

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Gulf War

Personal Experience

O.H 1412

CHERYL KOMARA

Interviewed

by

Angela Cellio

on

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CHERYL KOMARA

Cheryl C Komara was born in Youngstown, Ohio on November 14, 1948. She is the daughter of Francis and Dorothy Conkey and has two brothers, Barry and Robert. Cheryl has lived in Canfield for her entire life and attended Canfield Elementary School. Cheryl graduated from Canfield High School in the mid-1960's. Shortly after graduation she married her high school sweetheart, James J Komara, on May 17, 1968. They reside on 10321 Lisbon Road in Canfield and have two children, James Jr, age 22, and Katherine, age 18. James Jr is a Gulf War veteran. Cheryl is currently employed at Buckeye Pharmacy in Canfield where she has worked since 1980.

C This is an interview with Cheryl Komara for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Gulf War, by Angela Cellio, on December 3, 1991 at 353 Fairview Drive, at 5 20 p m

Okay Cheryl, I would appreciate it if you would tell me about yourself before we start with the other questions

K I have been married for 23 years I have a son who served in the Gulf His name is James Jr He is 22 I have a daughter Katherine who lives at home and attends Y.S.U She is eighteen I lived in the same are all my life, basically. Anything else specific?

C Tell me about where you went to school and growing up

K I lived in Canfield and went to Canfield Elementary and high school My husband did also He graduated the same year. We were married shortly thereafter [I] stayed home the first few years with the kids and have worked at Buckeye Pharmacy ever since

C You told me about your children. You said your son Jimmy served in the Gulf War What branch of the service was he in?

K He is in the Army, intelligence field. He is an analyst I should not make that current because he is out now He was in for four years He went right after high school He just recently got out, early July

C So he joined what year then?

K He actually joined his senior year of high school, which would have been in 1987 In fact, on graduation day he left and served just a little over four years

C Did you know he was going to join?

K Well, the recruiters come around to the high schools A friend of his talked him into going down with him He joined then, signing the initial papers. Then a few weeks later they went to Cleveland and he called me several times during the course of that day to say what he had found and to say that he was going to go ahead and sign. I was not happy, but aware

C: Not happy, why not?

K I think your senior year in high school is a little too early to make a decision like that Although I do not have any complaints They did do what they said they were going to It did not hurt him, but when you are looking at a seventeen year old you just see them going on to college and being home a little longer Once

he left, he was only home a couple times during the course of the next four years That basically was my objection

C· He had never really been away from home then?

K No

C Where was he stationed?

K He started out and took his basic in New Jersey Then, went out to Fort Dix Then, by Christmas, the first year he was in he went over to Germany and spent the rest of the time there

C· If you could remember, could you tell me a little about what it was like when he left

K. Originally for basic, or to the Gulf?

C· Originally for basic and then for Germany

K Being as he was my first and oldest, it was rough I was not even used to anybody going off to college, yet alone going off to the service Basic training is tough The letters and the time in between was difficult, but fairly short. He was good about it I mean, he wrote and mailed out all of that So it was all right. We knew the whole time that he would be leaving for Germany It was not like he was going to be stationed somewhere where I could pick up the phone and call or visit So that kind of added a little bit different dimension to it. Once you got used to the idea, it was okay He certainly got to see a lot of things and had a lot of experiences that he would not have been able to without going into the service It is okay now that he is back

C Do you have any idea why he joined, what motivated him?

K. I do not know, interested in seeing other countries, for one thing Interested in that field He likes the field of intelligence, analyzing things, and being involved with the government. So I think eventually he might do that again sometime, but as a private, not in the service Probably the education factor, too, was part of it

C Have they paid for him to go to school?

K They will pay for it

C With the G.I Bill or something?

K Yes

- C Yes, I am sure that was a big factor. Would you have felt differently if he had went away to college, say across this country or several states away? Would you have felt better?
- K I am sure I would have felt better about it
- C Because he would have been in college?
- K Not in college, just closer. There is a lot of distance. It does not matter. We went through several things where you just like to be able to have him come home. Of course, when my father passed away he did come home. It is not the same. You cannot get them here in between when you like to have them, see them or spend time with them. Plus, it is difficult that many miles away to discuss a topic like that with him. Then the phone call telling him of the death is really difficult because you would like to be there with him. You get through all that
- C: How often did you get to talk to him while he was in Germany?
- K I was fairly lucky in that respect. I probably talked to him at least once a month when he was just in a regular base. Now when he was in the field for training, then, of course, you did not get to.
- C. How often then was he able to come home from Germany?
- K He was home once a year at Christmas. Then when my father died he was home once in between, until he was scheduled to come home last Christmas, but the war kind of stopped that. He would have been
- C So, he was in Germany last August when the build up started?
- K. Right
- C When that was going on, did you expect him to go? What were you thinking at that time?
- K. In August I did not because I assumed that they would have to keep some kind of defense present in Germany. With his field I figured he would stay there. As time went on and I talked to him later in early November, I realized that they were closing his base so they were going to have to have something to do with the guys. I assumed that was probably what they were going to do, and it was
- C: Do you know why they closed his base?
- K. That was just one of the government cut backs

- C I assume he called you then and he told you he was going to leave for the Gulf? When did he do it and what was the reaction -- your reaction and his reaction, too?
- K That was probably the most difficult. The initial phone call was when he was sure he was leaving and when he was sure he would not be coming home for Christmas. It happened to fall, he was not even aware of it, on my birthday which is the fourteenth of November. I do not know if you can describe that. You try to be supportive, but he is a fairly strong person when it comes down to something like that. Especially with your mom, it is difficult. You do the best that you can. Then I talked to him several times after that.
- C While he was over there?
- K. Before he left because he waited until the 26th of December. The first time I knew for sure was the fourteenth.
- C So he left the day after Christmas then. Could you describe what your holidays were like last year, then?
- K. Not good. His birthday happens to be the 24th of December. That was the first time he had ever been away, let alone been on his way to somewhere with war involved. I cannot really say too much about it, other than, all I did was think about it. I did talk to him on his birthday. I think that was the last time. He was supposed to call on Christmas day, but things got messed up and he could not.
- C Do you think it could have helped if you could have seen him before he left for the Middle East?
- K I honestly do not know the answer to that question. If I had the choice, of course, I would. As far as him coming home and then having to leave, I think it might have been more difficult on both parts. Like I said, given the choice I would have. On the other hand, there might have been some things to take care of. He gave me power of attorney, different little things. He had some bills he wanted me to take care of. We got at least that month and a half in between to take care of those details. Had he been home, that might have been easier, too.
- C Others have talked to me about things like that, getting their things in order and power of attorney. This might be a strange question, but did that make you think of the worst? It almost sounds final in a way.
- K. It did because I think in the back of your mind you always worry that would be what would happen. But he said to me one time when we were taking care of his affairs that he really did not think he would be back.

- C He did not think he would be back?
- K Those were the words he said
- C Do you know why he said that?
- K Because he knew what mission they were to carry out Looking at it now, the red guard was not what it was quite built up to be From what his information was and what their mission was, he figured he would be in a serious battle
- C What was his mission? Do you know?
- K I cannot tell you towns, but he was one of the ones that went right in the thick of it He did meet the red guard and I have it on tape where they showed the arrows going in and I knew when Schwarzkopf was saying it I had no way to find out until quite a while later That was his mission. He was not in the back He was with the tank unit which went directly into it Fortunately, there was not nearly as much there as they thought there would be
- C Did you expect it to be worse than it actually was?
- K Absolutely There was not any question I thought it would be a lot worse. Even as it progressed and they did not see what they expected I still thought there must be something that they are holding back or something different that was going to come about Fortunately, it did not
- C Many people talked about watching CNN Did you watch it and what did it do for you? Did it help you?
- K It did help me There was not any other station that we watched. Even when my daughter was seventeen, that is the only station that she watched We did not watch anything else He was not one of the first ones in on the sixteenth Before the war started they had a last minute conference with the U N I truly expected the would settle it there on paper and we would never have to go in. I can remember we spent the morning watching and as they reported there, were times when it was pretty encouraging Then when Baker came out and announced what had come of it, that it was all bad You just kind of fell apart That was it because it was too close to the deadline. That was bad. After it got going, you just kind of watched constantly and hoped for the best. Fortunately, it did not last very long
- C I know I cannot say how it would feel for me because I did not have anyone that close there, but for me with no one close, the time building up to the deadline seemed to be the worst It almost seemed to me as if they finally met the deadline and either war or no war A lot of anticipation was over Was it like that

for you, or was knowing that the war had come on seem different because he was going to be in it?

K On the sixteenth when they actually attacked, it was a lot worse from then on. There was a lot of build up. I was glad that he did not have to be a part of the units that were over there from August, on. For them, I think that the time in between was very frustrating to them. You get prepared and do all of this and then you sit. You really do not know. It was fairly quick from the time that he was deployed there to the time it had actually started. Not the ground war at first, but just the air attack. I had an idea of what he was in so you always pay attention to see where they are dropping the bombs because you never know for sure. It was worse after it actually started.

C What area was he in?

K He was not in the middle of it. I cannot tell you exactly.

C How long in total did he serve over there, in the Gulf?

K He got there probably the 27th of December and he was out before Kathy graduated. So sometime in May he was out, about five months.

C What were communications like when he was there, between here and there?

K Fortunately, since he was in a headquarters unit, he had availability to a telephone. It would just depend on whether the beam was strong enough to take it where they were. I did get to talk to him a couple times throughout. That, of course, was during those days before the battle actually started. Then when it was over, that felt like forever waiting for the phone call. It was probably a week or two before he called and said things were okay.

C You were not able to call him at all?

K You could never get a phone call. You just had to hope that you were home which, we spent a lot of time at home.

C I am sure it is frustrating. I am trying to think of some other way to describe it, having to stay home waiting for a phone call.

K Basically, that is what we did and we did manage to be there for some. With the hours difference and everything, it was tough to tell. I believe they were eight hours ahead, if I am not mistaken. We always said, "Whenever you get the chance." You still have to appreciate the fact that you are able to take the phone call, but a few times you would be in the middle of a short conversation and you would be cut off. Once in a while he was able to call back, but the majority of the

time, whatever happened to the satellite you just dealt with it. As a mother, you sit at home and go, "Did something happen bad or was it just nothing?" Of course, it was always that the satellite was not working. It makes it difficult

C: Between waiting for phone calls and watching CNN, what else did you do to keep occupied?

K. Well, I worked, of course. Other than that we just did not do anything. Stayed home, listened and waited.

C Did it affect your family at all, the family at home?

K Sure

C In what ways?

K Kathy was affected. They talked about it at school. When you have someone right there and you have to go and listen to everyone's different views, if you should be there or you should not, it was real difficult for her. At home, she was just as avid about watching CNN as we were. Everybody basically excepted it and dealt with it the same way. There was not anybody that wanted to go off on vacation or do something different to get away from it. We just wanted to stay around and ride it out. It did not take that long. I cannot even imagine the Vietnam War, certainly World War II, or any of the ones that they were years. We were talking days. I had enough trouble dealing with that. People that went through the other, I do not know how you do it.

C I do not know either. It is quite a difference situation, yet it is the same in a lot of ways. After the war was over, from watching television, right after it was over, did you get to talk to him quite soon after or when did you get to speak with him?

K Probably a couple weeks before we got the phone call through. If I am not mistaken, everything was so jumbled. You just wait and wait, then you hear the voice and it is like, you forget. I believe the first time I talked to him he called me at work from over there. He knew, hour wise, that is where I would be. That was great because even though you know they are mostly all right and they do notify you if there are any problems, it was still good to hear. There were a lot of land mines out there still, and some accidents, even though they were not under enemy fire. So it was real good to be able to talk to him, get an idea when he would be home. I do not know how many times I talked to him after it was over. The phone call after he got back to his base was the best. He was not home and I think it put a different perspective on it. His being away in Germany seemed nothing when he came down to go into the war. It just seemed silly that you even worried about it or fretted about it. You easily slip back into those trends once the danger is over. Then we would get real anxious to have him

home Your next thought was when they can actually be home

C Was that just as frustrating, since the war was over in February and he did not come home until May? That is a couple months in between What did it feel like then?

K I did not mind that time You are anxious to see them His obligation to the service was not actually done until June, you are hoping they get an early out Sometimes they do that It was not anything It was just like this big pressure was off You knew you could talk to him again if you needed to That was easy then

C. Did your husband ever serve in the military at all?

K No, he had a skin condition at the time He was called for Vietnam That was the era that we were in He was not able to serve

C. So you never had to experience something like this with another family member?

K My brother was in the Marines and was involved, at one time, in a small altercation over in the Mediterranean That was the only time, and it was short Other than that, no

C So nothing could quite prepare you for a situation like that.

K: No, there was not.

C There is a lot of mixed reactions about it. I know they showed a lot on television, a lot of people who were against the war and against people over there, not nearly as much as Vietnam. They still do show some What did you think of that?

K: I did not agree with them going in, in the beginning Once they were in, I would never have demonstrated to get them home or any of that I did not agree with the demonstrations and that, even though the idea of the war, in the beginning, I did not agree with Going in, I just did not think it would solve anything. Today, I do not think it solved anything Once you are there you just have to be supportive The kids over there, I do not think they understand demonstrations are stupid. It is still as though you are demonstrating against them. If they are serving their country then they need the support of the people

C Tell me, then, about when he came home in May Did he call to let you know, "Listen, I'll be home," on such a day? How did that all take place?

K There were some problems there He was not sure of the discharge date

because of the base closing. The proper personnel were still not there. They were, of course, a minimal number there to take care of things. So, that dates kind of just kept shifting around. We were hoping he would be home by my daughters graduation, early June. We could see as things progressed that it just was not going to work out. I think it was right before the Fourth of July, he actually came in. Even that, there were some last minute problems, a rip in his sleeping bag stopped him from getting out on the date he was supposed to. All paper work, which is pretty difficult. He had everything ready to go, we had a date to pick him up and that came up, so it backed everything up. He was here shortly thereafter. The next time he called me, which would have been days later, he called me from Philadelphia.

C What day was that?

K I cannot tell you what date.

C It was in July, though?

K Yes.

C Where did you pick him up from?

K We picked him up from the Pittsburgh airport. Originally, we were to pick him up, we were going to drive to New Jersey because we thought he would be discharged from there, or Philadelphia. We did not care where. We were just going to drive and pick him up so we could be there when he came off the plane. It worked out better this way.

C Did you see him come off the plane? Tell me what kind of a reaction that was for you, for him, and the rest of your family.

K We did not actually see him walk off the plane. We saw him after. It was kind of a strange thing. We were just on time, but the flight was early. When we got to the gate they had already changed the number on the door, so we could even find where he was supposed to be. My husband thought I was a basket case at that time because it was like, "This is where he was supposed to be." So he said, "Let us walk down to where the bags are." He was standing there. It was indescribable. You are so happy and so relieved. Plus the fact that he was not home for just a visit. He was home and out of the service. It was just a nice feeling. There was just the three of us, my husband, me, and my daughter. We came home and just spent time talking. I do not think any of them cared to discuss the situation of the Gulf right then. We just kind of filled in on the other things that had gone on. Then, as time went on, he talked about it. Right then it was just nice to have him home and know that he was going to stay.

- C Do you think being over there and even being in the Army, in general, has changed him at all from your perspective of him?
- K It is difficult to say whether the service changes them or age changes them. You have missed those years in between. It did not hurt him. He saw things, that is what he wanted to do. He took four years of German in high school and got a tour of the countryside, got in with the locals. It was really good. The Gulf, I suppose, made them feel mortal which probably most eighteen- to twenty-year-olds do not. It has to have had an effect -- the service, in general, not as much as the Gulf situation. Nothing bad, it just makes them grow up a little quicker.
- C. Is there anything else that we have not talked about that you might like to tell me about, or something that I might have missed?
- K I do not think so. I think that pretty much sums up the feelings and happenings. I think that is pretty much everything.
- C. I have one last question. How would you react if he went in the Army again?
- K I would not like it, but like I said all along, a lot of people, when they go into the service -- especially the younger ones -- will say, "They did not give me this, they did not give me that." But they did exactly that. If he were to enlist, I am sure it would be under a specific job that he wanted to have. I would just wish him the best and I am sure he would serve stateside, which would make a lot of difference. Naturally, I would prefer to have him out. I would just like to have him more available. It is always their choice.
- C. I think that is it. I appreciate your time, Cheryl. Thank you.

End of Interview