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Donna Loring, interviewed by Mazie Hough and Carol Toner, Part 1

Donna Loring

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Narrator: Donna Loring

Interviewers: Drs. Mazie Hough and Carol Toner

Transcriber: Donna Loring (?)

Date: 19 June, 2001

Note: This is the transcriber's best effort to convert audio to text, the audio is the primary material.

[Begin cassette tape C 2308, Side A. Begin Session]

Mazie Hough began the interview by introducing the interviewers and the interviewee in the very beginning.

Hough: This is Mazie Hough and this is Carol Toner. We are interviewing Donna Loring on her experiences in the military. We are in Augusta at the Cates Library (007). It is June 19, 2001. Donna, before we begin I want to tell you what is going to happen to the tapes if you sign the consent form at the end of the interview. We are going to give it to the Maine Folklife Center so that people who are interested in the history of various kinds will be able to refer to it and find information from it.

Toner: Okay, why don't we start with the most obvious Donna. That is - tell us when and why you enlisted?

Loring: Let's see, I enlisted in November of 1966, I think that is right. I was discharged in 1969 so, November of 1966. You want to know the reason that I ... ?

Toner: Yes. What was your motivation other than Blanche Kelley sold you a bill of goods (laughter).

Loring: Yeah. Well, see a little bit before that ... the reason that I joined the military was to get away from Indian Island basically. It was only way that I could see to learn some sort of career and to travel at the same time. I had just finished going to private school. I went to Glen Cove Christian Academy. I was there for three years. I got kicked out like six times (laughter) but for stupid things you know. I was such a rebellious kid that the Principal said that he would not recommend me for college. I did not know at the time that I did not need his recommendation. So, when he told me that I thought - with me being so rebellious - I thought well, I won't go to college to heck with you. I will join the military because my father and my uncles were all military. So, that is what I did. I was going to join the Marines but my cousin said that he

recommended against it because they were so rough on you – the women – they actually struck them and stuff. So, once he told me that I said – well I am not going to go there – I decided to look at the Army and that is when I met Blanche. She kind of talked me into it. I was – I had just turned 18 – actually October 1st I turned 18. You see, they really wanted me. As soon as I turned 18 the following month they had me (036).

Toner: You mean, they knew you were interested and so they then ...

Loring: They signed me up. Well, actually I went to the recruiting station and that is when I met Blanche. She told me about all my options and stuff.

Toner: Now, what Recruiting station was that?

Loring: I think that was in Bangor. You see Blanche probably has a better memory of that than I do but I think that it was in a Bangor one.

Toner: because she was in Portland for a while and then in Bangor for a while.

Loring: yes, she was in Bangor. I remember her saying something about that she had moved to Portland after a while and then the Bangor Recruiter was upset with her for recruiting me because it was like her territory. I did meet her in Bangor.

Hough: You talked on the panel about why you went to this private school, do you mind telling it on the tape?

Loring: Um...

Hough: I was thinking about the business with Old Town High School.

Loring: Well -- you know -- they were really racist and prejudice at the High School and the Elementary School. Anywhere you find a reservation -- probably within ten miles or so of that -- those people are the most prejudice and most racist. When I went to Old Town High School, I did not feel comfortable. I did not like the way they treated me or the way they talked to me. Sometimes it could be very subtle. People do not have to call you names specifically, it is just how they – the tone of voice they use and the way they make you become invisible. I did not like that. I asked my grandmother if I – she was really religious – she had me going to church seven times a week and three times on Sunday. So, I knew if I asked her if I could go to a religious school she would send me.

Toner: What a strategy.

Loring: Yes. She was thrilled (057).

Hough: Was that a Boarding School?

Loring: Yes, actually we used my mother's social security check because she had passed away when I was 10 and she was 35. So, we used those checks to put me through that private school.

Toner: Blanche .. Blanche is still on my mind. She said she always stressed to those people she was recruiting the opportunity that the military provided. Would you say that as you were signing up, did you have some kind of educational training or anything like that?

Loring: No. They actually gave us a test to see what area we were better – sort of an aptitude test. Mine came out communications (065). Others came out cooks, medics or ... I think it was the test. I don't know if it was an area where they needed people or not at the time.

Toner: Is that what you ended up in communications?

Loring: Yes. That is what they told me. As a matter of fact it was a guarantee when you signed up that was – if you could not get the occupation you signed up for then you could get out, you could be a honorable discharged. That is key. That is key to what happened to me later on.

Toner: Will you tell that story?

Loring: I went through basic training at Fort McClellan, Alabama and AIT at Fort Clinton (?), Georgia and my permanent duty station was Fort McCarthur, California (075). You now how you have these green sheets and you fill them out and the joke is that – I did not know it at the time but – your first choice – you never get your first choice. You always get opposite that so I put in for Fort Devens, Massachusetts

Toner: Which was the last place you want to be ...

Loring: so I got Fort McCarthur, California.

Toner: Which is what you wanted (laughter).

Loring: No, I wanted Fort Devens, Massachusetts, it was closer to home.

Toner: Oh, I thought you had already figured it out.

Loring: No, I was not that smart. Not when it came to military stuff. From there I went to Viet Nam (081). When I went to Viet Nam they said this is a mistake and you are not supposed to be here. I said, well send me back. They said no. You can stay in the WAC detachment because there were something like 99 or 100 women staying in this detachment. They were not nurses, none of them were nurses. They were supply people, they were intelligence, and they were secretaries. So, they wanted me to be a secretary. I said, no. I also said, if you don't keep me in my occupation – in communications – then you can discharge me and send me home, I have a guarantee. Therefore, because of that, they assigned me to Signal Corps, which was a combat

military occupation specialty (094). Women were not allowed in combat at the time. I was probably one of six women in 1968 that was actually assigned to a combat unit. Actually it was kind of illegal to do but they did it.

Toner: This is 1968?

Loring: Yes.

Toner: Did it mean that you were close to battle?

Loring: Well it meant that you – see your occupation – they had infantry that was considered combat. They had parachute jumpers that were considered part of combat. They had radio technicians that were considered part of combat (101). Casualty people that kept the reports and stuff -- anything that had to do with combat directly or indirectly. Communications is really direct combat because you have to have communications to do anything. That is why women were not allowed in any of these, at the time, to any of these combat units.

Hough: As a member of the Signal Corps, what did you do?

Loring: Well, I worked in the Communications Center where all of the top secret – even higher than top secret – information would come in. A lot of this stuff was casualty reports which is what I handled – all the casualty reports not just in Viet Nam but in all of Southeast Asia that included Cambodia at the time (112).

Toner: You must have some stories to tell about that.

Loring: Not really because the way that we were trained – we were trained not to read anything we did. I can type something up right now, letter by letter and I would not know what I was typing.

Hough: So you would hear ... it would come in how?

Loring: Back then you see the computers were the size of refrigerators because – the military invented that computer technology. They were huge machines and they were using torn tape relay at the time which was Tele-a-tape – which was perforated tapes. The messages would come in over these tapes and you would get a message the tape would start coming in and you would stand there and hand role the tape and stick it onto the – we called them receive banks and then you would have a send bank. We would roll the tapes up and put it on the send bank and those would stack up. Then you would take from the send banks and we would send them into this other little room where they would type out onto hard copy. Then they would be disseminated to where they were going (127). I was probably the best in the business as far as getting those tapes

that were piled up on the send things and getting those out of there and into the hard copy. Because it would be one right after another I would just zip them right out.

Hough: How did you read them? I don't understand?

Loring: You don't. You don't read them. You know the perforations are like an "A" would be a certain way that the holes were. You could fix a message only by going back and they had little stickums and you could cover the holes and make another perforation. You could make another letter that way. The new technology back then was not tape it was the cards, computer cards that took the place of the tape (137).

Hough: I interrupted you – you were the best at getting the hard copy from the tape.

Loring: Yes, sending it in. As a matter of fact that is what I got my certificate of recognition for being able to do the rely position.

Toner: So, you were smiling when you said you were part of the casualty count. I mean – I was reading into your smile maybe but thinking that you had some information on the fixed numbers.

Loring: No. Back then Cambodia was supposedly – nothing was happening in Cambodia. That is why I was smiling because we were getting all kinds of casualty reports from Cambodia (146). In 1968 when the casualty reports were supposed to be low they said I – they were piled up so high on my desk that I could not see over them. That was during the Tet Offensive. That is the other thing too, in Viet Nam we sort of disliked the college people over here that were protesting against the war. Not because they were protesting against the war but because they did not realize the physical danger that we were really in. There was a big protest about stop bombing the Ho Chi Min Trail well, that was how the North Vietnamese were coming in. They were killing us. They were coming in on those trails and we had to bomb them to keep them clear and save ourselves. So, here we are trying to protect ourselves and we have our own people saying oh no, no, no, don't bomb them. We were very, very upset with the lack of support we were getting (162).

Toner: Did you take the same job the whole time you were there in the Signal Corps doing casualty counts the whole time?

Loring: Yes. That was the whole time and we did that 16 hours a day. Then, every 30 days we would change shifts and when we changed shifts we just worked 24 hours. Then probably get a couple of hours sleep and come back.

Hough: Were you the only woman working on this?

Loring: There was a Warrant Officer in the Communications Center, she was there.

Hough: Where were you stationed?

Loring: Long Binh.

Hough: Were you in danger?

Loring: I think we were all in danger especially during the Tet Offensive (172). There were times when – well you see the other thing to is that I was the lowest ranking person in the unit—I was an E-2. (laughter).

Hough: Tell us the story about your rank.

Loring: Well, let see I think I was an E-3 when I got there, but I like to – well – I would go out to the Officers bar and in order to get in you had to be an Officer. Well, I wasn't an Officer. So I would take off my little PFC stripes on my collar – take them off and put them in my pocket and just walk into the bar.

Toner: Anonymously.

Loring: Yes.

Toner: No metals telling what you were or what rank was.

Loring: So, one night I went in and drank a little more than usual and did not get back to the WAC attachment until I think it was about midnight or so and the curfew was at 10:00 (184). So they, of course, saw me when I did that and the Commanding Officer busted me for it. She said that I was AWOL in a combat zone and I said that this is not a combat zone. She said no you are AWOL in a combat zone. You know what they can do if you are AWOL in a combat zone? – they can shoot you. I said – well, this is not a combat zone this is a police action.

Toner: That helped didn't it (laughter). So, did you stay an E-2 for a while?

Loring: For a while, yes. I got back and then I got busted down again.

Toner: You got back up to E-3 and then got busted back down to E-2?

Loring: Yep.

Toner: Do you want to talk about that one?

Loring: (laughter) Well, I really did not go to the Officer's Club all the time (196). We would go to the Enlisted Club. We had friends there that were Australian. They like to drink – they drink a lot. So – they went out in the field and somebody – one of my friends -- his name is Spook and they said that Spook had been killed. A couple of weeks later they said – this was like after 10:00 -- that there was some Australian guy out there that wants to see you and his

name is Spook. I said what? I go running out to talk to Spook and they said you can't go out there and I said – stop me. So, I went any way and that is how I got busted again.

Toner: What is Spook?

Loring: It was Spook (206).

Hough: Great news.

Toner: So, that was worth being busted.

Loring: I thought so. (laughter) Just stupid things that I got busted for and if I had minded – been a good soldier or what ever (I was a good soldier) but if I had been a little bit more – less of a party animal or whatever I could have been an E-6 (212).

Toner: Would that mean beside the higher rank more money?

Loring: Oh yes, lots more money. As a matter of fact, speaking of money we had a payday every month where the Commanding Officer – she would have money like they were like Vietnamese Pesters. No, No it wasn't, it was military currency that is what it was.

Toner: Was it MPC?

Loring: Yeah

Toner: Military payment compensation.

Loring: Yes, these would be stacked up all over the place. So, one morning – I was the lowest ranking so I was the one at the end of the line (221). I had to wait for everybody to get paid. So one morning I was waiting in line and the Ammo dump was about a mile south of the WAC detachment – they hit that Ammo dump at about 8:00 in the morning.

Toner: They meaning the North Vietnamese?

Loring: Yes, when they did they blew up the Ammunition. What you really get is a repercussion – not like a big bomb exploding (228) and the shock waves – you could hear the sound first and you could count six seconds and the shock wave would hit you. So we heard the explosion and it was the first time I had ever heard that and everybody hit the dirt. We all hit the dirt and the shock waves – I felt the shock waves go over me – I went into the – of course I got right up afterwards and everyone else stayed down – I went into the office and there was this money all over the place strewn all over the place – there was a CO under the desk. For some reason I just thought that was funny.

Toner: Did you get right in line, you were now the first one in line? Were the other WACs – you weren't a WAC but the other

Loring: I was a WAC. I was in the Women's Army Corps but I was also in a combat MOS

Toner: That is what set you apart.

Loring: Yes.

Toner: Most of the – what were the other women doing?

Loring: They were secretaries. Some of them worked in supply. Some of them worked in intelligence. We did not really talk about what we did (245). The military was very secret about everything – especially my position – I heard later – we had a reunion – in 1997 it was a 30 year reunion – I went over to the people I used to drink with and they said – Donna, we always wondered what you did but you never said anything. We just never talked about what we did.

Hough: But you were in the barracks with the WAC detachment?

Loring: Yes.

Hough: and you eat your food ... I was thinking about the social arena – what separated you from them.

Loring: The detachment – there were two story barracks but it was so hot that there were no walls -- they were like slats of wood because you could see through them but they were kind of built out so that the rain would fall off because it rained a lot there (249). Monsoon season. There were probably five sets of those big barracks buildings and there was constantine wire all the way around except for where the entrance was and then an armed MP was there. There was almost 100 women guarded by one man and one rifle. We were not allowed to carry weapons.

Hough: Did you eat your food within that?

Loring: No, every place we went there was a bus, we would get on the bus. There was a hospital – I think it was a 23rd Evac hospital that we ate at. We would get in line and as we would be getting line the helicopters would be landing with the casualties (267) and they would be carrying those guys in all bloody and everything right past the chow line.

Toner: Is it true that all the women in Viet Nam were not allowed to have weapons?

Loring: That is true.

Toner: How about the men, no matter what their job or did only certain men have weapons.

Loring: All the men were allowed to carry weapons.

Toner: Even if they were cooks?

Loring: Yes because they were all trained in infantry.

Toner: All the men in the Army were trained in the area of infantry?

Loring: Yes, that is part of their basic training.

Toner: I see. That is not part of your basic training – you did not have any weapons training?

Loring: Right.

Toner: Any weapons handling.

Loring: I think that my group was the first group that was allowed to practice with M-16's.

That did not mean you could carry them.

Toner: That seems kind of dangerous.

Loring: Well, yes (laughter).

Toner: I mean Viet Nam was a place where ... so did you say something about that.

Loring: No.

Toner: That seems to be such a huge issue to be walking around in Viet Nam without a gun (282).

Loring: Yes. It was a little scary.

Hough: You could go where ever you wanted too as long as you got in at 10:00?

Loring: No, that is not true. We could go to certain areas; we could go to the clubs – Enlisted club – we could do the commissary, we could go to eat and we could probably get away with going some place on the base – this was like a 50 mile – the base had a 50 mile radius. It was a big base. We were not allowed to leave the base, which is something that I did. They did not catch me for this one.

Toner: It was kind of dangerous though wasn't it?

Loring: Kinda. This friend of mine, it was her birthday and she said well I know this helicopter pilot and these guys are going to go to Vong Tao which is like on the South China Sea like a peninsula kind of thing. That is where a lot of people went for R & R. She said it's my birthday, let's take off. So, I said okay. We went ...

Toner: Did you go lower than E-2 (300)?

Loring: (laughter) I would have if I had gotten caught, believe me. We got on this helicopter and went to Vong Tao and it was just like a resort. It had white sand and the South China Sea is right there. Of course, I am afraid of heights and I had a few too many and got really brave and got into one of the McQuire lifts on the helicopter – this is where there is a rope and a loop on the bottom. So, I step my foot into the rope and I hung on and the helicopter went up.

Hough: Oh no.

Loring: I was having fun. So, I came back down and then we did a double. I looped arms with one of the sergeants and we went up double and the Kernel (spelling wrong) was like screaming. You bring her down, you get down here because you are just a target. The jungle was right across and we could have very easily gotten shot (316). Then, after that I wanted to say that I went swimming in the South China Sea but I did not bring a bathing suit so I jumped in fatigues and all.

Toner: Donna, you as so sensible now (laughter) these days.

Hough: I wanted to make sure that I got it right. The women were limited – we the men limited too? Were these rules for everybody not going off the (323) base?

Loring: No, just for the women. As a matter of fact, let's back up. When I first came into country the airplanes had a special way they had to land – I thought I told you guys all of this but I will tell you again. Usually you land gradually, but in a war zone you do not have the luxury, you drop. We flew in, we dropped and landed. Then, when they took me to my quarters for the night there was an armed guard that stood outside my door. I said, "why are you standing outside my door?" he said, for protection and I said, "protection against what?" he said, mostly the GIs because there are not that many – he called them round eyed women – which meant American women. They had to be really protective of the American women. I wanted to go to the bathroom and he said he had to go with me, so he went in and he checked the bathroom to make sure that nobody was in there and he stood outside while I went to the bathroom.

Toner: So, while you were there did you hear about a lot of rape that was from GIs?

Loring: No. I didn't. Then again, they kept that sort of thing real quiet. But, my first night in country, which I think was funny, I heard all of this shooting and it sounded like bombs going off and stuff. I went and asked the guard what's that noise and he said, well they are watching combat on T.V. next door. (laughter)

Toner: Speaking of the round eyed thing did you see any racist in the military.

Loring: It was all over the place, yes.

Toner: Towards you but also toward the Vietnamese?

Loring: Oh, big time. Yes. Of course, the Vietnamese didn't -- which I found ironic, they called the Vietnamese "gooks" and the word "gook" or "gooks" is used by the Vietnamese for foreigner so, here we are in their country calling them foreigners.

Toner: "Gook" is a Vietnamese word?

Loring: Yes.

Toner: What about within the Army not towards the Vietnamese but toward you or ...

Loring: They had the Long Binh jail was about a mile – see we had the Ammo dump here, we were here and Long Binh jail was over here. There was about a mile between. They had race riots there all the time. They had racist riots in the compounds and in different companies. In the clubs and in Alabama when I was going through basic, we went out to have dinner in Anniston with some black women that came with us and they would not serve the black women. They probably would not have served me but they zeroed in on the black women. They would not serve them, there was like twenty of us, and we said well, we are not eating here, so we all got up and left. So, yes there was racism.

Hough: What about in the WAC detachment were there many African-American?

Loring: Yes, there were a lot of them

Hough: Were there any Native American?

Loring: No.

Hough: Were there riots in the WAC detachment?

Loring: No. There were not riots but there were a lot of disagreements and a lot of stuff like – if you were walking on the sidewalk and there were four African-American women walking down the walk, they would not move you would have to step off the sidewalk or have a confrontation. Most people just stepped off the sidewalk.

Hough: I wanted to ask why you liked to go to Officers Bar as opposed to the Enlisted bar?

Loring: Good question, maybe it was just because I could do it.

Hough: I wanted to back up – you said it was a mistake that you were sent to Viet Nam to be a communicator. How did that happen (382)? What kind of mistake was it?

Loring: Well, that happened because – the Supervisor in the Communication Center at Fort McArthur got reassigned to Washington, D.C. He asked me if there was some place that I wanted to be sent and I said yes, I want to go to Viet Nam. He said, oh come on. I said no, I really wanted to go to Viet Nam. So he said okay. He said just go and put the request in. I went and I asked for the papers to put the request in and the Commanding Officer said – you can't request Viet Nam because that is combat and women are not allowed in combat. I said, well I can request anything, they can turn me down but I can still request it. So I put the paperwork in and about thirty days later I came down on orders to go to Viet Nam. If you really looked at the

orders closely, they described a man's uniform – you will report in low quarters and summer khakis – well women don't not have summer khakis.

Hough: Interesting.

Toner: So, did they think it was Don Loring or something like that?

Loring: No, they spelt my name right out but it was just in the description of what you wore and where you reported and stuff. They had me reporting to First Signal Brigade, which was combat.

Hough: So, you traveled alone to report?

Loring: Yes.

Hough: You arrived and they were surprised?

Loring: Yes.

Toner: So, what was the status of women in Viet Nam because by the end of the War there were nurses anyway but outside of nurses not that many?

Loring: By the end of the war I think -- now they are finding out there were something like over a thousand women that were not nurses that were stationed there. But that includes Army, Navy and Airforce.

Toner: So there weren't that many then, even at that rate. Most of the women that we find will probably be nurses then.

Loring: Yes, I would guess – or Viet Nam era women (432).

Toner: Who weren't really in Viet Nam right?

Loring: Right

Toner: I am glad that we get the chance to speak with you then because it seems that your experience is particularly unique from most of the women than I realized.

Loring: There were some things that happened in Viet Nam that I really remember. The times when the Ammo dump was hit -- those are really etched (440). The second time that it happened we were just talking – we were standing by the sand bags and talking about – for some reason I said – now remember what we were taught, if you see a blinding flash of light to hit the dirt – that just came out of my mouth and I looked up and it looked like the whole horizon was being eaten up with white light. I saw that and said hit the dirt. We hit the dirt and it was the biggest aftershock that we had. It blew the lights off the ceiling. It blew windows and mirrors off the dressers. It blew people out of their beds and it blew doors open – it blew the doors right out of the buildings.

Toner: That had been planes going overhead dropping ...

Loring: No that is mortar. The Viet Cong mortared the Ammo dump and hit Ammunition or bombs or whatever. Sometimes it would hit the right combination of stuff and it would just blow.

Hough: If you had been standing what would have happened?

Loring: It just would have blown me against the barracks or ...

Toner: How could you handle the fear – you may want to talk around that but I would just feel like I would be terrified all the time.

Loring: Okay, here is an example. One day we were standing out again waiting to get paid and all of a sudden people started choking and their eyes were watering. The Commanding Officer came running out and she said get your gas mask because the Vietnamese have bombed a chlorine bunker. It was chlorine gas – we all ran and I got my gas mask. These things were so sensitive that if there is just one particle of dust or one hair they won't seal. I put my mask on and it did not seal so I said, okay – I went and got a six pack of beer – I opened the refrigerator and got a six pack of beer. The refrigerator is outside. Took the six pack of beer, went into the barracks with it and said if I am going to die, I am going to die happy (489).

Toner: Did you feel the effects of the chlorine gas was it in your eyes and throat?

Loring: Not too bad. Once I got inside – I don't know if it was the wind or whatever but it did not get in there.

Hough: Were you afraid or did you just forget that?

Loring: No, I was afraid all the time, I think everybody else was too. We would have nightmares. I would have to drink at least six beers to get to sleep at night – I was nineteen. It was scary (501).

Toner: How long were you there?

Loring: Less than a year I was there from November to November.

Toner: You were close to where battle was going on all the time?

Loring: Well, yes,

Toner: You said you heard the T.V. next door but did you hear – were you that close ...

Loring: Well, I guess when you flew in you flew into Tong Sa Nuh, which was forty miles from Long Bhin. Long Bhin was – here is Long Bhin, here is the detachment and over here was Bhin Wau where you process out. Now, if you have not had enough trauma there being stationed

there and being shot at. Another thing that happened was our own people (519) would get their coordinates backward and one of the buildings next to the detachment was blown up and we were there.

Toner: but you were going to say is that if you had not had enough trauma by that time...

Loring: Yes, after all this you had this calendar. I was going to show you the DEROS short timers calendar. They would – there were 365 five days in a year. We would color these days every day. When we had a like a week or two weeks to go we would say well we are short timers. Towards the end, what would happen is that you would go to Bhin Wau to get processed. The processing places would get bombed, they would get mortared. They would do that on purpose for moral reasons. If you, after you have served your whole time there and you are going home you think I got one more day. They did it on purpose to kill these guys before they left. Once you are in there -- being processed, then the height of your nerves are raw. I got there and I actually – when your processing out you are actually allowed to go to the Officers Club (laughter)

Toner: legitimately

Loring: so I went to the Officers club and started talking to these two officers (555)

[End C2301, Side A. Begin C2301, Side B.]

Loring: So these guys said do you know of any clubs close by. I said well there is this band and there is a club and it is about 25 miles away. So they said okay lets go. This is the night before I am leaving. I said okay – let me back up first I am getting ahead of myself. During that day, Bob Hope was in town and here I am in Bhin Wau and Bob Hope in Long Bhin. I talked someone into – once you are in DEROS once you are there you are not supposed to leave. I talked someone into talking me to see Bob Hope, which I got to see him and then came back. I did that. But, that night at the club, these guys were at the club and they were officers and this club was an Enlisted Club. The officers realized that they were in an Enlisted club and they said – we are not staying here, this is enlisted – that made me mad. They said, come let's go. I said I am not going anywhere with you guys. They said, well you know you are leaving in the morning and you have got to come with us. I said I don't have to go with you and I am not going with you. This club is sort of like – you had to go through the jungle to get at this club. They left and there were a couple of guys that were called Hell units – they were tank drivers – they offered to

give me a ride to Bhin Wau. I said, okay. We got in at the top of this tank because we were going through this jungle. Then, they started talking about they were going to take advantage of me in the jungle. I said, ah wait a minute, stop the tank and I got out in the jungle. They said, oh come on. I said no just keep going. So, they left and I am alone in the jungle. I am thinking Loring you stupid – you did it to yourself this time didn't you. I just kept following the path and I heard this vehicle come by and I sort of like hid because I figured it was those guys again and it was them. I just made sure that they did not see me. I got out to the road and there was this – by then it was nighttime – and you can't put your headlights on. This jeep was driving up the road with no headlights so I am thinking okay it is time to flag someone down here so I wave and who should it be but my Supervisor at work (599). I said boy am I glad to see you. I need a ride, I am leaving country tomorrow and I need a ride back to Bhin Wau. He said okay. But, we have to stop at the Signal Corps camp first because he had to drop something off for them. I said okay. We drove into the camp and all of a sudden I could hear these chairs being smashed and people yelling and screaming and shots and stuff and he comes running out and says, we have to get out of here they are having a race riot. We got out and finally got me back to Bhin Wau. It is pouring rain, the mud is up to my ankles. I wanted to bring my boots back with me but they were so muddy I couldn't. I made it to the plane and we are in the air. (This is another bad time). That is when they shot you too, when you are flying out of country. You could cut – the tension on that plane – you could just cut it with a knife. When the pilots finally said we are now over Guam that is when everybody starting clapping, yelling and screaming (612).

Toner: You know that story is incredible but it makes me think that the dangers you were looking at were from American men, from the Vietnamese and there was a race riot too so we have gender, ethnicity and wow – coming at you from every direction.

Loring: It was like a culture shock to leave that because when you first arrive in country you get use to the weather, you get use to seeing green all over the place, military uniforms, everything was military. Cardboard shacks from one extreme to the other. Then when you fly into the United States you see all this concrete and it was a huge culture shock. There was also in Viet Nam – the other thing you noticed was the smell because they have to burn their feces there. It is a whole new – whole different atmosphere from there to coming to this culture. For a long time every noise – I would jump – I think it was for like three months I spent – I swear I spent three months in front of the T.V. just watching T.V. and drinking beer that is what I did.

Toner: Was there anybody you felt you could talk to that would really get it?

Loring: No.

Toner: I would think that would be the hard part.

Loring: It was just like one day I finally said, what are you doing, you just can't sit around like this. I snapped out of it myself but there were other men and other women that didn't and they still suffer from that.

Hough: What struck me – I am reading a few short oral histories of women in Viet Nam and it is silly that I had not thought about this -- but when you are over there you lose a lot of people, you make a lot of friends and they die or go back so that is a terrible cost too, I imagine. If you want to say anything about that I don't know.

Loring: I think that I was pretty lucky. The people that I knew they lived – I did not know very many people who were killed. Even my cousin who was over there the same time I was – as a matter of fact he extended, he extended three or four times so he loved it there.

Toner: How could you love it there? You mean the landscape was beautiful and that sort of thing?

Loring: I do not know why he stayed but he married a Vietnamese and he stayed there.

Hough: Did you meet hostility when you came back (643) because you had been in Viet Nam and the Anti-War movement was on?

Loring: Not really – a few years after at some party some woman said something and I almost decked her but other than that no.

Toner: So, what was your total length in the military?

Loring: 3 years

Toner: When you look back on those three years were they coming of age years or were they wasted years.

Loring: No, they were learning. I learned a lot.

Toner: About what?

Loring: Just about life in general, people in general. The other thing too is the school I went to, the private school, kind of helped me too because that private school was really rigid for rules and stuff. When I got to the military it was not that big of a jump. The military rules were a lot more rigid but you know it wasn't overwhelming I guess.

Toner: What about any of your relatives- because you mentioned your father, your uncles and your cousin who were military people, did they have any trouble adjusting to the rules and the discipline?

Loring: They never talked about it. The only thing that my father would talk about was World War II and the 10th Mountain Division (658). He never talked about any details about rules and stuff like that.

Toner: When you talk to other women who were in Viet Nam, did you realize that you were doing something pretty different than most?

Loring: Yes, as a matter of fact we are getting ready to have another reunion in September in San Antonio (662).

Toner: Of any women that were in Viet Nam or just from your WAC detachment?

Loring: Well, it is the WAC detachment, women who were in country and Saigon and around there who were not nurses.

Toner: Interesting story.

Loring: These reunions, it is the biggest group of dysfunctional women you will see (laughter).

Toner: This is our first interview with a Viet Nam vet and I was wondering if you were the one asking the questions if you could – what would suggest would be ways to get at the experience of women in Viet Nam or during that era – women in the military during that era whether they were in Viet Nam or not?

Loring: I think if there is something important that if you listen to them they will tell you. A lot of times in an interview it is very important just to let people talk and let them go because if you have a question and ask the question you got only that. I think that is more important than anything. There is a point where women and even men too they don't want to talk about certain things and they won't unless they feel comfortable about doing it. If its time, they feel it is time to talk about it, they will.

Toner: Well then, in that spirit what have we not asked you about that you think would be useful to this project to really try to get a women's experience in the military during Viet Nam. Is there something you could think that really helps us understand – particularly women.

Loring: I mean the experience is Viet Nam is sort of like – when you've gone through a trauma and you do it together there is a bond there that exists for the rest of your life with this group. It

is even stronger than the normal groups that you belong too like your high school buddies. It is stronger than that even. It is part of your identity too.

Toner: Whatever their jobs were in the military, you think that this is true whether you are a nurse or in the Signal Corps or whatever – you find that importance in that kind of bonding.

Loring: I – probably – I only say that from – when I talk about that I talk about the women that were in the WAC detachment – that one unit. Not necessarily the women that were in Saigon or – but they have a bond too (694). I mean –

Hough: It is interesting. When we talked to one woman who had been in World War II she said that after the war she totally lost contact with all the women she was with. This was a nurse. You could tell that it really was not a good thing that she lost contact.

Loring: Well, see that is the thing – the Viet Nam women had not contacted each other for thirty years. The woman that spearheaded this whole thing and her friend were talking and they just – all of a sudden they said gee, we should start contacting the women if we can find them. They started searching – a lot of the women did not want to be found. A lot of those women don't want to remember. They don't want to go back there because they feel that it is an experience and the door is shut and stays shut. You can get trapped back there. A lot of them have gotten trapped back there.

Hough: I don't think people realize that the women there also were traumatized.

Loring: A lot of those women, I think they were – I think they had six – the Supply Sergeants -- I think they had all of the Supply Sergeants – at one point they were in a picture and all of those women have died of cancer. There is a serious effort to identify the women that have cancer and what sort of cancer and what ever. They are really looking at that.

Toner: So, there was an investigation going on.

Loring: Yes.

Toner: There is something there that they were exposed to.

Loring: Well, they did dump Agent Orange, which is dioxin. They dumped it heavily in Long Binh.

Toner: I did not know that Agent Orange is dioxin.

Loring: Yes.

Toner: Wow

Loring: I thought that was common knowledge.

Toner: Well, it may be but ... I think of Agent Orange as a Viet Nam thing and I think of dioxin as my backyard.

Loring: In 1997 I went back, I told you that already, I went back to Viet Nam.

Toner: Talk about this a little bit if you don't mind for the interview. Why you went and what was involved.

Loring: I went back because – it was actually a Francophone Daize a Fairre International Business meeting. I got invited basically because I was Native American and the French and the Indians got a long really well and stuff. I said look, I can not talk French but they said okay, it does not matter. I went –

Toner: Did they know when they invited you that you were a Viet Nam veteran.

Loring: Oh yes. It took me a while to decide to go but – plus on top of that I have a fear of flying. Nineteen hours in a plane kind of cured me of that. When we landed, we did not have this – it was a smooth landing but it had – they had their armed guards stationed every 300 yards on the runway. You land and you're looking at that and those are Viet Cong out there – Vietnamese – not Viet Cong any more but...

Toner: So it brought it all back huh?

Loring: Yes, kind of. The bunkers were old, you could see that they were rusting out and stuff. They had old American tanks there.

Toner: Did you land at the same airport?

Loring: Yes Tun Sonut. We got out. Since we were business Americans – Americans coming in for business they treated us very well (742). We did not have to stand in line with everybody else, we got special stations where we went to be processed. They put us right through. Once we got on the shuttle to go to the hotel – of course – as soon as we stepped out of the plane the same real heavy, humid hot – about 120 degrees like a big blanket. I said yep, I know this, this is Viet Nam. You could hardly breathe. We got on the shuttle and then the guy that was leading the tour from Lewiston – his name was Paul Dube, he said the Vietnamese want all your passports and plane tickets.

Toner: Were you a little worried there?

Loring: I said, they what? They want your passport and your plane ticket. I said, they are not getting my passport or plane ticket. He said, well you know Donna, this is their country -- your in it and they want your passport and plane ticket so you better give it to them. Well, I don't

understand why they want it. He said, well they are afraid that it might get stolen or something, which was a bunch of crock and I knew that. He was right, so I gave it to him. The reason they do that in Communist countries especially, especially this one is in case something happens politically, they've gotcha.

Toner: That is exactly what you were worried about too, that they would have you.

Loring: We stayed at the Continental Hotel, which was where Graham Greene wrote his book. I walked into my room and looked up at the ceiling and there is this little kind of lump in the ceiling. It was probably some kind of microphone or something. You know that everything is wired. I think that maybe two days later I looked up there and every thing was gone. It wasn't like it was thirty years before that. They are very entrepreneurial. I mean you could not step two feet on the sidewalk without walking into a vendor or a store. This is supposedly a communist country. They loved Americans. They did not hold any grudges. There were a lot of thirty and forty year olds that were deformed. I almost think it was from dioxin and some from the war.

Toner: Did you have a hard time getting to sleep at night?

Loring: At first I did. I actually kept a diary of everyday. We went to the War Crimes Museum – that is the name of it but they changed the name of it to the War Memorial Museum while we were there. Going through that museum – it struck me – it really hit me that here I am a Native American – people invaded my country and what did I do to these people – I was part of that invasion force that invaded their country. It did not hit me until I was in that War Crimes Museum. That was kind of a heavy thing. All in all, it helped me kind of shut the door on what happened thirty years ago. It was a good thing to do.

Toner: Was that after the last reunion you had?

Loring: That was before.

Toner: So you had a chance to tell all the women who were at the reunion what you saw.

Loring: Yes.

Toner: What are we missing Donna?

Loring: I don't there are any of my little stories that ...

Toner: They reveal so much about gender and race.

Loring: Well, we had a Commanding Officer, Joanne Murphy (805) she had a hard time – a really hard time. They allowed Commanding Officers to have weapons – to have like a 45 and one day – all of her Cadre – First Sergeant, Supply Sergeant and Field First – all of those guys –

they termed out and she was there by herself waiting for new Cadre to come in. She was going to term out the following week but she had that week or so where she was by herself actually -- responsible for the whole WAC detachment. I remember when they left, she was outside kind of looking -- staring out into space -- she looked at me and she goes -- I am an E-2 and she is the Captain -- she says, what are we going to do now Donna (821). Well, we'll take the next plane back to the States. She just laughed. I happened to look out of the barracks door or something and it was in the afternoon and we had a pool and she was always at the pool, all the time. She was sitting at the pool and she had the 45 in front of her. I am thinking what is wrong with this picture, that is not right so without even giving it a second thought I go over to her and sit down and start talking to her. How are you doing Mame and just started talking. She picked the gun up. At that point when she picked that gun up I thought and it just hit me that she could shoot (834) you and herself as well. It did not strike me until she picked it up. She looked at it and she put it in her pocket. The next time that I saw her she was being helped out by two -- I don't know if they were MP's or not but, by two men, they were helping her as if she needed help standing up or something -- to the jeep.

Toner: It was just an emotional....?

Loring: I think it was emotional

Toner: Just the stress of being in Viet Nam?

Loring: Yes.

Toner: Was there a lot of that?

Loring: Yes. But, I saw her thirty years later -- actually she came to Maine and Bill Greene (845) -- we were on my hometown -- her and I were on there together. She does not remember that all.

Toner: She was at a bad place at the time.

Loring: A lot of those women are right now. They really need a lot of help still -- thirty years later and they are still you know thirty years later and they are still processing some of the stuff they went through.

Toner: Now, in the Commission have you been dealing with ... the Maine Women's Veterans Commission advocating for Viet Nam Vets (852) in cases like that or trying to get ...

Loring: Well, we are not doing specific things right now, we did the conference and we just need to find a mechanism where we can start talking to some of these women and get out there.

You know, that takes time, it takes time and takes a lot of energy to process – you know – that door is shut for me and I am not going back there. I have things that I have to do. I have to move on, it is not a healthy thing for me to do (862).

Toner: So, by not being the Chair of this commission anymore you are giving up – tell me rank the you had achieved from an E-2.

Loring: Aid to Camp. Actually I still am an Aid to Camp – I still have that Colonel.

Toner: You can hang on to that even though you are not the chair anymore?

Loring: Yes. It is not – it is really a separate – it's an honorary kind of thing. He can give that to as many people as he wants.

Toner: Oh, I see, I thought it was because a chair. Oh that is great I thought you got that for being the Chair.

Loring: It helped me to get there but.

Toner: So there is some justice in the world after all Donna Loring is a Colonel (870).

Loring: Yes. From an E-2 to Colonel. It took me a little over thirty years to do it but you know.

Toner: Mazie, do you have any other questions?

Hough: No, I don't think so.

Toner: I love hearing your stories Donna and I am sure that there is a lot more. I hope you will come to class this fall (874) if we can arrange a good time because this one will be on Viet Nam this fall. I think we had too many for the panel last year. Everyone was a bit rushed. Maybe we should just have you come.

Loring: No, I think it might be nice if you could find one other person maybe from Viet Nam, I think there is.

Toner: Or the Gulf War veteran?

Loring: Yes

Toner: I think two people would be better because it was very rushed. Thanks

Hough: Thanks Donna, this is the end of our tape on June 19th 2001 (883).

[End Tape 2308, Side B. End Session.]