. So, I stayed there for a couple of years.

Healey: Oh, okay. Let me back up a little bit, I forgot, during the course of four years, did you have any extended leaves, like two weeks or three weeks, and what did you do?

Donald: I believe I took, like, my whole thirty days, because we were at sea so much, you couldn't use your leave, either. And so, I had plenty of leave stacked up. And so, I went home, and I think I took two weeks—I think it was, actually, thirty days, but after two weeks I had to leave because—just—I had changed so much. My family—I couldn't—they couldn't relate to me anymore. All I talked about was the military, and all I talked about was where I'd been, and what I did, and the

people that I'd met, and no one could relate to me. And so, that's when I just started to miss my friends, and I cut my trip short—or my vacation—short, and went back to Alameda. And yeah.

Healey: Okay. When you were promoted to E-4, did your living situation aboard the ship change, or no, was it still one hundred?

Donald: Still one hundred.

Healey: Still one hundred women in the squad bay—

Donald: Still one hundred. [laughs]

Healey: —or whatever they called it.

Donald: But even that, that becomes, like, your little family, because you're such close quarters. And—

Healey: So, you made good friends in the military.

Donald: I did, I did. I made some good friends, and we hung out. And, like I said, because I was a pretty shy, quiet, reserved person, and there were people that were more popular and outgoing than me, I think that's what built the closeness. Because we had those private times when we'd be in our bunks, and it would just be us, and we would just talk. And so, that, to me, was just, like, another way of meeting people, and I didn't have to do what they did just to know them.

Healey: Okay, and you said after you were discharged you stayed in California for a couple years. What did you do?

Donald: I, actually, worked for a contracting company that inventoried supplies for the Navy. And I think it was called DynCorp, and so, what we did was, we went on board ships and we'd count their screws, and the nails, and everything. We just did, just, total inventories. And that was an interesting experience, because then I was working with civilians, and then, that's—

Healey: And it was Navy ships that you went aboard to inventory?

Donald: Yes.

Healey: Okay. When you were on active duty did you know that civilians came in and did that.

Donald: I never saw them on the ship. I saw them on the grounds, or on the base, but I never saw them on the ship. So, it was kind of awkward, to me, to go on a ship. It just felt like, you know, home. You know, you don't—I—when you're in the military, or in the Navy, actually, and you go down the stairs, eventually you don't take the stairs anymore. You just start to slide down the pole, so you skip all the stairs, and you just take the pole. And so, when I did that, and the people now that I'm working with saw this, it was, like, they were just shocked, and, "You're going to hurt yourself, and you can't do that on the job," and blah, blah, blah. And I'm like, "But I know how to do this, because this is what I did." So, there was, like, that conflict. So, they didn't understand the life of being on the ship, and I didn't understand what I couldn't do, as a civilian. So, there was that conflict there of getting used to living on the outside.

**[01:35:03]**

Healey: So, you stayed there for about two years?

Donald: I did. And I worked for DynCorp, and then I took on a job as a base police officer. And I don't know if we were called base security, or base police. But we, actually, did have a gun. I would feel at that time that I was starting to harden up, because you stand on the gate, and you were the one to check the IDs for people to come on and off the base. And people lie to you so much, that, one, you've heard them all, and then two, what kind of fool do you take me for, you know? And so, it—I felt that that hardened me. Which is why when I got out and took the test for a sheriff's department, I changed my mind. Because I remember how that made me feel, and then, I didn't want to be that way with people when I had to deal with people on a daily basis. So, I said, "No," I didn't like the person that it made me, yeah.

Healey: So, how long did you do the security job on base?

Donald: I probably did that—I know I did it up until the time I left, so, maybe that was a year. I worked part time. I cut one job down to part time and then took on that one as a full time, and I did that like the whole time I was there, because that apartment was costing me a fortune. And so, I had to work two jobs in order to stay. And I stayed because I didn't want to come home. I didn't want to come—by then though, I didn't want to become a firefighter either. That had changed. I think that had changed with my traumatic experience, and the not telling. And the

idea that I was going to come back and be the forerunner, or frontrunner, for women firefighters, and I couldn't even speak up for myself, just, kind of shattered me, you know. So, I never did it. I was like—they were like, “You have to be physically strong.” And so, I was like, “That's no problem, I can carry all this weight,” which, I could. But mentally, I could no longer deal with the men making their comments about women and what they shouldn't be doing. I couldn't deal with, just, how—I couldn't deal with the racism. I just didn't want to do it anymore. I just no longer felt like I was the one that was able to put up that fight, so I just kind of shut that one. Shut it down.

Healey: Okay. So, you did make the decision to come back to your hometown, Milwaukee?

Donald: Mm-hm.

Healey: Okay. And why?

Donald: I had actually gotten pregnant. I had a boyfriend that was still in the military. And so—when I was out. When he went out to sea, then, one of my friends that were still in, was writing back and telling me what he was doing. And so, I thought, “Oh, well, I saw that when I was in the military myself. Usually, they cut those things off.” But he didn't. And he was cheating on me, and I was pregnant, and I decided, “I'm not staying here,” because I felt like I was alone. So, I wanted to be with my family, so I came back to be with my family to raise my child, my daughter. And because that's where I felt the support that I needed was going to be. Because I had a hard time adjusting. You know, I was still stuck in that loop, and what I could do as a civilian, what I did in the military, and again, what I talked about was the military. It was all I knew. So, and then if you don't have people to talk to, no one relates to you, and they don't want to talk.

Healey: So, what year was it when you came back to Milwaukee?

Donald: Ninety-one. My daughter was born in '91, so, I remember when I finally decided to leave, I called my father. He came from Milwaukee.

**[01:40:00]**

He caught a train, I think it was, or something. But he got there, and we drove back. We got a U-Haul, we trailered my truck—my car, we filled the U-Haul up, we just got some guys off the street to help pack. And we drove. And, of course, we made that stop in Nashville [laughs] to see his family.



But I remember my determination. My father has always been a driver. So, driving was not a thing to him. But we were caught in this storm, and I was driving at the time, and the wheel was shaking. And he said, “Di, I think we should pull over.” And I said, “No!” And that came from, “I can do this,” you know? They always said what we couldn’t do, so if you say I can’t do, I’m going to do it. And I was [mumbles], white knuckles, everything, I was just—I had that wheel so tight, it was so hard to control that truck. I was pregnant, had the car on the back, but, in my mind, there was no way you could tell me that I couldn’t do this. So, I drove that truck through that rain, [laughs] and we went to Nashville.

Healey: So, what did you do when you got back to Milwaukee? Had your daughter. Did you get a job, or not?

Donald: I did get a job. My daughter was born premature, so I didn’t want a job that I was confined to. So, I think I took a job at a nursing home, as a cleaner, so that I could get away if I had to, because she was still in the hospital. Then, once she was home, I got a job with Aldrich Chemical Company. And I liked that job. It was hard, for me, because it was new, it was different. I didn’t work any jobs before I went into the military, except for this one job I had, like, after school. And so, I’d never worked before, besides the military. So, that was different for me, because even in California when the jobs that I had, I was either on a base, or I was around military people, you know. So, I didn’t notice the change until I got back and started working for Aldrich Chemical Company. And then I thought, “Hm, I need more skills, I need to do something else.” And so, I definitely needed more money. So, I signed up to—I took the test for the post office. Then, when I got into the post office, it didn’t take long to figure out that was not going to work. So, then, I went on to MATC [Milwaukee Area Technical College] to pursue my associate’s in business. I was going to go farther, but then I stopped because my daughter was basically a latchkey kid, and I was working so many hours with the post office, this a little longer, but yeah.

Healey: Did you use your VA benefits for education?

Donald: I did. At first I didn’t even know that they were available, I’m not even sure how I found out about the VA, but I was, actually, one of the first women, when the women’s clinic opened up at the VA here in Milwaukee. And I remember one of the doctors saying, “Wow, so refreshing to see a young face,” because I guess they were used to treating the older veterans, and their wives, and so, to see a young person was refreshing, I suppose. So, but yes, I started using the VA, and then after the shooting at the post office, I found out then that I was eligible to—

about the getting your degree. You know, they had the voc rehab. And that's when I found out about that, and so, then, I took that on, and that's how I ended up in school. I bought a house.

Healey: You said shooting in the post office. Was that the post office where you worked, or not?

Donald: Yes, actually, the downtown Saint Paul post office, I can't even remember what year it was, but it was the employee that came in and shot the supervisors. Yeah, I was there that night. It was—it was—wow. Really scary, because you didn't know where it was coming from, you didn't know who was doing it, you know. And then, we couldn't take the elevator, of course we had to take the stairs, and like, there was this big glob of people, just, taking the stairs.

**[01:45:02]**

And so, yeah, that was scary. And I know, I ran all the way from—where is that postal—so Saint Paul, and I ran all the way to 6<sup>th</sup> Street, to the Stein where you turn to go down Wisconsin. I ran all the way there, and I don't even remember running, that's just how scared I was. And I didn't know you could be that scared, but when you don't know where it's coming from, you know. Because I thought, in the military, when I saw the firing going across, but I think, in my mind, I was thinking, "Oh, we're off-guard, they can't touch us." And so, I was—but this was different. It could be anybody. It could be anybody coming from anywhere. So that's when I really started to dig into my benefits, went to school, bought a house.

Healey: Use the VA benefits for the house, too?

Donald: For the house. My health.

Healey: Do you still own the house?

Donald: I, actually, sold the house. Or let it go, actually. That was after the flood of 2010. There was one in 2008, and then there was one in 2010, and the flooding, actually, I did the cleanup myself, because apparently I didn't qualify for FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] because I had flood insurance. So, FEMA wouldn't give me money because I had flood insurance. Flood insurance wouldn't give me money because they said, "Oh, you had a sewer water backup." So, then, mold started to grow into the house and everything, but I stayed in the house not knowing the mold was an issue, and later developed asthma behind it.

So, I had to just let the house go. Yeah, but then I used it again for the house that I have now, so definitely. And there are a lot of benefits available. There's so many that if you don't talk to the right person, you could be missing out on so much. And that's one thing about, as I would say, going to the military, I got the ten-point preference, just saying that you were in the military gets your foot in a lot of doors. You have—you know, you could buy a home, you can start a business. There are so many things you can do. The healthcare, which really helps out, you know. Even though I have insurance, I still prefer using the VA, you know, so.

Healey: So, what are you doing right now for a job?

Donald: I, actually, came to the VA and worked for fifteen years, here in the VA hospital. I've been around, secretary, program support assistant, finally worked for non-VA care. And then, after I left that, which was last year in December, then I went to work for the VBA [Veterans Benefits Administration], Veterans Benefits. And that's different, for me, it was a culture shock for me because though it is the government—whereas in the VA you have a lot of veterans here, you're surrounded by veterans, whether working with or working for. So, when I went to VBA, there's a lot of civilians, and they run things like civilians do.

Healey: And you say the B-A?

Donald: VBA, Veterans Benefits, yeah, Administration. And because you have a lot of civilians running things like they do on the outside, that was a culture shock for me, and I'm still working through that because I've been within the federal government services for so long. I have over twenty-seven years in federal service, and this is my first time working with civilians. And it's difficult, because I'm right back where I started, like, what I do as a—what I can do, what I can't do, you know. Just like getting out of the military, what I could do as a military person, and as a civilian. And it's difficult.

Healey: It's still government employment?

Donald: Right, mm-hm. And based on who you're working with, or working for, makes a difference. You know, if you don't have the veterans behind you—which I had here at the VA—to back you up—which I don't have at the VBA—which is a lot of civilians.

**[01:50:02]**

And even though I'm a civilian myself I still—I'm a veteran, so, it's like, we know each other. We know what we're going through, we know what we're dealing with, we know the difficulty in dealing with the outside. And so, of course, though, they don't, and they're not sensitive to it, either, you know. It's like, "Well, that was years ago. Oh, you're out now," or whatever. But for me, since seventeen, it's all I knew. Well, I get teary-eyed, it's like, because, now, I'm, like, in my fifties, and I don't know how to deal with it.

Healey: You don't know how to what?

Donald: How to deal with it. Working with civilians.

Healey: With civilians.

Donald: Yes. Not sure what to do with it, so, it's difficult. It's just like getting out, [laughs] it's just like getting out of the military, you know. You have to learn how to do things the way they do it. Yeah. So—

Healey: Well, you covered a great deal. I guess one thing that I haven't asked, you certainly have dealt, worked in the VA hospital here in Milwaukee for fifteen years. What other associations, if any, have you kept with veterans organizations since you've returned to Milwaukee?

Donald: I frequent the vet's center on 76<sup>th</sup> Street, which is a—it's kind of a branch off, and they only deal with mental health. So, because I worked here, I didn't want to deal with my mental health issues here, so I went to the vet's center. And from the vet's center I learned about the different things that they do, the groups that they have. So, as far as the hospital goes, I joined the Women's—it's been so long, I think they changed the name—Consumer Committee? Where it's we were a group of women veterans who received our care here so that we could speak out for women that, you know, weren't on a committee. So, you could bring your complaint to us, and we'd work with the people in the hospital to fix those things. Like, we even started the swimming—the women's swimming sessions. We opened up the women's pool, and during that time, during those hours, only women are allowed, no men. So, that was something that we did that came out of it. Chairs. The chairs are filthy, and so we said, "Hey, you guys need to clean those chairs." Surprisingly, I don't know, we got the chairs cleaned, we got the wheelchairs cleaned. So, we spoke out for other women in that committee.

As far as with the vet's center, we do outreach. That's when I was working, also, with Jill Feldman, who is the program manager for the women's clinic. We would

go to like stand downs where, for the homeless. We would do other outreach, you know, activities at the zoo, or, like, to just speak out and letting other women know about the VA and the services that were available to the women here. And then, like I said, I'm a strong supporter of the vet's center, where we have our women's groups. We have book writing, we have arts and crafts, we have movie nights, we have just a lot camaraderie, just military women, you know. Yeah, I like that because you can skip around all that explaining, what things are before you get in to just talking about what things are, you know. Before the conversation, you're not that constant—"What was that? What did they do?" You know [laughs]. So, that feels good to talk to people that understand you.

Healey: If you had to kind of summarize how you feel about your military experience, how would you do it.

Donald: I didn't like it. Bottom line. I did not like it. However, I wouldn't trade it for nothing in the world. Nothing. Nothing I went through, nothing I learned, the people that I met, that I liked and didn't like. I wouldn't trade any of it. Like I said, each stage of my military tour just taught me something, or just expanded my horizons.

**[01:55:06]**

I don't think I wouldn't have left Milwaukee had I not had that opportunity, but because I did, I met people I never would have met, I did things that I never would have done, and I've overcome things that I never thought I would have overcome. So, I wouldn't trade it for the world. I wouldn't do it again [laughs].

Healey: You have a daughter, did you ever encourage her to join the military, or not?

Donald: I encouraged her to join the Air Force, but the Air Force only. And she decided to go to school instead, which was also another benefit. She, actually, got a bachelor's degree in—what did she do? She was in journalism and Japanese, so she is a fluent reader, writer, and speaker of Japanese. And she currently works at UWM.

Healey: Would you encourage other people? I know you talked with your daughter, have you, or would you, encourage other people to join the military or to not join the military?

Donald: I would not discourage them from going, however, there have been a couple of people I would say, "Hey, this is what they won't tell you, and this is what you

need to know, and so that you can make a better-informed decision.” I also say to them that, “This is just based off of my experience, this may not be your experience at all. However, just know that these are some of the things that you may have to deal with.” So, I encourage people to go because a lot of good things came out of me going, but then I don’t think you can really warn anybody about the things that you don’t know, or may never even happen, you know. But just a eye opener, the stories you hear, they may be true.

Healey: I know before we met today, I talked to you over the phone, and I suggested that you might make an outline or jot down a few things that you wanted to talk about. Is there anything else you’d like to address that we haven’t covered?

Donald: Just that—let’s see [flipping pages], we talked about my childhood, and why I joined the military, boot camp, my duty station, travel. That’s pretty much everything, you’re very thorough, which is really good.

Healey: You’re very thorough.

Donald: Just, probably, about more of the military sexual trauma. What I wanted to say about that, was that, I think the most difficult thing about that is it took from me the person I wanted to be. You know, you’re a certain way before it happens. It changes you. You can never get that person back again. And what I would tell me, I guess, younger self, is don’t try to chase that younger person, or don’t try to chase that other person, or that person that you were, you know. Because you become a different person, so, I would say, “Develop the person that you have now become.” You know, I think I chased my past, and a lot of veterans do. That’s where the busywork comes in, they go to school to cover it up, they get jobs, and become workaholics to cover it up. So, basically, they’re running from themselves. And the reality is, you can’t, and you think if you sit still, you’ll have to deal with it, and that’s difficult. But, I think, now, knowing what I know now, is if you deal with it and deal with the person that you are now, or at that time, you’ll be a much happier person. Feel much more free to do other things. Yes. Wish I’d known that then [laughs]. Because now, knowing at fifty, I never married, I have some very serious trust issues, serious men issues, suffered a lot of depression, but now I see that I didn’t have to go through all of that.

Healey: Have you gotten help through the VA?

Donald: I definitely have gotten help through the VA.

**[01:59:48]**

Healey: Now, one of the things that you mentioned in your written letter the Veterans Museum was that when you got to the VA hospital, you appreciated the fact that there were so many veterans here, and they could be suffering from burns or loss of limbs, but your attitude—how did you describe your attitude?

Donald: It really was an eye-opener for me. I felt like it's—well, how did I put it? I think I said that—oh gosh, I can't remember how I said it. But I didn't feel like a stranger. I didn't feel like anything was wrong with me. I felt normal in a place that wasn't normal. You know, we're all walking around and we all have something. We've all had some kind of military experience that has changed us in one way or another, but, you know what, we're just all just going about our daily activities as if it were nothing. And it feels, just, kind of, lifting, to be able to talk to somebody with one arm, and you're not even thinking about, "Oh my God, how did that happen?" You know, you don't think like that. If they want to tell you, they'll tell you, you don't have to ask. You know that if someone is walking down the hall and they're singing or talking to themselves, don't interrupt, they'll talk when they're ready to talk. And because we know that about each other that, again, goes back to that you don't have to explain before you start talking. And it's just, like I said, it's normal in an abnormal place, it's familiar. Yeah.

Healey: Okay.

Donald: That's how I feel about that [laughs].

Healey: Anything else you want to add?

Donald: Gosh. That I think that I've seen the military and the things that they do, and the way they've opened the doors for women. I've seen the changes, and I really hope that more women stand up for themselves and each other. That's what I would like to see. Don't—it really can be a good experience, but only as good as you allow it to be, you know. If you shut yourself down, it's not going to be as good of an experience, and I think that having that camaraderie, that support, can really make it a really good experience. Yeah. I wish I'd appreciated it much more then, and then I do now. I didn't know that you could appreciate negative things, but when I look back on that, yeah, I wouldn't change a thing. Mm-hm.

Healey: Okay, well, thank you Diana, and thanks on behalf of the Veterans Museum, and also, we appreciate your service back in the 1980s.

Donald: Yes, well, thank you.

Healey: One of the first women aboard the ship.

Donald: [laughs] Well, that was a—

**[End of OH2159.Donald\_access.mp3]**

**[End of Interview]**