

The University of Maine

DigitalCommons@UMaine

MF144 Women in the Military

NAFOH Oral History Recordings

November 2023

Patricia Conlon, interviewed by Kristin Taylor

Patricia Conlon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mf144>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Oral History Commons](#), [United States History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Conlon, Patricia, "Patricia Conlon, interviewed by Kristin Taylor" (2023). *MF144 Women in the Military*. 55. <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mf144/55>

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in MF144 Women in the Military by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

NA3227 Patricia Conlon, interviewed by Kristin Taylor, November 6, 2001. Conlon talks about her personal and family histories; her childhood in Newark, New Jersey; her parents, Joseph and Elizabeth Conlon; being a commissioned officer in the Air Force during the Gulf War; McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey; hers and her family's reactions to her enlistment in the Air Force; being a mother while serving in the military; Shephard Air Force Base in Texas; her experiences and duties as a flight nurse for Air Vac in Europe and the United States; her opinions on differences between men and women in the military; activities during leisure time; her homecoming after the Gulf War ended; her opinion on women in combat; benefits received for serving in the military; and her subsequent training as a perfusionist. Text: 9 pp. Recording: mfc_na3227_c2332_01 (C 2332, CD 2464). Time: 00:28:42. Restrictions: None.

***NOTE:** Sound quality of this recording is poor and muffled with a lot of background noise, tape hiss, and repetitive movement and thumping.*

Kristen Taylor (KT): ... Women at War; professors Carol Toner and Mazie Hough. Interview with Pat Conlin, Gulf War era veteran. Interview performed by Kristen Taylor.

This is Pat Conlon—gracious enough to let me interview her, a Gulf War Veteran. Start with questions. When and where were you born?

Pat Conlon (PC): In 1953, Newark, New Jersey.

KT: Alrighty. I like Newark [*unintelligible*] What are your parents' names, occupations, and education about that?

PC: Well, my... both of my parents are deceased, and my father died my very young. And his name is Joseph Conlon. And my mother's name was Elizabeth Conlon. And to be plain, I don't know what my father's educational background is, because I know that they both went into World War II. When he came out, he was—worked as a polisher in a jewelry company. My mom, who was a [*unintelligible*] tech in an operating room during the war and when she came out, she got married and raised a family and after he died, she became a nurse.

KT: When and where did you serve and what branch of the military?

PC: I always have been in the Air Force. My first—I went in in 19... I was commissioned in 1984, and that was with the 714th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron, at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey. [*unintelligible*] And I was there for about twelve and a half years and November of 1996, I transferred over to the Air Guard at McGuire, [*unintelligible*] Medical Squadron

KT: What were your sentiments—what were the sentiments in your community and of your family toward the Gulf War?

PC: My family... I have family that supported it. Lots were very frightened. It was probably one of the most... September... [*becoming emotional*] difficult days of my life. [*unintelligible*] And then there... I guess that 12 or 16 at the time, most of my friends that I was with in the unit;

I was in Air [*unintelligible*] at the time, had littler children and they kind of kept the moms together when we got deployed overseas, so that helped—had a support system. But I think with her—for the older children, because they knew what was going on, and they were really frightened.

KT: How did your family, friends, and neighbors respond to you on this when you went into the military?

PC: [*Hesitating*] My brother was... He had already been in the military, been... He was in Vietnam in the Navy and then he'd gotten out and did civilian work and kind of went back in full time in the Army. And he found out I was going to join the Air Force. He said I was crazy. 'Why do you want to do that?' You know that type of thing. And I was commissioned because I, as a nurse, I already had a degree, so I was a commissioned officer when I went in. So, that, I think, helped a lot especially from the female perspective.

KT: Being an officer?

PC: Being treated differently. So, I would say that they were supportive, but they were little skeptical about it, you know. But my family was always in support of me.

KT: That's good. Where did you do your basic training?

PC: Well, as a commissioned officer, it's not like basic training—what most or many people would think basic training is. I went down to Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas for two weeks and that was Officer—well, they called it Officers' Training. Military Officer Induction type thing. And basically, there they taught you how to wear your uniform. You know, we saw a lot of films on protocol and courtesies and [*unintelligible*] And we did a little bit of training that was required [*unintelligible*] aerobic type things. Basically, just a lot of class work.

KT: What did you do when you were in the military—as a job?

PC: As a job? I was commissioned as a flight nurse, and I had to go six weeks of training down at Brooks Air Force Base in Texas. And, how this all works, since you got commissioned as an officer, and you actually got assigned to the unit you were going to belong to. So, I actually went to my unit one weekend a month until they [*unintelligible*] school dates. And so, I was commissioned in February of '84 and I went to school in August for [*unintelligible*] school. So, actually I was probably in the unit a good six or seven months, already wearing the uniform, already had been taught to salute, so still you go down there as a courtesy requirement.

And then the following year, or maybe couple months later, I went to flight school. And there you were taught how to take care of patients based on their [*unintelligible*] physiology and all the equipment that you would have to use to take care of the equipment—uh, the patient. And in addition, you had to learn the airplane that you're going to fly on, the emergency procedures of that aircraft. So, that's an intensive six-week course. I loved it.

KT: Sounds like it's interesting.

PC: Yeah.

KT: Did your training, that the military provided you, adequate enough for the job that you had to do?

PC: Yes. It did. And there was additional training when you came back, with what we called, it was ground training. And you did that at the unit you were assigned to. So, the planes at that base—at McGuire Air Force Base. So, you went through another two weeks of training where you would practice what you learned down at flight school, and you would get checked a lot [*unintelligible*]. You would have to fly, and they would have to check you out on the things that you were supposed to learn and then you would be qualified. And then in addition to that every [*unintelligible*] you had to fly again every 60 days to stay current in your qualification. And then, you had to have a check lab every—I can't remember now, but every year, every two years, but you have that check lab to make sure that we—

KT: What is a check lab?

PC: It just basically took you through your positions as a nurse. At that squadron there were two nurses and three medical technicians that would typically be the crew taking care of patients in the back of the plane. There's the charge nurse position and the medication nurse. And you were trained in both positions and assigned whatever position... Often times, we would fly more than one leg and, or successive days. So, I might have been the medication nurse going over to Europe and the charge nurse coming back. It was just for the way they organized everything.

KT: Did you find any differences in the rules and regulations between the men and the women in the military.

PC: No, I can't say that. I mean, as a commissioned officer, where I had to have a higher level of understanding of... to be the role model for the people that we worked with, not only our peers but the technicians. And I don't feel that [*unintelligible*]

KT: How did you feel when you went to fight the Gulf War?

PC: Scared.

KT: Scared?

PC: Yeah.

KT: A lot of emotions?

PC: Uh-huh. Initially. We were bussed down from McGuire Air Force Base to Dover, Delaware, and from there took a plane to Europe. So, it was that initial—when we left. When we got on the bus until we landed in Europe. They put us in a hanger which had been converted to a staging facility and I think that's probably when it hit me, that I was actually, really in the war—in a war.

KT: Can you describe the typical day in the military?

PC: During the war?

KT: During the war.

PC: Well, at Air Evac. we would have to... We were crew members. We were divided up into different 'teams,' for lack of a better way to describe it. And we were put on call. So, if 'Team A' was due to fly Monday, then we would be on alert and if they needed somebody to fly, they would do that. So, the way it was set up, there were several staging facilities in Europe that were Air Evac. [*unintelligible*] supposed to fly from where we were in Europe, stationed, to—down to Saudi Arabia, pick up patients, and then bring them back to Europe, if they needed further care, and then from there bring them back to the states, and then turn around and come back. So, we didn't really know which direction we were going to be flying. It was going to depend on how much casualties there were. As it turned out, there weren't, I don't think, a lot of casualties, so we never, our unit never wound up flying any missions.

So, basically, we were on call, and they set up, you know, a rotation and we trained in the morning. We went over various aspects of flying and taking care of equipment and the patients. And more time [*unintelligible*] and things like that. And then we were on call.

KT: Did your military training and/or experience help you later on in life with your job? Personal relationships?

PC: I would say that it's been... During the time of Iraq, I flew all over the world—mostly in Europe. [*unintelligible*] I shouldn't say all over the world.

KT: It's close.

PC: I met so many different people along the way. It's a family that nobody would understand unless you're in the military. I mean, you could meet somebody in school in Texas and then run across five years later, on an airbag mission and say, 'oh, I know you. You were...' you know. And then the people that you lived with once a month, and trained with... I have wonderful friends that I've had now for 18 years that I wouldn't have if I hadn't been in the military.

So, then that question to answer. But yes, because in the military as an officer you're trained in management skills and the and because I'm in the medical side, the medical schools, so it only enhanced my civilian job, I think.

KT: Did you... Were you able to benefit from the GI Bill at all for further training or education?

PC: Actually, it was different for the officers than it is for the technicians, but because I already... had already had my Bachelor's Degree when I went into the military, back then they didn't offer them some Master's program. They are doing that now. But I will [*unintelligible*] stipend after the war and a portion of the GI that I used when I went back to perfusion school to become a perfusionist. After Desert Storm I changed my career, and I left nursing and went into perfusion.

KT: What does perfusionist do?

PC: Their level is to run the heart and lung machine when somebody has to have open heart surgery. So, it's like a postgraduate course. It's two years. It's on-the-job, at school. You become certified after two years. You have to take written tests, oral tests, take up to two years to get

certified after school. You have to obtain [*unintelligible*] contact hours, like most professionals do. You have to have so many cases a year. And you have to submit that to the Board every year.

KT: Did you change your ideas or attitudes about military government while you were overseas, while you were in the service?

PC: No, actually. Well, I guess I could say yes because you know when you're in peacetime, you know in the back of your mind that... I mean, you know, I was a Major around 20 years when Desert Storm broke out and you know, in the back of your mind that could happen. There were other, other skirmishes that certain people went to, but never an activation like happened at Desert Storm. And now... So, in the back of your mind you think, 'that will never happen here.' But it did. And what it did was it pulled it all together because when you're in peace time, you train differently. You train, you do what you do in peace time. But when you're in war time, it's different types of injury, it's, you know. I think you just kind of saw the whole picture when it all came together. Because you knew, that if we ever got deployed, you never knew where you were going to go. That's until the day they call you up, you don't know where you're going to go. You just know you're going to go somewhere. So, it just kind of pulled it all together. How it looks.

KT: And how old were you during the Vietnam War?

PC: Well, that was in the mid-60s. Ten? Eleven?

KT: Do you remember anything about the peace movement or any of that?

PC: Yeah, I do because I had a brother that was in the Vietnam War, in the Navy. It was at that time they were drafting people, but he volunteered to go in, so he could go into the Navy. It affected me because he was older than me by like seven or eight years older than me. With my mom and him, and I—so, of course we were worried about him. And I do remember the peace movement. What a 10- or 11-year-old can remember, and the Vietnam War, and why we were there [*trails off to become unintelligible*]. I don't know if I thought about—as a 10-year-old—I can't really say, but I can look back and know that it happened.

KT: What were your thoughts about the politics that got us into the Gulf War? Activated the Gulf War?

PC: What were my thoughts? I don't understand [*unintelligible*] [*laughter*].

KT: I'll agree with you on that. I wanted it myself. Were there any profound changes that you've seen in the military from the time that you went in to the time that you went out?

PC: I'm still in.

KT: You're still in active reserve. That's right.

PC: Right.

KT: Have there been any major changes in that time span?

PC: Yeah, I think that with any conflict, there's a learning experience for the hierarchy and that they thought maybe this would work next time and it didn't work. Just on the Airvac side, I

know that we were trained on an airplane back then, and you were familiar with several of the other planes that were used for Airvac, but those were usually used for people that were on active-duty full time. The one plane that we flew in that was a cargo airplane a few months later on, we were just trained in that. That was our mission, flying that airplane. But during the war, it became really evident to us, that doesn't necessarily mean you were gonna fly on that airplane. If they need a mission and some other airplane was there, you may have gotten thrown on that airplane. After that, they talked about cross-training people onto the different airplanes. Which, I know, has happened. Also, some of the Airvacs [*unintelligible*] but I'm sure there are a lot of examples.

KT: So, what was your funniest moment while you were in the military?

PC: Oh, I don't know. [*Reluctantly*] I don't know if I can say this. One of our nurses had a little bit too much to drink one night. When we first went over there, we were in a gym on base [*unintelligible*] laying on all these stretchers. She kind of couldn't find the right bunk, so to speak. So, she ended up kind of crying [*unintelligible*]. We kind of had to help her to her bunk. [*unintelligible*]. I don't know. There was a lot of funny moments. It's the people you fly with. Unless—not during the war per se, but when I flew missions back and forth from Europe in peace time, I mean, we had some funny patient experiences.

KT: Like what?

PC: Psychiatric patients jumping off stretchers, coming out of the bathroom taking their clothes off.

KT: That sounds interesting. It makes the time pass.

PC: Yeah. So, you know it's, uh, you never know what's going to happen.

KT: It almost sounds like working in a hospital. What was the coming home feeling? I mean, did you feel respected? Honored?

PC: Yeah.

KT: Was there a big reception?

PC: No, actually, I was able to surprise my family. We were waiting for that. Once the war had ended, we were waiting just for the day when they were gonna be able to let us go back. And so there were several weeks before that happened. And every day we were waiting to hear what they were going to [*unintelligible*]. So, I came back, it was on my nephew's birthday, and I knew they were going to have a party for him, so I just walked in the house.

KT: Oh, God, that must have been nice!

PC: And my mother was freaking out. Everybody else.

KT: A good birthday present for your nephew. That's great. That's great.

PC: I didn't want anything. I'm not that kind of person. Yeah, just wanted to come home quietly and glad to be home.

KT: Did you think the country in general accepted the veterans from the Gulf War?

PC: I think they learned a lot from the Vietnam and because I mean, a lot happened after that. You know, people were sick, and they didn't know that. And eventually they found out about the Agent Orange. It was a different time in the 70's [*unintelligible*] A different era.

KT: Looking back at your experience, would you do it again? Well, obviously you're still in the reserves, is there...?

PC: That's a tough question to answer because my family sacrificed a lot. I think every family sacrifices if you have a military member. Unless that's your life and you're doing it full time, and even with that they get moved around every couple of years and they sacrifice. But when you're on reserve in the Guard, the majority of people have full time positions on the outside. Some don't, but most of us do. So, to juggle the military requirements, and your civilian job, and even your family, it's a big job you have to do for 20 years. That's what's required for you to stay in for if you want to have a pension from the military. Unless people, they know, they don't realize, I don't think they fully comprehend and understand the sacrifice that's made. When it comes to expectation when something like this happens, because now you're standing on the forefront, you could be called up any day now. Again. That's pretty scary. [*unintelligible*].

I would say that the military has been an amazing experience. I've traveled. I've met wonderful people. I would have never seen or done half the stuff that I've done if I hadn't been in the military. But, on the other hand would I have done it and caused that sacrifice for my family? I don't know. I guess that's the most honest answer I can give.

KT: How did you spend your leisure time when you were still in the service, when you were stationed overseas?

PC: Well, in Airvac, typically we'd go out. We'd leave—it used to be Friday night, then they switched to Saturday morning. If it was a training mission, we flew somewhere in the United States and we would simulate having patients and practice and go through our routine. Some crew would be the patients and the other crew would be the crew and we would have all these scenarios going on.

And if we landed, depending on where we landed and when we landed, and usually a group of us went out to dinner and just had a really good time. And that's when you really get to know people when you were out and about. [*unintelligible*] we'd actually have real patients flying to Europe and back. Then it would be like a three-day ordeal. You'd fly in there, land overnight, stay there overnight sometime the next day you'd go back out. That's typically what we would do, go out and have a snack. Tour, if we were there more than a couple of days, we would sightsee. Try to get some of the sights in. Things like that.

KT: Okay, describing general terms relationships between men and women in the military, working relationships, leisure relationships...

PC: I don't know that it's any different than the civilian world. You're just wearing uniform, you know.

KT: Nothing is expected differently?

PC: Well, I think it depends on what you're in. I mean, I've been in the medical side in my life, in the military and obviously, if I was a female pilot in combat, I would probably feel a lot differently than and my experience would be a lot different than being in the medivac side. But I think if you were a nurse—male or female—you had a role to do, and we did it.

KT: Okay, describing general terms relationships amongst the women in the unit or the military in general.

PC: I think that I've led a life that will always have those who are more competitive than others. And that wasn't an exception in the military. The military is based on your rank. You move up in line based on merit, based on, you know, based on responsibilities, based on how you perform and that's a different—whether you're male or female basically—I think you'll always come across some kind of jealousy, competition amongst women. Men and women in the military.

KT: How do you think society views women in the military now?

PC: Now? Like today?

KT: Yeah, today. Or even at the time when you were in the Gulf War. I mean, there were a lot of first women pilots into combat and stuff like that. Did you think society...?

PC: I don't know if, as a whole, they're really ready to accept women in combat and to be clear with you, I don't know if they should be there. I think that there's a lot... You know the... You just have to be very, very tough to do that kind of job. And I'm not saying that women aren't tough because we are, but I think that we're just [*tape shuts off and turns back on*] ... I guess I'm a little traditional when it comes to that. To stick to a little more traditional role. I think if they want to do that, they should have the opportunity.

KT: So, society in general is not ready for that.

PC: I think they're quite ready for that. I mean, I was listening to somebody talking about just that very subject about a month ago when things started kicking in. And I think that there's still a lot of people out there that don't believe that women should be in combat.

KT: Are promotional policies fair for women in the military?

PC: I can't speak for every woman in the military, but I can speak for myself, and I think I've had a wonderful experience with that. I was promoted, I was supposed to be promoted. I didn't have any problems.

KT: All right. And you were talking before about how you still keep in touch with the friends that you've made.

PC: Right.

KT: Friends for life?

PC: Yeah.

KT: That's good. Do you think all military jobs should be open to women?

PC: [*Clears throat. Long pause.*] Well, I think they should have the opportunity and I think they should be able to prove themselves that they can handle whatever particular job that is. I think they should be denied that right. But I, personally, wouldn't go and want to be working in combat and be on the front lines shooting and M-16.

KT: That makes two of us. Do you have anything else you want to add about your experiences or continuing experiences? How do you feel being an active reservist about the events that we're going through right now?

PC: It's not. It's not a [*unintelligible*]. I mean, in terms of, well, we know who our enemy is, but they're so shadowy, I think the scariest thing about this is that you don't know how long it's going to last. It's going to take a long time. And it's going to require the men and women in uniform to sacrifice for a long time. So, you know that's unknown. It has affected people that want to retire, cannot retire at this moment for the most part. I don't know how long that's going to last. For people who want to retire, they do stuff like that. But that's typically what will happen in time of conflict.

KT: Thank you very much.