

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 472-011**

**Interviewee: Kathleen Creel**

**Interviewer: Ashley Slack**

**Date of Interview: November 25, 2019**

**Project: Veterans Experience Oral History Project**

Ashley Slack: Okay, my name is Ashley Slack. It is November 25, 2019, Monday 3:30 p.m. I am interviewing Kathleen Creel, United States Marine Corps for oral history project. Would you like to introduce yourself?

Kathleen Creel: Hello, my name is, and I'm interested in doing this interview.

AS: All right, thank you. Okay, so first question will be the introduction. Who are you? Tell me a little bit about your service in the military.

KC: My name, again, is Kathleen Creel. I was an active-duty Marine from December of 1980 until September of 1993 at which point, I was discharged from Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. My field was, or primary MOS [military occupational specialty] job, was that of 3381 cook. [pauses] I think the important thing is the reason I was discharged was after the first Gulf War they had a forced reduction, and I had some medical conditions in my back and was forced to medically retire from the Marine Corps. If not, I would still be on active duty today.

AS: Very nice. Well, thank you for your service.

KC: Thank you.

AS: [laughs] We'll touch on that. So, what made you want to enlist in the military?

KC: For me, it really wasn't even a choice; it was something that had been ingrained in me from the time I was a child. I have a long family history of Marines in my family, most notably that impacted me was my mother and father. My mother was a Korean veteran, and she served in the communications field during Korea. My father worked in the supply field in Korea and in Vietnam. I grew up knowing everything about it. My dad didn't talk too much about the Marine Corps or service; my mother did share the goods and bads of what the Marine Corps stood for. We grew up living the integrity and the honor and the commitment of what it was to be a Marine. And the cleaning—we did a lot of cleaning. [laughs]

AS: That may have been a skill that was passed down. [laughs]

KC: Yes, it was. You get the toothbrush. But the biggest thing were the honor and integrity to where when it was time, when I was 20 years old, it was just a natural progression to go into the Marine Corps.

AS: So, you felt that that was just what you were meant to do, to a certain degree?

KC: Yes, yes.

AS: Well, that's wonderful. Can you speak a little bit to training? What was training like for you during these years? I know they were there were transitional years and training for Marines there was a lot of changes happening. So, what was that like for you?

KC: Given that I was on active duty for 13 years, there was considerable amount of training that went into my career. The basic training was enlightening.

AS: We're talking about boot camp?

KC: Yes, boot camp. The sense of confidence in my abilities and the frame of mind to accomplish whatever the objective was was instilled at that point. Graduating from basic training was a highlight of my life that I will never let go of. It gave me more confidence in myself than I've ever had. As time grew on, I went to the noncommissioned officer school [NCO] in Quantico, Virginia, and we used the basic school course, which is the course they use for officer training. That was most focused on leadership skills and being a Marine. It had not too much to do with technical skill—well, it had nothing to do with technical skills. It was very intense, and what was very apparent is we were not—as Marines we were not trained to say, “Oh, this is something too hard. We won't be able to do that.” The way we were taught to think was ‘this is an objective. What do I need to do to adapt and overcome the obstacles that are in front of me to obtain the objective?’ So, the self-doubt and the nervousness you have of accomplishing something never entered into it.

AS: You're speaking towards the psychological changes that come with this training how you're how you're handling things on a daily basis?

KC: Yes, yes. In the noncommissioned officer school, they also focused on responsibility for your troops.

AS: Leadership.

KC: Yes. That was compounded again throughout my career, and it became that as leaders that is your highest priority—the well-being and the training of your troops. It was good. The technical training—don't want to leave that out—I did mine on the job in Quantico, and it was very intense, and it was very focused and direct. It was very concentrated. What I have found since then is that the training I received from a culinary perspective in the Marine Corps rivals everything in a culinary school that people come out and do now in two or three years. I was able to accomplish that in less time, and I was more effective. I was very successful while I was in the Marine Corps in my field. You started at the basics of learning how to scrub a floor, okay. The training and skills that I got took it all the way up to managing and running the mess halls, building brand new facilities, and renovating all. When the Marine Corps went into a civilian

contract for dining, I was quality assurance. I learned how to write contracts; I learned how to quality assurance the contracts that were in place. It was all encompassing.

AS: So, really your training it was, like you said, it was intensive, it was concentrated, and then it was immediately applied is what it sounds like. Whereas now for school, we'll go through our traditional education, and then we have to get our experience in the workforce before we can actually say we have experience. Where it sounds like for you were able to be trained and immediately apply that?

KC: Yes.

AS: Okay, that's gotta be really helpful in regards to not just skill building but building on skills. As you said, when the transfer happened, you went to quality assurance so that experience was continuing to help you and further your career in that area?

KC: Yes.

AS: Now, was this all transferable?

KC: All of my technical training has been transferable, and while I have been excelling in my career in this sector, I have never been able to go past a certain point. The opportunity for growth is more inhibiting than outside of the military, outside of the Marine Corps. It's not encouraged. You're kind of held back, so you have to find other things. Luckily, the Marine Corps also gave me the insight into how to set my own objectives. Sometimes in my field you didn't have an OIC (officer in charge) that knew what your occupational field was supposed to do, so they really didn't know how to direct you technically. I was able to find my own challenges. It gave you the initiative to keep going; it gave you that inner strength to find, like, 'okay, if you're not gonna challenge me, I'm gonna challenge myself.'

AS: Okay, that inner motivation.

KC: Yes. Back to the leadership—when the first Gulf War changed became in, when it started—

AS: When it kicked off.

KC: When it started, I was again at Quantico, and I was transferred to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, to go to advance staff NCO training and technical skill training. I had orders to go to the theater and open a mess hall for the troops that were there. That was, I think, the most sobering training I've ever had because there was a war going on. My troops were transferred from Quantico down to Lejeune to ship out, and they were shipping out prior to my leaving. It was so, again, sobering when I would look at my young lance corporals and see the fear in their eyes because they're 18, 19 years old and go through my head 'did I train them? What didn't I teach them how to do? Was I disciplined enough? Was I hard enough? Did I teach them enough to where when they go into the war theater, are they gonna get hurt; are they gonna come

home?' And if I forgot or didn't do my job as their staff NCO, and something happened to them, then I was not fulfilling my responsibilities. It was almost worse being in Camp Lejeune with my troops in Iraq than it would have been for me to be in Iraq with them. At least I would have been able to be there to be with them.

AS: That's a really emotional aspect to this because it is. I mean, deploying without your troops then having to send them off not knowing if you've prepared them enough for what they're facing. Is that—

KC: You know what? It was not emotional for me. I guess looking at it now, I mean, from your perspective in a college environment, but from a Marine Corps environment, it was very analytical. This is my troop. These are my responsibilities. Did I do my job?

AS: Did I do my duty?

KC: Because in times like that, you did not have the luxury of being emotional. We weren't trained to be emotional because we were not—oh, how do you put that? It didn't solve anything. We were not trained to be individuals. We were trained to be a unit. What an individual need was less important than what was best for the mission—what was best for the objective.

AS: The overall.

KC: The overall. To where the emotional side of it can come later, but you don't have that time frame. It's irrelevant.

AS: You don't have the luxury to be emotional in those moments.

KC: Yes, yeah. You're not an individual.

AS: Wow! Well, thank you for that. That's a really good insight

KC: But you know what? Let me add to that for a minute. Okay. That could be misconstrued. You don't have your individuality like you would in a non-military environment. You're bigger than that. You're part of something that's more, and your contributions to that more are so much more fulfilling than your contributions to yourself in an individual basis. They were for me.

AS: So, the team aspect of that is the most important piece.

KC: Exactly, exactly.

AS: Well, with that then in regards to the different levels of training, what would you say was the most challenging part of your training experience as a Marine, or even as reintegration?

Kathleen Creel Interview, OH 472-011, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.

KC: Okay, from a training perspective—right at the point where I was processing out of the Marine Corps, they introduced a training platform that was instituted into the Marine Corps by the government and the civilian sector. That was total quality management. When the program was laid out to the staff NCOs in my unit—I was in Hawaii at this point—we listened to all of the emotional impact that we needed to include with our troops for training. We, as leaders, discussed the impact of those actions. Okay, if we coddled our troops, what is that gonna do to them? If they are put into a war and they are concerned about—they are afraid to cross a line of fire, if their OIC or staff NCO says ‘go,’ are they gonna go? Or are they gonna get shot? The military—you need the discipline; you need that part in there that's not warm and fuzzy. You can't be concerned with the emotion because when you're OIC tells you to go, you have to trust that judgment implicitly to go because your life may depend upon that order. You don't have the time to be afraid or worry if your officer-in-charge is making the right decision. So, we were not excited about introducing total quality management, and I can honestly say I'm so glad I did not have to do that to my troops. But the rest—I mean from a personal perspective that I never viewed the training as negative challenges. They were always positive because it was like, okay, I was learning skills that were going to improve my leadership, improve my technical skills, improve what I needed to do to continue in my growth as becoming a Marine that was worthy of the Marines that came before me. So, that what I added to the Marine Corps enhanced its history. It was an honor to be able to uphold the tradition that the Marine Corps has and to be the Marine that my grandfather's grandfather would have been proud of.

AS: That's really powerful.

KC: It gives you such a feeling of calm. I know that doesn't make sense.

AS: It does. It does in its own funny little way. So, what I'm picking up is the biggest challenge it sounded like was trying to incorporate that emotional aspect into the rigidity and the institutionalized concept of this of the military and the Marine Corps moreover.

KC: Yes, and I think maybe because I'm sitting here really trying to think into this about what kind of challenges, I think the only thing that challenged me outside of the total quality management—but it's connected to that—is there were different things that occurred in my 13 years in the Marine Corps that were introduced into the military by the government or civilian sectors. That, I can honestly say, made me a little resentful because they don't know the culture of being in the military. They don't understand what the mission is. It would be like me trying to put myself into your shoes as a college student in 2019. I have absolutely nothing to ground a decision on, so how do I force my personal wants onto you? It's not in the best interests of the units; it's not in the best interests of the culture of the Marine Corps.

AS: So, you're kind of speaking to that outside involvement of people determining and making decisions for groups that they have no real understanding, context?

KC: Yes.

AS: That is extremely frustrating, I can see that, but it is good though with what you were saying in regards to your personal perspective on training. You seem to have taken the challenges that were presented to you as opportunities for growth?

KC: Yes.

AS: How do you feel that those have benefitted you since you've been out—those opportunities that you've taken?

KC: I don't think in all honesty that if it wouldn't have been for my training as a Marine, I would have been able to assimilate outside of the Marine Corps culture. It is very lonely being out of that community. The first few years I was not part of the active duty segment, it was very hard. I had a lot of resentment, anger—I mean, the whole gambit of emotions—until I stopped, and I thought about it. I had to think 'okay, what is the objective? What do I need to do, what do I need to learn, what do I need to do to adapt how I am to fit into this environment to attain my objective?' because my objective was continuing living.

AS: So, you're talking adapting and overcoming the situation?

KC: Yes, yes.

AS: That's kind of—I don't know, I can't speak for other branches, but I know that that's definitely a Marine Corps saying that's tossed around a lot is 'adapt and overcome.'

KC: Yes, exactly. It's funny because I've been out for a long time, and I can honestly say the first civilian training I did was Stephen Covey. I laugh to this day because I am a Stephen Covey junkie because—

AS: Was it *The Seven Habits*—

KC: *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Leaders*. What I learned going through and reading Stephen Covey was how to adapt my skills and soften them so that I wasn't scaring people, I wasn't intimidating them, I wasn't making them nervous. My first director when I got out of the Marine Corps was scared of me. Every time I came in the room, he jumped back. Not sure what he thought I was gonna do to him, but it's always been 'oh my gosh, you're a Marine.' It's like, 'okay.' So, I had to soften who I was or at least give the appearance of softening who I was to accomplish what I needed to do, and it's been very effective because it's allowed me to have a positive impact on being a leader in the civilian world. I've had to accept that I will not be in an active-duty environment. Honestly, I knew when I got out of the Marine Corps, I could never be one of those Marines that would work on a base. I had a training where a retired master gunnery sergeant trained the troops, and I could look at him every day he was there in his blue polyester suit and the pain that it caused him to be around the Marines but be separate. I knew that that would be me, so I have never—I could never do that. I could not be a Marine working

on a Marine base. But I have adapted my skills to be a very effective leader, and it's kind of cool to see—I've worked in the college environment for a long time—to see the youth respond to the leadership, respond to the discipline, to the accountability, to the loyalty. I'm very proud of these young people because it's made—the Marine Corps training has quietly made these young people stronger and better leaders going forward.

AS: That's a really interesting concept that you just brought up because it really—it's speaking to your training being handed down, so to speak, to your employees. It's almost like them getting a little taste of what it's like—

KC: Without realizing it.

AS: —without realizing that that's a military thing.

KC: Yes.

AS: That's really, really interesting, and I can see that being helpful especially in your role as a staff NCO, somebody who has been in that role of leadership and having troops and being able to continue that as your service continues in the civilian sector. Just speaking on your example of that retired master gunnery sergeant. That's a very vivid picture you paint of that, I guess, separation when we get out of the military.

KC: I will never forget him—Master Gunnery Sergeant Kocher (?).

AS: Kocher. Did you ever know him during service, or was it after the fact?

KC: I met the Gunnery Sergeant Kocher the first time I reported to Quantico. I knew him for 10 of the years that I was in the Marine Corps.

AS: That's a very long time.

KC: I know. He was an amazing man he was. He was one of the heroes. He was one of the people that built tradition. He had a huge influence on who I—and I say this—who I was as a Marine because these are the people that set the examples: the humility, the common care about people that they're with, and turning those people into Marines. There's no deeper love than one Marine for another.

AS: That's very well said, and that's a very—that makes me smile, makes me smile. Makes me think about some of my staff NCOs that really were meaningful for me during my time in the service. That's exciting to hear.

Well, I'll save that last question. I guess for me I just thinking of another question right now. Do you feel—there's a lot of rhetoric right now going on in the social media world that military service should be mandatory for one to two years and just to give people the basis of training



and kind of going off that tangent. do you feel that the training received in the Marine Corps, military, this training is something that would be beneficial to society as a whole? Is this something that should be shared?

KC: No.

AS: Why do you feel that?

KC: I do not feel that everyone has the want inside to be part of the Armed Services. The Armed Services needs to be voluntary. I believe that every United States American needs to do something for the first two years after college—after high school, whether that be Peace Corps or whatever. Doesn't matter. They need to do something to give back to the United States, but the military is not the answer for everyone. There were too many Marines that I know that wore a uniform but were not Marines. You need to have a genuine connection with what you're doing, because you have to know going into this Armed Services that whatever nice words you want to call it, they're gonna brainwash you. They have to. They have to brainwash you to accomplish your mission because the things you have to do don't make common sense.

AS: Well, the things you have to do go against, literally, your human nature. You have to fight—you have to fight through fight or flight.

KC: Exactly. Exactly. You have to. Not everybody that goes into the service understands that. Too many people wind up getting processed out in boot camp and or staying in, because 'oh I only came in for college.' Okay, that's fine, but you need to commit. You need to want to wear that uniform, to watch the flag get raised, to feel that pride coming into your heart when that flag goes up and the colors play. You need to be able to look at the service people that came before you and see them as the larger-than-life people that they are and what they have given to this country and what they have given to the other members in the service. People say 'thank you for your service,' and that always makes me uncomfortable—

AS: I said it earlier, and I want to touch on it.

KC: —because the service, the service is something that gives so much to the people who truly are Marines. The ability to be there, to be part of something so big. Appreciation is there, but so many times people say, 'thank you for your service,' and they almost don't know what to say. But they have to say something because it's politically correct to thank your veteran. I don't think it should be that way.

AS: We spoke on this in class a couple of weeks ago, and I had made mention of—because I've heard that from other veterans in the past. One of the ideas that came up behind that also is there's a level of burden that comes with being a veteran and thanking someone, I mean, it's almost as if you're thanking them for carrying that burden but you don't understand the meaning behind it.

KC: Exactly. But, you see, that's not a fault. The whole thing is you're not supposed to understand that burden. You're not that Marine. The whole reason the Marine is there is to protect the people of the United States from ever feeling those burdens. It's not their burden to carry. It is a voluntary burden that as a Marine I want to shoulder. [pauses] Yeah.

AS: Yeah, that runs deep. Really does.

AS: Did you want to take a minute

KC: Yeah.

[break in audio]

AS: Okay just getting back into it to finish this up. We have visitor Otis finishing up the last of this interview with us. He may announce himself at one point.

All right, so going forward we've you've gotten it back together. If you could go back, Kate, and do it all over again knowing what you know now, would you and why?

KC: You know, at first I said yes, but I think in all honesty it would be yes and no. Yes, because the Marine Corps made me who I am. It has allowed me to accomplish so many things in my life, so many things tangent and untangent. I have been able to overcome so many obstacles. But I think knowing now how it feels to not be that active-duty Marine—I'm always a Marine. I'm a Marine. But I'm so alone, and it's nobody's fault. It's not the Marine Corps' fault; it's not the civilian sector's fault. It's just the training and the culture of the Marine Corps makes you a Marine, and part of being a Marine is being part of the Marine Corps. And I miss the Marine Corps. People really don't understand, and Marines don't talk about it because they're alone too.

AS: Thank you very much for sharing all of this with me. This will end our interview. Mom, I appreciate it. Thank you for sharing it—

KC: Thank you for the opportunity to share about how I feel about the Marine Corps.

AS: Thank you for sharing. That is the end of this interview.

[End of Interview]