

## Topeka, Kansas (1970–1973)

After purchasing a map of the United States and packing up our car, we headed for Topeka on March 4. It was a seven-hour drive and approximately one thousand miles to my new duty assignment. The car was packed full with our few household goods, clothes, ironing board, and cat carrier. Much of the trip was on local two-lane highways, interspersed with an occasional stretch on the new four-lane interstates. Most of the interstate highways were still under construction.

We traveled through numerous small towns in Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, and Kansas, familiarizing our-selves with the Deep South. We made the trip in two days, with one overnight stop along the way.

The next day, Mary and I reported to the base housing office at Forbes Air Force Base. Again, they limited base housing to officers and higher-ranking NCOs; we had to find an apartment. Fortunately, our relocation allowance was sufficient for us to stay at a local hotel for several weeks. We explored the base and found the hangar where I was to report on March 23, commissary, BX, chow hall, and movie theater.

It didn't take long to find an apartment. We looked at several by the base, and then we found a new three-story apartment complex within walking distance to downtown Topeka at 800 Polk Street. The first few apartments we visited by the base were less expensive. However, they were dumps compared to this new complex, and it had a swimming pool. The downside was the rent at \$135 a month; I was only clearing \$145, including quarters allowance. Mary loved the apartment, and we both agreed to take it under the condition Mary would find a job, and fast.

The furnished efficiency apartment was one large L-shaped room with a galley kitchen, dining area, bathroom, and

living room with a sofa bed. It was on the lower level, and the windows looked out onto the parking lot. Living in town, Mary could find a job she could easily walk to; we couldn't afford a second car. You could see the capitol building from our new apartment; we were close to everything.



800 Polk Apartments, Topeka, Kansas, 2019  
(fifty years later)

We had enough from our remaining per diem, savings, and salary for the one-month deposit and first month's rent, with a little cushion remaining. We were elated, this place was a palace compared to our Biloxi apartment and former apartments back in Pittsburgh. It was new, in town, had a pool, and was only a twenty-minute drive to the base—a reasonable commute. I was relieved we found a decent place to live after Biloxi, and I could get a second job here too. It would be worth it. For both of us, it was a dream come true; we had much to be thankful for.

We moved in March 15 and started looking for jobs. Restaurants and a Macy's department store were down the street

along with much more to take in on short walks downtown. People were friendly and welcoming. Baggers at the grocery stores took your cart to your car and unloaded it for you! It was nothing like Pittsburgh.

On March 23, I reported for duty and attended orientation classes. I was assigned to the S Band High Range Air Navigation (SHIRAN) and Terrain Profile Record (TPR) units. My specialty was airborne navigation systems. This was a completely different computerized radar system that filled up the entire inside of a RC-135 jet from front to back. Our mission was to map the world through geodetic surveys while ranging to four ground stations simultaneously.



Forbes AFB entrance, 1969

The ground units were located in isolated areas, and they recently completed mapping Southeast Asia and Vietnam. We maintained the airborne systems for deployment around the world. I believe this unit was assigned the top graduates from our Keesler training course due to the advanced required system theory and computer training. Gerald, the airman I always competed with for top honors back at Keesler, was also assigned to this unit.

Over the next six months, the new recruits attended three training classes for half of each workday: Introduction to the USQ-28 System (20 hours), SHIRAN Interrogator RF (124 hours), and the SHIRAN Digital F/O Maintenance course (200 hours). We worked with engineers from the system manufacturer who knew the equipment inside and out. The Terrain Profile Recording System (TPRS) was installed on the RC-130s, and SHIRAN on the RC-135s. I completed an additional sixteen career development courses (CDCs)—689 hours of training—while on active duty at Forbes Air Force Base over the next two and a half years. These courses were required to maintain competency in my primary aircraft electronic navigation equipment 30131 career field.

Mary applied for state government positions in the downtown area by the capitol building. I bought her a civil service exam study guide to prepare for the state civil service administrative test. She studied nonstop for weeks and then took and passed the exam in April. Shortly after, she was called for an interview with the state Department of Labor. When she called to see if a selection had been made in late April, they hadn't completed their reviews.

Another week passed, and she called again, telling the supervisor she needed the job and asking if she had it or not. He hired her on the spot, and she started a week later. It was a short walk to her new job, and we could now afford our rent, food, gas, and more.

Mary was hired about two months after arriving in town. To cover expenses, I found a part-time job in the evenings and weekends at the Katz Drug Store on Walnut Street in Topeka. I only worked there until Mary received her first paycheck, making just enough for us to buy what we needed over and above our rent. Mary's salary was almost double what I earned as an airman first class. In 1970, my W-2 yearly military wages

equaled \$2,012.25—\$167 a month gross wages, including separate rations. Mary earned \$2,140 for just over six months of work that year. She loved her new job and excelled there, making lifelong friends along the way.

My work was fairly typical of what you would expect in the private sector, with a few noteworthy exceptions. We normally worked forty hours a week with most weekends off. Occasionally, we worked twelve-hour shifts—sixty or more hours a week—to prepare the aircraft for deployments. We didn't receive overtime or holiday pay. We worked as many hours as our commander required without additional compensation. Plus, we had to come in to recover the aircraft when they returned from a mission.

Basically, we reviewed the aircraft equipment and system malfunction 781 logs and completed any repairs needed to turn around the aircraft for subsequent missions. When off duty, we wore civilian clothes and had a fairly normal life. However, we could be sent TDY (temporary duty assignments) on short notice.

Fortunately, the single airmen volunteered for the South American deployments while I was there, and they also worked all of the evening and midnight shifts. Evenings and midnight shifts covered short turnarounds and mostly consisted of flight debriefings.

I turned twenty-one on May 19, two months after arriving in Kansas. Our circumstances changed dramatically for the better even though we started out not knowing what lay ahead.

There are benefits to starting out this way. First, you are far from home and only have each other to rely on. This affords a couple the time to build a solid relationship and foundation without undue interference from well-intentioned family and friends. Couples need to be left alone for the first

few years to become a family with common goals and aspirations and to experience heartache at times.

Mary met two of her best friends, twins Judy and Jan, at work. They were born on the same day as Mary, February 7, a year earlier. They became fast friends and included us in their lives: inviting us over, taking us to their parents' homes, going out together, and so much more. Judy's husband, Dean, was a barber and refused to let me pay for my haircuts, his way of thanking me for my service.

I wasn't working on any of the equipment I trained on in Biloxi. Instead, we serviced the highly specialized SHIRAN and TPR systems, troubleshooting failures down to the individual component in the shop. If there was a circuit failure, we identified the actual component that was installed on the aircraft.

We had sophisticated high-tech test equipment. Some of the specialized test sets cost over a \$100,000 each. We learned the system language and viewed line after line of code to find anomalies and locate what that code controlled in order to fine-tune our search for the failed component. The transmitter was similar to the radar systems taught at Keesler, and we used standard test equipment for troubleshooting and repair.

Late one night during our first year in Topeka, we woke up to sirens blaring. We heard commotion outside our door. All of the residents of the complex were in the basement in their nightclothes. A tornado was in the area, and the hallway was the building's designated shelter.

Meanwhile, back home, Mother was having a difficult time at Connie's place. Their small two-bedroom home wasn't designed to accommodate a larger family, and Mom had to sleep in her niece's bedroom on a daybed. Florence asked Mom to come live with her in Detroit, and she moved there in April or May 1970.

In June 1966, five years earlier, a tornado a half mile wide and fifteen miles long ripped through Topeka. Seventeen were killed, thirty-five hundred were left homeless, and five hundred homes and fifty businesses were destroyed. Local residents took tornado warnings seriously. Fortunately, the sirens alerted the residents fifteen minutes before the storm hit in 1966, saving countless lives. That event was still fresh in everyone's mind.

Later that year, we experienced our first earthquake. It was mild but strong enough to move the lamp on our coffee table. Hardly anyone noticed, as small earthquakes are fairly common in the Midwest.

Mary and her friends often stopped at our apartment for lunch or visited the many downtown shops during their hour-long lunch break. She studied for her driver's test, and I took her out on the roads to practice in the evenings and on weekends. She passed her test on the first try that summer. The state trooper came to our apartment to administer the road test. He and Mary took our car out on the streets of Topeka. Back in Pittsburgh, the state police had designated driving courses where you took the test off public streets.

With both of us working, we were able to splurge a little. We went out for dinner or a movie occasionally and had an evening out with friends. There was a restaurant on SW Topeka Boulevard that served the best southern fried chicken I've ever tasted. We stopped there often during our stay in Topeka. It was easy to get around in the city.

In 1970, we headed home for Christmas, both of us taking two weeks off. It was a thousand-mile journey, and we spent weeks shopping for family. It was a two-day trip with one overnight stay at a hotel halfway home. There were many detours along the way since I-70 was still under construction for a good part of the trip. The first night we hit heavy fog after dark for

several hours and eventually stopped at the first hotel we could find, arriving home on Sunday, December 20.

Mary's mother had a pull-out sofa bed in their living room that we crashed on, something Mary and I were familiar with. My mother lived with Flo in Detroit. I left Mary at her mother's place and took a train to Detroit on Tuesday to visit Mother and my sister's family for a few days, returning to Pittsburgh just before Christmas. Tony, my brother-in-law, met me at the train station. It was good seeing everyone. Mom was exploring ways to return to Pittsburgh and wanted to get a place of her own. Aunt Stella and Mom corresponded, and Stella invited Mother to stay with her until she found a place.

My sister and Tony owned a four-bedroom home in Ecorse, Michigan, and with five young children and now a grandmother, it was crowded. Mom's room was at the top of the stairs on the second floor, and it was an oasis—quiet, bright, and an orderly environment for her to escape to from the household chaos. She loved her grandchildren, but it overwhelmed her from time to time. She enjoyed her peace and quiet.

I returned to Pittsburgh, and we spent Christmas visiting family and friends. Mary and I stretched our budget to buy gifts for all of our family. We visited my sister Connie, Mary's aunt Mamie, and we spent most of the time relaxing with family at Mary's place.

We left on January 1, and both of us felt relieved returning to our home in Topeka. We enjoyed our life together, and the trip home reminded us of the hardships Mary and I shared when we lived in Pittsburgh. The military turned out to be a new lease on life—a blessing for both of us.

We celebrated Mary's twenty-first birthday on February 7, 1971, at our apartment with several friends: Dan, Arlene, and their daughter, Michelle; Terry and Eva; Judy and Dean.





Mary's birthday (Michelle playing with Holly)

In early March 1971, Mary flew home. Her mother was gravely ill and died shortly after Mary arrived. I flew home to attend the funeral, and we returned to Topeka a few days later.

On June 3, 1971, I was promoted to sergeant, E-4 grade, just over two years from my enlistment date. My pay increased to \$312 a month, with an additional quarters allowance of \$110, for a total of \$422 a month and \$5,064 a year. Six months later in January 1972, my pay increased to \$487 monthly. My prospects looked promising.



Promotion to sergeant, June 1, 1971

What a sea change from when we first married and I made a fraction of this amount. The military more than doubled the pay for the entry E-1 grade in 1972 to \$288 per month. In 1969, I earned \$145 a month including quarters allowance when I was an E1 and married!

We moved to an unfurnished one-bedroom apartment at the same complex in June 1971. The rent increased to \$165 per month. Shawnee Furniture sold us a rocker and sofa for \$139, a three-piece bedroom set for \$199, a kitchen table and chairs for \$41, and a box spring and mattress for \$85—a total of \$477, including delivery and sales tax. Quite a deal by today's standard but a stretch for us back then.

We didn't know Mary was pregnant at the time. After several months, Mary's baby bump showed, and the apartment manager advised us we had to move, babies weren't allowed in their one-bedroom apartments! The two-

bedroom units rented for just over \$200. With a baby on the way, we decided to look for cheaper digs.

I signed up for evening college courses that summer at Washburn University and enrolled in the Community College of the Air Force, taking courses whenever I could. It seemed like I was in training most of the time.

I became friends with Dave Crumb, one of the contractors at the base. We occasionally went fishing at Lake Shawnee on the outskirts of Topeka. We had many good conversations and relaxing afternoons there. He lived in Illinois and commuted once a month back home.

Military personnel tend to develop close relationships within their unit. We were all far from home, in this together, and became fast friends. We socialized with other married couples in my unit and shared birthdays and evenings out. We hosted a few unit parties and had a great time. We actually had more friends in the military than we ever had before or after our time in Topeka. We also had many friends from Mary's work.



From left, George and Karen, Dennis  
and Mary with Junior, Dan and Arleen with  
Michelle, and Terry and Eva

In late September, we departed for Colorado Springs on our first vacation. Mary was three months pregnant; if we didn't get away now, it would be some time before we had another opportunity. On the drive west, we visited Dodge City and stopped at other local attractions. Storm clouds developed as we approached Colorado. Farther along, we realized storms weren't on the horizon—a panoramic view of the majestic Rocky Mountains appeared in all their glory. We stayed in a hotel at the base of Pikes Peak, not far from the Air Force Academy.

The mornings were cool and brisk; the leaves changed with vibrant colors, and the winds gathered up the fragments, surrounding us in a kaleidoscope of nature's hues. The cog train ride to the top of Pikes Peak offered spectacular views. This was our first trip to the mountains, and it was awe inspiring. We visited Garden of the Gods the next day and

Royal Gorge, walking across the highest suspension bridge in the country.



Mary on the cog train ride to Pikes Peak, 1972

I planned a day trip to Cripple Creek, a nineteenth-century gold mining town. I brought my gold pan along to try my luck on a few creeks along the way. We didn't realize this route was mostly narrow, cliff-hugging dirt roads up steep mountains. Most of the trip was one unpaved lane, but I couldn't imagine two cars passing on the sheer cliffs.

A ranger stopped us as we started up the mountain, advising us to stay in the car. The bears were out in numbers this season. About halfway to our destination, I ignored his advice and stopped to pan for gold on a meandering, rock-strewn mountain stream. Unfortunately, as luck would have it, I didn't

find any color to bring home that day, but I kept the bears at bay.

It took three hours to go thirty miles on a mountain trail. I thought of heading back many times; there wasn't room to turn around! We finally made it to town and stopped at one of the old saloons. Hundreds of motorcycles approached town, heading our way. The advance party parked next to us. They were a fairly rough crew, so Mary and I decided to quickly "get out of town."

We drove to Denver later that same day to enjoy the Mile-High City's unique characteristics: skyscrapers with spectacular mountain backdrops and the sun setting over the city, exposing shadows and brilliant colors as nightfall arrived, with the city lights illuminating the path forward. This was a thoroughly enjoyable vacation and our first of many.

Most vacationers get out and about, try new things, rest and relax. Our vacations after we married were simply driving through the country, taking in sites, and enjoying life and the ride.

In November 1971, we moved to 3304 West 29th Street Terrace. The two-bedroom apartment's rent was \$105 a month, \$60 less than what we paid at the Polk Apartments. I commuted to work with Dan until we were able to purchase a second car. The apartment was close to the base and a fifteen-minute commute for Mary.



Our 1970 Hornet at 3304 W. 29th Street

Shortly after moving in, we purchased a 1970 American Motors Hornet. It was copper and cream with air conditioning. We used Mary's \$500 inheritance for the down payment. She received the cash from a settlement after her father died. We paid \$2,100, and it only had fifteen thousand miles on the odometer. Bob, Jan's husband, owned a transmission repair shop in town and kindly checked it out for us. We could both get to work now without me having to bum a ride. I kept the Impala for my commute.

We were doing better with both of us working, but we still had to watch every penny. At our new apartment, we needed end tables and an entertainment center. I built the furniture myself from pine and used a red stain and a clear coat. They were sturdy and part of our household for many years. I also set up my first office in our hallway closet that I used for projects and studying.

Mary and her friends went to pottery classes, and she made a clock, sconces, candleholders, and a kitchen wall set to decorate our home. We were and still are a great team, working together to get wherever we need to be.



My first office

Mary and I attended several local auctions, and on one occasion, I picked up a half dozen new auto cassette tape decks. I installed the first one in our Hornet and sold and installed the remaining tape decks to others for a profit. There were always opportunities to earn extra money if you took the time to find them.

Fortunately, Mary didn't suffer from morning sickness during her pregnancy, and she was at peace with the world. She often reflects back on the times she was pregnant as the most peaceful and enjoyable times of her life. She was a trooper and worked up to the week before our son arrived. Her friends in Kansas gave her a baby shower, and she



received a playpen, diaper service for one month, and much more. One of the sergeants I worked with gave us several boxes of baby clothes, diapers, towels, washcloths, toys, and other baby items. Everyone was so helpful and kind.

We spent our free time preparing the nursery and getting ready for the new arrival. We purchased a crib for ten dollars from an older couple in Topeka who used it for their grandchildren when they were young. Back then you didn't know the sex of the baby until the delivery, so we were careful not to buy anything gender specific, focusing on nursery items and general supplies. *Better Homes and Gardens* published a baby book that we bought to better understand what lay ahead. There was a lot to learn, and we used that book even when our grandchildren arrived four decades later.



Dennis Jr.'s nursery, 1972

In fall 1971, our unit's mapping services began a trial, comparing our service to a newly commissioned satellite map-

ping system. Not long afterward in early 1972, we were notified that our unit would be deactivated. The satellite system produced more precise results at considerably less cost. Over the next three months, we identified and processed much of our specialized equipment as excess and sent it to the warehouse for public auction. The aircraft and pilots were reassigned as we gradually wound down. Months later, I attended a government auction and discovered one of our \$100,000 pieces of test equipment was being sold for scrap by the pound.

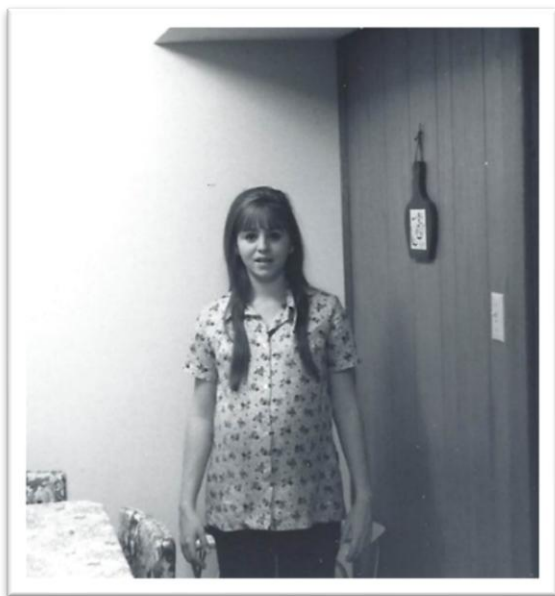
I was assigned collateral duties as a squadron general military training NCO from September 15, 1971, through December 31, 1971, and was awarded the Silver Pride Award by the base commander for managing the program. The citation read, "Sgt. Damp converted an almost nonexistent program into a most efficient operation. It was through his diligent and constant efforts that this organization was able to meet our goal of 100 percent GMT completion for 1971." I often volunteered for lateral assignments to obtain experience in different areas.

Mother moved back to Pittsburgh around this time and lived with Aunt Stella. After several months there, she found a fourth-floor attic apartment on Winebiddle Street, not far from Aunt Stella's apartment. I sent Mother fifty dollars to help her get situated in her new apartment and a little each month to help out. She sold household products by phone and earned just enough to make ends meet.

I now focused on three things: Mary, our new baby, and my upcoming discharge from active duty. I had to prepare for life after the Air Force and began studying for the first-class FCC license required for servicing transmitting equipment in the private sector. Our unit was scheduled to be deactivated soon, and my enlistment was up in a year and a half. I studied

nonstop for months with another sergeant on base. We drove to Kansas City in his Corvette to take the exam, and I passed the general license portion. Six months later, I retested and passed the first-class FCC license exam and received my license with ship radar endorsement.

On March 3, 1972, I received an Overseas Preselection and Alert Notice informing me that I would be assigned overseas for my next deployment. The notice read, "The purpose of this notice is to provide you with as much notice as possible that you are likely to be selected for an overseas assignment, either a short or long tour area anytime within the next six months." This was two days before our son was born. My four-year enlistment was up on April 28, 1973, a little over a year away. The first three years flew by, and we both focused on the next phase of our lives: children and life after the military.

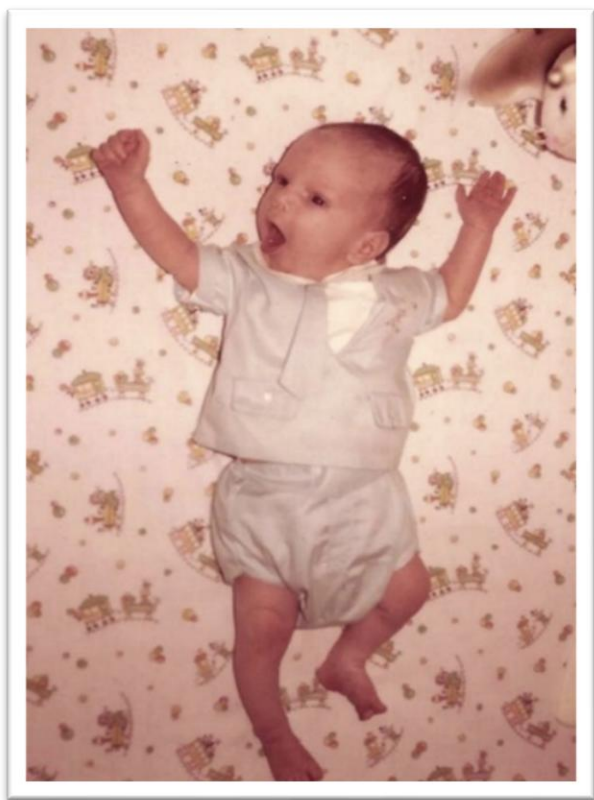


Mary at eight months pregnant, 1972

Mary and I discussed options and decided it would be best to leave the military and pursue other employment, possibly back home in Pittsburgh. I really didn't want to leave Mary stateside while I was assigned who knows where, and the pay in the private sector was higher. Thanks to my military training, I could find another job in aviation with the airlines, general broadcasting, or the federal government.

Mary's water broke in the early morning on March 5, 1972. It was raining and overcast on our drive to Stormont Vail Hos-pital. At the hospital, Mary had difficulty, and finally, the doctor came in and ordered the nurses to immediately take her to the delivery room. There were complications, and since sonograms hadn't been invented yet, the doctor wasn't aware the baby was sideways.

Shortly after arriving in the delivery room, a nurse pushed me to the back of the room, and another ran in with huge forceps to aid with the delivery. They put Mary under, and I was shaken by all of the commotion as I watched the procedure and prayed for my wife and baby. It was one of the most intense events in our lives, and several minutes later, Dennis Junior was born, a healthy eight-pound, six-ounce boy.



Dennis Junior, March 1972

It's amazing the little things you remember in situations like this. I recall helping Mary get ready. I can close my eyes and see her in the hallway when she announced her water broke and the dreary deserted, wet streets as we traveled to Stormont Vail Hospital early that morning. The general confusion was distracting as we prepared to welcome our newborn into this world. It scared the hell out of both of us. Mary was fairly calm, but I was a nervous wreck.

Mary was out cold from the anesthesia, and they placed her in the hallway to wait for a room to free up. I was beside her when she woke up confused and not knowing what happened. She asked for the baby. After all of the confusion, the nurse brought our son to Mary's bedside. Mary cried as she held him for the first time. She spent three days in the hospital. Dennis Junior had a black-and-blue mark over his right eye from where the doctor turned him with the forceps.

I was able to take a week off to help at home. It was painful for Mary to walk for several days, and I did whatever was needed: preparing the formula, sterilizing the bottles, changing diapers, cleaning the house, and anything else I could do to help. It was a stressful time filled with uncertainty. Neither of us had younger siblings who could have familiarized us with our new experiences.

The first day Mary was home I boiled water to sterilize the bottle nipples. Mary walked into the kitchen to find me taking the floating nipples out of the boiling water with my fingertips. She started to cry. The nipples weren't sterile after I touched them. Mary put them back in the boiling water and wondered aloud, "How will we get through this?" We knew so little about raising our son.



Holly greeting Junior

After several weeks, we settled into a welcome routine. Mary was a natural with the baby, and she adored him. She read the baby book front to back, and thankfully, she had Judy and Jan, her best friends, to talk to, both had baby girls a year or so earlier.

Junior gained weight fast and was sleeping all night after just 4 weeks. I was a light sleeper and the minute the baby made a sound I was up. Mary needed her rest and I tried to let her sleep as much as possible without interruption.

My failed attempt to properly sterilize baby bottle nipples encouraged me to develop a proposal for a baby product manufacturer, featuring a safe-cap pacifier. It allowed mothers to carry several sterilized pacifiers in their purse for when their child dropped the pacifier they were using. They could be sterilized, capped, and used over and over again. This was my first

invention and written proposal. I fashioned others after this later in life.

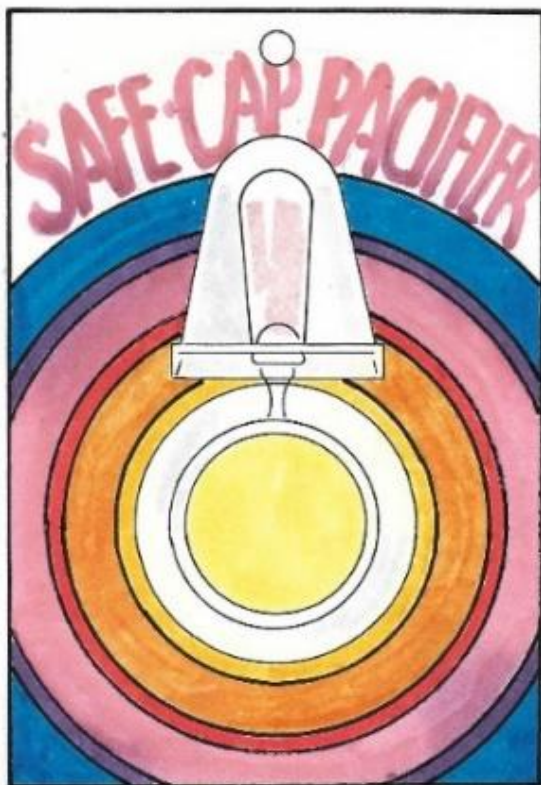


Mary with Dennis Junior, April 1972

The daughter of the unit's chief master sergeant was a graphic design student. She provided the drawings I needed for the submission proposal; her compensation was a small percentage of the deal if the concept was accepted by the



company. The proposal made it through three levels of review over a six-month period before being rejected. I wrote my first work-for-hire agreement for this project, the first of many to follow.



Artist rendering of the safe-cap pacifier