WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: E. Cindi Basenspiler

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: June 13, 2014

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is June 13, 2014. My name is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the office of Cindi Basenspiler in Charlotte, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at The University of North Carolina of Greensboro. Cindi, could you state your name the way you'd like it to read on your collection?

CB: Sure. E. Cindi Basenspiler.

TS: Okay. Well, Cindi, why don't we start out by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born, where you're from, and when you were born?

CB: Okay. I was born in 1970 and I was born in Murom, Russia, to parents and I had one brother and we lived in Murom, Russia, for about a year and a half.

TS: Okay.

CB: And I had an emergency appendectomy; my appendix burst. And I also had pneumonia in the hospital and so—

TS: When you were born?

CB: When I was one and a half.

TS: Oh my gosh.

CB: And so that caused me to move from Murom, which is a very, kind of, cold climate, to live with my grandmother in Baku, Russia, at the time, which is Azerbaijan, near the Caspian Sea. And so my grandmother raised me from the time I was one and a half until I was seven.

TS: Did you have contact with your parents and your sibling?
[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: I didn't. I didn't.

TS: No?

CB: There might have been; I don't recall it. I went to school and my grandmother raised me and that was all I remember. And then when I was seven, my parents came and got me, and they had been in line with the government for a visa to travel and we actually had—we—we established refugee status and traveled. My father was Jewish and he had had difficulty getting employment and had been in line for five years.

And so, at seven my parents came and said, "We're your parents and, by the way, we're going to America."

TS: Oh, my gosh.

CB: And so, we spent the next year kind of in refugee status through Italy, Vienna, and then ended up in New York City. And at the time, the Jewish hub in the United States during the Cold War was Houston, Texas, so that's where we ended up when I was seven and a half.

TS: I was going to say, so you were about—you were seven then?

CB: I was.

TS: Yes, or it would have been 1977 too.

CB: Nineteen seventy-seven, right.

TS: Okay, interesting. Well, do you remember anything about the time when you were being raised by your grandmother? What do you remember about that period?

CB: I do. My grandmother's very strict. She was a—She was a teacher, and when I reflect on, kind of, how I am, there's only just my brother and my parents, and my brother's very much like my parents and I am very much not like my parents. And so, my grandmother's very resourceful, very stern, and very, kind of, planning for the future always and making sure that she always landed on her feet. And so, all I remember is going to school and being very strict, and doing my homework, and not a lot of fun time.

And then so my parents came and got me, and during the time that we went it was just your worldly possessions, so you did not travel with money or possessions, and so all I recall is I had a math book and a couple of changes of clothes and we arrived in America and no one spoke any English.

TS: None—Nobody in your family did?

CB: No one spoke—it's—it's not like right now.

TS: Right.

CB: Right now English is kind of a forcibly taught language in every school in any kind of first world, second world country, but at the time, nobody spoke English and so we were put into a—I was put into the third grade because that's—that's my age, and my brother was put into the fourth grade.

TS: And this was in Texas?

CB: And this was in Houston, Texas.

TS: Houston, Texas. Well, what was that like? What do you remember about that?

CB: I think many of us at this age remember things that probably would have landed my parents in jail for being the latchkey kids and—and—

TS: Sure.

CB: —really being left unattended—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: It's a different world though now.

CB: —for long periods of time. [chuckling] I remember learning English through watching *All My Children* [American television soap opera], because you'd go to school and I didn't understand, really, the language, but I had absolutely no difficulty with mathematics. And so, I remember school in Russia starts at seven so I'd only been to school for six months, skipped a year, and now I was in third grade.

And so, they gave me a math book and I remember sitting in the back and cruising through the first grade math and second grade and third grade and fourth grade and fifth grade, just based on my six months of training in Russia. But literature and social studies and all of that, kind of, escaped me, probably, until the next couple of years.

TS: Well, it's interesting that you said that you came with a math book. Now, how—How was that? Did it just happen that way or did you take it?

CB: I think I—Probably that was one of the things that came naturally to me and—but—but the school—the school couldn't find any other topics that I was good at because I spoke no English.

TS: Oh.

CB: And so, they gave me a math book and said I could be amused in the back and I can just cruise through that.

TS: [chuckles] But I mean when you left Russia.

CB: When I—That's all I remember having. You know—

TS: Yeah.

CB: —I moved so much in the military and I've moved since the military, after a while your—your memories get a little fuzzy.

TS: That's true.

CB: But I do; that's what I remember, is having a book or two and a couple changes of clothes and just going from country to country.

TS: Did you stay in touch with your grandmother at all?

CB: I did. My grandmother came one year after we did, so she came in the late seventies and she lived, kind of, in or around our area for a—for a bit, and then ended up moving to Brooklyn, where she lived the next twenty-five years. And I actually was the primary caretaker for her for probably the last five, six, seven years.

TS: Is that right?

CB: Because I really did—I really did connect with her quite a bit.

TS: Well, it's your formative years.

CB: Right.

TS: She raised you, right?

CB: That's right.

TS: Wow. So how were you different from your parents and your sibling; your brother?

CB: Well, my mom and my dad and my brother have a tendency to, kind of, live in the moment and they all—they deal with, kind of, life's issues on a much more social, typical Russian "Let's have a drink and let's talk it out." I've always been somewhat of a hoarder and a planner and today is fine but there is a tomorrow and you need to plan for it, and I always need to be in control so I [chuckles] always have to have that plan, and so that's much more like my grandmother. My grandmother lived until she was ninety-three years old and she was self-sufficient, on her own two feet, and living in her own apartment.

TS: The whole time.

CB: The whole time.

TS: Yeah, that's terrific. When you're in Houston and you initially start school you—you're learning the language from *All My Children*, is that what you said? [both chuckle]

CB: Yes.

TS: And how are your—How were you doing in school then?

CB: I recall once I engaged in school and once I picked up English enough I remember being very engaged in mathematics but not so much in your social studies and your literature and those kinds of things; those things never came really. I had a little bit of an attention span issue and so it was very—I was either very challenged and too—or too challenged or not challenged enough. I actually struggled through middle school, got into quite a bit of trouble, and I recall being suspended a couple of times. [chuckles]

TS: What kind of trouble would you get in?

CB: I would question the teacher. So I was always the one that said, "You've just said something and I don't see it in the textbook so can you please explain where you got that?" And maybe not in such a polite way [both chuckle] as ten year-olds typically don't have, so I remember we had paddling back then.

TS: Yes.

CB: I remember—I remember being that person outside and being taught a thing or two. But by the time I hit high school I straightened up and my grades were—were good and I knew—I knew I was preparing for college so I knew—

TS: You did.

CB: —I had to get it out of my system.

TS: Well, what—Did you have any teachers in the younger years that you looked at as a mentor at any point?

CB: Absolutely. There's probably one formative teacher. When I ended up in—So we moved around; as children we moved around. We stayed in Houston, Texas, for four years, which probably didn't help my—my school entrenchment any, right?

TS: Oh, right.

CB: So four years in Houston, two years in Minnesota, three years in Illinois, and then I ended up in Alabama is where I went to college. But where I went to high school, I spent three years out of a four year high school and the math teacher there could see that I had a unique way of learning, so I was always the person in geometry that—that had the proof, that maybe had three extra steps and took it in a completely different direction, but I got the answer.

And so, she saw something in me so she would double me up on the math courses, and so I was that kid that had geometry, and advanced algebra and then pre-calculus and calculus, and I always really admired her for that because I could have really easily been that kid that was—would get done with my test and then was causing trouble. And so, I, to this day—Her name was Mrs. Kirsten[?] and she was in DeKalb High School [Illinois].

TS: She kept you, like, focused on it too.

CB: She did. Well, she found a way to alternatively channel my energy, whereas most people would either put you in an advanced course or a—or a—or detention.

TS: Right, right. You said you knew—Did you know by the time you were getting into high school that you wanted to go to college, or—

CB: I did.

TS: Yeah.

CB: I did. So really, if the records exist, sixth through eighth grade were really tough for me because, I mean, really, it was the third school for me and we—I lived in Houston in a very impoverished Russian immigrant version of—so there wasn't a lot of attentiveness. My parents both worked and I could have very easily gone in a different direction, but when I moved to—By the time I went to Illinois I really felt like those records would stay with me, and I don't know how I could have possibly known that, but when I was fifteen and in high school I did well.

TS: Did something just turn?

CB: Something turned. I never missed class, I never piped up and—and I just accomplished and I went to work—I worked part-time in the evenings—and so I had really positively channeled my time.

TS: Did you have a sense of, like, what possible future you could have?

CB: I don't think I did. I mean, I can tell you my mother has a four-year degree from Russia; my father has a Ph.D. And so, it's not that my parents were uneducated, and so as far as the intellect and the cognitive ability we were—we were never uneducated. We lived in parts of the city where it's unlikely there are other Ph.Ds as our neighbors but I always had that, kind of—that intellect in my family. My grandmother was a teacher, and so I don't think it was ever a question that I was going to go to college because it was unheard of.

TS: Well, but it was a lot harder for your parents when they came over, I'm sure, to get a position commensurate with their education.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: Absolutely, absolutely. And, in fact, my father went to work for NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration]. I think he was some sort of entry-level position. My mother went to Brown & Root, she was a—she did drafting. Drafting back then, women weren't in that field and it's since been replaced by AutoCAD and everything.

TS: Right.

CB: So back then when it was by hand, engineering—

TS: Yes.

CB: And so, they worked their way up. My father ended up putting his Ph.D. to use. He was a professor at three different universities and he spent his last ten, fifteen years working for the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] as a GS-14 [U.S. civil service general schedule pay scale] so he caught up, although it was a fight.

TS: Right.

CB: It was a fight, and it took him the entire twenty-five years that he was here.

TS: Right, right. Well, so—Now, in—Besides just being a troublemaker in school sometimes [chuckles], what'd you do for fun, like, in Houston and Minnesota you said, right? And Illinois? I forget.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: You know—

TS: Did you do it—

CB: When I reflect back on my younger years, I think I—and this is—this is kind of the journey that I think I've gone through in this job, is that I've been reading a lot about post-traumatic stress, and so I think what likely happened in my youth is I watched my parents go through a really, really tough time. Coming as a young couple with two small children from all of their connections and worldly possessions into a year of chaotic abyss and then re-emerging in a country that didn't really want them, right?

So as an eight year-old going through that, by the time I was thirteen, fourteen, I think that affected me and the amount of stress in our family, and the amount of day to day, kind of, conflict of—I don't think there was a lot of fun to be had.

TS: Yes.

CB: And so, I think I acted out in school because whatever I was going through, whether it was anxiety or—typical children, it's hard to switch school to school, but when you go through that much chaos I think—I think it affected me on a—on a very—"Okay, I'm now in charge of my life and I really have to put all my ducks in a row." So what I recall, there wasn't a lot of fun. There might have been kickball out in the—in the front lawn, but I worked when I was eleven; I worked weekends; I worked at a—

TS: Where did you work?

CB: Peppermint Park. I'm not sure it was legal back then.

TS: [chuckles]

CB: But it was a place called Peppermint Park and I would work there 10:00 [a.m.] to 4:00 [p.m.] Saturdays and 10:00 to 4:00 on Sundays. And so, I would make fifty dollars over the course of the weekend. And I did video games. I was a child of the eighties so I did a lot of video games. And then I worked at twelve, and at thirteen, and at sixteen I worked in high school as a waitress.

And so, I always had this, "I'm going to consume every piece of my time being productive," it—when I straightened up.

TS: Right. Yeah, that sounds like definitely you might have gotten that from your grandmother too.

CB: Right.

TS: From always having to get some things together.

CB: Right.

TS: Well, so when you're in school, and you're getting close to graduating high school, and you're just—and you're in Alabama at that time or—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: No.

TS: —not yet?

CB: I graduated high school in DeKalb, Illinois.

TS: Oh, DeKalb, Illinois, okay. And so, then, when you're thinking about what—where you're going to go for college what—How did you end up in Alabama?

CB: So my father, over the course of climbing up this—"What's the best job I can get?" he was a professor at Winona [State University], Minnesota; that's why we moved there. He was a professor at Northern Illinois University; that's why we moved there. And when I was eighteen, and in June—in June of my graduation month he went to the University of South Alabama. So being eighteen, we weren't the kind of—we weren't the trust fund college fund babies, so I went with him. So the whole family relocated and I started in Mobile, at the Univers—University of South Alabama simply because that's where the family moved.

TS: Good. Did you know what you were going to do; like, what your major—Did you, like, stick on that and stay with it all the way through or?

CB: I wish I could say that I did. I—

TS: Not many people do, so.

CB: I went—I mean, I feel like I should have been one of those people. I majored in math and I was convinced I was going to be that math teacher that was going to make a difference in people's lives. And what I realized, whether it's correct or not, but this is how it sorted out in my head, is that because I took Calculus I in high school—which was a rarity, like, most people, they get through advanced algebra—I talked my way through not having to take it in college, but their version must have been more sophisticated than my version so I took Calculus II as an eighteen year-old girl, and then Calculus III, and then Calculus IV, and then I just didn't—I just lost it along the way.

Somehow I didn't get the formative, formulaic methods in my head, and by the time I got to Calculus IV I literally was probably the only female in these classes. There was quite a bit of, kind of—element of Slavic and Middle Eastern people in this cl—I just

felt like a—as an eighteen year-old girl you notice those things probably more than you would as now and I really felt like I was out of my element. I really—It became less about being a high school teacher in math and more about why am I here and I just didn't—

TS: Didn't seem like the right place.

CB: It didn't seem like the right place, and so after the first year I switched majors and I was probably the most—I probably had the most math of a—In the end I graduated with a liberal arts degree, but then after that I went to computer science, so it was math and computer science. And I took classes like Pascal [programming language] and C+ and assembler[?], and really at the end of that year I looked around and it was many of the same kinds of folks. [chuckles] And really I, again, felt out of my element. I felt like I was working really hard at every class; it didn't come naturally to me, so.

TS: But are you enjoying college? Are you having a good time?

CB: So I think in the—in the midst of all of this I—my father had encouraged me to sign up for ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps].

TS: Oh, in the middle—so—

CB: And so, before my—

TS: Okay.

CB: So as I'm eighteen years old and I'm enrolling, I think that he being a professor, had understood and learned that ROTCs had scholarships. And so, again, not being a family of means, he said, "Go and get this scholarship," right, "so that you can get your school paid for." So my very first semester in college I started ROTC.

TS: Oh, right at the beginning.

CB: Right at the beginning. And so—Now, it was never anything I dreamed of. I really—I'd never thought of it in high school.

TS: More like a pragmatic solution to economic issues?

CB: Exactly, and so this was in—This really wasn't my economic issue, it was my father's. [both laugh]

TS: Right, okay.

CB: Right, so—because I was living under his roof and at the time I was like any other entitled teenager; I just assumed that it was going to be paid for. So I enrolled in ROTC,

and so as I'm going through math what had happened was I had to sign up on the dotted line and say, "This is my major and this is what I want my scholarship for."

And so, the way that things happened, I really excelled at ROTC. I really—despite the fact that I didn't know it—what it meant, I could run faster than most girls and I could do push-ups and my sheer willpower and ability to, kind of, get over any kind of dialogue that was happening in my head really put me as one of the leaders. And so, of course, what eighteen year-old girl could not benefit from that?

TS: What—About what year is this then?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: This is '88.

TS: Eighty-eight.

CB: So this is the—
S
TS: When you're starting—

CB: —fall of '88.

TS: Okay.

CB: So at the time then I was in ROTC and I had to sign on the dotted line and I was struggling through math and I really didn't—If I put math, then I get the scholarship based on math and then I'd have to stick with it four years. So I opted at that point to say, "I'm not going to take the scholarship because I don't know what I want to do." And so I actually did a year of Army ROTC and they sent me—Because I was really physically fit, and I suspect there were quotas in the back to send women occasionally to these schools, they sent me to Airborne School.

And so, here I am, I had just turned nineteen and I—and back then—I don't know what the demographics are now, but there were probably out of a class of five hundred, twenty-five women, maybe. And so, here I was, and I was al—I guess I never let it defeat me that I probably was not built to do the things that I was supposed to be doing there.

TS: Did you go to Fort Bragg [Fayetteville, North Carolina]?

CB: [Fort] Benning [Columbus, Georgia].

TS: Oh, you went—Benning, okay.

CB: Yes. And so—So here it is the middle of the summer, I'm nineteen, long hair, I'm a girly-girl, and it was an experience. It was—It was kind of this—On the one hand you have no doubt, people just making comments and—and just—

TS: Harassing you.

CB: Harassing and predatory. And on the other hand you just have these people who were, like, you're a kid sister, "Go, you can do it." And it was—it was a mix of I could handle harassment and I really just—I really welled up with pride when people were—were rooting for me. And I just—I remember—It was one of my formative experiences. I was very tiny as it was, and I lost probably eight pounds in the span of three weeks because I couldn't eat quick enough and in the harassment and the drop for push-ups and it was—It wasn't a negative kind of thing as I was going through, I really felt like everybody was—I guess back then—naively—I was thinking everybody's trying to make me be—make me better, right?

TS: Right.

CB: And so I just remember getting through that and being so incredibly proud that I had done this, right? And so between that year and the next year, then, I said, "I don't—I can't really take the scholarship. I don't want to do math." So I did Air Force ROTC. So I went to the other side and I did a year of Air Force ROTC and I really didn't—I didn't connect with what they were teaching. It's mainly aviation history and doctrine, whereas in the army it's building tents and the things that they were teaching you, right? It was much more fun.

TS: I see, okay.

CB: It was much more fun.

TS: So it's like doctrine for the air force and it's—

CB: Exactly.

TS: —what are—how are you going to work, sort of thing.

CB: Exa—It's hands-on and it's fun and you—at least, that's the approach the ROTC instructors—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Interesting, okay. So that was—And had you had any experiences like that before? Had you been camping or—

CB: None.

TS: Okay.

CB: None. So I really was—I really was thirsty for it and I felt like the people who dealt with me were optimistic, in that they didn't have to work as hard with me, because I—like, I guess I had a natural leadership capability, so no matter what it gave me I was able to rise to it. So I felt like—and this is probably terrible to [unclear]—but I felt like I was their quota female but I performed well. Like, they put me into things because they had to, and then I really did feel like at the end they didn't regret it, if that makes sense.

TS: Well, did you ever find later, though, that a lot of times you're given responsibility in the—in the service that you're like, "I don't know if I can do this," and then you do have that support and then you're, like, "Oh, okay."

CB: Absolutely.

TS: Maybe it started even back then.

CB: Absolutely.

TS: Yeah.

CB: No, I mean, absolutely in ROTC, and what I felt was, as long as I gave it my all, which I never shied away from, what I found were people either who were already there to support me or people who I turned to support me. Right? So, people who said—I really felt, I think, informally, that I was carrying on my shoulders the burden of not setting women back, right? If I didn't succeed in something that someone gave me a chance to do, then I would be setting back another woman's opportunity to do whatever it was.

TS: Right.

CB: If that makes—

TS: Right. I think you're not the only woman that's felt that way. Where—Whereas a man, if he fails he's seen as an individual. If a woman fails, it's her whole gender.

CB: Right.

TS: Yeah.

CB: And I think that at the time it probably was very stressful and very anxious but I think I probably wouldn't have done half the stuff I did if I didn't have that additional pressure on me. And when I reflect on it—now I have bad knees and bad wrists and degenerating

discs—there's—there's no doubt that me blending[?] for ten years, carrying fifty pounds on my back, running fifteen miles in combat boots fairly regularly, has damaged my body.

But when I reflect back on it I don't regret it for a second because I felt like I was one of the guys. I was one of the guys, I was able to be myself, and I was—I was able to learn from a group of people that wouldn't normally take women in and allow them to be one of them. And that was more important to me than any kind of pain I was going through.

TS: You said—When you're describing the men that—like, you had people—men—who—who were like brothers.

CB: Absolutely.

TS: And then the other ones that were more harassing were—how did you—would you characterize them?

CB: I think later in life I came to see them a little more predatory than I did initially. I think at that point it—there were just people who would have preferred to see me stumble; who, in their paradigm, it would have made more sense if I wasn't there. And it was one of those—I didn't even see that as a threat. I really felt like that if—if I could just do my own thing eventually they would go away.

And I really didn't—I was very naïve back then, and when I look at it through the lens of ten years later in the military I'm glad. I'm glad I was naïve about it because it didn't mess with my head. It didn't—I never thought that there were people rooting for me not to make it. I really—I felt like the overarching theme was, honestly, as long as I worked as hard as I could, as long as I left it all out on the field, that there were people who genuinely wanted me to succeed. They forgot whether I was a woman or a man; I was one of the team.

And I didn't see that with all women. I definitely saw the women who felt[?] prey and victim, and I saw people that were going to be that woman soldier for the rest of time. I was just a soldier and I felt proud of that. I felt like I never had to justify why was I there that day.

TS: Right.

CB: And part of that is probably based on the wrong foundation, but I like the way it played out. [both chuckle]

TS: Well, naiveté—

CB: Sure.

TS: —is something that is—

CB: Ignorance is bliss.

TS: That's right, it is at times, I agree. Well, okay, so you're enjoying this. Now, you got your wings?

CB: I got my wings.

TS: Okay.

CB: I went to Air Force ROTC; did not care for that.

TS: Okay.

CB: And then I came back to Army ROTC and they were not as pleased to see me the second time around because they'd done all the paperwork for the first scholarship.

TS: And you left and you came back.

CB: I left, I came back, and so what I told them was this, I said, "I'm back. I really, really am back," and I think I might have had to do a little bit of convincing. So at the time, I—Now I was on my own at nineteen. I left—I left after my freshman year from my parents; we had our parting of ways.

And so, now I'm paying for school and I'm paying for my house and car and I am—from my grandmother's days I'm debt-adverse, so I'm not on any loans and I'm literally working forty hours a week. And so, couldn't make ends meet and I enlisted. And so, that's the time then I went through basic training and AIT [Advanced Individual Training] as an enlisted person in the National Guard, and that was a very calculated decision. Again, when I reflect back on it I think I might have been smarter back then than I am now. [both chuckle]

It was the shortest MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] that I could go through; the shortest school for the highest enlistment bonus that I could do over the summertime.

TS: Did you study to find that—to find that out?

CB: I did.

TS: Did you?

CB: I did, because I didn't want to take eight years to get through college, but I was falling short every month and I was starting to get into debt. And back then school wasn't very expensive. You could live on probably—school, a modest rental, and a car payment or whatever—for ten thousand dollars a year; that's what I recall is the magic number.

And so, working as a waitress I wasn't quite making that and so I enlisted and what that opened up for me is it opened the GI Bill, which at the time was very modest. I

think it was a hundred ninety dollars a month. I went to drill pay, so once—once a month I would go and I would drill and that was another couple hundred dollars, and then they gave me that enlistment bonus, so that really—it was enough. And then what it also did was it showed the ROTC folks that I was serious, and I actually knew that I could work in parallel then and become—go back into ROTC and be enlisted, kind of, by day on the—on the weekends and be ROTC in training for officer [unclear].

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Really? Okay, I didn't know you could do that.

CB: You could. Now, there was one chink in that little bit of a journey because—the timing.

TS: Yes.

CB: I was literally in AI—so there's basic and that's ten weeks, which is a whole other story.

TS: What was the MOS that you chose?

CB: It was [U.S. Army] 88 November [88N; Transportation Management Coordinator] so it's the—I can't remember—It's the liaison between army and air force in time of deployment. It's not a truck driver. You have to have scores, right? You take your test, your ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery], so you actually had to have one of the highest scores to get into this MOS and it was a five and a half week AIT in ten weeks, so I was only out of commission for four—four months.

And so, I went to basic training and I had already—because I had my airborne wings and I had college credits, I was a private first class, which is high—the highest you can go in into basic training. And so, naturally, they made me lead everything. In that environment, in and of itself, was interesting because I had grown accustomed to being with college educated ROTC folks and basic training is a little bit different. So you have a lot of people who have a high school degree, and in—invariably there are some who are running away from something, and there's some who are there for the college money, but typically they're not college educated. And it was a different environment for me, and then I was in charge. So I was among the youngest, right, because I'm nineteen and I'm in charge of twenty, thirty year-old women and it's shared showers and wicked cold and exacerbatingly hot, and so I learned a whole new side of myself there and—

TS: What did you learn?

CB: I always felt like it's good to, kind of, be the leader when everybody's, kind of, designed to be learning to be a leader. It's not as fun being a leader when everybody's okay being a follower. And, in fact, they kind of resent you as being a leader. And so, I had to, I endured some—I mean, I felt fear for my safety at times, because I had to make some

decisions as a nineteen year-old to keep the platoon—I, in essence—I made a lot of decisions behind the scenes that the drill sergeants expected you—so you see the drill sergeants with the hats and they're yelling at people, right, and everybody just abides by those rules.

But what you don't see is the behind the scenes at night and on—the shifts for the watches and all that. There's someone that's making that decision and that's—that was me. I don't have the hat; I don't have the authority; I don't have the rank. And so, leading peers was a—and peers that are older and more life-educated, it was a—

TS: You said you were, kind of, fearful of, like, your physical safety?

CB: Yeah.

TS: Well, what did you think—what—Did anything happen or did you have threats made against you?

CB: I had threats.

TS: Okay.

CB: I had threats. And again, I was kind of like the hall monitor. So back then we couldn't have candy, and I had to do these checks where I'd have to check underneath people's mattresses and—and so again, you can imagine, kind of, a—almost a frail 105 pound girl with the rank and the wings, and I'm having to report that there's candy underneath someone's mattress, and so there's the—"Am I loyal to these people? Am I loyal to the drill sergeants? What am here for? I'm not—I'm not going to continue on in my career with this," right? "This is just a step for me." So in the back of my mind I'm an academic about this, right? I've just got to get through this.

And so, I had to—I had to sort all that out because for that ten weeks it didn't matter. I had to blend and I had to be a leader of these women who had to believe in me and they had to protect me and I had to protect them, and so I had to win over in different kind of leadership than I was accustomed to, right? It truly was. It wasn't what my title or what my rank was, it was how I behaved and how I made requests and—and—

TS: Did you have—Was it in the negotiation that you didn't expect—that there would be, like, this negotiation—

CB: Yeah.

TS: — to kind of help you—

CB: I was an arrogant nineteen year old cadet—

TS: [chuckles] Yeah.

CB: —who was in the enlisted ranks. I mean, it's like a—Yeah, I had to learn that—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Lead and you follow, right? But it wasn't like that at all.

CB: Exactly, exactly. And so—I mean, I made it through and it taught me a lot about myself, because ROTC, when you're there, it's an artificial environment, right? They're protecting you. You are—They've sunk money into you, right, and you're one of the future officers, and nobody cares about that in basic training; like, nobody cares about that. [chuckles]

And so, I had to—Yeah, I had to get over myself fairly quickly, and I had to continue to do what's right for the platoon but then also have that hall monitor hat, and so I had to—I had to learn some negotiations. And I remember having some heated discussions and I remember—I remember literally thinking I had to keep my eye open while I'm in the shower here. I—And that's not a good place to be.

TS: No.

CB: Because day in and day out, right?

TS: Right.

CB: [chuckles] There's no—

TS: You have to sleep—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: [unclear] about it.

TS: —in the same—like, was it open bays?

CB: Well, as—as the—and I ca—I think—I want to say my title was platoon guide. As a platoon guide I had—There were two of us in one barrack and then everybody else was in rooms of, like, ten, but the doors—there are no doors, there are no locks. [both chuckle]

TS: Right.

CB: There's a lot you can do to—And again—

TS: But you got it through unscathed?

CB: I got through and—

TS: Okay.

CB: It's interesting. But again, it was one of those—I could do a fair amount of the activities by just getting over it, but there was one activity you had to pass; you had to do weaponry. You had to shoot certain targets within a certain level of accuracy. You had to do a physical training test: push-ups, sit-ups, run. And then you had to throw a grenade, and for whatever reason I could not throw a grenade to save my life. I was the typical girl throwing the grenade, and so I had to do—I had a drill sergeant take me under his wing and we would work on it.

And again, I've been in situations there where you depend on a leadership—on a male leader, and it could have gone the wrong way, but he worked with me and was able to coach me on his own time and I was able to pass that one piece, otherwise I would have—I would have not made it through, for the most ridiculous reason, right?

TS: Right. Well—But you'd never had that kind of experience with that.

CB: Exactly.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: With throwing something.

CB: It's not like I was a softball player.

TS: Right.

CB: [chuckles]

TS: But the running was okay, the push-ups, that kind—

CB: Every—Everything else I'd already prepared for in the year that I'd done ROTC, and so I came out unscathed and then I went to the AIT, which is the individual training, and that's when [Operation] Desert Storm kicked off, and they were literally taking platoons—This was November—September, October, November of—

TS: Ninety-one?

CB: —of '90, '91, and they were—So here's my plan, right? I have calculated it all out. I'm going to go to basic and I'm going to go to AIT, I'm going to skip four months of school and I'm going to come back, and they were taking platoons straight off to war. And so,

there was a moment there where I thought my plan had not worked out so good. [chuckles]

TS: Right. But did you—

CB: I didn't—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: You didn't have to deploy?

CB: I did not deploy. And so—And if I would have it would have turned out fine but it was just that that moment of—you put out your plan.

TS: Well, you said from the very beginning you were a planner, so.

CB: I was very—I was very calculated.

TS: [chuckles] Yeah.

CB: Don't like surprises.

TS: So if something gets—throws a—a wrench into it.

CB: Exactly.

TS: Yeah.

CB: Exactly. And so, then I came back and I rejoined ROTC and I did the second year of army ROTC, and at this point I took no scholarship so they knew I was serious because I was—I was putting myself through school, I had had the [National] Guard to supplement. And so, there I went. I worked—I worked forty hours a week. My typical day in school was, woke up at 5:30 [a.m.], by 6:00 I was on the field running PT [physical training]. And in my last two years in ROTC I had a leadership position so I always had to be there a few minutes early. So 5:30, 6:00 to 7:30 was physical training, and typically class was 8:00 to 4:00 because I had to catch up some time because I had missed a semester. So 8:00 to 4:00 was class and 4:30 to midnight I would wait tables, and this was every single day. My—

TS: But you're young. [chuckles]

CB: But I'm young. I'm young, and I don't think I even needed coffee at the time. And so it—that's what I—that's what I really did. I did the second year of ROTC, went to camp in

between, and then the third year was when you decide your branch, and so I did fairly well. Again, it was something about the ROTC that made me be the best that I—that I could be. So then I was able to choose aviation. I don't know why, I'd never played with airplanes or auto—

TS: Really?

CB: Never. Never—nothing mechanical.

TS: So you don't—You didn't have a plan for why you chose aviation?

CB: Oh, I had a plan. So the plan—So again, once this is captured in "foreverness"—

TS: [chuckles]

CB: So the way aviation worked back then in the early nineties is that you had to have 20\20 vision. There were quite a few physical things that could kick you out. So if you had 20\20 vision and your arm span and your height and your every—so once you measured out, there were a bunch of people that couldn't do it, right?

TS: Because you have to fit in the—

CB: You have to fit in the cockpit; you have to be able to reach and touch all the buttons. And so there were physical limitations there so a bunch of people didn't qualify that way. So 20\20 obviously kicked people out. Then you had to have good grades. You had to—You had to do well in all elements of ROTC, because everybody that was left wanted aviation. Literally everybody was—because *Top Gun* [1986 American action drama film]. And so at the time, I just wanted—I wanted the best thing that was available [unclear].

TS: You wanted to be a pilot?

CB: I wanted to do the thing that—that was the most sexy at the time.

TS: And that was be a pilot?

CB: And that was be a pilot.

TS: Okay.

CB: So I applied, and at the time ROTC was quite difficult to produce [sic] an aviator because [United States Military Academy] West Point [New York] and the academies received most of those slots, so I was very fortunate and got a—an aviation slot for meeting all of the thresholds. And so I was—I was high on life but didn't really know what it meant.

TS: [chuckles]

CB: And—Because I was analytically and mathematically inclined, which is another way you can get yourself, kind of, weeded out, if you can't process analytically, right? You had to take a bunch of tests as well.

TS: Right.

CB: So it was an honor for me to be offered it but I didn't do a lot of analytics of what it really meant.

TS: This was a goal and you were going to try to—

CB: Absolutely.

TS: —do these steps to get there.

CB: Yes.

TS: Okay. Well, let me back you up for a second and ask you what your family thought about this—your trajectory into the army now. And your friends, too.

CB: Most of my friends were ROTC and so we became quite close, and so we were all on the same path. When you work that hard and you sweat that hard, it—we— we were all rooting for each other. I worked forty hours a week. I didn't have friends outside of ROTC so it was—it was just those folks.

My parents, I don't think they fully understand it. We had, kind of, grown apart at that time. My father is much more traditionalist so he was never the type that I could call up and say, "I'm struggling with this." I think one day I did and he said, "You know, why don't you find a profession that's a little bit more in line with a feminine kind of way." It was something along those lines. So I really—I think he's—I think they're extremely proud now but I don't think they could get their head around what that might be like. As Russian immigrants they would have never had an opportunity to do this.

TS: Right.

CB: So this is really foreign.

TS: Now, did your dad serve in the Soviet army at all?

CB: He did not. No.

TS: Did any of your grandparents?

CB: No. Well, my grandfather did; my father's father did and he was killed in World War II.

TS: Oh, he was?

CB: Yes.

TS: Oh, so that's why your grandmother was on her own?

CB: Yes.

TS: I see, okay. So she had been on her own since World War II?

CB: She had been on her own, I guess, since my father was one or two years old and never remarried.

TS: I see. Well, that tells you something about the grit she had to—

CB: Absolutely.

TS: —come up with to get—

CB: Absolutely.

TS: — through that period.

CB: Well, and I think my father had a skewed life of—of what—He was an only child and so I think that his—his perspective on what I was going to do was unfathomable. I mean, he's highly educated but I don't—he's not from—

TS: The culture is different.

CB: The culture is different.

TS: Yeah.

CB: Exactly.

TS: Right.

CB: And so, I wouldn't say they supported or didn't support, I think it was just kind of on the sidelines. My brother was a Marine. He was in the Marine Reserves at seventeen and eighteen, and he and I did our ROTC together initially.

TS: Oh, you did?

CB: Yes.

TS: What was that like?

CB: My brother's quite different, right, so—

TS: Exactly.

CB: And so, he gleaned completely different things than I did and so he wasn't serious as I was, and I just continued on and he kind of dropped it, but I think it was—it was formative for him. It made him much more serious [unclear].

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Did it give him some structure?

CB: It did. It gave him the structure that—and I think maybe that from the sidelines—because he was—he was older and I watched him go through this a little bit before I did—I think maybe that—that impacted me some.

TS: To see how he struggled a little with it at first, or—

CB: That he came back different.

TS: I see.

CB: Because Marine boot camp is quite different. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah. Well, he's not dealing with all those women in the barracks either, so.

CB: Exact—

TS: Watching his back. [laughs]

CB: Exactly. It's different, yeah. Different for different reasons.

TS: Right. That's right. Okay, so you—you've finished your ROTC, right?

CB: Yes.

TS: And you are being commissioned?

CB: Correct. So I received a regular army commission, which means the day that I rec—the day that I received my diploma I go regular army.

TS: Okay.

CB: [unclear]

TS: So not reserve, you're just regular army.

CB: No, regular army.

TS: Okay, and when was that, ninety—

CB: Three.

TS: Ninety—

CB: So it was June 3, June 5, '93.

TS: Okay. Now, did you do your aviation training after that or before that or—

CB: After.

TS: Okay.

CB: So everything is after; everything is contingent on you getting a bachelor's degree.

TS: So you got the slot, and then now you're in the regular army.

CB: Correct.

TS: Active duty, I should say.

CB: Active duty.

TS: Because you were in the army.

CB: Right, so you kind of resign your enlistment commitment for the National Guard, and then you kind of swap it out for the regular army officer.

TS: [chuckles] Okay.

CB: Yes, it was a happy day.

TS: Was it? [both laugh]

CB: "Woohoo. I'm going to rule the world."

TS: Now—So you go to—Where'd you tell me you went to training for that?

CB: Well, I—So the timing—

TS: Okay.

CB: The way the timing lined up I didn't go straight to flight school, what I did was—

TS: Okay.

CB: The West Point folks received the slots and first dibs on flight school so I had three months to kill, so literally the day I get commissioned I beco—I go active duty. I went to Fort Knox to be a platoon leader for other ROTC cadets, so—I can't remember what the technical term is.

TS: That's okay.

CB: But these are—These are cadets that, unlike me, didn't do the whole four year program but in the second year said, "I'm interested in ROTC." They have some catching up to do so they go to these camps. And so, it's an eight-week camp, and so they put a brand new second lieutenant like myself and then a sergeant together and we train them over the course of eight weeks to catch up what they missed.

TS: Kind of whip them into shape, sort of.

CB: Whip them into shape, correct.

TS: How did—Did you enjoy that?

CB: Yeah, it was—it was interesting because I was ready. I'm done with college; I'm ready to move on with the rest of my life and flight school. So it's—It was a little bit of a side step and it was—it was fine. I mean, I certainly—I've always enjoyed being around people who were just as driven and for whom you can make an impact in their lives, and so if one conversation or one leader by example makes a difference—So there are always those folks and there was just the really non-serious cadets that we just had to—We just had to get them through, right? So I enjoyed the portion where I could—I could really have some meaningful impact on the course of these folks, to decide whether they wanted to do this or not. But it was—it was one of those—I just had to get through it.

TS: Now, was it a mixed gender?

CB: Yes.

TS: Okay.

CB: It was—It was essentially an ROTC class but they didn't have the first year worth of training.

TS: Okay. Well, I wanted to ask you too—so when you were commissioned and when you're going through this whole process of the different aspects of being in the army, what is your end goal? Because I know you have a plan. [both chuckle]

CB: The end goal, I would say, I always felt that I didn't have it from personal experience but I could imagine that us being in the United States, my whole family had a better life. I mean, I—We didn't stay in touch with the family in Russia, and I always felt a debt of gratitude for our entire family, and so one way to repay that was to serve.

And I've always been someone who feels like I could potentially impact the world in a positive way; like, I had the naïveté I could, right? I had the elements where I'm kind of a leader, and, like, I'm kind of resilient and I overcome things and when I reflect back on my life it's—it's been a—it's pretty successful. And so, I thought that I could apply that and I could, kind of, change the world from the military side of it. So I really did feel like I was going to get in and I was going to help and change the world in a positive way. I didn't go in just to go for two years or five years or a—It was going to be a career. I—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Initially, even from the beginning.

CB: It was—It was initially—

TS: Okay.

CB: —from—for a career.

TS: Okay. So you're at Fort Knox and then you finally get to—

CB: [U.S. Army] Fort Rucker [Alabama]. So then I go to Fort Rucker and I—

TS: Fort Rucker, that's right.

CB: —and then I attended flight school. My class was, I want to say, sixty-three people and there were, I want to say, three women. And so, predominately West Point guys—guys, literally—and then there were—there were three of us that were women. And so, that course was about nine months.

TS: Tell me about that a little; what was that experience like? What was the most challenging part of that experience and what was the most rewarding?

CB: Challenging for me was—I was again in an environment where it's a bunch of peers, and you naturally have positions where because of economies of scale they—they can't be one leader, so they're always training you to be leader of leaders. And so, in that environment I had to learn more of how to navigate and negotiate with peers because I didn't—my personality—and I know this—I don't go into things to compete and I seldom compete with other people; I'm competing with myself. So I'm overcoming my own little obstacles of—"I'm afraid of heights. Well, let me go do this."

I'm a—And so, I know it appears as if it's aloof and it may appear as if I don't take as much time for the social graces, because I just—I won't allow myself to miss an opportunity because I'm screwing around. That's always been my—So what you get is you—You have in this particular environment, you have a disproportionate amount of West Pointers who have been locked up for four years and they have a pretty good amount—and I'm generalizing, but they have a pretty good amount of, like, structure to get rid of.

If you remember your—my background is one of choices and I've got all that out of my way, right, and I am focused and I want to be the best and I know that aviation will be difficult for me because my mind doesn't work like that. I've never taken apart engines and so I know it's going to be fairly—so I'm—I'm anxious and I am—I'm ready, right? I've taken a four month diversion and—And so, I think that the dynamic is I'm a female and I'm not acting like a female and there's not that many females there and—and I'm not accepted by the males because I'm not a traditional female, and so there—there was a lot of this, "I don't need any of you. I can do this. But, oh wait, I've got—I need to need you and I need to sometimes lead you and you need to sometimes lead me." So there's a lot of that negotiation where—

TS: You're still very young.

CB: I'm still ver—I mean, I'm twenty-two, twenty-three years old and so there's the negotiation of there has to be fun and you have to get to know each other and you have to build that. You can't stick out like a sore thumb. On the other hand, I don't do well when I'm messing around and then get serious like this, so I had to learn a lot of that, kind of, on the fly and I probably alienated a handful of people, and the two girls were not my friends. I always hung out with guys, always had male roommates, and so—

TS: Would you say you had a certain intensity about you then?

CB: Absolutely.

TS: And so, like, that would be something that people would recognize as, like, "Cindi—

CB: It's a—Yeah.

TS: —she's intense."

CB: And it's—It was intimidating to some and it was a turn-off to some, and there were other people who were struggling on the inside, and who were class clowns, and who labelled it a certain way. I was just doing my thing.

TS: Yes.

CB: And I really had gotten to a point where I didn't need anybody else, right, and that was not a necessary element for me, whereas these folks were mainly coming from a different background.

TS: Right.

CB: And they did need a good bit of, "Let's go out and have a happy hour." I'm studying like a fiend because it didn't come naturally to me.

TS: Because it was all new.

CB: It was all new to me and it was incredibly—I've never even known my short term memory. I went through college memorizing things the night before. That was a horrible, horrible thing I picked up in the—in college, is that I would work so hard during the week that before a final I would just stay up and re—

TS: Cram. So you crammed a lot.

CB: That did not work in flight school.

TS: No, I bet not. [chuckles]

CB: Shockingly, and I was in my own little hell trying to figure out how do I restructure my studying skills to learn all of these hundreds of emergency procedures and systems. And so, I couldn't help but be intense because this was the most important thing in front of me and I couldn't fail at it. And so, it took some time and, heck, I'm forty-four now, I still haven't figured that out—

TS: [chuckles]

CB: —completely, but I'm one with it. But back then I was still trying to figure out how much do I give of that and how much do I pretend and put on the good face and act like a normal twenty-two year old, when it's so very important for me that I make it through this and I—and I have doubts that I might not.

TS: Well, it sounds, too, like part of you is, like, not wanting to open up any doors of vulnerability; to have anybody to take you off your track, or have anything take you off.

CB: Correct.

TS: And so, by going out and letting loose a little bit, you open your—that—you can become very vulnerable.

CB: Sure. And then, I will say probably I'm not as naïve now at twenty-two, twenty-three, and I have learned—I think I had a conversation maybe when I was twenty-five, and people—someone said in—They said, "Cindi, you're so intense. You're—" Literally, some—a guy said this: "You're so attractive when you smile. You should smile more." And I remember having this response and I remember being surprised by the response.

And I remember saying, "You know, when I was eighteen and nineteen, I used to smile a lot and that landed me some very uncomfortable situations." And I got tired of being considered so open and so naïve and so playful and so flirty because that's not what I was trying to do." And I think over time in the military I became very intense and I—and you had to get to know me a little bit for me to open that up because you just get tiresome of—in a flight school of sixty-three guys, right?

TS: Fending everybody off.

CB: It was—It was—Honestly, it was exhausting to be able to explain to this person, "No, I didn't mean that." So if you're intense and intimidating you have so few problems.

TS: They just leave you alone, right?

CB: [chuckles] And I'm not sure it was a conscious effort—

TS: Right.

CB: —but I do remember that.

TS: Well, we put up barriers to—

CB: Absolutely.

TS: —protect ourselves—

CB: Absolutely.

TS: —and we do it in different ways.

CB: But people who know me, and even now they say, "You're so different that when you get to know you," right? But watching from a—from a distance I do have a way of standing up straight and confident and intimidating. I know that and that's okay. Of the ways that I want to be perceived, it's not bad.

TS: Right. Well, and like you said, you've been successful with it, right?

CB: Yeah.

TS: It works; it works.

CB: [chuckles] Right.

TS: So you—you're going through this—an intense period of training for this new career, really, that you really want to latch on to and so that was the challenging part; what was the most rewarding part?

CB: I'll tell you. There's the one instance, and, again, it kind of shows the vulnerability and the—Somehow through the beginning of flight school is the regular—you're out regular flying; it's called visual flying.

TS: Okay.

CB: And you're learning procedures and there's always an instructor pilot with you. An instructor pilot and a copilot, and there's always, kind of, three of you and there's a time where they let you solo flight. And what solo means in a Huey [Bell UH-1 Iroquois helicopter] is it's you and your partner but you have no adult supervision.

And so, we had gotten into—we were in instruments, and I happened to be paired up with the other—like, the second of the three women in this class, and we got lost. We got ridiculously lost.

TS: Flying?

CB: Flying. Like, she was a stress case, I was a stress case, so we were both very intense and we got—we got ridiculously lost. [both chuckle]

TS: What happened?

CB: Well, even to today I have no sense of direction. I am incredibly good with instruments and you could even—you could even put a hood on me and if I'm just flying with instruments and maps I was one of the best.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: [unclear]

CB: But you take that off—It all looks the same. [both chuckle] The trees there, the trees there, the building there. And so, the two of us just happened to have the same weakness, because we just got—

TS: Oh.

CB: —ridiculously lost, and we [had to?] be those people. And so, we're sitting there—the way that you—we didn't want to do a Mayday call, right, like—

TS: No, I imagine not.

CB: I don't—I don't know where the hell I [unclear]; sixty-six percent of the women of the class together getting lost. And somehow—somehow we were, literally, like, "Do we do it," because—

TS: Right.

CB: You get further away.

TS: You're going to run out of gas at some point.

CB: [chuckles] You run out of gas. And so, there's this, "We cannot let the womankind down by—" And so—

TS: Did you have that discussion?

CB: We did.

TS: Did you?

CB: We did; we totally did. [both laugh] We might have prepared for it because I think we both knew our weaknesses. We might have prepared for it knowing that we were probably going to get lost, and we did. We got lost exactly like we thought we would.

But somehow we were able to see something, see someone, and we were able to—we were able to land and then find our way. [chuckles] It was—It was one of those—just a split second, right, because we would have never lived it down. The rest of my career it would have never, ever, ever lived it down. Like, I would have been that girl, and we found our way. It's—And so, it was that—again, it was that, "I don't think I can do it. I don't think—" That dialogue, and then not allowing yourself to quit and somehow the two of us, we—we figured it out.

And it was—It was those moments, right? "I think I'm too afraid of this," or, "I think I—I don't think I can do this," and just that—that—whether it was—it wasn't just a commitment to myself, it was a commitment to this person, right? I can't let you down, and I can't let all of womenkind down. And it was—

TS: And you didn't.

CB: And I didn't.

TS: And did you ever talk about it?

CB: Just now. [both laugh]

TS: Really? You never—You two, like—

CB: No.

TS: —made a pact you're not going to talk—mention abou—mention it.

CB: No, no, because we went our separate ways.

TS: That's interesting.

CB: But there's—there were more moments, like, you—you—

TS: Yeah.

CB: It's a lesson in humility and, yeah, it was—every time I passed a check-ride, every time we went through a phase, it was an incredibly and powerful feeling, because during that time the dialogue is, "I don't think I can do it. I don't think I can do it," because there's one thing if I can run faster and I can make my body physically do something and there's another of, "I cannot remember," and, "It doesn't make sense," and, "I don't know where that drop of oil is supposed to go," and the mind over mind kind of thing is incredibly powerful if you can—if you can—if you can make yourself do things that you never thought you could. Those are the most powerful moments.

TS: Now, were there people in your class with you that you bonded with at all?

CB: Yes, but not many. I was kind of a lone wolf. I mean, this—the female partner that I had for a long time, we bonded, but she was married and I was single and—

TS: Off time it's a different world, right?

CB: Exactly, and really those weren't—those weren't times that I remember. I felt like people fell into two camps many times and there are people who want to see you succeed but they're also competing against you; everything is a competition, right? You want to be the first in your class, you want to get the aircraft of your choice, you want to get the—so there's parts of that. And then there are people who you intimidate and—and there's a different, kind of—an unhealthy competition. And so I—I don't—I had my—I had my moments where I—I don't think I came into my own until I was probably a captain. I think as a second lieutenant and a first lieutenant it was really about, "I just can't fail. I just can't fail and the only one I can ho—trust is me."

TS: Right, you're just trying to get through it.

CB: Just trying to get through it.

TS: Okay. You're there—what?—eighteen months you said, right, at Fort Rucker?

CB: Yeah, fifteen, sixteen, it wa—it was right there about. So it's flight school or the initial officer basic training—

TS: Okay.

CB: —was nine months, and then the [Boeing] Chinook [helicopter] is four months, and then the maintenance course—so I chose the Chinook. It was just a—It was an odd aircraft to choose, nobody was choosing it. It was—

TS: Really?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: I mean, you can see—

TS: What was everybody choosing?

CB: Every—So there was the Cobra and the [Boeing AH-64] Apache [helicopter].

TS: Oh, okay.

CB: Those were the sexiest.

TS: Could you choose those?

CB: I didn't.

TS: But I mean, could you, though—

CB: I could.

TS: —because aren't those attack ones?

CB: I could have. It was, I think, right around that moment and I think probably within that year—

TS: Oh, right, because it was '94, wasn't it, when that opened up?

CB: Right, that's correct, and so it was one of the first classes.

TS: Oh.

CB: That never appealed to me. I tend to be kind of a pacifist and—and I don't—the thought of, being on the front line—but the Chinook is the fastest aircraft. It's one of the most complex; you can carry forty soldiers.

TS: It's huge.

CB: You can carry sol—forty soldiers, you can go 170 miles an hour, you can carry another Chinook underneath. It was—

TS: You can?

CB: Yes.

TS: Really?

CB: Yes.

TS: Wow, okay.

CB: And so, the thought of—I don't know. It was—Each aircraft had personalities to it, right? If you chose the Cobra it was one kind of personality. The Apache, of course, had the—had the *Top Gun* version of the army, I think.

TS: Right.

CB: The Chinook, they were much more laid back and they were like, "Yeah, you can't—You can't fight war without me." [both laugh]

TS: You can try, right? But, yeah.

CB: It was incredibly sophisticated. One of the more—One of the more complicated, so the longest, kind of, school to teach you, then, that aircraft. And so, the—the struggle continued of remembering and memorizing.

TS: Well, when you think about it. Well, when I think about it, I think, "That's not a long time to learn something like that." I mean—

CB: It's not.

TS: It's—You're—You're still, like—Even when you're done you're probably, like, "Did I get everything?"

CB: Absolutely.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: "Am I good?"

CB: And it's—It's muscle memory so you just doing it every single day.

TS: Okay.

CB: And at night you're—you're learning the emergency procedures, so what you learn are the systems and how things operate and then you learn emergency procedures. You're constantly learning. If this light goes on but this one doesn't, or if this one goes on and this one does, you—you're constantly, "What do I do? What do I do?"

TS: Because you have to react really quickly.

CB: Absolutely, absolutely. And so—But during the day as you're flying and you're racking up the hours, it's muscle memory, right?

TS: Okay.

CB: That's how you take off; that's how you land; this is how you—

TS: Interesting. Now, did you—Were there any mentors that you had that helped you? Like, instructors and things like that?

CB: Flight school, no. The flight school for the Huey, these—these gentlemen—I'm generalizing, but I would say they were all Vietnam era and they had never seen, really—women in the classes was just such a new thing. I wouldn't say they were open arms embracing with it. I don't think they—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: But they—

CB: —were obstacles—

TS: Right, okay.

CB: —but there wasn't—there wasn't—I don't recall. My flight instructor was—he was a crusty old guy and he would use fishing terms to re—to explain anything. And one day I called him on it. I said, "Sir, I don't fish. Like, you're explaining—"

TS: Using this language I don't know.

CB: "—Ara—Arabic to Hindi, and, like, I don't understand either one."

And he said, "Well, what about Barbies [Barbie Dolls]?" And it would—and I just remember thinking, "We're never—We're never going to get beyond this." And so, it was just—it was interesting.

TS: [chuckles]

CB: But the Chinook course, I think they were much more professional, much more—I do—I do recall some very good pilots that—I had—I had, like—I had a personality in [unclear]. I had a—what was it? It was "spunky." It was—I would bring them in too fast and so I would—I would—there were enough good techniques that I used that I showed an aptitude for but there's just some things I did really wrong and—

TS: Right.

CB: And so, they were not insulting in the way that they taught me and guided me. They—They figured out, "Maybe not so fast next time. You see how the grass is flowing really fast beyond you? Maybe not so fast next time." [both chuckle] So they said it in a way that was not threatening.

TS: Well, that's good.

CB: Yeah.

TS: Yeah. When you finally got through that—or is there anything you want to add about that experience?

CB: No. I mean, when I—when I got my wings I think it was one of the—really, one of the truly monumental things in my life. It's a—I mean, a year and a half isn't that long but it—it's the longest year and a half.

TS: Right.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: You really—

TS: Well, upon reflection it's not that long, but—

CB: Yeah, there's so many times where it's just fail and get kicked out, fail and get kicked out. And I will—I will say one of the last things that you have to do in flight school is—it's a SERE [Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape]. It's a survive and evade exercise. So it's just a funny story. It's about, I want to say it's five or six days.

TS: Okay.

CB: And you know it's coming, and the way that it is triggered is that they say—it's, "Gas, gas," and you know after that you can't eat, and so then it's just kind of a—teams of four and you have to make it through the woods and people are chasing you. So the—the intent is to really dig deep and—and rely on your buddies and know that—but you can't—You don't have any food for four or five days, and very little sleep. And so, I knew it was coming.

TS: Did you know who you were going to be paired with?

CB: I can't remember whether you did or didn't.

TS: It's okay.

CB: I'm pretty sure you didn't but it was one of your class—three of your classmates. And I remember I was very—I was very tiny, very thin, and I knew I would struggle with four or five days of no eating. I—I really—I—Beyond any kind of doubts of whether I could do it and mind over—I really thought that I—

TS: Physically—

CB: —that I would physically not make it through because I—I ate every four hours. I just remember, so it's "Gas, gas," and I shoved as many—

TS: [chuckles]

CB: —breakfast bars in my mouth and—and so there we went. And on the first—on the first day we'd gone however long with no food and I couldn't sleep because I was foraging. I was constantly fora—I was really, really thinking that this was going to be the end of my flight career. Like, if you don't make it through you don't—you don't pass. I've gone through all of this and now this is going to be the end of me.

And so I—I had not slept, I hadn't eaten, and the first—the first stop you—you have to do some sort of an activity and if you do it correctly they give you a piece of bread. So, like, divided between four people. And then the next day you have to do one of four things, so someone has to build a little tent—a shelter from sticks and leaves, and

someone has to build a trap for an animal, and then someone has to do something else. And so, we built this trap and it caught a domestic rabbit. And I—It was—It was kind of sad but I hadn't eaten in three days so it didn't matter.

So the—the rabbit is captured, and then they don't give you that rabbit. So the instructor—this is maybe just in my head—The instructor looked at me, and I was so gaunt and I had lost so much weight; I think he sympathized and gave us the biggest rabbit.

TS: [chuckles]

CB: Well, we had two hours to cook it.

TS: Oh.

CB: And so, there we went, We—Someone skinned it; I couldn't do any of that. Skinned it, cooked it—and it was half-cooked. I mean, it was—there was no way we were going to cook it in the two hours that we had. But there's no doubt that some sort of dialogue in this instructor said, "I think this one's going to die."

TS: [chuckles] Give her as much as possible.

CB: And so, I remember we ate it. We ate that thing half raw and I could not eat chicken probably for two years afterwards.

TS: I can understand that.

CB: Because the consistency—

TS: Right.

CB: —is very similar.

TS: Similar, yes.

CB: And, anyway, that's my funny story. Towards the end I really feared that that was going to be my—the end of—

TS: But you made it.

CB: I made it. Thought it was going to be the end of my aviation—

TS: How did you celebrate?

CB: Well, it wasn't eating chicken.

TS: [chuckles]

CB: I think there was a lot of eating and I think there was a lot of drinking. I think—And as a—as a class we had grown clo—

TS: Yeah.

CB: —as close as we can be.

TS: Yeah.

CB: We grew close together.

TS: Nice. Well, so what was your first assignment after that?

CB: My first assignment was Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and it was a rare assignment. So no one—It was two of us that got stationed there but no one really had ever been assigned there out of flight school. So we went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, which is Lawton, Oklahoma.

TS: Okay.

CB: And I went there with another Chinook pilot and we both arrived and I was—he was the flight platoon leader and I was the maintenance platoon leader. And so, that was really our first leadership experience. So I—I led thirty-five aviation mechanics. So I'm twenty-four, twenty-five, at this point, and every one of them had been in the service at that point longer than I had.

TS: Right.

CB: And so, we had seven aircraft, and I was responsible for the budget and the rotation of preventative maintenance and any kind of surprise maintenance, and it was a—it was an enormous amount of responsibility. All the—All the maintenance pilots; all of the quality control; all the production control.

TS: How did it go?

CB: I think it went fairly well. I think by then I had gotten a little bit out of the—out of my system—the arrogance, and the cockiness, and I was much better about asking those—it didn't matter what rank they were—but who were the clear—the *senseis* [a teacher or instructor, usually of Japanese martial arts] [chuckles] in the group, right? The all know—all-knowing folks.

I had a good relationship with my warrant officers. I'm sure, as I reflect back, I was your typical first lieutenant but I think I was a little bit—I think I showed a little bit more humility than I had in the past.

TS: [chuckles]

CB: It—I mean, it was interesting. It was an enormous amount of responsibility. I had to continue to fly; I had to continue to stay certified. The responsibilities and the decisions that you made were—

TS: Did you find that doing the actual job of—like, the work, was not as hard as dealing with personnel or anything like that?

CB: It's hard to detach that—As a—As a maintenance officer, what you deal with—if you can imagine seven aircraft and they all have—I can't remember, but let's say they have five hundred hours that they can fly. And just like your car, there are certain periods where you have to take them down and change this or that. And you have to time it that no more than one aircraft is down at any given point, assuming that you could fly an aircraft and you could come back broken and you hadn't planned for it.

So you can imagine the intricacies of what the officer that's doing this has to deal with. So each pilot is coming in and they want their aircraft; the one that they like. And they have little ways that they could say, 'This one's broken and I want another one." And then you have to manage your thirty-five mechanics in the evenings and weekends and try to get these air—aircraft up.

TS: Right.

CB: So if you can imagine you have seven cars in your garage and six of them have to be up at any given point, right, but there's tens of people who are, kind of, in and out, in and out flying.

And so, the job itself was fairly difficult in that you couldn't predict and you had to react very quickly. And there are just things that broke that you couldn't fix very quickly, and so—then there's the personalities of trying to convince people, "You cannot fly this aircraft because it—you'll fly it into being down," right? And so, the egos of test pilots, and the egos of regular pilots and—You feel like you're defending, kind of, your mechanics from having to work too hard too long, too—without stops.

And on the other hand, you know there's a mission and you don't want to be too rigid, but you know that giving someone an aircraft that is not ready will cause your mechanics to work a lot longer. And so, there's this—There's the job itself. It's quite—

TS: You have to do a lot of juggling.

CB: Exactly. And then, so, the personality piece of it, of course, is you can't have your mechanics be distracted in any manner because they're working on—

So they've had—they've had incidents where—and this is probably a—kind of, a—an old wives tale, but if a mechanic drops a nickel and it lodges underneath the drive shaft, then in midair at that high of a rotation, that nickel could slice the drive shaft in half. And so, if you—if you turn the wrench one too many times or not enough, that's what tears the aircraft apart, right?

It's—In peacetime there's no one shooting at you and so the mechanics have to be sharp, right? They can't have any distractions. You have to monitor what are their finances like and are their kids well established and are their spouses—So you're twenty-five years old, right, and—and you have to understand what's happening there.

TS: And most of these people are older than you, right?

CB: And they're almost always older and they are almost always in the service longer than you, so there's a balance of you don't want to be their mother but you have to manage the personality conflicts and you have to manage the frequency at which you're training them, and they can't wait too—they can't work too long, right, because they're exhausted and they need to be protected just like the pilots do because they need to understand what they're doing.

So it's an—it's an incredible—If you're an intense person like me it's an incredible amount that you internalize, and so you're always keeping an eye on everything. And so, I would say the job is probably equally as hard but the personality piece of it—you can't have any—you can't have dissonance in a unit like that.

TS: Right. How did you get along, then, with your—was it platoon?

CB: I think I did. I mean, again, I think as far as first lieutenants go, I think my time as an enlisted person and my time having overcome a good bit of adversity, I think I had a decent amount of humility that—that I—I presented with. Because these guys see second lieutenants, first lieutenants every day, right? They're ready; they see them coming. That little shiny bar is just to let you know they're coming. [both chuckle] And they're ready for you. And so, I think I had the requisite amount of humility. I had a lot to learn and I'm sure—I mean, I had just gone through flight school, for god's sake. I was—I was a rock star.

And so, I think—I think—I did fine. I learned an incredibly—I learned about good leadership and bad leadership, and I understood how little I like to be micro-managed and how offended I got when people questioned my work ethic, because I only have one—I only have one switch; it's on, right?

TS: [chuckles] Right.

CB: So that was really the first time I learned about people who micro-managed and people who were insecure about their leadership. And so, I had probably not the greatest leadership but I had a good team and I really developed that, kind of, paternalistic attachment to the team and learned what it was like to protect them from—from extended hours and—and, kind of, the abuse of what could happen to these guys.

TS: Right, right. So you're—I want to take you, like, away from work for a second. And so, where are you living and how was that? What is the—Although, I'm sure that you—as a—how you describe your working, you're probably working a lot more hours than you should be. [chuckles] But what's your down time like?

CB: Fort Sill, Oklahoma, was actually—I remember it was one the fond times. I'd come into my own and for—I can't remember how this happened, but because I came there with another second lieutenant—first lieutenant—he—he had a built in group of friends and I ended up having two roommates and I've only had male roommates. These two—So there were three of us first lieutenants, and we one night went into a bar of some sort. Lawton is a very small city so there's not—town, maybe, I'm not even sure it's a city. So Lawton, Oklahoma, a good portion of it is Fort Sill Oklahoma, so I would consider it a military town, so there's a lot of acceptance and a lot of camaraderie.

So here we were, three first lieutenants went to a bar, met a colonel who had a house for rent with a pool—with an inground pool—and we were kings for a day. I mean, that was—Truly, I remember working really hard and then we would do things like have a pool party for Thanksgiving. We would bring in all of the soldiers that didn't have their parents in town and we'd just have—we—I remember down time there wasn't as intense and—as flight school, right? A lot riding on it, but there wasn't a test every single day.

TS: Right.

CB: [chuckles]

TS: Right.

CB: And so I—Those are probably the first times where—It was—It was a fun time. There wasn't—There wasn't the extra responsibility.

TS: Right.

CB: So the three of us, we—we were inseparable.

TS: Yeah.

CB: We'd work really hard in our own little jobs and then on the weekends we'd float around in the pool.

TS: [chuckles]

CB: And go out to the one bar.

TS: Did you get to stay at the house with the pool? Is that where you stayed?

CB: Me? Yes, yes.

TS: Okay. So you got to, like—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: We met this one guy at the bar—

TS: Okay.

CB: — and he—he said, "Oh, are you looking for a place?"
And I said, "Yeah."
And these two guys, I didn't even know them, and they said, "Well, it's eight hundred and fifty dollars," which back then was probably like three thousand dollars. "I can't afford that." And so, "Hey, you and you."

TS: Right.

CB: And, literally, the three of us, we—

TS: Just pooled all your money and—

CB: We pooled our own money—

TS: Nice.

CB: —and so we were three first lieutenants living in a—in a really, really nice house.

TS: Yeah, that does sound really nice.

CB: [chuckles]

TS: As you're going along, and—just looking to see how much we can fit in the next twenty minutes.

CB: You can take your time.

TS: I can take my time?

CB: Yes.

TS: Well, your relationships, as you described them with your peers, there's some competition, like, in the—in the different schooling and stuff but it—like, it's changing a little bit as you get—

CB: Right.

TS: —outside of that. And now, were there a lot of other women at Fort Sill or in the company you were in?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: If there were, I don't remember them.

TS: No?

CB: I mean, again, I think pilots—and I don't know the empirical data but I can tell you out of my class of sixty-three there were three women, and so then you take that into Chinooks—which was not a glamorous aircraft—I don't think to this day I've only met one other female Chinook pilot. Then you take it to maintenance and there's—there's really—

TS: Even less.

CB: Even less. And so, Fort Sill was a very small unit and I don't recall there being any female officers in the entire unit that I had. And so—and if there were, unless they were just like me there was not any compelling reason for me to befriend them because I always felt like I just didn't have the characteristics to hang out with other women, really, to tell you the—

TS: What characteristics do you need for that? [chuckles]

CB: Oh, I mean, I felt like—I just always felt like I had the analytical, logical process of sorting data and facts, and so I don't find a lot of women that are like that. So I can—I have friends now that I go out and we have drinks and we discuss, but I find that they're few and far between—that one of us isn't extremely bored with whatever the other person—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: I understand.

CB: [chuckles]

TS: So you're, like, the small talk of the surface level of lives, right?

CB: Yeah, no, I'd be—I don't like that.

TS: Yeah.

CB: So I've always had one or two really good friends that I can share everything with and they're typically guys and—and that's all I've always really needed. So I never needed to travel in a pack of women and—

TS: Right.

CB: In fact, it's always been quite comforting to travel with one or two men because that way I can choose if they could be the—the friend, or, "Wait, I'm interested in someone over here. I'm going to go over here. You're just a friend now," right?

TS: Right.

CB: Never—I never—That was never my—my life, I guess.

TS: Well, we hear a lot in the news about things like sexual harassment and sexual assault and that there's a lot more being reported today than back even in the period that you—in the nineties, in the early nineties. Did you ever have to, like, deal with that or experience it, like, either as an officer dealing with it coming your way in a disciplinary way or personally on the job?

CB: As an officer, of being, kind of, a—a platoon leader with forty, fifty, eighty employees, I don't recall any time. Now, you're going to have a different culture when you have a woman as leader and I was the leader, right? So I don't know that the door is open as widely when you have a female company commander or—I never had anyone bring a complaint to me as a female saying, "I have been harassed."

I can certainly recall when I was a cadet going to the non-traditional—so I went through—I went through four schools as a cadet, so as a—as an eighteen or nineteen year old I went through Airborne School where I simply recall maybe 5% women. I went through air assault school where I think there were even less women and typically these are unit-held job—job-specific and necessary skills but occasionally cadets will be sent into—for motivation or whatever it is. So I was that person there, everybody else was there for work.

Certainly there it was much more—Because I—Certainly there I wouldn't say I felt safe all the time. Like, I wouldn't—I couldn't be myself, and I think that if I were to transplant myself now into myself then, no doubt, I would have—I would have thrown the red flag. But I think I played it off and it never harmed me personally and it never got me off my course of wherever I was going. Those same people who made advances and said things inappropriate and put themselves when they were in a leadership position between myself and something else, right, and there's clearly innuendo, those people probably went on to hurt someone else, depending on how that other person reacted. It didn't harm me. I—It didn't stay with me, it didn't get me off my course, probably because I was so naïve. So I would say it was—it was a fairly regular occurrence at Airborne Air Assault [Army Air Assault School]. I went to mountain—mountain workers

school [Army Mountain Warfare School] where I was the only woman, and I went to a second mountain workers school. So there was definitely—but I was able to—For whatever reason, I was strong enough to just play it off and it never escalated into anything that was physical. It was much more innuendo and an invitation to do something that's in—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So verbally?

CB: Verbal, and there was one time when I was a cadet where I was placed into a very uncomfortable situation and actually made a complaint. It wasn't taken seriously and I tell people that after I got commissioned—I knew it was wrong; I knew it had gotten over the line and I—an instructor—one of my instructors made me feel very uncomfortable and very cornered and I felt like my career as a—as a cadet was in jeopardy if I had said something. I said something, and it wasn't taken seriously and I probably formatively learned my lesson there that I really, really had to have a serious case, and—if I was going to go out on that limb again. Later that person was charged with somebody—with something and it's unfortunate because then they called me and said—the same people I had complained to, so—

TS: What did they say when they called you?

CB: They said, "We—We've heard allegations," this and that. "You were here during that time. What transpired?"

I said, "I said my story and it should be—It should be documented somewhere and, you didn't—"

TS: Right.

CB: "Where were you when—when I went out on a limb?"

So I think during that—during those—probably those first three, four years, I changed the way that I was and the incidence of that dropped off significantly. And then I was an officer and then it doesn't happen—it doesn't happen as much when—when you—

TS: The moments that you're put in that position—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: The moments that you're put into that position—

TS: —are less, right.

CB: —are high—are more, probably more likely to happen when you're enlisted and when you are at a lower rank than the person that is—that is doing this. So does it happen? Absolutely. Does it—I don't know. I don't think that—I think it's formed the way that I carried out the rest of my military career. I think it depends on you as a person and how confident and strong you are and how you're affected by other affronts, right? And so, I was—

TS: You're mostly talking about sexual harassment, right? In this case or—

CB: I guess—I guess—

TS: Because I mean, an issue of assault would—would be—

CB: Well, and I think assault—I think assault, many times, there options where hypothetic—

TS: Right.

CB: I guess assume [belief?] it's a woman being assaulted and a man. I think there are—there are forks in the road, right, that—I think that in any given situation it could go in multiple ways.

TS: Right.

CB: Right? And so, it start out as harassment and you say the wrong thing and then it initiates into—right? So I guess I've never—I've never had it happen where, unfortunately, I—except for one time where I felt threatened, where anything could happen.

TS: Right.

CB: And it could just be a function of the units that I was a part of or the position that I was in or the way that it landed on me. Maybe I was naïve and maybe I just didn't see it as threatening as it was and for whatever reason it didn't escalate into something that—that harmed me.

TS: Right.

CB: But there's no doubt it happens and—and it's unfortunate because on top of everything else, in the times that I've come close to it where a trust has been broken, you can't take that away. You—You can't—You can't undo your self-doubt and how you reflect on not only that—the instigator—of anybody else that could turn into an instigator and that's unfortunate. There's no room for that when you are—when you're on the battlefield, when you're handling aircraft, when a split-second decision could—could mean your life, so—

TS: Well—

CB: —and it's unfortunate.

TS: Right, like, when you were talking about making sure that none of the people that you were in charge of had distractions.

CB: That's right.

TS: That would be a huge distraction for a whole unit, for it, right? To have something—

CB: Absolutely. So I mean it's—and it's not just for—If something happens to a female soldier and—the rest of the unit is going to take sides, right, and—and there's no way you could un—

TS: He said, she said.

CB: You can't undo that with a equal opportunity training, right? And I would—There was a time for a year and a half I was the equal opportunity person and I held that role at Fort Carson for twenty-five thousand soldiers and family members. We would—We would train—We would train on proper behaviors and whistleblower and—and what were the channels to be able to—and I think that over the years it's gotten better, but individuals are individuals, right, and culture is based on individuals and what's allowable in one unit isn't allowable in another, and so—

TS: Does leadership have a lot to do with that do you think? To keeping those kind of issues at bay? A good leader will—

CB: I think, yeah. So culture is what you allow and don't allow to happen. It's leading by example, but then it's also acting very swiftly and correctly. I'll tell you a story and this is—I don't know which category this falls into. I was—I was a maintenance officer in Korea, so I'm over eighty mechanics and I'm twenty-five, twenty-six years old by then, with sixteen aircraft and it's sixteen million dollar aircraft times six—an enormous amount of money.

I'm in Korea, and we had these—we had these contractors—DynCorp [International]—so Korea in particular, any kind of country like that that has a—an established base, they found out early on that rotating soldiers in and out, in and out, in and out, you lose a lot of knowledge, and so they began to get contractors that would stay there multiple years. And so, my intermediate maintenance was done by these contractors and I'm not going to name the—the company name. And so, we had the unit level maintenance which were the eighty mechanics that I was in charge of, and then you had these—I don't know—twenty, thirty of these contractors which would wear, kind of, flight suits—a version of it—but they were civilian contractors.

And I was there maybe two or three months, and someone thought it would be a really good idea to put a Russian bride magazine and circle one and then cross out the

name and put my name in there. And so, that went on for a little bit, that—that—So, of course, I'm the leader of this group and so it's not just offensive to me, it's how do I react to it publically and what am I going to do with it.

So I traced it to one of the DynCorp guys and I went back there and sure enough, he has—he has porn on his—on his—on his TV and[?] his computer monitor. And so—Again, it's not only offensive and mental midgetry [to be small or petty], it's—everybody's looking at you and how are you going to handle it. Are you going to throw a conniption and—or are you—and what is the guy going to say, and how's the power struggle going to end. And so, it's those things again. It's—It's unbelievably immature and low class but you have to dedicate time to it, and then you have to dedicate time to telling the unit, and then—so—If this was a male it would be a completely different dynamic of having to tell these guys that you can't do this because a female's complained.

And so, I don't envy leaders that—that have to put that out there before it ever happens, and I don't envy them doing it once it happens, and there's no right time and there's—it's—I didn't envy myself at the time and it was completely inappropriate, and the legal things that I could have done with the contractors were very limited, right, so—because they're not under my chain of command and—and so it's not just soldiers and it's—it's not—it's such a complex—

TS: Did that—How did you handle that and did it affect your unit?

CB: I had to handle it one on one with this particular person and I had to take it to my chain of command and it—and it stopped, but then this is, again, this is the mechanic who works on my aircraft that I later have to get on to. And so, it was uncomfortable. It was uncomfortable and the mere necessity for a conversation like that is uncomfortable. Like, really? In 1998, '99, I have to teach you that this is not appropriate. It—

TS: Right.

CB: [chuckles] And so, I don't know where you go from that, right? So I handled it, it stopped, but the relationship was never the same with the contractors, right?

TS: Right.

CB: And so, there's no doubt once I would leave they would have their own little—their little say and [unclear] soldier [unclear], but you hope—you hope that you've made respectful decisions and you—you show humility and you care for your unit, and that they have your back, and that's the best that you can do, right? So I had a harsh conversation with him and I said, "This is not appropriate. This is not appropriate and you can't do it, and if you continue to do this I'll have you fired," so.

But it's—I guess for me it's always been that I—the disbelief of "I cannot believe I'm having this conversation."

TS: The frustration that you have to actually go there for it.

CB: Exactly.

TS: When you could have—when that time could be spent doing something productive.

CB: Exactly.

TS: Right.

CB: I mean, there's definitely been occurrences like that but I won't say that there haven't been since I've been out, either so it's—it's—

TS: Right.

CB: It's a portion of it, it's human nature, and I don't think you can eradicate it.

TS: Right, it's not just in the army.

CB: No.

TS: Yeah. Well, how was Korea? You went there after Fort Sill, right? Wait, you went to Rucker for a little bit.

CB: Yeah. I went to the advanced course.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: You said a captain's course?

CB: I was reunited with a bunch of my old lieutenant friends and now we were brand new captains, and six months and—it's a—really the—the officers advanced course. I had—I had fun—I had fun during that time. Again, it's a little bit more relaxed at that point; there's not as much riding on it. You can't get kicked out as easily. [both chuckle] The army has a lot of money invested in you at this point.

TS: Right.

CB: So you start to build a confidence that it's a little bit harder to get kicked out. A lot of drinking. A lot of self—self, kind of—whatever.

TS: Promotion? [both chuckle] I don't know.

CB: Self—Self-introspection, and, "How much can I drink and still do PT?" And a lot of competition, and the same, kind of—I think the same three women that were in my class had come back—

TS: Oh, okay.

CB: —to the advanced course, and so it was—it was—I think I definitely—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: A reunion of sorts, right?

CB: It was a reunion of sorts, but it was interesting to see what everybody had done in the three, four years since we had seen each other.

TS: Yeah.

CB: Then straight from there I went to Korea.

TS: Now, did you put in for Korea or—

CB: Hell no; nobody puts in for Korea.

TS: No? [both laugh]

CB: Back then before all of these deployments Korea was the worst place you could go, because people liked to go to Germany, and there's Italy, and there's—there's South America. I mean, there was a lot of—if you were grow—going overseas, Korea was the worst place because it was South Korea and people picketed outside and nobody wanted you there and we didn't want to be there and the weather is awful and the—the air; three days would go by and you can—you could just rub your surface—

TS: Like pollution?

CB: Oh, the pollution—

TS: Was really bad?

CB: —was incredible. So many people on such a small infrastructure of roads. We used to have to fly a certain amount of height because there was so much smog and the—kind of, in a thousand feet layer.

So Korea, I arrived there, I'm a brand new captain, and now I had eighty mechanics and I have sixteen aircraft, and it's really essentially the same job as Fort Sill.

TS: Okay.

CB: But it's twice as many of everything.

TS: Okay.

CB: It's twice as many soldiers, twice as many officers.

TS: And you're in a foreign country.

CB: Foreign country, and so—and it—that really—it was—it was austere, so our barracks were austere, and I purchased a little eight hundred dollar car, a little hooptie [slang for cheap and/or broken down car], and you made—you made the best you could and—I—It's interesting, I just wrote—there was a staff sergeant that—When I came onboard I was practicing my listening with understanding skill that I had learned at Fort Sill the hard way.

TS: [chuckles]

CB: And I—I met this guy and I said, "Listen." He was a flight engineer so he was an E6 and I was a captain and—I was a brand new captain, and he was really quiet and just—you couldn't tell what he was thinking, but he was in charge of all the flight mechanics. So there are flight engineers and then there are maintenance people. The eighty maintenance people belonged to me but the flight engineers are the ones that go on the aircraft with you. So the ones I manage are the ones on the ground and the ones in—because the Chinook takes two pilots, a flight engineer, and a—good grief, I can't remember now—four—it's a four person aircraft.

TS: Okay.

CB: This guy managed the people who went up in the aircraft, so in the whole dynamics, right, he has a lot riding on the health of the aircraft as well. The mechanics do but they stay on the ground.

TS: Right.

CB: They never go on the aircraft with you.

TS: I see.

CB: I had kind of befriended him and I literally, basically—I said something like, "I—I'm going to need a lot of help. This is only my second tour," and—and he took me under his—under his wing. And so every time we had free time, he would, kind of, walk me through and show me the practical way of remembering things.

It's an incredibly sophisticated aircraft, and so in the pre-flight you had to feel bolts and see if they had the right amount of play to it, so as a—as a pilot pre-flighting you went through and you said, "There's nothing dripping from here. This has a grip of this," and you went through and that's how you made sure as a pilot that the aircraft was sound.

And so, the flight engineer went behind you but you had to do this and you had to get very good at it because if you didn't a mechanic could have forgotten something or something couldn't have been fastened.

TS: Right.

CB: And then once you get in the air bad things happen.

TS: Right.

CB: And so this guy—this guy took a lot of, kind of, care and I reciprocated. There's only two bars that you go to in Camp Humphries.

TS: [chuckles]

CB: And the curfew's 2:00 a.m., and as a—as a—kind of, a platoon leader I'd always inevitably be out there and I'd see these mechanics [unclear] make a mental—So pilots couldn't fly—it's twelve hours bottle to throttle, and so you cannot fly within twelve hours of taking your last drink. Well, mechanics are the same way. Like, you cannot take a wrench twelve—and so inevitably we'd be in the same bars and I'd be, like, "Stop drinking." [both chuckle] "Stop drinking." And so, we—really befriended. It's a tough, tough environment you're—he was married and away from his spouse and I was in the middle of nowhere and we just—he took a lot of care in showing me, kind of, the—the things that you can't read from books.

TS: Right.

CB: And so, I served eight months there and I happened to get promoted into being a company commander which is what—It's one of the milestones. And so typically, you don't command until you're third or fourth year in a captain and I'd only been six or seven months as a captain so I—but, again, I had a plan. [unclear]

I went to [United States Army Garrison] Yongsan [Seoul, South Korea] and I commanded a headquarters company. The reason I bring up this—this staff sergeant is it's been—it's been twenty—it's been sixteen years. So I—We left[?] and I just wrote him a note and I said, "You know, when I left I never told you just how much of an impact—" And he lit—he wrote me back. He sa—He goes, "I'm crying."

TS: Aww, how sweet.

CB: And it was really nice. I said—I said—He still—He's still in the—in the [Army National] Guard and—I just had that random moment.

TS: Right.

CB: A song comes on and you remember. And, anyway, it was—it was—There's people like that that I remember very fondly where it could have gone a different way.

TS: Right.

CB: But he—He helped out and he, kind of, taught me those things that made me sound credible.

TS: [chuckles]

CB: You know? [chuckles] He didn't have to do it.

TS: Well, there's a language you have to learn, too, right?

CB: Absolutely. I mean, or you're just standing there and you're using the terms and everybody's laughing on the inside, and so in that kind of environment nobody wins, right? Nobody wins in that and—but you could easily—you could easily hang people out to dry.

TS: Yes.

CB: You can salute the rank—I used—I used to say this: You can salute the rank and have somebody—especially the way that my platoon was structured—You can salute me and say, "No problem," and then do something that will get people killed. You could; you physically could do that. The real respect and the real care for the unit is they—they have to know that you're approachable and they have to be able to say, "You just asked me to do this and that will destroy the aircraft," right? And so, you have to have that relationship because those mechanics don't get on the aircraft with you. I mean, at the end of the day—

TS: Right.

CB: —I could command them to do something, say, "Nope, I don't want you to do it that way."

And they could say, "All right, you're the captain."

TS: Right.

CB: And I don't say that that happens often but there are subtle versions of that, right?

TS: Sure.

CB: So you have to have them respect and honor you enough as a human being and be comfortable to say, "I'm going to say 'yes, ma'am, but let's go off to the side and I'm going to teach you; I'm going to school you.'"

TS: [chuckles]

CB: Right?

TS: Right.

CB: "Because you're going to make an ass of yourself or you're—"

TS: Well, and probably there's times when you had people do that. Say the "yes, ma'am," and then, like, they don't want to embarrass you in front of everybody else because then that undermines the whole—

CB: Of course.

TS: —chain of command, right?

CB: Exactly.

TS: Did that happen? I mean, did—

CB: Yes. Yeah, so you—you develop those relationships and—and before anything goes awry they stop you and they say, "Here's what you should have said," right? But with the rank it complicates things, right?

TS: Right.

CB: So as a captain, typically, in that unit there's—you're not going to outrank—you're going to outrank everybody, right? And so, whoever you've built those relationships with are the ones that come forward and say, "You've just asked us to do something that's not—that's not going to work." Right? Because the rank really works not in that [their?] favor. The rank really works on, "Do it, like it, and I don't need to hear you."

You combine that with ego, right, and that's—that's where things go wrong. So as a conscious effort to—to being a woman, to being a Type A [personality] to being very intense, I had to work on that a lot, right? Because I have to come in, I have to sound official, right? But I also have to have the humility to say, "You can tell me if I'm wrong."

TS: Yeah, right.

CB: "I am wrong all the time," right?

TS: [chuckles]

CB: "But right now you're going to—You're going to do it under your breath and you're going to salute me while you're telling me I'm wrong," and so it's kind of that joke, right?

TS: Right.

CB: You try to get that relationship where people don't get you killed and on the other hand they still respect you. And it's a balance because you don't want to show too much vulnerability; on the other hand you want them to tell you when you're wrong.

TS: Exactly. Very interesting, though. Very interesting. Because like you say, you're—you're in a—in a place that can be scary, too. I know there's the incident, like, ten years earlier with that tree-trimming, right, in South Korea with—where a couple people were killed, or someone was killed.

CB: Well, there were people picketing on a daily basis, which I always found ironic because none of us wanted to be there and then every day we had to go through the picketers, like, "Go home, Americans."

"I'd love to, thanks. Send me." [both chuckle]

TS: Well, how else was the experience in Korea, then? What else did you bring from that?

CB: Again, I think it's—it's iterative steps of weeding out what doesn't work and doing more of what works, right? And often times you reflect on two years prior and you cringe [chuckles] and say, "Man, I've been doing that forever and clearly it doesn't work."

In my second tour in Korea was a company command and—

TS: Oh, right. Okay.

CB: —and I commanded—I always seem to migrate to jobs that nobody wants. I commanded a headquarters battalion and what happens is, in a headquarters—if you can think of, like, a holding company in a corporation. So you have—you have all of these companies and you then you have this, kind of—you have the personnel people and logistics people, and so in that company everybody outranks you. And so, it's lieutenant colonels and—and E4 and O4s and majors, and they're the ones that control all of the other things for these other companies. And so, as a captain commanding that—it—it's again, everybody's older, everybody's wiser, everybody has rank on you but the—the typical dialogue sounds like, "Hey, Lieutenant Colonel So-and-so, I'm going to need you to take your physical training test because when I present this and it says see this one person hasn't taken—that's you." It's a—It's an interesting dynamic of making people do what they need to do but not outranking them, so it's a whole new level of negotiation.

And so, I commanded a hundred people in a air traffic control company, so we had twenty vehicles that we had to deploy constantly on the highways and put up tents and—and all of that. And—But I commanded eight or nine captains—my peers—and a couple—and a lieutenant colonel, and a major, and it was just this constant herding of cats, right?

It's the same curfew and the same people who are out drinking only they all out-rank you and it was just—I formed some of my closest relationships, and I was probably at my most stressed out because as a company commander, I mean, you—the phone would ring and say, "So-and-so's in jail and go get him," or "So-and-so's father has died." I had twenty Korean soldiers and maybe their father has died.

TS: Yes.

CB: And we had to go out on the economy [slang for buying or spending money off of a military base] and go to a funeral, and it was just—I think it was a very, very fast-paced of—fast pace of learning everything that is—everything that is grown up, and I think as a company commander in that environment, having people injure themselves as their—I mean, I never saw combat but we fired rounds and people got injured and people had accidents and you ran into locals and the locals put you in jail and—and there was a special level of complexity. But those are probably the closest friendships that I made with those captains because at the time they were peers and—

TS: Right. They were all, kind of, in the same boat as you.

CB: The same boat except for I commanded them.

TS: Yeah.

CB: And then I had to pull them out of jail. And so, I—So I think I came into my own at that time and—and it was—it was an interesting almost two years in Korea.

TS: Yeah. What was—What was it like on the economy there? I mean, did you get out much?

CB: I did. I knew I was never coming back because the Kor—the Koreans at the time—and I'm generalizing—So I'm the company commander and that means I'm the highest-ranking in that person—in that—in that kind of unit. And so, I had a barracks of eighty people but the people came to work on the barracks were Koreans. And if—If the fence broke, if the road broke, they would have to come, and they would not talk to me. They would not talk to me. They would rather talk to any male.

TS: Oh, because you're a female?

CB: Yeah, because I'm a female.

TS: Okay.

CB: And so, that wore on me after a little while, I won't lie. So I kind of knew I was never going to come back to Korea. So we travelled; we went on our little long weekends. We went to—we usu—we went to Pusan Air Force Base, to the beach there, and we went to Cheju Do Island. And so, we did quite a bit of travelling.

TS: Who's the "we"?

CB: There's three or four captains that would go.

TS: Okay, so you'd go together?

CB: And one of them lives in Charlotte, which is really, really nice. I knew him when [unclear]. [both chuckle] We traveled quite a bit like that.

So far away from the base it was benign—these were—but right around the base was—it was—everybody, kind of, preyed on soldiers and there was constantly wanting money and you—It was interesting. It was—We experienced the economy for all its fullest; went to the restaurants and went to the—took the trains and it was interesting.

TS: Do you still like or eat Korean food?

CB: There are only a couple of—I don't like spicy food so there are only a couple of—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: No kimchi for you?

CB: No kimchi. Goodness, and if I smell it on anybody—

TS: [chuckles]

CB: —scar—scarred for life. I do—I eat a little bit of Korean food. Yeah, no, I kind of block that out. [both laugh] It wasn't a lot I could eat there, nothing I enjoyed.

TS: Okay. On your scale of experiences, like, for the environment, it was maybe not your favorite, but for the learning experience it seemed to have really enriched you.

CB: Yeah, and I think—and honestly I think that I came into my own in the way that I was learning and the way that I was presenting myself and the approachability; I think I was—I was at my best to learn there. And we were all—We were all off of our footing there.

TS: Right.

CB: And so there's a—there's a special kind of bonding that happens. Nobody there was married, right? Everybody was married but the people who were married, their spouses were far away so we were all geographic bachelors. I just happened to be a bachelorette but everybody else was a geographic bachelor. And so, there was never the after 6:00 p.m. and I go back to my family. Like, we all had time on our hands and so we'd all go to a movie and we'd go—so it was—it was a long—you're in a foreign country and they don't want you there and so it was a special kind of—it didn't matter whether you liked people a particular amount you just had to respect them and know that they—

TS: Get through it together?

CB: Exactly.

TS: There you go. What was you—your next—You went to Colorado next. Now—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: I went to Colorado—

TS: —was that something you were—Again, did you put in for any of these—

CB: Well—

TS: —or how did you get your assignments?

CB: The whole purpose for going into the company command that early—because I really—I mean, typically you do another two years and then you company command—I wanted to be a Russian FAO and—

TS: And what is that?

CB: What's that?

TS: What is that?

CB: A Foreign Area Officer. And so, what I had intended to do—I already was the highest of the—like, you could score a three as the highest on the natural language and writing. I was already those and I tested appropriately for that.

TS: You had al—You had always kept up with your Russian?

CB: I had. Well, I only speak Russian with my parents and so I—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh, is that right?

CB: Yes.

TS: Oh, okay.

CB: We—I do speak a seven year old's, which is probably 95% of what you need to know, right?

TS: Right.

CB: So my intent was to be a FAO, and I think it was during that time where the news was delivered to me that no matter what I did, no matter how—how good my language skills was, I had to wait in line beyond a certain amount and it was going to be like your fourth year as a captain, so it wasn't going to happen when I thought it would happen.

TS: Okay.

CB: So I did—I put in for Fort Carson which is—my brother at the time had just had a baby and I hadn't seen him in years and years, and so he was in—he was in Littleton, Colorado. And so, I chose Fort Carson and I received it, and there I was going to be the equal opportunity officer. It's a general staff position so I reported to the general and I had oversight on all of the equal opportunity and ethnic observances and things like that.

So that—When I got back, when I couldn't—and I couldn't become a FAO and it was—it was like that, it was, "What else am I going to do in the military?," kind of thing.

TS: Right.

CB: So it was almost really immediate that I went to a junior military recruiter and I said, "Well, what do I need?" right? "This is me."

And he basically told me, "Well, you have an undergrad in Sociology so that's useless."

TS: [chuckles]

CB: "And you've been in the military for eight years." So he basically schooled me and I enrolled into an MBA [Master of Business Administration] program, like, really, almost the day I got back from Korea. And so, I began my MBA program, I did the year and a half as a—as a equal opportunity officer and it was one of my least desired jobs ever. It was a staff position, it wasn't glamorous, it was really the people who police up people. It

was—I had to make sure that people's equal opportunity plans—all their T's were crossed and their I's were dotted, and my staff had gotten accustomed to just being in a huddle together so I spent the year really shaking things up.

I made them do physical training with the units, right? And I made them have their uniforms all nice and crisp and their boots shiny and my whole stance was, "I don't want to come into a room and go, 'That's an equal opportunity NCO.'" I said, "I want you to blend, right? You've got to be among the people." [chuckles] So I spent a year and a half really rehabilitating that whole thing and—and so we did. We would [unclear]—did the job to put the policies in place. I sat on a lot of really highly attended meetings of staff and just really just—my eyes almost bled.

TS: [chuckles]

CB: I just—I really did not enjoy that at all.

TS: Right.

CB: I got out of there as quickly as I could and I was able to become an ROTC recruiter, and at that point I already knew I was kind of getting out; I was aligning my MBA; I was non-stop MBA courses. I was taking an expedited version, and so—

TS: Why did you decide that you were going to get out?

CB: Well, I couldn't be a FAO. I'd done division staff and I really cou—when I fast-forwarded there weren't any real exciting jobs that I wanted to do. I'd compressed my exciting stuff.

TS: [chuckles]

CB: I mean, honestly. I mean, I don't—

TS: Yeah.

CB: —want to say that I'm that calculated but—but I was. I mean, all that was left was additional—there—this was peacetime and so there's—there's—there was just going to be another staffing position, and I'd worked on the general's staff and that was—

TS: What about flying the helicopters?

CB: You don't do that unless you track a specific track and after you reach captain—major—there's really warrant officers. Beyond a certain rank warrant officers do all the flying.

TS: Okay.

CB: So for commissioned officers, you're not going to fly beyond a certain amount of time. In wartime they fly quite a bit, but this was peacetime.

TS: Right.

CB: And so when I, kind of, mapped out my potential scenario it didn't—I had lost little bits of, kind of, the shininess of being in the military and when I looked at those staffing positions and doing more of those it just didn't—I didn't know why I needed to do it in uniform.

TS: Right.

CB: And so, by then a lot of my friends were getting out, and the MBA—I really enjoyed my MBA, I really enjoyed interacting, and I felt that renowned—I felt sitting in those classes that I once again was, kind of, like, "I can do this," right? Because the maturity that I had, compared to my class of other MBAers, it just—I felt like I could really rise to the top. I really felt like I could—I could be that—that successful person again. So I enjoyed my MBA and I slid over into an ROTC slot, so I did that for a year and a half and, really, I enjoyed—it was back to leadership. So I led a bunch of cadets, and the staff—there was a lieutenant colonel and two or three other officers and they were all older and, kind of, beat up and so I did—I led PT, and I really—it was with thirty young—twenty—twenty—nineteen year olds. It was really enjoyable again. It was—It was—I was back to the—

TS: [chuckles] It wasn't ship-shaping the ones in that—where was that? At Fort Carson, right?

CB: Yes, yes, and so it was enjoyable again. It was rappelling and cool stuff, and like I said, I really enjoyed the academic—the brain work of the MBA and—but—so that kind of set the course. I was going to have—My MBA was going to undo my sociology degree and so—

TS: Did you say "undo"?

CB: It was going to—

TS: That's interesting [unclear] [chuckles].

CB: It was going to reinforce—

TS: There you go.

CB: —and embellish. I love my sociology degree but apparently it was not as highly coveted by normal people so I needed to undo it. I needed to have a business degree.

TS: Right.

CB: So eight years of military plus a sociology degree did not equal a successful transition at the military.

TS: What did you have in mind, then, for what you were going to do when you got out?

CB: I really didn't know. I'd gone to Roger Cameron; Cameron-Brooks is—is a placement agency, and I think that he kind of burst my bubble to basically say that there's not a lot I could do. So I had a very technical career in the military and then I had a liberal arts degree. So I set forth—I received my MBA in finance, which is—I thought at the time was quite useful.

TS: And relevant, right?

CB: And relevant. And then I received a second emphasis in organization development, which is in line with sociology; I really enjoy that piece of it. So I didn't know what I was going to do but I knew I needed an MBA. So after I got out I went through a process of going through another one of these agencies and that was really—September 11, really, is the actual—

TS: Yeah, talk about that, talk about that. What happened with you when you—you told me off-tape—

CB: Right.

TS: —what happened.

CB: I had dropped my paperwork probably in January, February of that year.

TS: Two thousand one?

CB: In 2001, and I was wrapping up my MBA and my—my paperwork then and my end date just happened to be September 14, 2001. And so, on September 10, I went to Atlanta to a M—I can't remember the agency, but it was another one of these—

TS: It was like a conference?

CB: —junior military officer conferences for hiring. And it was a round-robin experience at the Embassy Suites in Atlanta, Georgia, and so what they do is they bring in, like, thirty companies and a hundred lieutenants and captains and they match them up and at the end what your goal is to get offers from all the ones. So I happened to have, I think, seven or eight companies that I was lined up with.

And so, we spent the night, and in the morning—eight o'clock in the morning was the first interview. And then I think the towers were hit between the first and second

interview, and by the second interviews you see people—and again, we're—we're captive audiences in these little suites, one by one going to GE [General Electric Company] and going to all the different—Home Depot. So between GE and a company called Lutron Electronics you're walking through hallways and to the next suite and you can see people gathering out around the TV.

TS: But you don't know what's happened yet?

CB: But you don't know what's happening because the TV's not on when you're interviewing.

TS: Okay.

CB: And so, then from the sec—between the second and the third interview there are more people gathering, and by the third to the fourth interview, really, the conference, kind of, began to shut down. We went through all the interviews but it was, kind of, this— you can see—we were shielded from it because we didn't have our own room, but the—the interviewers, also shielded, were beginning to get a little bit of—So we went through the whole day of interviews not knowing what had happened.

And so, it was probably around 3:00 or 4:00 p.m. when everybody was pulled together and everybody kind of said, "This is—This is what's happening." And so, on that particular day—so it's three days before my discharge—they shut down all the hotels, all the—all the air—all the airports, and that day I had to—I found someone in the phonebook or whatever—I can't even remember if cellphones were around—how ever I found them, I found someone who I'd served with in Korea and he took me in because all the hotels were overbooked. And so, I stayed with him for the next four days and—

TS: Because you couldn't fly.

CB: Because I couldn't fly and so during—That was the time I had to make my decision. I ended up getting offers from every one of the companies. And when you reflect on it, and how chaotic—and the world had stopped.

TS: Right.

CB: The world had stopped. So got offers from everyone—did some sort of a decision matrix and chose one, and it was—it was an interesting time. And I—What I tell people is that I put in my paperwork six months prior not knowing anything that would happen, so there's certainly a portion of me that longs and—and feels completely guilty and sad for not staying in for what it is that we all go in for, but there was no way at that time, having aligned all of the things that I had aligned for that day to happen, that you could go in[?] So there was that three days where you're, "Do I stay in, do I get out? Wher—What is happening? Am I actually going to be able to get out?" And so, it was—it was an interesting time.

TS: When the fourteenth came—boom—That was it, right?

CB: That was it because there's—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: It was already on trajectory.

CB: It was trajectory and—but I was in Atlanta and so you really couldn't know.

TS: Right.

CB: You couldn't know what—because there's—there's not an event. There's not a—

TS: Right.

CB: —a—there's not a re—a reminder that goes off on your iPhone that this is happening, right?

TS: Right.

CB: It's just on your DD [Form] 214 and it happens.

TS: Right.

CB: [chuckles]

TS: Kind of silently.

CB: And so, you don't want to call them up because what—so you just, kind of—I let it play out and—and—Yes, so I had—I had another two months to finish my MBA and then I began my job; they held it for me; I began it in December.

TS: What did you think about the 9/11 attacks personally? Aside from how it was connected with you—you're, like, in the middle of a retirement.

CB: Well, and it's—

TS: I mean, you can't probably disconnect it from that, but.

CB: You can't disconnect it and the—it's—like I said, it's—the timing can't be disconnected, and what you feel for the people—I honestly—It was a blur. I honestly don't remember. I was—I was saddened and I was immediately wondering, "What's going to happen to my friends," and—and "Did I do all the right things with the people that I trained?"

TS: Yes.

CB: And—Because I trained a bunch of mechanics and lieutenants and—and—

TS: Because you know they're going to war.

CB: And—

TS: Right?

CB: Probably what I thought of was all of those moms and dads that I talked to to convince them to let their kids get into ROTC.

TS: Oh, with the recruiting.

CB: With the recruiting. And you never—nothing like this had happened in—in the time that I was in the military, and so there's—there's no real way to put it anywhere. All you have is the conflict of, "Should I be there or is it best that I'm not? It's, "What do I do now? What do I do? What's the best outcome for everybody from—for me to do?"

I think as—And it was all unfolding when you couldn't really do anything about it, right? And then a couple of months, three months later, when it—when—when things become clearer, that's when the real guilt hits—

TS: Yes.

CB: —and that's when I think you are transition—everybody that transitions wants to get back in sooner or later because it's so uncomfortable on the outside and you don't know—Everything is new. You're a second lieutenant again only you're thirty years old. And so, there was—there was definitely a time, probably one year into it, that I had my—I had my PT test. I went up to the Pentagon. I was going back in; I was going back in. [chuckles] So I think it weighed down on me over—over a course of time, and so—

TS: So what happened with that?

CB: You know, I didn't go through with it. I—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Any particular reason? Just—

CB: I think—I don't remember the exact, kind of, logic sequence but I think that I came right back to, "I had to have left for a reason," right? So I didn't leave when my enlistment was

up, I left years later, so it wasn't—I stayed in longer than I needed to and I did what I felt was the best in every position that I was in, and so it was time for me to move on, and I—just because I was unhappy with the job I had taken, that shouldn't be the reason to go back in. And it was all blended in together, right?

TS: The job that you took in the civilian world?

CB: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

CB: I mean, it was all blended together.

TS: Right.

CB: Whether I was running away from one thing and running to the other thing. It was a very tough time to make that decision.

TS: Well, it's interesting because one of the questions I always ask—and we're almost done—is, how was that transition when you got out? Well, it's completely different for you because of the circumstances, too, right?

CB: Yeah, I tell you, my transition I felt was much more methodical than most people's, and I—the people that I started with, there were—there were two or three of us at that exact conference that ended up starting at the exact same day, and so it's not that I didn't have a cohort, it's not that I was a lone wolf. I went to this company, it was Lutron Electronics, and they treated us with as much dignity and—and red carpet as they could but I truly was miserable. I felt like—I think, like—like most people do. So I say this all the time, I was a female aviator with an MBA; I was a rock star, right? What was I doing selling dimmers? Really? I'm going to roll around my encyclopedia with dimmers to architects and interior designers. What miniscule percentage of my capacity does that tap into?

And so, I had to reconcile that day in, day out, while also reconciling with the fact of—"What is business casual?" And "Wait a minute, is this appropriate?" And "Why is that guy saying—Why does he look disappointed because I don't look happy? Do I really have to smile at him every single day?" And all of that was going on and it's, "Wait, you hired me to be direct but you look offended because I'm being direct." That dialogue—That dialogue of, "Oh, I'm sticking out like a sore thumb," more than I ever had anybody—anywhere else, and so that kind of beats you down. And then you were with these other—I was with an infantry guy and a navy pilot and a military police Marine, [chuckles] so we were not the best cohort to be together, right? These are the sexiest professions that there are, right, and so we would roam the halls and be just miserable.

And so—So the transition itself from really being a rock star and being—being somewhere where you just had to tell people, "I'm in the army." And that's it. You don't

have to say anything else and—and the—then explaining, "I sell dimmers to interior—" just the words rolling off of your tongue just made me cringe.

TS: Was your identity somehow now challenged?

CB: Of course. I think being a single person, right, it's not like I had a family or other things that I could really mark as my own. This was it. I did a profession and I got pretty good at it and I was—I was a low percentage of something, right? Those are—Those are all very easy things to roll off the tongue in a bar, right? And here it felt very undignified what I was doing, and it felt very unfulfilled and it felt like there was no true meaning to it other than just money. And I felt—I felt uncomfortable exchanging time for money.

TS: Have you progressed from there?

CB: You know, it's probably taken me ten years. I took—I took another job after that. I quit that job without having a second job; that's how much I hated it. So for four months—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: That doesn't sound like a “Planning Cindi”. [chuckles]

CB: No, it was—it was—I had a moment.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: It's like, "Done."

CB: I had a moment and I just said, "We're—We're done here."

TS: Yeah.

CB: And then I moved to Atlanta, I got married, and then I stayed at the same company for about six years. And then I took two other additional jobs and—and being a methodical person, towards the end there I made ridiculous money. So being a female, taking jobs that people don't want then being good at it, there's a trifecta, right? It's a trifecta. And being comfortable with leadership, being comfortable with adverse conversations, being—being outcome and process driven, those are all very good traits if you can navigate cultures and personalities.

And so, I had a moment a year ago and I just really—I'd had two kids by then and I had a moment with my husband and I said, "I can—I can see the next step and we're ridiculously comfortable at this point but I feel the least amount of relevance that I have

in my entire life," and I just happened to be a char—volunteering with this charity, and I—

TS: Say the name of it for the—

CB: Charlotte—Charlotte Bridge Home.

TS: Thank you.

CB: And when I got to Charlotte four years ago I began a monthly luncheon; a networking luncheon for veterans. We'd had it in Atlanta, and I found it at my very, very last six months that I was there, and I just happened to be nine months pregnant, and these guys took me in. These World War II, Korean War, Vietnam—A hundred guys in a room; I was the only woman in there; I was nine months pregnant. I was clearly—I wasn't just a woman, I was a woman at—right?

TS: [chuckles]

CB: I was nine months pregnant and these guys took me in and it was so comfortable. We—And I hung out with them once a month for several months. When I came here I said, "I can't believe you don't have a chapter like that." So I started one. And so, for the past four years, once a month we meet at a local restaurant. Any veteran's welcome. We just—We meet, we know each other for thirty seconds, and we're best friends by the time the hour is over.

And I really felt like that was the one day of the month that I could be myself. The rest of the days I wasn't myself but I was—I was making ridiculous money, and the people were content to give me more money, I'm sure, for an exchange for my time, and I really just had a moment and I think it's taken me twelve years to figure out it's not more responsibility, it's not more people, it's not a higher title, it's not stock options. Because I—Because I went through all—I went through that process of elimination. What I really was looking for was that relevance. And this charity helps other people transition, and my—my ultimate goal was to condense it to a one year process, what it took me twelve years to do.

TS: [chuckles] Excellent, yeah.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: I mean, honestly, I think that you're not a hundred percent ready to accept logical thought when you get out of the military, and so you take that job to replace that income and replace that ego and you're never going to find that. I'm never going to find what I had in the military, but I found the closest thing to it, so.

TS: Right. And do you—do you find that with the people that you're helping, too, because of the wars—when you were talking earlier, like, as a young girl with PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] from that—from the family issue and circumstances, that now the people that you're trying to help, too, have these added on issues? And do you feel like that gives you that relevance, too, that—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: Absolutely, and—

TS: — you're searching for?

CB: —and in—you can get PTS from a bad car accident, you can get it from being an immigrant. I think what we find and what being in a—in a vantage point here, it's—it's a lens that you carry with you and we try to help people navigate through it. So many people don't know that they have PTS and many people don't realize that they're searching for relevance, they just think that they're depressed, right? And so, what we try to do here is we really try to get to the root cause and we try to give them a support system while they figure it all out.

Because it really is—in the military—A lot of things are decided for you in the military, right? What isn't decided is how you're going to be as a leader. But when you're over here deciding which pediatrician, which barber, where—where am I going to live, and where are the good schools, all of that is very overwhelming and so people can't get to the good thing of being leaders and being ethical hard workers like we know veterans are, so they get lost in this chaos. So we try to smooth that stuff out; we make it one more, kind of, PCS [permanent change of station?]. We try to help them and wrap around them so they can do that clear thought and grab that—that relevant job right out of the military, instead of the only job that's there or the quickest job they can take.

TS: Right. Very interesting. Well, a couple just general questions for you. You were in during the time that I think they would have initiated "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," as far as that goes.

CB: I think so.

TS: And so—Now, since then that's been repealed, do you have any thoughts on that at all? The issues of homosexuality in the military.

CB: So—I don't know how to politically correctly—

TS: You don't have to say it in a politically correct—

CB: My personal thoughts are, as a leader in the military, there is a good bit of that issue that is logistics. When I went through—and many of the places I went through, there just

weren't accommodations for females. And I don't mean to downplay this, but being an only female going through mountain warfare school I had to learn how to change my shirt and clothes in public sight because there wasn't a ladies' bathroom, right?

TS: Right.

CB: I can imagine that as you—it's fairly clear-cut when you have men and you have women. When you have, kind of, this blended and overlapping, it becomes a logistical issue as well, right? So do you—do you put homosexual males with heterosexual males or do you put—I can only imagine that when you're out there and it's no-nonsense combat, and—and you want to minimize distractions and you don't want to—and that sounds like such mental midgetry, I know, as it comes from me but, logistically, how are you going to solve that, right?

I absolutely think that the capabilities of men and women and anybody who is willing to go to war could very well be equal, if not surpassed. There's no limitations there, so that many times people say women are better pilots and climbers and men are better this and better that. How are you going to know unless you let everybody in? And on the other hand, it's a very real—you're in foxholes, and you're in very close quarters, and you build that trust and, realistically, are we there as a society that the trust will be built when there are all these people who you don't know where they stand, you don't know what their preferences are. I think, realistically, it's going to be a pretty long time where everybody can be blended and that trust—It's very difficult to build trust when you know—when you know exactly what you're dealing with, if that makes sense.

So I was there when it was there, and I was there when it wasn't. There's certainly situations where if logistics aren't an issue—There's—It doesn't—It doesn't matter to me and I don't think there's a difference and I think you're eliminating a very good chunk of society. If you're willing to serve you should be—you should be allowed to serve. I don't think it's a—it's a blanket kind of policy to address. I think just like there's some women who probably shou—There's some locations and areas that women probably should never be allowed into just for the logistics piece of it, and—and that what could happen to a woman versus a man. I'm not certain that it's ever necessary to do a peanut butter every—

TS: Right.

CB: —slather it across the military. I think that it needs to be changed. I think that we need to open up into a greater diversity of everything. And so, we have min—minorities of every color[?]. Women that are minorities in certain units, you have African-Americans, and I don't think that there needs to be a built-in discriminator. On the other hand, you have to consider when you place that person in that unit what is realistically going to happen and how much time are you going to dedicate to protecting that one person. Does that—

TS: Right. So, like, there's—So basically if the individual can do it they should have the opportunity but there are logistical complications that go along with that if they're an isolated person.

CB: Ex—exact—I mean—

TS: Is that what you're saying to some extent?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

CB: Here it is—Yeah. I think that—I think that here it is—how many years later are we and I don't think a lot has changed as far as what I dealt with when I was—when I was nineteen, twenty years old. This issue will take time and it'll take people putting their thinking caps on and figuring out how do you integrate in places where one day it is just part of the—of the canvas, right?

TS: Right.

CB: But it's not overnight and it's not everywhere and it's not—You're not going to place women into special forces and just say that it's fine, right? It's going to take time and you have to experiment where it's a natural fit and where there's a benefit to being that diverse.

TS: Right.

CB: And again, I know it sounds like mental midgetry, and on the other hand I've been there where I've stuck out like a sore thumb and I know exactly how much energy that takes away and what kind of effect it has on the unit. And at the end of the day, if it's that great of a distraction we need to think about what's the easiest way to put that in there.

TS: Would you consider yourself a pioneer?

CB: You know, I definitely would consider myself someone that had it on my mind, that I—that we were still—that women were still proving themselves. That it wasn't a given, and that having gone to flight school when I did, we were being looked at to see how many more women were going to get in, right? So there—I went in at a time where, I think if we didn't have the successes that we did, that it would be so widespread, that women would—would permeate the aviation ranks the way they did, so.

TS: Like what you said about not wanting to ever fail at something to—

CB: Exactly.

TS: —set a good—

CB: Exa—Yeah, I mean, I certainly didn't set out—I never—I was just one of those people. I never—I was, like, that five foot person that thought I could play basketball really well. I

never really thought—nobody ever said that I probably couldn't do it and so [chuckles] I didn't—I didn't go out to prove somebody wrong, I just never considered myself under that filter.

TS: [chuckles] Well, now you have two young boys and would you recommend them, or if you have a daughter, to military service?

CB: That's actually one of my soapboxes. I do have two boys and my husband and I both spent over ten years each in the military environment and my—my father-in-law spent his entire life. And the values that we learned there and the way that we carry ourselves we owe to the military. On the other hand, if we can't fix how veterans are regarded when we come back, if we can't fix the "I stepped out of line and now I have to come back in but I'm years behind my peers," if we can't fix that, I don't think any of us could really, in good conscience, recommend to our sons that they go in, right?

I'm all for protecting our country but I'm not—I'm not foolish to say do it at the cost of your future. And in many cases now with the unemployment rates, with the homelessness rates, with the amount of untreated kinds of issues, and with the, I think, the lack of understanding and ability to say this person actually has better skills than someone their exact age who went to college and took a first job, I think with that de—detachment and disengagement, I don't know.

TS: Well, do you think that there are any misconceptions—Or would you like to tell a civilian, like, "Here's some misconceptions you have about the military."

CB: Absolutely.

TS: Or military—someone who serves in the military. What would you like to say to them?

CB: When I used to interview—none of my first jobs, my middle jobs—people would say things like, "Well, when you were in the military, you couldn't fire anybody. What kind of a leader—I don't think you were that great. How complicated could it have been to lead when you can't fire anybody?"

And I would let that land and then I would always say, "Okay, when you have a bad performer, you can fire them and you can hire yourself a good performer. When I had a bad performer, I couldn't fire them. I had to rehabilitate them. I had to figure out what motivated them. I had to develop them in a manner where either they or their peers brought out that performance, because I had no choice. You tell me which one is the better leader."

And so, there's—there's an element of—it's an autocratic and bureaucratic, kind of—It is, but you don't get to trade people in and out. You don't get to trade them in for younger models or whatever it is, right? There's no ageism or any—There—You get what you get in the military, and you have to get that unit very quickly to trust one another to carry the weight of one another when the other one is hurt, right? And to do so freely and quickly and without judgement.

And you talk about rigidities. So, yeah, I can—I can be rigid. Can I micromanage? With the best of them. But [then I?] take us back to when I was aviation maintenance officer. The worse thing that could happen was someone would do something because I ordered them to do it. I need them to do it because they respect me and they respect the unit. And so, that's the kind of teams that most leaders from the military build. They build self-directed teams; they build teams that care about one another and they're not—I don't need to be in the room to be a leader.

And so, I think rigidity is something—I mean—And I could go on and on, so—mental illness. A study just came out and they said 26% of the United States public has some sort of mental illness ranging from anxiety, depression, or whatever it is. It's not different in the military. It's just that we tell you we have PTS because—because we saw it; we know exactly when it happened. So you shouldn't discriminate against me because I might have PTS. I'm going to tell you I have PTS because I've been diagnosed with it and I know precisely when it happened. There are people who are not going to tell you and I—and I know what I'm dealing with, right? I had my—my introspection and I'm dealing with it.

So there shouldn't be a discrimination of this person is going to unravel right in front of me. There's a lot of services that are wrapped around these folks, right? They have supportive systems and it didn't happen overnight. And so, there's—there's just so many—Many of the people that I've met have made the best leaders, and they're the ones that keep track of their employees for years and years and years, and they're the ones that get through adversity, get things done. And I think—I think it's a shame that some of these predisposed discriminatory, kind of, thoughts keep people from hiring veterans.

TS: Do you think your life has been different, or how has your life been different, because you joined the army?

CB: There is no doubt, I think when people describe me they probably describe me as—as confident, and steadfast towards results. And I don't know that that comes to somebody who just goes to a college. Part of it is me before I came in, but there is no doubt that the military brought that out in me through trial and error and through atta-boys [expression of encouragement] and—and having always something in front of me that I didn't think I could do. I—There is no doubt. I wouldn't trade it for the world. I wouldn't trade my relationships and the way that I've learned—the lens that I have. You know, it's not life or death but it's—everything is important, right? Time is of the essence and everything's important and I don't find a lot of people that think through things like that.

TS: A sense of urgency.

CB: A sense of urgency. And a sense of if I don't—if I don't do this to my best, right, something will happen. It will affect somebody and someone's not going to do their best and I don't mind that. You can call that intense but I revel in it.

TS: What does patriotism mean to you?

CB: Patriotism, I have a saying and I think it's a quote from somebody. Patriotism is writing a check to the United States government and not knowing the amount and just giving it to someone, right? So patriotism is, I'm loyal and I will do what is necessary of me and I don't know how it's going to play out but I know it's the right thing.

["A veteran—whether active duty, retired, or national guard or reserve — is someone who, at one point in their life, wrote a blank check made payable to "The United States of America," for an amount of "up to and including their life." – Author Unknown]

TS: Excellent. Well, I don't have any more formal questions. I think we've talked—I'm sorry—longer than you meant—you meant to.

CB: My employees are probably all gone.

TS: Oh, no. But is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to add?

CB: I don't think so. I think I've incriminated myself enough. [laughs]

TS: You did not incriminate yourself at all, so. Well, thank you, Cindi.

CB: Absolutely.

TS: Really appreciate all your time.

CB: Hopefully I gave you—You can turn it off.

TS: Okay.

[End of Interview]