

Mary K. S. Santine

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Cohen: Today is November 10, 2020. My name is Leah Cohen. On behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, I am very pleased to interview Captain Mary Kaye Curran Santine, who served in the United States Air Force Nursing Corps both in active duty and in the reserves from 1969 to 1972. Excuse me, that was on the active duty. And served for the Air Forces Reserves from 1973 to 1974. So, we'll start with some questions about your background and then move on to your service and at the end some reflections. So, where, and when were you born?

Santine: I was born in Chicago in 1948. I grew up here, went to school here, still live here... I came back when it was time to start a family. And I went into the service as soon as I graduated as a nurse. As soon as I got my RN. I had to take the state boards. And although they said they didn't, they would know [my results] before I did...They called me up and told me to come down and raise my right hand.

Cohen: Wow.

Santine: And that's how it started.

Cohen: Wow. And what was it like growing up in Chicago? And which high school did you go to?

Santine: You know, I really like Chicago [but] I've always wanted to go somewhere else. I went to the neighborhood Catholic grammar school, where there were a million Marys. But they all had a second name. So, we all have two names. Mary Kaye, Mary Ann, Mary Claire, whatever. I just happened to be the Mary Kaye. And I went to high school at Mother McAuley [High] on the South Side. And then, I was torn. I really loved literature and I thought that that was what I wanted to do. And yet, I wouldn't have been a very good teacher. I was interested in nursing. So, I thought that would be a great option and probably a great career. So, I went to nursing school in downtown Chicago. At that time, Northwestern University had a number of hospitals, and I was at Wesley Memorial. And it was great. All our clinical were done in the university setting. We had all of the best equipment. All the specialties. We had...the fun of living in the Loop. So...

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: You know, but at the same time, there was a war on that nobody really cared for. A lot of protests. A lot of my friends, you know, we were all kind of pacifists. But... I had some skills and I thought just because I don't totally agree didn't mean that people shouldn't have the best care that they can get. I wanted to know what was going on and see what it was like. Of course, a lot of my friends were being drafted and it just didn't seem totally fair that they should be asked to go when they really didn't care to. And women weren't asked to do anything. I mean...[except] support them. It just felt that there should be some kind of community service or something. And then again, because I was a nurse, I had a little more to offer. So, I thought... Away I go.

Cohen: Were you inspired by the women's movement? Like the search for equal rights? And like in your case you wanted to take more responsibility... Like in the 1960s?

Santine: You know, I was very much on the fringe. I wasn't totally active. I mean... Politics was not my thing. I remember of the Democratic National Convention. My father refused to let me go downtown. Not that I was totally into it or anything. I just wanted to see what was going on.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: But he said, "No way." So, that was the end of that. I was never deeply involved in any of that, although, [I was] growing up with it. You know. The neighborhood I grew up in had a high mortality rate. Although, they were all a few years older than me [and] I wasn't really friends with them. It kind of struck home.

Cohen: Yeah. That you knew of people who... neighbors who would have been killed, basically. like in Vietnam?

Santine: Exactly. And then, I did have one friend that I had known growing up that had died there. And of course, I lost contact with a lot of the kids from the neighborhood once I went away to school. So, I am sure that there were... that I knew more than I followed. But I did have some friends that I wrote to that were over there. And it was, um... It was a weird time.

Cohen: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Santine: I have a younger sister. But my dad was in World War II Army Air Corps. So, that kind of made the choice easy. I thought the Air Force was kind of the way to go then. And the other thing... And this is very self-centered of me... [I thought that

if I really liked it, the Air Force would make the best career]¹. And I had the image in my head that a government run medical thing I would have the biggest [and] the best...I would get to go places. And at that time, women couldn't fly, and they couldn't be in the space program. And I thought well... if I stayed long enough that there might be a back door into the space program where at least I would have some [connection]... I could be medical support or something like that. If in fact it turned into a long-range goal...That was kind of my choice for the Air Force.

Cohen: Okay, that's cool. I was wondering about that. Yeah. Um, what were your parents' occupations? And...

Santine: My mom was mostly a stay at home. Until I went to high school. She went to work to help pay tuition. She worked at a hospital in the kitchen. And my dad worked for the city. He was ... an engineer for the city. He had operated heavy equipment.

Cohen: Wow.

Santine: We were blue collar. You know, middle class neighborhood and stuff.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: I was the first one to go to school, which made them very proud. And of course, even though they got a lot of flak. They had a star in the window when I left. [Laughter] They were always proud. So, I could do whatever I wanted. And frankly other family members didn't think too highly of that, but my parents were always there. They said, "Go for it. Go and do whatever you want to do."

Cohen: I'm sorry. The other family members didn't think highly of your choice to study nursing or the choice to serve?

Santine: Both.

Cohen: Oh.

Santine: They thought that women in the service were not the highest caliber. Or did they have a whole lot of... I won't say respect, but... You know, nursing... They didn't think that highly of nursing, [either]. And you know, I don't know why. But that didn't matter one way or the other. My parents supported me.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: So... So, yeah. I mean it was all good. It was all good.

¹ Mary Santine clarified this point and some others, when reviewing the transcript.

Cohen: When you were training even at Northwestern, um, did you see like Vietnam veterans who were patients there?

Santine: No. No. Although, we were affiliated with the Rehab Institute. No, I didn't. We didn't have any wounded or anything like that. You know, it was a large complex of hospitals at the time. There was Prentice Maternity. There was Passavant Hospital. There was Wesley. There was also Lakeside VA Hospital. And my dad used to go there as a patient. But I didn't have...any contact with any veterans or war wounded or anything like that at that time.

Cohen: Were you interested in a particular branch of nursing?

Santine: You know, I liked intensive care type things. And that was kind of where I wanted to be. And then ironically, when I went in the service, I got sent to a very small hospital which just kind of blew me away...having come from a university setting. And then I go to a hospital that, oh, they had thirty beds. [Laughter.] I mean I had one room with designated PEDs [pediatrics] and one room was designated...simple stuff. A couple of isolation rooms. They had a woman's room. I mean it was just so far away from what I expected. From what I had experienced up until that point. You know, when you are a student...especially when you are a senior, you know absolutely everything. You do. I mean you know everything. And then the next day when you are in the working force you know absolutely nothing. I mean the humility hits you like a ton of bricks. [Laughter.] And then to go from the big city hospital to this little... this little, tiny place. And they had sick people there. [Laughter.] And all of a sudden, you're in charge. You don't have a technician or a therapist to call on. You're it. So, you're putting together the equipment. And you're cleaning the equipment. And you're teaching and being the therapist. I mean... It was a rude awakening. I was a little surprised.

Cohen: Oh, wow.

Santine: Yeah, you know, that's what makes us who we are. And I thought, 'Holy cow'. But I wasn't there that long. And then of course, I went overseas, which was a big hospital.

Cohen: And what was it like, going back a little bit, what was it like when you went for basic training and where did you do the basic training?

Santine: I went to Wichita Falls, Texas. I think it was September. The weather was nice anyway. And...I guess it wasn't exactly the vigorous training that the regular... troops would have experienced, because we were all like doctors, nurses, dentists. You know. People like that. So, I think...it wasn't as physically taxing. But nonetheless...we really had to march. You learn how to march. [Laughter.] I

know that's part of the whole scenario. But it just seemed a little weird. And then, of course, you get new roommates, and you meet new people. And then the bivouac part where they put you in the woods at night with a compass and you have to find point A, point B, and then make your way back to the central area. That was kind of different. You know, I had been a girl scout, but never out in the woods by myself...But nonetheless, going through it was always a surprise, I guess... Then you know, you are sleeping in a tent. And there's a dirt floor. And they tell you you're having an inspection, so sweep the floor. How do you sweep dirt? I mean... [Laughter]...That's what they do to new people for their training... But some of it seemed kind of out there, you know.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: But I guess I thought it wasn't all that rigorous. I did have some physical qualities. Certainly, but I can't say that I was overtaxed or anything like that. But it was just... totally different. All of it. All of a sudden, I've gone from the neighborhood to Chicago downtown and then I'm in an environment where people are from all walks of life, all different areas. I mean races, ethnic, everything. You know. It was kind of new to me. Even growing up here, you know you are very isolated in the neighborhood settings...Everybody sticks to their own background and then all of a sudden, you are out there. And I'm no longer a Mary Kaye or a Mary Anne or a Mary Sue. Now I'm just plain Mary because I am in the world. And nobody recognizes the fact that growing up we all had to have second names. [Laughter.] That was my coming of age. I became a plain Mary after that.

Cohen: And what was it like you meeting people from different backgrounds? And, you know, um, did people get along with each other? How did it work?

Santine: Well, I think a lot of them were very similar to me...It was just new and exciting...telling each other stories. And you know the farm girls and the city girls. You know, it was interesting. It was fun. And everybody got along. I mean...Certainly, some people you liked more than others. But there was no contradictions as far as philosophies or big-time discussions. ... It turned into a social kind of group...You'd be assigned in your little groups. I think we were group of four or five. And it depended on where you were seated in the auditorium that they matched you. The five people at the end of the row. Or the five people at the other end of the row. All of a sudden, you're a unit and you're supposed to be working together for the next week or however long the exercise lasted.

Cohen: Hmm.

Santine: But it was... It was... The type of training was very realistic. At one point, again, it was at night. They had a field set up as a plane crash site. And they had flares all over. And pieces of metal. And we had had a little prep for it. And some were assigned to be the medical people. And the other people were assigned to be patients.

Cohen: Oh, wow.

Santine: And I was assigned to be a patient. They moulaged you [i.e. applied mock injuries on "patients" for the sake of training emergency responses]. So, you looked bad. Those wounds are very realistic. I didn't have any moulage. But I was a patient. I was supposed to have a broken leg. And the theory is that you don't tell people as a patient. You don't really say what's wrong with you. You expect these medical rescuers to ask you and to do a quick assessment and get you out of harm's way. That's the whole purpose of this exercise. Well, we didn't know what we were doing pretty much at that point. So, they released these hundred or so people out in this dark field with flares going. And we patients are all on the ground, which is all weedy, stony, and dirty. And we're all moaning and groaning. And then they assigned the medic in charge who ended up being a dentist. And he said, "I don't know about this stuff. What am I supposed to do?" And he said, "Where's the doctor?" And they said, "You're it for the day, Buddy." So... He was in charge of all these medical people who were supposed to be rescuing us who are screaming and hollering. So, they came to rescue me, and like I said, I allegedly had a broken leg. And I didn't tell them this. Because I am [supposedly] unconscious. And they never asked me, they never looked, they picked me up by my legs and dragged me over that dirty rocky weedy stuff to get me out of harm's way. Which, in reality, would have done a lot more damage considering it was my leg they were dragging me by.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: ...then of course you know lessons learned. The after talk. And you know, we all failed miserably. But the training was phenomenal. How they approached things. And how realistic everything was. We had, like I said, so many lessons learned. At least, I certainly learned a lot.

Cohen: [Laughter.] So, were there a lot of exercises like that? Subsequent to this one that you described?

Santine: Um, that's the biggest one I remember. It seems like there were a lot of little ones and then...later in my time I did go to a couple of survival kind of training...which were incredible. But that was basic training. Basic training was all... it was only six weeks, but it was consolidated. So, we had our lost in the woods and our camp out in the dirt. And our rescue missions. And a lot of

classroom work. A lot of classroom activity where you learned all about the whys and wherefores of the Air Force and what was expected of you. You know, just like school. But the actual hands on was very realistic when they did things like that.

Cohen: My goodness. And um, what was it like training with men? You had mentioned there were some dentists, doctors, so, did they, um, like what was their attitude to training with women in the Air Force?

Santine: Oh, everybody bonded. Because... none of us had any background in what we were heading into, we all bonded. And... It worked out well. I don't think any of them went in with attitudes or thinking that they were better as men. As a matter of fact, my little group... The one was a surgeon, and you know surgeons are notorious for their reputation. And he was a really nice man. And the other one was a plastic surgeon. [Laughter]. And then there was a dentist and two nurses. The five in the room that I was assigned to. You know, everybody just got along. There was nobody that felt that they were better than anybody else or less than anybody else or more privileged. It was, um... It was a good bonding experience.

Cohen: That sounds good. So, after the six weeks are over, where was your first assignment?

Santine: I went to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Which was... Oh, it was just beautiful... You could smell the pine trees. The water. You couldn't ask for a more vacation like atmosphere. [Laughter.] But again. It was a small training base. It was a TAC base, which means a Tactical Air Command and they trained fighter pilots there. So, there was a lot of coming and going. And the hospital, like I said, had maybe thirty beds. And although Myrtle Beach is really built up nowadays, it wasn't that big and expansive back in the '60s. And there was a lot of retirees there, as well. So, we had a decent size population of families. And young healthy men basically. And some old, retired people there that had chronic medical conditions. But there were a number of surgeons assigned there. And they were kept busy as well. So, it was busy. It was an active... very active base. But like I said coming from a big city university atmosphere going to thirty beds and figuring out now that I had to be the one to put the equipment together and take the equipment a part and you know the jack of all trade kind of thing. Whereas I thought... Aww.. Like I said you just have these delusions of grandeur. I was going to be the ultimate specialist and now I've got one room with kids in it and one room with old people in it [Laughter.] and then I've got a women's problems room and somebody that's got something communicable. [Laughter.] I was just so out of my element. Right. You know, it was a baptism by fire kind of thing. But it was good, because everybody... everybody should be a generalist

before they get to do something special. Because you need to build on that foundation. And that was it for me, boy.

Cohen: So, do you think that it ultimately helped cultivate your resourcefulness?

Santine: Oh, sure, it did. Sure, it did. You find out what you don't know. Probably more than you know. And what you don't know you'd better learn quickly or adapt. [Laughter.] ...There were some civilian workers there. And most of the military staff that I worked with on a daily basis, they were all from the South.

Cohen: Hmm.

Santine: So, there was one airman from Detroit. But the rest of them were all... more rural and very Southern. And that was an eye opener too. Just to see the discrepancies in the customs and of course we all talked differently. And they'd make fun of each other about the way we talked. And that was a cultural difference for me.

Cohen: What were some of the things that surprised you?

Santine: ...I don't know. It's, um, it's kind of a hard one. They were just over the top polite. [laughter.] But sometimes you know you had that feeling that they didn't agree with you. They were just nodding along. So, you know, give her, her say. You don't have to agree. Just be polite about it. It was just an undercut. Oh, I do have a funny story. You know, as a nurse in the old days you'd set up everybody to eat. You fixed their food on their tray. If they couldn't help themselves, you fed them.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: And I couldn't get over the fact that they got cream of wheat with every meal... Like I said there were retirees, and I was fixing their trays. You know whether I was working evening shift or morning shift or whatever. You know, cream of wheat. How do you eat cream of wheat? You put sugar and butter on cream of wheat. Right?

Cohen: Right. [Laughter.]

Santine: So, I'm doing this and it's dinner time. It's five o'clock in the afternoon. And they are getting their roast beef and their vegetables and their getting cream of wheat. And I am putting butter on it. And sugar. And none of these patients ever said anything to me... They'd say, "Thank you." And I'd spoon it in them. And they'd say, "thank you." Nobody ever said anything. And then one afternoon this med tech walks in. And he says, what are you doing with the grits? I said, "Grits?" What are you talking about? He says, "That's grits. You put gravy on them." ... And oh, I felt terrible. I had been messing up their food

all this time. Because to me it was cream of wheat. [Laughter.] You know, I felt so stupid. But that's one of those cultural issues. I learned.

Cohen: Yeah, right.

Santine: I learned the hard way. And they were too polite to correct me. Until this one guy just spouted off and said I was ruining their dinners. [Laughter.] But live and learn. Live and learn.

Cohen: Live and learn. Did you have any downtime when you were at Myrtle Beach? And so, did you manage to travel around a bit?

Santine: No, it was just a lot of learning. And process and getting the feel for the new job and the new environment. Of course, it was nice... I didn't have a car. So, I was a little restricted. It was about maybe a mile or two... I don't even remember... to the beach. And nobody ever walked out of the base. And there I was... walking out of the base... At that time, there was one theater in town. And, on base, of course, there's the officer's club, which is the hub of the social life. And having it be a training base for fighter pilots so there was always a lot of activity on base to go to.

Cohen: Oh.

Santine: Of course, the bar was the hub. And... I think there was only one or two WACs on base. And the only other military women on base were the nurses. There were maybe eight of us. There weren't many. So, you know, you became a very important person. And the club was very, very active. And of course, I think that is attributed to the fact that there wasn't a whole lot going on in downtown Myrtle Beach, because it was very small at that time. And because it was such a transient base for these training programs. So, they had to keep things kind of lively for everybody. So, there was a lot of special nights going on, special parties going on, and, and um, we had the volleyball team. Things like that. So, most of the social events at Myrtle Beach were on base.

Cohen: So was that enjoyable for you?

Santine: Oh, yeah. It was a lot of fun. You know, all of a sudden, you're a minority and people paid attention to me as a female [Laughter.] It was win-win...so, yeah. It was a fun time. I met a lot of nice people. And then of course because this was how the military is like a family, you do run into these people when you go somewhere else. And you know you have things in common, places you've been, bases you've been, people you've met or might know... so, yeah, I met a lot of people that way. Because they did sponsor a lot of social events on base.

Cohen: How long were you at Myrtle Beach?

Santine: ...I was trying to get my dates together and you know memories fade. But not long. Less than a year.

Cohen: So, what was your next assignment?

Santine: I went to the Philippines.

Cohen: So, I was reading that there were about six hundred to eight hundred WAFS that served in Southeast Asia from 1965 to 1975. Was this considered a choice assignment for someone in the Nursing Corps at this time?

Santine: It wouldn't have been my first choice to be honest. But, like I said, it was overseas. We took care of the casualties. It was a really nice hospital. It had all the specialties. It was one of two medical centers in Southeast Asia. They had one in Japan and one in the Philippines. So, anybody stable enough to be able to fly out of Vietnam and needed further attention would either go to Japan or the Philippines. So, that was our mission to take care of these guys. And, like I said, we had all the specialty surgeons and some really extensive injuries. They had a nice, nice environment. A nice, nice hospital. So, even though, it probably wouldn't have been my first choice... I would have actually preferred...to go to Vietnam. But I wasn't a flight nurse either at that time. So, it turned out to be a really good assignment for a nurse.

Cohen: Was it hard? Um, like working with people who very badly injured and so on?

Santine: Well, I think the hardest thing was that they were all within a year or two of my age.

Cohen: Oh.

Santine: And you know...That was hard. And for the most part I have to say... They were fabulous patients. And for the most part their spirits were so good that they had survived regardless of whatever awful injuries they had. There were a few that got really depressed and it was everybody's job to perk them up. And the camaraderie between the staff and the patients... The lieutenant type nurses that were there... we all were within a year or two of most of these patients and so although it hit home a little harder, I think it worked pretty well. I think what was hardest is when as a twenty-one, twenty-two-year-old you've got rank over this fellow. So, you are not only the same age, but you are bossing him around. You are also causing him a lot of discomfort because of what you've got to do to him.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: ... [For] anybody that was really serious or maybe there for the long term, um, some of their families had come over. And boy, they were fabulous. ... They

would certainly cheer up the patients and stuff. But they kind of adopted everybody, you know. [Even] a couple of wives were there...

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: They took care of the staff as well. So, it was just the sense of camaraderie, and we were all in this, the same boat. Socially. You had to work long hours I think we usually worked about ten hours a day. And...

Cohen: Wow.

Santine: And usually six days a week. It depended on how busy it was, how many flights were coming in, but, um... On downtime, it was the same group of people. Everybody you worked with -- doctors, med techs, civilian doctors. They had an intern and residency program there for Filipino doctors. So, it was just this big conglomerate of people from all walks of life, all different ranks, all different types, that were not only together all day long at work, but any kind of socializing we did was with the same core group of people. Well, you know, you just bonded, bonded with everybody.

Cohen: And did the Filipino doctors or interns, um, did they speak English like... How did...

Santine: Oh, yeah. They... Most of the medical people, the Filipino medical people, be they doctors, nurses, or whatever, they usually come from a more affluent background...But they all speak English in the Philippines. They speak English in school. So, language was never an issue. As far as who you were working with. And they were a wonderful bunch of people...There was also in the Philippines, there's a term for a tribe of native people. They're a small, Negroid [group]... and they live in the, um, jungle.

Cohen: Hmm.

Santine: And during World War II, when the Japanese invaded the islands, they were never captured. They just retreated to the jungle. And the Americans, of course, who were captured, and the Filipinos were captured. There are terrible, horrible stories about that. But the Negrito tribes were never captured. And so, they carried on during World War II like a guerilla warfare team, you know, just popping out of the jungle attacking periodically and, um, when MacArthur came back, he was grateful to these native people and he said, you know, for the duration, we will take care of you. So, when I was there, they were working in the survival schools. They were teaching jungle survival to the...

Cohen: Oh, geeze...

Santine: To the soldiers. And, um, they did a lot of domestic work, too...MacArthur had said they were granted free medical care from the Americans [because of their role in WWII]

Cohen: Wow.

Santine: And they never... almost never would utilize that except for their children.

Cohen: Ah.

Santine: So, there was a pediatric department that frequently had the little native kids in there. And the nurses just doted on them. And sometimes the nurses would go out to the village and say hi to the kids and stuff.

Cohen: Oh, my.

Santine: But... I only had one Negrito outpatient. He was an older man, and he was on dialysis. He would come in just horrendous shape. Because he'd get into a fight. He was lucky he didn't die from it. Because at that point, when you did dialysis, everything was external. Your vein, your artery, essentially--

Cohen: Oh.

Santine: --exposed and wrapped in a bandage. And then they sent you home and you came back. He's living in this little village, and he would come back, and the bandage would be off...

Cohen: Oh, God.

Santine: And he was the only one that I ever had. He was the only native person that I ever took care of...

Cohen: Wow.

Santine: You know, meeting these different people, different cultures, and... Everybody got along. Like I said, we were just like one big family. Of course, you have to be like that in these situations... So, it's not like... It's not like when you are home or stateside, you know. It's a little different.

Cohen: Well, it's nice that people were open and worked together. And...

Santine: Yeah. Yeah. It should happen more, huh?

Cohen: It works out. [Laughter.] Um, where were you living when you were at Clark Air Force Base?

Santine: Because I was single, they had a large bachelor quarters where all the single people lived. And it was like a dormitory. Everybody had their own room and

their own bathroom. And then there was a little cafeteria on the first floor and a bar on the first floor. And they had, um, facilities to wash your clothes although everybody hired somebody to wash their clothes and so you never had access to the washing machines. Unless you wanted to get up at 2:00 in the morning. So you were better off hiring somebody to wash your clothes. [Laughter.] But you know with the climate over there, you had to change your clothes all the time. All you did was sweat.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: So, it was like a dormitory room. It was nice facilities. I mean the base itself was just beautiful. And then they had a lot of amenities too. They had a golf course. On your off time, there was nothing to do. So, you either played golf or you went swimming or you... In retrospect, I guess it was pretty luxurious.

Cohen: Was it because it was a large base? Like was it a...

Santine: Very large. Yes. Very large. Because it was a major base, ideally located in Southeast Asia. We had access to every country and... Uh. It was huge.

Cohen: And secure.

Santine: And then of course, you know, because I, um, had lived for those few months in Myrtle Beach and that was where a lot of the pilots trained, you know occasionally, I'd see somebody I knew or had met before.

Cohen: That's great.

Santine: And when pilots were in country and got a few days off, you only had a few days off. It wasn't like you could go home for a few days. So, what generally, the guys did that had a few days leave was they would go to Japan or the Philippines, where they thought this was living the life. And that was like their vacation spot. So, we had tremendous transient population coming in and out. And then just a short ways a way there was a naval base.

Cohen: Hmm.

Santine: That...was huge. It had... the aircraft carriers and a huge presence as well from the [US] Navy. So, there was always lots of stuff going on and lots of people coming and going.

Cohen: So, it felt very lively.

Santine: It was. Very lively. Yeah. Sometimes it wasn't totally safe to go into town. So they had to make sure there was plenty to keep people you know in one place.

Cohen: Where would you go if you were given a few days off?

Santine: They had... a place in the Philippines called Baggio. It was up in the mountains. So, it was cool. It looked like Pennsylvania.

Cohen: Oh, wow.

Santine: It was all forested hills. And they maintained...a lodge up there. They had little cabins. And they would rent them out to military people. It usually went to families. But if there was some left over... Because families were allowed to live over there. But if they had some openings... they would also rent them out to the singles, as well. And...it was such a beautiful place. I'll never forget that place. You know, again, everything in the Philippines seems to be on the beach. It's really nice. And to have this little cabin with a bunch of other nurses. It was great.

Cohen: Wow. Did you write letters to your parents? Or communicate in some other way with them?

Santine: You know, there was always letters...The other thing was this ham radio service. And... you could ham radio to... what was it? Maybe Hawaii. And then, Hawaii would forward it to California. And then California could maybe forward it to Chicago. So, you had this network going.

Cohen: Wow.

Santine: So, if you planned in advance, you could call home. Of course, you're talking to your mother, and you got to say, "Over". "How are you doing, Mom, over." And you know, and they'll say, "over" so it doesn't disconnect. It opens up the channel for her to respond. So, that took a little getting used to. But that was kind of a fun kind of thing. It didn't happen too often, obviously. But that was kind of fun. Otherwise, you know it was letters. And you know mail was such a big deal. And I remember at the USO... Somebody from home... had donated a subscription to *The [Chicago] Tribune*. I think it was just the Sunday paper.

Cohen: Mmm.

Santine: And they picked me to get it. Oh, I just thought that was the neatest thing in the world. That I had this newspaper from home.

Cohen: Oh, it's true.

Santine: ...The USO did a lot too.

Cohen: Did you have access to other news? Or the *Stars and Stripes*? Or anything else?

Santine: *The Stars and Stripes*, of course. You had the radio and *The Stars and Stripes*. So, yeah, you pretty much knew what was going on. You know, it wasn't like you were isolated.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: But, uh, you can't help but miss home too, you know.

Cohen: Yeah, you're quite far away.

Santine: And it's not like you're... It's not like you went to New York or California. You're gone. Things are different and you know that I just can't drive home if I feel like it. Nor can you hop on a plane. Well, but the letters...

Cohen: How...

Santine: ...the letters were really important. And I know because my sister would [write often] ... She was in college at the time. So, um, we were very close. We are still very close, and you know when you are overseas it's a shopper's paradise. You buy all this stuff you find because it's all new and different.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: Until it's not new and different anymore. And you can't believe you bought all this stuff. [Laughter.] But I would send little things to her because she was in school. So, we were kind of in the same boat. We lived on the mail and the packages.

Cohen: What things would your parents send you in packages?

Santine: My mother was a big grocery person. She really couldn't send a whole lot of groceries. Not too good at that. But packages were for the pantry. But occasionally, I'd get one – it always had to be food. [Laughter.]

Cohen: How long were you in um the Philippines approximately?

Santine: Um, almost a year and a half.

Cohen: Wow. Did you want to go back? Or were you assigned to go back?

Santine: Actually, in the Philippines my time was up. So, I was scheduled to get out. But, you know, frankly, I wasn't ready to get out...So, I extended for a year... But the perk there was - were I to go home from the Philippines I would have just flown to California and mustered out, and then went home. But because I was on orders to go to a different base, and I had all this time accumulated. All this leave time, because you couldn't take much leave when you're over there although I did get to go to some neat places. I opted to go east instead of west.

So, I got to go by India, and Thailand, and Greece, and Spain. All on my way home.

Cohen: Oh, wow. Oh, my goodness.

Santine: So, that was fun. And yet you know I can't believe when I look back that it was no big deal. But I did all this stuff by myself. And in my old age [that] kind of surprises me somewhat. But again, wherever you go you met people. Nice people.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: And you buddied up with them for the interim. You know, you made friends to go to dinner for the night or... Yeah. It was just... It was good.

Cohen: So, it sounds like you were quite fearless.

Santine: You know I never thought I was. I always... In some ways, I just wanted a little adventure. But I wanted to make sure that I wasn't on my own. Boy, being in the service, you're not on your own. Because you've got the government behind you. And yet wherever you go there's a feeling an element of being protected. You know, even if you're by yourself, there's always somebody to talk to or somebody to go to if you're stuck. So, my god, it all turned out. I had some wonderful times and met wonderful people. You know, no complaints.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: Well, I shouldn't say that, because the strongest memories are always the complaints. But those aren't the things you talk about, you know.

Cohen: Well, okay, I'll ask you this. What was one highlight going back and what was one complaint?

Santine: Oh, everything was a highlight going back.

Cohen: Yeah. Yeah.

Santine: You know, the places you went, and it wasn't always the tourist route. For instance, uhm... I... Where was I going? I was supposed to... I was in England or Spain. And I had to be in England for my flight home like in two weeks or something. And I didn't want to spend two weeks in either place. So, there was a plane going to Crete.

Cohen: Oh.

Santine: So, I got a ride there. I thought from Crete I would go to Athens because I always wanted to see Greece.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: And the weather was horrible. It was Christmas. The weather was bad. And I got to Crete and there wasn't a plane going out for a couple of days. So, I had the option...to stay there a couple of days. So, I went into town to get some money. And I'm never comfortable if I don't speak the language, anyway. You know, I feel so much better if I can communicate.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: Crete was not a place I could communicate. So, I got to the bank and I'm in line and there's this girl about my age with long blond hair, is line with me.

Cohen: Oh.

Santine: And she taps me on the shoulder, and she says, "You're American?" Yes. She says, oh, me too. She'd been backpacking all across Crete and Greece. And she said, "You want to hang out for a couple of days. We can share the expense." And I said, "Oh yes." Because she spoke the language. She had been there before, and she knew places off the beaten track. So, I had a great time. A great time. And then when my time was up, I went to the base. And the plane was allegedly going to [Athens]... It was supposed to be a short flight to Athens. And it got canceled. And instead, they said they were going to England. So, I just went to England.

Cohen: Aww. Okay.

Santine: ... Traveling as I was alone [could have been difficult] But I was on orders. So, if you are like on a vacation, you kind of have to fend for yourself. You go to a city, and you don't stay on base, if they don't have room. You have to go to town and stay downtown or whatever. And you are on your own. But if you are on orders, they have to provide you with housing. So, I am supposed to be going to New Jersey from England. I am on orders, so, they have to put you up. So, when they put you up, they usually don't have, [at least] back then, they didn't have separate facilities for men and women. So, more than once, I'd be in a wing of housing. A lot of them were like...motels.... The smaller ones were like motels, side by side rooms. Some of them were bigger. More like hotels. And, um, they are set up for transient people. And they are short-term stays. And again, they are mostly male. So they all have their own bedroom. But they had a Jack and Jill bathroom. So, you [had] to be careful to make sure your bathrooms are locked all the time. But guys, being guys, didn't often lock their door. I was meticulous always locking my door. But unfortunately more than once I was locked out of the bathroom. So, you'd have to get dressed. Go the room next door and knock on the door. And of course they'd look at me like, "Who are you

and what are you doing here?" [Laughter.] And I'd say I'm really in the room next door and I am locked out of the bathroom. And they'd be all embarrassed and stuff. Because so much of that stuff was set up for...males.

Cohen: Yeah, yeah. They weren't used to...

Santine: And then one time I had to call ahead and tell them I was coming. I was on orders, so they had to give me a room. They asked me who I was. You have to give your rank, and your name, and all that. And I was just a proud captain. I just made it. And I got there, and they looked at me. And they said, you're Air Force. And, I said, uh huh. For whatever reason, they thought I was Navy. Well, in the Navy, a captain is a big, big deal. So they had set aside a VIP room. So, they [laughter.] put me in this VIP room. And they said don't touch the re Fridg-- anything. We'll have you out of here in a night. I said, okay. It was a tad humbling. But it wasn't my fault that they thought I was Navy. You know, I didn't misrepresent myself or anything. But yeah, that was kind of funny. And they did have me out the next day into a regular Jack and Jill bathroom.

Cohen: [Laughter.] Mary, how did you get promoted through the ranks?

Santine: You know, I don't know. At times, I got a little mouthy and got on my soap box and I would get called to the principal's office. And told, you know, to desist. But I think that it was just kind of the right time. Promotions came really fast and regular. And I know people... that nurses that came in maybe three months after me were on a different track. And they didn't get that promotion that I was getting regularly. So, I was kind of impressed. I was glad and I knew I was lucky. Because not everybody was on whatever track I was on. It just kind of happened. I don't know.

Cohen: So, like at some point, let's say after you had been in the service after X amount of time they would come and say/declare that now you were...

Santine: They did. It was a time thing. But like I said some people [who] as a group that came in after me seemed to be on a slower track. So, whether they were slowing down or changing the regulations then I don't know.

Cohen: Aww.

Santine: I just don't know. But I know I was lucky.

Cohen: [Laughter.] It's good.

Santine: I was lucky.

Cohen: So, I think you said you had signed up for another year. So, where were you assigned to next?

Santine: I went to Altus in Oklahoma.

Cohen: Oh.

Santine: It was funny, because... they allegedly give you a choice of where you want to go. When I got Myrtle Beach, I had asked for Florida. When I got Altus, Oklahoma, I, well, ... I had kind of learned my lesson by that time and I had thought you can't be too specific. So I asked them for anything east of the Mississippi River. [Laughter.] So, I went to Oklahoma. But, uh, I really liked Oklahoma. Again, that was one of those... It was a tiny little town. But they had two theaters, I think. And again it was one of those hospitals that only had twenty-five, thirty beds. It was another little place. But I mean the variety...It was the basis for my whole career. I had exposure and experience from soup to nuts. From the small places to the big place. To the type of diseases and wounds. I mean in Chicago, I would never would have seen shrapnel wounds or malaria or any of those foreign kinds of things. You know, it was really good for me.

Cohen: Were there any mentors along the way? Like even in the small hospitals? Like an experienced nurse who could give/ provide some advice or...

Santine: There was one when I first went to Myrtle Beach. She was about thirty. So, I thought of her as an older woman. [Laughter] And I can't believe I said that. But she was a spitfire. She was such a rebel. And she didn't mince anything. And she kind of took me under her wing because I was quiet. I wasn't going to make waves unless things were going really bad. And I was just so righteous. But anyway, she kind of took me under her wing. And she did show me the ropes. And she would never mince words with anybody. I am probably an average size. You know, she was petite. But, oh boy, she'd take the place by storm. [Laughter.] And you know, she was a captain. And I was a 2nd lieutenant then. She was probably my mentor. She was an OB nurse. So, we didn't really work together. But I still keep in touch with her.

Cohen: Oh, my.

Santine: Yeah, I still hear from her every Christmas. We, um, communicate. Yeah, she was my first and my best.

Cohen: Your best. [pause] Where did you live when you were at Altus Air Force Base?

Santine: Um, well, again, I didn't have a car. So, I stayed on base until they said I couldn't stay anymore. I think they gave you thirty days. And then there was this housing area that was a series of apartment buildings in the middle of a farm field, cotton field and one building was all studio apartments. So, I got an apartment there. And the girl who lived upstairs from me... she was some kind of therapist. She had a car. So, I had a ride to and from anyway. And a couple of months later I

finally got a car. Which was a whole other experience. But I guess we were a couple of miles from base. But it was a... very rural kind of area.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: It was five hours from Dallas.

Cohen: Hmm.

Santine: And, I think, two or three from Oklahoma City. So, we were like in the middle.

Cohen: So... I am sorry. Go ahead.

Santine: No, go ahead.

Cohen: Uhm, when did your active-duty end?

Santine: Uhm... December of '72.

Cohen: So, were you considering staying on or renewing it? What was going through your mind?

Santine: ... I had determined that I was career. I was going to go places. I was, "gonna move on up". I was going to be a general, you know. I was very career oriented. I never thought of marriage or anything like that. There wasn't any possibilities along the line. But I was really focused. Politics at the time were swaying me a bit. I met somebody that I thought aw, this is not a good time for me... [bot] I really liked him. And, um, you know, why couldn't you come a few years late? This is a crux. Do I go career? And I thought, you know what, I need to continue going to school. However, at the time, it was President Nixon, and he froze everything. So, there was no future... All schooling was on hold as far as active-duty personnel. And I thought, this is so wrong. How do you expect people to do a better job if you can't continue your education? I couldn't go up to any specialty Air Force schools. I couldn't go to and take college credits. Couldn't do any of that.

Cohen: Hmm.

Santine: And in the meantime, I've got this long-distance romance going on, which was kind of interfering with my career goals. Then my chief nurse came to me, and she said they were going to offer me a regular commission, which was huge. I mean that was the career track... Everybody that doesn't graduate from the Academy or Annapolis, or West Point goes in as a career reserve--

Cohen: Oh, I see.

Santine: --which means that you have to renew. Every time your time is up, you have to reapply, renew your commitment... You can renew for four years or whatever. And keep doing that every four years...It's not the track most career people are in. It's the regular commission. That's what the graduates of the Air Force Academy are in. So, to be offered that is really an honor... It means you're going to move in the ranks. They've seen some kind of potential. I thought, Ah, what a time for this to come...Then, within a week or two of her telling me this, I get a proposal... I have to choose... You know, at that point, you could be married and, in the service, but it wasn't a healthy career thing for a woman. Things were different, you know. Things were different.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: Not that you couldn't be. Certainly, there were a lot of married women. But they were married to men of higher rank usually or the same rank. And they weren't married to civilians. My guy was a civilian.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: ... And then, to add insult to injury, I was told... I couldn't... He lived in Philadelphia. I was told that I couldn't transfer to New Jersey because there was a freeze. And no active-duty personnel could transfer.

Cohen: Aww.

Santine: Well, shoot. What is the sense of being married if I am half a country away? I was mad anyway because I couldn't go to school. So, I said, well, the writing is on the wall for me. So, I got out. And I got married. And I joined the Reserves for a short time.

Cohen: So, where... How had you met the man whom you married?

Santine: Oh, boy... I worked with him in the Philippines. And he got out. And of course I kept going because I was career. But he kept writing to me. And you know, I really do like this [guy]...He kept writing and writing. [Laughter.] And when I came back to the United States I got to come through New Jersey to fly to Chicago. And he was there waiting for me.

Cohen: Oh.

Santine: Wow, this is romantic. And then, he actually came down to see me in Oklahoma. Boy, oh boy, this guy is for real. You know. [Laughter.] And we'd live happily ever after. So, it was worth the career... Plus, I've always had a job I loved. But to be honest... No regrets. [Laughter]. No regrets.

Cohen: So, you get married...

Santine: He was in school. And he was in school so he couldn't even transfer down because there was no school for him to go to.

Cohen: Oh gosh.

Santine: You know, I thought this is... going to be maybe an easier decision. Because I would have tried to work both sides of the street there. But they weren't making it easy for me. So, I said, "Give up the fight. Most of my battles were tiny." [laughter.] ...

Cohen: So, you moved with your husband to Philadelphia?

Santine: So, I moved to Philadelphia. And he was in school. And then eventually he went to school in Ireland, so we moved to Ireland for a little while.

Cohen: Oh, wow.

Santine: And then we moved back here when it was time to have a family because this was the place to grow up. And now believe it or not, my children all live far away. "I came here for you." [Laughter.] But that's a different chapter.

Cohen: So, did you look for a job right away? I'm not sure what to call it? Like in civilian nursing?

Santine: Oh yeah, I did, because he was in school.

Cohen: Right, right.

Santine: Yeah, so I got a job in a university hospital which was great.

Cohen: And what inspired you to join the Air Force Reserves?

Santine: Well, Maguire Air Base was not far... about an hour out of Philadelphia.

Cohen: Oh.

Santine: So, that was an easy one. So, once I got to Maguire, I went to flight school because if... Schools were open to reservists. They weren't open to active duty.

Cohen: Why...

Santine: I know... politics is politics. You either just have to wait it out or deal with it, you know... So then, I went to flight school. And that was wonderful... but the school really wasn't geared as much for the type of crafts flight nurses fly on.... Oh, I'm sorry.. Flight school was in Texas. San Antonio.

Cohen: Oh.

Santine: San Antonio for flight school.

Cohen: So, in flight school were you learning how to become a flight nurse? Like...

Santine: Well, you learn about the airplane and, you know, emergency kinds of things that you have to do that you only encounter on an airplane--

Cohen: Oh.

Santine: -- and the precautions you had to take. You know, you trained on different aircraft. They had this spiffy little plane that was set up like a hospital ship... Most nurses never get to fly on it. They fly on the big jets...that are transport carriers. So in flight nursing school you learn about the aircraft, how to treat the patient, what are really specific to the patient needs in that environment, and you know basic stuff like that. There is an element of survival tactics that you have to learn if the plane goes down.

Cohen: Oh.

Santine: ...how you get the patients off if they are in the water or whatever. You know. Things of that nature...That was really good. Then out of Maguire we flew to places like Germany and Panama.

Cohen: Wow.

Santine: Well, the Panama were training flights. The flights around New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, those were training flights. The flights to and from Germany were patient flights. You'd go there and pick up service people and then bring them home. They were usually rehab situations where... where the [where the patients were] walking wounded or the guys in drug rehab. Or something like that. They weren't severe cases. Very few IVs or stretcher kind of people. Although, there were those. Most of them were able to sit in seats.

Cohen: Oh. Okay. Not everybody was a case of lifesaving emergency care?

Santine: Right.

Cohen: Emergency care.

Santine: They were mostly going home because they were well enough to go home. And that they could be treated for whatever needs they had in a rehab institute of some sort. Be it orthopedic or mental or whatever.

Cohen: How did you coordinate your job at the university hospital with your responsibilities as a flight nurse in the Reserves?

Santine: Well, by law, the job...has to allow you a weekend a month and two weeks during the year to do whatever training that is required of you in the Reserves. There are certainly many other opportunities to... if you want to use your

vacation time or the job allows you to take extra time off. But basically, by law, they have to give you a weekend a month and the two weeks. So, unfortunately, as a regular nurse, I worked shift work. So, often, not every time, but often enough I would have to work the night shift on Friday and go in on Saturday.

Cohen: Oh my God.

Santine: Yeah. You know they weren't all that friendly sometimes. But anyway, it was good. You know once or twice they'd even send me to the hospital at Maguire to help out there.

Cohen: Ok. Yeah.

Santine: Mostly, you know, it was training...The Reserves are mostly training. You know, so you are ready...The amount of training pays off.

Cohen: Yes.

Santine: Sometimes it is what in the world do they have to do this for? Another checklist. But that is how you keep a cool head and the job done when you need to. It's all about the training.

Cohen: I agree. Yeah. Hmm. Were there other courses that were taught like within the Reserves? Or did you further your education after that?

Santine: Well, because the flights out of Maguire were over water you had to take a course in sea survival. So, that was what I first talked you about by mistake. That was in Florida. Sea survival course.

Cohen: Oh, okay.

Santine: There were multiple survival courses. They have the Arctic. They had the jungle. They have sea. Uhm.

Cohen: That's wild.

Santine: They have regular flight school. The only one I went to was, the sea survival because I was flying over water. And that was not truly set up a whole lot for the type of training we needed. Because it was geared more towards the pilots and people that may have to eject. Nonetheless, it was very valuable training. But sometimes I had to laugh. I didn't need to know how to eject from my seat to go into the water with that seat strapped to my back. I needed to know how to get the people off the airplane because if the plane...

Cohen: Right, right.

Santine: Had to go down in the water, the probability would be that it would float. And that you would have time to access all the emergency [equipment] and whatever to unload the passengers. And so that's what we trained for. How to react in the emergency where the plane was to go down over water. And that was fun. Sometimes not so much fun because I am really not a swimmer. I had to be labeled a non-swimmer.

Cohen: So, you're a not a swimmer?

Santine: Yeah. It sounds kind of dopey. But I am out there floating around in the water. Bobbing with all these vests and stuff on. Because they dump you in the water. ... They'd take you out and they would inflate the parachute. And they take you up 500, 800 feet, whatever it was. And then you had to release the parachute and float down. And then once you hit the water, hopefully you'd remember your training and you'd get the stupid harness off you so you wouldn't be dragged under the water.

Cohen: Oh, God.

Santine: There were boats there to pick you up if you were in trouble. So... And because they wouldn't even take you out on choppy days. It wasn't too hard to get out of the parachute. And then the little raft would come and pick you up. And you had to float out in that raft for I don't know how long. And pretending you were fishing and signaling and [laughter] doing all this kind of stuff. And ironically, I was the only woman in my raft. I was the only one that couldn't swim in my raft, and I was the highest ranking in my raft which didn't go over well with my raft mates. [laughter] But you know it only lasted a few hours out there in the water. So they had to put up [with me]. So that was okay. [laughter] Lessons learned. Always lessons learned.

Cohen: How did you find the parachuting itself? Did you get special training for that aspect as well? The parachuting out of the plane?

Santine: You train for everything. You know. It's grueling. You have your checklist in your head. All the things you have to do. First of all, allegedly, when your exiting the plane your parachute opens by itself. But there is a whole checklist of things that you just practice till ... forever. You know [how] to get out of the harness. So that once the parachute hits the water it doesn't drag you down.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: So... But you know, as I said, there are certainly emergency vehicles around in case you goofed up. And nobody had to be rescued. We all made it to our rafts. Sometimes with a little more help than others. But. Yeah.

Cohen: It sounds like they were doing it safely. With backup.

Santine: Yeah, they were. But I just remember the bull horn telling my raft to make sure they got me, because they weren't very aggressive for me. But nonetheless I was bobbing along. I was okay.

Cohen: Did you earn like wings for jumping?

Santine: Yes, if you are a flight nurse you are qualified to transport patients as a crew member. So, yeah. I mean it's prestigious. You know, it was what I always wanted to be.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: So, it was good.

Cohen: Uhm, so when did you leave the Reserves? Or when did it come to an end?

Santine: Well, I left. I was only in about a year. And a... My husband was graduating, and he was going to go to graduate school overseas. So, that was the end of it for me.

Cohen: Okay, that was when you went to Ireland?

Santine: Yes.

Cohen: Okay. [pause] Uhm, when you joined the Air Force at a time when there were some milestones for women. Like I was reading in 1969, women were allowed to join the Air Force Reserve Officers Training Corps or in 1971 Jeanne M. Holm became the first woman to become a brigadier general. Were you aware of these milestones at the time? Did they have any impact on you?

Santine: Well, the first didn't because as a nurse you go in as an officer. The OTC [Officer Training Corps] is for enlisted that can apply to go.

Cohen: Okay.

Santine: I was commissioned because I was already a nurse.

Cohen: Okay.

Santine: Um, but knowing there was a general... All the nurses were just so pleased.

Cohen: Yeah, yeah. Uhm, similarly, it is my understanding that the nurses were all in the forces broadened a lot in the '50s and '60s. Like more nurses worked with trauma or began to work in MASH [Mobile Army Surgical Hospital] units in combat zones, like did these changes have any impact on you? Or the nature of the Nursing Corps? Or the people with whom you were working?

Santine: I don't know. That's a hard one. You know, like I said, I wasn't very active as a young person. But MASH was one of my favorites. I thought they [the television series] was so realistic.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: You know, it always bothered me that women got treated a little differently or didn't have the same options as men. So, there was times when I was outspoken... Like I said, a lot of it was silly little things. Sometimes, it is just the little things that really drive you nuts.

Cohen: What was one of the little things that bothered you? Or that you spoke out about?

Santine: You know, I... This is going to sound really silly, but as I say this... but when I was in Myrtle Beach, there was only maybe eight or nine nurses and maybe one or two WAF on the whole base of thousands of men. And aside from the one or two WAFs, all the women were in the hospital squadron. We were all nurses.

Cohen: Oh.

Santine: So, they had a volleyball team. Well, I grew up in Chicago. I went to an all-girls school. The only sports girls played in my time were volleyball and basketball. And basketball had stupid girl rules compared to the real basketball game

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: So, to me, volleyball was a girls' sport. I didn't know anybody else played it seriously... So I signed up for the volleyball team and I was told I wasn't allowed because they didn't have females. I was just so out done. I said we are the only squadron that has girls and it's a girl sport, anyway.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: Because I didn't know any better. So I said, you got to be kidding me. They said, "No you are not allowed to play." So, I, uhm, I was mouthing off a little bit you know. Telling everybody that wanted to listen that this was not fair. [Laughter.] It was not fair... You know I wasn't a good player. If I was really good, it would have made a difference. But I wasn't. I was not good at all, but I think that if I wanted to play. I should be able to play.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: I shouldn't be disqualified because I was a girl. So, anyway, I was bemoaning the fact at the Officer's Club and one of the squadrons said, "Hey, you can play with us. We don't have any rules like that." [Laughter.] You know ... I'm good with

that. I'll play with somebody else. So, when the hospital commander found out I was going to play with another team. I was told I couldn't play for their team. I could only play for my own team, but my own team wouldn't allow me. [Laughter.] It went all the way to the base commander. Some stupid little thing, like this. And then lo and behold, I got sick.

Cohen: Oh.

Santine: And the doctor said no physical activity... Maybe he didn't want me to play in the first place. But anyway...no physical activity. I was allowed to be on the team. I was allowed to sit on the bench. But I could not play. [Laughter.] So, I lost the war. I won the battle and lost the war on that one... It was stupid little things like that. So, stupid things.

Cohen: Well, Ginny [Narsete] pointed out that women who served during this time on the Honor Flight [2021] were trailblazers. In a way, that's true. Like the things, you know, that would maybe be taken for granted today, had to become issues then. Like this story that you told.

Santine: I know. Even me. It's hard to believe that in my grandmother's time, they couldn't vote. I mean, how unreal is that?

Cohen: Yeah. Yeah.

Santine: And then to women today, "What do you mean we can't go into the Army? What do you mean we can't do this? What do you mean we can't go to space?" I mean...

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: It's unreal to think that within our lifetime things have changed so much.

Cohen: Yes, it's true.

Santine: So much. I can remember when bars... women had to be segregated in some bars. Or certain parts of the bars. Or the men's clubs. You know... I mean... So many things that are just unheard of today that were part of the norm back then.

Cohen: Yeah. I also want to marvel at some of these changes.

Santine: I mean so much has happened, and it is hard to think that things were like they were. Things we take for granted now.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: You know... Women twenty years ago couldn't take for granted. So that's kind of an eye-opener.

Cohen: Yeah. On the subject of changes, I know that men began to be accepted to the Air Force Nursing Corps in 1955. But did you yourself come across male nurses when you served?

Santine: No. I didn't know any.

Cohen: Yeah, yeah. Interesting. Yeah.

Santine: I know there was a med tech that I met. And when he got out, he asked me for a... to write a reference. He was going to use me as a reference... He wanted to apply to nursing school.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: And that was the only...

Cohen: That's close. As a...

Santine: Yeah. Close.

Cohen: I don't know if this is a fair question because you worked in many different like environments. But I was wondering over the five years, had you noticed changes in the practice of military nursing?

Santine: You mean like professional practices?

Cohen: Yeah. Or equipment? Or the ways of approaching the patients?

Santine: No. No. I don't think so. No, I don't think so. I can't think of anything special. But I do have one more funny story.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: You...

Cohen: You know, it's good. I do.

Santine: Again, I was brand new. I think I had been in the Air Force maybe my second month at Myrtle Beach. And, uh, you learn in basic that there is no rank on pajamas. That was what they said. [Laughter.] I could tell you, you had to take your pills whether you were a private or a general. It didn't matter. You know. There's no rank on your pajamas.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: I'm your health care worker. I'm in charge here.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: So, anyway... I am at Myrtle Beach... Of course, it's a small place. And there is only one nurse per shift. So, I am working 3:00 to 11:00. And this retired gentleman comes in. And he needs a simple surgery for the next day. Everything is done. I just have to admit him. And because it was nothing bad, I was going through the routine of admitting him. You know, getting his vital signs. And assigning him a room. And there were some semi-private rooms that were near the nurse's station and then there was like a back room that was reserved for the simple surgeries. You know, the one-day events.

Cohen: Hmm.

Santine: They would have their surgery in the morning and then they'd either go home the next day or the day after. You know. Healthy individuals and that you didn't need to keep a close eye on. Because the way the place was laid out the room was out of sight.

Cohen: Hmmm.

Santine: And they had maybe six or seven beds in there. And I think there were a couple of young guys back there recuperating from something. And they were sitting back there playing cards. So, this man came in and he was going to have surgery the next morning. And it was no big deal. So, I put him back there. I came to work the next day and got reamed. "Didn't I look at his admission papers?" I said, "Yeah, he's getting a surgery." "And where did you put him?" I said, "I put him in the bay because he's going home." And they said, "Lieutenant, this is a retired admiral. Show him some respect. And she said it so loud that they could hear it in the front room. [Laughter.] Oh brother...What happened to no rank on your pajamas? And oh, that didn't go over either. I just shut my mouth and went into the room and apologized to him. And he was just so gracious. And he said, "They made me move up here." And he said, "You don't need to apologize. I had the best time. I had good company. We played cards all night." That made me feel a little bit better. [laughter.] I'll never forget that, you know. Be careful of the unwritten word. Right. The rules that aren't on paper.

Cohen: It's sometimes hard to pick those up.

Santine: ... He was just going to be an out patient. But he was fine. He was fine with it. But some people really get into that rank thing.

Cohen: Right.

Santine: And I have to say the Nurse Corps... [is not that] as strict or regimented... Some of that stuff doesn't come across as [all that] serious. Seriousness is your physical and mental well-being.

Cohen: Yes.

Santine: Not so much the brass on your collar. And the stripes on your shirt... [laughter]. ... And again a lot of that is the difference between stateside and overseas, too. Because everything is a little more regimented stateside and when you go overseas it's a little bit different. Sometimes, it's hard to separate the two. Going from the camaraderie in the one arena back to the salute, "Yes, Ma'am; no, Ma'am stuff. "

Cohen: Oh. Okay. I see.

Santine: Yeah, it's a little bit different. You know.

Cohen: Well, that makes sense. What did your uniform look like? And did you like it? I realize its superficial in light of the work that was being done. But I just wondered what your thoughts were about it.

Santine: Well, in the hospital, you had to wear this white starchy thing and a cap. You always had to have this cap. And that was okay because all through school you had to wear the starchy thing... They were doing the laundry. So that was okay. Nurses' uniforms for students, for military, they were all done in the hospital laundry. So that was no big deal. Uhm, your dress uniform got almost no wear and tear... That was just a navy-blue suit. That was fine. And in the summer, there was a light weight one. And that was fine. Like I said, I rarely rarely wore it. And then they had a formal suit. If you ever got invited to one of the formal military dinners, you had to wear that. And that looked like... more like a tuxedo [laughter] and then as a flight nurse, you wore navy blue pants and a navy-blue tunic... And that was fine. That was comfortable. And easy to work in.

Cohen: So, was that the first uniform that had pants? Out of curiosity?

Santine: Pants?

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: Yeah...The plane is not a clean environment, and you can't be going around there with little heels and your skirt, you know.

Cohen: Right. So, you wrote on the form from Operation Herstory that some of the best experiences for you involved overseas patients. So, would this have been in the Philippines?

Santine: Yes. I mean these patients; they were trauma victims. There were ugly wounds. There's no such thing as a clean wound.

Cohen: No.

Santine: And sometimes the flight would come in and there would be more than we anticipated. And the stretchers had to be put on the floor until we rearranged some of the beds, so that they could be put in a bed. Some of their dressings, some were primary. So they still had some grit and stuff in them...The wounds were horrendous. And yet they all... And yet they kept their sense of humor. If they felt better, they were in the practical joke mode. And they were just...

Cohen: Isn't that something...

Santine: Fun. They were, they were good. They were a pleasure. Not that there weren't the gripe-y, whine-y ones as well. But they were in pain. They were patients. They're allowed to do that. And they got over it.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: Yeah. It's just the thankfulness and that you were giving them attention. And you know, they could goof around, and you'd be okay with it. It wasn't the totally strict environment. You know you'd walk into a room, and they'd all be laughing and carrying on. And then you'd walk in, and it would get real quiet. And then somebody would have a snarky remark to make and then everybody would start laughing. I mean it was fun.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: They all bonded in their own victim like way, as well. [Laughter.]

Cohen: It's, uhm... It is sort of inspiring to see how they kept their spirits up and had fun in spite of the wounds.

Santine: Yeah...[but] then you knew most of them had to go back. And go through this painful mental and physical transition. You know they had to learn to walk better or walk at all. Or... They had these ugly scars. And you know as a nurse that's in a hospital it's all about the here and now. I... Myself personally I don't often think about the road down the line.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: It's my job to get you from here to here.

Cohen: Yes.

Santine: And then good luck and you are on your way. But that's a very short time. The bulk of it is after they leave me. After they leave the hospital. Going to another hospital or rehab or wherever. It takes months if not years of...skin grafts or you know, prosthetics, prosthetic training, and fitting...That part of my brain is just locked out. I don't have to deal with that. I'm glad. I much prefer the here and now. But they kept their spirits up. You just hope and pray that that continued. You know, when they were separated from all their buddies and that close environment and went on to a different environment, that they could re-bond and reconnect and make a go of it for the long haul ahead. And you think the gut wound and colostomy and the limb damage. The scarring, you know. It's hard on somebody who is only eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: And it is worse now. I mean. Back then, you didn't save as many as they save today. Today, there is a lot more horrendous wounds that people survive. So that is even harder for them.

Cohen: Oh that's true. Like a longer road to recovery.

Santine: Right.

Cohen: Recovery.

Santine: Yes. but you know you always have that physical memory when you look at the wound.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: It may be healed, physically, but it's always there.

Cohen: It's always there. Uhm, you also mentioned in the form that you filled out that you really appreciated the med techs and...

Santine: They... Well, for the most part, they were enlisted. For the most part, men. Although, there were some women. And they acted above and beyond nursing assistance. Here were young people who didn't for the most part, they didn't want to serve in combat. But they had no way not to go. Their number was up they had to go.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: You know, it wasn't their choice. And a lot of them were Pacifist kind of people. Not all. But they were there to do a job and they did a wonderful job. And they did things that required training certainly, but things that I had spent years in school learning, they were given a six-week course to do.

Cohen: Hmm.

Santine: And they did it so well. I mean, sometimes there were a few that would laugh at some of my dressings and then they would go and put me to shame the way they did them. And I just marveled at how they just picked this ball up and went with it... It's not like they had the background knowledge or the science behind it.

Cohen: Wow.

Santine: But the technical expertise that they ended up performing their job duties...You had to remind them not to overstep. You can't do that. First of all, you think you are doing it right. But maybe you are not doing it right. But they just so embraced taking care of patients. And doing it with empathy and skill, technique. I mean they just wowed me sometimes. You know there is always those that don't. Just like in a regular job. You know, you've got your good ones and your not so good ones. But the majority were just terrific.

Cohen: Amazing.

Santine: Terrific.

Cohen: Uhm, how did the sense of camaraderie differ in the military versus civilian nursing? Or was it similar?

Santine: There was more of a bond, like, you're kind of in this all together. Now, overseas, it is a 24/7. Stateside, you still have a life. You know,

Cohen: Yeah, yeah.

Santine: It's more of a job. You bond as well as you do with any co-workers. But then after hours you have a whole other life. If you are overseas, not so much.

Cohen: Uh-huh.

Santine: Your after hours is the same as your working hours. It's the same people. It's the same environment. It's different. Unless you are in that overseas restricted environment. At home, it's like a civilian relationship.

Cohen: Yeah, yeah. [pause] So, I have a question. Maybe. If it's not relevant, just let me know. Uhm, so many view the U.S. involvement in Vietnam War as a proxy war between Communism and Democracy. What was your understanding of the Vietnam War at the time?

Santine: Well. That's complex. I... Like you said, I didn't get involved in politics.

Cohen: Yeah, yeah.

Santine: I felt like I should do something too. It wasn't so much my country right or wrong. But there were people over there. They didn't want to be over there either. And who was going to take care of them if they got hurt. So, I felt like I should do something. On the other hand, it was a stupid war. And nobody was winning this war...Nobody had what they needed to either end it or retreat from it. It was very much a proxy war. And not that I took sides in any which way. I decided to get involved and really didn't make any decision one way or the other. However, it was a stupid war. And it was mean that they weren't nice to these soldiers coming back. And there is always that hidden resentment I had. I had people spit on the sidewalk in front of me.

Cohen: Really?

Santine: Being called a baby killer for god's sake. I am a nurse. You know, that sense. I will never forget that! Never. And yet, I am glad that people appreciate them now. Because they were sent into a war that nobody was really committed to. But they had to go anyway.

Cohen: And you were treating the people who had went.

Santine: Yeah. You know, I was sincere. And that is why all these guys who are my age they are all kind of scarred. You know.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: Because nobody backed them.

Cohen: Hmm.

Santine: Anyhow...

Cohen: Did...

Santine: That's neither here nor there. It's over.

Cohen: Did it make a difference where in the country you were? Like, you you know what I mean, whether you were in Chicago or Philadelphia?

Santine: I don't think so.

Cohen: No.

Santine: I don't think so. [pause] I mean, like I said, I wasn't all that aware of stuff.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: As far as that went. I didn't feel I really had a political voice. I wasn't really active. And I guess I kind of lived in my own little world there...

Cohen: Yeah, I know, I was just wondering in terms of your experience. I see what you... Uhm, is there a moment that you were most proud of?

Santine: Nothing stands out. No.

Cohen: Uhm, and what are you looking forward to for the Women's Honor Flight to Washington?

Santine: Uhm, you know, I am not really sure. I had a friend who went a couple of years ago. And he was just awed. He was just so impressed and so grateful. And he couldn't say enough good about it. He keeps in touch with the people that were involved. And you know, to be honest, I didn't think for me... It should be such a big deal. I didn't do anything. I just went... There was nothing special. I did my job. And I loved it. And I would do it again. But it wasn't special. There were thousands like me. We just went and we did a job. And to be recognized for that above and beyond it should be saved for the people that had to sacrifice more or did more. I am just on the fence about all this. Although, it is such an honor to be asked. Sometimes, I fell maybe it is misplaced.

Cohen: Well, isn't it a special contribution that you gave years of your life to save lives using your skill and your intelligence?

Santine: But I would have done it anyway. I was a nurse. You know. You know, I'd... maybe, it's a little bit of much to do about nothing. Don't get me wrong I am certainly grateful and appreciate that this is a spectacular thing. The Honor Flight does. I mean I am more than grateful. But I think... You know... Maybe I should be low man on the totem pole for this. I don't know. I, I really have mixed feelings about this.

Cohen: Yeah.

Santine: And I shared that with my children, who all said I was nuts. [laughter.] And that's neither here nor there. Don't get me wrong. I am just so grateful. I just don't know if it's... You know... I don't know.

Cohen: Well, I know what you mean. I know that you are grateful. It sounds like you're maybe modest, very modest.

Santine: Well, you make modest sound like a virtue.... [laughter.] I am trying to be objective. I didn't do anything special. I gave a few years.... I was never at risk. It wasn't like these other guys. I wasn't... I donated time. I made no sacrifice. I mean everything turned into lemonade for me. It was harder on my family, and yet the experience was beyond expectations. We got to see the world. I got to meet people. So, it's like you're telling me thank you and rewarding me for the good times I had in my life.

Cohen: [Laughter.] Okay. I know what you mean. But I think there's an element of happenstance. I once interviewed, uhm, a veteran who served right after World War II in Japan. He loved it. He loved the people and the environment. And he felt [guilty] in contrast to all his older brothers who served in World War II and one of them was killed, but sometimes, it is a bit happenstance too. You know, why you were selected to go to the Clark Airfield Base rather than a MASH unit in Vietnam. Who knows? It was sort of out of your control as to what happened.

Santine: Well, that's true. You know, it's all about opportunity and, and circumstances. You are absolutely right. I would have been happy for those circumstances and that opportunity. But, you know, it wasn't my decision. It would have been my choice, but I didn't make the decisions.

Cohen: Yeah, so the Pritzker Military Museum and Library is dedicated to collecting the stories of the Citizen Soldier. What does the term Citizen Soldier mean to you?

Santine: Citizen Soldier. I guess it could be interpreted a couple of ways. A citizen that used to be a soldier. Or a citizen that still values the core of all America regardless of whether they are in uniform or not.

Cohen: Hmm. That's nice. [pause] Mary, is there something that you would like to talk about that we didn't talk about?

Santine: No, I can't think of anything. But then I don't remember yesterday half the time and maybe tonight when I'm in bed I'll think of a hundred things. You know.

Cohen: Maybe, I'll just ask you briefly, where you ended up working in your career and how many children you have?

Santine: Well, my career is pretty varied. I did home health. I was... I thought of myself as an intensive care nurse for a long time. Then, I became a supervisory type. And then I ended up in infection control as my specialty for twenty-five years.

Cohen: Oh, my goodness. Wow.

Santine: So, you know, I really worked the gamut. I think the only thing I never worked ever is OB [obstetrics], but I did manage an OB area for a short time. And uhm, OB, Peds, Surgery. I pretty much ran the gamut as far as career wise. I've been in small places, home health. I've been at large places. I've been community, I've been university. I've been state. I've really run the gamut as far as experiences go. And a nursing home. I've even worked in a nursing home.

Cohen: Wow.

Santine: It has been a wonderful career. I mean it. It certainly was varied. As far as home life, we moved to Chicago. We had four children and all in different states now. They are all happily married and most of them have children. So, I have nine grandchildren.

Cohen: Wow.

Santine: And it's been good. All is good.

Cohen: Oh, my goodness. [pause] Well, I just want to thank you for the interview today. And even though you have a lot of fun and so on, nevertheless, you did dedicate yourself to people in need during the Vietnam War. And the Pritzker Military Museum and Library will be sending you a challenge coin as a token of our thanks.

Santine: Oh, that's nice. And send me the papers to sign as well.

Cohen: Yes, that's right. That's right. And if you do wish to send emails with some more scans that would be great too.

Santine: I wrote that down.

Cohen: Oh you did. Thank you.

Santine: I hope I didn't come across as too...dull.

Cohen: No, no, no. I think you were actually a very good storyteller, and it gave me just a little glimpse of what it was like being a nurse in the, thank you.

Santine: Thank you for talking to me. I think you do wonderful work.

Cohen: Thank you. And I'll also be honest too. I would like our oral history program to interview more women. So, I feel grateful that you were willing to be interviewed. Yeah. Thank you very much and if anything comes up, we'll be in touch.

Santine: I appreciate this. Thank you very much.

Cohen: Thank you very much. Take care.

Santine: Take care, bye-bye.

[END]

