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University of California
Berkeley, California

Helen Fleck:
Oakland Army Base Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Robin Li
in 2009

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Interview #1: January 22, 2009
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01-00:00:13

Li: This is Robin Li, speaking with Helen Fleck on January 22, 2009 at her home in Piedmont, California. Just to begin, could you please state your name and when and where you were born.

01-00:00:25

Fleck: My name is Helen Fleck and I was born on July 14, 1921 in Saint Augustine, Pennsylvania.

01-00:00:36

Li: Okay. And can you tell me a little bit about your background? What your parents did for a living.

01-00:00:48

Fleck: Yes. My mother was a schoolteacher and my father's family was in timber and farming in the mountains of western Pennsylvania.

01-00:01:04

Li: Okay. And you had mentioned earlier that you lived in Washington, DC for a while. How did you come to live there?

01-00:01:08

Fleck: Yes. In my second year of college—it was 1941, and there was a sign outside the post office that said, "Uncle Sam wants you." And so I went inside and I said, "What does that mean, "Uncle Sam wants you?" And I was with my first cousin and he was the same age I was. And it said, "Well, you can go to Washington and they need secretaries." And my cousin, they said to him, "You can join the Army, the Navy, or the Air Force." So my cousin Paul joined the Air Force and I signed up to take an examination to go to Washington as a secretary.

01-00:02:07

Li: So what was the sense of things at a time that prompted you to see that Uncle Sam sign and want to inquire more?

01-00:02:16

Fleck: Well, I always knew that I wanted to travel. And, of course, it was maybe five hours by train from my home to Washington, DC, and I thought, "Let's get started." And I had finished my second year of college. I had graduated from high school when I was thirteen.

01-00:02:42

Li: Oh, wow.

01-00:02:44

Fleck: No, not high school. I went into high school when I was thirteen. So when I graduated, I was seventeen. So after the second year of college, and we had

come through the big depression, when I found out what the salary would be for a beginning secretary—it was \$5,280 for a year—I thought, "Oh, I hope I pass this examination."

01-00:03:18

Li: So that was a high salary at the time?

01-00:03:19

Fleck: Oh, that was a lot of money in 1941. Those were pretty rough years. And it was amazing. I went to Washington in April of 1941 and I was at my desk working on a weekend on December 7, 1941 and I had the radio on my desk and I heard about Pearl Harbor. And there were only about six of us in this big office that day, and I didn't understand what I was hearing. So I soon found out. There we were, right there, when the war started.

01-00:04:07

Li: Had you been keeping up on the war going on in Europe at the time?

01-00:04:12

Fleck: Not too much. I knew there was a war going on in Europe, and of course, they talked about Hitler, and I had read about Chamberlain. And the office that I worked in was the office chief of transportation and we gave out the permits for all the freight that was moved in the United States, and it was called lend lease, and it seemed to be going to Russia.

01-00:04:51

Li: Oh, interesting.

01-00:04:52

Fleck: I couldn't understand why they were bringing 2,000 secretaries a day into Washington, DC. You'd read that in the Washington Post, and I thought, "What is going on?" But it was electrifying, and it was so busy. It was just magical. You know, you could feel something in the air, but you didn't know what it was. I didn't know what it was.

01-00:05:25

Li: And where were you living at the time?

01-00:05:26

Fleck: I was living in an apartment with a lady that was older than I was, and she had been divorced and she had one child, and he was in the military academy in Staunton, Virginia. I bet she was eleven years older. I had answered an ad. And she worked in the Department of Agriculture. And here I was sent to the War Department.

01-00:05:56

Li: So it sounds like there was a lot of working women, then, in DC.

01-00:06:00

Fleck: Oh, lots and lots and lots.

01-00:06:02

Li: Was it a fun time to be a part of that?

01-00:06:04

Fleck: Yes. Yes, it was. It was. We would talk. We're a part of history, but we didn't know what was going on.

01-00:06:16

Li: Yes. But you felt the energy?

01-00:06:18

Fleck: Oh, the energy level was very high.

01-00:06:22

Li: So your first job was at the War Department?

01-00:06:26

Fleck: Yes, yes.

01-00:06:26

Li: And how long were you there?

01-00:06:27

Fleck: I stayed five years. But I went in in 1941 and in 1945, I was a member of the American Women's Voluntary Services, and we had a place where we met in a hotel on Dupont Circle. That's where the American Women's Voluntary Service had entertainment for officers going in and out of Washington. And so I was like the chairman on Thursday nights, and we played a record player, and the songs. We danced, we played bridge, we played ping-pong and sat around. We had tea, and coffee, and cookies. And then on Saturday nights, we were dressed in gowns and we would go to the leading hotels, and we wore a banner across here that said, "Hostess," and we danced with the officers from all over the world.

01-00:07:41

Li: And you were in your early twenties at this time?

01-00:07:43

Fleck: Yes, yes.

01-00:07:45

Li: You said that your husband, you knew him growing up?

01-00:07:49

Fleck: Yes.

01-00:07:50

Li: How did you come to reconnect after you were in DC?

01-00:07:55

Fleck: When he returned from combat—he was a B26 strafe bomber stationed in England, and he flew over to Germany and bombed railroad bridges, railroad yards, highway bridges.

01-00:08:13

Li: That was a really dangerous assignment.

01-00:08:15

Fleck: Yes. And it was low level bombing. So I didn't know he was over there, because the last time I had seen him was when I was fourteen. But everyone came through Washington, and so when he came back from combat, he came through Washington to visit his aunt on the way to R&R in Miami Beach, Florida. On the East Coast, there were two places: Atlantic City in New Jersey, and Miami Beach in Florida. So when you returned from combat, you went down there for two or three weeks. So he came to see his aunt on the way down and she called me and invited me to go to dinner with them.

01-00:09:06

Li: And what year was that?

01-00:09:09

Fleck: Oh, I would say that could have been like 1943. I had been in Washington a couple of years. And we didn't date exclusively. I dated other gentlemen. But we kept in touch.

01-00:09:28

Li: And so what year did you get married?

01-00:09:31

Fleck: In October of 1945. I never wanted to get married while the war was going on. I can remember that when I was working at the American Women's Voluntary Services—that was my volunteer duty at night. I heard about the organization of the Charter of the United Nations being held in San Francisco. So there were three ladies talking about it. They were my age. And I asked them, "How did you get in on this?" And they told me and they said they need about 250 more secretaries and that was the State Department. And I said, "Well, what do I do?" and they told me who to go to. And so I went and that was like in January or February of 1945. And they brought us out on a special train.

01-00:10:35

Li: Just the secretaries?

01-00:10:36

Fleck: There were 2,000 secretaries on this special train. And we came out early to learn how to type on an electric typewriter, because in those days in Washington, we were typing on the old fashioned type. I even forget what you call them. Standard.

01-00:10:58

Li: So they brought out 2,000 secretaries and you were trained?

01-00:11:02

Fleck: Yes. We were trained to type on the electric typewriters. And then, when the conference was over, President Truman came out and Secretary of State Stettinius, and they signed the documents. And then everyone that had been working at the UN left, but the secretaries were left to get all the papers in order for the future, because they would create a UN. San Francisco wanted to be the headquarters, but they lost the bid. I believe the Rockefellers donated the land in New York City, and that became the permanent home of the UN. So we had to get everything ready that would be transferred to the headquarters of the UN when and where it would be created.

01-00:12:02

Li: And so how long were you in San Francisco?

01-00:12:05

Fleck: I came in February of forty-five and I went back to Washington around the latter part of July.

01-00:12:16

Li: Wow. What an amazing thing to be witness to.

01-00:12:18

Fleck: It was, it was. Really something. Eleanor Roosevelt was in the—I guess you would call it the US delegation, and we were permitted to go to one meeting a month. The meetings were held in the Opera House, and we worked in other buildings where the office work was done—but it was less than a block away. And we could select what day we wanted to go. And I watched for the speakers. And Molotov came and he spoke in Russian, of course, and he had an interpreter who was a wiry Russian young man. And when Mr. Molotov would hit the lectern, the interpreter would mimic him exactly. [laughter]

01-00:13:24

Li: [laughter]

01-00:13:25

Fleck: And he was the most popular speaker. Everyone wanted to see him.

01-00:13:35

Li: So you returned to Washington, then, in July?

01-00:13:40

Fleck: Yes. Late July. And I had almost finished five years working for the War Department, and I decided that maybe it was time to get married, because the war was over in Europe, the war was over in Japan, and certain offices were closing. And I knew that eventually the office in which I worked would be no more. I did want to go back to the State Department. They were going over to Europe to have the war trials, and they were recruiting secretaries, and that

was on my agenda. That's what I was going to do next. My husband was a test pilot then at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, and so he asked me to marry him and I said yes.

01-00:14:48

Li: So instead of going to Europe for the war trials, you went to Ohio?

01-00:14:51

Fleck: Yes. He said, "I'll take you to Germany."

01-00:15:03

Li: So did you stop working, then, after you were married?

01-00:15:09

Fleck: Oh, yes. I resigned. I resigned in forty-six. I had gone to work in April of forty-six. No, I had gone to work in April of forty-one and I worked until about March of forty-six, and I had enough annual leave and sick leave that I could leave like a month early. So I went out to Wright-Patterson. I got married in October and worked a few more months in Washington, DC, and then I went out to live in Dayton, Ohio.

01-00:15:58

Li: And you mentioned you have three children?

01-00:16:03

Fleck: Yes.

01-00:16:05

Li: So then were you staying at home raising your children?

01-00:16:09

Fleck: Yes.

01-00:16:10

Li: For how long? Were you working during this time?

01-00:16:12

Fleck: No. Once I retired—I didn't retire, I just resigned. I had five years. I was a stay at home mom. But I want to tell you that being married to a member of the service, to me, was very exciting. It was very organized. We had the Officers Wives Club. We always lived on a base. They had housing, they had the pool, the golf course, the tennis courts. And we women were all organized and we had babysitting clubs and bridge clubs. Lot of golf. A lot of the ladies played golf. We had a gardener's club.

01-00:17:15

Li: So did you enjoy life on the base? Was it—?

01-00:17:16

Fleck: Oh, I loved it. I just loved it. We had the youth club. And the officers wives were in charge of all these things. We were the advisors and we were

volunteers, and I wanted specifically to tell you that there was a group called Family Services. I volunteered two or three days a week at Family Services, which I will tell you—in the Air Force it was called Family Services and in the Army it was called Army Community Services.

01-00:18:03

Li: So how many years did you volunteer there when you were raising your children?

01-00:18:08

Fleck: Oh. Well, we got married in 1945 and he retired in 1965. And I was a volunteer the whole time.

01-00:18:24

Li: So you never really stopped working, you just stopped working for money.

01-00:18:26

Fleck: I never stopped working, I just didn't get paid.

01-00:18:27

Li: Right, okay.

01-00:18:29

Fleck: And it was through my volunteer service in the Air Force that I was selected for the job at Oakland Army Base as the Army Community Services Coordinator, because I had spent over twenty years as a volunteer in Family Services in the Air Force. Every base I went, I always volunteered at least two or three half-days a week in Family Service, and then I volunteered in the Red Cross as a gray lady two mornings a week. And then I always belonged to the Officers Wives Club, and I volunteered for committees. Decorating committee. Anytime they wanted a volunteer, I volunteered.

01-00:19:28

Li: Volunteered.

01-00:19:29

Fleck: And I would get all this experience.

01-00:19:32

Li: So how did you come to work at Oakland Army Base? How did you end up in the Bay Area? How did you find out about the job?

01-00:19:37

Fleck: Okay. Maybe six months before we retired, we were over in Tucson, Arizona, and my husband said to me, "Write down on a piece of paper where you would like to go when we retire and I'll write down on a piece of paper." So he wrote down San Francisco and I wrote down San Francisco. So he came out. I stayed until the children finished the school year.

01-00:20:10

Li: How old were your kids at this point?

01-00:20:11

Fleck:

Oh. Our oldest son was in his first year at UC Berkeley, and our next child, Suzanne, was finishing her junior year when he retired. She graduated from Piedmont High School in 1967. Billy was four years younger. He was in junior high when we moved to Piedmont.

01-00:20:36

Li:

Okay. So that was a consideration, having school aged children?

01-00:20:39

Fleck:

Yes, yes. Now, my husband found a job in San Francisco. He went with the General Services Administration in the heart of San Francisco, and so every day after work he would drive all around looking. And when he found Piedmont, he called me on the phone and said, "I think I have found where we're going to live." And it was a little village. He told me all about it and then he rented a house. And as soon as school was out in June—we came on July 1 and moved into Piedmont, into a rented house, and we looked for two years, and we found this house. We liked old houses and this house had been built in 1929 and we liked it and we bought it.

01-00:21:35

Li:

Wow. So you've been in this house since nineteen—?

01-00:21:38

Fleck:

Since July 1, 1968.

01-00:21:40

Li:

Oh, wow. So then when you came out here, was this the first time you had lived off-base in twenty years?

01-00:21:52

Fleck:

No. Sometimes when you transfer from base to base, there may not be a house for you on the base, so you would rent off-base until a house became available on the base.

01-00:22:09

Li:

Did you miss having a connection to a military base like the way you had?

01-00:22:13

Fleck:

Oh, my, yes. Oh, my, yes. It's quite a transition. But fortunately, when we moved here, there were bases all around. For instance, Alameda Naval Air Station. There was Oakland Army Base. There was the Presidio in San Francisco. Then we would go up to Travis Air Force Base.

01-00:22:35

Li:

And your husband was working for the GSA at this time, so he was still involved?

01-00:22:38
Fleck: Correct, correct. And we made friends with three other couples here in Piedmont and we formed a poker club. We met. And our children were all the same age.

01-00:22:57
Li: Oh, nice. Yes.

01-00:22:59
Fleck: And my husband only lived twelve years after he retired, and he died of lung cancer when he was fifty-seven.

01-00:23:11
Li: Wow.

01-00:23:12
Fleck: So that's over thirty years ago. He died in 1978. But I never moved. I stayed right here. And this is the old homestead for my kids. This is where we have Christmas and Thanksgiving.

01-00:23:26
Li: Nice. And they're in the Bay Area?

01-00:23:27
Fleck: Yes, they are. Right here in the Bay Area.

01-00:23:29
Li: Oh, nice.

01-00:23:29
Fleck: Yes.

01-00:23:31
Li: So when did you start working at the Oakland Army Base and how did you find out about the job there?

01-00:23:40
Fleck: One of the colonels in our poker club worked at Oakland Army Base in transportation, and he was telling us they were working around the clock, three shifts, and they just couldn't get enough people. It was in 1968. We moved in here July 1 and I went to work at Oakland Army Base in December of sixty-eight, right before Christmas.

01-00:24:12
Li: Oh, wow.

01-00:24:15
Fleck: And I worked there until I retired on February 1, 1985.

01-00:24:23
Li: So December of 1968 to—

01-00:24:26

Fleck: To February 1, 1985.

01-00:24:30

Li: 1985. So how did you get the specific job that you had? Were you the Coordinator for Army Community Services?

01-00:24:40

Fleck: No. When I first went to work, MOTBA—Military Ocean Terminal Bay Area, at Oakland Army Base. I went down and took an examination again and the minute I passed the examination, they said take this out to Oakland Army Base, and they wanted me to go to work that day.

01-00:25:08

Li: Oh, really?

01-00:25:10

Fleck: [laughter] But I didn't do that. I waited about a week, because I wanted to get my house in order so I could go out to work.

01-00:25:22

Li: And this is in the middle of the Vietnam War, right?

01-00:25:24

Fleck: Oh, yes, the Vietnam War.

01-00:25:27

Li: Was that a contributing factor to you wanting to take a job at the Army base?

01-00:25:30

Fleck: Oh, yes, because I had worked during World War II in the Pentagon, and I was very anxious to get back into the swing. Very anxious.

01-00:25:40

Li: Was there a sense of patriotism in your decision to work for the military?

01-00:25:43

Fleck: Oh, yes. Yes, yes.

01-00:25:47

Li: So then a week after you sign up, you go to work?

01-00:25:50

Fleck: Yes. I go to work. For instance, you've heard it before. I only went to work until the children were through college. And I was only going to work ten years, but I stayed a little bit longer than that.

01-00:26:14

Li: And so for your first job, you were a civilian employee of the Army? Is that right?

01-00:26:20

Fleck: That's right.

01-00:26:24

Li: And what level was that?

01-00:26:25

Fleck: When I went back to work?

01-00:26:26

Li: Yes.

01-00:26:27

Fleck: Okay. I went back in as a GS-5.

01-00:26:31

Li: GS-5. Because of your previous experience?

01-00:26:33

Fleck: That's correct, yes. And then I worked for the same lady for five years. Carolyn Meagher. And she was the deputy chief of cargo documentation division in MOTBA. And when she retired, I then went up to civilian personnel division and I was hired to do the awards program.

01-00:27:09

Li: What's that?

01-00:27:11

Fleck: That's performance awards. You get a certificate with your name on it signed by the commander of the base and you hang it on the wall. It's framed and everything. It's on nice paper and all, with the gold seal. And I did that for a few months and the lady who was the Army Community Services Coordinator was a friend of mine and she wanted to retire. And that's exactly what I had done for years as a volunteer. So I applied for the job and was interviewed, and because I had lived the life, and I had worked as a volunteer in all capacities. What was called Family Services in the Air Force was Army Community Service. So I jumped right in.

01-00:28:11

Li: So was the structure fairly similar between the Air Force and the Army in terms of these kinds of services?

01-00:28:15

Fleck: Oh, yes, yes, yes. The mission is the same in all the services. It is to help the families in transition from one base to the other. It's problems that they can't solve themselves. But in Army Community Services, there are people there that are trained to refer them to what is needed. You know, sick children with very severe handicaps and things like that. And then, of course, I do want to talk to you about the various programs that we had in Army Community Services.

01-00:29:01

Li: Yes. Right. Was there a vision for the kind of community that the Army wanted to have on base?

01-00:29:10

Fleck: Oh, definitely. This starts right at the top in the Department of Defense, and they have experts there that are working in departments just to create programs and to create the programs that are carried out on the bases throughout the world, whether it be in the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, Coast Guard.

01-00:29:40

Li: So there's a vision from Washington of what kind—?

01-00:29:44

Fleck: And all the appropriations, they go to Congress. We always had to have a budget five years out, and they were always improving. One nice thing they did, they would have meetings at least once a year of Army Community Services throughout the United States, and we would meet in Washington and we would be there for a week, and people would speak on what they were accomplishing at their base. And they would have generals and colonels speak about the vision that the Department of Defense had for families.

01-00:30:30

Li: Could you talk a little bit about that, what that vision was?

01-00:30:35

Fleck: The vision was this. If you have a happy family, you have a happy serviceman. And he does his work better, with more enthusiasm, with more accuracy. It's a life that you're highly trained in what you do, you're highly specialized. And because they have these programs in Army Community Service or in the Navy—I think it's also called Family Service. There are clubhouses built for the different ranks. Like the officers have the Officers Club, the NCOs have the NCO Club. If you are like the lowest rank, which is E, E-1—I believe it's E-1 through E-4, they have their club. And they have different programs. There was something for everyone. They had like cooking classes, and speakers, and you could go to museums or they would bring entertainment to the club. And as you know, a lot of the lead entertainers, both men and women from Hollywood, they would go to the different bases and do a show on Saturday nights. It was kind of nice.

01-00:32:41

Li: It seems like a lot of the activities were focused on fun and free time. It was seen as a really important part of the base.

01-00:32:51

Fleck: It was very important. And when I first worked at Oakland Army Base, we had a very small nursery which provided baby-sitting services. But in just about four years, the Department of Defense changed the name to Child Development Center. Then they brought in people who had certificates to

teach or certificates for this or that, and they took a child like—I believe it was—I don't know if it was six weeks. I think that might be a little young. And this was for civilians, too, out at Oakland Army Base. If you had a child and you couldn't work because you couldn't get a babysitter, it could go to the Child Development Center.

01-00:33:53

Li: Even at a very young age? Even—?

01-00:33:54

Fleck: The child had to be at least six weeks old.

01-00:34:30

Li: Yes. Can I just back up and ask you about what it was like being involved with the military during Vietnam versus during World War II? Was the energy different? Was the sense of patriotism different? Because you have experience with both of those eras. If you could talk a little bit about that.

01-00:34:51

Fleck: Yes. I would like to talk about that. It was like apples and oranges.

01-00:34:59

Li: Really?

01-00:34:59

Fleck: Yes. In World War II, we were rationed. We were rationed at the grocery store. Butter, eggs, meat, sugar, flour. Those are what I remember. We had no hosiery at all. I don't know what they did in the cold climates. I was in Washington, DC. But we used Max Factor pancake makeup on our legs. And some people would draw the line up the middle of their leg. Remember we had seams at that time.

01-00:35:39

Li: Oh, really? Yes.

01-00:35:42

Fleck: Yes. If you really wanted to get dolled up, you would draw that line.

01-00:35:46

Li: Wow.

01-00:35:47

Fleck: It would be like eyeliner. And it was sacrifice. It was a lot more sacrifice. And nobody complained about this. It was just that. Now, in the Vietnam War, there was no rationing. And in World War II, we only had the radio and if you wanted to see some war scenes, you went to the movie and then they had these news clips before you saw the movie, and that's how you saw it. But in the papers every day, it would show you ships burning, or all the scenes from war. But you couldn't see it like you could see the Vietnam War. When you were eating dinner, every night at six o'clock, they would show you the bags. They

showed you all that. They don't do that in this war that we're in now over in Iraq. You never hear or see anything like it was in the Vietnam War.

But no, the Vietnam War, there was an entirely different mental outlook about the whole thing. In World War II, we were all in this. If a young man from, let's say, House A was in the war, all these houses around, the people would bake cookies and cakes. They knew what this young man liked. And they would all take it over to the mother and they would all have little packing parties. And people wrote to people they didn't know. Of course, they still did that in the Vietnam War. And of course, in the Vietnam War, Hollywood still went to Vietnam. You can remember Bob Hope going so many times. Now, in the war in Iraq, you read sometimes that different stars go over there. But they didn't have the publicity like they had in the Vietnam War. And, of course, in World War II, they sold war bonds. The movie stars went by train, city to city, selling these war bonds. We had the feeling if you have this war you have to pay for it, so we bought war bonds.

01-00:38:49

Li: It's funny, because it sounds like in some ways the Vietnam War was both more real, but then actually less real in your day to day life.

01-00:38:56

Fleck: Yes. We didn't talk about it like we did World War II.

01-00:39:03

Li: But you saw it every night on TV.

01-00:39:05

Fleck: Oh, you saw it every night on TV. It was hard.

01-00:39:12

Li: And on the base, was morale different than it had been in Washington, DC at the time during World War II? Was there a sense from the soldiers? Did the soldiers seem like they had a different sense of the work they were doing or—

01-00:39:31

Fleck: The only thing that I can speak to is that during the Vietnam War, I was working in Army Community Service, so I was working with the soldier when he would come home on leave, and we had a program called Army Emergency Relief. And when the mother or the father, or sister or brother, someone would die at home, the Army could get him on a plane if he could be sent home. But once he got here to the States, like if he had to take a Greyhound bus or something like that, you know, they don't have the money. Then they could go to the nearest base and they could get money to attend the funerals, and stuff like that. That was one of the nice programs that Army Community Service had. Army Emergency Relief. And once a year—it started on February 1 through August 1, we had the Army Emergency Relief Drive, and there were golf matches, and lunches and dinners given. People would pay. And people just opened up their pocketbooks and would write

checks for the four months to make the money, and that money was all sent to Washington, to the headquarters of the Army Emergency Relief.

01-00:14:14

Li: And then divided up among all the bases, right?

01-00:41:17

Fleck: Yes. Every base, yes. And Navy relief had their programs.

01-00:41:21

Li: So what were the programs that were included under Army Community Services?

01-00:41:28

Fleck: I have a book here that I'm going to give to you. Now, this happens to be one of the most recent. It's called Family Resources Directory. All right. One of our first programs that we had when I was there—it's been changed now, it's a different name. But I'm going to tell you. It was a medical program for military and their families. It was called CHAMPUS. That was a program that the service member and his wife, children, could use.

01-00:42:30

Li: It was like health insurance basically on base?

01-00:42:33

Fleck: Yes. Now, you see, if you would happen to be at a base that didn't have a hospital on it, such as Oakland Army Base had a small dispensary, so their parents were sent to Presidio or to Oaknoll, the Navy Hospital right outside of Oakland here. Well, it's in Oakland, as a matter of fact. It's about nine miles from downtown. But in case you couldn't get service there, you could go to a civilian doctor. The C stands for Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services. So that was a very important service for the military and their families.

01-00:43:32

Li: How long would a family be on base typically?

01-00:43:35

Fleck: Usually an assignment would be about three years. However, that also changes. They try it for longer periods. For four years. Our last two assignments in the Air Force were four years each.

Now, here's another program we had. Emergency food. We had what we called a food locker. We had a whole wing. It was a barracks in the old days, and we were given this whole wing and it had many rooms. And one of the rooms was our emergency food locker, and in there, we had basic foods, like we would have basics that could be stored. And, of course, our shopping had to be done. We had to keep things fresh. In other words, you just didn't put a lot of food in the food locker. You went each week and you would get basics. Or if a family would give you notice that they didn't have food, they would

tell you how many were in the family, and then you would go and get it. But that was one of the very nice services that we provided.

01-00:45:07

Li: So was that for a family in case they somehow didn't have enough money to cover groceries for a month?

01-00:45:14

Fleck: Yes. They had spent their money and they didn't have any money for food.

01-00:45:22

Li: Was this common on the base?

01-00:45:25

Fleck: There would be maybe three a month.

01-00:45:33

Li: Okay. But enough that it was a necessary service.

01-00:45:35

Fleck: Yes. We had the service, yes.

01-00:45:38

Li: Yes, interesting. Could someone keep returning back?

01-00:45:45

Fleck: No. They would be given some instruction by their commanding officer. We had many programs. One of them was how to manage money.

01-00:46:07

Li: Personal financial readiness handbook.

01-00:46:09

Fleck: We had many instruction books. For instance, there was a book for young soldiers that had never handled a checkbook. In the old days, they didn't encourage—now, I mean, even before my time. Before World War II. There's an old saying. "If the Army had wanted you to have a wife, they would have issued you one." But as things went on, they needed—we went many, many years without a war. But when you have a war and you have to get people to come, you have to be ready to take care of them. That's why these things were created.

01-00:47:02

Li: And so it sounds like Army Community Services included programs for almost every aspect of family life.

01-00:47:10

Fleck: Absolutely.

01-00:47:12

Li: So did you have to handle any cases of, I guess, what we now call post-traumatic stress with soldiers returning from Vietnam and having family issues when they came back from combat?

01-00:47:27

Fleck: Now, when I left in 1985, we were seeing results of drugs being used in Vietnam. And mothers or fathers would bring their very young sons in that had been on drugs. And, of course, there were specialists for that and they would be counseled by the counselor and then they would be sent on to a medical program. They could be sent to like Presidio or Oaknoll. But yes. I left in eighty-five, early eighty-five, and yes, we were seeing the results of the drug use in Vietnam.

01-00:48:26

Li: And that kind of activity fell under the responsibility of Army Community Services, as well, that mental health and drug use?

01-00:48:33

Fleck: Army Community Services, kind of like an information and referral. It's something that you can't solve yourself, but it's there. You go and you get the right person counseling you and they do take care of their own.

01-00:48:53

Li: So parents would bring in former soldiers, even if they weren't on base at the time, stationed on base, but were living in—?

01-00:49:02

Fleck: Yes. They would come home. They would come home and it would be sad. They sent a young innocent soldier away and then they came home. Yes.

01-00:49:24

Li: Must have been a hard job to see soldiers coming back like that.

01-00:49:31

Fleck: Yes. It makes you think. But I'll tell you, I'm glad because I was older and I had lived the life of a service wife for twenty-five years before I went into this job, and I knew what it was like to be transferred and to raise a family. When they would come back to Oakland Army Base, it's the base from which they left and it's the base they came back to. And you know what a Dempsey dumpster is?

01-00:50:10

Li: No, what's that?

01-00:50:11

Fleck: Well, they have it all around cities. It's a great big container that you throw everything into that you don't want. You can throw newspapers or boxes and clothes. Whatever, you throw it in. Well, there was a Dempsey dumpster right outside my office window at Oakland Army Base, and these men would come

there to get their last paycheck and their ticket to go home, wherever they came from, and they would take all these uniforms and they would have civilian clothes, like one set of civilian. And they would throw all these boots, hats, coats into this Dempsey dumpster, and they'd go, "Yippee!"

01-00:51:02

Li: And just throw out their military clothing?

01-00:51:05

Fleck: Like this, yes. Yes. They were so happy to get home again. We still had the draft there for a while, and people went that didn't want to go. And when they got back home, they were very happy to say goodbye to all of that.

01-00:51:24

Li: So that must have been different, too, then the end of World War II?

01-00:51:26

Fleck: Well, you see, I wasn't there at the end of World War II. I was in the Pentagon at the end of World War II.

01-00:51:35

Li: All right. So can you tell me what were some of the other programs that you oversaw that you thought were important?

01-00:51:44

Fleck: Well, now, we had the exceptional family member program. That would be a child that might have autism or something like that that really—like let's say you were stationed in Germany, and then your new base would be Oakland Army Base. Before they came, they would have a lot of information sent to them. They would go to their ACS in Germany, and then they would write to ACS in Oakland and say, "Send us all the material you have for this condition." Like I told you, we had so many referral things and we would send that back. And then when they would come, they would come in and see us, and we would welcome them and talk to them and tell them about the community. Now, that's one thing that we had in Army Community Service. We had a library which took up—oh, I can't tell you. We had so many file cases in there, and we had a file on every base in the world. Every military base of the United States of America. It could be Navy, Army, Coast Guard. And volunteers did the work for this. Now, all these file cases, we would get requests from anywhere in the world, send us your latest information. And we had lovely envelopes that was printed, "Army Community Service, Oakland Army Base, Oakland, California," and we would take that and mail it. We would update our own file I would say every six months. Some of these would be this thick. We'd have all these booklets on all the stuff that we had around Oakland, and we would mail that. That would go to every base in the world, and we would receive back from them. So you can imagine the tables that we had stacked high just for the library, getting that stuff in and out.

01-00:54:25

Li: So for a serviceperson who was going to be transferred, they could go to the library, look up whatever base, and look at all those services in the new community?

01-00:54:32

Fleck: Yes. And if he wanted to know anymore, he would just go to someone that worked in Army Community Service and they had a form that they would fill out with the man's name on it and everything, he wanted to know, check it off, and then it would be sent to the new base for a reply.

01-00:54:52

Li: So kind of continuity of service was an important part of Army Community Services, so that as service people move from base to base, they had some stability.

01-00:55:00

Fleck: Yes, they did. And another thing we had was a loan closet. Now, when you are moving from base to base, you're being moved by the military and your stuff might not arrive for six weeks after you left anywhere. And you needed a crib, a playpen for the children. Let's say you had a husband, wife, and two children. So you needed a service for four. Plates, cups and saucers, cereal bowls, and all of that. We had those in nice boxes. They had big holes in them so the air could get in them, you know what I mean? And it had Army Community Service painted on the box. We had service for four, service for six, service for eight. When a man came in, he would tell us. We had like so many pots and pans. That was a wonderful service called the loan closet.

01-00:56:10

Li: It sounds like that's an amazing feat of organization.

01-00:56:13

Fleck: It was, it was.

01-00:56:15

Li: I mean, all these programs.

01-00:56:18

Fleck: Yes. And on top of that, you didn't work there unless you wanted to help people. And the smiles. When you're helping someone, there's nothing that gives you more satisfaction when you're helping someone. So, yes.

01-00:56:39

Li: So would you say you felt good about the job that you did?

01-00:56:41

Fleck: Oh, I loved it. I couldn't wait to get there in the morning. See how I could help. And when I retired, that's one prayer I said every morning. "Oh, Heavenly Father, just let me help one person today in this civilian world." If I could just do one thing, then I didn't feel useless.

01-00:57:05

Li: Because of the other people I've spoken to, this sounds like a common theme, that people felt really good about the work they did in community support and community services on the base. Would you say that was true?

01-00:57:15

Fleck: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. If you didn't want to help people, you couldn't be in Army Community Service. You just had to want to do it.

01-00:57:32

Li: What was the greatest challenge, you would say, in the work that you did?

01-00:57:43

Fleck: Believe it or not, the greatest challenge to me was—I love organization and charts, but to do that, that takes time. And when you're helping people—like if you get a phone call, your phone call could be an hour, an hour and a half. While you're talking to the people on the phone, they're crying and they need help and you're trying to keep them calm and tell them, just get their story and everything. Well, while you're doing that, here's all this paperwork backing up. Fortunately, a great deal of the time I had been a widow, so I didn't have to get home to any children. My children were grown and I could stay there until eight or nine o'clock at night making these reports, because headquarters, how could they help the people—they called it out in the field, we were in the field—if they didn't know what the field was doing. So they had to know what type of cases were you handling, and how long did it take you to do this and do that. And you had to feed that back. How many phone calls you received during the day and how long—the challenge was to keep up both ends.

01-00:59:25

Li: Right. Provide the service and also record the provision of services so they knew how it went. Yes.

01-00:59:29

Fleck: Yes. And they absolutely had to have that to know where they needed more help, because they are the ones that would get the appropriation from Congress. In other words, you had to find out where was your need so that they could put that in the budget. That you could have three more of this or three more of that.

[End Audio File 1]

Begin Audio File 2 01-22-2009.mp3

02-00:00:00

Li: This is Robin Li speaking with Helen Fleck on January 22, 2009 in Piedmont, California, for the Oakland Army Base Oral History Project. All right. So when we left off on the last tape, we were just talking about the challenge of doing your job of providing services at the same time as having to record

everything that you did so that the command would understand the jobs that you needed to get done, the funding you needed.

02-00:00:55

Fleck:

Yes. They compiled all the statistics from all over the world, all their Army Community Service Centers, and they would know what they needed, how to improve their care. Now, I wanted to talk to you about some of our other programs.

One was financial planning. And as I told you before, we had all kinds of leaflets and booklets for instruction. We had a person that was an expert in filing for bankruptcy. And maybe we might have four cases a year, and this lady not only did that, she did other things. But she would help. She had classes for these young servicemen to teach them how to, when they got their check, how to save a little money, how to put a little bit here, here, here, and here. And she also taught them how to keep a checkbook, how to balance a checkbook, which was so helpful. And I was still in the period when the wife still stayed home. They were just starting to go to work like after the eighties. They were just beginning. Both the husband and the wife worked, and so therefore, we had to have more help at the child development center, and we had to have some more programs to teach. Men usually didn't do anything in the house, you know what I'm saying? They had classes to teach the men. Now that your wife is working, you have to help around here.

02-00:03:08

Li:

Oh, you're kidding. Like on—

02-00:03:13

Fleck:

Because—

02-00:03:14

Li:

—housekeeping tasks and that sort of thing?

02-00:03:15

Fleck:

Yes. We had classes in how to manage a home.

02-00:03:26

Li:

Wow.

02-00:03:28

Fleck:

This was a new thing. Wives didn't work. And now they had to go out to work. The man's paycheck didn't do it like it did in my day. We didn't have any problems, but it became necessary. So there were lots. I can remember we even had recipes for simple cooking. I grabbed that book right away because I didn't like to cook. And it would show you fifty different ways how to cook hamburger in a hurry.

02-00:04:13

Li:

That sounds like a really useful thing now.

02-00:04:15

Fleck: Yes, right, right.

02-00:04:17

Li: Because women have been serving in the military for a while, did you have military husband who would be on base but whose wives would be being deployed?

02-00:04:32

Fleck: That was just starting up, too, in the eighties and we had single women. Some of them had two children. And they were transferred and they could take their children to childcare and pick them up in the evening. And I can remember, we had two, I call them civilians. Women were in the military and they had married civilian men that weren't in the Army. And one couple had two children and that was the first time I had ever met a house husband, and it was very interesting to watch that, and to observe it. And out another window was the playground for the children. And, of course, the stay at home moms would bring their children out, and they had the swings and the slides and then when we had a house husband, to see him out there chatting. And you could read about it in the newspaper, it said it was happening. And it was nice to look out the window and see it in action.

02-00:06:03

Li: Yes. What a change, huh?

02-00:06:05

Fleck: Yes, yes.

02-00:06:06

Li: So was there a lot of intermixing between civilian employees on base and the military employees on base in these programs that Community Services would provide?

02-00:06:19

Fleck: Now, civilians did come down once in a while to use the library. They knew that we had it, and they would be going on a trip somewhere, and they knew that they could get information. Let's say they were going to Wisconsin. They knew there was a base in Wisconsin. I'm talking about civilians now. So they could come and look through our library and get information about that.

02-00:06:56

Li: But Army Community Services didn't provide services? Like the Child Development Center? Would that be open to civilian employees?

02-00:07:03

Fleck: Yes, it was.

02-00:07:04

Li: Oh, okay, yes.

02-00:07:05

Fleck:

At Oakland Army Base it was, because there was a need for it. See, Oakland Army Base was, let's say, maybe three miles from downtown Oakland. It was out there kind of by itself, right before you got to the Bay Bridge. So once you came to work there for the day, if you had a child, you certainly could take it to the Child Development Center. They charged by your salary, your rank. If you were a civilian, you went by your salary, and if you were in the military, they went by your rank.

02-00:07:47

Li:

So it was more affordable, probably, than private daycare off base?

02-00:07:49

Fleck:

Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes.

02-00:07:53

Li:

So you had to service everyone at Oakland Army Base. Not just the military people stationed there, but the civilian employees, as well, were part of your client base?

02-00:08:02

Fleck:

Yes. We had the ID card. When you're in the military, you can't go anywhere without your ID card. And so we issued ID cards in the center. And we had what we would call in and out processing before you left the base. When you came in, you processed in. You would come and we had one section just for in and out processing. You checked in, and that clerk would—you would always have questions. "How do you get here?" or "how do you get there?" "Do you have this? Do you have that?" And they would get their questions answered. And then when you left the base, you also came and processed out through Army Community Services. So it was in and out.

And I told you about the installation fact sheet library. Now, before I cleaned house a year ago, I had a whole trunkful. And I go, "What am I doing with this?" And this is all I saved. But anyway, you could find out instruction on just about everything.

02-00:09:35

Li:

So your job was overseeing all of these programs? Is that right?

02-00:09:38

Fleck:

Yes.

02-00:09:39

Li:

So what would an average day look like for you, given all of these different programs that were under your supervision?

02-00:09:45

Fleck:

Well, I will tell you, you went to work in the morning, and before you took two turns—I worked from 7:30 to 4:00. It seems like I made two turns and it was four o'clock.

02-00:10:05

Li: And so you said you often would stay late then.

02-00:10:07

Fleck: Oh, yes. And I think of it today. I locked up that whole building. It had a big padlock. It's called securing the building. And the military police went by like every fifteen minutes. They'd drive around. And I would be there and sometimes wave at them. But I wouldn't do that today. I would not.

02-00:10:34

Li: Did it feel safe then?

02-00:10:36

Fleck: I had no qualms about it at all. I could be there 9:30 at night. Of course, the outside had a big floodlight coming down. No problem. Floodlights on the parking lot. My car would be the only car in the parking lot. I had no qualms at all. Now, today, I don't think I would do that.

02-00:11:01

Li: Yes. Did it feel really different being on-base versus off-base, or was just Oakland safer as you remember it?

02-00:11:10

Fleck: Well, I can tell you that I drove right off the base, right through Grand Avenue, and there was a restaurant there right on the corner. It was called the Hofbrau, and they served the biggest sandwiches. Like I'd go in and get a roast beef sandwich. It seemed like half a loaf of bread. French bread. They'd go chomp and they would put a pile of roast beef on it. And I would bring it home and eat it and then go to bed. And I wouldn't stop there now. It was right at the corner—

02-00:11:46

Li: Yes. At nine o'clock at night, yes.

02-00:11:48

Fleck: It was at the corner of Broadway and Grand. It was called the something Hofbrau. Oh, I wanted to get into another subject. We had a program for spouse abuse and child abuse. And the base chaplain, he took care of most of these things. We were trained. We were sent to classes and trained how to recognize it, how to talk about it with the victim or the perpetrator. You listened. Then after I left the base, they had people with degrees. This all increased. Things were pretty normal up until a certain year in history, as you know, and then the bottom just fell out. I mean, our crime increased, all of that.

02-00:13:13

Li: When would you date that around? Like was it the late sixties or early seventies?

02-00:13:18

Fleck:

No, no. I retired in eighty-five. I would say it maybe started around 1983. When they started coming home with—well, in World War II we called them war brides. But they didn't call them that in the Vietnam War. Like World War II, we were dealing with European, people that came from Europe. The men married European women.

02-00:13:58

Li:

Right. Most of the war brides were German or French.

02-00:14:00

Fleck:

That's correct. Or English.

02-00:14:02

Li:

English, yes.

02-00:14:03

Fleck:

Lot of English war brides, French. But in the Vietnam War, I went to classes that taught the culture, how they felt. In Vietnam, if they saw one of their young girls with a soldier, those girls were stoned. They did not accept it. And so when these girls came here, it was quite a different culture all together, and all they really knew about it is what they saw in the movies when they went to movies with the GIs over in Vietnam on the base.

02-00:14:48

Li:

So would these war brides, even though they weren't called that—

02-00:14:52

Fleck:

No, they weren't called that.

02-00:14:53

Li:

But they would come live on Oakland Army Base when they came back with their spouses?

02-00:14:54

Fleck:

Yes, they did. Yes.

02-00:14:56

Li:

So did you have to hire people who could speak Vietnamese or who—?

02-00:15:00

Fleck:

No. It was right downtown in Oakland, and it was a center for Vietnamese women, and a lot of them were, as we would call them, war brides, but they weren't called that. And I had the name, the address, the telephone number, and all I had to do was call down there and speak to someone that spoke English and tell them that I had a young lady in my office, and I would give her my phone and I would walk out—I had a private office—and let them talk it out. And I would go and do something else. And when she was finished, someone would come and say, "Your client,"—they always called her client—"Your client is finished now," and then I would get back on the phone. And then they sometimes would send someone out to get them, or, if need be,

sometimes I took them down myself and just dropped them off and someone would meet me. But they did have a very fine organization. I just forget the name of it. But it was highly organized.

02-00:16:32

Li: And so these issues of spousal abuse and child abuse, did you see them increase, then, as the war in Vietnam went on and these families with two cultures came back?

02-00:16:44

Fleck: Yes. It not only happened with a foreign war bride, it happened with the American wives that they had married. I attribute it to the use of drugs. And at that time, they opened up a drug and alcohol center upstairs over the office that we were in, and it was strictly for—they called it drug and alcohol. And they had the experts up there. And usually a person that was sent into our office, we would call them and they would come down and get them. And then, of course, we had a dispensary right across the street that helped, and the chaplain helped. So they were not alone, I can tell you that.

02-00:17:51

Li: So would you describe the community at Oakland Army Base as being fairly diverse, then, with some of these wives that were coming from Vietnam? Was the rest of the community fairly diverse in terms of ethnicity and race and background?

02-00:18:07

Fleck: I would say that most of the people in the quarters were American. I would say when I was there, we had at least twenty that were not American wives. Now, when I left the base in 1985 and a new coordinator came in, we used to talk from to time, and she told me that the Army had provided now a new service. It was people who were trained to go in to the home and—and this was also an American girl that had never cooked a cup of tea—they had to show them what you do.

02-00:19:18

Li: So not just for the househusband, now, but for the housewives, as well? These were—?

02-00:19:21

Fleck: No. Yes. And she said we have such a small need for it, but would you be interested? And I said, "No thank you."

02-00:19:40

Li: So you really saw a transformation of American culture in the years?

02-00:19:44

Fleck: Yes. It was changing. Things were changing.

02-00:19:49

Li: And the Army Community Services had to change with the changing cultural needs.

02-00:19:52

Fleck: Yes, yes.

02-00:19:53

Li: Was there much space for innovation on the base? It sounds like there were a lot of programs that came down from Washington. But could you innovate on base as needs arose? Was there flexibility for that?

02-00:20:07

Fleck: Of course. For instance, certain times of the year, we would have—like let's say, in our culture, we have certain things we do on Valentine's Day, Saint Patrick's Day, Easter, Christmas. We had to start realizing that we had to have days for other cultures. And the headquarters sent us out our instructions. If you came from a certain country, this was a tradition. And if you have anyone in your community or enough, have a luncheon, have a dinner. We had a beautiful recreation department. First of all, they had a huge gym, but they had another place that was right next to the library, the community center. You could have programs and you could have dinners and just bring the food in the tradition of that country, and they would do their dances. And we would do it in conjunction with the director of that program.

02-00:21:35

Li: Oh, that's neat.

02-00:21:38

Fleck: They had dance classes. Like if you wanted to learn an Irish jig or if you wanted to learn a Greek dance or a Vietnamese, or whatever, they had a wonderful director over there that took care of that. As I've told you before, I've never lived on a base that didn't have so much going on that you had no time—I never had any time to get bored. And children were bussed to school and bussed home, and they had the movie theater and the gym, and most bases had a swimming pool. Oakland did not. I saw the parents. They had baseball fields, they had basketball. I would see them on the weekends when I would go out there. They were playing football. They had a big field. There was always something to do.

02-00:22:43

Li: So it was a very vibrant community, it sounds like.

02-00:22:44

Fleck: I thought so. I really did. I thought we had a wonderful set of officers at Oakland Army Base. They all seemed to be interested in the well-being of people who were employed there, whether they were military or civilian. They were young. We had, I thought, a very vibrant base. And it was a base where you could know everybody because it wasn't that large.

02-00:23:35

Li: Yes, yes. So you stayed there, then, for almost twenty years.

02-00:23:43

Fleck: Yes. And I was only going to work three years or ten years. No, I loved it.

02-00:23:50

Li: And so what prompted you to retire, then, in 1985? What was—?

02-00:23:55

Fleck: Well, I wanted to work until I was sixty-five. They all retire like at fifty-five. They start work young. I think you could retire at thirty years. Well, I worked five years and then didn't work. So when I went back to work, I was forty-eight years old. So it was like something new for me. I loved my work. I really had been a widow, and so I thought I better start traveling here while I can still go up all the steps and go through all the cathedrals and the museums, instead of working and then starting to travel. So I retired mainly to travel, which I did.

02-00:24:50

Li: Now, that was over twenty years ago. [laughter]

02-00:24:53

Fleck: Yes. Eighty-five, ninety-five, 2009. It's twenty-four years.

02-00:25:01

Li: Wow. [laughter]

02-00:25:05

Fleck: [laughter] It seems like yesterday.

02-00:25:08

Li: So do you keep in touch, then, with people that you worked with on the base?

02-00:25:12

Fleck: Oh, yes. It's called the Oakland Army Base Retiree Group and we meet twice a year. Now, we used to always meet in the Officers Club over at Fort Mason, but that closed. Everything closed. And now we meet in May and October. And when I started going to the luncheons back in 1985, there would be about eighty of us. But now we're down to thirty-five. The new people retiring aren't interested. You know what I mean? There are those of us who were like a family. That all changed, too. Suddenly one day it wasn't a family anymore, it was a newer generation coming in that had different values. They liked to do different things. But we still have thirty-five or forty. And Jim is always there, I'm always there, and a girl named—she runs it for us—June. She's been the chairman for so many years. If she resigns, no one will take the chairmanship. I've already done that—I'm working now with the Piedmont Seniors. I have to keep that vibrant, that we're all having a good time.

02-00:26:50

Li: So even now that you're retired, you're still working?

02-00:26:53

Fleck: Yes. I'm volunteering.

02-00:26:54

Li: [laughter] It seems to be a pattern. Yes.

02-00:26:58

Fleck: Yes. But I'm enjoying life tremendously.

02-00:27:03

Li: Is there anything that we haven't talked about about the base that you wanted to add? I know we didn't get to talk about all the programs that were there.

02-00:27:10

Fleck: I think that I would like to stress that the Army Community Service or any organization like that, while I was there, you couldn't do it without the volunteers. We had a very strong volunteer group and they came to work just like they were getting paid. Like I did for years. And without them, I don't think that these programs would be so successful.

02-00:27:59

Li: And these are the wives or spouses of the military?

02-00:28:02

Fleck: They're the spouses, yes. And if you're ten years old, you can volunteer at Army Community Service. For instance, they can work back in this library. They can be assembling stuff in the envelopes.

02-00:28:18

Li: So even the children would be volunteering?

02-00:28:20

Fleck: Yes. And I always have been a strong believer in you must put back into your community from which you take so much, and I think it's good to start children in that vein of thought. That you're not just here. It's not about you. It's the big picture. The community. The village.

02-00:28:53

Li: Great. Thank you so much.

02-00:28:54

Fleck: Thank you, Robin.

[End of Interview]