

Interviewee: Beasley, Martha
Interviewer: Robin Sellers
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Sellers: Mrs. Beasley, will you acknowledge, please, that we have your permission to tape record this interview?

Beasley: Yes, you have my permission. Thank you.

Sellers: Thank you. Tell me a little bit then, to start with, about where you were born and grew up.

Beasley: I was born in a small town, Marshall, Texas. It's in northeastern Texas. I was born there, raised there, graduated from high school, and that's where I met my husband, also. He was attending college there, at East Texas Baptist University.

Sellers: Where you going to school, college, too?

Beasley: No, I was not. We were introduced by some mutual friends and he, at that time, was waiting to be drafted. And within just a couple of months after we met, which was right after I graduated from high school, we were married.

Sellers: What time frame was this? About what year?

Beasley: We were married in 1957, December of 1957.

Sellers: So the draft was going on, but it was not Vietnam draft at that point.

Beasley: No, no, it was not Vietnam. It was just the regular draft.

Sellers: Was he in ROTC at school?

Beasley: No, there was no ROTC. He went in as a private, and after he was in, oh, a year, year and a half, he went to OCS at Fort Benning, Georgia.

Sellers: Did he intend to fly when he went in?

Beasley: No. He had not given it any thought at that time. The main thing – after he went in, he decided since he was a college graduate that he was tired of saying “Yes, Sir” to all the

other college graduates, so he went to OCS. And then after OCS we went back to Fort Hood, Texas, and then his CO at the time encouraged him to go to flight school, so he did.

Sellers: Where were you living? Were you following him to these different places?

Beasley: Oh, yes, I was a camp follower [chuckles]. He went to OCS at Fort Benning for OCS. He went to Fort Hood as an enlisted man. That's where he received basic training. And then he went to Fort Benning, and then back to Fort Hood as a 2nd lieutenant.

Sellers: And you were going back and forth with him?

Beasley: Yes.

Sellers: Did you have any children at this time?

Beasley: We had our first child a month before he went to OCS.

Sellers: Tell me a little bit about packing up a brand new baby and tripping across to places.

Beasley: Well, at that time, of course, our belongings were very scarce, and I didn't go immediately with him to Fort Benning at OCS because wives were not allowed there until the last six weeks. So I took the baby and we went home, and he went to Fort Benning. And then, six weeks before he graduated at Benning, the baby and I went to Fort Benning. And then from there we went back to Fort Hood and it was — at that time, I was so young — well, both of us were so young. I was only twenty when I had my first child. I just knew I had to do it.

Sellers: And didn't think too much about it.

Beasley: Didn't think much about it at all.

Sellers: Where was he then sent after OCS, and were you able to go with him then?

Beasley: That's when we went back to Fort Hood. He was sent back there as a 2nd lieutenant.

Sellers: And you stayed there for a while?

Beasley: We stayed there for about a year and a half, and then he went to flight school. And then from flight school, we went to Fort Huachuca, Arizona.

Sellers: Did you have any qualms about him being in flight school? Did you think it was any more dangerous than anything else?

Beasley: No, I worried about him, of course, but he enjoyed it so much that it was just another thing that we needed to do. It felt like, you know, we wanted [to do] —

Sellers: For his career.

Beasley: His career. At that time, though, he had not decided — it was after — no, before he went to flight school, he became regular army. And then that's when we had decided we would stay in. Each commitment required more time, you know, like two or four years or whatever. And within a few years we decided that it was what we wanted to do.

Sellers: And that was something that you mutually agreed?

Beasley: Oh, yes.

Sellers: When did Vietnam start coming into your perspective?

Beasley: When we went to Okinawa.

Sellers: Tell me about that. When was it and what was it like?

Beasley: We went to Okinawa from Fort Huachuca in 1962, and we were with this group which became the 173rd before it became the 173rd. We were there, you know, before the transition. He was a fixed-winged pilot at that time, and by that time we had our second child. Now that was an experience for myself, flying over there. You know, he flew over on a jet and I flew over with two babies, and it took me thirty-four hours to get there. So — [Chuckling].

Sellers: Did the military help you at all?

Beasley: Well, of course, from California I flew military, one of those old Eisenhower prop planes.

Sellers: Oh, no wonder it took you thirty-four hours! [chuckling]

Beasley: And then when I got there, when I landed on Okinawa, the CO's wife met me because the men were in Thailand. And so the first night I spent with her, the next day she took me to my new home, which was up in the village surrounded by tombs and the local village people.

Sellers: It was scary?

Beasley: It was really — it was eye-awakening, let me put it that way [chuckling]. Well, anyway, he came back after a couple of weeks, and so we continued to live on that hill for another two months, I guess, and they went off island again. And while he was gone the second

time, I moved. But I moved up on Hobby Hill, which was considered really a nice place to live, and we lived there until we got Army quarters. And when we moved out, that's when the Blisses came. And they moved into the house on the hill until they got quarters. And during that time, it had become the 173rd Airborne Brigade.

Sellers: What was your husband's position and what was your position relative to the other people around you?

Beasley: Well, of course, he was not the CO. You know, he served under three COs during that time – company commanders, so to speak. Don Bliss was the third one. So I was, you know, not in any position as far as command or anything. But we just had a really close knit group, the aviation platoon. Liz Bliss, she was the last CO's wife, and then it was just – I don't know, it's kind of like a big family group; we became close.

Sellers: You had plenty of support?

Beasley: Oh yes, yes. And then came Vietnam in '65, when they were all dispatched to Vietnam, the entire brigade. Of course, that was really something, and I'm sure the other wives have told you about it, that were left there on the island. It was, oh, there were so many wives and children.

Sellers: Did you know that they were going to be dispatched?

Beasley: Not for a long time.

Sellers: So it wasn't a total surprise, but —

Beasley: It was not a total surprise, but not for any great length of time did we know.

Sellers: All right, and did you have any idea of how serious Vietnam was?

Beasley: Well, that was the — of course there had been troops there before, but this was the first large build-up, in '65, when the entire brigade went. We did not know how long they were going to be gone or anything at that time. It was more or less waiting to see. But in the meantime, it became apparent they were not coming right back, and then they began to move the wives out.

Sellers: How did they move you out?

Beasley: Well, fortunately, my husband had received orders to go to Fort Benning to the infantry course, and so he did not spend an entire year there; he only spent half of the year.

Sellers: In Vietnam?

Beasley: Yes. He came back to the island after well, just a couple of days before we boarded the plane to go to Fort Benning. I had already shipped the household goods and the car. We left Okinawa and went to Fort Benning, to the advance course. And then, once he finished the advanced course, he went right back to Vietnam.

Sellers: But you didn't go this time?

Beasley: Oh, no.

Sellers: And where did you stay then?

Beasley: I stayed here in Texarkana.

Sellers: So you were back home again, sort of?

Beasley: Sort of, yes, and I had my third child here while he was gone to Vietnam.

Sellers: I've learned that every time you guys got back together again, the population increased. [laughter]

Beasley: The population grew! Well, like the Blisses, their two youngest sons, my youngest son is right in the middle of theirs, just by like six weeks.

Sellers: Ah, there's a reason for that.

Beasley: Well, there's a lot of those Vietnam babies walking around.

Sellers: Yeah, I'll bet. How did you stay in touch with your husband while he was in Vietnam?

Beasley: Letters. At that time, you know, we didn't have email or cell phones or anything like that. The first time he was there, when they left Okinawa, there were times when they were able to call by radio and talk, you know, for just a few minutes, but not for very long. But the second time, it was strictly by letters and then, of course, I met him in Hawaii for R and R, as most wives back then.

Sellers: Did you have to pay for your airfare to Hawaii?

Beasley: Oh yes, yes.

Sellers: The military didn't take you over there or anything?

Beasley: No, no.

Sellers: When you went to Hawaii, did the military make any special provisions for the soldiers and their wives?

Beasley: No, not really. We stayed in a commercial hotel and took care of all of our own bills.

Sellers: Did you get any special treatment or recognition from the Hawaiian people?

Beasley: Well, no, not really. We were just more or less considered the tourists, you know. And there were so many of them at the time —

Sellers: That's why I thought they maybe would have been considerate enough to do something special for you.

Beasley: No, no one picked up any tabs for us.

Sellers: What were your thoughts in between letters, and what kind of news did you send to him in your letters?

Beasley: Well, most all of my news was about the children and family-type thing, and friends. Of course, he never wrote anything in detail as to what he was doing, as such. I kept up with the news as much as I could. It was, it was a long, long, worrisome year, because there was so much going on during that year. At one time, his mother called me, and she had just heard — she knew the general's name that he was flying for at that time, and it was on the radio that he had been shot down — the general. And that was very upsetting. And finally when I regained my sense, I realized that they don't put things like that on the news unless they've notified the family.

Sellers: Right, first.

Beasley: Right. You know, as long as everyone's okay, they talk about it. And so, then I knew he was okay, when I finally realized that, no, they wouldn't put that on the news unless he was okay.

Sellers: That's not the way you're going to learn about it.

Beasley: Right.

Sellers: At least you hoped.

Beasley: That's true. But actually, you know, for years I've really wanted to know a lot of the things that happened, but he was like most all of the other men — they never really talked in detail about it.

Sellers: How did you deal with the children? Were they old enough to ask questions or be concerned themselves?

Beasley: Well, no, they were not old enough to really understand. They just knew that Dad was gone. They missed him terribly, you know, and we would talk, of course, most every night about what we thought he was doing. Of course, they knew he was flying a helicopter at that time.

Sellers: Did they watch the evening news?

Beasley: No, no. I didn't really want them to do that.

Sellers: When you were just kind of on a day-to-day basis while he was over there, what did you do? Were you working? How did you fill your time?

Beasley: Well, the first six months I did not work, because I had a brand new baby. I did work for about, oh, four months during the period of time he was gone. His sister, youngest sister, came. Her husband was in Vietnam also, and so she came to live with the children and me at that time. She was working, and she talked me into going out there and go to work also. And I did for about four or five months.

Sellers: You say going out there?

Beasley: Well, it was here in Texarkana.

Sellers: Oh, okay, it wasn't a military —

Beasley: No, it was for the government, though, _____ [sounds like a name of a company] [??]

Sellers: Were there positions that were easy to get because you were wives of servicemen?

Beasley: I don't know that they were easy. You had to take tests just like everyone else.

Sellers: So it was civil service?

Beasley: It was civil service. Civilian-type civil service.

Sellers: I just wondered if maybe there was preference given because your husbands were overseas, or something.

Beasley: No, no.

Sellers: When did you learn that he was coming back and how did that happen?

Beasley: We knew approximately when he would be coming back, because his year would be up. And then once he had his orders, well, he let me know when he would be coming.

Sellers: Was that particularly stressful, between the time you knew he had his orders and the time he actually got out of there?

Beasley: It was stressful, yes, because I wanted him to come home. And it's like everyone else. It's so — you know, you worried all the time, thinking about what could happen.

Sellers: Was there a network among the wives that were there?

Beasley: Yes, yes, there was, and I guess some of us are friends today because of that network, of being on Okinawa together and then all of husbands being in Vietnam.

Sellers: So you've kept in touch?

Beasley: Oh, yes.

Sellers: Do you still get together?

Beasley: Yes, we do. We had a reunion last year, in fact, of the Aviation Platoon.

Sellers: Is it with the Casper Platoon or do the wives get together separately?

Beasley: Well, now there were four of us: Liz Bliss, Betty Watson, Madison Lemay, Irma Bachali, and myself. We were all the original platoon wives, and we have gotten together periodically during, every year or so, up until the last couple of years, but then we went to the brigade reunions last year and the year before last, so that was our get-together.

Sellers: So you are still in touch and things?

Beasley: Yes, we are.

Sellers: What, if anything, do you remember about those years that you wish you hadn't had to go through?

Beasley: Vietnam.

Sellers: Vietnam? [Laughter]

Beasley: Vietnam. You know, twice, that was enough.

Sellers: Was your husband ever in a situation where you didn't get a letter that you expected to get or, other than when his mother called you or something, did you ever have an anxious moment, aside from the usual heart-in-your-throat all the time?

Beasley: Aside from Vietnam?

Sellers: Yes.

Beasley: Yes. Now when we were at Fort Huachuca, before we went to Vietnam the first time, went to Okinawa, he had an airplane crash. He and another friend were flying over the mountains and they were caught in a downdraft and crashed and totaled the plane. It was ten hours before we knew whether they were alive or not.

Sellers: Oh, not good!

Beasley: Not good. The chaplain had come and everybody, you know, waiting. But they walked out. It took them ten hours to walk out of the mountain range, and that was an experience, yes.

Sellers: Did you kind of feel like he was going to be okay even though he was in Vietnam, or did you have any sixth sense about anything like that?

Beasley: No, I worried about him. I knew that he was very careful. I knew he wanted to come home to his family. Other than the fact of normal worry, you know, and just being – oh, I don't know exactly what to say – but concerned all the time. Yes. You know, it was just a worry all the time. But I don't know, for some reason I always felt like he would come home, yes. And he did.

Sellers: What has the Casper group itself meant to you as far as getting through that period and then on through the rest of his career? Did these men stay in touch as they went their separate ways after Casper was disbanded?

Beasley: Yes. Some of us did stay close through the years. We may not have seen each other for a number of years because everybody went their own way in their career. But while we were on Okinawa, that was our family, you know, and we were there for each other and enjoyed each other and had our bad times, of course, but we had our good times also. Now, when we went on after those years, and when my husband died, there were some of them from that group that came to the funeral and were there for me. And then through the years since then, a few of them have been good friends still – are still good friends.

Sellers: Would you do it again?

Beasley: Be a military wife?

Sellers: Uh-huh.

Beasley: Yes.

Sellers: Did you get to travel to places other than Okinawa or Texas?

Beasley: Oh, yes, we did. We had – ah, let's see, think about states – we had two tours at Fort Hood, we had two tours at Fort Rucker, two tours at Fort Benning, two tours at Leavenworth, the Pentagon, England and Germany. He died in 1976, while attending the War College at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

Sellers: Okay, so that was worth it, wasn't it?

Beasley: It was great. After all these years, you know, he's been dead thirty years now, there are times when it still makes my heart flutter when I go to a military base once in a while and of course all the memories come back. You know, it's just when he died, I had to leave that. I didn't have a choice.

Sellers: He died in the line of service?

Beasley: While he was still on active duty, yes. I always equate it to the old Indian squaw whose husband dies and they kick her out of the tribe, you know. That's what I had to do.

Sellers: Put you out in the cold and leave you.

Beasley: That's right. That's right. You know, those things just happen. But I've been very grateful that I still have some of my military friends in my life.

Sellers: Can you think of anything in particular about being one of the Casper wives that you'd like to put on the tape for the history of the unit?

Beasley: Well, it was a great time in our lives and in our career. It was challenging, but yet it was wonderful because of the people. Vietnam was not wonderful, no, but being on Okinawa, because we had such a great group, it was like family. For all the different units my husband served with during his career before he died, I think the Caspers was one of our favorites. And those people have remained friends off and on during all those years.

Sellers: Do you think maybe it was because that was pretty much the first major unit that he was with, or the circumstances surrounding it, or just everything put together?

Beasley: I think it's everything put together, because we were so far away from home that we only had each other there.

Sellers: And very young.

Beasley: Very young. We were all in our twenties, and early twenties. Then of course, you throw Vietnam in on top of that and it really makes you come together. And there again, like when all the men left the island and all the wives were left there, it was — well, that's when you really became family. We ate together, our children were together, and it was very tight group at that time.

Sellers: Have your children stayed in contact with each other, the ones that were about the same age?

Beasley: Well, not really, other than — now last year or the year before last, when we had our own little platoon reunion, two of my children went. Now, my youngest son went, but he was not born at that time, of course. But my daughter, my middle child, she went and she was really happy to see the ones her age, her peer group, that were there from Okinawa. They had seen each other through the years a couple of times, but they got to spend time together and really talk at the reunion.

Sellers: I just wondered if it was maybe it was like extended family — cousins that you only see once every ten years or something.

Beasley: Well, I guess you could probably say that. It's like we've known each other all of our lives type thing, even though everybody's gone their own ways through the years. But like you say, it's an extended family and you retouch, regroup.

Sellers: I can't think of other questions to ask you. If you'd like to add something else, please go ahead.

Beasley: Well, I don't know, but I think it's great, what you're doing.

Sellers: Well, thank you. I hope it is, too.

[remainder of tape is unrelated conversation and not transcribed]

End