

Mary Roberson

Nov. 22, 2021

Interviewed by Leah Cohen, on Zoom

Transcribed by Sonix with corrections by Leah Cohen

Edited by Leah Cohen

Web biography by Leah Cohen

Production by Angel Melendez

Cohen: [00:00:03] Good morning. Today is November 22nd, 2021. I'm Leah Cohen, the Oral History and Reference Manager at the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, and I'm very pleased to interview Dr. Mary Roberson, who was also Petty 3rd Class officer [i.e., Petty Officer, 3rd Class] in the U.S. Navy. She served from 1973 to 1976. Dr. Roberson served at the Navy Supply Command out of Coronado, California, and later at the Naval Undersea Center at Long Beach, California. So thank you for coming in, so to speak, and we look forward to hearing your story.

Roberson: [00:00:48] You're welcome.

Cohen: [00:00:50] So when and where were you born?

Roberson: [00:00:55] I was born in Greenwood, Mississippi, November 30th, 1953.

Cohen: [00:01:03] When did your family move from Mississippi to the Chicago area?

Roberson: [00:01:10] I want to say around 1959-ish. Yeah, my mom moved up from Mississippi to Chicago for a better opportunity for her and our other siblings.

Cohen: [00:01:28] Oh, I believe you told me personally. Had you grown up in West Garfield Park?

Roberson: [00:01:35] Yeah. My mom moved to the West Garfield Park area of Chicago, and we stayed in that area for about ten years. We moved to various locations in Garfield Park and, you know, sometimes we were in the Lawndale area as well. So during the early sixties and seventies, so we spent a lot of time living in those areas.

Cohen: [00:02:06] What was it like growing up in those areas?

Roberson: [00:02:10] Well, it was during a time of well, in our family, you know, we were struggling, you know, financially and it was and I had a big family. I grew up in a family of, in the end, a total of eleven boys and three girls, so it was hard to make ends meet financially, however, there was a lot of love and support in the family. So growing up as the oldest girl, I was basically one of the persons that helped my mother a lot where, you know, cooking and cleaning and, you know, attending to my younger siblings. So in essence, it was, you know, difficult financially. But you know, my mom and you know, her husbands or, you know, live-in boyfriends, you know, basically kept us together and we still stick together to this day.

Cohen: [00:03:07] Wow. Wow. What were where? Where did the...men in her life work? Were they? And how did they help support the family?

Roberson: [00:03:20] Yeah. My younger sibling's father worked at the Water Market down on Halstead Street...near Halstead and Washington or Randolph. Back in those days, there was a lot of those fruit markets and vegetable markets where, you know, a lot of produce was sold. And he worked there. And as a matter of fact, during the Christmas holiday, we always think about this. We always had crates of oranges, crates of apples, crates of grapes, grapes and things of that sort. And then he always he was also a general contractor where he will repair various properties and, you know, have extra income like that.

Cohen: [00:04:04] And which school did you go to?

Roberson: [00:04:09] Started out at Gregory Elementary School, and then we moved and I went to Leif Erikson Elementary School. I spent my middle school days and Manly Upper Grade Center on the West Side. And then after graduating from middle school or Upper Grade Center, as they called it, in them days, I went for one year to Lucy Flowers High School and all girl high school over by the - what is that - the Garfield Park Conservatory. And my brother always tell this story that off then I then I followed him over to Austin High School, and I spent the last three years of high school at Austin on Pine Street in Chicago, and I graduated from Austin High School in 1971.

Cohen: [00:05:02] Was this the brother who had joined the Navy, as well? This is the same brother?

Roberson: [00:05:07] Oh no, no, no. I had, remember I had eleven brothers...No, the one that joined the Navy was an older brother, the one that, you know, graduated one year after I did is a younger brother, and he went to Austin High School and I was in high school at Lucy Flowers and we moved. As a matter of fact, we moved to 4220 West Carroll Street. And it was closer to Austin and I transferred over there, and he always tell the family that I followed him over to Austin High School. [Laughs] Yeah, it's a good story.

Cohen: [00:05:47] Which subjects did you like in school?

Roberson: [00:05:51] ... I like -- they started an Afro history course, as they call it. I really like that and then I like world geography because it gave me an opportunity to learn about different places that I had no idea about. So. Yeah, those are the courses that I like Afro history and geography.

Cohen: [00:06:12] Yeah. Like an eye-opener?

Roberson: [00:06:14] Yeah. Yeah, yeah, I was pretty adventurous. You know, I always wanted to travel and do certain things, and which was one of the reasons I joined the Navy because I wanted to see more than, you know, the West Side of Chicago.

Cohen: [00:06:30] Were you involved in other activities? I mean, it seems to me you would have been pretty busy between school and looking after your younger siblings. But did you, you know, just like, what did you have any pastimes that you enjoyed as growing up?

Roberson: [00:06:45] Um, no, basically being the oldest girl, a lot of my pastime, if you will, was helping my mom with, you know, with cooking and household details and things of that sort. So but in the summertime, I would get summer jobs. As a matter of fact, one of the things that I hold dear to my heart, I had an opportunity for two summers to work at an electrical manufacturer. It's called Reliable Electric out in Franklin Park, Illinois. And that was a pastime for the summer to be able to work out there in the summer, and it gave me an opportunity to

meet some diverse individuals again. You know, [it] kind of feed into my desire for adventure and all of that. So I met some, some people that lived in Melrose Park and Franklin Park and had an opportunity to kind of travel outside of the West Side and enjoy some of those type of adventures.

Cohen: [00:07:47] Oh, sounds good. You're also living in the area where there were the riots after the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968. Like, what do you remember about them and how do you think it might have influenced your thinking?

Roberson: [00:08:08] Yeah, we were living on Carroll Street when Dr. King got assassinated, and I vividly remember the riots on West Madison Street, where things was burning and people were looting and things of that sort. One personal thing that really impacted me and my family, my sisters, my younger siblings, they're biracial and my sister was going to [George W.] Tilton Elementary School on Maywood, no on Maypole right there. And my sister got beat up or, you know, jumped on or, you know, got into some got into a fight with some other students because her skin was very, very light. And you know, the texture of her hair was, you know, that of a mixed race individual and the kids and school beat her up during the assassination of King because she didn't look totally like them. And she came home and she was very distraught about that. And it really impacted me and our family that, you know, individuals in our own community were beat up someone that lived in a community, you know, because of what had happened to Dr. King. So I vividly remember that. And often when I was teaching graduate courses at National Louis University and multicultural counseling, I would ask the students what was a cultural awakening experience for them, and I would always lead out with that was a cultural awakening one for me because it was very distressful that our own community members are our own neighborhood members was beating up or attacking my my sister because of the King assassination.

Cohen: [00:10:06] Hmm. Yeah. So it was the sort of cultural awakening in a difficult type of way?

Roberson: [00:10:17] Yes, yes, absolutely.

Cohen: [00:10:21] Was there rioting going on at the time of the Democratic convention a few months later in August 1968 in in your in the area where you were living?

Roberson: [00:10:33] No, I don't remember it in the area where we were living, but I do remember the news reports where it showed, you know, the police officer and Mayor Daley at that time talking about what was going on down there. But in our neighborhood, I don't I don't remember any rioting during the Democratic National Convention. I just remember seeing it on TV and down at Grant Park. Grant Park sounded like a very long place away, but you know, it was right downtown Chicago and I particularly remembered a police officer with their *helmets* [emphasized] on and doing the things that they needed to do to try to control the rioters.

Cohen: [00:11:18] You want to talk about relatives of yours who served in the military?

Roberson: [00:11:25] Sure. So I have four older brothers... My two oldest, they got drafted during the Vietnam time. One brother, my older brother, went to Vietnam and then my other, my second older brother went to Germany because they both of them couldn't be in country at that time. And then my third older brother later on, he and I'm going to say probably in about 1970... he enlisted... I'm thinking because my brother, another brother and I were talking about this recently because I was wondering if Curt enlisted or got drafted because it was the end of the draft. And then he was saying something about maybe it was during the last part of it, the lottery, because I don't know how Kirk got to go into the Navy. I just, you know, as I reflect, I don't see him enlisting in the Navy. But nevertheless, he was stationed in the Navy at the Naval Station and Great Lakes, so he went up to boot camp, came back to the West Side.

Roberson: [00:12:40] We were living on Carroll Street still, and he had on his dress white uniform and, Leah, I got to tell you and he brought two of his friends with him. And I got to tell you the look of those guys in those sharp white uniforms with the little hat on, it just - I fell in love with it! And I'm like, Oh my God. Now I had seen my older brother and his Army uniform and my other brother and his Army uniform. But we were so concerned about the Vietnam and Germany and the uniform really wasn't of attraction to me like it was when my brother Kirk, you know, came back from Navy boot camp. And when I saw that, I was like, 'Oh my God, I wanted to go to the Navy'. And then they had this thing. "Join the Navy, see the world", and

that kind of tapped into my adventurous side. So I fell in love with the uniform for the Navy, and that's why I decided to go to the United States Navy.[Both laugh]

Cohen: [00:13:46] Although [I did not enlist in any Navy] I did enjoy it . When I was eighteen years old and living in Israel, I remember also seeing at Israel's Independence Day, the Navy wearing the white - It looked so like it's so amazing, you know?

Roberson: [00:13:58] Yeah, yeah.

Cohen: [00:14:00] Anyhow, so did you, did you enlist right after you graduated from high school? Like, what was going on?

Roberson: [00:14:08] So I graduated from high school in June of 1971, and I had got gotten a teacher's scholarship to Chicago State University on the far South Side of Chicago. And I went to a Chicago State for a little while. I was driving from the West Side to the South Side to go to classes, and I was like, "You know, I really don't want to go to college." So then I got a job working at Motorola. It was a TV manufacturing company, again out in Melrose Park. In that area, it seemed like I was attracted to that. And I was like, "You know what? I don't want to go to college right now." So I work for Motorola for about a year, a year and a half. And then in 1973, that's when I decided to join the military and yeah.

Cohen: [00:15:05] Oh, Okay, okay. So you had some work experience behind you and then you joined up? Yeah, yeah. So where did you sign up out of curiosity?

Roberson: [00:15:15] Oh, it was downtown Chicago, you know, and I've been trying to remember where that was. I remember taking a bus to a recruiting office, and I'm going to research that because I had to take a bus to go somewhere to office and take a test. It must have been a military entry exam. And, you know, I did pretty good and they told me what fields that I was eligible for. And then I remember standing me and some other young people standing in front of a a flag, swearing in. So I'm going to say, what's in the West Loop, maybe somewhere around in that area. So that would be a good thing to find out exactly where that was, because that, you know, memory kind of alludes me.

Cohen: [00:16:07] And what did they say? Which areas did they determine you were eligible for and did they appeal to you?

Roberson: [00:16:17] Well, they said something about communication and then they said something about, you know, the supply area. And it probably I'm thinking, you know, as I've advanced in my education, there's a strong called a strong inventory. And that inventory kind of, you know, tell you where your, your career path would be and things of that sort. So it was social stuff. It was supply and it was manufacturing - a lot of things that was relative to interaction with and people.

Cohen: [00:16:50] Interesting. Yeah. Yeah. How long was it after you were in the recruiting center until you went off to basic training in Orlando, Florida?

Roberson: [00:17:04] I'm going to say it was probably, you know, less than sixty days. Let's see, I went in in September and I remember it being like the summer, you know, warm weather. So probably in June, July, somewhere in there, and then in September, it's September 3rd is when I enlisted and actually, you know, caught the first flight of my life to Orlando, Florida. [Laughs]

Cohen: [00:17:33] That's true. Before I go forward, what did your mother and your family think about your enlistment and were they worried about girls also being sent, shipped off to Vietnam or--

Roberson: [00:17:47] Well, as I recall, I had an apartment out in Oak Park, Illinois, so my family was going through - my older brothers were, you know, having their challenges. And again, I never wanted to just stay on the block, as they say. I had this vision or, you know, adventurous spirit. I want to go beyond that. So I had gotten an apartment out in Oak Park. Uh, while I was working at I guess, I was working at Motorola during that time and when I, you know, again saw my brother and, you know, wanting to do a little bit more, want to do some traveling, if you will. My mother was like, "Are you sure this is what you want to do?" And then I distinctly remember Leah, my baby sister. God bless her soul. She's resting in heaven, right now, my baby sister. I'll never forget the day that I was leaving to go into the Navy. She was standing in the doorway of the house as the recruiter came and got me and we drove off, head up, head to where we were leaving from. My baby sister was, you know, really sad about that. But my mom

was asking me, "Are you sure? Are you sure? Are you sure?" And I'm like, "Yeah, I just want to, you know, get on with my life. I don't want to be stuck here on the West Side of Chicago with all the stuff that my brother's name was involved in. And, you know, girls in the community was having babies out of wedlock. And I just didn't want that for myself. I, you know, saw that me. I saw myself doing something better than what was going on in my environment.

Cohen: [00:19:35] What were your brothers involved in; some of your brothers involved?

Roberson: [00:19:39] They were involved in gangs and drugs and, you know, all of that kind of stuff, so I just didn't want to be a part of that at that particular time.

Cohen: [00:19:50] Yeah. So I guess it felt like a bigger, broader vision, you know, for you.

Roberson: [00:19:55] Mm hmm.

Cohen: [00:19:56] So, so you're on your first flight. Are you meeting other recruits as well on the plane? Like how, how does it work?

Roberson: [00:20:06] Well, I remember that I was nervous and we as my friend Deborah, who is a retired Navy vet, says, "We left at Ole' Dark Thirty", so it was really dark getting on this plane to go to Orlando. And I remember that again, I was nervous. I had never flown in an airplane and they were passing out chewing gum, and I was asking, what was the gum for? You know, but they say, "When you go up, your ears are going to be popping."

[00:20:37] So I remember my ears popping and I'm looking out at the clouds and, you know, just a little bit nervous about where I'm headed to. But at the same time, I was very excited about it.

Cohen: [00:20:52] Yeah. So what was it like when you arrived there like? What was boot camp like?

Roberson: [00:20:59] Yeah. So when we got there, you know, it was this big bus waiting for us to take us to the training center at Orlando, and I remember it was raining and it was dark. And

you know, we all, you know, got cattle herded onto this bus. And I went to the recruit, the training center and started getting checked in and, you know, as it got lighter and went on in the morning. So they kind of gave us physicals and, you know, passed out uniforms and all of that kind of stuff. And I just thought that it was really, really exciting. And I start seeing, you know, different races of women. You know that I hadn't, you know, been that close and personal with. And I just thought that, 'Wow, this is going to be a great adventure and I'm a small frame woman. I was small frame during that time. You know, I'm going to say one hundred and five pounds, you know, and this being fitted for the uniforms and all of that stuff was pretty interesting because, you know, the person [was] like, "You're tiny, you're tiny, you're tiny." But you know, I made it. [Both laugh]

Cohen: [00:22:15] So what were some of the impressions you had with, you know, women of other of other races or other parts of the country?

Roberson: [00:22:24] Well, the impression was that, you know, I was excited about it, I didn't want that experience with what happened with my sister to influence me. You know, I had, you know, working at Motorola and those experiences with, you know, my White friends in Melrose Park and my Latino friends at Franklin Park and at Motorola that prepared me, so to speak, you know, for the diversity that I encounter in the military. So it was just like, kind of, you know, building on that. And then I met a couple of young ladies from-- One was from Texas and another one was from, like Virginia or something like that. And one of them's father was a dentist. And I remember her teaching me how to brush my tongue for the very first time. And and we were, you know, it was it was really great because I learned some things from them that I didn't know or didn't get a chance to be told in my own community. So it was great.

Cohen: [00:23:34] That's great. Wow. And what was the physical training like? Was it very difficult, rigorous?

Roberson: [00:23:44] So this is always a funny story. So when I was in high school my sophomore year, I got some trauma about swimming, my brothers trying to teach me how to swim and West Garfield Park by throwing me in a pool and holding my head down, right? So joining the Navy, you would think that I would have had thought that I'm going to need to know how to swim, right? So in basic training, we had to pass a swimming test and here we go. I'm

like terrified and they take you over to this big, huge pool and say, "Okay, recruit, you know, go to the deep end and jump into the pool and tread your way to the top and float the length of the pool on your back." And I was terrified. I didn't know how to swim. And during that training, that was the most horrific part for me because I didn't know how to swim and they kept saying, "What did you think joining the Navy? You wasn't going to need to learn how to swim?!" And it didn't dawn on me. I wasn't thinking about that. But so the most set of training was terrific. I was the flag bearer [i.e., guidon bearer]. I love the cadence and marching back and forth and all of those things. But that swimming piece was something that I had to put extra time in, in order to pass the swim test. [Chuckles]

Cohen: [00:25:15] Did somebody else teach you? Did anybody help teach you how to swim while you were preparing?

Roberson: [00:25:23] Know what? No one didn't teach you how to swim. They taught you how to pass that swim test, right? And there was another African-American woman from Texas. She did the same thing. She didn't know how to swim and both her and I after chow every day, we would have to go over to the pool, you know, to get prepared for the swim test. And, Leah, I got to tell you, I was terrified. I remember, you know, this big, you know, excuse the big White, burly woman with a long pole come like, [bossy voice] "Git up et up there, recruits. Walk to the-" it's like walk the plank, "right to the end of the diving board. Get your legs into that pool." So they had a gentleman down in the pool, you know, to help us, right? And I start begging the guy, "Please, please, please, I'm going to jump in this water, but I need you to help save me." [Laughter]

Roberson: [00:26:17] But after, you know, going there like maybe three weeks, I think it was, I would manage to learn what to do, you know? And that's what they were doing, telling us, you know, how to just clean, you know, because the first time I jumped in, I had my eyes wide open and all the chlorine was in my eyes. My eyes was burning. And then as I got a little bit more instruction, I was able to float the way top and do the back paddling and pass tests. And the rest is history. [Laughs] I had a fear of swimming and you know, that's why I love my, my middle sister. I love all my family. But I would talk to her about that trauma of that swimming episode, and I don't think that my brothers meant any harm. They were just trying to teach me how to swim, and they figured that's the way to do it, which is not the way to do it. But I was terrified

and so I would talk about it with my family throughout the years about that's why I don't like to go, you know, around swimming pools because people think it's funny and fun to push you in the pool and all of that kind of stuff, and to me, that's not that's not funny and it's not fun.

Roberson: [00:27:33] So when we would go to different places and where we're swimming and bob, I would stay far away from the edge of the pool because I don't want somebody going by walking, pushing me in the pool or, you know, the kids, they'd be jumping all in the pool and they're having a great time. And I'm terrified, right? So eventually, my family, we were traveling somewhere and we were staying at a Holiday Inn and I said to my sister and my sister in law, I say, "I want to get over this fear of the water, you know? So would you guys come down to the pool with--?" I'm getting emotional just thinking about it. "Would you guys come down to the pool with me because I want to be able to feel comfortable in the water?" And they did. And it was like 10 o'clock at night and we were down in the pool, we were only ones and I got into the pool and I walked from one side to the next side. And like two feet, you know, and then, you know, that felt comfortable. Then I went to three feet and did the same thing. And I either, you know, put my head under the water and, and my sister, that's why so it was so emotional when I got that letter. [At the mail distribution on the return flight to Chicago on HerStory/Honor Flights. Roberson and Cohen sat beside each other. HerStory asked that family members write letters to the veteran which are delivered on their way back]

Cohen: [00:28:52] Th sister! The same sister!

Roberson: [00:28:53] The same sister. And my sister up. She said, "It's okay, Sis. It's okay, we're here, we're here", and my sister in law, and I was able to feel comfortable in the water and not be panic stricken that, you know, I was going to go on under. So I was able to get over that, that that fear of the water. So now when I go on a cruise and stuff like that, I don't try to swim because I still don't know how to swim, but I don't mind getting in the water in this way and they tease me, "Are you in the kiddy area, you and the kids?" "That's all right. I'm in the water." [Laughs]

Cohen: [00:29:31] So yeah, like it is true. Like you overcame it overcame your fear of it. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. You were saying before that you I think it was called the flag bearer. So what is--

Roberson: [00:29:46] They call it the guidon bearer.

Cohen: [00:29:50] So so what is the guidon bearer do? Are you the one who leads the group or how does it work?

Roberson: [00:29:56] Yeah. So when, we march everywhere, you marched to chow, back from chow, you marched to our appointments and back to the barracks, you march to the class. So you line up in formation, and the flag bearers or the guidon bearers are those individuals that are in the front of the pack, if you will, carrying the flag, you know, the United States flag and your company flag because it was a lot of different companies on base. So marching around, you got to have identification. And I was one of the ones that, you know, carried one of the flags, the company flag or American flag. I can't remember which one it was, but yeah!

Cohen: [00:30:42] Yeah. Wow!

Roberson: [00:30:45] It was fun. You know, the cadence went, [chants it out]," I don't know what you've been told. Company 30 is good as gold. Am I right or wrong?"[Both burst into laughter].

Cohen: [00:30:59] Like you take everybody into order and submission?

Roberson: [00:31:04] Right, right?

Cohen: [00:31:06] Yeah. When you were in basic, did you guys learn how to shoot or use any ammunition?

Roberson: [00:31:17] No, no. We didn't have to do that.

Cohen: [00:31:22] The thing I was wondering about is like, I interviewed a woman in the Marines, and she told me that they had to take a course on on grooming and putting on makeup. Did the Navy required this as well when you were there?

Roberson: [00:31:36] No, they didn't. But we did have to keep everything clean, like they would have barrack, barracks inspections where they inspect your locker. You know, you have to have your bed made up perfectly squaring the corners and things of that sort. So in your locker, is certain hygiene items and your uniforms and your shoes and all of that and your soap dish and your toothbrush holder have to be sparkling clean. Can't have any of that, you know, stuff that we, you know, at home the soap dish is a mess sometimes. You know, as a matter of fact, I still have an issue with the soap dish being messed up. I clean it, you know, clean it every day, right. I don't want to see all that goop piled up in it. So. But no, we didn't have to be taught about makeup at that particular time, and this could be, you know, later on. But all I remember is making sure that our corners were squared. They taught us that how to make the beds and then also make sure that our lockers was, you know, the shirts, the dungarees, the dress uniforms and and your toiletries and things of that stuff are in order.

Cohen: [00:32:55] Did they require you to have short hair? Like were there any regulations about hair?

Roberson: [00:33:02] Um, I don't remember anything, you know, pertinent to me, but I know for the guys their hair couldn't go beyond their ears that had to be tapered. You know, these days with natural hair, with African American men and women, I think that they have some regulations. But back in '70, '73, '75 during that time, there wasn't any a lot of the regulations that are current. Other than it had to be neatly chopped and not hanging over your ears and things of that sort, which is why I fell in love again with the Marines. The Marines guarded the Navy like when I was stationed at Coronado. The Marines were the ones on the guard, at the front gate and them jokers look good, Leah. Oh my god. I mean, you know some of the Navy guys, they try to get away, but they push their hair up under the hat because they want to have a little lift on their hair. And then when they take the hair off, you know it's below the ear. But the Marines was clean cut, everything pristine, to nice standing at attention, and sharp salute and all of that. Oh my god, I love it. [Laughs] But I don't remember any regulations about hair other than it had to be above the ears.

Cohen: [00:34:24] Did you have a chance to interact socially? Well, actually, maybe we'll go back to basic, like at basic, did you have a chance to interact socially with with men who are on the base or--

Roberson: [00:34:37] No, we knew that they were there, but I think halfway into basic training, we had R&R and they took us to Disney World or Disneyland. I keep getting it mixed up, which one is in Florida? And they took us there and the guys was there as well. So we had a chance to interact at that time, you know, because that big park and we had like so many hours to to have some recreational time. But on the base, I don't remember any close interaction with the guys. They pretty much had the company separated.

Cohen: [00:35:16] Oh, okay. When you were at basic, did you have a chance to travel around Florida or no, you're kind of kept pretty much on the base?

Roberson: [00:35:28] Yeah, pretty much on the base, except for the situation I just mentioned that they did took us out for R&R to Disney Land, which is a Disney Land of Disney World?

Cohen: [00:35:39] Which I forgot. Which of the two? Sorry. Yeah. So after basic training, what happens next?

Roberson: [00:35:52] Well, maybe two weeks before you're done with basic training, they start talking about your next duty station or orders, as they call it. So they call you into a particular place office and they say, "Well, we got orders for you to go." I think that my first set of orders would have been to Rota, Spain. And again, another, you know, story as a young person coming from urban Chicago, I was like, Rota, Spain, where is that? And I had no idea where Rota, Spain was. And then you could deny your first set of orders, I believe. And I always wanted to go to California. That was my whole goal for joining the Navy. So when they said Rota Spain, I say it's there somewhere else I could go because I don't know about going way over wherever that is. And they said, "Well, we could send you to the Naval Supply Center in Coronado, California, which is right by San Diego." And I accept those orders because I thought that that would, you know, be more beneficial for me than going to Spain, which I had no idea where it was. So. So, yeah, that's they give you orders and you finish up your training, boot camp training, and then go to your next duty station.

Cohen: [00:37:27] So your dream came true. And what, what motivated you in wanting to be in California?

Roberson: [00:37:35] Well, you know, the Beach Boys and all of the good music that they were making back during them days and just thinking about being close to an ocean. And I always thought about California. So yeah and doing my high school and those college days and those that little time in between, I always, you know, like the peace, love and happiness. My cousin and I, we used to travel down to Old Town, so I always was like a hippie by nature. So I thought California would be the ideal place for me.

Cohen: [00:38:12] Sounds good. So what is it like have in Coronado, California, working at the Navy Supply Depot?

Roberson: [00:38:24] Oh my God, that was like. They was like, really, really good, so I got to San Diego. And checked into the command, and they showed us to the barracks and and I met a woman, I never forget, Judy. Judy was from some part of Texas and she was a tall, you know, blond, you know, Southern White hick, right? Right. Yeah. And she was on part of the supply command that I was going to be working for. So when I got there and met her and got checked all in and, you know, had some time before reporting to work or reporting to duty the next day, just meeting her and being introduced to, you know, a few of the other people that was on that base was really, really, you know, interesting. It really was. Yeah, just meeting Judy. She was my first impression of San Diego being from Texas and then I got to meet Bruce. Bruce Lovett was a young man from Boston, Massachusetts, had the dialect of Boston. I just thought that that was so interesting and then met some other people. So yeah, it was pretty cool.

Cohen: [00:39:50] Where did you live when you were there? Were there?

Roberson: [00:39:54] I lived on the base for a little while and then they didn't have a lot of quarters for women. And I had an opportunity to get what they call BAQ, where they would pay your housing money to get an apartment off base. So I had an opportunity to live across the Coronado Bridge in a little town called National City, California, which was right by San Diego. So yeah, I lived on base for a little while and then I had my own apartment in the community.

Cohen: [00:40:29] Sounds good. So I was reading the definition of an SK-4 storekeeper and it says, "SK-4s are tasked with maintaining ship or company military supply stores. Their

responsibilities generally include purchasing and procurement, shipping and receiving, issue of equipment, tools, consumable items or anything else obtained through the federal stock system." So I guess I wondered, did this describe what you were doing or or--

Roberson: [00:41:01] Yeah. Yeah. So I worked at the Naval Air Station Supply Command and I worked in basically a procurement office and my responsibility was doing just that. Going through the GSA General Service Administration catalog. Like we were, we were stationed at the Naval Air Station, Coronado and on and Naval Air Station was the USS Kitty Hawk, which was an aircraft carrier and the USS Constellation, and these was huge aircraft carriers. So the Naval Supply Command was responsible for making sure that they had all the supplies that they needed. So my job was, you know, to go through those procurement manuals and look up the identifying numbers and the unit cost and the quantity and order and provide the supplies for that. And then another part of what we were doing, they wanted to build a hangar on Naval Air Station North Island. So some of us was, you know, temporarily assigned to build a hangar there. So we were out there putting together, you know, frames and putting the aluminum siding on it and things of that sort. That's when I really, really got a kick out of Bruce Lovett because he was he was a young man and small like I was and we were climbing up scaffolds and using, you know, equipment to make sure that things are all sealed up properly. So yeah, it was, it was pretty cool.

Cohen: [00:42:41] Yeah, it's like a lot of building as well as working on procurement.

Roberson: [00:42:46] Yeah.

Cohen: [00:42:48] So did you get to know the ships pretty well then, since you're building a hangar on one of them?

Roberson: [00:42:55] No, the hangar was going on the base, it wasn't on the ship.

Cohen: [00:43:00] Oh, okay.

Roberson: [00:43:00] Yeah, but I did get an opportunity to go on board the USS Kitty Hawk. And you know, somebody I was dating at the time was stationed on it, and he took me to down in

and I called it in a dungeon because it was so small going through these little, you know, different places. And he showed me where they slept and, you know, some parts of the ship. But it was huge, gigantic, like a football field. And then I met a young lady come to find out, we grew up in similar neighborhoods in Chicago, Phyllis Parker, she now this was at Norfolk. Was this at Long Beach? Yeah, I met her at Long Beach. She was one of the first persons I know that was working on a on a ship, on a boat, you know, in the Navy, because that was when during that time was when they first started, you know, having women serving on ships, boats and in the stores and things of that sort.

Cohen: [00:44:03] Yeah, I was about to ask you that. Like I was reading that, that around the time you're in there, there's a lot of firsts like, I think Arlene Duerk, the first woman admiral, or or that they're beginning to let women enter ship, like work on ships, or surface warfare. And so. So what was it like for your friend being part of that?

Roberson: [00:44:27] It was she had a difficult time. She, again, being a young urban woman and been put on this ship trying to figure it, not navigate through that the way she expressed it was, she was having a difficult time and then a part of her responsibilities was dealing with the what they call the ropes that they pull in tighter ship. And she she ended her finger doing that, you know, it kind of took half of her finger off. And, you know, she just said it was a difficult time, but they eventually took her off the ship, you know, from that injury. But you would hear a lot of the ladies say that, you know, "This is challenging", but that was the Navy at that time. Yeah.

Cohen: [00:45:21] Were you also on the USS Constellation? I think you'd mentioned that you provided logistical support is for the USS Constellation. So I was wondering if you happened to have been on that carrier, as well?

Roberson: [00:45:36] No, I didn't go on that. We was just providing the support the Kitty Hawk and the Constellation. Those were those were the two aircraft carriers that were stationed at NASA North Island.

Cohen: [00:45:49] Did you ever have an opportunity to get a ride in any of the aircraft that were, you know, based [there]?

Roberson: [00:45:55] No, no, no, no. I didn't.

Cohen: [00:46:01] So, oh, like like what was it like? And did you have free time in the evenings? Like what was your lifestyle like when you were in Coronado, California, or the town nearby that you mentioned whose name I've forgotten?

Roberson: [00:46:16] Yeah. And Coronado, that was the time of a lifetime. So San Diego, as you know, it's a booming town. It's about twenty minutes or thirty minutes from L.A., or maybe an hour. So after duty, you know, the people that I knew and hung out with, we would go to different parties in Balboa Park in the summertime would have the, you know, the drum beaters and all of that stuff. So we got introduced to the nightlife, if you will. So I would travel to L.A., met some people there. I went up to Hollywood one time to see Chaka Khan at the Roxy. That was pretty interesting and met some, you know, civilians who really kind of were attracted to the military personnel. So we went to concerts and had a good time. And, you know, the partying got to be obsessive after a while, You know, a little bit [was okay but I] was overdoing it and, you know, got wrote up a couple of times for, you know, I'm rushing to get to the base and, you know, just throw my uniform over my civilian clothes and my my chief was like, "What's that? You got under your clothes? It looks like a red, sparkly kind of thing." So yeah. And it was it was a top I had on and it was showing through my uniform. So I pretty much got written for that. Yeah.

Cohen: [00:47:56] Well, sounds like fun. It sounds like you had a chance to fulfill the sense of adventure, you know?

Roberson: [00:48:01] Yeah, yeah, I did. I met a lot of people and yeah, I really enjoyed that. And, you know, until I lost a couple of brothers to gun violence while I was in the military. And that kind of turned the corner a bit. But you're about to ask something.

Cohen: [00:48:16] Oh, yeah, no, that's okay. That's okay. I was wondering, I think when you left that Coronado to Long Beach to Long Beach Naval Shipyards, California, Like...when did you leave the Coronado area to go to the Naval Undersea Center at Long Beach?

Roberson: [00:48:41] I think I had about six months left on that enlistment, so I got out in September, so probably about February or March. I went up to Long Beach. Yeah, it was a new order to go there. My intention was to make the Navy a career, but circumstances, unfortunately, that didn't happen.

Cohen: [00:49:09] So you're there and that's when you hear about and that's when your brothers, unfortunately, got killed.

Roberson: [00:49:15] Yeah, yeah. When I was in San Diego and one brother got killed, and then when I was in right before going to Long Beach, another brother got killed, as well. And that was a very difficult time.

Cohen: [00:49:36] Did you go back to Chicago for a bit?

Roberson: [00:49:40] Yeah, one of my older my oldest brother got, got a gun, got killed, you know, from gun violence in Chicago. I got notified by the Red Cross, the American Red Cross. And I remember them providing the means for me to get back home, you know, to to be with my family because he was still alive, but they didn't anticipate that he was going to survive. And I remember the Red Cross making arrangements for me to get home and I got home, but my brother had already passed away. And then I'm going to say maybe a year or a little over a year later, my brother, the next one older than me, got slammed as well. And this time I don't remember the... American Red Cross being involved in me getting back home. I had to make my own arrangements to get back home. And at the time, I was told that you could take a Navy, they call it a Navy hop or a Navy plane to-- just wear your uniform and they will get you back, you know, depending on where they were flying to. Well, this during this time, the only hop was flying to Baltimore, Maryland. And you know, in my young mind, I didn't think that Baltimore was as far away as it was from Chicago. So I scheduled to take this hop, you know, to Chicago [sic]- to Baltimore, and then I was going to work my way to Chicago somehow. So that's how I got home for my last brother that got slain, unfortunately.

Cohen: [00:51:53] Yeah, yeah. So how did you and your family cope with it, especially that they were so close together in time?

Roberson: [00:52:06] It was devastating. Again, coming from a huge family and so much was going on on the West Side with, you know, in the areas that my family lived in and, you know, wasn't the best areas were, but my mom was doing the best that she could with, you know, the number of children. But there was a lot of, you know, drugs, gangs, gun violence and, you know, similar to what we're experiencing today. So my family was in turmoil. You know, when my mom didn't have money to bury, you know, so we had to pull together money and all of that kind of stuff to, you know, funeral arrangements and all of that. So it was really, really tough. And by me, being the oldest girl, it was like I felt a responsibility to help my mom, you know, been feeling that way, you know, all my young life, a responsibility to help her. As a matter of fact, you know, I had allotments coming out of my naval check, going back to my mom during that time, but my family was, you know, in distress. So, yeah, yeah.

Cohen: [00:53:25] Where were you allowed to spend some time with them, I mean, more than a few days or--?

Roberson: [00:53:30] Yeah, I think it was a week. I had like seven days, seven day leave.

Cohen: [00:53:37] Yeah. You know, when we when we met in person, you told me that your middle sister had been particularly supportive of you during this time. How? How so?

Roberson: [00:53:53] Um, so she...during the time that I had to come back for those loss of a family member, she was one of the stable ones in the family, if you will. You know, she graduated high school, went to Carthage College [Wisconsin] and was, you know, doing things that was supportive for her. And so I always had a kinship and a relationship with her, so I was able to talk to her about different things and, you know, when they talk about the trauma, the military sexual trauma, one of the things in this thing didn't come up until forty years later. On that last trip home, on that military hop, when we got to bottom, I was on the plane that was the pilot and and the copilot and another serviceman, you know, he was a second class, a first class. So I had respect for him. So on that hop I was talking about, I was going home, you know, to, you know, my brother got killed, blah blah blah. I was going to fly in Baltimore, and I had to figure out how I was going to get from Baltimore to Chicago. So the the the person, the other Navy person befriended me and said that he would help me to get from Baltimore. He would

take me to the airport or bus station or something along those lines, you know, to help me get there. So when we got there, he said, "Well, we need to go to my house and get my car first."

Roberson: [00:55:39] So long story, you know? You know, I was sexually assaulted by this gen- I wouldn't call him a gentleman, this military personnel and, you know, but I was so afraid of being left there because, you know, he threatened to leave me there in Baltimore, where I had no idea where I was at, you know? Anyway, long story short, I eventually was able to get home. But Leah, I suppressed all of that because when I got home, again, my family was in distress from my brother being killed. So I didn't tell anybody what had just happened, happened to me, and I suppressed that for forty years. You know, and it wasn't until I retired and I wasn't as busy with work, school and all of that stuff. I started having flashbacks and nightmares and, you know, thinking somebody was standing over me and, you know, couldn't sleep and all of that. And I didn't know what was going on and I was falling apart. Actually, I had been having a successful career, and now I'm retiring. I'm falling apart?! What the hell. Excuse me, what the heck is going on, right? So I go up to the women's clinic where I was, you know, getting some of my VA care. And I talked to a social worker and I couldn't stop crying and I couldn't understand what was going on.

Roberson: [00:57:10] And that's when she said to me, "You have PTSD from military sexual trauma." And you know what, Leah? It was like somebody punched me in the gut. Now my career has been in, you know, mental health counseling and all of that. And to sit there and hear somebody say, "You have PTSD from military sexual trauma", it just devastated me. And you know, those dreams kept coming that feeling like somebody was in my bedroom. I would ask my husband, "Are you standing over me at night?" And he's like, "What are you talking about?" I said, "I keep feeling like somebody is standing over me and I can't sleep and I wake up and and I'm anxious and all of that." So I went through therapy and all of that stuff at the V.A. and they, you know, diagnosed it that it was PTSD related to military sexual trauma. But I got to tell you, for forty years, I had no clue. But what they told me was that different markers, you know, the obsessive working, the workaholic. And then unfortunately, I got caught up in and substance use, and I've been in recovery for twenty nine years currently, you know, but those are some of the markers that substance use and, you know, workaholic and keep them busy and all of those and I had no idea any of that stuff had anything to do with anything.

Cohen: [00:58:40] Yeah. But you know, you'd mentioned that after the service, you you had an issue with substance abuse, but I don't know how to like, put it like like how were you feeling at the time? Like, I mean, even though you were like, like, were you, were you feeling, let's say, down because your brothers were killed? Were you feeling out of sorts?

Roberson: [00:59:02] No, I wasn't feeling any of that. I was just, you know, partying. I just looked at it as partying. And yeah, and that just happened to be part of the partying. But unfortunately, it got out of control, you know? So yeah, I was I worked at Illinois Bell for many years, and you know, at some point it got out of control and I couldn't. It was, you know, I lost control of it. And, you know, things started up and some of the consequences of loss of control, like, I lost a good job and, you know, finances suffered and I thank God, I didn't have any legal problems, but those were, you know, as my therapist said, those were some of the markers. You just was covering up all of that. You didn't know. You know, it's sort of like the way she described it, you know, right under here, right under the surface is the PTSD. But you're working a lot. You're going to school. You're you know, you're doing all of those things to kind of cover it up. And then when my life slowed down, then it blew [emphasized like a breath] all this stuff start boiling over.

Cohen: [01:00:14] Yeah, yeah. Like when you became less busy, you know?

Roberson: [01:00:18] Yeah, yeah.

Cohen: [01:00:20] I'm not sure where to go. Let me ask you in general, how did you find the attitudes of most of the men toward women in the Army [sic Navy]? I mean, this man obviously sounds like a predator, he took advantage of you at a very vulnerable moment. But in general, what attitudes did you find?

Roberson: [01:00:40] Well, they were very supportive, some of them, and then some of them was male chauvinist. They like, "You need to be women, they should be at home, you know, raising families, they don't need to be in the military." Some had that that attitude, and then there was some that was very supportive.

Cohen: [01:00:58] Yeah, yeah. And and you said it was like, I don't want to put it like a like a like a double challenge being both a woman and being Black in the Navy. Like, was it like what...let's put it this way. I remember interviewing a Marine. And she said at the time she had the impression this goes back more to the late '60s that [i.e when] they perceived the women joining the Marines as either being whores or lesbians. They couldn't imagine people [i.e., women] wanting to be of service. But what was it like having this extra challenge?

Roberson: [01:01:34] Um, yeah, again, you know, you don't belong in the Navy, you should be back, you know, in your community and all of that, but me being a feisty young woman, you know, excuse me, I I didn't accept that because again, growing up in a diverse neighborhood, you know, because in the West Garfield on Carroll Street where we live, you know, it was it was Puerto Ricans, it was Polish people, it was Black. So that, [coughs] excuse me, the neighborhood was diverse. And then also, you know, working out in the suburbs diversity. So I didn't really see any reason that these people would be, you know, so against Black women or Black men or anything like that. As a matter of fact, when I was in San Diego for a little while, I was dating a Black guy and we broke up and then I started going out with really nice White guy in and from Anaheim. And my Black communities of sailors went, my God they ridiculed me. You know, "How dare you date somebody White and all of that?" But I mean, it was, you know, I didn't see anything wrong with it, and he was really nice. As a matter of fact, he took me to the Beach Boys concert at Anaheim Stadium You know, it was cool then. But yeah, it was. I mean, I didn't really feel the pressure of, you know, discrimination or racism or anything like that because I always had the mindset that we're all in. We're all the same.

Cohen: [01:03:20] Yeah. Yeah, that's interesting. See? Well, I was about to ask you, when were you discharged from the Navy? But before that? Is there something about your experience in the Navy that you would like to talk about that we didn't mention yet?

Roberson: [01:03:41] No, I think we pretty much covered it all. I had a great opportunity to be part of the Navy, I wanted to make it a career. But you know, when this situation happened, you know, I just, you know, I had as a matter of fact, I had taken the Petty Officer 2nd class exam and I think I passed it, you know, but when September, August and September kind of rolled around a '76, you know, I just started desiring to go back home, you know, even though I had it already planned in my mind, you know, to make the Navy a career. And I don't know if

that was one of the markers, you know, as well. But I just, you know, felt the urge to just go back home. I kind of lost interest. So I never, you know, really talk about this. There was a time that I also went into the Army for like a short period of time and it was a totally different animal. And again, that was another one of the markers from the PTSD that I didn't do very well over there because. Yeah, I didn't do very well there.

Cohen: [01:04:52] Yeah, this was this would, would have been after the Navy?

Roberson: [01:04:56] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Cohen: [01:05:00] Was it the reserves or the active duty?

Roberson: [01:05:03] It was the active duty.

Cohen: [01:05:05] Wow. Wow. Okay, so so just to get the chronology straight. So, so you left the Navy, you sort of lost a certain interest around '76. So you were discharged. Where do you go after that?

Roberson: [01:05:22] I went back home to my mom's house and in Garfield area, and you know, I I decided, Oh, I got a job at the Hines V.A. for a short period of time, but I wanted to do something adventurous. So I registered for school to do fashion merchandizing, and I moved from my mom's house to the north side of Chicago, where it's more diverse and more in line with what I wanted to do. So I did that for a little while and lost interest in that. And then I got a job at Illinois Bell when they were hiring women to do nontraditional jobs. So I was in 1979, I was a cable splicer, pulling cable from the ground and splicing it to wire it so you can run new lines. So I did that for a little while and then they transferred me into the office and I worked for Illinois Bell for about ten years.

Cohen: [01:06:26] Well, meant to ask you, when you were in the service, were you writing letters to people or were they writing to you? And who are your major correspondents?

Roberson: [01:06:40] Ah, it wasn't a lot of letters, but I would write home to my family, my mom in particular. Yeah, and my sister and yeah, my mom and my sister and my baby sister when she was living.

Cohen: [01:06:54] Yeah, yeah. So so the time that you're working for the Illinois Bell when you were like, you're saying, also got a little too involved in the party scene and was like, is that? Was it around that time...?

Roberson: [01:07:11] Yeah, yeah, yeah, that was after the Navy I just started working at Illinois Bell in 1979. I believe it was. And yeah, I was doing. I was going out and, you know, had had a nice apartment and just, you know, living a pretty good life. And I worked at Illinois Bell for just a little bit over ten years. It was right before my ten year anniversary when things kind of spiraled out of control and I got introduced to the VA by someone that I knew. And, you know, after I lost that job, I worked a little bit more. And then, you know, in mid '80s, late '80s, that's when I first went into the VA system to get some assistance.

Cohen: [01:08:03] So do you want to talk about your assistance and as you mentioned, in of the interviews I was listening to. It also became a whole career direction for yourself.

Roberson: [01:08:14] Yeah, so I was spiraling out of control, so to speak. I have actually walked off my my job at Illinois Bell. It was during the time that they had this big, I'm going to call it an epidemic of, you know, the cocaine crisis and all of that stuff that was impacting Black and Brown communities. And unfortunately, I got caught up in that. And so when my friend introduced me to the VA, I went to Jesse Brown VA. I believe it was. And from there, I learned about North Chicago VA, and I moved up to North Chicago and went into an extended program for substance use disorder and got introduced a whole new population of veterans and got still some lifelong friends from there and took a couple of times and July of '92 after going through one of the programs that focused on a lot of, you know, relapse prevention and looking at the reasons why you did the things that you did and how you could, you know, have like a prevention plan. That particular program literally saved my life. And since 1992, right after that in '95, I got a job working at the North Chicago, VA in their acute rehab program just as a rehab tech. You know, talking about, you know, my experience and helping other vets and that, you know, open the door for a career in social services. And from there, I started at the College of

Lake County taking courses and just went up, up, up, up, up and. And now here I am. Dr. Mary Roberson, retired from the VA, retired from the NICASA [Northern Illinois Council on Alcoholism and Substance Abuse] and have my own 501C3 recovery community organization. Yaaay! [Laughter] Yeah. God is good.

Cohen: [01:10:14] It's all good.

Roberson: [01:10:30] Yes, it is, Leah, that's my favorite saying. It's all good.

Cohen: [01:10:39] Where did you, where did you meet the man whose your husband of today?

Roberson: [01:10:44] Oh my God, I love Jeff Roberson. I met him at the Chicago VA when I first came up here. Actually, he was coming to, you know, get his life back on track as well. And we met and we talked a little bit and we both went our, you know, ways along our lives. And then lo and behold, what twenty years later, twenty-something years later, you know, God crossed our paths again. He was going through a divorce. I was going through a divorce and we kind of kindled a friendship and we helped each other through some very difficult times. And then four years later, our paths crossed again and it's like and we were in the same church and and he kept saying he, you know, he liked me. I like him and all of that good stuff, and we made a life together. And it's been a very beautiful life.

Cohen: [01:11:48] It's wonderful. Has has church and spirituality been a big part of your life the whole way through?

Roberson: [01:11:59] Um, not the whole way through as a young child, I got introduced to, you know, church, but I never followed it throughout my teenage years and all of that. It wasn't until I came up here to North Chicago that I was reintroduced, you know, to church. As a matter of fact, one of the people that I met at the VA, he was also, you know, a preacher, and he introduced me to the church here. And I got interested again. And you know what? You know, the Bible was saying and how that could accentuate, you know, my recovery and so I started getting involved in and one particular church and I, you know, changed to another church. And, you know, this is my second marriage. So the guy that I was married to the first time we were actively involved in a church and leaders in the church and so on and so forth. And he was in

recovery, as well. And unfortunately, he returned to all of that. And I didn't want that to be a part of my life and I tried to work it out. It didn't work out. And God bless him. But I transferred to a different church, the church that I'm currently at, and all of that, you know, along with a Twelve Step program, you know, I've been involved in mutual support throughout my recovery church, you know, spirituality and recovery support and surrounding myself with friends, with like minds has really been very, very beneficial, you know, for me and again, you know, next year, I'll be celebrating thirty years in recovery and I'm very excited about it because I'm going to use that platform to help my recovery community organization with a big fundraiser.

[Laughter]

Cohen: [01:13:54] Well, that's else that struck because you seem to have a lot of organizational talents like, honestly, I've lost track of all the organizations like NIRCO, NICASA [Northern Illinois Recovery Community Organization] . I forget the name of the current in Lake County that you've done in your retirement. [i.e., the name is Lake County Veterans and Family Services Foundation]. So how does that play in? And do you think the Navy helped cultivate your organizational skills in any way?

Roberson: [01:14:17] Yeah, absolutely. Because again, working in the Naval Supply Center being able to, you know, manage, you know, all the different orders. And then I work for a little while and at that, one of those manufacturers and I worked in shipping and receiving. So again, a lot of organizing. And when I, you know, started to change my life, you know, I found that I was more people oriented than just, you know, detail oriented, you know, because it takes a lot of detail with shipping and receiving and all of that stuff. I found out I was more people oriented and I'll never forget. Mr. Kim Pickett, God bless his soul. You know, I was telling him that I really want to begin to do something that gave me passion. And he said, "You're a good people person. Why don't you do something along those lines?" And that's when I got my first job at the VA. It was working as a rehab tech, and I fell in love with the with the idea, the notion of helping others, you know, who had some of the similar challenges that I had. So. And then I just went on and I found out about NICASA and what was happening in the Lake County community. And I just enmeshed myself in that because that is what I enjoy doing.

Cohen: [01:15:41] Yeah. Were you able to use like benefits in education for as a veteran like to for tuition or other matters or?

Roberson: [01:15:55] Yeah. When I was in Chicago and going through what I call my challenges, you know, with the fashion merchandizing, I use some of the benefits there. I went to Olive Harvey, Harvey Olive, Olive-Harvey College for a little while. Used some of the benefits there, you know, but it what it did, it gave me college credit. So when I did get really, really serious about it, I was able to still use some of those benefits as I did my undergrad and things of that sort. And then also the VA benefits afforded me a house. I bought a house in Chicago at one point and unfortunately, through the challenges, wasn't able to keep it. But the benefits of joining the Navy and I say this all the time that the Navy afforded me so many opportunities that if I had not gone to the Navy, I don't know if my life would have took the trajectory that it did. So yeah, so the benefits were very, very useful and helpful

Cohen: [01:17:01] At what point did you decide to study for a doctorate in educational psychology?

Roberson: [01:17:08] Oh my God. So I was working in NICASA and working at the VA. You know, back and forth. And then I finished my bachelor's program in Applied Behavioral Health. And then I want to go on to get a master's because I wanted to be a licensed clinical professional counselor. And in that course and that course of time, I met some different professionals and I met individuals that had PhDs in psychology PsyD who didn't want to do the clinical piece, doctorates in education that was educating and supervising. And so once I finished my master's degree and passed my LCPC [licensed clinical professional counselors] exam, you know, it was like, "Okay, do I really want to go on and do a doctoral program?" And I said, "Yeah, yeah, I do, because I really wanted to do teaching and I really want to do supervision, and I really want to do training." So versus doing a PhD program that called for a lot of clinical, you know, internships and things of that sort. That wasn't my interest. My interest was to train up new counselors, educate and then supervise counselors and things of that sort because as a managing director at NICASA, that was part of my role. So that's why I decided to pursue the doctorates in education because it afforded me the opportunity to do counseling, supervision, counseling, education and training.

Cohen: [01:18:42] Having worked with veterans for so many years in recovery and related matters like have you come out with any insights or notice patterns or something that I don't know could be rectified?

Roberson: [01:18:59] Well, what I what I noticed and what I know is veterans have a particular language. You know, it's sort of like in the military, you know, the acronyms and you know, the language and the cultural implications, like it's a whole subculture of its own, you know, so what I notice in working with veterans, you have to speak the language, you have to know how to communicate with them. And being a veteran myself and working ten years with the Department of Veterans Affairs and now working closely with Lake County Veterans and Family Services Foundation, that language is still important. You know that kinship, you know, recognizing you know what branch of service or making sure you understand the rates, you know and the officer, you know, insignias and all of those things, I think that that's very, very key. And knowing what questions not to ask, that's well.

Cohen: [01:20:00] Yes. And when did you move to to Lake County, to Waukegan, and was that helpful for your own journey?

Roberson: [01:20:10] Yeah, yeah, I moved to Lake County in 1989 or '90 somewhere around in there. And it was very, very helpful because part of the recovery process is that they talk about you had to change people, places and things and the place being a geographical area. So when I came up here to get some help, I just decided that I was going to stay in Lake County. I wasn't going to go back to Cook County or Chicagoland area because that's where my, a lot of my problems existed and I didn't want to go back to the problem. I was looking forward and I wanted to make sure that I had a chance to be successful. So I just stayed up here, come into the VA to get some help.

Cohen: [01:21:00] Oh, cool. Gosh, I think where to go with this? Did you stay in touch with your family, though?

Roberson: [01:21:10] Absolutely. Absolutely. I love my family. Yeah. And they come. They come. As matter of fact, they were here this last weekend, but they come up here, you know,

to Lake County to visit and, you know, see about their big sister. We're just going to comin' to see how you're doing and spend some time with you. So yeah, that's nice.

Cohen: [01:21:31] That's nice. Do you have any children? Do you have any?

Roberson: [01:21:36] I'm sorry, say that again, please,

Cohen: [01:21:38] Do you have any children?

Roberson: [01:21:40] No, I never *birthed* any children, my husband has three boys, which I love, and they're a big part of life. And then I have a goddaughter that actually my church, you know, I met her through church and, you know, she grew up in foster care and her parents are deceased. And and so we took her in, not in physically, but took and took her into our lives. And I have a daughter that I didn't have to carry through birth and all of that pain that you go through. Twenty three years old and she's the love of my life.

Cohen: [01:22:17] Wow. Well, that's cool. What? What does the term Citizen Soldier mean to you?

Roberson: [01:22:27] Hmm. Citizen Soldier. I've never heard that, but to take an educated guess at it, it probably means something about being a citizen, but still having your military background or all of the mannerisms and behavior and then making sure that you are following standard operating procedures of the society. So that's an educated guess.

Cohen: [01:23:04] Oh, that's great. That's great. There's no right or wrong answer. Pritzker Military Museum & Library is dedicated to tell a story of the citizen soldier and I, and I love it because I hear a wide variety of interpretations of the term. So that's great. Oh my goodness. Is there one single moment of which you're most proud? I'll say either either your military service or your or your service for veterans.

Roberson: [01:23:37] Is there any one particular moment that I'm proud? Yeah, most recently. I mean, there's been a lot of moments, but I'm going to talk about the most recent one. I had the opportunity to go with Operation HerStory on a Honor Flight to DC, and this was the all women

veteran Honor Flight, sponsored by Operation HerStory. And I was just blown away by all of the love and the compassion that all of these different organizations bestowed upon us women veterans. And I was so honored I was so humbled by the entire process of it from the time that they send you the information in the mail and have you fill out the application and following up with phone calls to check to make sure sending the little masks with the Operation HerStory emblem on it and all of those things. And then the day up to be picked up at my house here in Beach Park, Illinois, to be driven all the way to Midway Airport in Chicago and then being with such a kind and loving gentleman, it just it was just awesome and then getting into the airport and all of this activity surrounding the women veterans. It was just wow justice. And then the flight there and then the flight back and all of the different components of it. And you had an experience with me with the mail call and then, you know, coming off the plane and send the United States Navy welcoming. [tears up]

Cohen: [01:25:32] Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, well, well, welcoming everybody home.

Cohen: [01:25:43] Yeah. Yeah. That that I'll carry it to the day I go on to be with the Lord. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Cohen: [01:25:56] But Dr. Mary, Mary, is there anything left to add or or or this is a very good closing point?

Roberson: [01:26:08] That's it. Just closure, as one of my friends say, now that's a closure.

Cohen: [01:26:12] That's what I was thinking about, now that's a closure. So without further ado, really, on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, I'd like to thank you for your service and for sharing your life and also your life story, and I will send you a challenge coin from the Museum and Library as a token of our appreciation.

Roberson: [01:26:35] Bless you. Thank you. That's I appreciate that.

Cohen: [01:26:39] God bless you, too. Thank you. You're just great, really.

Roberson: [01:26:44] All right. Bye bye.

Cohen: [01:26:45] Bye bye. Have a good day.

Roberson: [01:26:47] You, too. Happy Thanksgiving

Cohen: [01:26:49] Thanksgiving. Yeah. Bye bye now. Bye.