

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Gulf War

Personal Experience

O. H. 1408

STEPHANIE KAPICS

Interviewed

by

Angela Cellio

on

October 16, 1991

## STEPHANIE KAPICS

Stephanie Kapics was born in Canton, Ohio on January 11, 1967, a daughter of Larry and Marsha Smith. The Smiths moved to Salineville, Ohio, a small rural town. After a series of moves, the family finally settled in Youngstown where Stephanie entered fourth grade at Kirkmere Elementary School. She also attended Volney Rogers Jr High and graduated from Chaney High School in 1985. After attending Youngstown State University for four years, she graduated in 1989 with a B.S. in B.A. Stephanie currently works in the pharmacy at St Elizabeth's Hospital.

Stephanie married Jeffrey Kapics on September 14, 1991. He is an operations specialist in the United States Navy. A Gulf War veteran, Jeff is currently stationed in Norfolk, VA on the USS Trenton. Stephanie resides in Austintown where she and Jeff will make their home upon his December release from the Navy. Stephanie is a member of St. Christine Church, and her hobbies include reading and crafts.

--Angela Cellio

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INTERVIEWEE      STEPHANIE KAPICS

INTERVIEWER      Angela Cellio

SUBJECT            Navy, deployment, Norfolk, Virginia, Persian Gulf, wedding

DATE                October 16, 1991

C      This is an interview with Stephanie Kapics for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Gulf War, by Angela Cellio, at 4604 Rhode Island Drive, on October 16, 1991, at 6 15 p m

Stephanie, tell me a little about your childhood Tell me a little about yourself

K      I grew up in a town called Salineville, Ohio It's a real little town I went to school there until kindergarten Then, we moved to Pennsylvania, then to Ohio, back to Pennsylvania, back to Ohio again I ended up at Kirkmere (elementary school) I started there in fourth grade From Kirkmere I went to Volney (Rogers) Then from Volney, (I went) to Chaney I graduated in 1985 I started at YSU in September of 1985 and graduated in August of 1989 with a BS in BA I'm still looking for a job right now (Laughter)

C      Are you employed anywhere right now?

K      I'm working at St Elizabeth's right now in the pharmacy there It really has nothing to do with my degree, but I'm still working

C      Okay Tell me a little bit about your family

K      My mom is a waitress My dad is a train dispatcher I've got two brothers Chad is 17

and he will graduate from Chaney this year Bret is 21

C No sisters?

K No sisters (Laughter)

C Okay. You recently got married, correct?

K. Correct

C When did you get married?

K September 14, 1991

C Who's your husband?

K Jeffrey (Laughter) He's in the Navy He'll get out on December 14 of this year (1991) I'm looking forward to it very much

C How long has he been in the Navy?

K He went in on December 14 of 1987 He went to boot camp before that, but went to Norfolk, Virginia on December 14 of 1987, and he will get out of the Navy on December 14 of 1991 He's in communications radar, something like that He's what you'd call an operations specialist

C So he's the person that served over in the Gulf War?

K Yes.

C Tell me a little bit about how you and Jeff met

K Jeff and I, I guess we knew each other--he went to Chaney, too. He was a year ahead of me. We knew each other just in passing We worked at McDonalds together in Boardman for a couple of years We talked on and off and we wrote back and forth when we went to boot camp We started dating when he came back from boot camp before he left for Norfolk That's where he was stationed

C So you started dating in 1987?

K Yes.

C And he graduated from high school when?

- K 1984.
- C So that's a three year span between graduation for him and before he left Do you have any idea what made him decide to join the Navy?
- K He called me up one day and said, "Steph, you'll never guess what I did today " He said, "I joined the Navy " I said, "Why would you do something like that?" He said he felt like he had no other choice He had nothing going for him He had gone to school for two years at New Castle School of Trades for electrical engineering but nothing ever came of that So he just more or less felt like he had to do something, plus his family was having financial troubles His dad just lost a job, and he felt that he would try to help them out by getting out of the house by joining the Navy, so that's what he did He shocked everybody
- C. It did? Including you?
- K Oh, yeah!
- C Did he tell you this after you started dating, or was it before?
- K It was before I think it was--I want to say May or June Something like that. It was a real shocker, that's for sure
- C So he started in 1987 and he was in Norfolk, Virginia the whole time?
- K Right He was stationed there for four years
- C Okay How did him being away affect your relationship once you started dating?
- K It was real, real hard, but they say that distance makes the heart grow fonder It's been real tough, but it's been well worth it We weathered the storm , I guess. I think it's made us stronger apart We look forward to being together when he comes home It's been well worth it
- C When he was there, how often did he get to come home? Or, how often did you get to see him when he was in Virginia?
- K Probably just a weekend each month, if that Sometimes there were months in between He only gets one weekend off a month now, so it wasn't too often, unless he got a leave for two weeks. Other than that, it wasn't too often I would go down there occasionally
- C So it wasn't so bad thus far?

- K. No, not really
- C You were able to communicate be phone and by letters?
- K. Yeah. We talked quite a bit, yeah. If he couldn't come home, he'd call. Certain days, he would tell me he was going to call. That helped a little bit, just to hear his voice.
- C Do you think that while he was in Virginia that he felt the Navy was a good choice, that he made a good choice in joining?
- K He said that sometimes he's glad he did it, and sometimes not. He's got to see a lot. He's been all over the world. So in that respect, he's gotten to do a lot and seen a lot of places. He has got to save some money, because he's got that GI Bill. They put some money away to go to college when you get out of the service. So there are good points to it. But being apart is probably the worst. He doesn't know why he joined--being apart.
- C So things were going fairly smoothly and your relationship progressed to the point of engagement?
- K We were engaged in February of 1989.
- C When did you plan to get married?
- K September 8, 1990. I hope these dates are right. I'm a little fuzzy on them. (Laughter)
- C So you were engaged, planning a wedding, and then his deployment orders came. When was this?
- K I believe--well, it was a few months before then that he called me and told me that there was no way we were getting married in September, because they said, "There's no way that you can get married in September." They wouldn't tell him exactly what the reason was. This must have been in June. So we scratched those plans for September 8, 1990. I went to Norfolk to pick him up. He was coming home on a two week leave on--I think it was--August 11, 1990. It was a Friday afternoon when I got there. I pulled into the parking lot and I saw Jeff. He came up to the car. He never said, "Hello" or anything. He had this look on his face, and I said, "What's wrong?" He said that they going to the Gulf within 10 days of that day, so he couldn't come home. I stayed down there for the weekend, and I left Monday morning. He called me that night and said they were leaving the next morning for the Gulf. That was August 14. They left the next day to go to Morehead City, North Carolina to pick up the Marines.
- C Did he say that he had any idea how long they would have to stay there?

K. He had no idea whatsoever So, that made it even harder not knowing when I was going to see him again That was the hardest thing

C I guess it's pretty evident how you must have felt when you heard he had to leave. Did you ever, ever expect he would have to go off to war?

K Never. It never entered my mind I don't think he ever did either

C Even though he was serving in the Navy?

K No I really don't think so

C. So he had just about, almost a year and a half left from when he left to serve in the Navy when he had to go to the Gulf

K Right

C Once he was there, were you able to talk to him while he was there? How were communications?

K I think from the time he left, from the time I talked to him that Monday night when he told me they were leaving the next day, it was quite a while before I talked to him on the phone They didn't touch land from the time they left from picking up the Marines in Morehead City, they didn't touch land for 110 days It was probably a good month and a half before I talked to him again. that was when they finally hit land

After that, maybe twice a month I talked to him Well, it was probably--he was gone eight months and four days--and I probably talked to him maybe a total of six times in that period of time. We talked for about 20 minutes or a half hour each call

C Was this strictly him calling you?

K Yeah

C Could you call there at all?

K No He had to call from different places, wherever he could find a phone Sometimes it was in a hotel lobby It was real hard getting through, because there was such a distance between us The operator it took time for them to get through from over there to here

C How about the mail? What was the mail system like?

K I guess it worked I mean, the mail came--I wouldn't say--regularly I probably got a

letter once a month, once or twice a month. I wrote him every day, and he got most of my letters, he said. But, I guess the mail system did good for him being, you know, clear over there

C How was that like having him gone?

K It was awful. It was the worst time in my whole life. It was awful. I didn't want to go to work. I just didn't want to do anything. It was just awful.

C Did you see any reason then, any justification that he was over there? Did you blame the Navy? How did you feel then?

K We knew since he was in the service that there was always that risk. I never really thought about him going. He did join the service and, you know, things do happen like this, I guess. I did some justification that he was over there. He was over there fighting for his country, so. He knew that when he signed up. It was just a shocker. Why couldn't they pick someone else in the Navy (Laughter)

C Did you watch the CNN 24 hour coverage?

K Oh yes. I watched it all of the time. I think for the first few days--well, more than just the first few days. Right at the beginning I was in front of the TV constantly. CNN, I just loved CNN. They had good coverage. That's all they talked about, from night to night. I was expecting to hear something about the Trenton on there, the ship that Jeff was on. Just anything, I was hoping for any kind of news that it was resolved and they were coming home--just anything. I looked forward to the news, that's for sure.

C Did watching it make you feel better, then?

K Sometimes it did. When there was bad news or something else happened that day, I wished I wouldn't have been watching it. For the most part, I'm glad I did watch it. It eased my mind some days.

C During this time, what did you do to cope with his absence?

K Like I said, I wrote him every single day. I read a lot and slept a lot. I watched television, watched the news. (Laughter) I did cross-stitch. I made little packages to send to him. I did whatever I could find to do.

C Were you still planning a wedding at this time?

K For some reason which I can't remember why--I don't know if we thought he was coming back. I don't know if we heard that they would be gone for six months and then be



coming home We rescheduled the wedding for February 16, 1991 We must have thought they were coming back, but--it must have been the beginning of January when we realized that this couldn't go off We realized that there was no way it would go off on February 16, so we called everybody and cancelled. We just waited and made sure that Jeff was home, and knew he was going to stay home, then we set another date. By then, I was real bad, too It was real hard Everybody was real nice about changing the wedding plans Because of the situation, they knew we couldn't stop it Everybody was real good about it

C You mean, as far as .

K As far as the people we contracted for the wedding

C Did you get a lot of support from your friends and family?

K Oh, yeah! I couldn't have done it without everybody In fact, there was a support group that--I think it was the Red Cross--that got together right after almost everybody left in September or October We went for one time--Jeff's mom and I went for one time, but it didn't help us So we just, more or less, her and I together with everybody else had our own support group

C What was the support group like, the organized one that you went to?

K See, that's why we never went again. To us, we felt no better after we left there There was people there, but we didn't feel close to them Maybe it's because we didn't know them, I don't know what it was We just thought it was a big joke as far as that goes. we just never went back Nothing against them or anything, we just felt that we shouldn't be there We made our own little support group

C Do you think--if there could be a positive thing out of the whole situation--Jeff being gone, did that bring you closer to his family?

K Oh, yeah, definitely I think I talked to Jeff's mom everyday If I heard something or if she heard something, I let her know and she let me know We sent cards to each other to keep the support up and keep good thoughts, "He'll be home soon," and all that stuff. Definitely, yes We were close before, but this just brought us even closer together We were in the same boat

I couldn't have done it with everybody--the people at work, and I was hard to work with. I would just go to work and I wouldn't want to talk to anybody It was awful, but I made it through

C Did you ever think that Jeff might not have come home from the Gulf?

K No, I never did

C But he did finally come home. When was that?

K We got the news probably in the middle of March that the tentative day for them to pull into Norwich was April 17. There was a number I could call. It was a family service center in Norfolk for the Navy. You call this 800 number. I would call and ask about the USS Trenton phone line. They would connect me and there would be a message on there to keep the family and friends updated on what the Trenton was doing over there and how the guys were doing, and when they thought they would come back. I called back, I think, everyday, because the message is updated every few days. Sometimes it was the captain telling how they were all doing and that they missed everybody over the holidays and that they would all be home soon, to keep our spirits up. So that hotline, the 800 number helped a lot. It was the middle of March when I called, and they said they had a tentative homecoming date, and it was April 17. They said they would let us know when it was definite. They did pull in on April 17, 1991. Do you want me to tell you about when I went down there?

C Sure

K It was me, my mother, my father, my brother and his girlfriend, Jeff's mom and dad, Jeff's brother, and one of his aunts, and a friend of mine. We all left on the April 15 to drive down to Norfolk. We got a hotel and stayed the night. On April 17, we all got up and--it was at the Norfolk Naval Base. They pulled in around 11.00 a.m., and it was wonderful. It was the best day of my life. We video taped it and photographed it and everything. It was just great. It was so exciting! When I first saw him it was wonderful, it was unbelievable.

C What was the first thing you thought when you saw him?

K I just remember looking, because we walked, me and Lori--my girlfriend Lori went, too, because she was dating one of Jeff's buddies on the ship. I remember running down the little place along the ocean, whatever its called. I remember looking up, and I was looking for Jeff. I saw two guys pointing to us. I said, "Oh my god, there he is!" It was wonderful. I was so excited! I was, like, half sick. I ran up to the steps and there was ten million people in front of me. I'm like, "Get out of the way!" (Laughter) It was absolutely wonderful. We got to the top of the ship and there were all these people up there. We were just looking around. As soon as I saw him, I started crying, of course. (Laughter) Oh, it was just wonderful. It was absolutely wonderful!

C What was he like when he got off the ship?

K He was real glad to see us. He had these black glasses on, which he didn't tell us until

afterwards, he asked, "Do you know why I wore those glasses?" I said, "No, I really never thought why you would wear glasses " He's the type that won't cry or show emotion, but he was crying He said, "That's way I wore those glasses." He was more excited than he let on, you know He said his stomach was all upset. He had been gone for a long time and he missed being home. But, it was great It was absolutely wonderful We made banners and we decorated the hotel room When he came back, we put up signs saying, "Jeff, welcome back " We went out to dinner that night and celebrated and came back We left the next day to come back home to Ohio. He had two weeks off We drove back to Youngstown the next day and had a little welcome home party. But then, I think we came back here on Thursday or Friday I had a surprise party for him--I think it was on a Sunday--that he knew nothing about We had signs up and cake It was real nice. He really enjoyed himself, because he knew nothing about it. His family was there and friends, and it was just real nice

C So, finally, he was home Were you able to plan a wedding again?

K Again I said, "Jeff, do you think we're going to be able to do it this time?" (Laughter) He said, "Yes " His ship was supposed to be at a place called the Yards That's where the ship goes to get fixed and painted and everything since they were gone for so long So that meant that it was going to be out of the water. There was no way they could leave again They were going to be there a little bit after the time they pulled in on April 17 until October 14 or something like that So it had to be, for sure, between those dates just to be safe So we got married on September 14 and everything was wonderful (Laughter) It was the best day of my life

C During that time between April and your wedding, did you ever think that something again might happen?

K No, I didn't, but when the thing came on about--what was it that happened not too long ago? Oh, in Russia when they had that coup d'etat Jeff's mom said, she had these thoughts of them taking Jeff back over there to help out That never entered my mind until after she said that So, I was thinking for a few days, "Oh, if he even has to leave now, I'll die " But, things worked out and he didn't have to leave again Things went off quite well

C That's great He's done on December 14 for good, right?

K He's on his last mission now Jeff should be back on Friday That is his last time on a ship

C Is he going to reenlist?

K No He doesn't want to at all He's done his duties and its time for him to get on with his

life, be close to his family, be home for the holidays. He's only been home for Christmas and that was 1988. He's missed every holiday, and he just wants to get on with his life. His four years are done. He's glad he did it. It was an experience and everything. Like I said, he's seen a lot, but he's definitely ready to get out

- C. Was the war, do you think, the deciding factor, "No, I'm not going to reenlist."?
- K That was probably the big deciding factor (Laughter) Yeah, that's probably what it did. He was telling me he's never going to reenlist. He doesn't want any part of it.
- C. Do you think that--I mean, its hard having your wedding postponed Having to go through this three separate times, do you think that was all in the line of duty also? Do you blame the Navy? Do you think they mislead you at all?
- K Oh, no When they told Jeff back in June that there was no way he could be home in September for the wedding the first time, they could have at least told him not to plan anything for a while I don't know if it was top secret, that they couldn't tell him or what They could have given him a little hint of why he couldn't come home. They just didn't give him a reason at all They just wouldn't okay his leave for then We just thought they were being S O B 's or trying to get him back for something (Laughter) But, here it was in there plans. They knew what they were doing I'm glad they told us four months before rather than waiting until all of the invitations were out a week before or whatever But, I think God had his plans Things worked out really well Things must have been just meant to go like this for some reason I think it all worked out for the best.
- C Did you try to keep a positive attitude that you have now during the whole time that he was gone?
- K I tried Some days it was real hard Some days it was real hard, but I tried to keep a positive attitude most of the time I tried hard
- C What would you do if he wanted to enlist again?
- K Well, I told him I said, "Jeff, that's totally up to you If you want to reenlist, I'm all for it I'll support you " I would just move down there, so it wouldn't be so hard for us to be apart, because I don't want him to think, "She doesn't want me to reenlist, so I'm not reenlisting for her " If he wants to reenlist, that's fine If he doesn't want to, that's fine But, he doesn't want to reenlist, and I know that's coming from his heart He's counting down now, 31 days I can't wait
- C Do you think the war changed his attitude about the Navy at all from what you can tell from him?

- K Not really I really don't think so I was worried that when he came back, he would be a different person. You know, him being gone for so long, that we'd be like strangers or something. But the war never really did that. I never felt like that It was like we'd been apart for a little while, but not anything major. That's what I was worried about I thought we'd have to get to know each other again Through letters and phone calls we tried to keep the best contact we could. As far as his attitude, I don't think it changed toward the Navy
- C That was going to be my next question Did the war change him at all, do you think?
- K No, I don't think so, really I don't know It might have if he was on the front lines or if he saw stuff that would have made him have nightmares. Him being on the ship, living on the water made it easier The closest they were--they were three miles off the coast of Kuwait If I'm not mistaken, that's what he said. But they never really saw any of the hard action that I'm sure most of the guys in the Army did, which is good. I'm glad, because it very well may have changed him He's still the same person as when he left I was glad for that There was supposed to be a mission They were supposed to do it, but something happened He would have been on land, but something happened to it. They had to scratch that plan, which I didn't know until after he came home and told me about it I was glad (Laughter) He was more disappointed, because he wanted in on some of the action, I guess For my sake, I'm glad he wasn't (Laughter)
- C Is there anything else you feel we haven't talked about that you'd like to add?
- K Just like I said before, I hope nobody has to go through what I went through. It seemed like a long time for me, eight months I hope nobody has to go through what I went through It was awful You don't know how it feels unless you go through it yourself. It was , just like I said, the worst time of my life I hope there are no wars forever and ever, if that's possible, so nobody has to go through it It was just real hard
- C Do you think perhaps that him being gone and everything that happened in a way prepared you to deal with other emotions? Did it prepare you at all for your married life with him while you were apart?
- K I think since we made it through this, we can make it through anything, because it was real difficult It must have been his senior chief or something that said, "This is going to be a real test for your relationship." This is before they even knew they were going I think he told him this when we cancelled the wedding for the first time. He made the comment that it was going to be a real test for your relationship We didn't know what he meant Well, I told Jeff, "Now we know what he meant " (Laughter) Going through this, I think, there's nothing else that can even come close to it Since we made it through this quite well, I think we can deal with pretty much anything that comes our way In that respect, I think it did help us get ready for married life

C Is there anything else?

K I'm just glad he's home I'm glad the war is over I think we were over there for a reason. I'm not glad that guys had to go, but they had to go I think that most people think we were over there for the right reason

C Yes

K I'm just glad everybody is home, and I'm glad Jeff is home Everybody around me wanted Jeff home, so they didn't have to deal with me anymore. (Laughter)

C. Okay, Stephanie, thank you for your time

K You're welcome

END OF INTERVIEW