

**PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT—KATHY GERSTEIN**  
(Recorded 05 March 2007)

Interviewee: KATHY GERSTEIN

Interviewer: Jonathan Due

Interview Date: 05 March 2007

Location: Alexandria, Virginia

Length: 1 CD; approximately 58 minutes

**Start of CD 1**

Jonathan Due: This is Jonathan Due who is conducting an interview with Ms. Kathy Gerstein—is that pronounced correctly—on 05 March 2007. It is 4:15PM in the afternoon, and we are conducting this interview at a Barnes and Nobel bookstore located in Alexandria, Virginia. We will be discussing Ms. Gerstein's experiences as a member of the Class of 1980 at the United States Military Academy. Again, thank you very much for agreeing to do this. To start off, could you briefly describe your childhood and your educational background and some of your experiences prior to attending West Point.

Kathy Gerstein: Let's see. I had five brothers and sisters. I grew up in Clearwater, FL. Typical childhood, you know. I went to school with the same kids, kindergarten through high school. No military experience whatsoever, absolutely none. My older brother, two years older than I am, was in the Class of 1978 at Annapolis. I guess probably around, I don't know, '77, told me that they are going to start letting women in. "Do you want to go?" Of course, it never appealed to me until you start doing the whole college thing and it did not look so bad. Nothing exciting about my

childhood; it was typical. Grew up in a beach town and that was it. I should have worn more sunscreen, honestly.

JD: That brings up an interesting point. One of the questions I wanted to ask was why you decided to go to West Point?

KG: You know, what I can, it is so hard, in terms of what you think you went for as an eighteen-year-old kid is no where why you really went. Five kids, you do the math. I mean, I needed to get some sort of scholarship to go to school. This appealed to me more than going to the University of Florida with all of my friends. I do not know why, at the time, I just wanted to be different. So, no burning love of country. I was never one of those kids that played army or anything like that. So it was not that. I wanted somebody to pay for my education.

JD: You mentioned that through your brother that you heard that the service academies were becoming integrated.

KG: Yeah. Right. Well he was up there and just let me know that it was going to happen. It must have been in a civics class or something like that and I read about Ford signing it into law. And that started the whole process going. I kind of thought that oh, my brother is doing it, so maybe I will do it too.

JD: Right. Then again, just from reading through some of the differnt accounts of it, it seems like there was a probably pretty quick turn-around from when Ford announced that the law was changing, the law was changed, and then the application process all the way to reception day.

KG: Yeah. That's right. I think it was September or October wasn't it.

JD: I think so.

KG: Yeah. Now you have to have all that stuff in by about December. So it must have been rapid. You know, that kind of stuff, I couldn't remember if I tried, but it had to have been quick.

JD: And during that process, did anyone offer you any encouragement or discouragement?

KG: Some of my friends moms were, especially those who had been in the service during World War II, had been very encouraging, but they told me I was going to the wrong Academy. I really should have been going to the Naval Academy. They just thought that it was a better life. But, my mom and dad weren't. If I wanted to go to school, I needed to fill out the paperwork, number one to get myself into school, and find myself a way to do it. So this afforded me the opportunity to do it. So.

JD: Again, coming from Florida, did you consider yourself a Southerner?

KG: No, no, no, no.

JD: And was your family relatively new to Florida as well?

KG: Oh, no. We had lived there, no, I mean my parents are still living there in the same house, forty-six years now. I mean we moved there when I was two, same house, same everything, all paid for.

JD: And where did they move there from?

KG: We were in, my dad worked for Honeywell, Dallas. I was way too young to remember any of it.

JD: And again, you might describe yourself as being from Florida...

KG: Totally.

JD: but no overarching identification of being a Southerner.

KG: Oh, no, no, no, no.

JD: Also, at the time, did you consider yourself a pioneer or even a feminist in any way?

KG: A feminist, no. Absolutely not. A pioneer. I think people considered me that. Some of my teachers at school I do remember made some comments like that. But to me, it was like what I said, a way to pay for me to go to school. But a feminist, absolutely not, nope.

JD: In terms of receiving the actual nomination, do you remember who you got the nomination from?

KG: Bill Young. Still serving.

JD: What was that process and experience like working your way through the application?

KG: I filled the stuff out, that is about all I can remember.

JD: Any interviews?

KG: I am trying to think. I had to have had some sort of interview process. Who I actually sat down with, no, no. I can remember going with people, guys in my graduating class, going with them to take the APFT. To do the interviews. But I don't remember a thing about them. I remember the car rides and that is about it.

JD: And anyone else from your high school, was anyone else applying to go to the academies?



KG: There was another. Florida is a big, you have probably figured that out, is a big recruiting ground for kids to go the academies. And, I had another female that went to Air Force, a guy, two other guys went to Air Force. And another guy went to West Point with me. But he dropped out after Yearling year. I mean he did the two-year plan and got out. But yeah, I think there were probably about five of us out of my high school class that went.

JD: And were you close with them through the process and afterwards in terms of just maintaining friendly relationships?

KG: I mean, they were from the same crowd of people that I hung out with. So we all partied together. We were all in the same kind of classes. I mean if I saw them at the reunions, if I ever went back to a high school reunion, I know I could pick-up and talk to them and stuff like that, but deep-seated, wow, aren't we having fun, no. None of that.

JD: One final question about your background, what was your maiden name?

KG: Wheless.

JD: Wheless?

KG: Yeah. W-H-E-L-E-S-S.

JD: And along those same lines, how did you meet your husband?

KG: SCUBA class. He is a grad. He is class of 1980 also.

JD: Excellent. Getting to West Point. Could you describe arriving there on that first day, what was that experience like for you?

KG: My parents did not take me up there. I remember staying overnight in the Barbazon Hotel and I am packrat, so I have everything ever sent to me, issued to me, in

trunks. My husband has long ago let that stuff go, but I keep hauling it around. But, you know, they put us on the bus and drove us right to the reception point. We did not, I never did the go sit in the Michie Stadium. They did not take us there, they just dropped us right off. So, after that, I don't; long snaky lines getting issued stuff. I can remember looking around thinking, "Oh, my god, what have I done?" People were yelling at everybody and I was thinking, "What am I doing here?" You know, my roommate, we were comparing notes that night, and she said, "You know, I thought I was in a movie, people playing music, I was marching around." I was like, "No, it is worse than that. It is not a movie." So, yeah, some things, you remember little bits and pieces. My daughter is a firstie right now, so going back, sometimes I am not sure that I remember things that I did or I remember what she is doing right now, kind of thing. And my husband and I have two totally different versions of our time. Sometimes I think that we went to two different places, truly. So, it is kind of weird, we will be talking about something, "No, no, no, it didn't happen that way." And I will say, "Yeah, it did." In my mind, it happened that way.

JD: In what ways; what are a few examples of some of those divergences?

KG: Some of the lectures that we went to. We will remember certain things about it. "Oh, we were in Mahan Hall." "Oh, no, no, no, we were WB-something, something, something." OK. It is way, the Academy right now, is way more parent-friendly and we just got back from 100th Night with my daughter, and I do not remember any parents being there at all for so many of us. And I got most of the jokes; some of the names, you know, I remember her mentioning that this kid got kicked out or this happened, but, you

know, it is so very much the same. I mean they all, the cadets there think they are making these great revelations. And you are thinking, "No, sorry, same stuff, different century."

JD: A different number on the calendar?

KG: Yeah, a different number on the calendar, that is about it. Exactly.

JD: And, as you started at West Point, how did growing up in Florida and your past experiences, did that help you in some ways, hinder you in some of the new challenges that were at the Academy?

KG: I don't know if it was growing up in Florida, if it was more the times that we went there. Title IX had just been passed. As far as actual sporting activities for various women, they were very minimal. Both of my daughters have been involved in sports since Kindergarten. They have no, my older daughter who goes there [West Point] now has, you know, the physical stuff like was not an issue at all. Seeing as how the Academy really did not know what to expect when they got us up there, they went through a big learning phase on runs and pull-ups and that kind of stuff. I remember taking the APFT and doing the flexed-arm-hang or something and I get there, and it is like, "OK, do a pull-up." And I do the flesed-arm-hang; well, no. I remember we were down in the sinks, we had a pretty good squad leader, down in the sinks every night, you know practicing our stupid pull-ups, which you know, seems so stupid, but they had to show this progress. We came in doing zero. I think there was maybe two females that entered that could do even a pull-up. And that was the measure of success. If you could



do it before you left for Christmas leave. And it's like, OK, great, I can do a pull-up. But that was one of the measures that they had in place.

JD: Were you involved in any sports?

KG: Uhh, I was a rable rouser. Yes, I was. I swam. And I found that, both my husband and my daughter were corps squad athletes, I found that I really liked doing the company stuff. I just really thought that it was way more fun. That is another thing that my husband and I big-time disagree on is, you know, as cadets you are always measuring who got over more. But, it is kind of like, well, you know, "You corps squad guys did not have to do this and that." And he goes, "Well, you guys were all company kiss-offs." You know, of course those discussions were at the beginning of our marriage and you know, we were just like, "Wait, I remember it this way." Now it is like, if I can remember what I had for dinner, it is a good thing, if you know what I mean.

JD: And do you all get married immediately after graduation?

KG: No, we got married in November of 1980.

JD: OK, so a couple of months after?

KG: Six months. Yeah.

JD: And so when you say that you swam, was that in intramural competitions?

KG: I swam, probably about three months on the, I guess we were probably considered Corps Squad, I do not think that we were considered Club Squad at that point and I couldn't. The academics were kicking my butt. And I just said that I can't do this. I talked to my roommate into trying out with me. She stayed on and swam for four years. Whatever. I did something good.



JD: In terms of some of those challenges there, you mentioned academics.

KG: Yeah.

JD: How was that experience?

KG: Well, I guess I was more of the English literature sort of individual and it was not that way. It was, you know, all math, science, and engineering. So, my seven electives that my class had, mine were all in English classes. So, but I am surprised, I am not sure when they went and changed it, but you can now get B.A.s and B.S.s and everything like that. It stopped being more of an engineering school. But, hey, you know, I don't believe that I would have pursued that level of math and science if somebody didn't tell me, "Here's your book, here's your class, here's your first test." So, yeah.

JD: Because you still received the general bachelor of science degree?

KG: I did.

JD: With no major?

KG: With no major. I did.

JD: Did they have fields of concentration at that time?

KG: I think they did. Yeah, I think they called them fields of concentration, and like I said, seven electives. And I probably had, I took no advanced courses, I did not clep out of anything or whatever they call it. So I was your M1A1 cadet. You know, I just followed along. So.

[Interview Continues to 26:00]

KG: Things change. Not quickly, but they change.

JD: That's right, I had similar experiences just with those long-standing reputations and institutional personalities even at that level. When you mentioned the learning phase of the academy, were they prepared for the integration in 1976.

KG: Oh, no, no, no. No, not at all. I mean, you had the Superintendent, Berry, you know, "I am going melt my ring down, I suggest you all melt your rings down. Don't let them in." And then, you know, what was it, six months later, and he had to turn around and say, "We welcome you." No, no, he did not want us there, no, he was not a nice person, so.

JD: And he quickly left, by 1977 I believe.

KG: Yeah, he was gone. I do not know how long he had been there before, so maybe it was just his time to rotate out. Maybe he was done. Maybe they wanted a different route; get in a different guy.

JD: Yeah, again, I just remember reading, and also being an insider to the institution, some things that struck me as odd, such as the full dress uniforms.

KG: Oh yeah.

JD: My understanding that the first version of those for women were without tails.

KG: Right. Yeah, wasn't that a surprise. Well, "Your rear ends will accentuate the tails." And then when they had those big white butts sticking out there. I mean, they were feeding us some incredible caloric content and it was not pretty. It was not pretty. I mean I entered at a certain weight and I left at that weight. I wish I could go back to that weight. Time marches on.

[Interview Continues to 38:57]

JD: You mentioned that the cadets and the climate around G-4 were very positive and quite cohesive. How were the interactions with the Tac officers and the professors? Was there any difference between those groups of commissioned officers?

KG: Short of one professor that I had that was, I remember going to AI once, and he was like, "You should put in four hours a night on this or something." As a typical cadet, I said, "How can I do that, I have all this other stuff." He goes, "Well, when do you sleep." "12 to 5, or something like that." "Well, that's your study time." Yeah, right, sure, I'll make a note of that. Short of him, and he just sticks in my mind, I had two good Tac officers. They fit the personality of the company. They knew, I guess they knew the reputation of the company and they really did not come and try to change it. As long as we followed the rules, made our grades and everything like that, they really did not try to change. Which worked; it worked for us. I do not know if it would have worked for another company. I had good professors. Whenever I would go in for AI, and it is one of the things I always told my daughters is to go ask for extra help. I mean if you appear to be interested, they are going to help you. And I got that from West Point. And I was never, ever made to feel like you shouldn't be here or you are really stupid, or anything like that. They were going to get you knowledgeable enough to pass the course and would explain whatever you did not understand. So, I had great instructors.

JD: That's good. I know that one of things I always think back to in my experience there is that it always felt as if there were a lot of people there doing everything they could to help you succeed.

KG: Oh yeah, sure. Well they have invested a lot of money into you already. When the slot is gone, they cannot fill it. It is not like they can take a transfer in from somewhere, so the class is just that much smaller. So, I think that they want to graduate as many as they can.

JD: And despite some of the initial disparaging comments from General Berry, that did not trickle down to that point of contact between officers and cadets where it mattered most, I guess?

KG: Not that I was aware. I mean, could they have gone into the professor's smoke room; I wasn't there, so I do not know. But a professional demeanor during class, so, that was good.

[Interview Continues]

Transcribed by Jonathan Due, 08 March 2007