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Oral History Interview with Doris Guenette
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Angela Stuart, Interviewer
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Editor's note: The quality of the original recording is poor, and comments by the interviewer are especially unclear. It is also possible that there may be a second interviewer whose name is not known.

Angela Stuart: What is your name?

Doris Guenette: My name is Doris Guenette.

Angela: Could you tell us a little bit about your background, when and where you were born?

Doris: I was born in Lewiston, Maine, in a family of twelve children; 7 boys and 5 girls. I was raised here, all my life.

Angela: Where were your parents born and raised?

Doris: Both in Lewiston. Mom and Dad, they were born in town, on Lincoln Street, Lewiston.

Angela: Where did you attend school?

Doris: Lewiston High School. Holy Family was my grammar school and I went to CMVTI for post-graduate.

Angela: Could you briefly describe your child and family life, we know how many immediate family members there were, but could you describe the ancestry of your grandparents?

Doris: Both my grandparents on my mom's side and my dad's side are from Canada; I don't exactly know where. My mom is part Indian. My dad? I have no idea; he was adopted."

Angela: Did both of your parents work?

Doris: Yes

Angela: What jobs did they have?

Doris: My mom was a CNA at Marcotte Nursing Home, which is now D'Youville and my dad was a police officer in the city of Lewiston for 17 years. He retired from that and went into mechanic's work.

Angela: What, if any jobs that you worked at before you entered the military?

Doris: Most of my jobs are started – I was 16 at the Foodtown in Auburn as bundle person. I worked in a shoe shop for two years before joining the military.

Angela: This is the events leading to joining the military; what made you decide to enter the military?

Doris: I saw pictures of my dad in uniform and I thought that would be nice. I was always interested in the military and they always talked about it and it sort of fell into my brain, stuck there."

Angela: When did you go in?

Doris: September of 1969.

Angela: How old were you?

Doris: 18.

Angela: Which branch did you join?

Doris: I went into the army 'cause my dad was the army.

Angela: Did you know or know of other Franco American people, friends or relatives that were involved in the armed services during this time?

Doris: Most of my mom's brothers were in the military at the time it was the army air corps. Most of the men that I worked with were in the military, but they were all Franco Americans. Women, I have no idea. I haven't met one yet, not around here anyway.

Angela: Out of those people, how many did you socialize or communicate with?

Doris: I was – we were a close-knit family so I would socialize a lot with my uncles and aunts. My uncles were the ones that were pushing me towards the military. They thought it would be a good career for me.

Angela: Were there any forms of Franco American customs, such as attending mass, practiced by you and your family?

Doris: Yes, I attend mass regularly and most of my friends do, my parents do. It's like a family tradition."

Angela: [Unclear...] Did they have catholic mass where you part of Desert Storm?

Doris: Did they have masses? Yes, they did but they were restricted to compounds in our units. We weren't allowed to bring our religion on the outside of the compound. We were not allowed to wear any type of jewelry that would signify that we were Catholic.

Angela: Were there any other ways in which your Franco American heritage affected your experience in the service?"

Doris: Yes it did, because a lot of the Saudi Arabians spoke French. With my French background, it helped me out a lot dealing outside of our compounds in Saudi Arabia, going to the stores and such. The clerks, if they found out we talked French, they would just speak fluent French to us and that helped me out a hell of a lot.

Angela: Where were you first stationed in the military?

Doris: Fort McClellan, Alabama.

Angela: What was your job title there?

Doris: That was my basic training. My first duty station was Fort Dix, NJ and I was a truck driver instructor.

Angela: How long was your work day?

Doris: It ranged from 8 to 12 hours depending on how big the group was that we were instructing. There were a lot of times we had bilingual students that were Puerto Rican and did not speak English. Some of the Canadians did not speak English so you had to work with them individually.

Angela: I don't think this is a question on here, just one that I want to ask. How did you happen to get into truck driving?

Doris: My dad was truck driving on the side. I used to go on with him on a couple of trips and I liked the idea of driving a truck.

Angela: That's something that you learned in the military too?

Doris: No, my dad taught me on the outside and I picked it up and stuck with me in the military.

Angela: How were the working conditions in terms of safety and or comfort?

Doris: Here in the States or overseas?

Angela: Probably overseas?

Doris: [Sighs] They were cramped, dirty, bug infested. It wasn't a lifestyle that I was used to because being from the family that I come from, my mother was always clean and the house was always clean. To go into a bug infested country, like Saudi Arabia, it is totally - I found it very disgusting. It was dirty, it smelled. I don't think would have been able to live there the rest of my life cause I just couldn't get over the smell. It just reeked of urine.

Angela: How as a woman were you treated in comparison to men?

Doris: Equally.

Angela: How about the men and women in similar rank, they were treated...

Doris: Yes.

Angela: Were the women restricted from certain jobs?

Doris: Not in my unit. I was told that we were not allowed in the infantry part of the military, but I put my life on the line just like any of the other driver as far as hauling ammo. Ammo is one of the biggest problems over there caused it's handled loosely, which I consider very dangerous. I drove my truck just like the guys did. I jumped on ammunition going out, whether it was ammo or equipment, clothing , supplies.

Angela: In your opinion, do you think the promotions were given out fairly in terms of both women and men?

Doris: Yes.

Angela: What types of benefits did you receive?

Doris: You earned 30 days [vacation] a year, which is paid. You can take those usually anytime, unless you are overseas. They do not normally let you take your leave overseas. They only give them to you when you get back in the states. Unless it's because of marriage, family matters, or to see someone overseas, which they really frown on. Insurances, doctors, everything else is paid for. I didn't really have to worry about money. I was fed, clothed and I had a house, the whole time I was in.

Angela: That medical health was totally free.

Doris: Yes, everything was free there. I made a Hell of a lot more money overseas than I did in the states though 'cause we received combat pay overseas because we were in a hostile country, which is good money. I didn't mind the 10 months for that reason. I saved a lot of money.

Angela: When will you get out?

Doris: No, I'm already out, I got out last April. I got a medical discharge 'cause I lost a toe and ended up with a hernia.

Angela: What other living expenses you paid were not covered by the military.

Doris: Off-base housing was not paid by the military, any extracurricular actives came out of your pocket as far as phones, any types of games you wanted to play. Any extra clothing you wanted was to your cost. Basically everything was paid for unless you lived off base, then you had to dish out of your own pocket.

Angela: Did you receive any bonuses or other extra compensation?

Doris: We received a bonus when we went overseas, that was a pretty big bonus, and I'm getting disability now.

Angela: How were the housing conditions where you were stationed?

Doris: Cramped, we were in a room probably 12 X 12, maybe 15 X 15, and there were six to a room. That is not much room with all your gear and stuff. No co-ed; it was either all females or all male, no co-ed. Even today the co-ed, when they say co-ed, it's not a male and female sharing a room. It's either two males or two females; they share the same room on the same floor.

Angela: [unclear]

Doris: Yes, same thing.

Angela: How were you treated by your supervisors?

Doris: I have no problem with them; I was treated as an equal. I do my job and they knew it.

Angela: [unclear]

Doris: Yes

Angela: [unclear]

Doris: There is. If they didn't show authority, they weren't going to get it.

Angela: So you were treated well by men around you?

Doris: Yes.

Angela: [unclear]

Doris: No, they let them walk all over them, and I didn't do that. They tried to walk all over me, I'd stop them right in their tracks. I still do that today. Giving them the dirty work, trying to use their masculinity. It doesn't work with me.

Angela: Were there ever any forms of sexual harassment that you as a woman were subjected to?

Doris: Yes, I was assaulted while I was on one of my missions, but I had a body guard so he took care of him.

Angela: Was that one of your own?

Doris: Yes, not one from my unit but from another unit, a unit we weren't familiar with. He got court marshaled.

Angela: How did your co-workers react to that incident?

Doris: They won't stand for it. They took the report and turned it in. The gentleman was pulled aside and shipped back to the states and court marshaled. The superiors were expected to turn in the

individuals that are acting in the wrong way. That is what I did. It was wrong for him to do what he did, he suffered.

Angela: Did you ever feel unsafe around male co-workers?

Doris: No. Actually, most of the males that I have worked with in the military were very protective of our group. Not me in particular, but of the group, whether you were male or female. This is your group and we are going to take care of ourselves. Everybody stuck together. I wasn't pin-pointed as a female or some little one, I was just another soldier and part of the group.

Angela: Were Franco Americans treated differently?

Doris: No, actually most of the Franco Americans that I knew overseas were looked upon as a translator. They found it easier because being in Saudi Arabia, and the Saudis speaking French as fluently as they did made it easier on the rest of the unit so they always made sure there was a French speaking person with a unit going out. That was one of our pluses."

Angela: Did you ever find any discrimination at all when you entered the service, being Franco American?

Doris: No.

Angela: I can see that to the Saudis it was an asset, but I mean in the United States?

Doris: No, never.

Angela: What kind of training did you get in the service?

Doris: Physical, educational, learned about the rules and regulations in the military, weapons, living out in the wilderness. I was in airborne jumper; [I learned] first aid; survival – I learned basically how to live on my own.

Angela: You were an air born jumper, but isn't that [a role reserved for men]?

Doris: I jumped out of planes. I went to airborne school to jump out of planes. I got my wings but I didn't, at the time I had gone into airborne it was just opening up. It was on a trial basis for women back in the early 70s. They only took the top 10 of the class if they wanted to go. That was one of my things that I wanted to do, but once I did my job, I couldn't use it anymore. That was my end because airborne troopers are an infantry ground troop, and women at the time were not allowed in the infantry. We were allowed in the military but the infantry was a front-line unit, they couldn't use me there. I just wanted to know that I could do it.

Angela: Now were any services not allowed, other than the infantry?

Doris: Only certain units, like your tank units, they won't allow unless it's a back line unit for setting up the units going out. That is the only type of front line work that they do. Even then it's not on the front line. You are sitting behind a desk on a computer.

Angela: Why do you think that is?

Doris: The American people did not accept women dying in the military.

Angela: [unclear]

Doris: Oh yah, and I to this day would die for my country, whether male or female.”

Angela: Have training methods changed?

Doris: It’s changed a lot in the last 20 years. When I was first in it was the Women’s Army Corps. It wasn’t the regular army; it was the Women’s Army Corps. You were trained totally different from the men. Your physical training was totally different. You didn’t go on to the rifle ranges. No grenade throwing or anything like that. It was basically physical training; PT was our main objective then, first aid. Today women are just, I see it opened so much in the last 20 years. It is unbelievable. “

Angela: [unclear]

Doris: It does, it does. Being bought up with seven brothers, weapons are a big thing in our family and I’ve always liked my weapons. I made marksman in the last ten years in Iraq. There are only four in my unit that can say that. But it has opened up a lot.

Angela: Did you get promoted and get to work in different jobs?

Doris: I was switched around quite a bit. I did some computer work. When things got slow they, they put you on the telephone or put you in the mess hall. You got to move around a lot. Your promotions usually work on your ability to do things, whether you excelled or not. I got promoted twice on the field which is usually a good sign. It goes into your 201 file which is your records. If you are promoted in the field, you have done something out of the ordinary. The two last promotions I had were on the field. One was in Saudi and one was in Fort Devens [Massachusetts], on active duty.”

Angela: Did you like it that you got to travel?

Doris: Oh yes, plenty of traveling. I traveled here in the states a lot with the reserve unit. We hauled different reserve units from Canada and back into the states. I went from California to Florida, to almost every state here, transporting equipment. I signed up for extra duty to haul these units ‘cause I liked to travel. It was great.

Angela: You must have been in dangerous situations?

Doris: More than once. As a matter to fact, we were heading toward the front line the night the war started in January. We were hauling ammo to the front line and you could see the bombs dropping in the distance. That was one of my hairiest times in my life, just knowing I was heading towards the war. It didn’t last long, but to me it lasted forever.”

Angela: What was the most exciting aspect [of being in the military]?

Doris: Just the thought of going to serve my people. I served my country. I served proudly, to know that I was going to war to fight for what we believe in.

I had never expected to go to war, after Vietnam. A friend of mine had spoken to me [in 1967] about joining the reserves. "You don't have to worry about going to war, reserves don't go to war." I wasn't in the reserves two years when they shipped us overseas! I went and I went proudly. I think that was the most exciting part of my tour, just knowing that I was going to fight for my country; that I was getting that chance. Being a female I didn't think I would ever get that chance and I did.

Angela: I remember being in high school when all this happened. I'm not sure if that was around the time that you were there. We were talking about females in the military and being on the front line [...]

What are some of the jobs that you disliked the most?"

Doris: KP duty, that was the worst. KP duty is kitchen patrol and I ended up doing all the big pots and pans. I'm not talking about little quart pots, I'm talking about pots and pans all day long. That was the worst part. It's usually the first, the new arrivals that end up on KP duty. Once you get into a permanent duty station, you were not normally given kitchen patrol.

Before you get to your permanent duty station, when you first start on basic and you are AIT which is [...] is when you get kitchen patrol. After that you get transferred to a permanent station. Usually your duties are CQ, or CQ runner which is company quartermaster, which they patrol the barracks, whichever barracks you are assigned to, to make sure nothing is going on and everything is quiet. Bed checks, done. CQ runner was about the worst. He had to chase people down

Angela: During your time in the service how did that affect your family life?

Doris: It brought my dad and I closer together. I got a lot more respect from my brothers and sisters. They looked up to me a lot more. Mom and dad were really proud. When I got home, they wanted to bring me to all their friends' houses. We got a lot closer, more so than when I was growing up. Mom wanted me to go work with her! I couldn't see myself working in a nursing home. Dad's always looking for answers now and he will turn to me. The kids are always doing that. All of them have grown up but if they have problems, I am the first one they will come to. I have earned their respect, basically.

Angela: [unclear]?

Doris: Yes, it is considering half of them are old and the rest are younger. Even the older ones turn to me when they get problems. I think they are, I don't want to say jealous. I've gotten a lot further with my military career behind me. It has given me a better outlook on what I really want. It taught me, I would never force anybody into the military, but I think it's a good start for somebody who is not sure what they want to do. I brought up some kids from the state, most of them joined the military and they are still in the military today.

Angela: [unclear]

Doris: It is, it is. I wish my younger brother would join.

Angela: Were you married?

Doris: No.

Angela: No children?

Doris: No.

Angela: Do you continue to receive benefits from the military?

Doris: Yes.

Angela: Any type of medical pension?

Doris: No.

Angela: Are you eligible for medical services?

Doris: Yes

Angela: Are you eligible for educational benefits?

Doris: Yes.

Angela: Are you eligible for any other benefits that you are aware of?

Doris: I am getting disability now. Any type of training that I want to pick up, career, job security is there if I need it. With my restrictions that I have, I'm a member of the DAV [Disabled American Veterans], I belong to that. If I have any problems getting a job, they will train me for that job for which it's done. There is a lot open to the disabled anyway as far as the military is concerned. [The Veteran's Affairs Office at] Togus has all types of schooling and courses that you can take to help you along. If you can't find them, they will. I found the benefits to be open. Housing - as a matter of fact I am going to a VA loan now for a house. Bank loans, job applications, government or postal worker jobs, pretty well opened to veterans if they want to do that. You get so many points for ever year you have been in [the military] toward a postal job. You have to take an exam. You have to score so high. They will add those points that you have earned through the military to help you along. The benefits are there.

Angela: [...] Are you heading in a particular direction, as far as your career is concerned?

Doris: No, I am happy where I am right now. I am learning a lot at work. I'm learning a lot of the equipment which is really what I wanted to do anyway. I just got off a bulldozer course and I'm getting into a road grading course. I've already passed my front loader, backhoe, and stuff like that. I've got my class one license so I can haul equipment. I like it because it keeps me outside and it keeps me in shape.

[unclear]

[laughter]

Angela: Are you currently involved in any Veteran's Groups?

Doris: Yes, I belong to the VFW, the Legion, DAV, that's it."

Angela: Have you noticed in change in the way the military treats women since you were in the service?

Doris: Yes, a big difference. We are treated more equally now then we were. Twenty years ago we treated as a second rate citizen. Today it's pretty well even, from my standpoint. I've always b been treated as an equal.

Angela: I'm just curious, in the military you said you were treated equally, and that it's fine, being a woman.

[Side 2]

Doris: I got a lot of harsh feels when I first got back from Vietnam. I just sort of set those aside. I didn't [listen]; I just let it go in one ear and out the other. Desert Storm, I found the people were more excited to learn about it. They were more interested in it. It's like they wanted to put the Vietnam War back there and not even know about it.

Angela: Do you think the interest changed because of what they saw in the, people that came back from Vietnam, what they went through. Do you think they wanted to be excited and be accepting to...?

Doris: Yes, I talked to a few of the guys that I went to Vietnam with and it's like, why couldn't they treat us this good when we came back from Vietnam? A lot of them were, they had some hate in them about the Vietnam War. They didn't like the idea of being treated differently because of the Desert Storm War. Why treat us differently?

The Desert Storm War was so much different then Vietnam. There was a lot more killing in Vietnam. The way that the killing was being done I think is what the public saw the most of. I was heartbroken when I first got back. Mom had a little hard time talking to me. Dad, well he didn't say too much but it wasn't really talked about. When I came back from Saudi, it was like tell me about it. Dad was all happy and Mom was just psyched. Why could it not have been this way when I came back from Vietnam?

When we were in Vietnam, we didn't know what the country here was seeing. We had a good idea of what was going on and there were times that we saw what was going on but we didn't want to believe it either, that it was happening. I found that hard, for a long time I was stuck with the misery of knowing what we did over there basically. The Vietnamese were in their own way kind of weird anyway. What mother would think of strapping dynamite to their kid and sending them into a group? I have never had children but I can't imagine doing that. They didn't care.

I fought in both wars and I'm proud I did. I am not happy with the results of the Vietnam War but there is nothing I can do about it. I can't change that. "

Angela: Are there any other aspects of your experience that you would like to share with us that have not already been told?

Doris: Not really, not really. I did a lot of traveling on my own time when I was in Saudi. I jumped a train one time, from one part of the country to the other, which was fun with a friend of mine. I always wanted to jump a train but never had the guts to do it here in the states. I knew in Saudi that we couldn't go overseas, so I said, come on, let's jump this train and we rode for like six hours. We found out we were in Saudi's capital which is Riyadh. That was a 20 hour drive from where we were stationed. We had to wait another four hours, once we got to Riyadh, to jump a train back. Then we were afraid that we were going to get caught. That is an automatic jail time over there. We didn't want that cause he was chief warrant officer anyway! That was one of my exciting times over there was jumping the train and not getting caught.

I shipped a lot of sand home which we weren't supposed to do. We had what is called an MRP, it's a mail ready packet. We used to have these little bottles of Tabasco sauce. We used to talk all the bottles and wash them all out, put sand in them. I mailed dozens of them home. I got home, and my mom's got all these little bottles on the shelf. I says, "Mom, what are you doing with all these bottles, why?"

She says that she didn't know what I wanted to do with them.

I says, "I sent you a letter telling you to give them to the kids...something to talk about."

I started handing them all out. I still have three at my house. Then there was a couple of bottles that I saved. I had a chance to go to the Red Sea, which I thought was fascinating. I got to swim in the Red Sea; that was great, so I filled up a couple of bottles of sand from the Red Sea. I did bring some pictures if you guys want to browse though them. I can let you know what is what. I bought a variety of [...]. I got pictures of Kuwait after they bombed it, stuff like that. I didn't know if you would want to browse through it.

[End of recording]