Kelli Petersen oral history interview

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Abstract: Kelli Petersen, a career veteran of the Army JAG Corps, originally from Nevada but now retired in Chesterfield, shares the exciting and unique experiences she had during her 21 years of service, while balancing family and military. Starting with an ROTC college scholarship that led her to law school, Petersen spent most of her career as a legal counselor at Fort Lee, Virginia, while her husband worked at MCV and Richmond-area VA hospitals. While serving as a Brigade Judge Advocate in Germany—the only female on her command staff—Petersen planned her deployment to Iraq in 2007–2008 around the birth of her daughter. And while stationed in Japan, she helped coordinate emergency relief following the disaster at the Fukushima nuclear power plant.

Transcript Notes:

Transcriber:	TEMI
Abstract by:	Heidi Sheldon, VWM Archivist
Additional Notes:	
	KP: Kelli Petersen
	HS: Heidi Sheldon

Interview Transcript:

[1:55] HS: So, I'm gonna begin by asking you, for our transcriptionist, if you can say and then spell your name for us.

[2:02] KP: OK, my name's Kelli: K-E-L-L-I. Petersen: P-E-T-E-R-S-E-N.

[2:09] HS: OK, and I'm just gonna say that today is Tuesday, October 6, 2020, at about 10:02 AM.

[2:17] KP: OK.

[2:18] HS: I know you grew up in Nevada, correct?

[2:22] KP: Yes

[2:23] HS: OK, um, and how did you decide that you were gonna join the service?

[2:29] KP: You know, I was thinking about that this morning, and I don't really know. Like, I can't remember. I know that I was applying for scholarships, and I kinda wanted to be a pilot, so I think I just thought that an ROTC scholarship would be a good avenue to become a pilot. And I'm not quite sure why I even wanted to be a pilot (laughs), which I never became (laughs), and so I applied for an Air Force scholarship and an Army scholarship, and I got the Army ROTC scholarship. So, I, the only college close to my house that accepted Army ROTC scholarships was University of Nevada-Reno because I grew up in very, very remote town in the mountains—like, six hours away from a working stoplight (laughs), so it was really far. So, that's why I picked Reno, just because it was the closest place to my house."

[3:29] HS: And what was that ROTC experience in college like?

[3:32] KP: It was *wild*, like nothing I could have ever imagined. So, the scholarship was for engineering, civil engineering, and I had never even taken an Algebra class, so it was just culture shock all around. And the ROTC's, um, experience was so wildly different because I had had two uncles and a grandfather that served in, like, Vietnam and World War II, but it wasn't our family history, you know? We didn't really talk about the military; no one, you know, except for those isolated instances, no one had served. So, to me, you know, the first time I picked up a weapon and had to pretend like I was shooting someone, I was like, "Wait, (laughs) what are we doing here?" (laughs). Like, "This doesn't seem right!" So, the whole concept was so foreign to me, and I had no idea what I was getting into. We spent, um, I think Thursday mornings we would go in before school, and then we had military science classes two or three times a week for those four years. And we would go to the field for a week every semester, rain or shine. I remember sleepin' in sleeping backs with no tent in the snow, so it was—yeah, and, you know, we learned how to do raids and ambushes. And, um, they taught us how to be platoon leaders and use barracks and take two-minute showers and all the things that we would need for our real training. And then, um, we had to do a, I think, six-week course, um, either at Fort Bragg or Fort Louis, and I went to Fort Louis. And there, they assessed, you know, whether or not you were capable of being an officer, and I did really, really well. I ended up being, like, the—my senior year I ended up being our

Operations Officer, which, next to the Battalion Commander is like, you know, the highest[-ranking officer], yeah. And, I *loved* it. I loved the people; I loved everything about it. And so, I was really excited to start my commission service.

[5:56] HS: So, when you graduated, you commissioned. Where were you [sent] next?

[6:00] KP: Well, by then I had met, uh, a boy (laughs), and he wanted to go to medical school at UNR [University of Nevada-Reno]. So, the Army wanted to send me to Missouri for, uh, Officer Basic Course Training for corpsman engineers, and I wanted to stay close to him. We did, we got married; we were married by then. And so, I tried to find the longest educational delay—they called it at the time—that I could find, just to stay where he was going to school. And I didn't want to go to medical school; that was the longest one. And so, a master's degree was only two years, but law school was three years. So, I got the educational delay for law school, and I got into the closest law school at the time was in Sacramento, California. So, I went there for three years, and there was no military training or anything, but it was all my own dime; I had to pay for it. So, I was just on, I think, it was Inactive Ready Reserve. When I graduated law school, I still had another year because my husband, Dave, was still in medical school, so I applied for a judicial clerkship, which would allow another year delay to going on Active Duty. And I got that with the Supreme Court of Nevada, in Carson City, which was near where he was going to medical school. So, I did that for a year, and then they finally said, "OK, you *have* to come on Active Duty now (laughs). Like, we've waited long enough." So, um, he matched his residency *here* at what was then MCV, …

[7:44] HS: Mhmm.

[7:45] KP: And now it's VCU. And so, I asked if I could be stationed at Fort Lee, and so the JAG Corps let me go to Fort Lee for my first duty assignment.

[7:57] HS: Wow!

[7:58] KP: I know, a lot of information (laughs)!

[7:59] HS: No, no, I think that's [inaudible] interesting! So, you went into engineering, got a law degree, went to Fort Lee, and what type of things were you doing there?

[8:10] KP: Well, um, we had, like, you know, the best crew in the world in my office, and like I said, my husband was doing his residency, so that was four years. And so, I needed to stay at Fort Lee for at least four years, I decided. And that, at the time was doable. Now it's more rare to stay somewhere that long. So, I ended up staying at Fort Lee for four years, and, um, I have this very unique career pattern because I was trying to stay in certain locations. So, um, I started practicing Family Law and Legal Assistance and, you know, doing wills and divorces, and child custody, and lease terminations, and all of those types of legal issues for soldiers. And then, I became what we called a Trial Counsel. I got promoted to captain; I started out as a first lieutenant. And I started trying cases. Um, my first case was a—one of my first cases—um, was a shaken baby murder case. So, and that's just how the Army does things: like, you just hit the ground running. So, there I am, my first year as a criminal prosecutor, trying this massive murder case. It was, you know, a really

big deal, and our whole office was in on it. And then, we had a few rape cases in the interim. Um, lots of financial, fraud-type cases. And then, we also practiced as special assistant U.S. attorneys and helped the DOJ prosecute, like, DUIs and speeding tickets and any crime a civilian would commit on cancellation. So, I did that for two years, and then I became the chief of our Claims Section, which uh, paid—or, I guess, managed—courts. So, if the Army would cause damage to—you know, soldiers are always out there causing damage to somebody (laughs); they're running into things with cars—so, um, I would decide whether or not we were gonna pay for the damage. So, I was in charge; that was my first leadership position. And then, did I have another position? Oh, then the Army said, "OK, it's been four years. You have to move." By that time, my husband wanted to do a fellowship, so I needed to stay longer! So, I asked if I could stay, and they said, "Oh, well we have": They were gonna make me a defense counsel, which was a different chain of command, so it was considered what we call PCS, which I'm sure you're familiar with.

[11:10] HS: Mhmm.

[11:11] KP: *But*, 9/11 happened, like, that moment as I was getting ready to move. And, um, then everything shifted because we were getting ready to go to war, clearly. And so, they said, "OK, we have to shift all that around." And they made me, um, they put me in this position which was for a lieutenant-colonel; I was still a major, or, a *captain* at the time. But it was a liaison to—because Fort Lee is a logistics installation—so, it was a liaison to the Combined Arms Support Commander from the JAG School. So, I got to sit in the CASCOM building, advising a three-star general as a captain (laughs), as the only captain in the building. And, um, on behalf of the, the uh, commandant of the JAG School, who was then an O-6; now he's a one-star. Yeah, I got to do that for two years, which was such a cool job, just sitting around this big table with all these colonels, advising this three-star general (laughs)—like, "my God, how did this happen?! (laughs)." But, um, yeah, so that was a really cool job. It was in what used to be called Combat Development, and now they've changed the title of that to—what have they changed it to? I should know this—um, the Legal Center. There's a legal center in Charlottesville at the Judge-Advocate's Legal Center and School. Then Combat Development, now it's called the Legal Center.

[12:49] HS: Was that at Fort Lee, or was that?

[12:51] KP: That was at Fort Lee, yeah! So I got to stay at Fort Lee. I was just on my own little island, by myself, sitting in this three-star general's chain of command at Fort Lee. He was the commander of Fort Lee. And then, it was time for me already to go to our Advanced Course, which is called the , we call it the Graduate Course. And that's in Charlottesville, so then my husband got a job at MCV and the VA Hospital, working for them. And so, I transferred—actually, it wasn't time to go to the JAG School. I asked if I could stay again, and they said, "No (laughs), but we can give you this job at the JAG School in Charlottesville." So, I got a little condo up there, and we kept our house in Richmond. And I became the, what was then called the Post Judge Advocate for the JAG School. So, I was still a captain, and I was then the legal advisor to the commandant of the JAG School, (laughs) which is so silly! I mean they guy's, you know—but because he was a *commander*, he was entitled by law to have a legal advisor. And so, they put this captain in this position, and um, of course all of the subject matter experts in the whole JAG Corps—legal subject matter experts—are at the JAG School teaching, so anything I needed to know to help with whatever paperwork the commandant needed, I would just go to these instructors, and they would

give me the latest and greatest on the law, and I would put it together. But mostly, what I did there (laughs), which was such a fun job; it was a two-year job. I did practice legal assistance again. I practiced claims again. I was the IMSO: the International Military Student Officer. So, all of the international—I managed all of the international students that came to the JAG School to, um, study. So, like, we took them to New York, and we took them, you know, all these cool places. There was all this funding, and um, just little things, which was so neat. Like, we would take them to the DMV to get their driver's license, if they were there for a prolonged period; we would help them find housing. Yeah, it was just, I still keep in contact with some of them. It just was such a neat, a neat thing. And then, we also had these really large, um, I guess you'd call them conferences, where all of the leadership from all of the JAG Corps all around the world would come for a week to, you know, learn new developments and meet each other. And so, I was in charge of managing those two conferences. So, and they were, well, they came, and they were all O6s—colonels, some lieutenant-colonels, and all of the general officers—and I would manage their, you know, formal dinner and their banquets and their—they would have runs, like these hash runs, and they would have barbecues. And one year, I remember, we went through like ten kegs of beer (laughs). I mean, because that was back in the day when you could just go, and these guys would party. And I was in charge of the informal fund—like, not the appropriated fund—you had to keep the official funds very separate from what these guys were buying beer with and t-shirts. And, I mean, I ran like $20,000 through those informal funds one year. It was just a wild job. The whole thing was just, it was a lot of fun, but it was also very high-profile and zero-room-for-errors. And it was just something that you wouldn't expect, and you wouldn't think about, as far as an official function in the military (laughs). It existed. Now they, when I was there they changed it to the—instead of the Post Judge Advocate—they changed it to the *Command* Judge Advocate, which, I guess, is considered, uh, I don't know what. But anyway, so that was changed, and then we also changed the Judge [inaudible] the Judge Advocate-General's School to the Judge Advocate-General's Legal Center and School when I was there; so, it was just this huge shift in the JAG Corps, and how we did business. So yeah, that was a really cool job. And then, I did a follow-on year there at the Advanced Course. And there, we, the JAG School has it set up where you gain an LLM—which is a Master's of Law—through VABA, yeah, in military law. So, it's a really nice service, and we were all admitted to the Supreme Court, not that probably any of us have practiced in front of the Supreme Court (laughs). But, we did go to the Supreme Court. We met, like, Justice Ginsberg, and it was just a really neat experience. And we were there—one of my friends was pregnant at the time, so she was in her the Class-As, the old, green uniform; those things are just *horrible*. Um, they're still horrible, and Justice Ginsberg, no kidding, came up to her and said how proud she was that she was able to serve and be there, you know? Because that's a recent development. You know, I think it was as late as the '70s or '80s that women couldn't serve while they were pregnant. Justice Ginsberg was, like, really excited about that (laughs)!

[18:54] HS: Cool!

[18:56] KP: So yeah, that was like the first ten years or something, I barely moved with my career.

[19:05] HS: And how long were you in total?

[19:07] KP: 21 years, I just retired two years ago and moved here, to Magnolia Green. Are you in Magnolia Green?

[19:17] HS: I am, yes!

[19:18] KP: You have quite a commute every day.

[19:20] HS: Ah, it's not so bad. It's about 30 minutes, sometimes a little faster; thanks to the current pandemic, there's not quite as many people.

[19:29] KP: Oh, well that's good!

[19:30] HS: I telework some days, so that's nice.

[19:35] KP: Very nice, yeah.

[19:36] HS: Well having a 20-year career that started before 9/11, um, do you think you would have joined if 9/11 had started before you began your ROTC college experience?

[19:52] KP: Well, when I was in ROTC, it was the first invasion into Iraq, and I remember being concerned about being pulled out of college because my mother, you know, when Vietnam started her friends were in college, and they were getting pulled out of college to go to Vietnam, and so she was horrified that I was gonna get pulled out of college to be deployed. And uh, so I do remember being nervous about that but not to the point where I wanted out. I think, and this is—I don't know if this is a good thing or a bad thing, but—I just kinda stumbled my way through my way through my career not really knowing what I was getting into, and then getting into it and loving every second of it. So, it's almost as if I didn't give those types of things much thought at all. And I, looking back I (laughs), I feel like I *should have*, but it just wasn't something that was on my family's radar screen, and I knew it meant money, and we didn't have any. So, that was—so no, I don't think it would have changed my mind only because I don't think I would have given it enough thought for it to change my mind. Or maybe I would've. I don't know. Or maybe I would've been *more* patriotic because I remember feeling that way once it happened, you know, being really excited and proud to be a part of the solution. You know, whether or not there was a solution ever, I don't know, but yeah.

[21:42] HS: So, do you think you had any unique experiences due to the fact that you were a woman in service?

[21:49] KP: Yes, huge. And that was another thing that I just didn't give any thought to; I didn't realize. I was talking to my daughter about it last night, how she doesn't understand that having a mom who's a combat veteran is kind of a big deal. Like, because all of my friends are females, a lot of them, and we get together all the time, and they all have kids, and they've all been deployed to some of the most horrible places in the world. So, to her it's like no big deal (laughs), you know? This is what people do! And, um, but if you think about it, like, what is it, one or two percent of the population ever serve or go to combat, and then one percent of those are females. So you, it's just, it's probably one of the most unique and honorable experiences you could have as a person, let alone a female. So, after the grad. course, we went, we moved to Germany, and I became the only female on an infantry brigade commander's staff. At the time, um, women were not allowed

to serve in combat below the brigade level, so now of course that's changed. So, even at brigade level, though, there just were no females that would be in charge of operations for an infantry brigade, especially because we were ramping up for the second invasion for Iraq. Like, we were, actually we were already in by then because that was 2005, yeah. So, I knew my unit was deployed; I knew it was an infantry brigade. You know, and all I had ever been to was basically Fort Lee and a school, so I couldn't figure out why in the heck (laughs) my leadership would send someone like *me* into this position. Um, now, looking back I feel more confident about who I was a s a soldier and an officer, and I can see why they would've put that kind of responsibility onto me because I would've done that as a leader as well. Like, I would've seen what they saw. At the time I didn't see it, and I was like (laughs), "You are *crazy*! (laughs)" Um, and so I got there, and I was in charge of my own office, and I had—We were really on an island; we were not near a division or, you know, and we weren't a big installation. It was just us, a little, tiny brigade on this little caserne in Schweinfurt, Germany. I did have some females working for me, but one of them just didn't make it. Like, she was just; she didn't make it. But the other two were amazing, and um. So, the issues that arise being the only female on a brigade staff is that now I was a major, and I was serving with lieutenant-colonels and majors and colonels who had been working together in a very male-dominated field—because there were no females in their world for 10 or 12 years, they had been working like this—and now, all of a sudden, there I was. And again, I hadn't given it a lot of thought, so I wasn't afraid of it, and the first commander was just horrible. He was a screamer, a yeller, and it broke me a little bit. Luckily I had a great office, and we got through his very short tenure, and then a new brigade commander came in who subsequently made it very far in the Army, and he was amazing. And we were getting that brigade ready to go to war. We were, we um, went to Hohenfels for several months to train in the snow. We were in Germany, training in the snow to go to Iraq. Again, there were no females, so at first there was like one or two; at first we were separated into our own sleeping quarters, and that didn't work for the commander because he didn't have his staff together when he needed them. So, I had to move into the male quarters, and there was one bathroom. And so, it just became this kinda balancing act of making it work, and we did, and we bonded, and I think we just all had a tremendous amount of respect for each other. I don't, I don't know this to be true, but I think there was a lot of consternation on the wives' parts because they weren't used to having that situation. So, I feel like that maybe was a little—it could have been—over time that will be better for these units, like you won't have that weird dynamic. But I think, I don't ever remember having any issues with any of them. You know, I walked in on one of them in the bathroom once; that was kinda weird (laughs), but, you know, it was all just. And that had to do a lot with our leadership and also with my professionalism. Like, you just have different levels. And also the staff's professionalism, so everybody was just expected to live at a certain level of professionalism, and we just did, and it worked very well. My husband was working at the Caserne Hospital in the rear, working, and then we came out of our training scenario, and we were the commander as he's getting ready to go and getting his troops, you know, aligned, a lot of soldiers didn't wanna go to war. So, they were smoking pot and going to bars and getting drunk and fighting. So, we were discharging—we, I was bringing the paperwork to the commander, and the commander was discharging—a ton of these soldiers; they were just falling off the books, like hemorrhaging. And a lot of the females that we did have, um, were getting pregnant. So, we were having lots of pregnancy issues, which the commander was, you know, not happy about. And so, we had this very tight-knit team. I had my very tight-knit team of about 10 or 12 working for me in the Law Center, and we had it all worked out: Certain ones of us were gonna deploy, and certain ones of us were gonna stay in the back and handle all these courts-

martials and all these issues with the rear detachment commander. And we were ready to go in, I wanna say, June we were supposed to leave, and then all of a sudden everything got pushed to the right. So, we're just sitting there in Germany ready to deploy. We had all the equipment ready, we had everything loaded, and it just came to a halt. And so, we didn't end up deploying until August; the unit didn't. But what I didn't know in June, when our deployment window was pushed to the right, was that I was actually pregnant—total accident! I mean, I didn't think I *could* get pregnant because we had tried for years and years with all kinds of medical help and everything. I just, we didn't think it was possible. So there I am getting ready to go to Iraq, thinking I'm leaving tomorrow, and I'm pregnant, not knowing it!

[30:47] HS: Oh, my goodness!

[30:48] KP: Yeah! And so, then of course I'd had a couple of miscarriages before. So, I'm thinking, this is probably gonna be the same issue. And I knew how my brigade commander felt about this from having taken all these packets to him. And so, I'm mortified! I can't send my team and not go. I can't, you know, how am I gonna tell my brigade commander? How am I gonna tell my, you know, technical JAG chain of command? They've gotta find somebody else at the *literally* last second to go to Iraq. And my head was just spinning. I didn't know what to do. And especially thinking that it was only probably gonna last a few weeks. But I couldn't wait to tell them because I was in this leadership position; my boss and I had this tremendous amount of trust, you know, with your legal advisor. He was relying very heavily on me when it came to anything, you know: Should he spend money on particular things? Should, you know, how does, how do you interpret regulations [in] international law? Who can we fire at? Who can we—you know, there's all kinds of Law of War issues. So, he and I were very in tune, and he trusted me, and I had to go in and tell him that I couldn't *go*. And so, all of those conversations came to fruition, and everyone was very, very supportive. And, there was, of course, a ton of guys—mostly—people lined up, dying to deploy because it was very good for your career; it was very prestigious; it was something that we all needed to do in our careers. So, everybody raised their hand. You know, lots of people wanted to go. And so, my team—that was the hardest part though, was that I had to send my team with someone else—but they did *great*. I stayed in the career and had this beautiful baby girl, and she's awesome. And, yeah, nobody was worse; well, people were worse for the wear. That was a *tough* year. Our unit lost like 122 soldiers.

[33:12] HS: And what year was that?

[33:13] KP: That was 2006–07, yeah, because she was born in 2007. So, it was 2006 when they deployed. And it was just, they were in Baghdad, and it was just a horribly violent year, horribly. And so, you know, I'd go to all the memorials; there's 122 of 'em. It was just a horrible year. There were a lot, I think there was an investigation initiated very day. S, o we managed all of those from the rear. We managed all of the courts-martials. They started doing them downrange, but not that year they weren't. So we ended up doing like 40. We had 40 courts-martials on the books when they left, and then of course more people popped up and got sent home. But that was *a lot*. That was a *ton* of court-martials. So we were just, and then of course I had to take six weeks off to have a baby, so my team had to step in again (laughs), and they did, and they were wonderful. And um, yeah! So that was my unique (laughs) female experience in a whole lot of words, but it was, um, yeah. You know, looking back there's really no way to put that into words because, how do you

feel about something like that because there are so many mixed emotions. Luckily I had some good—all of my leadership was male at the time—I had good male leadership. And they, at least outwardly, said they understood. And my guys were so great; that worked for me. They picked up the slack like they didn't even need me. So, that's how you want your subordinates though. And we still keep in close contact to today cause we had such a close team, and, um, that brigade commander came and spoke at my retirement ceremony. So, that was pretty cool. And um, so yeah, they all came home, and we cleaned up all of their deployment stuff, their legal issues. And my husband and I and our then—what would she have been, one or two, no, yeah—so we moved then within Germany. We went to a different post in Germany, from Schweinfurt to Grafenwoehr. And she was, I guess, one [year old] or less when we moved to Grafenwoehr. And I became a defense counsel, a senior defense counsel. So, we were defending soldiers who had committed crimes at courts-martials and boards and stuff. And then another opportunity to deploy came up when she was one-and-a-half, and so I took it. And then, I deployed to Iraq. So, I missed her second birthday. She just did great though. My sister-in-law came and took care of her, and my husband worked at a hospital there. And I was only able to stay in the theater though for six months because then they wanted me to go to this school in D.C. So, I went back to Germany for like a week and then went to D.C. for six months while they all had to stay in Germany; they couldn't come. So, I was gone for a year all told. And so, she was, I think, two-and-a-half when I got back. And there, when I was a senior defense counsel, I think I had a team of like seven or eight defense counsel, and they were just trying cases all over Germany. And I think I tried one or two cases, but mostly I think I was just in a management role. And then we immediately PCS'd [Permanent Change of Station] to Japan after that. And, um, we plunked our three-year-old in a Japanese school, and she got, like, all the uniforms, and she hated every second of it, but she became fluent in Japanese (laughs), which was so adorable. And it was hard to get her to speak to us because she knew we spoke English, and all of our Japanese friends spoke English. So, I had to, like, follow her around with a video camera with her friends (laughs) and try to get her to do it. But her teacher said, you know, "If you closed your eyes, you would think she was a little Japanese child." So that was, like, super-fun. And she looked like, uh, Madeleine. You remember Madeleine?

[38:00] HS: Mhmm.

[38:01] KP: But she looked like Madeleine in her little Japanese uniform (laughs) with the little hat—so cute! Yeah, so that was an amazing experience, but my husband was unable to work there cause they didn't have any positions open at that tiny, little clinic. We were at Camp Zama, and I was the, I was promoted there to lieutenant-colonel. And I was the Deputy Staff Judge Advocate, and we had an office of about, um, 30 maybe. And we tried cases all over Japan. We were the senior office to the aux[?] in Okinawa and Korea; we would send people to Korea at times. And it was just a very formal experience because we had a relationship, I guess, a formal—there was a term for it—but a formal relationship with the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force Judge Advocate General's Corps. And so, we would have all these bilateral engagements with the Japanese Judge Advocate General and all the high-level Japanese lawyers, and everything was there was just extraordinarily formal. Um, there were so many rules that you had to learn, and um, everyone was so polite. And, while I was there—is this getting too long? (laughs)

[39:27] HS: No, you're fine!

[39:28] KP: OK (laughs)! It comes real slowly to an end (laughs), but while I was there I got promoted, and my mom got super-sick. Like, three-weeks-to-live sick: kidney failure. And my dad was already gone, and so. Oh, because my husband wasn't able to work there, he decided to study acupuncture in China. So, he had just gone to China for like six months and was studying at Beijing University, yeah! And um, so Dane and I—my daughter—were in Japan; my mom gets sick. So, I take emergency leave to come back to the states to help my brother and get her settled. And um, the day we were supposed to fly out, the massive Japanese earthquake happens, and the Fukushima Nuclear Plant is collapsing.

[40:31] HS: Oh, my God!

[40:32] KP: The airports are shut down. People are walking 20 miles to get to their kids. There's no food. There's no power. Everything was just completely—no trains, nothin. So, we couldn't get out that day, but somehow I got a flight out the next day. And I don't even know how at this point. I don't know how. The freeways were all closed. Normally, in Japan, our house was like 20 miles from the airport, but it would routinely take you at least three hours because of the traffic. And so, looking back everything was such a blur: I don't know how we got to the airport; I don't know how we got a flight out; I don't know how it all happened; I don't even know how my boss *let* me go because we were deploying troops to Northern Japan to the site of Fukushima to help maintain order, which we didn't *have* to do in Japan. I mean, people are so orderly. There was no rioting. There was no staffed[?]. People were, like, gathering up piles of money and pictures and stuff in the rubble and putting it on the sidewalk, where families could come back and get it. Like, that's how these beautiful Japanese society is. So yeah, we had to set up; we were doing the humanitarian disaster relief operation for the Japanese. So, we were setting up showers, and food distribution, and everything that these poor people needed that had just lost everything. In these massive communities, people are just stacked on top of people in Japan. Like, there's *nowhere* for you to go, and there's just thousands and thousands of people in these tiny, little areas. So, my boss lets me *go* (laughs). I'm so shocked [inaudible]! And so, I was gonna take three weeks at the time, and I get to the States. And then, the Army is designated the R-4, which is the Army was then in charge of all of the joint forces that were conducting this humanitarian assistance disaster relief operation. And so, my boss was pulling his hair out, to say the least, and he didn't have his deputy. So, and at the same time they started evacuating all of the American citizens—the non-military-dependent and other citizens that were just in Japan living—the State Department did. And so, my boss was in charge of *that* whole operation: trying to find all these people motel rooms and getting them their per-diem, and what do you do with their pets? And you know, it was just a wild time. And I was, of course, in Reno, helping my mom and my brother, and I had Dane. And by then, my ex-husband had already moved back to Richmond because he got a job here, back at VCU and the VA. And so, my boss was calling me, "Get back! Get back! Get back!" And I couldn't bring Dane back with me because there was a moratorium on U.S. citizens' flying back into Japan. So, I had to fly her to D.C. to drop her off with her dad, and then I had to go back to Japan. So, my mom's dying, my kid can't go to Japan, everybody in Japan is just [in] complete chaos, and we're in charge. And yeah, so we went into 24-hour operations for Tomoduchi—I think it was called—Operation Tomoduchi [Friend]. And, um, yeah we just worked that for several, several months. And then, I think it was, so that was in March was the earthquake, and then I came back to the States that summer because I was scheduled to rotate out anyway. And I went to Maryland for, like, 11 months as a—I was the Branch Chief for the Western Torts Division. So, I managed all

the torts [that is, legal injury claims] for the western half of the United States. And the interesting thing that happened during that time was the Hassan Shooting down at Fort Hood. So, I was put in charge of that: managing all those claims that came in. And there were probably, I would say, 2,000 claims from family members and stuff. Was it that many? It was a *lot*. And they were all over $1 million. It probably was about 200 claims; I think I'm misremembering now, but it was a lot of claims on the family members' parts. And then we had to prepare all those to go to the Department of Justice for litigation. And, um, then I quickly was able to get back down to Richmond as an instructor at the Army Logistics University at Fort Lee. And I did that for two years: I taught like Law, War, and Military Justice and Human Trafficking; I did some contracts. And then, um, because Dane's dad was still here working, I asked if I could stay at Fort Lee again. So I, like, spent most of my career at Fort Lee, and they transfer me over to be the deputy at the main JAG office. So, I got to do that for two more years, and then they finally said—the Army finally said—"We're not leaving you at Fort Lee anymore." "But I only have one more year before I can retire!" And then they said, "No, you cannot stay there." Cause that was kind of a coveted position for people, and they told me I couldn't hog it. So, they sent me for my last year to Fort Belvoir at the Army Headquarters, and I was in charge of a branch of an environmental law division that advised the Army staff and the Judge Advocate General on environmental law issues. And I got to do mostly historic preservation law, which was super-cool. I know! I mean, who knew all this stuff? But yeah, there's just tons of historic sites in the Army that need to be protected, and they fall under these federal laws for protection. And I stayed there for two years and then decided it was time to retire because my daughter was starting middle school. So, we moved to Magnolia Green, and I retired (laughs). That's the whole story (laughs)!

[47:12] HS: And what year did you retire?

[47:14] KP: 2018, the end of 2018. Yep, and so, yeah, it was just a great life, and I miss it a lot. It was—my daughter was such a military brat, and she loved moving around so much. It was really hard to convince her that it was in her best interest to sit still for awhile. So, she still, she's still ready to go, and she wants me to try to get a federal job overseas, so she can study (laughs) at an international school (laughs), and I'm like, "You're supposed to *not* want to be moving!" But yeah, it's just how her brain works now. And they just opened the Army Museum at Fort Belvoir, and we were lucky enough to be stationed when they were working on their exhibit for the Military Child. So, she's part of that now in her little Japanese uniform and, yeah, it's really cool (laughs).

[48:11] HS: I'm excited for them to open up, once restrictions…

[48:13] KP: Yes, I know! It will be neat to go see. But yeah, that's the whole story. It was, it definitely had some highlights, and you make the best friends in the world. And I mean, you know, you can't beat it. I wish I could do it all over again.

[48:32] HS: So, what would you tell a class of students? Because we have a lot of relationships with middle-school and high-school teachers at the War Memorial. So, what would you tell a classroom of students if they were interested in joining the military?

[48:52] KP: I think, for middle schoolers, I would say something along the lines of, you know, just what a wonderful service that they could give to their country, and how exciting it can be, you

know, moving all around the world and meeting every different kind of person, and seeing all of the different cultural sites and all the cool stuff around the world. And I would whole-heartedly encourage them to take advantage of every opportunity that they can to join high school Junior ROTC and college Junior ROTC. And the education benefits—this is what I would talk about with the high schoolers—the education benefits are unbeatable, unbeatable, you know? You can do to college for free. You can go to grad school for free. Your *spouse* can go to grad school for free. Your *kids* go to school for free. I will not have to pay a cent for Dane's school from undergrad through med school if she wants to go. It's all paid for, between my VA benefits and my Army benefits. Just, the benefits are unbelievable. Like, I could never work again if I didn't want to. At, I think I retired at 48–49. I'm set! It's hard, and you're getting told what to do all the time (laughs). The Army tells you what to do, what to wear, where to live, you know, and when you can go, when you can't go. So, we were joking about how people are getting upset about the government telling them that they can't (laughs) go certain places, or you have to wear a mask. And we're like, "Really?! (laughs)" You know, that's easy! But yeah, I would just tell them to take every opportunity they can to be involved with it because you make the best friends in the best places in the world. Plus you get to learn a whole bunch of cool stuff along the way

[51:07] HS: Well Kelli, I just wanna thank you so much for chatting with me today. I'm so grateful that you shared your experiences with us.

[51:14] KP: Yeah, I'm so happy you're doing this because I know someday Dane is going to realize that this is cool (laughs), and she'll want the, you know, the firsthand version like I do for my grandfather, but I can't get it. So, I'm excited for you to talk to James for sure, and um, Ben is—he has got some neat, neat stories. He said he was under the weather today, but he wants to schedule for later in the week, if possible.

[51:44] HS: Sure!