

Penny McInnis
Narrator

Sean Quinn
Interview

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Sean: For the record can I get your name, your date of birth and your place of birth?

Penny: My name is Penny McInnis. March 14th, 1956. I was born in Cobleskill , New York Hospital actually the town is Charlottesville, New York.

Sean: Okay. So what in your early life encouraged you to join the army or the armed forces?

Penny: It was something I always wanted to do. Even as a young child I knew I wanted to be in the service. As I got older I knew that I wanted to get out of my country lifestyle and go out and see the world and that was a way of doing that by joining the armed services.

Sean: Did you have any relatives who served?

Penny: Yes, my father was actually in the 111th Airborne Corp that doesn't exist anymore in Fort Campbell Kentucky and he was a ministers assistant which was very unusual for his personality, I would never have thought that he would do that. But he talked highly of that and it was from 1950 to 1951.

Sean: So did he see any action in Korea?

Penny: He did not go to Korea. No, he was at Fort Campbell the entire time. He jumped out of a lot of airplanes.

Sean: So when did you enter the Army exactly?

Penny: I actually entered, delayed entry, April of 1975, I was a senior in high school and you had to complete high school in order to go in then and I never left until 6 months later delayed entry. So what was good about that was I got credit for being on the service so like I would get promotions earlier than other people, or pay raises before other people because that actually counted as time.

Sean: What did your peers in high school think about you joining the service?

Penny: My peers, most of them were going to college or just no plans at all, business school, trade school and all but I was definitely one of the only females back then 1975, three other males went from my class... there were only 36 in my entire class, a very rural school district. My teachers did not want me to go. It's really funny how it all turned out, my business instructor said that women were not treated correctly in the armed forces and that I was too good of a person to be treated wrongly. He felt that I would be disrespected. So anyway, throughout the years I went back and checked in with him and told him that I am doing great everything is lovely and I am still today in touch with my teachers.

Sean: Good. So they must have been happy that you were doing alright?

Penny: Yes, yes. It is out in Schoharie so I go back time to time and a lot of the people who went to college didn't do anything (shared laughter) working in McDonald's or whatever because I was the one who went out and saw the world and had a successful career.

Sean: Show's them (laughing)

Penny: Yea! (Wry and proud smile)

Sean: So where did you go for basic training?

Penny: Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

Sean: What was that like?

Penny: Very interesting...um... I was one of the first...I was in the women's Army Corp which no longer exists. It was disbanded in 1978. I was one of the first to have a male drill Sargent. We were all females but it was the first time we had a male as our instructor. So the males are not use to being around females, we were totally segregated before then, totally and anyway I had a drill Sargent who when he got mad at us would call us hamburger heads and when he thought we were doing a good job he would call us sweet peas . So, that is not what it is like today. But it shows you how things have progressed. Women are in combat now.

Sean: When you were in boot camp did you have any other interactions with the males?

Penny: No, no it was all females. When I went to the next duty station where I was given training at postal school then we were integrated.

Sean: So what did you do at postal school?

Penny: It was 4 weeks long and I learned everything there was to learn about being in the post office. It took a little bit of training afterwards but basically I could go into any post office here and run it from top to bottom.

Sean: Was that related to your army service?

Penny: It was my field of duty. Everybody was given a job. You do army stuff but how it was different from other army jobs was if I was stateside the civilians actually ran the post office but if I was overseas

in Germany, we ran the post office. So going back and forth from overseas to the states, my job would change. I would be an admin, like secretary, stateside and postal work overseas.

Sean: So what do you remember about the men and women you were with during your time at boot camp and your service with the post office?

Penny: We were all one team. We all worked together. I miss that part. You had a job to do and you had to figure out the best way to get it done and to work together in order to get it done to get your mission accomplished...teamwork.

Sean: That's always good! So after you finished boot and you finished your postal training, where did you go?

Penny: Germany.

Sean: Where in Germany exactly?

Penny: It was the first armored division and I was in Ansbach, Germany but they are stateside now. What was different about that, being female, I was 20 female in a division of 10,000 men. So I could have the pick of the litter (shared laugh). Again, we basically had one wing of a dormitory and the males were on another wing not allowed on our wing. Now it is all integrated, coed completely. Interesting.

Sean: You said pick of the litter..

Penny: That was actually a funny because out of all the men I could choose from, I chose the wrong one. The one I married it turns out was discharged for being mentally unstable. So um...

Sean: Was it a problem to have had a relationship? Did you get in trouble?

Penny: No not at all. It wasn't a problem. It was integrated by then. You could date. You could do anything you wanted to.

Sean: What were your responsibilities in Ansbach?

Penny: I ran the post office. Basically, anything they do in the post office here I would do there. It was a very busy time of year because people would send things back home, like cuckoo clocks. It was 1976, part of the Cold War, and I am in an armored division where we are basically protecting thethere was East Germany at the time, there is Russian, the Communist wall all that so my job was just to get the troops their mail which morale was big, we didn't have e-mails and computers ... you waited for that letter to come. Very important job.

Sean: How were you received by the other soldiers?

Penny: I was well respected. I moved up the ranks. I am kind of a bossy person by nature and so my bosses can see that and you get promoted. There are always leaders and there are always followers and I happen to be a leader. So, I was a Sergeant within my first three years. I ended up with Sergeant First Class E7 out of E9.

Sean: Could you explain how the Sargent ranking system works?

Penny: Absolutely. You start out as a private and as long as you do your job you are going to get your regular promotions. If you happen to do a job well you are going to get promoted faster. So I became a Sargent, I was in charge, within 3 years which is pretty good. I got to an E5 position and got stuck there because they needed me in another field. They encourage you to change fields like I was in admin or postal but they had enough of those they wanted me to change to military intelligence. So, I did to get promoted. So now I am 10 years into the service and I am learning a new job. A lot of the people who worked for me knew more than I did which is a little strange but I learned, I figured it out.

Sean: What did you do in military intelligence?

Penny: Again it was still part of the Cold War. My job was to watch what the Russians were doing and all the communists, like East Germany was actually considered our enemy. So, we would watch, we'd watch their training because lots of times trainings would turn into real wars. Anyway, I was in West Berlin when the wall fell. As far as history, Poland started with Solidarity and people started having opinions and Democracy was coming forth with the Communists always held. I watched the whole thing crumble- Russia was part of the USSR and there were 18 different satellites and they all started breaking away from Mother Russia and became Democratic and said we are not taking it anymore. So the tanks that we use to watch they got turned into tractors by removing the turrets. We had to make sure that they had disassembled all of their weapons so that was my job; They called us bean counters like you knew that a tank division had so many tanks well those tanks needed to be turned into tractors so if you saw tanks out there then they weren't doing what they were suppose to do and so we would report that back. So throughout that whole mess I was at Stuttgart Germany and in 1990 Kuwait was invaded by Iraq. So no longer are the Russians the "bad guys", the Iraqis are the "bad guys" and we had to switch gears completely. So we geared up to go to war from Germany the whole 7th Corp went to Saudi Arabia. 70 kilometers from the border is where I was physically located. Again I did basically the same job, watching what the enemy had, by different types of intelligence and I can go into that a little bit. But my job was to gather everybody's intelligence pieces together and put them together for a puzzle to figure out what was going on and so I was a targeteer and what my job would be was to tell the 7th Corp Commander what to expect if he was going to cross this particular border – was it an armored division there or just infantry. There is a big difference about what you are going to take to fight them- are you going to take Apaches or are you just going to take infantry. So that was my job and what was interesting about that was that the Russians had Hip and Hind Helicopters so they were "bad guys" they were called foe. All of a sudden the Egyptians are our allies and they have Hps and Hinds so I am watching these helicopters that use to belong to our enemies come across our berm and I had to change tracks, not to shoot them down because they are our friendly's now. (laughs)

Sean: So back peddling just a little bit, when you were in Germany did you ever meet any of the people there?

Penny: fully integrated with the Germans. Absolutely! I loved it. A lot of military don't. They actually can live on base and never step foot off there. That was not me. I did not live off of government

housing; I lived off of the economy. I spent 11 years in Germany out of my 20. Now unfortunately, I didn't pick up a lot of the language or I didn't get to speak it fluently. We hung out with the Germans, partied with them, went on Volks Marches – you go out on a Saturday and walk for 30km. me and my kids and it is an all day affair and you would pick up medals or steins, they are very health conscious over there.

Sean: Is that what a Volks March would be, a long walk?

Penny: It is along walk like a walk-a-thon only they did it every week every Saturday and Sunday so you would look in the paper for where it is this week. A lot of traveling, I saw all of Europe from Germany, dirt cheap.

Sean: I wish! (shared laugh) So you were raising your kids at least in Germany?

Penny: I was. I had my first child 3 years in the service by then. So I raised both of my kids while in the service. I got divorced so I ended up being a solo parent. That was tough because you never know when you were going to be deployed or go on extended field exercises and I paid astronomical amount of money for daycare. That was what I did when I got out. Knew that there was a need for daycare for families for somebody like me, I opened up a daycare 24 hours. So the base daycare opened up at 6 and closed at 6 so I would pick the kids up and they would become a part of my family and drop them off again at 6. So, I made a lot of money.

Sean: That's great! So, if you don't mind me asking, what did your kids think of this?

Penny: My daughter did not particularly care for me running a daycare in our home because she felt it wasn't separate, she didn't get the attention she wanted. Both of my kids absolutely loved being in the military. We have to move every 3 years. They don't know how to stay put. A lot of kids would be traumatically impaired if they had to leave their friends: they thought nothing about it. But we are still friends with a lot of those people we knew from so long ago.

Sean: Did either of your children go into the military?

Penny: My daughter is in the military right now. She is a Sergeant, doing very well, she did a 4 year hitch. She intends to get out. Have mixed feelings about that as I like the stability for her and the fact that you can retire early and stuff like that only the world is a very unsafe place. We see our soldiers coming back mangled or traumatic brain injuries or not at all. So I certainly don't want that but she says it herself, because of the way that she was brought up she is a natural in the military: she can follow orders and she is bossy and she is good at what she does. It is unfortunate that it is not a safe place right now.

Sean: How does what she is doing compare to your service in Germany and Desert Storm?

Penny: Oh, it is exactly the same. The difference is Mom is concerned about her child. She was concerned about her Mom at 4 years old. She doesn't want to leave her family.

Sean: Getting back on track, when you were in Saudi Arabia, did you meet any of the Saudi people?

Penny: That was a very strange experience. I was a Sargent First class and so I was in charge, and women don't have any rights there and they wanted us to dress completely wrapped up not allowing us to drive our own cars. I was in charge of this vehicle and it didn't take long before the US Government stepped in and said look these are soldiers and they are going to do everything or we are going to leave. Me physically actually sitting down and talking to the Saudi's – no. we were busy doing other things we were fighting a war.

Sean: The Gulf War was a coalition force. So, did you meet any soldiers from the other armies there?

Penny: Yes. British, German and Canadian. It's a lot of fun to hang out with other folks, (smiles)

Sean: Cool accents! (She smiles and agrees)

Penny: I had a lot of opportunity in Germany too. We would practice for coalition forces. So we would hang out with Brits and Canadians, yea. (nodding)

Sean: Did they have the same integration with their women that the US did?

Penny: I never saw another female in the other forces. So I don't know, I never thought about it.

Sean: I believe you already touched on this but in Saudi Arabia what did you do again? Tell me what you can about military intelligence?

Penny: I was a targeteer in the military intelligence. I would get information when the POW'S would come back. They would be interrogated and that information was passed on to me. And then we had imagery from satellites or the bombers could report what they took out when they got back and so I would put that all together in a puzzle. After the war we went to all of the destruction sites on the Tigris, Euphrates Rivers where they were trying to get across to determine if our intelligence was correct. There were live grenades there but luckily the bodies had been removed. It has actually affected me for post-traumatic stress because I caused the destruction. But it was interesting to see that we did have the right information for the Commander.

Sean: Did you ever meet any of the "bad guys" the Iraqis, East Germans or Russians?

Penny: No I did not. I got the report back from the interrogators.

Sean: Did you ever see combat?

Penny: No I was not involved in hand to hand combat.

Sean: When did you leave the service?

Penny: I left in 1995. So, 20 years.

Sean: How did things change for you?

Penny: It changed dramatically. I joined as a woman's army corps, completely segregated. Then I got married and they offered to let me out of the service and I said no so they made me change my contract. So when I had a baby they offered to let me out again and again I said no so they made me change my contract again. I intended to do 20 from the day I started. Before if you got pregnant or married you were not allowed to stay in, so now that has all changed. We all are married and have children. Unless you are at war it is kind of like a real job. You practice to go to war. Also, a year from retirement they teach you how to reintegrate back into the civilian world- interviewing and how to dress, resumes and things like that.

Sean: How did the military affect you in the long run mentally and physically?

Penny: I got out in 1995 and collecting retirement ever since. I have been out as long as I was in so that is a pretty good chunk of change. So that is good. It wasn't until about 10 years ago that I realized that things were affecting me like the destruction sites. I think its because of the media hearing about how our guys are being killed or wounded and things are getting blown up I realized that it had affected me more than I realized. Recently, the last 4 years, I have been going to a lot of counseling and alternative therapies. This book is one of them as a creative expression of my anger, my hypervigilance –things people take for granted like gassing a vehicle I am watching my back. It has affected me that way, I had no idea. All and all it was a wonderful experience. I am glad I chose it! I would do it again.

Sean: Did the alternative treatments help you feel better?

Penny: It gave me a sense of empowerment. I am not a victim. We did the play that focused heavily on military sexual trauma which I did experience and now I am advocating for others if I find benefits others can apply for...It is just now making sense. I do all kinds of alternative therapies: acupuncture, chiropractor, art therapy, horse therapy, aromatherapy , yoga, tai chi, chi gong... in fact my next project is to write this all down and how it has helped me to get through everything.

Sean: So if you don't mind me asking, what exactly is horse therapy?

Penny: It is like pet therapy with a horse. Horses are intuitive and I direct the animal to do anything I want it to. The horse could tell I needed a hug and stuck by me until I was ready to do work.

Sean: Are you a member of any military organizations such as the VFW?

Penny: I am not currently but there was a reason for that. A year out of my retirement I stopped drinking, drinking in the military is a big thing like hanging out at the watering hole, I did not want to be like so many other vets who hang out at the VFW and get drunk every night and talk about the old times. I severed myself completely from the military, I made myself a civilian and stopped drinking for 13 years. I am thinking about joining the VFW because they don't have a lot of female presence and I have been talking about that with folks and I have been asked to join.

Sean: To wrap it up, what is this most important thing the military has done for you?

Penny: Discipline, structure how to work with other people...employers are glad to hire vets because they know they are up to the challenge. Being part of a team!