

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Erin Pennington
Women in the Military

Interviewed by: Ernesto Valdés
Date: July 16, 2008
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: 2727 Allen Parkway, Suite 600, Houston, Texas

EV: Okay Señora are you ready?

EP: Yes.

EV: Alright can you just give us your full name?

EP: Erin Pennington.

EV: Is that, what's your maiden name?

EP: Reed.

EV: Reed? Do you have a middle name?

EP: Dalia?

EV: Dalia? Where were you born?

EP: Memphis, Tennessee.

EV: When also?

EP: 1979.

EV: You went to, I assume, public schools there?

EP: No we moved. I started school in Texas.

EV: Public schools?

EP: No private school.

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EV: Okay where did you start school?

EP: We lived in Pasadena and I went to a private school there.

EV: Where?

EP: I couldn't tell you the name of it. We went to another private school in Pasadena called Agape and in 4th and 5th grade...

EV: Degape?

EP: Agape.

EV: Oh Agape okay.

EP: Then I went to another one in 4th and 5th grade and then I started school in Alvin at Livingstone when I was in 6th grade and that is where I graduated.

EV: From elementary and high school?

EP: Yeah.

EV: Were you like a cheerleader or football queen or anything, choir?

EP: No.

EV: National Honor Society, Spanish club?

EP: No I played soccer in junior high and then I started working when I was 15.

EV: What kind of work did you do?

EP: I worked at a grocery store and then I worked at a pharmacy?

EV: Clerking?

EP: I started as a cashier at the pharmacy and then I worked up to doing like pharmacy tech.

EV: What did your parents do?

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EP: My dad was... my parents met in the Army and then my mom did different odd and ends jobs and my dad worked for the FAA.

EV: FAA, Federal Aviation....?

EP: Aviation Administration.

EV: As what?

EP: He started as a controller and now he does more, he's got 30 years now, this year is 30 years and now he does investigations.

EV: Of wrecks?

EP: Yes.

EV: I take it he likes that?

EP: Yes.

EV: Did you get to know your grandparents at all?

EP: My dad's parents, we were not raised with them, I guess... separate. But I know that they owned a car dealership.

EV: You got to know them a little bit?

EP: Yeah now as an adult you know, they are retired.

EV: So you never had Grandma and you'd climb up in her lap and she'd told you...?

EP: No.

EV: No, okay? Did you have any brothers and sisters?

EP: I do. I have a stepbrother and a sister.

EV: Okay.

EP: After school did you go to college right afterwards?

EV: I did. I did a semester of college.

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EV: Where at?

EP: At Alvin Community College.

EV: What did you study?

EP: I wanted to do EMT work.

EV: What kind of work?

EP: EMT work.

EV: Emergency Medical Training? Then you decided to go into the service?

EP: Yes.

EV: Was your father an officer in the military?

EP: No, neither one of my parents were.

EV: Okay, your mother was also in the service?

EP: Yes.

EV: Is she still alive?

EP: Yes.

EV: What branch of the service is she in?

EP: They were both in the army.

EV: Okay, do you remember what their MOS's were?

EP: I don't.

EV: I mean were they infantry, medic, artillery?

EP: My mother was airborne.

EV: Your mother was airborne?

EP: Yes and I don't know what my dad was.

EV: She wasn't a combat troop airborne was she?

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EP: I don't know.

EV: Okay. Is she still here?

EP: Yes.

EV: Could we talk to her do you think she wouldn't talk?

EP: I don't talk to her.

EV: Oh you don't talk to her, okay. Was she in Vietnam do you know?

EP: I don't know.

EV: Okay. Well when did you decide that you were going into the military?

EP: After my first semester of college.

EV: Why the Coast Guard?

EP: I had been a lifeguard all through high school also while working I life guarded. I really enjoyed it and I really enjoyed being on the water and then I had gone to EMT school because as a life guard if something happens that's the next step. But I really wanted to be on the water. So I tried to find something that I could be on the water all the time and do life saving type stuff. So the Coast Guard seemed like the next step.

EV: As opposed to the Navy?

EP: Yes, because it was more search and rescue.

EV: Did you get to pick your MOS do you use the same title MOS?

EP: We don't we call it a "Rate" in the Coast Guard.

EV: What position you have is called a Rate?

EP: Yes.

EV: So did you get to choose your rate when you got in?

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EP: They had that option where you could go straight from boot camp to what they call an "A" school where you learn your rate, or your MOS, and I didn't know what I wanted to do. I kind of wanted to go out in the field and see what all was offered before I chose, you know, without knowing.

EV: Were you in pretty good shape when you went to boot camp?

EP: Yeah.

EV: I mean you could jog a mile and all that a couple miles?

EP: Yeah.

EV: What was it like the first day you walked in?

EP: You know you have to travel up to Connecticut and I had signed up in December but I told the recruiter I wasn't going to up there when it was cold and so he said okay. He called me back and I said I want to wait until summer but I'll sign the papers now but I'm not going when it's cold. And he says... he called me one day and says, "I have a special deal." I said, "What's that?" He said you can go aboard the U.S. Eagle which is America's tallest ship and sail in the Caribbean instead of being at boot camp the whole time. I said, "Well that sounds like a good deal." So that's what I did. When we first got off the bus it was very scary.

EV: Very scary? All those people yelling at you?

EP: Right, nothing really prepares you for the intensity of it all. You know we were tired from traveling all day and excited and then people started screaming at you, "Oh my!"

EV: Let me make sure I understand it: you did go to boot camp?

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EP: I did but I was only there for three weeks and then instead of having an eight week boot camp I had a ten week boot camp where I was still in boot camp but I sailed aboard the Eagle with the rest of my company for seven weeks.

EV: Okay. So in essence the people you showed up with you stayed with the whole time?

EP: Yes.

EV: What did you do for your first three weeks of?

EP: It was a lot of training, you know this is what you ... port, starboard, you kind of go through classes. You do extensive drills, shine your boots and drill with the weapons and learn how to march and you know that sort of thing. But it was I think more intense because we were on a fast track they wanted to make sure we were in line to do this trip. It was the first recruit company that they had let do this.

EV: What year did you go in, the date?

EP: February of 1998.

EV: When was 9/11?

EP: 2001.

EV: So you were in when 9/11 hit?

EP: Yes.

EV: Okay. Did you fire or do any weapons fire when in your first few weeks?

EP: No because we were doing this trip.

EV: Did you ever get any weapons training?

EP: I did.

EV: On board the ship?

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EP: Well I was on land for the first two years of my tour so in Florida and so yeah we did a lot of range...

EV: What kind of weapons were you trained in?

EP: The M-16 and the Berretta 9.

EV: Which one?

EP: Berretta 9.

EV: Did you ever fire the weapons that you had on board the ship?

EP: No, they had a special people whose particular job is to do that they are trained.

EV: If they get bumped off its c'est la vie because you are not trained as a secondary gunner?

EP: No.

EV: Okay. Once you finished that initial camp, all the screaming, the shouting, the spit shine and everything, then where did you go, what was the movement?

EP: Then after boot camp I went to Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

EV: And trained, you were schooled in what?

EP: Well, I was just what they call a "Seaman" I just did boardings and things like that until I decided what I wanted to do.

EV: Okay. When did you decided what you wanted to do, did they let you do what you wanted to do?

EP: Yes. I, well initially I wanted to be a rescue swimmer but it took a much larger person than myself to do that. So I decided to be a quartermaster which is navigation.

EV: Quarter master in the army is the guy that takes care of all the sheets and the pillow cases and all that is that what you did?

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EP: No. Quarter master in the Coast Guard is the same as quartermaster in the navy which is navigation.

EV: Okay. Let me go back a little bit to your camp. I assume you had separate barracks and all that type of stuff?

EP: Yes.

EV: But you were not treated any differently during training or anything is that right?

EP: No, that's right.

EV: I mean you had to haul ass like everybody else?

EP: That's right.

EV: And there were no special privileges given to you all?

EP: No I mean we had to do less push ups I think then the boys. I think maybe less sit ups as well.

EV: Did you get any harassment of any kind from the guys...I mean extraordinary harassment, guys just kidding you or jiving you?

EP: Same as they would give to the others, you know it was all the same.

EV: So you weren't treated any differently going through training or anything?

EP: No.

EV: So you asked to be a quartermaster and you got to set sail somewhere?

EP: That's right.

EV: Where was your first big trip?

EP: My first trip was up north, or down south I think, I went to the *Chase* in California and we went to Mexico, you know south.

EV: From Florida?

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EP: No, no from Florida I went to Virginia to "A" school from Virginia I went to California.

EV: How did you go by plane, how did you get to the west coast?

EP: I drove.

EV: You drove?

EP: I drove from Virginia to Texas and I stayed at home for a while and then I drove out there.

EV: So...okay now you are on quartermaster on the ship. What was the name of the ship?

EP: *The Chase.*

EV: *The Chase?*

EP: Yes.

EV: What kind of a ship was it?

EP: It's a 378 or... wait, sorry it's been a really long time... 318 they call it a 318 because it's 318 feet long. Besides the ice breakers it is the largest ship.

EV: What is its main function search and rescue?

EP: Search and rescue and drug interjection.

EV: Okay and did you stay along the west coast for some period of time?

EP: I did. I was there for probably 2 1/2 years.

EV: What was the length of your total enlistment?

EP: I was just over four years, maybe four years and maybe eight months or so.

EV: Wow is that what you signed up for or were you extended because of the amount of...

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EP: No I extended... I wanted to come back to Houston and I wanted to be on land and there was a duty station open and so my C.O. let me come train here thinking that when the position opened I could get here full time. You know it would look good that I paid for my own transfer and I could go ahead because I wanted to go to school. So I came to Houston. I extended to try and get the duty station here.

EV: Okay. Now you put in almost five years. Alright so you are out looking for bad guys on the west coast right?

EP: Yes.

EV: Pretty much and idiots who got caught. Did you take part in any extraordinary rescues or...?

EP: We had some really neat things happen. You know when you go south its drugs and when you go north its fishery and our ship was a part of one of the largest narcotic busts in the history of the Coast Guard and we had confiscated over three tons of cocaine at one point.

EV: In one hit?

EP: Yeah it was really, really cool. They would do air drops, you know and then we would intercept it before they got there.

EV: How did that come down? Did you all receive a tip or you just happened to bump into these guys?

EP: They have intel yeah.

EV: So you have some intelligence guys, some intelligence saying these guys are moving in and can you tell more about... can you tell me more about it then that?

EP: No I think that's probably all I should say, you know.

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EV: So you have some intel and they say they have some guys coming in... on this particular thing though, how did you...you were out looking for them because you knew they were out in some spot or something.

EP: Right. We would get the intel that we should patrol this certain area and then we are there and then, you know, the rest is kind of up to us to spot vessels or air craft and then call in the name of the vessel and board it and then we would search the vessel.

EV: And what was your job while all this was going down?

EP: Quartermaster, site navigate... you know navigate us along side the boat. Or we would have small boats to carry the guys to the other one and sometimes I would do boardings but not very often, not in California.

EV: So are picking up on radar or are you actually doing the wheel right?

EP: Right. Well you chart it, you know, you take fixes and...

EV: You see some blips and you start reacting to the blips...

EP: That's right.

EV: Then one of these blips turned out to be a hen with a lot of eggs.

EP: Right.

EV: Was it... how long did it take you to... there wasn't any violence in this thing or was it?

EP: No, it was rare. Most of the people that we encountered south were immigrants that we would intercept, they were, you know, trying to come to America so by the time we would get to them they were grateful for the help because they were either lost at sea, so to speak, or they had gone days and days without food and water. So we would, of

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course, have to take them back to where they came but in essence we would give them food and water and you know help them.

EV: Were those... did you have permission to cross into Mexican waters to do this or was it?

EP: Well it's international, you know, so many miles out.

EV: Yeah but when you picked them up you had to take them back.

EP: Right we would have to call.

EV: They would let you in to their ports or wherever you left them off or something?

EP: Right we pulled into their port.

EV: Okay. Can you, this is a jurisdictional question, can you bust somebody out in international waters carrying dope?

EP: Yes.

EV: Really?

EP: Yes. You know depending on... if I remember correctly there's agreements with the country of origin that the boat is from and so we would have to turn them back into their country so you know I can't remember what bust it was but we would have to bring the drugs and the people back to the country of the flag that the boat was flying.

EV: The flag that they are flying.

EP: Right.

EV: Because they could be from anywhere and you wouldn't know.

EP: Right.

EV: Did you have folks on board that spoke Spanish?

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EP: Yes. We'd have, sometimes we would get, depending on what kind of trip it was, we would get interpreters, the Marines have people that all they do is they speak several languages and sometimes they would come on board and you know do the radio and do all the interpreting for us. We had a couple of guys, since we were in California we had a lot of guys that spoke Spanish and then we had one guy that was Czech, [Czechoslovakian] so that helped when we went up to the Bering [Sea].

EV: Were there a lot of Czechs... was that Czech guy multi-lingual or...?

EP: Yes. He was from there and spoke mostly Czech and some English.

EV: Okay. I just wonder what the Czech would be doing in the Bering Sea.

EP: Well in the Bering a lot of the fishing guys, you know Russia and Alaska... so there is this line that the Russians can't cross that you are not supposed to fish on, we aren't supposed to fish there in this area either. So the Russians would come over that line and then...

EV: Chase them back?

EP: Well we are supposed to bust them but he could get on there and speak.

EV: How do you chase them back do you say "Igen"?

EP: Well the idea of that patrol was to plot the other vessel for so long, we would plot them on our side of the line or in the area that they weren't supposed to be in and then that would all get used as evidence against that vessel and they were breaking the law.

EV: Would that allow you to confiscate the boat or stop it or surely you wouldn't shoot it out of the water?

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EP: No we wouldn't. We wouldn't. I think it would all just get turned in and then the captain would turn it into whoever and it would go I believe to trial or something you know criminal type thing.

EV: Well I had heard that every once in a while they would just grab a boat, haul it in and hold it until trial and then let it go and at least unpack it and hold the guys, the crew and everybody else that is on it.

EP: Well...

EV: That's in Miami with aliens and stuff I don't know if that...

EP: Right, when I was there in Florida that was the case. Yes we could get a boat, if we are on patrol and we could bust it open if we had to, if we had good cause to think that there were immigrants or drugs on board the vessel.

EV: Did you have anything that just scared the bejesus out of you? You probably weren't heavily armed out there.

EP: Yes. No I don't think I was ever really just scared. I think the scariest time was in the Bering and we were in 40 foot seas and our little ship was just getting tossed around. I think that was probably the most, "Wow!" But...

EV: How do you handle that stuff? Man I'd be tossing cookies forever.

EP: You know I've never gotten sea sick.

EV: Really?

EP: Yeah I've never gotten sea sick. So some people were very sick in that time but most of the time when you are that young I think it's more exciting than anything.

EV: No I've always gotten... really I mean I went out here to the red snapper, the snapper banks one time and I was tossing my cookies long before... once they shut the

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engines. It was okay when it was going but once they shut the engines and then you are just sitting there going up and down then it just got really, really bad.

EP: When your sitting there.

EV: And I started out in and administration company and wound up in a helicopter unit inland, but flying in choppers didn't bother me that much.

EP: Yeah my husband, he's a pretty big guy and he's always bait fished in the area and my dad, we go off shore in Florida and he got very sick so I thought that was odd, spent his whole life in the bay but no where else.

EV: Okay so how long did you stay out there protecting our shores? Did you ever go across the pacific or pull away from...?

EP: I did, we did...there is a boat based out of San Francisco called the *Sherman* and they...

EV: The *Sherman*?

EP: The *Sherman* and they needed a female quartermaster of my rank and rate and so I volunteered because they were doing west pack and doing a circumnavigation and I was ready to do a little more traveling.

EV: Break that down for me what does that mean circumnavigation in relation to your job?

EP: Circumnavigation... yes you sail around the globe and that's what we got to do. But they did six months over in the Gulf for U.N., enforcing U.N. treaties.

EV: For what now?

EP: Enforcing U.N. treaties.

EV: Oh the United Nations okay.

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EP: Yea so we did that and that was really neat. So, I missed it out of San Francisco but I picked it up in Singapore. So I flew from LAX to Hong Kong to Singapore and then sailed with the boat for about six months.

EV: You were the only one that left for this excursion?

EP: From my ship.

EV: From your ship.

EP: Yeah I went and met a different ship.

EV: Okay and that literally oceanic trip from where to where to where?

EP: Oh we, it left...

EV: I mean you can just give me the continents you don't have to give me anything specific.

EP: Yeah we went from Singapore I think over to the Gulf. We were supposed to hit Australia but we didn't we got diverted and we were in Bahrain is where we would pull in when we had to in the Gulf. After there we hit Seychelles.

EV: Are those as beautiful as they say?

EP: Oh my gosh they are gorgeous!

EV: I'm sure they are just incredible.

EP: Breathtaking.

EV: Did you get to spend any time there?

EP: We did, we spent about three days there so that was the coolest.

EV: What did you do when you were there?

EP: I had hooked up with this girl she had joined the Coast Guard also to travel and she spoke several different languages, really neat, and her mom would always email us

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the places to stay wherever we were going. So she had found a bed and breakfast on a small island and we took another boat out there and spent three days at this bed and breakfast. We just hung out and rode bikes and surfed and enjoyed some time off.

EV: You were a surfer?

EP: A little bit.

EV: Did you pick up any scuba diving when you were in the military?

EP: I didn't. You know the only reason I did any kind of diving was because my dad lives in Florida and when I was stationed in Florida we would dive together there and then I think we did some training but nothing major.

EV: But you were certified you got certified.

EP: Yeah.

EV: In the Keys, you are talking about in Florida or?

EP: Yeah in Florida.

EV: Wow. Did you do any scuba diving while you were in the service?

EP: Not professionally.

EV: Okay. So... how do you pronounce it Seychelles.

EP: Say-shells.

EV: Was that original Dutch or Portuguese port?

EP: No it's... they all speak French.

EV: So then you went around the horn of Africa?

EP: Next we hit Madagascar and they Seychelles and then Cape Town, South Africa and then Cape Verde and then on to the Caribbean.

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EV: Did you go to the hump of Africa, I mean the Ivory coast, Ghana, Sierra Leon, Freetown?

EP: No we didn't pull in there.

EV: So when you came out, when you made the round of Africa you just went straight and headed up to the Caribbean?

EP: After Cape Town. Cape Town, South Africa.

EV: Yeah, Cape Town.

EP: Yeah and then Cape Verde.

EV: Where is Cape Verde?

EP: I think Cape Verde is actually a string of islands on the east coast of Africa. So here is Africa, here is Cape Verde and then you go over to the Caribbean.

EV: Did you go by the Canary Islands at all?

EP: I don't recall.

EV: Okay this was on the same ship right? Where did you wind up?

EP: We wound back up in San Diego. They dropped me off in San Diego.

EV: Did you go to the Canal Zone? Was that impressive?

EP: Yes, very. It was really cool. It was cool to say you've navigated it.

EV: You know you are free to tell me anytime you want, you know, to express yourself, and say, "That was really neat". I'm pulling impressions out of you like I'm yanking teeth! (laughter).

EP: It was really a trip of a lifetime. So you know at the time I was really young and no family attachments, you know, so most people didn't want to leave their family and stuff like that and I was just thrilled to do it.

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EV: Then when you got back how much time did you have left on your tour of duty when you finished this “pleasure cruise” you were on?

EP: I was actually thinking about signing a contract when I was in international waters because if you did your bonus was tax free. You know, because you get all these different things, you know endangered zone... and if you are in an endangered zone it bumps it. I thought I could sign my contract now but I wasn't sure where I would go so I came back to the states and started looking at what was next because I think I only had maybe 6 or 8 months left after that trip. That's when I decided to try to get the VTF Houston here.

EV: Not that I'm unpatriotic or anything but if you would have just hit your ETS or gotten out of the service, discharged why couldn't you just get on a bus and come to Houston? I mean why would you extend for another eight months?

EP: Well I wanted to still be in the Coast Guard. I didn't want to get out.

EV: Oh I see, there you go. What made you decide to get out?

EP: The detailer couldn't put me in Houston and he said, “Alaska is your only choice.” and I said, “See ya!” I just told him I just want to be South of I-10, you know where it's warm I don't do cold and so far I had gotten really lucky and then when he said Alaska, and we had been up to Alaska a couple of times and I thought, “Well no that's not going to work.”

EV: Did you go to the Aleutian Islands, all those little...

EP: Yes.

EV: Through there?

EP: Yes.

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EV: I mean I've seen PBS shows on that it looks intriguing to me for some reason.

EP: Yeah it is very neat. It's...

EV: I mean I wouldn't want to camp out there and raise my family.

EP: You hear a lot of people cruise there but that's all you want to do is look at it and say, "Wow that's cool" I don't think, like you said, camp out or anything but it's definitely a great cruise to go through that.

EV: Yeah because it is just awfully mysterious to me and I guess part of it is because...

EP: Nothing's there.

EV: I guess it's just such a remote place that... those are like calling cards for me for...

EP: It's really neat going in the summer time and when the first time we pulled in, you know, being from the south. You don't see snow and you don't see mountains and so it was all very breathtaking and then when we pulled up we pulled up to the dock and then on the mountain facing the ship there were probably 20 bald eagles just sitting there.

It's like these guys are not extinct! So it was cool.

EV: There was an island there that was invaded by the Japanese did you visit all the islands?

EP: No we hit Onalaska and Juno and I can't remember the names there's probably two or three other small ones. We tried to pull into Nome but we didn't make it. Our ship was too big for that particular port up there.

EV: So this circumnavigation that you did, that was just for exercise just patrolling the world or was there a purpose to all of this?

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EP: No. Every two years, you know, the Navy's over there obviously all the time and every two years a Coast Guard ship has to go so it just rotates around to the bigger boats and it would just so happen that it was that boat's turn to go. Normally they don't do that.

EV: Did you ever, when you navigate I expect they probably taught you to navigate by the stars too, right?

EP: That's right.

EV: Use the... what do they call it?

EP: Astrolabe?

EV: That's an ancient tool.

EP: It is.

EV: But it still works doesn't it?

EP: Yes.

EV: Did you ever have to do that while you were at sea? Oh you have all electrical stuff right?

EP: We do and they have what they call the "Old Guard" and the "New Guard" and the "Old Guard" didn't have all the GPS, you know, it is slowly coming about to where instead... now they don't have paper charts they have electronic and all that and so our chiefs and things didn't really like us totally relying on the electronics, he wanted us all to know how to do the celestial navigation and so he would cover up the GPS and all the electronics and make us go shoot fixes and figure out where we were by the stars.

EV: That's pretty extreme.

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EP: So, and there's no harm when you are a couple hundred miles off shore. It was neat. We would have contests and things like that so we would do a three day still map drill.

EV: Did you go to that traditional maritime ceremony when you passed the equator?

EP: Yes I did.

EV: What is that now... back in WWII... my dad was in the service it got a little rough?

EP: It was a... there was a shell back a golden shell back...

EV: S-h-o-w...

EP: S-h-e-l-l, shell back.

EV: Shell back, b-a-c-k.

EP: Yes. And then I think...

EV: What is that?



EP: I think that is when you cross the equator. I have done the blue nose.

EV: Which is what?

EP: It's been a long time. I know you have to jump in cold water, is what we did, so that's what we did to get that.

EV: That must be the blue nose.

EP: That's the blue nose yeah. Then there's the golden shell back where you are at the Greenwich Mean Time and the equator and we did that. And I think that's all I have is those three. So the ceremony for that it's more fun, you know, they don't let it get too out of hand anymore these days.

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EV: Do you ever go walk out at night sometimes and say I could navigate myself from here to anywhere?

EP: No.

EV: Did you lose it the ability?

EP: Yes.

EV: Did you really?

EP: I think so. You know you have to have a sextant and you have to have the star charts and then you have to do a very long mathematical equation to get to where you are. It's not just looking up and going, "Oh if I go right I can go home."

EV: Out in the ocean in the middle of the night I would think you had some spectacular things to look at.

EP: Yes. There's I think they called it phosphorescence or something that you would go through.

EV: In the wake?

EP: Yes, well the luminous have you ever heard of the Luminous at Bay in Puerto Rico where there's those... I don't even know what to call them... like little jelly fish?

EV: Plankton?

EP: I guess yeah plankton and they glow?

EV: Yeah and when you churn it up in the wake?

EP: Yeah and it would light up the whole water. And so we've been through, where all you see is the water glowing and that's cool.

EV: Did you see the northern lights?

EP: Seen the northern lights.

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EV: You know I saw those in New Mexico of all places? It was a real unusual night I mean a real unusual thing. I don't know what set it off, why we could see it there but they told us we would be able to see it. We were way up in northern New Mexico and that kind of helped. Did you keep any contact with any of your shipmates over the years?

EP: I do, probably two out of all of them. One was a girl I met in barber school that she was Navy and I was Coast Guard but we wound up being very good friends and still are and then another one is on the east coast. She is in California and the other one is on the east coast.

EV: None of the guys?

EP: Yeah, the one on the east coast is a guy.

EV: Did you attend any of your reunions or have you all had any of those?

EP: No I don't think we have had any.

EV: When were you finally discharged?

EP: May of '02, '03, what year is this '08... so it had to be '03.

EV: And you had this big check to go to school with?

EP: Well I had my GI bill which is just a monthly installment.

EV: Tell me what you did... number one where did you discharge from here?

EP: Here at the civil **traffic** service in Houston. They told me Alaska was my only option and I told them, "No thank you." So I was planning on going to school so I went back to the community college where I had started and I thought, well I'll just get some general classes out of the way and I wound up getting my paralegal Associates of Applied Science in Paralegal Studies and worked different odd and end jobs and my

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department head told me there was a position open here and I interviewed for a secretarial position and I've worked here now for four and a half years.

EV: Wow, I'm sorry you said you got out in '98? Didn't you tell me, I thought you told me you were in during 9/11.

EP: I was.

EV: When the hell did that happen?

EP: September of 2001.

EV: I'm sorry but okay I'm getting confused here.

EP: I joined in '98.

EV: But when did you get out?

EP: I got out in '02 or '03. But I was in on 9/11 because I remember being on a ship when it happened and we were deployed immediately.

EV: Yeah I was going to ask you was it just a huge difference after that?

EP: Oh it was massive. You know I was on the Naval base in San Diego and we were all sitting there, it was really early because we had just had breakfast and I remember we were all sitting there at breakfast watching planes...

EV: 9:00 in New York was about 7:00 for you all?

EP: Yeah about 6:00 and so immediately the whole base shut down. There were snipers on the roof and everyone just started... I mean you could just watch the ships pop off the docks to deploy immediately after that. So they did all this security. They would have to check every car and you would have to... everyone just started sleeping on the ship and on the base because the line to get back on base that you would have to wait was

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like two hours and we already had to be to work at 5:55 so everybody just said, "well we'll just sleep on the ship." So that's what we did.

EV: Wow. You all were not... were you at that time part of the Department of Defense?

EP: Transportation. No we were Department of Transportation and then in the time of war we turn into Department of Defense and we are kind of under the Navy. They call us the red stepchild... the red headed step child of the Navy.

EV: But now they are Homeland Security right?

EP: That's right.

EV: Yeah I've talked to some infantry men the guys who fought in World War II and all that and they said they much preferred to have the Coast Guard guys take them in on the LST's then the Navy guys... they wouldn't take them all the way to shore they'd chicken out and say, "You guys...right here is as far as I'm going." And the Coast Guards always took them in.

EP: Huh.

EV: So there's something to put in your little cap.

EP: Yeah we had a lot of Marines come on board. The Seals and things like that and they would do... sometimes if we knew a vessel was going to be, maybe a little more resistant, then the Seals would come on board and help us.

EV: Would they fly them in or just when you were on post?

EP: It was like we would be already underway and the next thing you would know I'd be in the taking fixes and doing all of that...taking fixes in the wheelhouse and then our radar wouldn't even pick them up. The next thing you know there's people coming up

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the side of the ship. It was really cool. Of course our Captain and everybody else knew and I think they would just jerking our chain for the shock... people coming on board. But they all knew they were coming it was really cool. So they would sneak on board and the next thing you know they were gone again and they would help us with the boardings and stuff like that.

EV: Let me flip this thing.

End of Tape 1, Side A

Start Tape 1, Side B

EV: What were your promotions? What did you finally walk out?

EP: An E5.

EV: In essence a sergeant right?

EP: We call it Second Class.

EV: Seaman's Second Class?

EP: No just Second Class Petty Officer.

EV: Okay did you all have the same ranking as the Navy?

EP: Yes.

EV: Okay. Let me go back a little more, you don't call your drill instructor... we call him the drill sergeant?

EP: Drill sergeant for boot camp?

EV: Yeah for boot camp you call him drill sergeant. Okay somebody told me you call them company commander or commander?

EP: I don't remember. It's been a long time.

EV: It's been a longer for me and I remember.

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EP: I don't know we were...that was only 8 weeks or 10 weeks that we did but it was funny because those are the faces... I can remember their names, you know, and when I was in... we had much closer relationships with those guys since we did the tour on the *Eagle* with them. You know we would have more I guess smaller group interaction with them doing certain activities with us and so when I was in "A" school I heard him call my name from across the softball field and I never forgot that voice and I just froze because I was mortified... everyone was mortified of this guy he wore those little clicks on the ends of his heels so you could hear him coming with the taps or whatever. I said, "Oh my God." He just thought it was so funny that I was still pretty scared of him. Because everybody said, "Who's that?" I said, "I think that's my company commander." They are like, "Oh no!" So he wound up being stationed there. We had a nice conversation and stuff.

EV: If they did your life story in a movie or something what part do you think would be interesting parts of your career in the service?

EP: Probably just the travels and maybe a couple of the boardings and things that they did.

EV: Did you have any boardings that was just sad?

EP: Once we were very upset because we had been out in our maximum out at sea. We had been out, I think it was maybe a month or two that everybody kind of got stir crazy after that and we got diverted from going in and there was a boat with... just full of families. These people had paid this guy and, it could be rumors about the money, but I want to say it was like \$10,000 a head to get on board this boat and then he drove the boat out to sea and was going to sink it. And these were people from Ecuador and so we

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wound up getting everyone on board the boat and it was a lot of people because we didn't have... you know room to put them in the berthing area. This one lady was very pregnant and wound up having a miscarriage on board and you know it was very sad. We ended up taking these people back to Ecuador. That was a rough trip because we were out so much longer than we were supposed to be and the people and all that stuff.

EV: Did you all have a compliment of medical personnel on board, a doctor?

EP: Yeah they called them corpsman, I guess.

EV: Those are medics right. But did you have a full fledged doctor or MD's?

EP: I don't think so.

EV: Did you have a dentist?

EP: No. No if you had to have anything like that done or if you had any major problems then you would have to stay home. You wouldn't go.

EV: What if you were in the middle of the Atlantic or the Pacific?

EP: Well we had some different things happen. People would break bones or emergencies and we always had a helicopter on board so they would just fly you back to the closest friendly place and then fly you home or to a hospital.

EV: Have you ever visited the *U.S.S. Texas*?

EP: Yeah as a kid.

EV: Did you know they have... it's amazing that little ship it's small compared to the other battle wagon and carriers and stuff but they had a dispensary, a pharmacy, and a dentist and surgeons...

EP: They had everything.

EV: Everything on that little ship.

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EP: The Navy has, you know, it's like a small city on some of their larger carriers and stuff it's amazing.

EV: It really is. Describe your bunk to me on the ship.

EP: Like a coffin.

EV: Well number one I assume they had men and women separate?

EP: That's correct. I think ours fit twelve and I couldn't tell you the dimensions of the room but the bunks were three high and the racks opened up into storage space and then you have like a little locker like you would in high school and then we had a bathroom and it had two showers and two stalls and two sinks and two mirrors and that was it. So it was pretty close quarters and small.

EV: Did you all... were you at least assigned to different shifts or were you always stumbling over each other to use the facilities.

EP: Yeah everybody stood four hour shifts so no matter what your job was unless you did things like they had... I guess you could call them secretaries or things like that, that didn't have to stand a watch, you know, obviously somebody has to be navigating all the time, somebody has to be on radar all the time. You know different jobs like that require people to be doing things at all hours. Even the cooks would get up in the middle of the night and prepare for the next day's meals. So everybody slept kind of in shifts when you are underway.

EV: Speaking of... it seems to me that sitting there staring at a radar, while it's going around and around, I don't know if it does that anymore that would just drive me batty just looking...

EP: Those are guys are a little bit different, those radar guys.

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EV: Do they still have that thing going around radar/sonar?

EP: No I don't think so.

EV: So somebody is watching a radar screen now what do they watch? You do use radar I take it?

EP: Yeah you use radar you just look for contacts and once you find a contact you have to identify it and pass that information along.

EV: Okay so if you don't see it on a round screen like you do in the movies in the old days what do you see it on, what does your screen look like?

EP: Well it was a round screen?

EV: It was. Does it have a little arm going around and around?

EP: We got new ones and they don't anymore. You know and they have these... a ball and that is what you would use to move the mouse, or whatever and then you would lock in on...

EV: Oh they are different.

EP: Very different, yeah. They really got... they were able to do a lot of neat things with those after a while but no...

EV: Right. Alright so now you've got out of the service you started going... I'm trying to recap here. I don't want to leave anything out about that after 9/11 when you all went into full alert... that stayed pretty tense I guess until you got out in terms of...?

EP: Yes it was very different. You know and in fact I wanted to get out and go to school when I was at the Vessel Traffic Houston so I thought I'll do the reserves and I'll do it here but then they started recalling all the reservists back to active duty and then you

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don't know where you are going to land after that. So I just said, "The heck with the reserves" and went to school.

EV: They started calling back during Iraq or just calling them back in after 9/11?

EP: Yeah after 9/11. It wasn't long after all that that I got out. They had been, you know the Coast Guard is very small and they started beefing up all the port security especially in bigger cities like Houston with a big port. So they had to recall all these reservists to active duty. I didn't want to do that.

EV: You were a civilian now, right?

EP: Oh yeah. I was worried that I would get sent to who knows where because of my rate, you know, with quartermaster which means that you have to be underway. I was ready to go to school.

EV: How long after you got out of the service did you get married?

EP: I just got married in February.

EV: Was your husband in the service?

EP: No. In fact one of the reasons I got out was because he said wasn't going to be a sailor's wife.

EV: So you knew him before you got out of the service?

EP: I have known him since we were in 6th grade.

EV: Really?

EP: Yeah we grew up together.

EV: That's got to be different.

EP: It is, it's different.

EV: (Laughter).

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EP: But it's cool because we start talking about things when we were small children and you kind of lose track of time really, forget how old we are.

EV: When you go to your reunions and everybody knows... it's not like you married somebody that wasn't part of your clique, someone from out of town, and they go to a reunion with you it's like very boring. This way you are all involved.

EP: Right. We are still pretty good friends with a handful of people that we grew up with that we have all known since we were small kids.

EV: Did some of your friends think "You are going to do what? the Coast Guard?"

EP: Yeah I didn't tell anyone. In fact, you know, we grew up in a pretty strict house and I was driving at the time. I was 18 but I wasn't allowed to drive on the freeways or coming into Houston or anything.

EV: Wait say that again.

EP: I wasn't allowed to drive in like into Houston.

EV: When you were a kid?

EP: Yeah when I was 18 and I had thought... I was worried and so my sister who was older, I made her come with me into Houston to go and do all of this stuff. I was like, "Don't tell Mom I snuck out." She was like, "Oh yeah." I think that's the least of our problems. So I went ahead and signed up before I even told anybody.

EV: Did they get pissed off at you when they found out? Did you just not come home one day?

EP: Yeah I probably would have done that if I thought I could get away with it, you know just run off. I was like, "Oh yeah by the way I'm leaving in a few weeks." So that's what I did. I think everybody... you know we lived in a small town so it was good

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to get away. Most people had gone away to universities and things like that or working and I was just kind of like, "I just need something to do" so it worked out well.

EV: I assume life on the boat was... they had fights and with they guys and all that kind of stuff.

EP: Yes. It got a little wild at times but it, you know, really it's like your family. You spend so much time with people and everything.

EV: Any fights over women or that kind of stuff?

EP: No.

EV: Is there anyone else that you know of that was in the service that would maybe give us an interview?

EP: I have a friend that was in the army, a guy that I'll talk to him.

EV: Well I'm talking about women. We are trying to beef up that...

EP: No I don't think so. My friend Sunny but she's in California.

EV: Okay and you don't belong to any foreign legions or any of that type of stuff.

EP: No.

EV: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you would want to include in this that you think should go into "The Life of Erin as a Sailor Girl?"

EP: No.

EV: Did you enjoy your tour?

EP: I loved it.

EV: Did you really?

EP: It was really the best thing I could have done for myself.

EV: What do you think it did for you?

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EP: I grew up and I think I grew up to have good work ethic and responsible and you know I got those wild years out pretty quickly and I just really... when I got out I think I realized my friends were still kind of doing the same thing that we were doing a couple years ago out of high school and I had done all these other things and so it was really a good experience.

EV: Well when you came back and started college did you feel... because you were a little older and more experienced than these kids in college. Did you feel that differentiation?

EP: Yes. When I went to school there was definite... you know at that point I knew that I wanted to go back to school and that I wanted to be there... whereas especially at a community college a lot of kids are just taking a couple of classes before they go off to universities so there was definitely that gap there in age and attitude.

EV: Did you ever regret maybe not going to a regular university, being on campus and as a regular college life?

EP: I thought about it but up until recently I didn't know what I wanted to go to school for. So I just thought I would do this until I picked what I wanted to be when I grew up and that way I could work my way through college and so that's kind of what I have been doing.

EV: Yeah I have the experience of... during my sophomore year I was up to "here" with college. I wanted more. One of the guys in the fraternity club that I belonged to came back and said he was NAVCAD in Navy and I thought that's what I want to do. So I went and signed up with the Navy and all that and they took me aside and said, "Look you got two more years go ahead and finish it. Because you are..." I said, "I'll finish

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when I get out." He said, "Your doing a seven year hitch as an naval aviator. Your going to come back and you will be seven years older than everybody else, your going to feel really weird. Just go ahead and finish it now and we'll still be here when you come out." So when I came out I had astigmatism in my eye by that point and I couldn't fly. So my idea of taking off the deck of carriers came to a screeching halt. I wound up in the army as a clerk and flying in helicopters part time.

EP: Oh wow.

EV: I wasn't the pilot even. I was just on there playing with those guns.

EP: I know I wanted to stay in and go to law school and do JAG but then I got out because I didn't want to go to Alaska.

EV: Well I mean you are still able to go back in. If you were an attorney now would... you're not too old to go back in are you?

EP: No I'm not too old to go back in, I'm getting there though. Then I think I would have to go to boot camp again. Now I have a daughter and all of that so...

EV: Ah yeah, motherhood.

EP: Yes.

EV: Did you, did you collect a lot of mementos from all these places you went to.

EP: I do in fact you know everybody has their things that they collect and one thing I found easily in all the ports were shot glasses, because they would have maybe a picture of the place with the name on it. So I've got over 100 shot glasses from all these places I've been. It's one thing...

EV: They are small and you can pack them away.

EP: That's right you can wrap them in paper.

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EV: If you had a fertility king chopped out of bamboo or something...

EP: Right.

EV: Okay I guess that's it.

EP: Alright.

EV: If you don't have anything else. Did it take you long to adjust to civilian life when you came out?

EP: Yeah. You don't make the same kind of friends as you make when you are in the military. You know it's different; the relationships with people are different so it is a little bit of adjusting.

EV: Like what?

EP: I always say those are the best friends of my life even though we don't stay in touch...

EV: In the service?

EP: Yeah because you are just so close and...

EV: Yeah I tell everybody I'd rather see the guys I was in the army with then the guys I went to college with.

EP: Definitely.

EV: I would love to get back with those guys.

EP: You know because you are, like I said, a family and you spend so much time together and you know I don't think nobody cares about race or anything like that. You are just there and you are all together.

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EV: So many funny things happen you know. You look back on it... I try to explain to people something that happened in the service that was just hilarious... but unless you were really there...

EP: Inside jokes and experiences, you know stuff like that. But we had some really cool times, really great times.

EV: Yeah it's nice. I enjoyed this very much, Erin, thanks a lot for taking your time.

End of Interview

