RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH GLORIA DECKER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH
and
MARC EHRENKRANTZ

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TRANSCRIPT BY

JULIANNA MCDONALD

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Gloria Decker on October 15, 2013, in Haddon Township with Shaun Illingworth and …

Marc Ehrenkrantz: … Marc Ehrenkrantz.

SI: Thank you very much, Ms. Decker, and thank you for having us in your home. Thank you for the wonderful hospitality.

Gloria Decker: You're welcome.

SI: To begin, can you tell us when and where you were born?

GD: I was born in Philadelphia, 1925, in a house, with the doctor coming to the house.

SI: What were your parents' names?

GD: Mae and Isaac Kassab.

SI: How do you spell your last name?

GD: K-A-S-S-A-B.

SI: Starting with your father's side of the family, what do you know about his family and how they came to the US?

GD: His family, my father came with two brothers and himself from Lebanon and they wanted to get married to a Catholic woman. They arranged marriage for my mother, which I thought was terrible when I found out about it, as I got older, but they were married, against her will, and she wound up staying with him. They had an elaborate wedding planned. They had their own train from Coatesville, Pennsylvania. They had their own train, riding from Coatesville to Philipsburg, Pennsylvania, is where they decided they would have a business there. They had a department store, had bought, purchased one, after they got married and [they] had a pool parlor for the workers in the coal mines that they owned. When the Great Depression started, after the collapse on Wall Street, I guess that was in the '20s.

SI: Yes, 1929.

GD: He [my father] lost everything. He had, I think he had, a Duesenberg car. They lost everything they had, their homes. They all owned homes, the three of them, and, after that, my father just got different jobs, here and there. It was a struggle and, by the time, I guess, in the late '20s, they had about three children and, in the '30s, they had three more. So, we were three boys and three girls and raised in a very good household, very loving father and mother. Now, what else can I tell you about that?

SI: Tell me a little bit about your mother's side of the family and how they came to the United States.

GD: My grandmother was born in Israel, though she was Lebanese. She was from Lebanese parents and there's another thing where, [when she was] thirteen years old, they had her marry an older man and that was the custom, the Arabic custom. She eventually came to Philadelphia. I think they all came--in fact, their names are on the, what's that they have in New York City, when they come over on the ship?

SI: Ellis Island.

GD: Yes. My father's name is on there, my Uncle Casper and Paul are on there. We haven't been up there to see it, though, but we have the certificates that they arrived here. Between losing all the businesses, they came to Philadelphia, eventually. My grandmother stayed in Philadelphia all her life. She lived to be eighty-five, never went to a hospital until she got cancer, at eighty-five, and all her sons worked in Bookbinder's. They were all waiters. They were all successful.

Jacquelyn Decker: What about Uncle Eddie?

GD: And her youngest was Edward and he was like a modern, in the '40s, a modern fellow, very, very nice. I looked up to him and I'm so upset that we don't have anything about where he was on the [Bataan] Death March. He was in the Philippines. [Editor's Note: The Bataan Death March took place following the surrender of US and Filipino forces on the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines in April 1942. Over seventy-eight thousand POWs were forced to march to Camp O'Donnell over six days with little to no food and water while enduring constant cruelty from their Japanese captors. Thousands died along the more than sixty-five mile route.]

ME: Bataan.

GD: And he wrote to us and he said, "We have no apples here. When I come home, I can't wait until I have apples." So, my grandmother had it all planned that she was going to put a bushel of apples in the yard and start putting apples from the front door all the way to the yard when he comes home. He was due to come home after a year of training, because he was drafted. Well, you know Pearl Harbor started and they kept him on the death march and all we know [is], his best friend, who couldn't swim, was with him when he was on a Japanese ship as a prisoner. Our [an American] ship came and started blasting the Japanese ship. So, my uncle and his friends jumped overboard and [the] Japanese shot him, yes, when he jumped over. These people owned a restaurant in Philadelphia, I think it was Cavanaugh's, and they're the ones that came to tell my grandmother. She just went into hiding. She went upstairs in her bedroom and didn't come out for weeks. We had to take food up to her. She wouldn't eat. It was a horrible, horrible thing. So, we went through that with another uncle [who] came home. He was shot, but he got MS, and then, his brother got MS. So, we don't know if that came from the shock of being shot. So, I guess that's about it with my grandmother. The youngest one, though, I would like to know--his name was Edward Gussin, loved to dance, dressed like a model would dress, for a gentleman his age, and we never got to see [him again]. I think he might be buried in Hawaii. There's a place in Hawaii where there's a lot of our men buried there, but I'm not sure. If I didn't have anything

else, I would have loved to hear what happened, why they didn't send us anything else, other than he was lost in the war.

JD: Mom, what funeral did we go to at Arlington Cemetery?

GD: My cousin Joe. He was an aerial photographer in the CBI [China-Burma-India] Theater. They didn't find him for, what, twenty-some years?

JD: It was more than that.

GD: Yes. He's buried at Arlington. His name is Joseph Kassab and they found [his remains], I guess the monks, the ones that lived up in those [mountains] in the CBI Theater. It's so remote, nobody goes there, but that's where the plane had gone down.

SI: The Himalayas.

GD: So, that's my cousin. Oh, I have a picture, too. These are all relatives of mine.

SI: Were they all in the Navy?

GD: Yes. I think they all were.

JD: And all three of her brothers were in the military.

SI: Okay. We are looking at *The Progress* from May 27, 2000. The headline is, "Eight Brothers Go Off to War, All Return." It is about your eight relatives, John, Raymond, Edward, Frank, Louis, Lee, Bill and James Kassab.

GD: And my brothers are named Louis and Bill and Raymond.

SI: Wow.

JD: But, your brothers aren't in that article.

GD: No, no. Raymond was in the Air Force and Louis and Bill were in the Army.

SI: Let me go back to when you were growing up. Did you grow up in Philipsburg?

GD: Yes.

SI: Okay.

GD: Partly. We moved a lot. I went to school in Philipsburg up until I was twelve years old and my grandmother, one, insisted we move to Philadelphia, so that my father could work. He worked in a hotel. He was, oh, like, a maître d' in a hotel and then, he worked in a factory. My

mother worked in a factory to make Army and Marine uniforms and that was on Broad Street in Philadelphia.

SI: Can you tell me a little bit about what you remember about Philipsburg when you were growing up there in the 1920s and the 1930s?

GD: Well, I guess I didn't remember too much, except that we walked everywhere. We didn't have a car. My father had a truck, that he went out and did huckstering in the Pocono Mountains. He would sell fruit and vegetables. Going to school, I don't remember too much about that, except it was a very small town and the men went hunting and they brought home the deer and the pheasants. We had a place, it was called--oh, I forget the name of the dam. If we wanted to go swimming, we had to walk and it was, like, maybe thirteen miles, over thirteen miles. Nobody came with us to protect [us]. [laughter] I didn't even know how to swim and I jumped right in. It was a dam and the only way I saved myself, I guess I paddled over to where the falls were and I held on there until someone came, one of my cousins that swam. We used to take mustard sandwiches, because you didn't have a lot of goodies in those days, mustard sandwiches with us, sometimes, from the garden, tomato sandwiches. My mother would be cooking and baking. Every day, she was either cooking or baking and taught us how to clean our rooms and how to take care [of things].

JD: Her picture is up there.

GD: She said when she was pregnant, the night before she went to the hospital, she was still kneading bread, baking, to make sure we [ate]. [laughter] She had five children. One time, I tried to help her. She was cleaning house for some neighbor and that's how she made a few dollars, and so, I thought I'd surprise her and make the spaghetti for that night. She had the sauce only. So, I put the big pot of cold water and threw the spaghetti in [laughter] and I'm stirring and stirring and my sister's saying, "Something's wrong." It looked like it was all white glue and she said, "I think you had to wait until it boils, and then, put the spaghetti in." [laughter] Of course, I wasted like two pound of spaghetti and that was a heartbreak, can't waste food, and my mother came home. I was crying. We had a big stove that you had to light up every morning. My dad would. It was a coal stove and my mother came home and she saw it. I said, "I wanted to make dinner, so [that] you didn't have to cook." She said, "Sweetheart, don't ever do anymore favors. Don't try to cook, unless I'm here with you." [laughter] So, that was [that].

JD: Did you have indoor plumbing?

GD: Pardon me?

JD: Did you have indoor plumbing?

GD: Yes.

JD: I remember you telling me about outhouses that you used.

GD: Yes, that was in; we had family in Houtzdale, a town called Houtzdale, Pennsylvania, and we had my aunt, like, removed twice from Dad, and they had their own goats. They would make their own goat cheese and we loved going up there, because they would send us in the mountains to pick berries. If we picked enough, we could save enough, we could sell them and go to the movies with that money. We were allowed to do that. That's how we made our money to go to the movies, pick the berries, huckleberries.

SI: It sounds like you had to be very resourceful to make it through the Depression.

GD: Yes, yes, and, when the relatives in Houtzdale, the father died, that's something I'll never forget, because they had the body laid out in the living room and the casket in the living room. We had to sleep there that night, because we lived, like, twelve miles away, maybe a half-hour, I don't know, and that stayed with me a long time. I didn't like that.

JD: Didn't the kids suffer from malnutrition?

GD: No. We all …

JD: Didn't you have rickets, you said.

GD: I had rickets, but it wasn't malnutrition. It wasn't. It was the way I was eating, but we always had enough food, always.

SI: It sounds like you grew a lot of food.

GD: Yes. We had our own garden and my father was a huckster, so, whatever he had, and, sometimes, they would give him maybe a chicken or something, when he gave them fruit, yes. So, they taught us how to be resourceful. The place where I live, it's mostly elderly and we get together sometimes and we talk about, "My god, the kids today don't know anything. They don't speak English correctly. They don't spell." I even notice, on the news, I'll watch a commentator or a newsperson and they don't speak correct English half the time.

JD: They don't have survival skills.

GD: We were taught that. In fact, my English teacher in Philipsburg, as I got older, I realized how she taught us and I sent her a letter thanking her. Then, I found out, two more cousins of mine did the same thing, to send her this letter, thanking her, because you had to speak correct English or you didn't pass. So, that was a good [thing]. They had good teachers in those schools.

SI: Growing up in a Lebanese-American home, were there traditions from the old country that were kept up in your family?

GD: No, just the food.

SI: Okay.

GD: Yes. We didn't realize it--we ate healthy all our lives.

JD: The phyllo dough, Grand-Mom used to make.

GD: And you see when the people make these--I don't know if you know the Greek pastry.

SI: Baklava?

GD: Yes. Well, we always called it baklawa, because that's how my father pronounced it, and my mother made the dough, that thin, thin dough. They would cover the ironing board, they would cover the table and she would make the dough, roll it out. Her and my dad would be going like this with it and spread it out. That's how thin it was, that you could see through it. That's how they dried it to make the baklava, yes. So, we always had that Christmas. Thanksgiving, we always had a turkey. One Thanksgiving, we couldn't afford it and my brother and my cousin went to the market and they stole a turkey. [laughter] They found stubs, ticket stubs, and they picked up the stub and they got the turkey. They ran and brought the turkey home and told my dad, "Look, we won a turkey." [laughter] That's how we had turkey that year.

JD: Yes, but what happened to the turkey?

GD: Oh, the turkey got, I guess, aggravated.

ME: It was a live turkey. [laughter]

JD: Yes, it was a live turkey.

GD: My dad was going to twist the neck or chop the neck. He took the hatchet and the turkey ran away. It ran up a tree and my brother was home for lunch, I guess we all were, from school. They sent you home for lunch and he had to go climb up the tree, shake the tree and get the bird out. So, he was late for school by the time we got the bird down. My father caught it in a bag and that was the story he [my brother] told and he got an "A" for it, [laughter] that he saved the turkey by climbing up [the tree] and that's why he was late. So, that was another thing, but we had turkey that year.

SI: Did your family eat a lot of the animals your brothers hunted?

GD: Yes, always. We always had deer meat and we always had pheasant. I still love pheasant, and my father and his brothers would go to the farms and buy the sheep and they would sheer them right there and gut them, clean them out. They would--I don't know how they cleaned the sheep's skin--and that's what they would [do]. After it was all dried, I don't know if they kept it outside or in a garage or something, and, when it was dry, they brought it in. My mother would wash it with soap and water and let that dry and that was a rug, in front of the--we had those, not a fireplace, it was like almost like a barrel and you had to put coal in it. That kept the living room warm.

SI: Like a pot-bellied stove?

GD: Yes, yes. So, between the kitchen and that, that's how they [my family] got the heat.

SI: Were there any other techniques that you remember for making things stretch during the Great Depression?

GD: My mother made fudge and divinity and sold them to our neighbors. I think they made everything stretch. [laughter] Father bought used toys from Salvation Army and fixed them and painted them for our Christmas presents. To keep us occupied in the winter, my mother made taffy and we pulled the taffy until it was shiny and we'd eat it.

SI: Okay.

JD: Mom, you were telling me about [how] Grand-Mom had one pork chop for eight people.

GD: Yes. If they had a few dollars to buy pork chops, she would buy, like, two or three pork chops and there was eight of us, with Dad and Mom, I mean, yes, six, seven, eight, yes. She would fry the pork chops, and then, she'd make gravy out of it, and then, cut it up and gave all the kids the meat. She put [out] homemade bread that she made and her and Dad would be without the meat, yes. I had a good, good family.

SI: Were there a lot of hobos coming through town? Was there a Hooverville [homeless encampments] there?

GD: No, no. I don't remember any of that.

SI: Okay.

GD: I know my brother and his cousin hopped one of the trains one time, got in trouble, but that's all I remember about the trains there, because, otherwise, it was all very clean, beautiful area, yes.

SI: Was there a Lebanese community in town?

GD: No. We were the only Lebanese, yes. Everybody was English, Irish, maybe German, but all white. You never saw--we never saw a black person until we came to Philadelphia. My kids didn't either, until they came here. In fact, Jackie thought they were down the shore too long. [laughter]

SI: How did all the groups get along?

GD: Famously.

SI: Okay.

GD: Yes, they were all nice. Yes, we got along with all of them. In fact, my cousins married their boyfriends. They went with boyfriends, none of them were Lebanese, Arabic. They didn't know what that was, but, because we were Catholic, we all went to the same church.

JD: Tell them how they used to change the photos of your boyfriends. [laughter]

GD: Oh, that was later.

JD: During the war.

GD: My father said, "You confuse me," because, if I had a date with a sailor, I'd put the picture up in a little frame, and then, the next night, I'd be out with a Marine. [laughter] My father said, "I thought you were going to marry this man." I said, "Dad, we only go out on dates, to dance, yes." "Oh, I'm confused," he said. "I thought you were going to marry him. You put another picture in here." So, he didn't know who he was going to meet.

SI: What role did the church play in your life and your family's life growing up?

GD: It was very important. We went to Mass every Sunday, had to go to confession, have Communion and that's it. They don't do anything, like, to help, like they do today, all the charities and all. We didn't have any of that. Everything was done on their own, but we got along famously with the parishioners. Everybody was good, yes. We didn't have any animosity.

JD: There was a lot of neighbors helping neighbors.

GD: Yes.

JD: More of a sense of community.

GD: Yes, you went outside, you talked to your neighbors.

JD: If you had a problem, everybody came running.

GD: Yes, it was nice.

SI: Do you remember, in your neighborhood, if people would lose their houses or their jobs?

GD: No, none. We didn't know of anyone that lost what my father lost. I wonder why that didn't happen to somebody else. Maybe it did and we weren't aware of it, and we didn't know my dad lost everything. They kept everything away from us like that.

JD: You helped Bitar's family come here from Lebanon.

GD: Huh?

JD: When Mr. Bitar was bringing his family from Lebanon, you helped him get everything set up. In his house as his wife was coming from Lebanon

GD: Yes. I put up drapes in his living room.

JD: He and his family own Bitar's restaurant and bakery down in South Philly.

SI: Okay.

JD: And he wanted to bring his family and my mother helped him get everything ready and set up.

GD: Yes.

SI: Was that before or after the war?

GD: After, way after, yes.

SI: Did your family still have relatives in Lebanon?

GD: Yes, they did, and what my father and his brothers owned was a ranch--I don't know if they called it a ranch, I don't remember what it was. The way they had it was, my father said, "Every year that we're away, that we don't come back, you take so much toward keeping the farm." So, he never could afford to go, and then, I guess they just took over the ranch. We did have one of my relatives go over, had a lawyer, and see if there was anything left of what their property was and she said there was nothing. So, it either went to those relatives and their children and we don't know anything about that.

JD: It's probably all been bombed.

GD: Yes, yes.

SI: When you were twelve, you moved to Philadelphia, correct?

GD: Yes.

SI: What part of Philadelphia did you live in?

GD: South Philadelphia.

SI: Okay.

GD: Yes, that's where my grandmother lived. So, she got us a house near her, which I think …

JD: There's a big Lebanese community at Tenth and Ellsworth Street.

GD: Yes, a lot of Lebanese. Yes, there was a Lebanese church there, too.

JD: The Middle East restaurant.
SI: Not sure.
JD: Yes, and St. Maron Church, the Lebanese church there.
GD: Yes. There's still a lot of Lebanese in that area. It's in South Philadelphia, and a lot of Italian. So, we learned the Italian food and Lebanese; mostly Lebanese food, we had.

SI: What other kind of Lebanese dishes would your family have often?

JD: The raw kibbeh, steak tartare.

GD: Grape leaves. Yes. See, then, upstate, you had pure spring water from the mountains and the sheep and the animals, they all eat the grass. There was no kind of medicinal plants, I mean, when they used to fly over and drop …

SI: Pesticides.

GD: Yes. There was nothing like that. So, we had our meat, like steak tartar, that's what we had, and that's what we miss.

JD: But, don't we use lamb, ground, raw?

GD: Yes, lamb, and my father had a marble--I guess, I don't know if he got it, how they brought it from Lebanon--but it's like this big, has a hole carved in it.

JD: A mortar and pestle?

GD: Yes, and he would put the meat in and pound it, and then, they'd use, like, onions and salt and pepper and the grain was bulgur. They would wash that, like, he'd wash it three or four times, and that's what he mixed it with and either they would bake it or eat it raw.

SI: Wow.

GD: And we were raised with that.

JD: Baked Kibbee we ate with yogurt.

GD: And the pita bread, my mother made herself. We never bought anything. She made her own American bread and her own pita bread, yes. So, she suffered a lot. When we came to Philadelphia and she got the job, all she got paid was, like, twelve, fifteen dollars a week. You didn't get paid much, but, then, you weren't paying a lot for anything, because everything was much [cheaper]. A loaf of bread was five cents. Ice cream was five cents. Everything was a nickel or a dime.

JD: She used to do her own wallpapering, didn't she?

GD: Yes.

JD: She'd renovate a whole place, even if she didn't own it.

GD: Yes, my mother would wallpaper. My father would put the glue [on]. They made their own glue out of flour and water or something and that's what they put on the wallpaper. [laughter]

SI: Wow.

GD: Yes, telling you, you could save a lot of money if you do it like that. People would have money today. What else, dear?

SI: Did your mother work outside the home before moving to Philadelphia?

GD: No. See, in those days, even almost in my day, in the '60s and '50s, you got married and you had kids and you stayed home.

SI: Do you know if she went to work in the factory because of the war effort?

GD: Yes.

SI: Okay.

JD: Well, no, that was during the Depression, wasn't it?

GD: No, no. She never worked during the Depression. In the '40s, she worked.

JD: I didn't know that. I thought she worked ...

GD: During the war, she worked.

SI: Okay.

JD: Okay.

GD: And I would get one job after another when I was sixteen. You just went to work and that was it.

JD: She had to quit high school.

GD: And my first job was in, it was called Bayer Cigars. They taught us how to make those cigars that were so expensive and I got sick from that smell, so, quit that job, [laughter] got another job. Anything that I didn't like, I'd just leave, and then, they hired me in the shipyards, to do welding. I think I was only like ninety-eight pounds then. The guy felt so sorry for me that

was teaching me, that he would keep telling me, "Go in the ladies room and rest." [laughter] So, I'd go to sleep in the ladies room, and then, he'd come and call, "Come out and do this and do that and I'll show you this and that." So, I quit that job and that's what made me join the service. I knew I had to do something.

SI: How long were you a welder?

GD: I don't remember. Not long.

SI: Okay.

GD: I don't remember, but I did weld. I did know how to weld and I did it good. He said I was very good, but I guess I was a little spoiled, too. I'd tell my mother, "I don't like it," and she wouldn't force us.

SI: How old were you when you left high school?

GD: Tenth grade.

SI: Tenth grade. Was that common for women in that time?

GD: Yes, well, you had to get a job and help the family, yes. My sister had to quit. She quit before I did and we all got jobs, didn't pay much. You didn't get much money.

SI: Were you upset to leave school or did you see it as something you had to do?

GD: No, we were happy. [laughter] I mean, I didn't miss it that much, because I used to like to read and I learned a lot on my own and, when I was in the service, I learned a lot.

SI: You were twelve when you moved to Philadelphia and you were in school for a few years there. What did you think of the schools in Philadelphia?

GD: Well, I went to Catholic school.

SI: Okay.

GD: And then, after Catholic school, I went to a public school, a high school, and I was really afraid of the kids in the public school, because we didn't have that in the Catholic school. I think that's why I was glad to get away from it.

JD: You mean they were tougher?

GD: Yes, well, they used to curse and all. We never were around people like that. It was very hard for us, and then, we didn't have the proper clothes to wear, as we were used to wearing uniforms.

JD: You said you had problems with the bottoms of your shoes coming off.

GD: Yes, the soles of the shoes would come off. This was before, when I was in Philipsburg, and we'd put rubber bands around to hold it and it would flop. I know a lot of people went through that. My father would go to the five-and-dime and he'd buy the rubber soles and he'd cut them to fit the shoe. He had one of those long, iron shoe things. You put the shoe on it and you nail the things and that's how we got our shoes fixed. That's another thing--you didn't have to pay a shoemaker then.

JD: Didn't you make your own root beer?

GD: Yes, made our root beer, our own ice cream.

SI: Did your family make wine or anything like that?

GD: No, the Italians did. I remember going to Ninth Street and seeing them buy crates and crates of grapes and they'd say, "Oh, my father's going to be making wine this week."

JD: Mom, how old were you when you were working in the fields?

GD: I guess, sixteen, fifteen, sixteen.

SI: That was after you moved to Philadelphia.

GD: Yes.

SI: Where were the fields?

GD: In the summer, they'd go to Bridgeton, New Jersey, and the boys would pick tomatoes and the girls would pick beans, stuff like that, and that's what you had for dinner.

JD: She hated it. To this day, you won't eat those frozen beans.

GD: And my mother worked in Birds Eye foods. That's when they started freezing everything, yes. She worked in that. That was only summer.

SI: Would you travel out there for the day or stay there?

GD: No, we stayed in--they were like cabins. Of course, we didn't like it.

SI: What were the conditions like?

GD: Well, because we had a mother that knew how to clean and take care of [things], and a dad that was the same way, we didn't have any problems.

SI: Was the whole family there?

GD: Yes, the whole family.

SI: Wow.

JD: Why did you have to do that?

GD: My father would be with us while we're picking and I didn't like it at all.

SI: How many hours would you work a day?

GD: Well, I guess they had to go six o'clock in the morning, they'd go out, and wouldn't come home until late afternoon.

JD: But, it was in the heat of the summer.

GD: But, we met a lot of wonderful people there and they all became--well, I won't say wealthy, but well [off]. They bought their own homes and their own cars and they lived good after that, because they saved money from it.

SI: Did you keep in touch with some of them?

GD: We did, yes, for years, until they passed away, I guess.

SI: Were they also from Philadelphia or were they from all over?

GD: Yes.

SI: Okay.

GD: They were from Philadelphia.

SI: Did you meet people coming up from the South that were doing that kind of work?

GD: No. It was all people that we'd [know], because their cabin would be near ours. So, we got to know them, yes. It was like one big family.

SI: You were about sixteen when you were doing this for a few summers?

GD: Yes. I don't remember how many summers we did it.

SI: Was it into the war years?

GD: Yes.

SI: Okay.

GD: When the war started, we didn't think anything of "bad war" or anything, until I was dating my first boyfriend and they drafted him. That's when we started to feel it. Then, our brothers got drafted, my uncles.

ME: How did you hear about the war?

GD: I guess the radio. You only had radio in those days. In the evenings, we'd sit with my mom and dad and put the radio on. We'd all sit around in the living room and listen. We heard the President come on and just the speech you always hear, he says, "We're at war." Then, it dawned on us. My uncle was over there, where they killed [men, were] bombing all the ships. So, that's how we found out.

SI: Your uncle had been drafted in the pre-war draft.

GD: Yes. He was supposed to come home, say in a month or so, and they were supposed to go for a year, for training. [Editor's Note: The Selective Service Act of 1940 required all twenty-one to thirty-five-year-old males to register for the draft. These age parameters were expanded to eighteen to forty-five years of age after the United States entered the war.]

JD: Was that before or after Pearl Harbor?

GD: Before, before.

SI: Was your first boyfriend also drafted before the war or was it after?

GD: Yes, before the war, he was [drafted], yes. I forgot what they were, parachute--he was in the paratroops.

SI: Were you and your family following the news about the war in Europe closely?

GD: Yes, through the newspaper and the radio. That's it. I remember going, I guess I was eighteen, and my sister and our friends took a bus and went to New York, to Radio City and all. They told us to sit in the audience, and then, they say, "We're going to show you something that's going to be used from now on, called television," and they put us on the [television]. They showed us how we'd look on the television. It was all black-and-white. So, that's the first I knew about that and we used to laugh, say, "Oh, how you going to put a picture in a radio?" [laughter] We had no idea, yes.

SI: When you were a teenager, working all these different jobs, did you have time to do anything for fun or for recreation?

GD: Yes, I roller-skated and danced. That was my main recreation, roller-skating and dance. Beautifully, they always had someone there to watch you. You didn't do anything wrong in those days you don't go to bed with them until you're married. [laughter] That was it. If you

dyed your hair--we had a neighbor that I was very close to her sister and we were the same age and her older sister dyed her hair. Well, we weren't allowed to go out with her. [laughter]

JD: What about, in those days, if you got pregnant, what happened, out of wedlock?

GD: I don't know.

JD: Would they make you marry the guy or did they send you away?

GD: They wanted you to, yes. They'd want you to marry [him], but my mother used to say, after we got married--I don't know if it was after we got married or when we were in our twenties--she said, "I used to think of, if you girls ever got pregnant, I would take you away and have the baby and say it was mine." She had a plan.

SI: Wow.

GD: And I said, "Oh, if I knew that, I'd have had a good time," yes. [laughter]

SI: Things were very strict back then.

GD: Yes, and we didn't mind it. We didn't think it was bad, but I did, I loved dancing. That's one thing I miss, yes.

SI: Would you go to halls that would play Big Band music?

GD: They were like ballrooms, yes, Big Bands. I saw all the Big Bands, Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey, all those, yes. Anytime they were in Atlantic City or Philadelphia, the train would go from Philadelphia--it was then on Broad Street, the train--and it would take you down to the Shore, or wherever they were playing. We'd come home that night, but everything was on the up-and-up. We never had to worry.

SI: Would your father not allow you to dance sometimes?

GD: No, he wasn't strict.

SI: Okay.

GD: His idea was, "Mom takes care of the girls, I take care of the boys."

SI: Okay.

GD: Yes.

JD: Didn't you date a lot of your brothers' buddies from the military?

GD: Yes.

SI: Okay.

JD: So, it was people you knew.

SI: Okay.

GD: Yes, that's right. It was mostly people we knew and, [when] anybody had a wedding, anyone, during the war, when a soldier came home, everybody on the block would give in their [ration coupons]. We had coupons, to buy butter, mayonnaise, anything like that, but, then, I think my mother knew how to make mayonnaise, so, they made their own, but anything like cold cuts, you had to have stamps for, if you wanted soda or beer, stuff like that. So, we would all give what we had. Everybody would chip in, so [that] we could have a party for them coming home and that's how they had their welcome home parties.

JD: How many days were the Lebanese weddings?

GD: Three. Mine was three days.

SI: Wow.

GD: Yes. Well, people never leave, yes. [laughter]

SI: For people who got married during the war, was it still three days or did they shorten it?

GD: No, they got married, went on their honeymoon and everybody else stayed for a couple days.

SI: Okay.

JD: Was that just Lebanese or everybody, Mom?

GD: When I got married; then, when we went back to Wilkes-Barre, my husband and I, we had a reception there, too.

ME: When were you married?

GD: In '48.

SI: Okay.

GD: In '48.

SI: After the war. Going back to your time as a welder, you were working in a shipyard. What kind of ships were you working on?

GD: Well, number one, I did work on--I forgot about that--I learned drafting and I learned how to make the furniture for the ships.

SI: Okay.

GD: No, they never tell you what …

SI: What ship you are working on.

GD: No.

SI: Okay.

GD: But, I did make furniture. In fact, I have a table that I made. You don't use any nails, anything. It had to be all cut. I'm sorry I didn't stick by that. That would have been a good trade, but I learned from where the tree comes in into the factory and what you had to put them through--I guess the thing was half of this room--and I worked on those big machines with the men. They would help me when anything was too heavy and the machine would take off the bark, and then, from then on, that's how we learned everything about wood. So, when I got married, I knew what kind of furniture to buy and how to buy it, yes.

SI: Was that a job that women had not done before the war?

GD: No, no, they didn't do it before. In fact, they all were willing to give up the jobs when the boys came home, yes, and that's what happened, no battle. They had riveters and, I guess, well, mostly, welding and riveters.

SI: When you first got into these jobs, was there any resistance from some of the men?

GD: No. They were happy, because they couldn't go in the service. So, they had to do everything--they got jobs--that they couldn't do in the Army.

SI: They did not have any prejudice against women.

GD: No. They were all good to me, yes. I was lucky. I didn't have any problems.

SI: When you were welding, what would a typical day be like?

GD: Well, we worked nights. So, you went in at night. I don't remember the hours.

JD: How did you get to work?

GD: I don't know. I guess by bus, trolley.

JD: At night?

GD: Yes, we didn't have a car.

JD: But, it wasn't dangerous, like it is now?

GD: No. In fact, when I was, like, nineteen, we'd go to a nightclub. My brothers would be with us with their girlfriends, I'd be with my [boyfriend] and we'd walk from the nightclub all the way home, maybe twenty-some blocks. Nobody ever bothered you. We didn't have anything happen until the war, when the men that used the guns had learned how to use the guns, and dope, everything else, all the drugs. After the war, it was completely different. So, we had the best years. Our era, even my nieces tell me, "You had the best times, Aunt Glor." Everything was calm.

SI: You were saying that you did the welding job at night.

GD: Yes.

SI: What would you do during a shift? How would you do your job?

GD: You had to put two things together and they would show us what has to be done together and you worked on that. You'd get overcome by the smoke and everything. It didn't bother me that much, but I did get sick afterward. I couldn't take that.

ME: Was it in operation twenty-four hours?

GD: No, you could only do so many [hours], I guess an hour at a time, and they'd tell you to rest. Then, you'd go back on it.

ME: Was the yard itself a twenty-four operation?

GD: Yes, yes.

SI: Was it physically dangerous?

GD: No.

SI: Were there any accidents?

GD: I don't remember any accidents, because the foreman was right there with us and they took care of us. So, we didn't have to worry.

[TAPE PAUSED]

JD: Well, tell them why. I don't understand why you joined the Army.

GD: Because I couldn't hold a job. [laughter]

JD: You could hold a job.

GD: I was a little spoiled. If I didn't like it, [I said], "I don't have to work here," like as if I had money. Money wasn't the big object in our house. Nobody said, "You have to do this and you have to make this."

SI: When you would work, would you have to give your paycheck over to your parents?

GD: Yes. We would take--say I brought home twenty dollars. My mother would say, "Keep five dollars for yourself." If she didn't need it, she'd have never taken it, but we were happy to give it to her.

JD: Well, how did you get all those beautiful clothes?

GD: By my five dollars a week. [laughter] We knew just where to go and how to get it. First thing I did with my first paycheck, as I got older, clothes, I wanted to buy nice clothes, and that's what I did.

ME: Did you view joining the Army as an alternative to work?

GD: Yes. No, I knew I had to do something, because, when it came to working, if I didn't like it, I just left.

GD: I hope you edit this--I fixed my [age]. My girlfriend said, "You have to come with me. I don't want to go alone." Well, we were supposed to join the Air Force. At that time, they weren't taking the Air Force. They had enough. They were taking Army. They said, "Well, you could eventually go back." They lied to me, too. So, I fixed my birth certificate to make me, like, twenty-one or twenty.

ME: How old were you?

GD: I was eighteen.

SI: Okay. That was 1943.

GD: Yes.

JD: So, the legal age was twenty-one?

GD: I'm looking here. By moving, everything got messed up.

SI: We are looking at some of your records from your time in the service. This is your discharge.

GD: I don't know if you can read them. My mother wrote and told them I lied about [my age], so, they had to let me [out]. She was so worried about me. I guess she knew more than I knew, because I didn't think there was going to be a man that would hurt me or didn't even occur to me.

JD: What do you mean "men that would hurt you?"

GD: That's what she was worried about, all of the servicemen.

JD: Oh.

GD: "And my daughter doesn't know anything about all that could happen to her," which I didn't.

SI: How did you first hear about the opportunity for women to go into the service?

GD: Oh, it was common knowledge. Everybody knew.

SI: Okay. How was it viewed in your neighborhood and among your family?

GD: How was it viewed?

SI: Yes. Did they have an opinion, one way or another?

GD: My mother didn't know I did it. She was heartbroken, but she accepted it, because I did come home on leave and everybody was happy about what I was accomplishing.

JD: So, what, you were still living at home and you just didn't show up one day?

GD: No. We told her we were going to go and we were already signed up. The train was leaving. [laughter]

ME: Where did you go first?

GD: I guess Oglethorpe, Georgia, for training, and I wound up in Newport News, Virginia.

JD: Tell them about your first night in the mess hall.

GD: It wasn't my first night, but it was, like, the first month, I guess.

SI: Was that while you were at Oglethorpe?

GD: Yes. They said, "Mess is at six o'clock." You had to go. So, we're in there and we're all talking, we're all smoking. They taught me how to smoke. I didn't know how to smoke. [laughter] Of course, I piled my plate, get a tray like this and I piled it up with everything. Of course, I wasn't a big eater. So, they said, "You have to eat everything." I said, "I can't." So, I said, "Put your cigarettes out in here." So, we put our cigarettes out in my dish, with the food.

So, we come to go out and the Sergeant's standing there. He said, "Come here, Private. What's this?" I said, "I couldn't eat it," and he said, "And what's that?" I said, "A cigarette ash. I can't eat it with that in it." He said, "You eat it." I don't know, "My mommy, where's mommy?" [laughter] So, I had to eat, put it all in my mouth and run like hell to the garbage can outside and throw up. [laughter] All my friends, they really protected me. They were all in their twenties and thirties. So, they felt like I was the baby and they were always trying to help. They're laughing, holding my shoulders and my head and got a cleaned cloth. That was it, boy, I didn't eat after that if I [could help it]. You had to learn. So, that's why I say everybody should go to the service one year after graduation, learn.

JD: They do in Israel. They go two years.

GD: Yes.

SI: Where did you report to? Where did you get on the train to go down to Georgia?

GD: I don't remember.

SI: Was it Philadelphia?

GD: Yes. It was in Philadelphia, probably one of the--what do you call it, where you go to join up?

SI: An armory?

GD: No, they had …

SI: Enlistment station?

GD: It was almost like a store, but …

JD: The recruiting.

GD: Yes.

SI: Recruiting station.

GD: Yes, and they're the ones that talk [to] you, "You want this. You want that." Then, they find out what you did. "I worked in an office, bookkeeping." So, that's what they put me as, a clerk-typist, and then, something else. We had to do, like, a parade, I don't know what they would call it now, parade march. They had our platoon, plus other platoons, and we had a parade for a General (Marshall?). We won the blue ribbon, our platoon, and that's what I said, I was mad that I can't find my picture of the whole group. I don't know if you could send somewhere and see if they have that.

SI: I am sure the Army has an archive of photos related to the WAC [Women's Army Corps].

GD: Yes, we won the blue ribbon there, and so, after that, we were treated like normal people, because, before that, you had to take orders for everything. While I was out there, we had German--let's see, when I was in their offices, which are, like, big barracks and stuff, I had German prisoners there. They weren't allowed to talk to us or anything, but they used to put ties around the mice and hold the string. One of them came into where I was typing and the way I screamed, I went like this--the whole desk went over and my boss said, "What the hell?" I was screaming. I'm standing on the chair and I said, "There's a mouse." Then, he looked over and he saw that the German prisoner did it. That's how close they were to me.

SI: Wow.

GD: And, when we're in the barracks, right outside the barracks was Italian prisoners. So, we had prisoners all over us.

JD: How were they treated?

GD: That was in Newport News. That's where the ships came in, and we couldn't talk to any of the boys that came over, the girls, that were on that ship until they were deloused. They had to be deloused.

SI: Were you allowed to talk to the prisoners of war?

GD: No. They used to think I was Italian, so, every time they'd see me out, if we were outside the barracks, they'd be yelling, "*Bella, bella*," "Pretty girl, pretty girl." [I thought], "I'm not going to get in trouble with these guys." [laughter] So, somebody did report that I was flirting with the Italians, and then, I had to be called in and I said, "Are you kidding me? [laughter] No, not me." We had our own soldiers that took us out. We had Army, the Air Force and the Navy and they used to have certain clubs that you can go to. We'd have dinner with them or we'd go dancing with them, stuff like that, and then, they left for Europe from our place, where we were. So, [we were] the only ones allowed to go give them a party and dance. They were only told, like, say it was seven o'clock, they'd tell them, "Eight o'clock, you're going to be taken overseas." So, then, they'd call over to the barracks to ask, "Who wants to come?" So, we'd go and we'd dance with them. They would beg us to give letters to their families. We couldn't do it. Yes, everything was kept [secret, you] couldn't open your mouth.

JD: Didn't one soldier want to leave you all his worldly goods?

GD: Yes, and I only knew him a short [time]. He said, "I don't have anybody. If I die, I want you on my [will]," and I wouldn't do it. We were too nice. When I was dating, I wasn't allowed to take a gift over ten dollars. If it was over ten dollars, you have to give it back. They were proud people, my people.

SI: Before the war?

GD: This was after, yes.

SI: That was not an Army regulation; that was just how your family was.

GD: My parents, yes. No, we couldn't. We didn't want anything anyway.

SI: Tell us a little bit more about getting into the Women's Army Corps. What was it like going down to the South on the train?

GD: That was kind of scary, because your whole family was at the train station, crying and worried, and then, you start thinking, "Gee, nobody's going to be around for me." It was only the two of us, my friend and I, and the other people that were in it. So, as we got there and they welcomed you in and give you your uniforms and all, we got to talking to each other and everybody felt okay. Nothing was scary about it, but the strictness of everything was hard, because you think, "Well, I don't want to do that." Well, you've got to do it. I had duty to wake the girls up, to wake the whole platoon up in the morning. I called the fellows and I told them, because they had a barracks away from us, the ones that I knew were going to be on duty, I said, "Do me a favor. Make sure you call, six o'clock. Make sure I get up." Somehow, I didn't hear the phone. If he did call, I didn't hear the phone. [laughter] All of a sudden, I'm waking up and I didn't know what time it was and I hear everybody yelling my name, "Get up. You're late. We're late." They were all dressed fast and I had my pajamas on and I had to put my boots on and my uniform, fatigues. I put the fatigues on and my hair had toilet paper [rolls?] in it. That's how we set our hair, with toilet paper, and I threw the cap over the toilet paper and I didn't know the back of my uniform was open and the shoes were untied. I flew out there to be on time. The Sergeant said, "Kassab," and I looked at her and she said, "You're a disgrace to the Army. [laughter] Get back in there and get dressed," and so many gigs against me. So, I had to do KP for I don't know how long, for not being dressed. Another time, my friends that I said took over for me, one was a beautician, one was a chef and she said, "Come on, I've got keys to the mess hall. We'll go get something." So, right away, we ate something there, and then, we brought sandwiches back. I put them in my footlocker and I don't know when I got up and I said, "Oh, I have that sandwich. I have it in the footlocker," before we had an inspection. I opened the locker and roaches, [laughter] and I was afraid of little ants. I screamed, woke everybody up. I'm saying, "How do we get rid of…" Oh, my god, I couldn't go back to bed.

JD: You're like Private Benjamin. [laughter]

GD: That's why I loved that show, because when I saw the way she was acting, [I said], "Oh, wait, she's going to hear it." The drill sergeants are so mean and all. Afterward, you're their best friend. After your basic training, you get along so good with everybody.

SI: Did you have mostly women as your drill sergeants or men, too?

GD: No, only women.

SI: Only women.

GD: The only time, like, there were men who were in the mess hall or the dayrooms, where you'd go to play pool, and stuff like that. If we had, like, say, a New Year's party or a Christmas party or something, if you were in a hotel, you had to leave your door open. There's always someone there going back and forth, checking on [you], and, actually, we didn't drink, because I couldn't drink. I would get sick if I [did], so, it would always be sodas.

ME: Did you get to go off base when you were down there?

GD: Yes.

ME: How did you find the locals?

GD: Well, you know where we went when we went off base? We went to Chattanooga, Tennessee. We didn't go much in Georgia. We wanted to see other places, because Georgia was so stinky hot. I would never want to live there. It's that you feel like you need a shower every time you go out, but we went to different towns. You don't see much. We didn't see much of the people, until we got to Tennessee, and then, everybody was nice to us there. If you were in uniform, they took care of you.

SI: Would you go to people's homes for dinner?

GD: No, no. We went out, because it was, like, a day thing.

JD: You stayed with Essie Klodfelter

GD: Yes, I had one [girl] in our platoon, that was her name, Essie Klodfelter. She was from a remote part--I don't know if it was Virginia or Texas, because I had one in Texas, too--and they invited us to stay over. Her parents invited us and they didn't have a bathroom inside. [laughter] It was a farm. They raised pigs. That's all I heard during the [night], pigs snorting. They had a thing, you'd go outside and pump the water and that's how [they got water]. I had my toothbrush, think, "How am I going to brush my teeth? How am I going to get washed?" Everything's in basins. Then, they had a big pot under the bed if you had to go to the bathroom. I said, "I don't know. I'm going to go to the outhouse." So, I woke her up and I said, "You have to come with me." We'd walk, we're silly, walking and laughing, and she said, "We have two holes in the outhouse, two holes. [laughter] We could both go in." [I said], "Oh, my god." They were the sweetest, her mother, the sweetest people I ever met. I loved being with them. She picked us up at a bus stop in one of these old, old cars that your head hit the ceiling. It was like a box, the car, and clutch and all, she used the clutch. From the very beginning, she had dinner all ready for me, fried chicken. Everything was fried. In the morning, if you didn't eat what they made, sausage and potatoes, all that stuff for breakfast--so, I loved being with them.

JD: What about the bed? You were telling me …

GD: Yes, the bed was a feather bed. It was so hard to get in and out of it, but we laughed about everything. Everything was funny.

JD: You said when you got in bed, she couldn't see you.

GD: Yes. [laughter] She said, "I can't see you."

SI: It sounds like you got along very well with the women you served with.

GD: I did. They taught me that I was supposed to shave my legs and under my arms, which I never even had enough to shave, so, I didn't think [of it]. So, what they did was, two people held my legs and two held my arms in my cot. They got the razor out and they shaved me, and so, then, I knew. I said, "Now, I have to shave the rest of my life." They said, "You're supposed to." So, they taught me that, all that.

SI: Did anything else strike you as very different from the way you had been raised?

GD: No, because I knew …

SI: Just in general.

GD: My father always told us, "Nobody is better than you."

SI: Okay.

GD: So, even when I got jobs, when I was older, president meant nothing to me if you disrespected me, and I would tell them. I said I didn't like the way they treat their women, about the pay and all, and he respected me for that. So, I learned a lot, but we were also taught, at home, manners. Manners and respect, you learned at home.

SI: Were there other things in general that stood out from what you knew?

GD: No, except I couldn't eat or drink after anybody and they got [their] feelings hurt, when I was drinking a Coke out of the bottle and one of the girls asked me for a sip. So, I took another sip and I said, "Here, you could have it." She said, "You don't want it back because I drank from it," and I said, "No." She forced me to drink after her. So, then, I learned--you want to keep your friends, drink after them. [laughter] No, that's all. We had good manners at home, so, I didn't learn anything different in the service, except you don't put cigarettes out in your food and you don't take too much food, yes.

JD: You don't waste.

GD: Otherwise, it was a normal go-to-work-every-day, and you had your drills and stuff like that, which we didn't mind at all, once you know. In the beginning, I couldn't take it. It was hard and I thought I was having a nervous breakdown, because, one time, I just couldn't stop laughing or crying. The girls all got together and came around me. I begged them not to call, for me to go to the hospital, and they got me a drink of water and a Coke and they sat with me--it was most of the night--calmed me down and I was fine.

ME: What was upsetting to you?

GD: I guess, I don't know, everything about it

JD: Nothing's familiar. You're away from home.

GD: Yes, but you were told what to do and I wasn't used to being told everything. They would command it and you did it. I guess, finally, it just all got to me.

JD: Yes, but you weren't used to get hollered at, either.

GD: No.

JD: Constantly.

GD: No.

ME: The discipline was tough.

GD: Well, we had discipline at home, yes. With my father, if you reached across the table for something, he'd slap your fingers and we would say, "Please pass the bread," or whatever you wanted.

JD: But, he didn't scream at you.

GD: He'd say, "May I please?" and that's what you learned.

JD: I think it was the screaming and the hollering that you really couldn't handle.

GD: Yes, and then, we had people that were really uncouth. Other people didn't shower. They didn't take care of themselves personally. We had a lot of that, and then, women came in with lice. We all had to get deloused. We had to walk around with--they put stuff in our hair and we had to walk around with the towels in the barracks for I don't know how long.

SI: Was that at Oglethorpe?

GD: Yes.

SI: How long was the training at Oglethorpe?

GD: I think it's just six weeks, if I remember correctly.

JD: Didn't you have to put on a gas mask?

GD: Yes. We had gas mask training. I had to climb a ship, when they pulled the rope over with the rungs. We had to climb a ship. We had to bivouac, like the Army, like the men do.

JD: Did you have to crawl under that thing?

GD: Yes.

SI: Did you have any firearms training?

GD: No. All I remember having is the gas mask thing. They put you in a room with the gas and you have to have your mask on, know how to use it.

JD: Didn't they make you take it off and get sick?

GD: No, when you go in--I forget. You have to smell it, and then, put your mask on, but everybody did it.

SI: Did any women washout or go home?

GD: No, no, not that I know of. They all became good friends of mine. A couple of them got married and we stood up for them, went to their weddings, yes. I kept in touch with them a long time.

SI: Where were you sent after your training at Oglethorpe?

GD: Newport News, and that's where the ships were coming in.

SI: Were you given a liberty to come home or did you go straight to Newport News?

GD: I don't remember that. I don't remember. We probably were, because I remember going home on leave.

ME: Were you given additional training?

GD: Difficult?

ME: Additional.

GD: No, no, because [it was] whatever you knew how to do, just like you were going to work.

ME: It was like a job.

GD: Yes, whatever you knew how to do.

SI: You went into the service in March of 1944, or February?

GD: I forget. It was a year.

SI: I think you were in a little over a year.

GD: It was about a year I was in there. I don't know.

ME: Discharge says April 7th.

SI: Yes, April 7th.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: We looked up your date of enlistment. It was February 5, 1944.

GD: Okay.

SI: You would have gone up to Newport News in mid-April.

GD: Probably, yes.

ME: Can you describe a typical day in Newport News? What did you do?

GD: Well, you still had to get up at six o'clock in the morning and the trucks that they had took you to your job, or a jeep. That's where I learned how to drive a jeep, too, and it was like a warehouse where we went. The prisoners were working in the background and you were in the office part. I had a captain that was my boss and I did typing there.

SI: Was it a Women's Army Corps captain or a male captain?

GD: It was a male, yes, and he was in, like, his forties, I guess, very nice. It was just like having a friend. Anything I needed, he would make sure I got it. I'm trying to think of what else we did. Christmases were good and everything that had to do with holidays, rather. They would have the big dining rooms open.

JD: You didn't go home for the holidays?

GD: I don't think so, no.

ME: What kind of processing did you do in the office? What were your responsibilities?

GD: I don't know. It was mostly paperwork; well, I think because it was where they handed out all the equipment.

SI: War goods?

GD: Yes, and I learned a lot about the tool shed and types of tools. I worked in there, too, and gave out tools and you always had to have the paperwork for all that. So, I think that's what, mostly, the paperwork was.

SI: About how many women did you work with?

GD: I was the only girl in that office.

SI: Okay.

GD: I'm trying to think, though--we did do other work, but I can't remember a lot of it.

SI: Do you remember if you ever had to deal with shortages?

GD: No, no. Mostly, it was processing, too, when the boys came home, processing them out. We had paperwork for them. That's about it.

SI: According to your discharge, you had two jobs there, one in the tool shed, for about five months, and the other one was in general processing.

GD: Clerk-typist.

SI: Clerk-typist, yes. At that time, you were processing the men coming back from overseas.

GD: Yes. I had my name in [for overseas duty] because they took my best friend to Guam. It was really, really hard for her. She sent me a letter and she said, "Take your name off the list. It's hell. We have to bathe out of our helmets. It's filthy, dirty. It's hot." She was telling me everything that was horrible about it. So, I went in and I told the Lieutenant to take my name off. I didn't want to go, but, then, my mother had sent a letter that I was underage. [laughter] They called me in to tell me I have to leave, but I would leave with an honorable discharge, because I was a good soldier, and so forth. He said, "Your mother wrote and told us that you were underage."

ME: They made you leave.

GD: And he said, "I can't believe somebody put something over on the Army." [laughter] He laughed about it. So, it was sad leaving my friends.

ME: Did you have contact with any of the soldiers or did you just process their paperwork?

GD: No, you can't. In the first place, I guess they were in no mood. They had to be deloused and go through all that and go to hospitals here. No, we just welcomed them back, had dinners. They had dinners for them, but we didn't have anything to do with the officials, like, their commanders and all took care of everything.

SI: Would you attend the dinners?

GD: No. They had a good welcome and we were always at the port there when they're coming in, to wave to them and wish them luck, but you couldn't go near them, because they had to go through delousing and all. That must have been awful.

SI: Were they all coming back from Europe?

GD: Yes, mostly Europe. I think that's about it, though. I don't remember doing anything else there.

SI: What would you do when you were not on duty?

GD: We would go dancing. We'd go shopping in town. One time, I don't know how, we got to Williamsburg.

JD: Do you remember what your pay was?

GD: No; probably twenty-five dollars a month. [laughter] I don't remember that.

SI: Were you a private?

GD: I didn't stay long enough to get to be PFC, sergeant or corporal or anything.

SI: When you went into town, or on the base, would you see any USO shows or go to the USO club?

GD: No, they would come to us. We would go whenever they were coming, like, I remember Red Skelton [a radio and TV comedian] used to come a lot and he was funny. We would have a theater there that we went to. We had a chapel to go to church, a small place, and then, a theater near it and that's where any of the movie stars or anybody were coming, any bands were coming. Then, we'd just get dressed up and go. We had two different types of clothes, like your Army clothes, and then, you have an Army dress uniform and that's where we went, yes. Other times, we made our own fun, because most of the times, you're around the barracks or, in those towns, you didn't have any place much to go except to a club. I didn't drink, so, that was the end. I was boring. [laughter]

SI: You were dating soldiers.

GD: Yes.

SI: Were they the ones that were on the base?

GD: They were ones on the base, yes. We dated them and we used to go in groups when we dated, always with groups, and I guess I never was serious enough with anybody. We didn't get too serious, because, when I came home, I dated--well, some of them had come in our town, like Willow Grove. They would call to see if we wanted to go out or something. Then, we'd go out

with them, but to clubs in Philadelphia. I did have a soldier I went out with a while and he wanted to get married and I didn't. So, that was the end of that. [laughter]

SI: In the service, were there any regulations about who you could date or not date?

GD: Yes, you couldn't date a commissioned officer. It had to be a private, corporal, some sergeant, but you can't date officers.

SI: Do you know if any other WACs broke that rule?

GD: They probably did, yes. They probably did, but nobody would tell on them. Yes, nobody would say anything. No, we stayed with the Air Force and the Navy and the Army men that we knew, went out with them--always had respect, never had fights or anything like that. So, otherwise, my time there was just a whole year. You didn't really have much time to do anything else.

SI: How often were you able to come back home?

GD: Well, I think I only came back home twice. You got your leave to go home. You ask for it and, if they say it's okay, it's okay. You go home. I think it's a week or two weeks you could stay and that was nice, coming home. Now, we started to wait for all our boys to come home and all that. Then, that's when I started to get serious about working.

SI: When you came back to your neighborhood, did people treat you any differently, being in uniform?

GD: No, no. They were all friendly, yes. I guess they thought I did my part in the war, but we werealways friendly. My family was like that. You'd come to our house and, like my son said, every time his buddies would come to my place, my house, they'd say, "First thing Mrs. Decker does is ask if we're hungry."

SI: For the record, you put out a great spread for us. [laughter]

GD: It's my baby, yes.

SI: It is a tradition you are keeping up.

GD: Yes. Like I said, you know how people keep sending us [mail appeals], to help this, to help this? I faithfully give to the food bank, because I know what it would be to be hungry and want something. So, people don't know that today. They have everything they want.

JD: He asked you when you met Daddy.

GD: Well, I knew them all my life, because we lived in Wilkes-Barre and they lived in Wilkes-Barre and we lived on the same street. I knew their parents and his brother was a Marine.

JD: Which brother?

GD: George, and we were at a Lebanese--it's like a festival and it was in New Jersey. That's when he came up to me and asked if I remembered him and I said, "Yes." He had gotten out of the Navy and he asked me to go out. So, we went out, but I wasn't serious about it for a while. Then, we decided we're going to get married.

JD: How long did you date Daddy before you got married?

GD: I guess, maybe a year, back and forth, because he was in Wilkes-Barre and I was in Philly.

SI: I might be confused. Did you say your family lived in Wilkes-Barre?

GD: We lived in Wilkes-Barre, and then, moved to Philadelphia from Wilkes-Barre.

SI: Okay. You lived in Wilkes-Barre in-between Philipsburg and Philadelphia.

GD: Yes, we went into Wilkes-Barre.

SI: Tell us a little bit about coming back to your neighborhood after being discharged from the military and how you readjusted to civilian life.

GD: Well, I knew I had to get a job and I got a job. It was a factory, but it was in the billing department, accounting department, and I think I stayed in that job until I got married.

JD: No, you said you went to college.

GD: Yes. No, it was only a few months, because I didn't want to stay. [laughter]

JD: Tell them why you quit.

GD: I wanted to make money. [laughter] He knows why I quit.

JD: No, he doesn't.

GD: The fellows would ask us to go to lunch and we'd go to lunch and we'd go back, or we'd go to a movie. Then, I thought, "I really didn't like accounting," but it taught me a lot, whatever few months I was there. I learned a lot.

SI: Which school was it?

GD: I think it was called Columbia Institute, part of Columbia. It was in Philadelphia, though.

SI: Did you use the GI Bill? [Editor's Note: The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the GI Bill of Rights, offered funding for college or vocational education, as well as one year of unemployment and loans to buy homes, to returning World War II veterans.]

GD: Yes. It's a shame I didn't take advantage of it.

SI: Did you use any other part of the GI Bill?

GD: To get a house, yes, my husband and I.

JD: I didn't know that.

GD: Yes. They had a better chance than they do today.

JD: So, what did they do for you? What, did they give you money or a loan?

GD: No, it has to do with the loan. I don't know.

SI: Was it a four-percent loan?

GD: Yes.

SI: Something like that.

GD: Oh, real low, yes. Everything was low.

SI: You had worked before the war, during the war and after the war. Could you see any changes in how women were treated after the war?

GD: No. After the war, the men came back and they had to get their jobs. So, the women were stay-at-home wives, unless they were allowed to stay at the job they were at, maybe a man wasn't doing it or something. There were a lot of jobs for women, but they were all clerical. They weren't like--clerical or factories where they made clothes. That's what my mother did. After the war, she made civilian clothes, but it was hard work and they didn't make a lot of money.

SI: Did your wages go down quite a bit after the war?

GD: Yes, yes, but it looked like everybody prospered. They built homes, like Levittown, where you could afford to buy a home, because it was maybe ten thousand dollars. You try to buy something like that today. Everything is hard today. I feel sorry for anybody that's raising kids or buying property. It's hard, but it'd be nice if they all learned something, like a year in the service after school, to learn respect and learn how to cope, because I learned, did me good, because I had three children that I had to take care of myself. My husband was an alcoholic and I stayed with him too long, and then, I had to raise my three kids. So, I thank God that that went good. Then, I wound up in Jersey. I lived in Bucks County for a while in Pennsylvania and I worked for an engineering firm in Philadelphia. I guess I was there ten years and I retired from there and decided to move to Jersey, because I got in on the apartments for the elderly, and been here since. My kids, my daughter moved to Jersey. She was in Philadelphia. My sisters, brothers, all moved to Jersey. So, we're all [here]

ME: What were you doing when the war ended?

GD: What was I doing?

ME: Yes, on V-E Day. [Editor's Note: V-E Day was declared on May 8, 1945.]

GD: What was I doing? Oh, I was probably on Broad Street celebrating with everybody. [laughter] We were in an open [car]. My brothers had a convertible and everybody was tooting horns and, yes, that was a happy day. Happy and sad, because we lost my cousin in the plane crash and my favorite uncle, never heard anything more about him. I imagine if I checked and tried to get them to look into where he's buried or anything about him, because you go on a death march, that's the most horrible thing. If you saw anything about that, it's horrible. He was on that and all they would do is send cards, that he was well. The Japanese would send it.

JD: How did you found out about Pearl Harbor, through the radio or the newspaper?

GD: Radio.

SI: You had two close relatives lost in the war. Their bodies were not found, or, in one case, not for a very long time. Would you have services for them without the body?

GD: Yes, Arlington Cemetery for Joseph Kassab--that was the one in the plane crash--and my Uncle Ed, I'm not sure, but I heard that they might have put some kind of plaque in a cemetery in Hawaii.

SI: Did you have anything locally?

GD: No, no.

SI: Like a remembrance ceremony?

GD: [No], couldn't have anything. It was the saddest, saddest thing, knowing what he went through, and then, get shot.

JD: So, he survived the Death March, but got shot in the water.

SI: Yes, on the hell ships. [Editor's Note: "Hell ships" were Japanese transport ships that carried prisoners of war, in cramped, poor conditions, to various locations throughout the Japanese Empire. These ships were unmarked and many were attacked by unsuspecting Allied forces.]

GD: Yes, excellent swimmer. He was excellent and his buddy said he couldn't even swim; he just hung on to whatever was there.

JD: His buddy survived?

GD: He's the one that told my grandmother that he saw him die. He said, "I couldn't save him." It was really heartbreaking. That took me a long time, to forgive the Japanese. I couldn't even look at them.

SI: Were you corresponding with your brothers and cousins?

GD: Yes, always, always. We still correspond, whoever's still living, but most of them passed away. Well, that's what you did in those days. You went to a nightclub, it was full of smoke. We used to say, "Look at all the smoke," and we were smoking. [laughter]

SI: Did your family members who had been overseas talk about their time in the service?

GD: That's one thing that we noticed--nobody wanted to talk about it. My brother did tell us that when he used the--

SI: Flamethrower?

GD: Flamethrower. They didn't want to do that, but they had to get the Japanese that were hiding in there. They had to get them out and they wouldn't come out. They wouldn't come. Some raised the white flag and they'd come out. They got to be in prison. The others, they had to keep the flamethrowers in there.

JD: It's a shame they didn't get to meet Uncle Bill. He's got the most extraordinary pictures.

GD: Yes.

JD: Of the Japanese soldiers that were dying.

GD: That's right. She's got pictures of the planes and everything, my niece, of her father. I said to her she should have had Tom Brokaw at the house and show him all that Bill had from the Second World War. He had a lot of things from Japan. He brought a samurai sword home and somebody …

JD: How long was it before you started to feel differently about Japanese people?

GD: Oh, well, a long time. Japanese and Germans, I didn't want go near them, because they took our family and they started the war, we didn't, but, then, after, I had German friends that came over that didn't want war. I got to meet them and hear their stories and what they went through, and Ukraines. They told me about how they were pushed, taken out of their homes and put on a farm in Germany.

JD: A lot of the German people starved, too.

GD: Yes. So, we met a lot of people from the war.

SI: Do you think that your time in the service shaped your attitudes afterwards or changed your personality in any way?

GD: Well, we had the Italian prisoners. I didn't mind. They were prisoners. No, I didn't hate them. The Germans, I just didn't want to be bothered with them.

SI: Just in general, did your service affect your outlook or the way you presented yourself?

GD: No, I don't think so.

JD: Didn't it give you more confidence?

GD: Oh, yes. You grew up; only a year and I grew up in a year in the service.

SI: You worked in the factory in the billing department until you got married. Then, years later, you worked in an engineering firm.

GD: Yes.

SI: Did you have any other jobs in-between?

GD: Yes, General Motors. Yes, I did work for General Motors. I don't know how long. That was in the '70s, right?

JD: Yes, '60s, between '60s and '70s.

GD: It was a good company to work for then.

JD: What was it you were doing? I never quite understood it.

GD: We were making parts for tractors or whatever they were, something like that.

JD: She hadn't worked in twenty years and she got a job in one day.

GD: Yes.

JD: With no experience.

GD: And then, when I got the job, I was hospitalized, because I had surgery. After that, I went for this other job, the engineering firm, and that's where I stayed until I [retired].

SI: What did you do in the engineering firm?

GD: Clerical work. I was a receptionist and I helped out accounting, and what else was it?

SI: Like human resources. Was that in the 1980s?

GD: Right before the '80s, mid-'70s and '80s, but we were mad that they let the Japanese and Chinese in to take pictures of everything they were doing. The girls were telling me, the ones who put everything together for computerized stuff.

JD: You mean they took pictures of your workplace?

GD: Yes. They were in the factory and taking [photos]. I thought, "They could copy everything." That's how they learned our technology.

JD: So, they got your technology.

GD: Yes.

SI: Wow.

ME: The CEO that you told off, which company was that?

GD: Where I told off? What was it? Bell Telephone.

JD: You also forgot you worked at the Holiday Inn at night.

GD: Oh, yes, I did. I worked for Holiday Inn for a while.

JD: She did front desk work.

GD: I was front desk, everything. When they had a snowstorm, I even went--the chef couldn't make it--I went in and made coffee and eggs for everybody that came in the dining room. [laughter] I told them, "I don't know what this is going to taste like, but we don't have a chef," and I never made the coffee in that urn. I just threw everything together and served them, and they all tipped me nice. [laughter] Yes, I did that. See, I forget half the things.

GD: And the mayor was Rizzo. Did you ever hear of him? [Editor's Note: Francis Rizzo, Sr., served as Mayor of Philadelphia from 1972 to 1980.]

SI: Yes, sure.

GD: He is, like, when you meet him, meticulous suit and, yes, his guard, the guy that guarded him, what do you call him?

ME: Bodyguard.

GD: Yes, I worked in Holiday Inn. So, anytime I would go to New York, it would be free. I'd have everything comp-ed.

JD: I'm trying to think, I was in high school.

GD: Yes.

JD: So, it had to be between '67 and '71 that you were at the Holiday Inn.

SI: What were your children's names?

GD: John was the oldest, David is the youngest, Jackie's the middle.

SI: Okay.

JD: So, when were you at Bell Telephone?

GD: When I was …

JD: When you first started working?

GD: When I first came out of the Army, AT&T was hiring, but what was unfortunate, I had a good job there and they offered us stock at one time. We were kids. We didn't know what that was. "No, I don't want to take anything out of my pay." We had to take our pay home and, because it was night work, I used to put all the soldiers through for free. I would never [charge them]. [laughter] We'd say, "Would you deposit such-and-such?" At that time, they were the big boards. You wouldn't even know about them. We had all these, what do you call it, wires to plug in?

ME: Jacks?

GD: And, when I knew it was a solider calling home, I wouldn't make them put money in the slot. So, they lost money then. [laughter]

JD: So, what, they were using pay phones?

GD: They had to use pay phones to call their family.

JD: Okay.

GD: And I knew where they were calling from and all. So, I got to where I couldn't eat, because everything was mixed up, day and night, day and night. So, I got very sick. I lost a lot of weight, and so, the doctor said I would have to be treated for, like, I guess, almost like malnutrition. So, my mother sent me to my cousin's in Virginia. They had a restaurant and I knew every[body], my aunt was there and all. They started giving me eggnogs, that I didn't even know I was eating, because they put ice cream in it or something. Little by little, I gained a little bit and I felt better. Then, I come home. So, then, I was fine after that.

SI: That was in the mid to late 1940s.

GD: Yes.

JD: Well, wait a minute, when did you work for the electric company, because you did switchboard work there?

GD: Yes.

JD: That was when? Philadelphia Electric.

GD: Right after …

JD: That had to be in the '70s.

GD: Probably. I don't have all that down.

SI: No, that is fine. It sounds like you worked a lot of jobs to support your family.

GD: Yes, yes. I worked for a bank and that was night work and I didn't want to leave my kids. They asked me to stay. They gave me a raise and I didn't want to leave my kids at night.

JD: She's really good at math. [laughter] She does cryptograms for fun.

GD: But, I think that's about it, dear.

SI: Was it at Bell Telephone where you told off this supervisor about women's pay?

GD: No.

JD: After you retired from Technitrol, you went up with Aunt Libby and Uncle Bill.

GD: That's right, yes. I moved up.

SI: Was it difficult to make the original adjustment, when you were working at General Motors?

GD: Oh, no, that wasn't difficult.

SI: Okay.

GD: You know why? because everybody was so friendly, when you have everybody friendly around you.

JD: And we also had good neighbors that were looking out for us, because my brother and I weren't really old enough to be staying home alone. We were in row houses, so, the neighbors lived--we were in and out of each other's houses.

GD: And, when I got laid off from there, I made more money being laid off. [laughter] I hated to go collect compensation. I hated it, but I went because they said, "Go collect," and then, General Motors gives you enough that you would've made for your paycheck. So, I did just as good being laid off. Yes, I didn't realize how many jobs I had. [laughter]

SI: Yes, quite a few.

GD: Hey, you have to do what you have to do, right? I wound up buying my own home and car and, thank God, we're all here.

SI: I wanted to ask you about your trip to Rome, which your daughter wrote up in a story. Can you tell us a little bit about that, when you were going to see your relative be canonized?

JD: Well, she went to the beatification, which is the first step. [Editor's Note: The Deckers are referring to the beatification of Blessed Nimatullah Kassab Al-Hardini by Pope John Paul II in May 1998. He was canonized in May 2004.]

SI: Okay.

GD: Yes.

SI: You [Jackie Decker] went to the canonization.

GD: Yes. In fact, yes, I was on the plane myself to go to the beatification. They said there was one seat left and because some man was sitting on the third seat and he said, "Would you like to get a pillow and lay down here?" He said, "I'll sit back there." So, I slept all the way almost to Rome on three seats. Once I got there, I had one bag that I had emergency everything, clothes and shoes and things I would need if they lost my luggage, brand-new case, it was like a duffle bag. The cab driver stole it. I had someone waiting there, because somebody I knew got their uncle to come pick me up. So, he had my name and I went with him. As soon as we come to get out of the airport, he had to stop. I forgot why he had to stop--oh, to pick up the luggage. [He] picks it up, they didn't put one in. They put it in another cab, the one that I was carrying. So, I got to the hotel. I called the cab driver, because I had his home phone, from a friend of ours. He said, "You lost; they didn't give me; oh, my god." He said, "I'm going to go look," but he never found it. So, I lost all my luggage there. We were supposed to be right in Rome. They put us outside Rome, where you had to pay to get a cab if you didn't go with your group. Cab drivers [were] crazy. They cursed everybody out as you're going, but, anyway, we got to the beatification. It was in a beautiful, beautiful hall with, I don't know, all the art they had there. It was magnificent.

JD: It was at the Vatican.

GD: Yes. Everybody was there to show you where to go, what to do. You always had someone there to guide you, and so, then, we found family. These people from Lebanon and London, Paris, rather, were looking for us, because they heard we were relatives. This one man found me. He said, "My name's Gabriel." His wife was a lawyer and they lived in Paris and they wanted

me to go to Paris to visit them. I did keet in contact with them. I should have brought pictures; I have those pictures, all the famous places around where the Pope would be, and you couldn't take anything [inside]. We tried to take a bottle like this in, of water, and they threw it in the trash. Yes, you weren't allowed to take anything in and this was all outdoors then. Then, they took us the next day into the building where all the beautiful art was. That's when the Pope came in, and then, when they did the beatification, you were outside, thousands and thousands of people, beautiful. I enjoyed that and they had us in the front row, but we actually didn't touch the Pope. We could see him better than anybody else, but we did get in touch with a lot relatives that still live in Lebanon.

JD: Didn't you have a private audience with the Pope, like, your group?

GD: No. We thought we would, but they didn't.

ME: What was the beatification for?

JD: He was becoming a saint.

GD: Prior to becoming a saint, yes, and, when it came time to do the sainthood, she went.

ME: What was he known for?

JD: I'm printing out the story for you.

GD: Okay.

SI: How were you related to the saint?

GD: Well, he was my father's [great], great-uncle, so, it would be [great], great, great-uncle. He was, I guess, his picture's more like a monk would be. Anyone who touched his garb would get well. That's how he got to be [a Saint]. People from Lebanon told me that. When I said to them, "You had to have three miracles," they said, "He had many more. You don't know what this man was, what he did for the world." So, like I say, giving, all he did was give and help.

JD: He died very young, when he was fifty-two.

GD: Yes.

JD: Of an illness.

SI: Could you tell us his name, for the record?

JD: It is Nimatullah Kassab Al-Hardini.

SI: Okay.

GD: And that's where my father was born, in Hardine, Lebanon, but it was peaceful then. They had money. They were wealthy. They had good lives, but he did very good in the United States. They did everything right. They came here, they learned their English, they got to be citizens and they lived honest lives.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You were telling us before, when the tape was off, how your parents learned English.

GD: Yes, soon as they came over, they went to school and learned English. They went to school at night, worked in the daytime, because they had a department store. Their department store had burned down. This was before the Crash and the money they had, insurance, went into the bank. So, they wound up losing everything. It was sad. That's a hardship that I don't know [how] my father dealt with life after that, but he went out and worked all his life for us, a good man.

SI: Is there anything that we did not discuss that you would like to add or anything that we forgot to ask?

GD: No, I think you got most of it, yes.

SI: Okay. Do you have any other questions, Marc?

ME: No.

GD: Well, I thank you for taking the time for this.

SI: Thank you. We deeply appreciate your service.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Juli McDonald 1/21/14
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 1/14/15
Reviewed by Molly Graham 2/17/15