

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

El Toro Marine Corps Air Station Oral History Project

An Oral History with VERA NELSON

Interviewed

By

Brenda Arreola

On April 27, 2007

OH 3547

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Clarence and Vera Nelson at their home in Oceanside, California, 2007.

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NARRATOR: VERA NELSON  
INTERVIEWER: Brenda Arreola  
DATE: April 27, 2007  
LOCATION: Oceanside, California  
PROJECT: El Toro Marine Corps Air Station

BA: This is an interview with Vera Nelson for the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station Oral History Project. The interview is being conducted by Brenda Arreola at the Nelson's home in Oceanside on 27 April 2007. And Mrs. Nelson, I wanted to know when and where were you born?

VN: I was born in Garland, Texas, June 7, 1919. I'm eighty-seven; I'll be eighty-eight, next June 7.

BA: What was it like growing up there?

VN: It was wonderful. We played outside at night. I had a very happy family. My mother and dad had five children, and we were all very close. We sat together every evening at suppertime [and] told what we did all day. My two sisters and I took turns doing kitchen chores. It was usually my chore to slice the bread; in the twenties bread was not sliced. It came in a loaf, so one of us had to slice the bread for supper. And we didn't have—our family couldn't afford butter at that time, and we ate margarine. At that time margarine came in a plastic bag with a little orange pellet in it. What you did to make it look like butter was you mashed that pellet, and you kneaded that bag of margarine until it turned yellow. And that was our butter! (laughs)

But my mother and dad managed to have a very happy home for all of us, and we grew up in a small town in Lancaster. As I said, we played outside at night until Mother came on the porch and called or when the streetlight came on. We knew then it was time to come in. And all the games—we played with all the neighborhood kids. There was no such thing as computers and Game Boys. I remember very well when I was a girl my mother raised puppies, bulldog puppies, and she traded one for a radio. And it was a great, big thing with three dials; I believe it was Atwater Kent. That radio had a lot of static, but we were thrilled. We would all sit around and listen to the radio when we could get—there weren't programs all the time, just occasionally there was a program. That was fun. When I think back and think of all

the games we made up and things we did to play together, I feel kind of sorry for kids today who don't have that close family life, where everybody worked together and shared what we had. My brother got hold of a guitar one time, and in his bedroom he learned to play. I can remember the rest of us kids shouting for him to, "Be quiet," [because of] all that noise. We didn't, we didn't have much sympathy with him and his loud guitar.

But I had a very happy home life and a very happy childhood life. I miss my mother and father. I still have my—two brothers are dead, but I have two sisters. They both live in Ventura, and I get to see them several times a year. It is just a joy. One is five years older than I. Let's see, that makes her ninety-three, and my other sister is two years younger, so she is eighty-six. My ninety-three-year-old sister is a beautiful woman. She drives a lovely, big car, and she takes all of her old friends to the doctor. (laughs) She knows lots of old ladies that need help. She takes them to their doctor's offices, and to their card parties. Of course, she is not one of them at ninety-three.

BA: That's great.

VN: I have a very happy life and happy memories of a happy childhood.

BA: Who were your role models growing up?

VN: Oh, Kate Smith. I remember when Kate Smith introduced the very first time "God Bless America" was sung on the radio. Kate Smith sang it; she introduced it. And I thought, oh, she just must be so—of course, I didn't know what she looked like, but I thought, oh, to be like that. And get to have that wonderful voice and sing. And my older sister, she was so pretty and had boyfriends. She was a wonderful girl. And she sang, and uh—my little sister and I, we always looked up to our big sis, and we wanted to grow up to be like her. It was not like today. Girls look at movie stars, and I didn't know any movie stars. When I was a teenager, I looked at uh—I saw an old movie by Janet Gaynor. I think she won the first Academy Award back in the twenties sometime. She had dimples, and I remember standing in front of the mirror sticking my finger in my cheeks (laughs) hoping that I would get a dimple. But I guess my role model was just my older sister mainly. And I wished I could sing like Kate Smith. (chuckles)

BA: It sounds like you had a very patriotic family?

VN: Yes. My brother, one of my brothers was in the Army Air Corps. The rest of the family was very surprised when I enlisted in the Marine Corps, but it seemed perfectly natural to me. But they all supported me and thought I was just wonderful to do that, but it never occurred to my, my—I take that back. My older sister would have loved to enlist but she only weighed ninety-eight [pounds], and you had to weigh one hundred. At the time you had to weight at least one hundred pounds. Mary was too thin, so they wouldn't take her.

BA: Oh, wow! Now you mentioned earlier, um, that you went in right after high school. Is that how it carried out?

VN: Well, I graduated from high school in 1937. I got a really nice job with the county school superintendent. I was his secretary, and I worked his, took his dictation and worked for all the people in the county school office. And then I got a job out at Ventura College. I was assistant to the dean of men, and I managed the college cafeteria. I did all the work in there with the dean of men, Mr. Verhuesen. I took a course in high school in business administration, and for six weeks during that course I was assigned to one of the professors to be his assistant as part of my training. I was assigned to Mr. Verhuesen; he was in the agriculture department. I just loved the work, and he thought I was very good at my job. So those later years he offered me a job as his assistant; he was dean of men.

And that is what I was doing in 1943. I was making two hundred dollars a month, which was really good. I was really proud of my work and my job. I loved it there at the college until I went into the post office that day in July of '43 and saw that picture of a beautiful Marine girl in uniform with the big slogan that said, "Be a Marine and Free a Marine to Fight!" And I thought silently to myself, "I think I can free two of 'em." So, I enlisted in August of 1943. I went to boot camp in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, in the fall. I remember October in North Carolina was beautiful. All the trees looked like a Persian carpet, yellow and gold and brown. But all I saw was the back of Millie Lancer's head. (laughs)

BA: And what was that like, boot camp training? What did the training consist of?

[00:09:59]

VN: Well, it was—I'll have to admit, I'm not sure I could have made it the way the Marine women train today. Their training is equal to the men's today. We did not have an obstacle course. We didn't have to qualify on the rifle range. We did march; the first DI's [drill instructor] we got were men who were assigned—they were not happy about having to teach women to march. I remember one day up on the tarmac we were drilling back and forth to the rear and left oblique and right oblique and to the rear. They were merciless. They just marched us up and down for hours, and one girl in my platoon fainted. Nobody said a word. He just drilled us out of her line there, and we went back and forth. The minute she stirred he looked at her and said, "Fall in!" And she got up to her feet, got back in formation, and we went—if any of them thought they were going to be treated differently because they were girls (laughs) they found out that that wasn't the case. They were tough on us, but that was good. We had all kinds of classes in map reading and um, oh, all about the planes that America was using. We learned all about warfare out of the books, but unlike the girls today, we didn't have to go get in and out of the tanks and go through the tough obstacle course like they do today. I've wondered since, and I'm not sure I could go through that crucible. Now-a-days they have a fifty-two hour crucible. Did you do that?

BA: Yes, I did, and you could have done it. It is just mental.

VN: Well, it just seems so physical. Lots of things then were different. But we got up very, very early and fell in for calisthenics before daylight in front of our big barracks. And we learned how to scrub and clean. I found a little note in my scrapbook that said my squad room bay was not clean enough, so my platoon is restricted to the barracks for the weekend. And tomorrow, if it is not perfect, we will have to scrub everything with toothbrushes. Then I put in parenthesis, "And she didn't smile when she said that." So an old, tough PFC [private first class] read the Riot Act to us. I don't know if we finally had to do it with toothbrushes, but everything was clean. Friday night we had a GI party where everything was scrubbed with a brush. The bunks had to be so tight that the next day, when they would inspect, they'd drop a quarter on your bunk, and if it didn't bounce it wasn't made properly. They'd rip everything off, including the mattress, and you had to start over. It was lots of fun, really, as I look back. But I was scared spitless at the time that I would do something wrong. One of the women in my platoon, she saw absolutely no reason to say, "Ma'am" and "Sir" to the officers. And some of those officers were not very much older than we were. But this girl was raised in Pasadena, California, and kids in California weren't taught to say "Ma'am" and "Sir." Whereas I was raised in Texas, and, of course, we always said "Ma'am" and "Sir" to our mother and dad and to anybody. They didn't have to be older; they just had to be senior. It came perfectly natural for me to call everybody in the Marine Corps "Ma'am" and "Sir," but it was hard for Betty. She never made it because she said, "Why should she call her Ma'am?" You know? And with that attitude, naturally—(laughs)

BA: You are kidding?

VN: She didn't make it, yeah. Everybody wasn't born to be a Marine, but I think I was. I loved it.

BA: What was it about the Marine Corps that made you choose being a Marine versus joining any other—

VN: I went to Los Angeles into the recruiting office. There was a Navy, an Army, I don't believe there was a Coast Guard recruiting desk, [but] there was a Marine. The Army, they were willing to sign me up right on the spot, but when I got to the Marine desk I had to take a written exam. It took two or three hours for me to take that exam, and they stressed the fact that they don't take everybody. And um, when they took me I knew that the hardest thing to get into had to be the best. I didn't know any Marines at the time, but I just instinctively leaned toward the Marine Corps.

BA: Wow. And so training, how long was training?

VN: Eight weeks.

BA: Eight weeks.

VN: Camp Lejeune. Um-hm.

BA: After that do you do additional training where they send you—

VN: No, at the time—out of boot camp we were each assigned to some other base. Some girls got six weeks of mess duty. I was sent to Cherry Point, North Carolina, with casual company waiting for assignment. There were three hundred of us girls in the barracks. Everyday we did calisthenics, and we checked the board to see if we had orders. And, of course, I had come from California; I graduated from high school in California. My dad brought us out here in 1935, and naturally, I would have loved to have been stationed in California.

Well, while at Cherry Point I got sick in the barracks with a high fever, and they sent me to sick bay. I had something called cat fever which I have never heard of before or since. It was Cat Fever and uh, it was common in those days, I guess. The sick bay had quite a few girls who had this. It involved a very high fever, delirium, and I had to take a whole handful of little, white pills every few hours. I was really very sick. Well, I began to get better about the second week in December, and they began to play “White Christmas.” That was the year they introduced “White Christmas,” and Bing Crosby was singing. Well, I lay there in the bed about half-sick and homesick, and I thought, “Oh, wouldn’t it be great if I could go home for Christmas?” I knew I couldn’t.

But the minute I could get out of that sick bay I asked somebody where the personnel office was, and I was told where the administration was. I got a bus and went over there. Here I am a green boot, and I walked into this building and asked where the lady officer was. They directed me off down the hall, and I went in. On the door was this—I believe she was a captain, an administrative personnel officer, and here was this sergeant sitting at the desk. She said, “Yes, Private, what can I do for you?” And I said, “I’d like to see Captain “Upteeump.”” She said, “Do you have an appointment?” And I said, “No.” And she said, “Well, what do you mean? You can’t just come in here and go in and see Captain “Whatever!”” She said, “Get out of here, we’re busy here. We don’t have time.” So I went out and stood in the hall. Pretty soon that sergeant got up and went down the hall to the head [bathroom] I guess, I don’t know. And I marched—I can’t believe the guts I had—I marched right in there and knocked on that captain’s door and she said, “Come in.” And I went in and stood at attention, and she said, “What can I do for you, Private?” And I said, “Well, Ma’am, I wanted to tell you that I think the Marine Corps would be much happier, and I’m sure I would be much happier if you would send me to California as my duty station. And I would work very hard for the Marine Corps.” I gave her this little spiel, “And I’m sure I would be a credit to the Corps if you could send me to a duty station where I really want to be.” She looked at me like I had two heads. But you know what she did? She pushed a button on her desk and in came this sergeant. She said, “Bring me Private Dodd’s—” it was really the qualifications sheet from all our I.Q. tests and tests we’d taken, like aptitude. She took a look at that, and I’m telling you, the only thing on her desk was a telegram in the middle of her desk. It was from Colonel Gephardt at North Island, and he requested ten women of certain qualifications. This captain looked at my sheet and she said, “Well, Private, it does



seem that you have the exact qualifications that Colonel Gephardt at North Island, San Diego, is requesting.” She said, “I would like you to go down to the quartermaster where they will cut your orders. You will be leaving this afternoon at five o’clock on your way to the West Coast.”

[00:21:10]

BA: Wow, just like that?

VN: Just like that. I went out, “Yes, Ma’am. Thank you very much, Ma’am.” And I didn’t dream the great good fortune, you know, I was too green. I just didn’t dream that—you just don’t do that, you know. But I did it. I was in exactly the right place, and I went back to the barracks and started packing my seabag. All of these women gathered around, “What are you doing?” I said, “I got my new duty station. I’m going to California.” And they all said, “Oh, sure you are.” Most of them wanted to go to California. I said, “Yes, I am,” and I packed my seabag. The Jeep was going to pick me up at three o’clock that afternoon, so I drug my seabag out there at the front. They said, “You’re kidding; you’re not going.” “Yes, I am. You just watch.” At three o’clock here comes this sergeant right to our barracks door. I had my seabag, lifted it up and put in the Jeep, got in, and when I turned back, I’m telling you those 299 women were most to the door and window. They couldn’t—(laughs) and off I went. And at five o’clock that night I was on the train. I remember it was a full moon, and I remember singing, let’s see what was that song, “Full Moon over North Carolina,” or something.

Anyway, I had a five day journey to San Diego, and from everywhere else, other training stations, the other nine girls were coming. And here we appeared at Colonel Gephardt’s command; there were thirteen hundred men. We were sent to the WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services] barracks and then we were put on a cattle car [a special open-sided, semi type vehicle for hauling troops] and taken over. When the back of that cattle car went down and we started climbing out of that—all of these AGB2 [Air Base Group 2] fellas never had seen a woman Marine much less have one in their duty station. (chuckles) [They] saw us, and I have to say, they were all so nice, so good to us. They used to change their clothes right in the hangar, you know, and the colonel had told them, “Now you’re going have ten women [around], and you can’t act like you did. Be careful. I want you to treat these women with the utmost respect. We need them, and we want them here.” One or two of those men at the beginning called us BAMs [broad ass Marine], and when they found out we didn’t like that they never called us that again. They all treated us with such respect. The man I married said he was watching as we all got off, and he said they all thought, “What a nice looking bunch of girls.” You know, they were all pleased, and we got along great with them. I sort of liked the odds, you know, (chuckles) ten with thirteen hundred men. And, as I look back, I got two men, two good men out of that Air Base Group Two. So it was a great duty station. It really was a lovely duty station.

BA: How long were you at North Island?

VN: About two years until June of 1945 when our whole outfit moved to El Toro. El Toro opened and uh, lots of other women came there from other places. I believe we were AWRS8, squadron eight was the women's squadron. And we got uh, a lady lieutenant; Nita Bob Warner was her name. We had about four lady officers stationed there at ABG2, all of whom became good friends. Of course, I worked in the squadron office. I was skilled in all kinds of office routines, but Colonel Gephardt placed me—we had different squadrons, all men squadrons—he placed me in administration squadron, headquarters squadron. And those men, there were three of them: a first sergeant, payroll clerk, and a muster role clerk. Well, they taught me—I worked with each of those three men, and they taught me all of those duties in preparation for a squadron of six hundred women that we were getting later that year. And then we established a Squadron 8 office upstairs in the hanger building and um, they sent a Master Sergeant Martha Hermenson. She came from headquarters Marine Corps and uh, she was head of this squadron. I worked in the office with her. I did payroll and muster role and personnel work all with her. Then we got a couple of privates working there in the office with us. I remember going down and paying the troops. We paid in cash. They stood in line, and I had all these boxes of cash, hundreds of two dollar bills. We used two dollar bills then. Isn't that strange? Now you never see one.

BA: Hardly ever.

VN: So, I did lots of interesting, wonderful things in that small group. We were like a family being a small group the way we were. It was just like a family; we all knew each other. And um, the same when we went to El Toro. And the same now, we still have reunions every year with that same group of people, and we've seen them die. Now they are bringing, those that still come are bringing their kids and their grandkids—[they] are coming with them. Lots of them are disabled. Last year we lost one, Pappy Nowell; he was ninety-four, I believe. But he came every year, the last couple years in his wheel chair. And they are all just like my sisters and brothers. It has been a wonderful, wonderful big part of my life. The fact that I spent three years in the Marine Corps [means] I get wonderful care at the VA hospital in La Jolla. We have a wonderful VA clinic right here in Vista and have all those benefits that I really appreciate. And since Clarence is retired we have TriCare for life. Where lots of older people we know have trouble with prescriptions and their health care, we are blissfully free of that because of the Marine Corps.

It is wonderful being married to a Marine and his last duty was Pendleton. We love living here; we go to church on Camp Pendleton. We go to the main chapel out there which is always filled with Marines either back from deployment or just going out. We know many of them. It's going through the gate and seeing all these young beautiful Marines. It's just a real joy in our lives to have been Marines. I know we are real gung ho about it. We try not to bore our friends who are not Marines. We tell them we feel sorry for them. It wasn't their fault! We still call the Navies, Navy guys "swabbies." (chuckles) And we tell them, "It's okay, they were friendly forces." (laughs) They took us where we needed to go.

[00:29:31]

BA: (laughs) When you first arrived at El Toro what was your first impression?

VN: Big. We were in such a small area on North Island, and we had one hangar, one administration building, and a little mail building. And then the air station, of course, had the hospital and sick bays and all of that. Our barracks were pretty far removed from our hangar. We all worked in such a close, small area that when we got to El Toro these great, big hangars and the huge long runways, the big buildings, it just seemed immense to us then. And at that time they had a lot of contracting work there. Some of the men that worked with us were civilian, some over in one hangar, and a lot of our women Marines worked over there. Now, I never got to meet them all. Even though they were in my squadron, I never got to meet them all personally and get really well acquainted with them as I did at North Island when we were all such a small group. But El Toro was big; we loved it. We checked out bicycles. A group of us girls rode up to that main gate. Now it's all so big and busy, but we rode out that main gate, turned, and bicycled all the way to Tustin. Which, I don't know, where was Tustin? Maybe two or three miles? [There were] many, many orange groves which I don't think are there anymore. But we loved El Toro. We loved our base.

And I experienced something that I find as rather unique. My master sergeant was a lady from New York, Martha Hermenson. Martha and I got along fine, but she was Yankee. She couldn't help it; she was Yankee! And uh, she was married to uh, I don't know—I'll never know why she went into the Marine Corps when she was married to a very well known set designer for the big television shows at the time. She was a city girl, but um, she was just maybe a little sophisticated and she drank. Of course, none of us—I never drank, I didn't know what that was all about. But Martha went down to Tijuana and got in trouble in Tijuana. It was, of course, just across the line, and a lot of our guys went down there on leave. I've been down there a lot of times myself for supper. I love the Mexican food, especially one particular hot tamale cart. And then I learned they were using dog! (laughs) I never enjoyed it as much after that. But anyway, Martha went down there and got in trouble and was late getting back and she was court-marshaled. We all stood out on the parade ground, and her rank, she was master sergeant, her emblem, her stripes were all torn off of her. They don't do that in the Marine Corps anymore, but she was stripped of all of her rank. She told me later that I took her to the bus. And now, can you just imagine being a master sergeant for several years in the Marine Corps, commanding a squadron, and suddenly getting in trouble? But she was out of there. They didn't condone any such—so she was out of there.

Years later I had to make a business trip to Vermont. Coming back I stopped in New York, and I went to see Martha and Yale. They had a beautiful apartment in Mount Vernon. They were very well-to-do people, and she had a daughter as I did later. And uh, we had written and sent pictures, but she told me one evening when we were visiting, she said, "You were the only friend I had." And she said, "You cannot imagine the feeling I had leaving that base with my suitcase, and you took me to the bus station." She said, "I didn't even have a way to get to the bus, and you took me

to the bus station. You befriended me.” And she said, “I have always been grateful for that.” And I didn’t—at the time, I knew it was a very serious thing. It was hard to watch and hard to be a part of, but then I washed my hands of it. I didn’t think of it again. I took over the squadron, and we went forward. But after speaking to her all those years afterwards, it left a real scar on her. I’m sure she wished she had, many times, not strayed into Tijuana that night and gotten into trouble as she did. But uh, as I have told one or two old Marines about that, they said, “That happened back in olden days.” And one or two people I have known have seen somebody stripped of rank like that. But Clarence said he never did, and uh, anyway that was unique experience.

BA: Can you describe what a typical day was like at El Toro?

VN: We got up at seven o’clock, went to work in our office and uh, of course, muster roll. We had many shops, metal, machine engine overhaul because we overhauled the fighter planes that came back shot up from the Pacific. They were ferried in and out constantly. And then we had a lot of Marine pilots that were based there with us, and uh, I have a picture here of all those pilots. We had many, many planes, and our people were all skilled in all of those things. All of our women worked in all of these shops alongside of the men. Few of our men were sent away overseas because we had all this specialized equipment. These men were all trained in each of those skills, and they were needed right here to do the planes. So, not many of them were sent overseas. Clarence, in fact, was sent to Guadalcanal, and then he served in lots of areas outside of aircraft maintenance. And then he worked up to—he was adjutant of a lot of companies and held a lot of responsible jobs and got a lot of commendations. But we just all sort of were in a small group. We had shop parties and we had uh, a band that played. I was no longer playing in the band, but even Colonel Gephardt came to some of our shop parties. We had a lot of entertainment for the troops, you know. And we had USO [United Service Organizations] shows come. I remember once when Bob Hope and his troop came to entertain the troops. (laughs) I loved El Toro. It broke my heart when they closed it.

We went uh, one of our Air Base Group 2 reunions was held at El Toro. We had a warrant officer that uh, was still stationed there as a part of our group, and so he invited us to come. We stayed in Santa Ana and spent our time there on El Toro. We went to the Mess Hall and um, were absolutely amazed. When we went in the mess hall here was a salad bar (laughs), here was a dessert bar. There were two lines: if you wanted hamburgers or pizza you took that left line, and if you wanted uh, an entrée and vegetables you took the right line. We couldn’t believe it! Everybody didn’t just go down and have stuff put on their trays like we did. You know how the mess hall is today being a young Marine. Well, it was so different that all of us, after all of those years, thirty years later, we were just so thrilled to see the new mess hall, the wonderful food. On top of all the entrées they had a little card up on the glass showing how many calories. They were getting very conscious of overweight Marines, and they were harping on the Marines if they got overweight. If they got too much overweight, and they couldn’t get them down, I’ve heard of them discharging some. You can’t be a fat Marine. Of course, you can’t. Naturally, some fellas eat

more than others, but they had all the calorie counts along, and they had them all in weight management programs that were overweight.

[00:39:57]

BA: What kind of a relationship did you think that the Marines had with local community around El Toro?

VN: We never were allowed to wear civilian clothes off base. We were always in uniform which I really loved. I just loved knowing what I was going to put on everyday, and it never bothered me. Some people got tired of the Marine green; I never did. I always felt proud in my uniform. And when we went to downtown San Diego, North Island, of course, there were thousands of sailors, everybody in uniform. And we Marines, I just have to say, it sounds braggy I know, but I just have to say that we stood out in a crowd of service people. You could see a bunch of people standing at a bus stop, for example. The Marines were standing back, standing there, and the sailors were maybe smoking a cigarette, you know. (laughs) And the people were all so nice to service people in those days. It was just wonderful. And El Toro—we'd go to the little restaurant in Santa Ana. I used to go to a place called Lafonda, which was a Mexican restaurant I loved. I still remember it. They were always so happy and set us a big table for a group of Marines. Everybody seemed so respectful.

You know World War II was different than the war today. The whole nation was at war then. Today it's only the military. The military is at war. Here everybody else sits and sees it on television and tells them what they ought to be doing. But in those days everybody at home—my dad planted a victory garden and shared vegetables with everybody. My mother saved fat, bacon grease, any kind of drippings and took them to the butcher. I don't know what he did with them, but it was for the war effort. Every kid in school brought a dime to school to buy a war stamp. We had a little book, and if we filled up our war stamp book we got an \$18.75 War Bond. Every civilian—we all were rationed. We had ration books. Shoes were rationed, gasoline, meat. The whole country participated in the war effort. And the women who didn't join the armed forces worked in the airplane factories: "Rosie the Riveter." They all did jobs. We all went to war because when we were bombed at Pearl Harbor we were not very well prepared for war, but it was just due to the industry of America. We went to work and built ships and planes and all these big warplanes, some of which still stand in San Diego today. But I'm struck by the difference in that war and this. That war, everybody was part of the war effort. And it just seems to me that now-a-days the military is mostly the war effort and those of us who think military. I don't even think our Congress and our Senate are in the war like we are.

But we, your first question—I went astray. We were treated with utmost respect by anybody. Everybody respected the military and thanked us for our service just as they do today. Today, I'm pleased when people learned that we have served. Just this last week, I don't remember who said, "Thank you for serving. Thank you for earning our freedom." I think is what the lady said. It was wonderful to be in the military. You were so respected and loved. I felt so honored to be in the military.

BA: Wow. Women in the Marine Corps make up 6 percent of the Marine Corps. And, you know, I think about the first women that came into the Women's Reserves. What was that like to go out in the community and people seeing you in a Marine uniform?

VN: Yes. Well, the first couple years, of course, it was surprise. Most people didn't know there were women Marines. But I think we had the most beautiful uniform, and they tailored them to fit us. We all looked neat. The only nail polish and lipstick we could wear was one made by Elizabeth Arden, and it was called "Montezuma Red." It exactly matched the red cord on our green service cap. That's the only color—you weren't allowed to make-up heavily, you know. Everything was discrete; we carried ourselves in an acceptable manor. We represented something so much bigger than ourselves. I would not have thought of going out somewhere and acting in a manner that was other than ladylike.

BA: At your time at El Toro—I know you mentioned women weren't allowed to be in if they were married, or if they were—

VN: Some of our women married but if they became pregnant they were discharged immediately. You were not allowed to be pregnant [and] have a baby in the Marine Corps.

BA: Okay, but the men were allowed?

VN: Only sergeants and above were allowed to be married. And uh, they could bring their wives, but nobody lived on base, of course.

BA: Okay, that was my next question.

VN: No, they had quarters, they rented quarters off base. They had no housing allowances back in those days. Of course, I made \$50 a month as a private. A few years earlier the Marines made \$21 a month, and \$3 extra if they were sharp shooters, if they got sharp shooter rank. Clarence got \$3 extra a month, which was kind of important. But at \$50 a month I never had any more money before or after. Everything in the world is furnished to you: my uniform was furnished, healthcare, our food, everything. So \$50 a month was spending money. We felt pretty good about—(chuckles) we often helped if we went out on a date. If I went on a date with another Marine and we went anywhere other than back and forth on the five cent ferry—when I was stationed at North Island there was no bridge, and we had ferry boats. We called them the nickel snatcher. And right down from our barracks these big ferries—and it was lovely going back and forth. I've had dates where—more than once I can remember we just rode on the ferry a couple of hours back and forth sitting up on the top deck in the moonlight. (chuckles)

So, no, but you couldn't have a baby. And now-a-days, I still do not approve of women having children in the Corps. Everybody has their job to do, and a woman, a pregnant woman, has to have time off for prenatal care. Then after the baby comes somebody has to do her job. So the men have to come in and do your job while you

are out having a baby. It just doesn't seem Marine like. It doesn't seem fair to me that women should get to have a child, raise a family, free healthcare on base, free medical care for all their children. But then who am I to say? I'm old fashioned I guess. But we strictly tended to business, and I don't see how a pregnant girl can do that.

BA: How was it at El Toro to have the men—did they treat the women Marines with the same respect?

VN: Yes, they did. They did. I have talked to women—in all my years, I have talked to women who thought they were discriminated against and um, treated with less than respect. I can honestly say we never were. We had absolutely no complaints. They never treated us in anyway way other than how they would have treated their sisters, I'm sure. I'm just sure they were just all good friends. I had so many good men friends. I like men. I had lots of good friends in the Marine Corps, and I still do.

[00:50:23]

BA: I do have a question [about] the way that the units worked. I know there were more females at El Toro. In your squadron, was it just the females or was it integration? How did that work?

VN: No, Squadron 8 was just women.

BA: Just women.

VN: Uh-huh, our squadron was apart. Just like there was Squadron 22, headquarters squadron, Squadron 21. The men were all divided into squadrons, and the women were—our women worked in all of those areas, all of those shops where those men and those other squadrons were. For administrative purposes they were in Squadron 8. We had all of their records, and our squadron CO [commanding officer] approved furloughs, leaves. I always, of course, gave forty-eight. We had forty-eights then; twenty-fours and forty-eight hours leave. I don't know if they still call them that.

BA: Yes, they do.

VN: Uh-huh. I approved those. In fact, the colonel called me chaplain because a lot of the men would come in and visit at my desk and ask me questions and tell me some problem or something. And a couple of times the colonel came to my desk and found me counseling some man Marine, and so he began to call me Chaplin. (laughs) He called me that until the last time I saw him. And I have given a couple of fellas forty-eight hour leaves; it really wasn't my job. I signed them anyway. I was good at forgery, and I signed the first sergeant's name to some. I shouldn't say this for the record; I might be pulled up on the carpet for that! (laughs)

BA: Okay, so the war ends and they start discharging all these women. If you could have stayed would you?

VN: Yes, I would have. I would have stayed. I hated to be discharged, but, of course, that was the way of it. I went back home, went to work, and you never want to—one thing I've learned, you never want to wish you hadn't done this or hadn't done that because had I not been discharged when I was my life would be all together different now wouldn't it? I might not have married that sergeant. I might not have been happily married and gone through all those experiences for fifty years. I might not have then ended up marrying my soul mate, and I was a very fortunate person to have a second life. One life ranching, planting lemon and avocado trees, learning to drive a Caterpillar, dressing up on Sunday to go to church, raising a little girl, and having it rough on the GI Bill, worked on a ranch half days, and went to college half days. And in those days it was really, money wise, it was rough. Then I went from that to retirement years in Arkansas: hunting and finishing and muzzle loading and rendezvousing and meeting mountain men and hunting wild turkey and deer and squirrel. That was a whole different life. And then I lived right next to the banks of a lake where we fished everyday.

Then, when my husband died after fifty years, I came back to California to be next to my one daughter who lived at San Louis Obispo, so I moved close to her. Within the next two years, Clarence's wife had died, and we married. I didn't own an evening dress to my name. But Clarence was going to these affairs in Washington and all over the country, and he had half a dozen tuxedos. And here I am with not even one evening dress. So I went from my teepee days of being two feathers to being a lady in the National Sojourners and having a half a dozen beautiful gowns, traveling around the world on a ship. So, you see, I should write a book about all of the different phases of my life. If I ever have time I'm going to do that. I'm going to get on my computer and do that. It would be interesting because I know so many people from all these different phases in my life. It must sound strange to a young person but when you reach my age you will feel the same I'm sure. You will have all these—your life just kind of falls into compartments. I've been one of the fortunate ones because I had a second chance, a second wonderful marriage where we are totally happy, totally in sync. With my little pension and social security and his captain's pension and social security we can afford—we don't want for very much. We are happy to live in a mobile home park; we don't pay a lot of taxes living here. We are safe in here. The neighbors look after your home when you are gone. We save up our money, and we take trips. Fortunately, we are still able to drive. We bought a nice car two or three years ago, and it's like sitting in a rocking chair. We drive out the driveway, and we feel perfectly safe to leave our home and our cherished treasures.

We take all these trips. We go to Idaho every July for the Nelson family reunion, and Clarence does the family newsletter for that. Then in October we go to St. Louis for our Marines ABG 2—we host that every year and make all the arrangements and get entertainment. We send out our Hanger Dust on that two or three times a year, and we are active here in the park. We have only about ninety people who live here, so Clarence does the park newsletter. We each have an office



- so we do our separate email, letter deals, and I work with WMA [Women's Marine Association]. I used to be the national historian for the Women's Marine Association before I lost my arm, and then I was really sick with that for a year or two. So I had to give up that job. We have a very happy and busy life for our age, it just seems like our calendar is always full of something and isn't that wonderful, to be needed for different committees and community things. We are both very community minded.
- BA: With that first marriage um, at what point did you two start dating while at El Toro?
- VN: No, at North Island.
- BA: At North Island?
- VN: At North Island. Yes.
- VN: He worked in engine overhaul. His name was Gilpin, Rea Gilpin, and he played guitar. I played—that's where I met him, when I went to play in the band. We played—the first engagement was to play was for the officers group. We were supposed to play for them, and they all ate and then afterwards we people in the band, all of whom were enlisted, were to eat. Well, when we got through playing all that was left in the kitchen were barbequed beans. The meat, the barbequed meat was gone. Everything was gone, eaten up, but the beans. And so, Rea said to me, I wasn't much into beans, and he said, "I'd be happy to take you out to dinner." And I thanked him, and we went out to dinner, and we had spaghetti that night as I remember. So, we began to date after that, and we married in July of '46, a couple of years later.
- [01:00:00]
- BA: Okay. What was the date of your discharge?
- VN: I think it was the fourth of January 1946, after everybody was discharged.
- BA: Did he stay, your husband, did he stay in?
- VN: He got out a few months before in '45. His father owned a business in Mississippi, and his mother was a dear, little southern lady that had never even written a check. When his father suddenly died of a heart attack he got emergency leave to go back there to try to do something with the business which was his mother's only income. He got what was called hardship discharge after that [because] he was needed at home. So they discharged him to go back and take over his mother's business, and then when we married he came back to California. We married, went back there, and we both worked in that business until we were able to sell it and secure her future. Then we came back out to California to seek our fortune and to go to college and develop our lemon and avocado ranch.

BA: Okay. I think I just wanted to get those dates.

VN: Yes, yes, um, yeah he was discharged earlier but—

BA: Did he go overseas?

VN: No, no, as I told you most of our people did not—they all stayed. He was in aircraft engine overhaul and um, each of the guys had this heavy duty equipment. They all were skilled in what they were doing. Lindbergh—an interesting thing happened one time. Have you ever heard of Colonel Lindbergh?

BA: No?

VN: He was the first person to fly solo across the ocean and landed in France.

BA: Oh, yes, I have.

VN: Of course, you've heard of Lindbergh. He was a colonel in later years. My husband, Ray Gilpin, was a little boy, he was about twelve, and they lived on a plantation in Mississippi. One day he was on his old mare, Princess, going down through the pasture to the wash woman's house to take the laundry, and he heard an airplane. Now this was in 1928. You didn't see airplanes flying around in those days. He saw this airplane, and, of course, he was fascinated. He watched, and it circled, came over the big, virgin pines, and dropped right into their pasture. He rode old Princess over there and here this man was—he immediately recognized him as Lindbergh, Charles Lindbergh. And he went up to him, and he was, uh, it was just almost dark. He forgot all about his mothers' clothes, of course! He invited Mr. Lindbergh to come up to the house for supper, but Mr. Lindbergh said no, he had to stay with his plane. But he thanked him. And a couple of the other neighbors came through the field, Mr. Boyd and his grandson were there, and they were all fascinated. Well, the other little boy said, "Aren't you Mr. Lindbergh?" And he didn't answer, but he reached up into the cockpit and he pulled out a little brochure telling about his flight, his solo flight, and um, gave it to William. And he said to Gil, "I'm sorry, son. I only have one of these or I'd give you one." And Gil said, "Oh, I wanted that so bad, but it was William's." Anyway, he said that night it stormed it rained—oh, he went home and told his mother and daddy at the supper table that Lindbergh was in their back pasture. They fussed at him, and his daddy said, "I've taught you not to lie, you know that's a lie. Mr. Lindbergh in our pasture? No," he said, "that's just too much; we just can't believe that." So he went to bed, of course, and he said in the night he worried so because of this hard rain. [It was] just a gully washer.

The next morning at daylight he heard that plane rev up, and he got on old Princess and flew back down out there. Mr. Lindbergh had packed up his little pup tent, he had, had it under the wing, and here came William and Mr. Boyd. He said to them it had rained so that the wheels were down in the mud, and he was a little worried because that pasture wasn't all that big. Then those big, virgin pines were, oh, sixty feet tall, I imagine. He had them hold onto the back of the wing until he said,

“Now when I get it really revved up I’ll raise my hand and turn loose.” So they did, and he just clipped those pines as he got up out of there. Well, honestly Gil just had his head in the clouds. He went to school and told the teacher that Lindbergh had spent the night in their pasture; same thing, the kids made fun of him, they didn’t believe him. And the *Jackson Daily News* came out that evening saying that Lindbergh had stopped for fuel at Meridian, Mississippi, and he wouldn’t say where he came from. That was the night. Okay, that’s the end of that story.

And then all of those years later, while we were in the Marine Corps, Colonel Lindbergh came to ABG 2 to help put in the water injection system in the F4U to make it faster and fly cooler. The man assigned to work from engine overhaul with him was Gil. And he said to him, “Mr. Lindbergh, Colonel Lindbergh, do you remember that night all those years ago when you spent the night in a pasture in Mississippi?” And he said Lindbergh looked up at and said, “Were you—you were that kid on that white mare weren’t you?” And Gil said, “Yes!” And he said, “Do you remember it rained that night?” He said, “I’ll tell you I’ve never seen such mosquitoes in my life.” He said, “They were big as flies. I’ll never forget that night as long as I live.” And they laughed and talked. Gil was so amazed that he remembered after all those years and all he’d been through.

Well, let’s see, it was about 1991. [Dear] Abby in the paper came up with uh—somebody wrote, she said that she had heard from someone who was in France and took their son to France to watch Lindbergh land on his flight across the ocean, and did any other reader have any experience? Did they know Mr. Lindbergh, Colonel Lindbergh? And I said to Gil at the table that day, I said, “You should write and tell them about your experience when you were a kid.” “Oh,” he said, “Nobody would be interested in that.” And I said, “Well, if you won’t, I will.” So I wrote her a letter, told her about what happened in the pasture; I’d heard it ever since I knew him and his mother and father. And then I told her all those years later what happened in the Marine Corps, and the next Sunday after I sent off that letter—I signed his name Pine Bluff, Arkansas. The next Sunday when we got to church they said, “Boy, Rea, you made the newspaper today.” And he didn’t know about it. See, I had sent this letter off, and so we went home and read the paper. She put every word; it was a long letter, [and] she put every word in there. It wasn’t a week until I got a phone call from her assistant saying that Abby was so impressed with Rea Gilpin’s letter and wanted to know if he had any other stories he could tell. I said, “Well, yeah, he does have a lot of interesting stories to tell. Like the time the alligator was after him down in Pearl River, him and his kid fishing buddies.” I told her—Olivia was her name. She said, “Oh, I know that Abby is going to be in touch with you later. She’d like you to write that story.”

So three years after that I got a call from a lady up in Ohio. She’s a writer of children’s book, and her name is Louise Borden. She had cut that article out of the paper. She said, “I knew immediately that would make a good children’s book.” She came down to Pine Bluff, flew down there with her sister. I got them a place. I didn’t have any bed for them, but I got them a place in town at a bed and breakfast. And she spent three days interviewing Gil and getting every facet of that story. Then she went home and—she was a lovely woman. She went home and researched it all. She found out that the day he landed he was on his way—when he landed in France off that solo

flight, that French ambassador gave him some pajamas. He didn't even have pajamas with him, and he slept there that night. And that ambassador was in America, and he [Lindbergh] was flying to his funeral up, I forgot now, up in the east when he landed in Gil's folk's pasture. So she did all the research, she knew all about the plane, and she later sent us a model of the plane. And she wrote this wonderful book, and she kept sending the manuscript to Gil to look at. In the story, of course, she calls him Gil, but she gives fictitious names, of course. On the fly leaf she said, "This is an actual story of this farm boy, Harold Rea Gilpin from Canton, Mississippi." She finished the book, but he died before it all got in print. I'm so sorry he didn't get to see himself in the book and read it. It was darling. It's a dear book; she sent me several copies. We're still friends, and we keep in touch. She sends me copies of her new books every little while; she is a well known writer. So wasn't that an interesting sequence of events?

[01:12:33]

BA: It is.

VN: Uh-huh.

BA: I do have uh, a few questions before I forget, with El Toro. I know you live here in Oceanside, and I don't know how often you travel to that area. But, how do you feel that that area has changed from the time you were there, you know, to today?

VN: Well, I had gone back there for our reunion when it was still a very active base. So different than when we were there but still a very active Marine Air Base. Then, just a year and a half ago, we were invited to come back for the final ceremony before they broke ground for the Great Park that they are putting there on our El Toro Base. And um, we were surprised to see that it was—it had closed a few years before, but there was grass on our runways and my office building was grown-up around with weeds. I went through the weeds to peer through the windows to see if I could see anything inside. But um, we were sorry to see that they tore it down, are tearing it down. But, at the same time, we are very happy that the city and the county is putting in that beautiful Great Park that is going to be a world known monument to El Toro. We are looking forward to going there and seeing it when they open that park. But we have seen it through a lot of different phases when it was brand new and seemed large and overwhelming to us when we first went there in '45. It grew to many, many, many buildings and many outfits were there besides ours. And then, after we were all discharged, we were not back there until we went to our reunion years later. But we've kept in touch, and we plan to keep on seeing what that area is like with that Great Park going in there. But it has changed just as inevitably—forty or fifty years [later] things do change, you know. (chuckles)

Now-a-days the Marines have that new MV-22, the O spray which we read so much about. And we think about how wonderful our F4U's—and I remember seeing the P38s in the air. You have probably never seen a P38 but it was the little twin tail, fast, fast, little plane. Recently, on one of our tours up the Colombia River, we took a

paddle boat cruise up the Columbia River, and we saw a wonderful museum way out in the boonies in Oregon. This was a wonderful aviation museum. They have a replica of Charles Lindbergh's plane; they have planes that we saw all through our service time. It just had everything. They even had, if you can believe it, um, four hundred years before the Wright brothers, Michelangelo invented an airplane. It's made of wood and rope, and he had wings at—for a man, he dreamed about a man flying. He's the great artist, and all of his original plans are there in that aviation museum. Everything he wrote was—he wrote backwards, upside down and backwards. The only way you can read his writing and that graph is with a mirror.

BA: Oh, that's DaVinci. Yeah.

VN: Yes, DaVinci. And uh, oh, Leonard DaVinci. I said Michelangelo, it was DaVinci. So that museum is just wonderful. We loved getting in all those planes and seeing the Spruce Goose, that is the home of the Spruce Goose, which is unbelievably large. Two or three other planes sit under its wings. I saw the old plane when I was seven years old. For my birthday my dad gave me a ride in an airplane; [it] cost five dollars. My mother and sister were afraid to go so they stood out on the tarmac, and I saw that very, one, a plane exactly like that. I got to step up into it, and I saw the seat where I sat and where my dad sat that day. Of course, it didn't go very high, and it wasn't a very long flight. I saw all of these little square fields. Oh, I was just fascinated with that plane ride. And to go back just last November and see that very plane and see where I sat in that old plane, that aviation museum was great. There was an F4U, all of our wartime planes; it was a great museum.

BA: I guess my last question for you would be how would you like to see El Toro be remembered?

VN: Well, it's impossible to have it the way I remember it with the hangars and all the buildings and the runways loaded with F4Us. So I think that the next best way is their plan for it, with a beautiful park. Instead of one million condos going up everywhere it's going to be this park, and in studying those plans I think it's not going to be an ordinary park. It's going to be a park for all ages. It's going to be huge with lots of different buildings and exhibits. So I think what better future for El Toro; it will always be remembered as El Toro Marine Corps Air Base. And I'm sure they will have monuments there to show what it was during our war years, but I think it has got a great future. I think that is a great way to remember it. I look forward to going to that park when it's finished.

BA: Sounds great. Well, again, thank you very much.

VN: Thank you, Brenda. It's been lovely to have you.

END OF INTERVIEW