

Oral Memoirs
of
Sharon L. Ekern

An Interview Conducted by

Roy McKinney

November 13, 2014

Community Veterans History Project

University of Central Florida RICHES of Central Florida

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Interview Histories

Interviewers: Roy McKinney

Transcriber: Roy McKinney

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the RICHES of Central Florida Department, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida.

Project Detail

The Community Veterans History Project, a RICHES of Central Florida Project at the University of Central Florida, includes interviews with Central Florida veterans from all branches of the United States Military. Beginning in 2010, the UCF Community Veterans History Project is collecting, preserving, and making accessible to the public the experiences of Central Florida's veterans so that future generations will better understand the realities of conflict. It is a collaborative endeavor supported by multiple departments and offices at UCF. The histories, which are collected by students and faculty, are archived and made digitally available through the UCF library. The UCF Community Veterans History Project will also contribute selected veterans' histories to the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress.

Roy McKinney is an undergraduate history student at the University of Central Florida
Sharon L. Ekern served in the United States Marine Corp from 1981 to1990. She currently works at the University of Central Florida with the Student Development and Enrollment Service.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Dr. Sharon L. Ekern is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on May 28, 2014.

Abstract

Oral history interview of Sharon L. Ekern, who served in the United States Marine Corps from 1981 to1990 and now works at the University of Central Florida with the Student Development and Enrollment Service. This interview was conducted by Roy McKinney at the UCF Main Campus on November 13, 2014. Interview topics include Ekern's family life, her education, enlistment in the Marines, boot camp, advanced training, her first duty station, the San Diego Recruit Depot, Parris Island, the Cold War, serving as a female, the Tailhook Scandal, Camp Smith, her awards and medals, life after service, her employment at UCF, and being an expert markswoman.

Sharon L. Ekern

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Roy McKinney
November 13, 2014
Orlando, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

McKinney Today is the 13th of November, 2014. My name is Roy McKinney and we are interviewing Dr. Sharon [L.] Ekern. She served in the United States Marine Corps from 1981 to 1990 and now works at the University of Central Florida with the Student Development and Enrollment Service. I am interviewing Dr. Sharon L. Ekern as part of the University of Central Florida's Community Veterans History Project. This interview is being conducted in Orlando, Florida.

0:00:40

Family life growing up

McKinney Where and when were you born?

Ekern Union, South Carolina. September 18th, 1962.

McKinney What did your parents do for a living?

Ekern My dad retired from AT&T, and my mom, um, who has been passed away for – gosh – uh, 28 years today, as a matter of fact. She worked for the attorney general of South Carolina.

McKinney How big was your family growing up?

Ekern It was my parents and two sisters.

0:01:05

Family in the Military

McKinney Were any of your family members in the Military?

Ekern Yes. Um, my stepfather was full time National Guard. My uncle is a retired Navy captain, and I have a couple other uncles who served in the Air Force and Navy.

0:01:19

Education before joining the Marine Corps

McKinney What type of education did you have before entering the Marine Corps?

Ekern Uh, I went to a small, um, junior college, right out of high school, and was there for two semesters. So I had basically one year of college.

McKinney Was there any focus of your studies while there?

Ekern No, not really.

0:01:45 **Why she enlisted in the Marines**

McKinney Uh, why did you decide to enlist in the Marines?

Ekern Uh, I had decided during that second semester that I wasn't ready for college at that time, and I had moved to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, where my grandparents had retired, and there was an Air Force Base there. Uh, so I had met some Air Force friends and decided at that point that I would join the Air Force. And then when I went to MEPs [United States Military Entrance Processing Command] to do my processing, they couldn't take me until like maybe the following year. It was maybe nine months, and I wanted to leave in the fall when my friends would be going back to school. So, um, I basically – when I got – when I was there at MEPs, I told them to take me to see the Marines. That – I didn't want to go in the Army. I didn't like the uniform that the Navy wore. So...

0:02:30 **Family reaction to joining the Marines**

McKinney How did your family react – react to you enlisting?

Ekern Eh, well, they had just got used to the idea of me joining the Air Force, so when I came home and told them I was going in to the Marines, Um, it took a little while, especially for my mother and grandmother to get used to that idea.

0:02:49 **Boot camp**

McKinney And where did you go to boot camp?

Ekern Parris Island, South Carolina.

McKinney How did you feel when you entered boot camp and the whole process of going through – just getting there and your first reactions?

Ekern I was scared to death. Um, my processing station MEPs was in Colombia, South Carolina. And it wasn't that – maybe two hours or so. We shipped out on a bus to Parris Island, and I was the only female on the bus. and, um, the person at MEPs had, um, given my package to somebody, uh – to one of the guys that was also, uh, shipping out that day, and he got off the bus with my information with this drill instructor just, you know – he came on the bus and was yelling at them get on the yellow footprints. And then I had to get off the bus and go – and go tell him, you know, that somebody had my package. So I was scared to death.

0:03:42 View of instructors, then and now

McKinney How did you feel about you instructors?

Ekern Um, how I felt about them now and how I felt about them then is probably different. Um...

McKinney How about both?

Ekern Yeah. I was – they kind of played different roles. There was one who was more like the motherly type, and one who was just downright mean, and the other one, who was kind of in between. Um, I was really scared of the one that was just mean, you know? I – I've actually been in contact recently with our senior drill instructor on Facebook, so it has been kind of nice, um, you know, touching base with her again. She retired – gosh – after – I don't know – maybe 25 years in the Marine Corps, there at Parris Island. So...

0:04:26 Most memorable experience at boot camp

McKinney So what was your most memorable experience at boot camp?

Ekern At boot camp? Gosh. Um, probably the physical training. I, you know – I've always been, um – well, probably, more so since. I've gotten out. I've been athletic, but I don't know that I was totally prepared when I went in, so that was difficult – the ph – the physical training. So that was probably one of my more memorable.

0:04:59 Being a woman in boot camp

McKinney How did being a woman affect you in boot camp?

Ekern Well, in the Marines, we're totally separate. I know in some of the, um – maybe all of the other branches – they train together, but we don't. We're a separate battalion and, uh, we have no contact with the men. So we were all just together.

0:05:20 Advanced training

McKinney Did you receive any advanced training?

Ekern Yeah. I went to several schools. Um, I went to a school right out of boot camp in Albany, Georgia. Um, then I went to my first duty station in San Diego. And, I believe, it was after – yeah. It was – it was after I – no. Maybe it wasn't San Diego – where I went to another, um, supply school at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. And then after I came to Orlando, I went into the contracting and purchasing field and went to several schools. They were at Lowry Air Force Base, because, at the time, the Marines didn't have a contracting school so we went to the Air – Air Force schools.

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0:06:01

First duty station

McKinney So where were you stationed after you were done with training?

Ekern My first duty station was the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego. And then, from there I came here to Orlando to the, uh, recruiting headquarters. I was not a recruiter. I did supply, but I—I was at headquarters. And then from there, I went to Camp [H. M.] Smith in [Aiea,] Hawaii.

0:06:24

Job at duty station

McKinney What was your assignment or job while you were there?

Ekern Uh, I started out in supply and, like I said at some point, uh, in my career, I changed to contracts and purchasing.

0:06:37

Typical day

McKinney And, uh, what was a typical day like for you?

Ekern We usually got—usually PT [physical training] was, you know, the first thing we did at least three days a week, if not more. Um, you know, we'd have—PT was around six A.M. and then have to be at work at 7:30. Most days were like typical work day. You know, you went to work, you had your lunch—you know, you got off at a certain time. There were other days when there might be inspections or parades or, you know, other things that might be going on. But ordinarily it was like a typical work day.

0:07:20

What it was like at San Diego Recruit Depot

McKinney Can you describe what it was like working at the Marine—Marine Corps Recruitment Depot at Parris Island?

Ekern Well, I didn't work there. That's where—that's where I received recruit training.

McKinney Okay. Can you describe what it was like working at San Diego—the depot in San Diego?

Ekern Yeah. It was—I mean—San Diego, of course, is beautiful. And, um, it was good. Um, out there they only trained male Marines. They don't—they don't train any women Marines out there, but, um, it was, uh—I think it was a—you know, it was a good first duty station, uh, working with all of the recruits and, um, doing the different, you know, jobs that were assigned to me at the time. And then I worked for a colonel, just in his office, for a good bit of my time there.

0:08:00

How Parris Island and San Diego compare

McKinney How did the environments of Parris Island and San Diego compare?

Ekern Um, well, I mean—it was two totally different experiences. At Parris Island, I was a recruit, you know. I was going through recruit training and at MCRD [Marine Corps Recruit Depot]. I was—I was basically working there. I was a Marine at that point. So totally different experiences.

0:08:20 Cold War's effect on Military life

McKinney How did the Cold War affect everyday life in the Military?

Ekern Um, hmm. I would say, at least for me and my job, um, you know, it di—didn't have a big effect. We basically did what we were, you know, assigned to do at, um—at the recruit depot. It was training Marines at the, uh, MCRD—I mean, at, um, the recruiting headquarters here, it was enlisting Marines. So, um, in my everyday job, I wouldn't say it had a big effect.

0:08:59 Entertainment in the Military

McKinney How would you entertain yourselves, uh, during your service?

Ekern Well, um, hmm. Let me think back on that. Uh, like I said, it was—since I wasn't a—a grunt, per se, you know, um, I left and I went home most days, unless there was something special going on, or we were out in the field, or had some special training. So, you know, I think we did pretty much what everybody would do. When I was in, um—here at the recruit station, I had a child. So, you know, I had a family just like most people and I did live in base housing. So it was—it's a different community, Um—a different culture. But I would say we did what most people would do.

0:09:55 Assignment in Orlando

McKinney Why were you assigned to the recruitment headquarters in Orlando?

Ekern I'm not exactly sure. Uh—we have what's called a "monitor" in the Marines, and they decide where you're going to be—be stationed. And, um, they just decide based on when it's time for you to depart a duty station and what the needs are. Um, you can put in for several different things, um—several different duty stations. And this was just one that I had, you know, put in for that needed a supply person at the time. So I was fortunate enough to, you know, be stationed here.

McKinney Where else did you, um, apply for a duty station at?

Ekern Gosh, you know, I really don't remember. Um, I know one of them was in Georgia, because I'm in South Carolina. And I can't recall now where—oh, Macon, Georgia, I believe it was, because it had a recruiting headquarters there. Um, I thought it'd be nice to be somewhat close to home. Um, but besides that, I really don't recall.

McKinney Were you excited when you were assigned to Orlando? Or how did – how did you feel about the...

Ekern Yeah. I was excited. Um, I was excited about the job. I mean it is a bit different being in a recruiting headquarters with maybe 15 Marines ver – versus being on a base full of Marines. Uh, so it was going to be something different. And yeah. I was excited about coming to Florida.

0:11:10 **Being a woman in the Marine Corps**

McKinney What was it like being a woman in the Marine Corps?

Ekern Um, hmm [*laughs*]. It could be different at times. Um, the period that I was in was before Tailhook [Scandal] – if you’ve ever even heard of “Tailhook.” No?

McKinney No.

Ekern It was a big sexual harassment scandal, uh, that occurred soon after I got out of the Marine Corps. But when I was in, um, basically, sexual harassment – it was – it wasn’t something that you heard about. So – and women at that time, um, depending on where you were and who you worked with – most men – I won’t say most. Some men made it very clear that didn’t think women should be in their Marine Corps. And so it was – it could be difficult at times. I feel like you always had to, um, you know – you had to be the one to give 110 percent, you know, if you were out on runs or just in your everyday job just to prove yourself.

McKinney Was there any time that you felt that you had to prove yourself to someone that was – that looked down on you as a woman in the Marine Corps?

Ekern Oh, yeah. Yeah.

McKinney Is there any – any example that you can – you can tell us?

Ekern Um, hmm. I don’t know that I can think of just something – like a particular example. It was more the comments – the everyday comments. Um, it was the things – when we did have to go out on marches or runs, and there were women who couldn’t keep up and, you know, there were women who made up excuses. And, you know, that – I think that made it harder for the rest of us, but...

0:12:55 **Events that stand out in memory, Camp Smith**

McKinney Are there any specific events during your service that stand out in your memory?

Ekern Events such as?

McKinney Um, anything. Um, s – something that you enjoyed, or something that you didn’t enjoy, or just something that sticks out in your memory?

Ekern Yeah. At Camp Smith—Camp Smith is built on like the side of a big—I guess you'd call it a mountain. Um, so everything we did was either going up or going down. So anytime we PT'd, we were either running up or we were running down. And we would go on like these marches with, you know, the packs and the Kevlar helmets. And along the side of this mountain—and you'd look down and there wouldn't be much over there. So that has always stuck out in my mind a lot.

But it was also beautiful there, which, um—I mean, I will definitely have to say I really enjoyed probably being in Hawaii the most, where we were at Camp Smith. Um, with it being on the side of a mountain, you know, we'd look out one side of where we worked and you'd see, um, Diamond Head and look out the other side and there was Pearl Harbor. I mean, it was—it was just a beautiful place to be.

0:14:07 Leaving the Military

McKinney And when did you leave the Military?

Ekern 1990.

McKinney What was your last day like in the Marine Corps?

Ekern Sad. Yeah. Really sad. Um, you know, it—even though it was my choice to leave, uh, I had just kind of come to a point where I had to decide. I had finished my bachelor degree and I had to decide if I wanted to, um, try to get into an officer program or, you know, or to get out. And I had made that decision at that point to get out. And, uh, even though I had, you know—it was still difficult to do. You know, I had done this for nine years, and I really, um—I really liked what I did. I felt proud of what I did and I still do. So it was hard going from that to the unknown, you know.

0:14:58 Motivation in leaving the Marines rather than applying to officer program

McKinney What motivated you to decide to leave the Marines and not go into an officer program?

Ekern Well, an officer program isn't a guarantee. So if I had signed another enlistment, you know, for three to four years, there's no guarantee that I would have gotten an officer program. And at the time, I had a three year old son, um, and was a single parent. So that had a lot to do with it.

Um, [Operation] Desert Storm¹ was right on the horizon. That started like three months after I got out. So at that point, I did feel like I had, you know, made the right decision. But...

¹ First Persian Gulf War.

0:15:31 Highest rank in the Marines

McKinney What was the – your highest rank, uh, at the time you left the Marines?

Ekern I was an E[nlisted Rank]-5 Sergeant, but I was a Staff Sergeant Selectee. Meaning: I had been selected for the next rank. Um, but you just have to wait for a certain date. Um, so I was a Staff Sergeant Selectee.

0:15:51 Awards and medals

McKinney Were you awarded any, uh – any awards or medals or citations?

Ekern Yeah. There were several things, like good conduct medals, national, uh – no. meritorious, um – oh gosh. I had it on my, um, commendation medals, meritorious. Uh, can I look at my DD [Form] 214 [Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty]? I've got it with me.

McKinney Yeah.

Ekern 'Cause I thought I might not remember something [*laughs*]. Let's see. Meritorious unit commendations, um, certificate of commendations, good conduct medals, meritorious mast, certificate of appreciations, letter of commendations and recognition. So those kinds of things.

0:16:33 Life after the Marines

McKinney What did you do after you left the Marines?

Ekern Uh, I decided to come back here to Orlando. Um, I didn't have a job, at the time, lined up, but, um, I had real – I liked Orlando when I was here, uh – when I had been stationed here. And Orlando was sort of close enough to home, but not, you know, too close. So, uh – and I still had some friends here. So I decided to come back to Orlando. I had a job. I had a civilian job, um, for about six months before I started work here at UCF [University of Central Florida].

0:17:04 Joining UCF

McKinney How did you come – how did you come – become involved with UCF?

Ekern Well, when I – I – like I had said, I was a contract – I did contracts and purchasing when I was in the Marines. And, um, the job opening here was for the assistant director of purchasing. So I had applied for that and got that job. So that was my – my first position here. So my training in the Marine Corps had, you know, a direct effect on what I do now.

0:17:35 Contracting and purchasing

McKinney I know this is kind of late but what does contracting and purchasing entail?

Ekern Um, basically we purchased anything that, you know, was needed there on the base. So, it's — yeah.

0:17:50 Contact with Marines

McKinney Is there anyone you still keep in contact with from the Marines?

Ekern Mmhmm. Mostly on Facebook. So that's been a — yeah — a good way to connect with people. And then, um, I went to my first Marine Corps ball in like 25 years this past weekend. So that was — that was really nice. Brought back a lot of good memories.

0:18:06 Military influence on life

McKinney Do you feel your Military experience changed you?

Ekern Oh, yes. Definitely. Yeah. Um, like I — like I said, it's — it's such a different culture. It's — it's even hard to explain, you know? It's — it's like I had a 100,000 big brothers and they could pick on me, but nobody else could. And, you know, the — the skills and the leadership, and the, um — they're just all things that I don't think I could have learned anywhere else.

0:18:37 Incorporating Military experience with UCF

McKinney Did you find it easy incorporating that into — your Military experience into your career here at UCF?

Ekern I think it was difficult in the beginning, because the Military is very, you know, black and white. Um, and coming here wasn't exactly that way. So, even in purchasing, now there are a lot of rules and regulations, uh, in the field of purchasing with the State [of Florida]. It's still very different than, um, being in the Military. But I think my work ethic, my discipline, um, you know, leadership — I think all of those skills were definitely transferable to what I do here.

McKinney Is there anything else you would like to talk about with us today?

Ekern Hmm. I can't really think of anything at this time.

0:19:15 Expert marksmanship

McKinney I noticed that you had, uh — you were an expert marks[wo]man in the M16-A1...

Ekern Yeah. Yeah.

McKinney How was, uh — do you still shoot?

Ekern No. I don't. I did it with my son a couple of times, but it's been awhile. Um, as a matter of fact, when I first went into the Marine Corps, women did not even

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qualify with the rifle, which they all do now. But, um – so, in San Diego, that was the first time I'd had to do rifle qualifications, and I was actually second on the – on the, uh – uh, at the range that week. So...

McKinney Yeah. I noticed it said you were “expert marksman.” That’s very impressive.

Ekern Yeah. Yeah. Expert with the rifle. Only a marksmen with the, uh, pistol. But yeah, I was a good shot [*laughs*].

0:20:05 **Closing remarks**

McKinney I'd like to thank you for joining us here today, for helping us out with the Community, uh, Veterans [History] Project and thank you for your service.

Ekern You're welcome.

End of Interview