

Wendy York

Narrator

Sean Quinn

Interviewer

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Guilderland Public Library

SQ: Can you tell me your name and your date of birth?

WY: My name is Wendy York and I was born in Lockport, New York in 1950.

SQ: As you told me, you joined the Air Force. What in your life encouraged you?

WY: Well there were several things. I was working for a veterinarian at the time and I heard you could get some money to go to college and I wanted to go to vet school so I went to go see a recruiter and thought I was going to go part time into the guard or the reserve and of course recruiters are kind of good at that and he said we have an opening for a vet tech active duty so that is how I got in.

SQ: I guess in the end you became a different kind of vet.

WY: I did! (Laughs) I am!

SQ: When exactly did you enter the Air Force?

WY: Well I do not know if they still have it but it was delayed enlistment so I enlisted the 15th of December but went in in March. The nice thing about it is my retirement pays from December. For Air Force now, of course, everyone goes to San Antonio, Texas so in March we went down to basic training. I was a little bit older, I had had college already so I was one of two or three women who were oldest in our unit so they picked on me for having a little bit more experience and maturity as a squad leader as a leader of our little unit there.

SQ: And what year was that?

WY: 1975 So, I am considered a Vietnam era Vet because officially Vietnam did not finish until 1975.

SQ: What was your training in San Antonio like?

WY: I had a really good recruiter who told me they are going to break you down to build you up to be able to follow rules and hand out and take commands so again I was 24 years old and that was an easy concept for me so basic training was sort of a pushover a learning experience of course and then we moved on to my technical training school. I was going to be an animal technician so I went up to Wichita Falls in Texas for my technical school and from there on to my first base.

SQ: As an animal technician in the Air Force, what did you do?

WY: I thought it would be a lot of work with working dogs which in the 70's we had working dogs as sniffers for drugs and bombs and the big thing was working dogs with the military police which they used them when they went out on patrol. The base that I went to had a Veterinarian shop so half of my work was working with animals but the other half was as a food inspector. Little do people know that all of our meats are inspected by veterinarians because they are animal people. So I would go down to the commissary and make sure the food was good for military people to eat.

SQ: Did you ever run into anything that was contaminated? Do you have any stories? (Both giggle)

WY: OH Yea! When the beef trucks came the sides of beef were hanging in the trucks and we had to check to assure that they were the quality that the Air Force had bought, probably the Department of Defense not just the air force. So, we found the grades stamped on the sides of beef as 1,2,3,or 4. The department had procured 1's and 2's and we had found that a 5 had been carved off of each individual side to make it a 1. So, we found this supplier was fraudulent to the government and we shut him down.

SQ: Going back to your training, it is fair to say that as a woman you had, not a unique experience enlisted. What was it like for you as a woman?

WY: In the early 70's, I went to basic training in 1975, there was still the WAFS. All the services had different acronyms for their women in the military and a WAF was a woman in the Air Force. So the basic training was separate for women. The dormitories were separate but most of the training was the same. We had to go to the shooting range. We had to run and learn military history. Most of it was pretty much the same. Even some of the female flights had male instructors. I had two female training instructors. It was during a period when all services were trying to do away with the separation between men and women. And when I got to my first base they were still struggling with the separation. We were given office quarters all the women because they were separate from the mens' but again as the years rolled on probably two years, we were all put together in the same dormitory the men and women.

SQ: So how many women were with you?

WY: In basic training a flight of fifty the same as the men had a flight of fifty.

SQ: So segregation ended in what year?

WY: I'd say 1977 or 1978. There were still sign on the dorm that said no men allowed but there were floors and even partial floors. The dormitories were set up such that two rooms would share a

bathroom. But there were still fewer women than men in the Air Force so we might only get a part of a floor. There was a partition or doors to block visitors not that that stopped anybody. We all had visitors. (Big smile)

SQ: So what kind of interactions did you have with the men as it couldn't possibly be 100% segregation?

WY: Correct. Well we had flight formations that were all integrated. I had a female veterinarian, an officer, but a male supervisor. There weren't that many women into the animal technician positions, so most of the people that I came into contact with except for the female vet were male. It didn't seem to pose any problem, again I was a little older so that probably helped me to get into a work routine without a problem. Also I came off of a male-oriented gentleman's farm so for me there was no difference.

SQ: What other roles besides what you were as a vet tech, did the other women hold?

WY: The vet role was in the medical field. So a lot of my friends were in the clinic or the hospital. A lot of women were in the medical field. A lot of women were in the administrative field.

SQ: Where was your first assignment after basic?

WY: My first assignment was Hanscom Air Force Base in Massachusetts. The Air Force let you fill out a dream sheet to go where you wanted and of course Massachusetts was probably one of my last choices as I wanted to see the world, California or overseas or someplace like that? But Hanscom Massachusetts made it about 4-4 ½ hours from home. I didn't get too far away from home. Then I had special duty assignment to go to Groton, Connecticut, a sub base that was also doing things experiments with aquatic animals. That was going to get me into the animal field totally and I really wanted to take that assignment but I busted up my knees playing touch football so I had to go have knee surgery. When you are suppose to show up at an assignment at a certain time and you can't the assignment is negated. At around that time my Dad had died and my Mom was alone so I tried to get a job closer to home. I went into the recruiting service for 4 years.

SQ: Okay. Well, unrelated, you said you played touch football what position did you play I want to know?

WY: I was the quarterback!

SQ: That doesn't surprise me! (Both Laugh) Flashback to Massachusetts. Can you describe what you did when you were there?

WY: I look back on my military history and that was kind of a boring time. It was all pretty much base oriented and I had to show up at a specific time. Being from the country I was interested in the surrounding area and my sister was living in Boston so I went down on weekends and hung out and did different things but it was also the Lexington and Concord area where the "shot was heard around the world" so there was a lot of history. Some of my close friends also lived in Massachusetts so some

Sundays we would go to their house and have a nice home cooked meal. In the Air Force I didn't fly anywhere I didn't go anywhere, I lived on base. So when I transferred into recruiting the recruiting service would rent you a house and you were out doing school tours and different community events so that got me out and about which was really really exciting. After my 4 years in recruiting, I wanted to go back into something electronic wise because my dad was a GM engineer and I had the background. That was around 1983. They said no your vet tech position is transferring over to Biomed and you can't take another job. I thought I didn't really want to do that so i went to see a reserve recruiter and also when I was recruiting the hours were horrible 10-14 hours per day, so I could never do the educational things necessary for a promotion. Therefore I left active duty for the reserves at that time. Also, because I had a medical background as a vet tech I took a test to prove that I had enough medical knowledge to be put in as an aero-medical specialist. It meant I was medically able to take care of people on a plane. So that is how I transitioned into the reserves where they sent me to school and hospitals and I became an EMT. I trained in Delaware for 2-3 intense months. Then you had to come back to learn the equipment on the plane you were flying on. Nowadays it would be called a flying combat medic where you get really wounded people.

SQ: Did you ever go into combat zones?

WY: In the beginning it was domestic because we flew C1-30's and they're for props. They are like a cargo plane but we were just practicing. Then things started gearing up in the world like Desert Storm, Haiti and Honduras so we started doing our exercises in these areas. We were then brought into Desert Shield to start giving immunizations. Then we were sent overseas to take care of all wounded. We were stationed in Germany prepared to do what we needed to get the wounded individuals home. There were crews stationed in Iraq so we didn't go. The wounded were brought to us in Germany. We would get the plane full and take them to the USA. They would try to stabilize the patients in a German Hospital called Lonsteulan first before the flight home. We also did a lot of training with new equipment for emergencies like a heart attack or a bleed out so we could handle any emergency. So my first combat situation was in Honduras and my second combat situation was in Arabia and then my third combat situation was in Macedonia. Because we were taught to fly in a plane there were short take-offs and landings and we would fly right into a combat zone to pick up the wounded. While this might not sound so dangerous there is a lot of armament today that could just rip through airplanes so it was pretty dangerous.

SQ: Did anyone ever shoot at you?

WY: Of course and while in Macedonia in addition to being shot at they tried to laser the pilots you know blind the pilots so the plane would crash. So, there was a lot of anti-lasing equipment on the plane like glasses we would wear to look out the portals to see if you could detect the lasers coming up from the ground. The other problem was when we were waiting on the ground, especially in Macedonia, bombs were being lobbed across the airfield by both sides and they were old armaments so they would drop in our camp or blow a hole into the tarmac where the planes were. That was pretty scary. They would start at 11:00 at night and we were living in trailers. There were two people per trailer and they were all tied together and everything in your trailer area would shake when the bombs were dropped.

SQ: Were you able to meet any of the local people in all of these places you went around the world?

WY: Oh sure! Being aero Med we would be flying between 7-15 hours per day so when we reached our destination and the patients were taken care of the rules said we had to have 10 hours of quiet time. Flying all day you might have had a boxed lunch or something so when we were done we were all looking for a place to eat and drink. So we always went local. There were people on the crew called barracks rats and they would just go wherever we were staying and order a pizza. But there was a group of us ...the local areas were so vast. I mean Korea, I was in Japan, Guam, the Philippines, Hawaii, South America, Panama just exotic places where you can always find a local place to eat.

SQ: hat was the weirdest thing you ever had to eat?

WY: Yes it was in the Azores. It was dark and the taxis weren't allowed to come on base so we had to walk down this huge hill (the Azores is just a rock anyway) and got a taxi and asked him to take us to a place to eat. We told him we were very hungry and it was 11:30 at night so he takes us to this little tavern (I don't know if you can call it that but it was dark and small) and they bring this hummus plate and meat on a stick. It tasted ok and then afterward we found out it was raw dog. Well nobody got sick on it. (laughs)

SQ: Aside from the raw dog experience you saw three pretty intense situations-Honduras, Saudi Arabia and Macedonia- Can you expound on those experiences?

WY: The most interesting and culture shock was Riyadh, Saudi Arabia(the capital) We were in a little village called Eskon Village and the buildings were cement and it was very, very hot there and I was there for 4-6 months. I had never been in such a secure situation. In order to get in and out of the installation you went through 5 sets of security and that meant even though your vehicle was a military vehicle at each stop the hood was lifted, the trunk was opened and the truck was tipped up and we all had to get out and we all were frisked and you went through different secure stations. Often there were breaches with terrorists trying to get into the installation so that meant we would get our weapons and stand guard. Also the extreme heat for 2 months solid the temperature was over 120 degrees and I would check with the environmental section about what the wet bulb said that day and they would say it reads 120 but that is all we are allowed to say because the TCN's(Third Country Nationals) are not allowed to work when it is any hotter but actually we have gone at 130 degrees all week. So that was probably the most extreme weather conditions. Also back then women weren't allowed to drive and they weren't allowed to walk in front of the male and they had to wear a black cloak (burka) and a head scarf and no sneakers. But it was worth it to go local and shop at the market or get something to eat. So you had to decide if the tradeoff was worth it. When I went to Macedonia we had to go downtown to get some drugs for our clinic because the supply lines had been cut. This too was sort of a culture shock because you didn't just go into a store and buy something you went down the back alley and someone greeted you and you sat down and you had tea with them and talked and bartered for the items you needed. After we got the drugs we did some shopping in this little mall area and it was hard to dress native (dress slacks and shoes and a button down shirt) because you were an American (tee shirt, jeans and sneakers). And the poverty that was there, the kids who were dirty and sticky would grab you and

want things was also a culture shock. I had seen a little bit of that in Egypt but not as much as it was in Macedonia. The country was so poor.

SQ: What about Honduras?

WY: In the mid- eighties(1989) an exercise called Ahas-Terra. They had had mudslides and we had to go and give dental and foot-rot help to the locals again an eye opening experience as they were so poor yet the people were so thankful for the help.

SQ: As you obviously had a long career in the Air Force what memories stick out?

WY: There are just so many of them but one that I was especially proud of was that I advanced through the ranks and they offered me an officer's position and I was pretty high ranked at that time and I refused because I didn't want to be grounded in administration work. I am not like that I wanted to be in the field. I was proud of my ability to become a chief master Sargent as a female and the first one in my unit and my base in less than 20 years. Achieving rank in the military is of course like getting a promotion in a civilian setting and you need to be educated, aware of your surroundings and know your military history in order to get promoted so that was a memorable time that I had. I also remember doing domestic aero vac which was taking our wounded Afghan and Iraq veterans from Andrews Air Force base in Washington home wherever they lived in the United States. That was a real rewarding time because they were pretty banged up and wounded individuals and you could make or break their long flight home. Being able to give personal care to each and every one of them was real rewarding.

SQ: Based on the play I saw on your experience were you the one who made the cookies for the soldiers?

WY: Yes.

SQ: That was nice and kind of you.

WY: Depending on what planes were available and how critical your patients were would affect how much equipment you had to bring and how long your flight would be. I jotted down all the planes I was on C9, C21, KC35, KC135, C130, C141, C17, a German 130. So you had to be pretty versatile as an aeromedical technician. It was intense. There was a team of five.

SQ: When did you retire?

WY: January1st,2008

SQ: That's an incredible career!

WY: It was incredible. A lot of people call people in the military that long lifers but they really are just career oriented because they have been ingrained into the military way of life and it is just a rewarding career. Also if you make it to 20 years or more the benefits are super (until Congress hacks them all away). I have a very good pension and I have very good medical care and I get to travel still and those are things that I wanted.

SQ: Sounds pretty worth it to me.

WY: But military is not for everyone. Usually you can find out within the first 4-6 years if you are going to hack it or not.

SQ: Are you a member of any military organizations?

WY: Yes. I am a member of the disabled American veterans and the American Legion and I am a life member of Air Force Sargent's Association and I am involved with many things with the female veterans of the Albany area. There are several female veteran initiatives which I have become involved. I also volunteer to drive the van for the DAV. There is just something about being around military people; we all speak the same language. We have a lot of things in common and that is really good for me. I was missing that when I first retired as it was kind of traumatic to be away from my job after 33 years.

SQ: Do you keep in touch with your military friends?

WY: Yes! In fact my old medical unit tries to have a reunion every 5 years. We go back to the base and have dinner and drinks. Yea definitely! We write or have dinners.

SQ: In conclusion, how do you feel the military has affected your life?

WY: I have grown and become very educated with regards to the rest of the world. The wealth and the poverty and hearing people complain about this country need to go somewhere that doesn't have all the things that we have. I am very aware and appreciate living in this country as a free person with clean water and a roof over my head. I have been educated and was able to help others and I think that is my legacy. (smiles)