

1 **Interview of retired Major Clara Christine “Chris” Johnson**
2 **on her service in the U.S. Air Force**
3
4

5 Ruth Stewart: The interview today is with Clara Christine Johnson, more commonly
6 known as Chris. Um, we are interviewing at the Air Force Village 1 in San
7 Antonio, Texas for the Women's Overseas Service League. I am Ruth
8 Stewart. [00:21] Chris, start in by telling us a little bit about your early
9 life.
10

11 Chris Johnson: Well, I was born in Jackson, Mississippi. Uh, my father was a, uh, a letter
12 carrier for the, uh, city of Jackson. And, uh, his route was the, uh, uh,
13 governor's route. And, consequently, I, as a black child, had a more
14 privileged, uh, upbringing because my father had a position that, uh,
15 provided for us. But, um, you can realize that people want to venture out
16 and, consequently, at the age of 6, my folks moved away, and we moved
17 to Chicago and that's where I, uh, went to school and, uh, began my
18 college career at the time that I came to the air force in 1950. And my
19 reason for joining the air force at that time was because there was just
20 nothing available for a young black female. I had a position with the, uh,
21 theater group as a stage designer but I couldn't join the union because I
22 didn't have the \$500. So, therefore, I was frustrated in that I couldn't be
23 [inaudible 2:00] in my job so I went looking for a job and there was this
24 sign on the corner that said, "Uncle Sam wants you!" and I went in
25 assuming that I was going to be turned away, but I wasn't. And I think that
26 the reason that I was taken on the spot, really, very short interview, was
27 because I had some college. And that was very necessary at the time
28 because, uh, the skills that I came with only needed developing. They
29 didn't have to do more for me. So began my military career.
30

31 From Chicago, in early December of 1950, 8 young women were placed
32 on an airplane and we flew to Little Rock, Arkansas, where we, uh, had
33 lunch and we joined with 20 other young women and we were flown here
34 to San Antonio. Welcome, San Antone! Uh, it was November and I had
35 just left Chicago, cold, snowing, and we had weather almost like we had
36 today, and that is 60 degrees. You could see 40 young women shedding
37 coats and boots and babushkas, that we, as we called'm in those days. We
38 began a friendship of those 40 young women that is still lasting for those
39 that are still alive. It's amazing how you can bond together in such a short
40 time. And I was always impressed with my female colleagues, in that I
41 was the only person of color and they were readily accepting of me. Now,
42 this was something that you find very odd and strange, particularly in the
43 early 60s.
44

1Ruth Stewart: [4:42] I'm sure it would be. So this coming here to San Antonio, was that
2 for training or...

3
4Chris Johnson: We, I came into San Antonio for basic training. [Week 4:55], the old 3743
5 training command.

6
7Ruth Stewart: [5:02] What was that?

8
9Chris Johnson: 3743rd – I've been over to visit Lackland since I've been back and all the,
10 uh, training squadrons have since been renumbered so, therefore, it's no
11 longer alive. It's been retired. The, um, it was 8 weeks and 12 weeks, but
12 we had an 8-week training session. We, um, it was interesting because we
13 were trying to be as competitive as we could with the male training squads
14 and we had some TAC officers and TAC sergeants, training sergeants,
15 shall I say, that were very competitive. And they wanted us to be
16 competitive. And, they realized something that we didn't yet know – that,
17 in order to survive in the, the air force, you're going to have to be
18 competitive. It is only the person that is the most competitive that would
19 survive. And I gather that this is, uh, pretty much the same today, but not
20 as much so then because women were small in numbers and just beginning
21 to find their place, or their niche. So, therefore, we had to survive. We're
22 here, we're going to survive; we're going to stay. We were the trailblazers.

23
24 From Lackland, I went to Brooks Field and, uh, I joined the, the WAF
25 squadron there and worked in the, uh, Special Services Unit. And, because
26 of my training that I had in my civilian life as a stage set designer, I
27 became a float designer. And, a float designer, we did floats for the Fiesta.
28 The air force put a float in, and Brooks, put a float in each parade – the,
29 the Riverboat Parade, the Battle of the Flowers Parade, you name it! We,
30 we were, we were busy building floats.

31
32Ruth Stewart: [7:41] In no place are there more parades than San Antonio.

33
34Chris Johnson: That's right. But we also, I also went TDY to, uh, Los Angeles to work on
35 floats that the government might have in the Rose Bowl Parade. And I also
36 worked on floats in Cheyenne, Wyoming in the Frontier Days Parade. So,
37 I was very active, there for, for about 3 years, being in Special Services
38 and, uh, learning new, uh, components of the, uh, Special Services Unit,
39 being a librarian, being in the testing services, uh, running the Service
40 Club. I got, all of those things that were there, I took advantage of, but I
41 realized that I don't want to do this for the rest of my life. I would like to
42 be able to do something that, uh, I'd been trained to do and use my talents
43 for, which I, uh, felt more comfortable with. So, from there, I applied for,
44 uh, Officer Candidate School. And, in November of, uh, 1953, I went to,

1 uh, I came back to Lackland to become a member of the class of 1954 [A
2 9:12]. And that was 6 months of training but that 6 months of training was
3 like combat because President Eisenhower and his government at that time
4 felt that they had to have some financial constraints with the military. So,
5 therefore, the upper class that we had were not assured of receiving a
6 commission once they graduated. And there was well over 200 of them,
7 and there was only 125 in my class. But, for every one of us that washed
8 out, it meant that would be a commission that my upper class could have.
9 So, believe me, they tried to wash out as many of us as they could.

10
11 Ruth Stewart: [10:15] 'Cause this was all women?

12
13 Chris Johnson: No!

14
15 Ruth Stewart: [10:17] No, this was...

16
17 Chris Johnson: There was 125 of us, of which, only 3 were women. Only 3. And all 3 of
18 us survived. There was a young woman from Hawaii, uh, a young woman
19 from New York, and myself, from Illinois. I think, all, expending all of
20 our energies in order to be successful. Because if there was any way that
21 we could have been washed out, it was tried. So we had to watch each
22 other's backs. We had to learn how to be team players, be team members,
23 be supportive of each other. Again, skills that we could use for the
24 remainder of our careers, if successful. I can recall that while I was in
25 OCS, my father died and I, I left in the end of November to go the funeral.
26 I was gone for 3 days, but those 3 days that I was gone, there was midterm
27 exams. And, [throat clearing] I was told that as soon as I came back to
28 base I would be tested. And I can remember when the plane landed that 5
29 of my classmates met me and we stayed in the airport for almost 3 hours
30 while they drilled me and asked me questions. They didn't give me any
31 answers, but they drilled me and drilled me and drilled me so that I could
32 sit for that exam because, when I arrived on base and signed in, I went
33 immediately from the squadron in to sit for the exam. [inaudible 12:37].

34
35 Ruth Stewart: [12:38] [inaudible 12:38] great stress.

36
37 Chris Johnson: Which was another tactic of trying to wash me out, because there's no way
38 that she can pass this exam 'cause she wasn't here...

39
40 Ruth Stewart: [12:47] Her father's death...

41
42 Chris Johnson: ...my father's death, and stress. But they forgot that, uh, we had a team
43 full of young people...

44

1Ruth Stewart: [12:55] What a wonderful story!
2
3Chris Johnson: ...all 125 of us, bonding together. We really, I, I don't remember exactly
4 but I would have to say that we only lost about 4.
5
6Ruth Stewart: [13:08] Mm-hm.
7
8Chris Johnson: We were determined. We were supportive of each other. Well, anyway, I
9 passed the exam! I was [laughter], just barely. You had to get 65 out of
10 100, I got 65! [laughter] Oh, gosh! I passed! I passed! It was interesting. It
11 was really interesting. I, uh, again, I had, um, we had the physical; before
12 we could accept our commissions, we had to pass a physical. I, uh, had a
13 little bit of [inaudible 13:43] problem so they said it was something that
14 would have to be dealt with before I would graduate.
15
16Ruth Stewart: [13:49] Ha!
17
18Chris Johnson: Consequently, I had the surgery and I could only be in the hospital for 3
19 days. Well, I was there for 3 days and back to drilling and back to
20 parading, and I survived. I had my doubts there for a while but, I survived!
21
22 Um, from, from graduation in March of '54, I was assigned to Cheyenne,
23 Wyoming. And, at Cheyenne, Wyoming, the first thing that I can
24 remember – [Billy Bobbitt 14:27] was the commander of, uh, the WAF
25 Squadron there and I was assigned to her at Frontier Days. "I've read your
26 file, uh, Cheyenne, we need a, a float." "But, I just got here!" [laughter]
27 "What kind of materials do I have to work with? [laughter] Oh dear!"
28 Rallied around and got the support of the fire department, the motor pool,
29 and [inaudible 15:08] and we built onto it and, believe it or not, in less
30 than 3 weeks, we had, we had a float. But, while there, I attended the flight
31 officer's school and, being a biochemistry major in college, I found that,
32 uh, going to be a [inaudible 15:32] officer, or either a special weapons
33 officer, probably would be the area that I would like to go into. It didn't
34 happen. I wound up in regular supply and this, because of the shortage of
35 truly qualified supply officers, and I had been classified coming out of
36 school as being capable of being, of assuming responsibilities beyond my
37 rank. And I left Cheyenne and went to a supply depot in Wales. And, from
38 Wales, I went to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.
39
40Ruth Stewart: [16:22] Before you leave Wales, tell us about your, the way you lived
41 there and what it was like to be in [inaudible 16:28].
42
43Chris Johnson: Well, we were actually stationed at an RAF station. RAF Station, Sealand.
44 We had a, a supply depot and we had the subsistence depot. Subsistence

1 depot was responsible for stocking all of the commissaries throughout the
2 United Kingdom. Um, we lived in a, uh, RAF officer quarters, and many
3 of the officers had the [bathmen 17:04]. I always wanted a [bathman
4 17:06] but I never got one. [laughter] It would've been nice to have
5 somebody to press my uniforms and have my tea waiting for me but
6 [laughter] it never happened. We, uh, had a [padron 17:21] of, uh, RAF
7 officers and we had the British Constabulary and, uh, we'd march
8 quicktime and, uh, to me, there was a little bit of, more of a snap than, uh,
9 the American forces did. We were always saying, "C'mon! [inaudible
10 17:43]." And you must learn to do this properly. [laughter] So, therefore, I
11 actually came out of Sealand being a, uh, a combination of both, uh,
12 British and American, but with a little bit more of a snap to my step than
13 the average person would have, and that's because the young people there,
14 the young troops there were determined that, if I was going to be stationed
15 on their base, I was gonna learn to do it their way. It was interesting. And,
16 whenever we had to parade, and, once a month, we had a parade, we
17 would com-, the WAF squadron and, uh, the, all the other squadrons and
18 then we'd, the commander would stand and watch us as we pass in review.
19 But I also had another review team, the British Constabulary, as they
20 would all stand there and applaud. [laughter] As I [inaudible 18:41] ...

21
22 Ruth Stewart: [inaudible 18:41].

23
24 Chris Johnson: ...my own cheering section. I was very [inaudible 18:45], my own
25 cheering section. I, I loved them dearly. I think it was common between
26 both [inaudible 18:53] there.

27
28 Ruth Stewart: [18:53] Mm-hm.

29
30 Chris Johnson: We stayed there and, for 4 years, and we closed Sealand.

31
32 Ruth Stewart: [19:05] And, you went there what year?

33
34 Chris Johnson: In 1954.

35
36 Ruth Stewart: [19:08] 1954 to 1958?

37
38 Chris Johnson: No, '57. [inaudible 19:12]

39
40 Ruth Stewart: [19:12] Okay.

41
42 Chris Johnson: Because it, it closed. And we were reassigned back to the United States,
43 rather than be reassigned someplace else in the United Kingdom or in
44 Germany for 1 year, they chose to send us back to the United States but it

1 was interesting because, uh, we wanted to close out all of the books and,
2 the more we tried to close out the books and sell equipment and, and close
3 the Officer's Club and leave, we chartered a boat and went to Ireland, uh,
4 for St. Patrick's Day, they had, uh, slot machines onboard the ship so
5 actually we made money. [laughter]

6

7Ruth Stewart: [19:52] Interesting. Really, really interesting.

8

9Chris Johnson: When I left Sealand, I went to Wright-Patterson. And I was in, at the
10 ANC, the old [inaudible 20:04] command, where we were doing, uh,
11 contract [inaudible 20:09] and purchasing for the air force. I was
12 responsible for the, uh, the financial logistics and defending the budget
13 was one of my duties. I traveled back and forth from [inaudible 20:26] to
14 the Pentagon to, uh, defend any budget line we might have that was going
15 to be cut. And that was key because, in order to be sure that all of the
16 planes could be flying, spare parts for aircraft was one of the main items
17 of defense because that was something that was very necessary. And for
18 the individual that knew nothing about what we were doing, to say,
19 arbitrarily say, that this is a line item that can be reduced, no. And I felt,
20 uh, that this was something that my boss gave to me to do because he felt
21 that I could do it. And I was [inaudible 21:14]. I got these looks when I
22 walked in the door – a woman! What do they think she can tell us? But, I
23 was able to convince them that I had the necessary supporting information
24 that was necessary for them to make their decisions and they were going
25 to have to listen to me.

26

27 I spent 3 years there and went back to Europe. And I finally got to do what
28 I had been wanting to do from the very beginning, as a chemist. And that
29 was to be a weapons, a special weapons officer. Not only was it special
30 weapons, but conventional weapons, as well, and I could mix a mean
31 napalm. [laughter] Again, young men took one look and said, “A
32 woman?” But I soon persuaded them that I was just as capable, or more
33 capable, than my male counterparts. And that was [inaudible 22:25].

34

35 Okay, while stationed in Ramstein, if you will recall, this was the era of
36 John Kennedy. And, John came through, uh, Wiesbaden and to, uh, Berlin,
37 “Ich bin ein Berliner,” uh, his famous statement. And we did a static
38 display at Wiesbaden of all the weapons that we had in our inventory. And
39 we went along with the Weapons Officer and the Weapons Maintenance
40 Officers and we did our static display.

41

42Ruth Stewart: [23:25] That was for JFK?

43

1 Chris Johnson: Yes. And, we did get a note back from the President in his own
2 handwriting that said, um, it went to the commander, “Job well done.”
3 That really raises the morale and goes to the morale of the troops and
4 everyone else. It was something that, uh, I felt that, uh, here, I finally get a
5 task to do what it is that I wanted to do and someone paid attention!
6 [throat clearing] We had a, uh, a shipment. They’re using those things now
7 – cluster bombs – but they were brand new in 1961 and ‘62. And they
8 came in these top-sec-, top-secret shipments. They could not be flown to
9 Ramstein and they could not be shipped by a German carrier. So what we
10 had to do was, in teams of officers and airmen, we drove our own trucks to
11 [inaudible 24:44], to all 3 of these ships, and bring those weapons back.
12 But there was 1 truck, and we were close to the German border [inaudible
13 24:57], go up through Holland and through, get into Germany, I mean to
14 rush a little faster. We had one driver who stopped on the road and he said,
15 “I am sick. I need to stop. Can everyone else [inaudible 25:20]?” And, uh,
16 I had a young man who had more foresight than I that was riding with me
17 with the, with the, uh, weapons. He cocked his .45 and put it to his head
18 and he said, “Be well. Drive.” And this, I am sure now that this man, he
19 was well. He was fine. [inaudible 25:53]
20
21 Ruth Stewart: [25:53] He was trying to sabotage you?
22
23 Chris Johnson: He was trying to sabotage us. And had it not been for that young man,
24 God only knows where we would’ve been. Because he was faster on his
25 feet than I was.
26
27 Ruth Stewart: [26:05] Was the driver an American or a [inaudible 26:07]?
28
29 Chris Johnson: No, they were German, they were German drivers. German drivers but we
30 had a shotgun, someone riding shotgun along with an officer in each truck.
31 But we got them back and later found out they were cluster bombs. Cluster
32 bombs. Those are some dangerous little suckers, in the wrong hands.
33
34 Ruth Stewart: [26:33] Mm-hm.
35
36 Chris Johnson: But, um, it was interesting. And, we had a stockpile of, uh, warheads that,
37 uh, the inventory I [flew 26:50] over now has prevented me traveling to
38 quite a few places because I’m told that, somewhere in the back of my
39 mind, I still carry that knowledge. I don’t believe it [laughter] but, uh, I
40 still to this day am controlled by where I travel.
41
42 Ruth Stewart: [27:08] Mm-hm. Interesting what [our mind saves 27:10].
43

1 Chris Johnson: Yes. And from, from Germany, I went to Amarillo to Supply Officer
2 School, that I needed to be upgraded, and it was while I was in Amarillo
3 that John Kennedy was killed. We were in class, I remember. We were in
4 class; there were 12 of us in that class and someone walked in and said,
5 “The President has been shot.” And we were all stunned. And later, the
6 teaching had long since fallen by the wayside and we sat there, talking
7 back and forth – what does this mean? And, before long, someone came
8 and announced on the loudspeaker system that the President was dead.
9 And it was as though someone had launched us, 12 officers, rose to their
10 feet like someone had said, you know, “Ten-hut!” and we all came to
11 attention. And then did a silent salute. It was, it was, I could never feel that
12 again. That – my hair just stood up on the back of my neck. That’s part of
13 being in the corps, part of being in the corps. I went on to drive from
14 Amarillo to upstate New York to Griffiss Air Force Base.
15

16 Ruth Stewart: [29:16] Where was that?
17

18 Chris Johnson: Griffiss Air Force Base, another depot. I never got to do base supply until
19 much later but, uh, I went to the depot and arrived at Griffiss on the 9th of
20 December 1963, and I find out the base is gonna be closed. [laughter] Or,
21 the depot is going to close. Why am I here? Oh, give me a break! But, I
22 had been specially requested by a former colonel that I had worked with at
23 Wright-Patterson who was there. So, therefore, I went into the supply
24 depot and later became GEEIA, part of GEEIA, which is Ground
25 Engineering and Electronics. I controlled all of the ground radio and
26 airborne radar, worldwide.
27

28 Ruth Stewart: [30:22] Tell me again what that stands for? Ground...
29

30 Chris Johnson: Ground Engineering Electronics Installation Agency (G-E-E-I-A).
31

32 Ruth Stewart: [30:39] ...Installation Agency.
33

34 Chris Johnson: I put the cart before the horse, it’s Electronic Engineering.
35

36 Ruth Stewart: [30:48] Oh, okay. And, this was still while at Griffiss?
37

38 Chris Johnson: Yes.
39

40 Ruth Stewart: [30:56] They closed the depot... [inaudible 30:59]
41

42 Chris Johnson: They closed the depot [inaudible 30:59] I moved over into another job.
43

1Ruth Stewart: [31:01] Mm-hm. Okay. And you controlled then air, tell me again, the,
2 uh...

3

4Chris Johnson: The airborne radar that's installed in aircrafts across the United States and
5 abroad. We kept inventories, I had inventories for 4 different locations in
6 the United States, for which I was responsible for. And that was so that
7 you could have those airborne radar sets centrally located for anyone that
8 needed a plot or needed a new unit. You couldn't keep it all at one
9 location. You had to decentralize so that it was available, but then I had
10 these people at these various locations that was responsible for those
11 inventories. I can recall one incident where, uh, President Reagan had
12 some, a team of consultants of college professors, and was wondering why
13 it was necessary to have these units on as many aircraft as we had them
14 on. And I can recall that the message came down, the inventory is too
15 large, you need to reduce your inventory. And you can eliminate them
16 from X number of aircraft, which the commanders agreed, and we were
17 able to, we started taking them, I set my keys out to go around and take
18 these windows out of the aircraft. We no sooner got these radar units out
19 of the aircraft – you've got to remember now; the aircraft were normally
20 flying below 5,000 feet with the aircraft so they can make [detection
21 32:54]. And years when the Russian leaks landed in Florida, that's 'cause
22 we couldn't detect them. We had taken the units out of the aircraft below
23 5,000. So, I'm sorry, back we went! [laughter]

24

25Ruth Stewart: [33:11] What did the professors [inaudible 33:13]?

26

27Chris Johnson: In, remember when [inaudible 33:15]? Yeah, remember when [inaudible
28 33:17] at the [commanding office 33:20] being advised? This was with,
29 advisement that this [inaudible 33:30]. This, unl-, I say unless you're
30 really working to expose in some ways, have some general knowledge of
31 what's been going o-, what's going on, it's hard to make a decision about
32 it if you know nothing about it.

33

34Ruth Stewart: [33:44] Mm-hm.

35

36Chris Johnson: I can recall, back when I was in Vietnam, we had some congressmen and
37 legislators who came and decided that we should release Hamburger Hill.
38 And, President Johnson at that time sent out a, a message to General
39 Westmoreland, who immediately got on his plane and flew to Washington
40 and said, "Here's what we're doing and here's why we're doing it." "Oh,
41 we're sorry!" Just because they see something – B52s flying over
42 Hamburger Hill, when you drop a 750-pound bomb, it's like dropping a
43 marble on a granite hill. But, you've got to realize the effect,
44 psychologically, on what it's doing on people. And you, you had control.

1 But stopping the bombing took us out of the well, which we had created as
2 control. That's what happens when you've got people who don't know
3 what's going on but think they know. All the more reason for good
4 briefings before you [hit an area 35:14]. Lets you know what's going on.
5 [inaudible 35:19] So, from Griffiss, I went to Vietnam. And was stationed
6 at Tan Son Nhut.
7
8Ruth Stewart: [35:41] And this was, when?
9
10Chris Johnson: This was in 1968.
11
12Ruth Stewart: [35:47] Now, the visit by the congressman, was that before you were
13 stationed there or after?
14
15Chris Johnson: No, that was after I was sta-, it was during the time that I was stationed
16 there. I came in and was assigned to 377th Combat Support Group as a
17 Management and Procedures Officer within the Chief of Supply...
18
19Ruth Stewart: [36:22] Management and...
20
21Chris Johnson: Management and Procedures. In other words, I was managing, seeing that
22 the, um, policy and procedures were in compliance for 100,000 items that
23 we had in storage. That entails maintaining, to see that the Inventory
24 Officer was performing the inventory, that records are being kept, and do
25 periodic, uh, internal, uh, inspections. In addition to that, we found, well,
26 ma-, that many of the, [new women 37:09] were coming in through the
27 theater. I was assigned an additional duty as WAF Advisor for the enlisted
28 [inaudible 37:15]. This was a real education for me, both, uh, in Korean
29 culture and also in the, uh, the overall combatant environment. It was an
30 education for me to learn to deal with being in an area of combat [throat
31 clearing] but also in an area where the, uh, Vietnamese were trying to
32 maintain their culture. And, maintaining their culture, regardless to a war
33 effort, was first and foremost in their lives. And survival was of the fittest
34 because, in order to survive, they found that, um, there were many things
35 that they had to do and I found that they weren't as effective in
36 maintaining the family as they should because, for instance, Asians have
37 always felt that women were useless and if a woman gave birth to a female
38 child, she would get rid of the female child, which meant putting it on a
39 garbage dump. And, if you put it on a garbage dump, it could be attacked
40 by rodents. And, I had a sergeant, Sergeant [Downy 39:08], and the 2 of us
41 would visit the garbage dumps and we would find these babies and we
42 would take them to orphanages. And I can re-, I am deathly afraid of rats
43 and mice. You could chase me a mile with a mouse!
44

1 When you're free, you do things that you normally wouldn't do, and, I
2 saw this infant being attacked by mice and I waded into that to get this
3 baby. And, we delivered them to an orphanage there and, uh, just outside
4 of Saigon. I can remember, Christmas Day 1968, the orphanage and the,
5 the nuns who ran the orphanage they had pittance, pittance, pittance in
6 order to, uh, to sustain these kids, and, food was dished at a minimum –
7 they were lucky if they got 1 bowl of rice a day. So, we had a plane come
8 in and land, coming from Australia, on Christmas Day with Christmas
9 presents for the, uh, Australian troops and it was loaded with fruit – apples
10 and grapes and oranges and pallets and pallets of rice. Well, we waylaid a
11 pallet of rice [laughter], busted! And we loaded into the back of the pickup
12 truck, and we drove through some hostile areas to deliver that rice to that
13 orphanage. The only thing they had to put it in were some old sheets. We
14 swept that truck out because we went to sweep it, the nuns had used the
15 broom to sweep it. I was thinking, 'You don't want that that's laying
16 there!' But, yes, they did. Once we swept the truck out, the bed of the
17 truck, into a pan and they she took the pan and she put the rice through a
18 screen and the debris came out into the screen and then she washed it and
19 we watched her wash it. That was the very first rice that she cooked for the
20 children, which was the debris, not the, not the main part of the shipment,
21 but the debris from the shipment is what she used for the very first meal. I
22 learned how to be frugal and thrifty and survive.

23
24 It was because of some of the things that we did in support of the local
25 people in the community that, um, my boss put me in for the, uh,
26 Vietnamese medal, and also nominated me to the Unsung Heroine Award.
27 It is by the VFW women and, that particular year, I gathered that there
28 were well over 400 women who were nominated for the Unsung Heroine
29 Award and I came out #4, so I feel good.

30
31 There was a squadron of security police and, every night, they went out on
32 the perimeter of Tan Son Nhut. So they would be the first line of defense
33 if someone would try to overrun the base. And, I would stay there every
34 night until they had gone out, several of us, uh, would sit there and we
35 would say goodnight to them as they would go out on the perimeter. And,
36 sometimes we would go up, like Christmas Eve, we'd go, we took donuts
37 and, up on the line for them, just being friendly. By being friendly, I found
38 gained a lot for me. Because when I rotated to come back to the United
39 States – by the way, we went into Vietnam on Braniff planes and, if you
40 remember Braniff Airlines, their planes were bright colors. They were
41 green, you name it! They had all different colors. I came in on a yellow
42 one and I wanted to go out on a yellow one. 'Yellow birds, we slipped on
43 banana tree' – well, there was a yellow plane when I was going to leave

1 and I thought I was gonna miss the plane because I had to be there at 7:00
2 in the morning.

3
4 They processed me through, all my papers, and I'm sitting there waiting.
5 They're loading the airplane and every time I went to the door to get up,
6 stand, "Major, you're gonna have to wait." Okay, gimme a break! Let me
7 get on my plane! My seat's gonna be gone! [laughter] Oh, here comes a
8 general or another officer through and they get on the plane. Okay. "Is
9 there gonna be a seat left for me? Okay, it's time, about 5 minutes before
10 takeoff, "Major Johnson! You can board now!" Oh, yes! You can board
11 now, finally! Oh boy, and I say goodbye to my friends! And when they
12 opened that door, I still get tears thinking about it, they had found all of
13 these security police who worked there, [7 45:31], and they had formed an
14 aisle from the entrance all the way to the plane and I had to walk through
15 that gauntlet of military and shake those hands as they said goodbye to me
16 and thank you. Nothing else has ever happened to me in my lifetime as
17 much as that did that particular day. That's why I couldn't get on the
18 plane. [laughter] I wish [inaudible 46:11].

19
20Ruth Stewart: [46:13] Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

21
22Chris Johnson: Back to, yeah. Coming from Vietnam...

23
24Ruth Stewart: [46:22] When did you come back?

25
26Chris Johnson: In 1969. June of 1969. And mother had lived with me for quite some time,
27 since the death of my father. And I, we had 2 cocker spaniels. And, being
28 from Chicago, I had said to her, "Mom, please don't, uh, go back to
29 Chicago while I'm in Vietnam. I would really worry with you walking the
30 dogs on the streets of Chicago. Please don't do that. Let's just stay here in
31 the house and then, whenever I get my new duty station, we'll worry about
32 putting the house on the market at that time and then make the move.
33 Okay?" Fine. She was satisfied with that and I had lots of friends and air
34 force people that would take care of her while I was gone. I was sent back
35 to Griffiss! [laughter] I didn't have to look for a new house [laughter] or
36 move, thank God we did! Because I would have really been upset if we'd
37 sold the house, put it on the market and I wound up going back to Griffiss.
38 And I went back to Griffiss. And back to GEEIA, where I stayed until I
39 retired.

40
41Ruth Stewart: [47:44] And that was? Retirement was?

42
43Chris Johnson: November 1970.

44

1Ruth Stewart: [47:55] So that's 34 years ago?

2

3Chris Johnson: Yeah. Mm-hm

4

5Ruth Stewart: [48:00] Okay, so what have you been doing in the meantime then?

6

7Chris Johnson: In the meantime now I, um, I went to work for the State of New York for
8 the Division of Human Rights. I was inspector with the Division of
9 Human Rights, inspecting industry on discrimination of women in the
10 workforce. And I did that for a, almost a year and a half when I got a call
11 from a representative at McDonnell Douglas. And, McDonnell Douglas,
12 uh, was gonna offer me a job managing parts for the Air Force C aircraft.
13 And, I'm talking about now, in 1971, which was a good job – either '71 or
14 '72 – a good job. It was gonna pay me about \$45,000. And, in the
15 meantime, I took a job at Hamilton College. I'll tell you why I took the job
16 at Hamilton College – my father was a, uh, an English professor and, after
17 he had been with the Postal Service, he went to teaching English. He
18 wrote speeches, a line speech, uh, speechwriter for many politicians. And,
19 he had said to me, "Whatever you learn, learn it well so you can teach it to
20 someone else. If you can't teach it, you haven't learned it."

21

22 When I came back from Germany, I landed in, uh, New York at Travis, I
23 went through Travis Town, New York to pick up my car. And I had to
24 stay in a motel for the night because my car had been shipped over by boat
25 and it was at the Brooklyn Naval Yard and it was, um, uh, Labor Day.
26 And that was the year that Martin Luther King gave his speech in
27 Washington. And, I watched on television all the proceedings going on in
28 Washington, and saying to myself, "You haven't made any contributions."
29 In fact, I had never been, I was out of the United States every time
30 something was going on. I had never been a participant in the issues that
31 were being addressed. Those same issues that were germane to civilian life
32 was also germane in military life. And, "Chris, what are you going to do?"
33 And I sat there and felt sorry for myself, "Why aren't you doing
34 something?" And, immediately, when I got my car, left my mind. But,
35 when I went for an interview for the job at Hamilton College, one young
36 lady turned, and she said to me, "You wouldn't take the job if you were
37 asked." And I said, "Why do you say that?" She said, "Most people of
38 color that have, that has attained a certain status or place in life, they're
39 not interested in young adults. They're only interested in themselves."
40 And, I said, "This young woman is bitter," and I went out and I did some
41 research and she was right! And, I'm talking about in this era of the early
42 70s. You didn't have people giving of themselves. They were busy taking.
43 So, therefore, but then I said, "Oh well, I don't have to worry that, because
44 at my age, they want someone closer to the age of those young people so

1 they're not gonna ask me." Well, by God, they called me, and they offered
2 me the job! And my mother said, she had an expression that when you did
3 something irrational, they threw out the baby with the bathwater. Well, I
4 turned down that job for \$45,000 and I took a job for \$13,000. And that's
5 what I've been doing for 33 years.

6
7Ruth Stewart: [52:33] All of it at Hamilton College?

8
9Chris Johnson: All of it at Hamilton College. Many things that I've been doing...

10
11Ruth Stewart: [52:38] For, ho-, thirty-,

12
13Chris Johnson: For 33 years. And, as, uh, became a lobbyist for higher education for the
14 state, for the state of New York. I've been, uh, on the school board; I was
15 elected by my peers in Rome, New York to serve on the school board.
16 There are many things that I can do, all having to do with young, the
17 reason I got involved was for young people and for education. I adopted a
18 young man that was, they told me, was retarded. There was nothing wrong
19 with that child. It was just that he had been so fe-, severely abused because
20 he was a leftie; he had been beaten to make him into a right-handed. So,
21 therefore, he didn't talk at all. He didn't do anything. And all of his motors
22 were out of sync.

23
24 I, I needed to do something, not only for other young people but for him,
25 as well. So, consequently, I went on to involve myself in community. I
26 involved myself in many things, an effort I would have to say another one
27 of my great achievements, in addition to that gau-, walking through the
28 gauntlet with the aircraft. He came home to me one day when he was 7
29 years old and he said, "Uh, I am not a Sambo, am I?" And I said, "What
30 are you talking about, a Sambo?" "Well, all the kids were laughing at me
31 on the school bus, calling me a Sambo." And I said, I remembered there
32 was a sign on the way to the house that said Sambo's Restaurant is
33 coming. I went down and talked to my lawyer to see what I could do, and
34 he said, "Chris, I don't know but we can try something – whatever you
35 want to do." So I said, "Well, this is only a tenth of a mile from my house
36 and I really don't want something that's going to be within a tenth of a
37 mile of my residence referring to me as a Sambo."

38
39 We wrote to the lawyers saying, "We understand you have a name called
40 Jolly Tiger. Can't you use the Jolly Tiger rather than Sambo." And he
41 said, "Well, it's a combination of the names of the 2 owners that have
42 gone into, uh, this effort and, therefore," and I said, "Yes, I know that but
43 why do you refer to all of the characters in the book Old Sa-, Black
44 Sambo?" And, he said, "Well, I don't know," and I said, "Well, I want to

1 know.” The lawyers came from California and when they got there to
2 interview us to see what my problems were, they said (on a telephone
3 where we could overhear), “Well, there’s the 1 woman here and a country
4 hick lawyer. We should be on the next plane within the next hour.” So,
5 [throat clearing], and he didn’t realize that the man that was my lawyer
6 was a [inaudible 55:39], an educational [inaudible 55:40] for the state of
7 New York. So, [Enlan 55:43] turned to me and said, “Chris, this isn’t
8 gonna cost you anything. We’re gonna do this.”
9

10 We got an injunction that stopped construction and when they stopped
11 construction, they agreed to put the Jolly Tiger on. But, in the meantime,
12 everything else, the menus, was all being printed with Sambo. We went to
13 the judge in the, in Albany, and the judge said, “You’re in violation of
14 New York state’s Human Rights Law.” Now, remember, I was doing
15 Human Rights, so I know the law. “And, you’re going to have to close all
16 restaurants in the state of New York until you com-, are in compliance.”
17 They said, “Well, you can’t do that!” He said, “Yes, I can.” Well, they got
18 on the phone with, uh, with their owners, the major stockholders, [throat
19 clearing] and they agreed to change the name. However, in the meantime,
20 New York Times had given us a lot of coverage because of [Enlan’s
21 56:53] affiliation with it and we had, Boston had joined me in my suit and,
22 uh, other cities in New York and other cities in Cleveland, Ohio and in
23 Philadelphia joined me in the suit, Johnson vs Sambo. To the point that,
24 um, they went bankrupt, and, consequently, all of their restaurants were
25 closed. I [inaudible 57:22] my son, “The system does work, sweetheart.
26 There’s a lesson to be learned. The system works, it’s just that we have to
27 persevere. We can’t give up. It took us 3 years, but we did it.”
28

29 Now, the little boy that, uh, started the scene, “Little black Sambo, little
30 black Sambo, niggers live in houses infested with roaches, liz-, niggers
31 live in houses infested with roaches.” If you will recall that, it was during
32 this era that Roots came to, uh, the television screen. Well, Alex Haley is a
33 very dear friend of mine; he was a dear friend of mine. And, when he had
34 taught at Hamilton where was now working, and, he had been a writer in
35 residence. So that when he came back to Rome, New York, where he had
36 written his book, he took Eddie in the car to show Eddie where he used to
37 live. And, it happened to be the house where the little boy was living.
38 [laughter] Well, needless to say, my son had just [smacked his ass 58:38],
39 but he went and got on the bus the next morning and said, “You live in a
40 rat-infested, roach-infested house! You live in a nigger house; did you
41 know that?” [laughter]
42

43 Ruth Stewart: [58:50] Oh, what a story! [laughter]
44

1 Chris Johnson: [laughter] Oh, yes! Gimme a break! Needless to say, I had to go down to
2 school, but, um, that's, and I have my students that I was directly
3 responsible for, [inaudible 59:05] young people; I taught young people
4 how to study, how to think, and how to reason. How to read. How to read
5 a textbook. And many of these young people were very successful once
6 you were able to develop their innate skills. What they missed in high
7 school. High schools will give you a lot of [infractions 59:36] but I have
8 well over 800 graduates and my 800 graduates are doctors and lawyers.
9 They're entertainment lawyers. I have, um, a, uh, former student that is the
10 agent's lawyer for this young man, Rodriguez, that's now going to the
11 Yankees. He's gonna get \$126 million. His, uh, lawyer is one of my
12 former students.

13
14 Um, the people that are being successful because of the time that I took
15 going back to what my father said, "If you learn it, learn it well. Teach it
16 to someone else." So being an applied epistemologist for the last 33 years
17 was finally my calling! Never knew it until I got into it that teaching was
18 my calling. I'd been all over the books, as you well see. And, what am I
19 doing now? I'm tutoring young people, [laughter] teaching them how to
20 read. I have a couple 7-, 7 year olds. I, um, went to a wedding, the
21 wedding of my son in 1994, I think it was, and I was, we had a new
22 president at the college. And, the new president had been given an agenda
23 and he had to hire some new people-, fire some old people, and, uh, hire
24 some new people. And, he had, on Monday, he had fired these people, 3
25 officers of the college, and I had gone off to the wedding of my son, and
26 he called while I was in Ar-, Arizona, and I said, "Oh now, what's
27 wrong?" [laughter] The call, I guess I'm the next to go. And I finally got
28 him on the phone and he says, "How's the weather in Arizona?" and I
29 said, "It's nice. Gene, why did you call me?" [laughter] He said, "Chris,
30 you, I'm just trying to find out when you're gonna be back in New York
31 state, because..." and I said, "Well, why? I wasn't in a hurry to come
32 back. You know, I've still got some time to use." He says, "Well, you're
33 gonna have to be back because Governor Cuomo has nominated you and
34 it's been approved as the Outstanding African-American of the Year."
35 And, that was another milestone. That's because of my involvement with
36 youth and lobbying for youth, lobbying for youth causes. I need to be
37 lobbying again because our youth in San Antonio...

38
39 Ruth Stewart: [1:02:53] And Texas.

40
41 Chris Johnson: Yes.

42
43 Ruth Stewart: [1:03:04] Well, this has been a lovely story...a truly remarkable,
44 remarkable life and career. And your contributions have been phenomenal.

1 And, even in the military, you said it was not until after the military that
2 you began to at least articulate that you hadn't contributed to the situation.
3
4Chris Johnson: Mm-hm.
5
6Ruth Stewart: [1:03:42] But through your story today, it's quite obvious that, as a woman
7 and as a woman of color and a military, first enlisted and then officer,
8 mostly officer, that, as a role model and a mentor, if you weren't filing
9 lawsuits or turning over barrels, you were still contributing...
10
11Chris Johnson: I guess.
12
13Ruth Stewart: [1:04:14] ...significantly.
14
15Chris Johnson: I try. My son, um, I adopted a child while I was in Vietnam – one of those
16 – and I couldn't bring him back to the United States. He had TB. And, I
17 couldn't bring him back but, first of all, I was single and [throat clearing],
18 the next thing was that, not only was I single, but in those days, office-
19 officer, enlisted, what have you, women could not have minor children.
20 You had to sign them over to somebody else if you had one, but it just
21 didn't happen. You didn't dare get pregnant or you were going to be
22 drummed out of the corps. So, therefore, but I, I knew I was going to be
23 retiring like in the next year and a half, so I wrote back to, then, Al Pirnie,
24 who was the congressman who tried very hard. He said, "Chris, there's
25 nothing I can do about that child. You're just going to have to leave that
26 child in Vietnam. However, the state of New York is going to allow single
27 people to adopt children." And I said, "Oh yeah, you're trying appease me.
28 Ahh, okay." So, I went back to New York and I had been, maybe 6
29 months I had been there when I got this application from Al Pirnie. It was
30 all filled out and all I had to do was sign it. And, 6 months to the day that I
31 fil-, filled out that application, I became the first single parent in the state
32 of New York to adopt a child. And, they took me through all kinds of, oh,
33 difficulties. I had to come up with pictures on both sides of my family and
34 they wanted to bring this child to come to this single parent with some
35 semblance of, uh, looking like other members of the family, not to create a
36 psychological problem.
37
38Ruth Stewart: [1:06:26] Oh, gosh.
39
40Chris Johnson: You wouldn't believe it. But, this was, they were new, they were new at
41 this, so I did everything. I got pictures of both sides of my family, my
42 nieces, my nephews, my mom, my father, you name it! I sent it all in.
43 And, out fo-, popped these 5 kids. And, there's no way you can tell that
44 Eddie does not belong to me. But, I'm looking at this kid and my mother

1 said, "Oh, he's beautiful." So, I said, "I want to see him. This is the one I
2 want to see," and the adoption clerk said, "Oh, I'm so sorry. That's not
3 one you can see because he's retarded. He should not have been in with
4 this batch. They were going based on genetics, buildup, and everything but
5 the kid is retarded." And I said, I want to see him. I don't care what you
6 say to me, I want to see him. Well, at this time, this was in, um, 1970, the
7 early part, in the spring of the year. There was a riot in Syracuse, New
8 York. In the black, ghetto area there was this big race riot. She said,
9 "Well, I can't get in there, I'm white; I can't get in there to get him." So
10 the woman said to me, "Tell you what though, but if you drive – and I'm
11 not supposed to do this, because you're not supposed to know where he is
12 – if you drive me in, we can go and do this." So I said, "Okay," and I'm in
13 uniform now, so [laughter], we didn't have any problems because I was in
14 uniform. And we drove in and we pulled up in front of the house and the
15 neighbor came out and she said, "There's nobody home there." And she
16 said, "I recognize you. Aren't you the social worker?" She said, "Yes."
17 She said, "That youngest child is in the house alone." And [inaudible
18 1:08:28] he's 2, 2 years old." She said, "And he's tied to a chair, the
19 highchair, in the basement, that's where they keep him.
20

21 I, in turn, called the police. The police came – she was able to get on the
22 phone to get a court order, so they could break into the house. Because of
23 this, because of, of the riot that was going on, she was, it was easy for her
24 to get the court order. And, uh, of course, to get the police in there, and the
25 [inaudible 1:08:59] police had broke down the door. They thought, "Oh,
26 what's going on here?" Well, anyway, needless to say, this kid – I didn't
27 go in. I wasn't allowed to go in, and I'm glad I didn't. He was tied to a
28 highchair. The highchair was sitting on a piece of paper and he had
29 something like gruel or mush in this plate. So, they took him out and she
30 said, "We're going to have to take him. If you want him, you're going to
31 have to take him now." They said, "There's no way you're going to get
32 him out of this car. I took this child home to my mom. No, I didn't get
33 home to my mom. I said, "What about his shoes?" She said, "He doesn't
34 have any shoes." You know, I didn't get any shoes. So, I stopped at Sears
35 and took him out of the car and went in and they put him, as measuring his
36 foot. I don't know why this man took this kid's sock off, but he took the
37 sock off and he looks at me, looks, and this kid's toenails had all grown
38 into his feet. They'd turned and grown into his feet and I'm saying, I'm in
39 uniform! And he, "How could you...?" I said, "He's not mine!" "Yeah,
40 yeah, yeah, I know, he couldn't have been." Well, anyway, needless to
41 say, I took him immediately from there to a podiatrist. They had to give
42 him a shot in both feet. My mother still hadn't seen him. They gave him a
43 shot in both feet and cut those toenails out. And I took him home to my
44 mom. And she said, "What have you done?" [laughter] I said, "Mom

1 [laughter], we've got to do something for his child. I couldn't leave him
2 where he was." He was so filthy, and he had cradle crap-, cap all over. She
3 took baking soda and she washed him down because we couldn't put him
4 in water because of his feet. But when the feet healed, we tried to put him
5 in the bathtub and we could not. And, could not get him, he just stiffened.
6 So then the psychiatrist said he had been placed in water that was too hot,
7 and he said, "You've got to let him, let him fix the water. Let him play in
8 the water with his hands. And, as he plays, he'll know what the
9 temperature is." "He tried to," I said to, you know, "he was trying to feed
10 himself and he looked up and then, 'Oh, good boy!'"

11
12 Immediately called up the base, got an eme-, I got an emergency leave,
13 threw him in the car and drove to Walter-Reed. We were there for 4 days.
14 They said, "This kid has been severely beaten to make him from left to
15 right. You've got to give him everything in that left hand. There's nothing
16 wrong with this kid." You can tell that by his eyes. There's nothing wrong
17 with this kid. The first time he did a belly laugh when he saw, uh, Mickey
18 Mouse, "Look! Look! Look!" and I said, "Oh, you can talk!" "Look!"

19
20Ruth Stewart: 1:12:11 Mm-hm.

21
22Chris Johnson: He's a beautiful 34-year-old man now.

23
24Ruth Stewart: [1:12:21] That's a wonderful story. Your, your entire story is just
25 inspirational. And thank you for sharing that with us and providing us with
26 this. [inaudible 1:12:33]

27
28Chris Johnson: But, when my son comes, I want you to meet my son when he comes to
29 visit. I really do.

30
31Ruth Stewart: 1:12:38] And what I would [inaudible 1:12:40]. Chris, this has been a
32 very, very remarkable story of your entire life and career in the military
33 and in human rights. Thank you for doing this.

34
35
36/ab