WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Melissa Culbreth

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: June 22, 2014

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is June 22, 2014. My name is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the home of Melissa Culbreth in Youngsville, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at The University of North Carolina of Greensboro. Melissa, could you state your name the way you'd like it to read on your collection?

MC: Melissa L. Culbreth.

TS: Okay. Well, okay. Melissa, why don't you go ahead and start out by telling me a little bit about where you were born and—when and where you were born?

MC: Okay. I was born in Smithfield, North Carolina—well, outside of Smithfield, in between Smithfield and a community called Brogdon—famous for Ava Gardner history—on a tobacco farm. My grandfather, when I was little, still farmed it; old stick barn deal. And grew up there. Grew up trumping [sic] through the woods. That was—I was a little tomboy in rural Johnston County in eastern North Carolina.

TS: What'd your folks do for a living?

MC: My father did auto body repair work, initially for the Ford dealership, and then opened his own shop there on the farm, so most of my life he was—he worked from home. I'd—One of my jobs was to help him in his body shop. Probably the only twelve year old girl I knew who could take a fender on and off a car. My mom was a teacher assistant. She took a—She took a break when I was born. I have an older brother, seven years older than me. She took a break from work when I was born, and then when I started kindergarten she started kindergarten again as a teacher assistant.

TS: Was she in your class or a different class?

MC: No, she was across the hall.

TS: I see.

MC: Which does—isn't—is—is good and bad all at the same time. So—So yeah, she was a teacher assistant.

TS: Why was having her across the hall good and bad?

MC: Well, when the teacher yells at you she can hear you, or if you get held in for recess, she walked by the door and it's, "Oh, crap."

TS: [chuckles]

MC: So—

TS: So she's aware of everything that's going on.

MC: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Yeah, so. But—But yeah, she did that her entire career. My dad eventually left the body shop. He wanted retirement—wanted healthcare after he retired so he went to work for the county and was a detention officer in the county jail for about ten years until he retired.

TS: What was it like growing up?

MC: I was a farm kid. I had my own little zoo. My parents—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: What kind of—

MC: My parents joked around that I was Elly May Clampett [character in the TV show *The Beverly Hillbillies*]. I had dogs, cats, chickens, rabbits, ducks. Then when my dad's buddies would go hunting and accidentally shoot, like, a mama squirrel or a mama raccoon, they'd bring the babies to us and we'd bottle feed them. And so, I've had pet squirrels and raccoons. All of them have had—All of said animals have had babies at some point. We raised quail for a while. Yeah. Yeah, it—loved outdoors, loved animals. Played softball from the time I could—from when I was four years old. Always played—loved baseball. Played softball year round, except for November, December, and January when I was in high school.

TS: Yeah.

MC: I found a fall league. I play spring at school. I played summer girls softball, and then in the fall I—I'd come up to Raleigh where my brother lived and he found a coed team up there. So he was working at WakeMed [Health and Hospitals] and they had an ER [emergency room] group called Blood and Guts, and so I played with them in the fall.

TS: You guys play slow pitch or fast pitch?

MC: Slow—It's—It was all slow pitch in North Carolina during that time.

TS: Was it?

MC: That was when all the—It was when we were all petitioning the state to make girls softball fast pitch so we had a better chance at getting scholarships and stuff for colleges.

TS: Right.

MC: But yeah, it was—I was one of the last generation of slow pitch high school—

TS: There you go.

MC: —high school.

TS: Well, what other kind of things did you do for extracurricular? Anything else?

MC: I played basketball. I was—I was a sports—sports geek. But once I got to high school I just focused on softball. I was also the—fairly smart. I graduated third in my class, so I was a pretty studious student as well.

TS: Were you always that way, even in, like, elementary school?

MC: Yeah.

TS: Did you always like school?

MC: Yeah, yeah. I was—School's always been something I was good at. I know how to figure—play the game and figure out what the teacher wants and give it to them.

TS: Did you have a favorite teacher?

MC: Early on, I had a redheaded third grade teacher named Miss [Sybil Edwards?], and yeah, she was—she—she—She helped me a lot. And then once I got in high school, my—I had an English teacher, Sandy Perkinson, and my softball coach, Don Andrews. And I babysat for them. They were—They were like surrogate family. In fact, I still talk to them on Facebook.

TS: [chuckles] Now, this Miss Sybil Edwards with the red hair, was that—did you, like, bond with her because of your own red hair, or—

MC: Yeah. I was—I've never blended in well. [chuckles] I've always been, kind of—and at that—at that point my mom was—There were only two thirds grade classes at the school and my mom had moved and she was a teacher-assistant in one and I was in the other one next door, and there are some challenges to having your mother that close by.

TS: Right.

MC: And—So yeah, Ms. Edwards, kind of—I became her—her helper after school, and kind of helping me find my own way and identity so I wasn't just "Kathy's kid."

TS: Well, did you have a sense of what you want—Like, with the classes, did you have a favorite subject that you liked?

MC: Math.

TS: Math?

MC: I've always been good with—good with numbers. In fact, when I went to college I was initially—The first year and a half I was a math major. I was going to teach high school math and coach softball.

TS: Was that, like, your plan for a while?

MC: Yeah. Yeah. From—Well, I went through—because of my math, science thing I went through a phase—Well, the animals; I went through a phase where I wanted to be a veterinarian. Then I went through a phase where I wanted to work for NASA [National Aeronautics and Science Administration], be an astronaut; all that aerospace engineer stuff. In high school, went through a phase where I was going to go through the air for—go to the Air Force Academy. I was in Civil Air Patrol. I don't know if you're familiar with that. [The Civil Air Patrol is a congressionally chartered, federally supported non-profit that serves as the official civilian auxiliary of the United States Air Force.] As a kid, I was actually cadet commander for a while. And then just being a kid; family; didn't—got nervous about going to Colorado Springs; and got a scholarship to Campbell [University]. I was get—I had a—I sent a—I sent a congressman who was going to appoint—give me an appointment to the Air Force Academy, or recommend for an appointment, but I ended up getting scholarships and—to Campbell and—

TS: Where's Campbell at?

MC: Buies Creek [North Carolina], between Wilmington and Angier; we called it UCLA.

TS: Okay.

MC: University of Campbell between Wilmington and Angier. So—but—but yeah, ended up there, and it was—it was good. It was small enough to where—

TS: [unclear] stop it.

MC: It was small enough to where I was—didn't get lost in the shuffle, like at a big state university. Teachers knew my name. But it was also—I lived on campus so I was far enough away from home that I was able to begin to divide that out.

TS: Yeah? To figure out, like—I'm going to lean back here. What's—What's this puppy's name?

MC: Rock Rock. Rock Rock.

TS: Okay. We should introduce him on the tape here.

MC: Oh, this is my boy Rocky.

TS: Okay.

MC: In the pictures he will be the brown and white puppy.

TS: There we go.

MC: He is AKC [American Kennel Club] Advanced Canine Good Citizen, and well on his way to passing his Public Access Test—

TS: [chuckles] Okay.

MC: —to be a service dog.

TS: He's very friendly.

MC: Yes, he's my boy. He's my snuggle bug.

TS: So how was college for you?

MC: It was cool. It was a—There was—It was—My freshman year was an up and down time. Like I said, I played softball pretty much year round; ate, slept, lived it. My softball glove and bat laid right beside my bed in my room. It was one of those—And then had the chance to walk on at Campbell, and got there in my freshman year and decided not to. Some—Several things happened. I was in a car accident and—where a lady was killed, and the wreck was my fault, which sent a-whole-nother, kind of, realm of—of bumps.

And then began—I had had several friends that were majoring in Religion and kind of found that world. And that's when—My sophomore year I changed my major. I changed my major to Religion and became a youth minister at one of the churches there, and it just—It fit. I've always loved kids and working with kids, and I always ended up with the—the youth groups that—I tend to attract the kids nobody else wants to deal with.

TS: Why do you think that is?

MC: I know what it's like to be the oddball, [chuckles] so I tend to—tend to blend—work well with those kind. And so, ended up doing that. Campbell opened a divinity school as I was graduating so I was in the first class of Campbell University Divinity School, with a grad assistant.

TS: Well, did you—did you have—Was there a particular denomination that you were drawn to, or religious—

MC: Well, Campbell's a Baptist school—

TS: Okay.

MC: —but I was also there during the time when the Baptists were having their disagreements with fundamentalism and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship [The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is a Christian fellowship of Baptist churches formed in 1991], which is where Campbell ended up aligning. And Campbell, one of the reasons they started the divinity school was because of the fundamentalist movement and the Southern Baptist Convention that was excluding women from being in the ministry and being ordained.

TS: Were there other women in the class that you were in at the divinity school?

MC: Yeah, that was—that was at—Yes. They—It was very pro female, because there were a lot—at the time, like, Southeastern [Baptist Theological Seminary], which is here in Wake Forest, and a lot of the Southern Baptist seminaries were excluding women from pursuing a Master of Divinity.

TS: About what year was this?

MC: I graduated Campbell in '96, and then I graduated divinity school—I finished my coursework December of '99, and actually walked with the first graduating class in December of 2000. And Campbell was very pro women. In fact, our assistant—Our associate dean had been fired from Southeastern here in Wake Forest because of his stance about women in the ministry.

TS: Because he was for it or against it?

MC: For it.

TS: Because he was for it?

MC: Because he was for it.

TS: So that ran against the grain there.

MC: So yeah, we were—we were very much—Campbell was on the cutting edge—Campbell, Gardner-Webb [University]—of starting schools so women had a place to train to be ministers. So.

TS: What did you do after you graduated from divinity school?

MC: While I was in undergrad divinity school I was youth minister in three different congregations. All three of those congregations split for various reasons. The first one, the pastor became a target, and I was very close to him so it really upset me. Left that church, went to another one. They got me there, decided I was a female, and they didn't believe in women in the ministry. I'm not real sure what showing up to the interview in a dress mis—I got nothing. But—So it was my turn to be the target. And then in the third church, things were going well and this one family decided that they wanted to take over the church and started maneuvering their family members on various and sundry committees in the church. And I noticed what was going on and took it to—every Baptist church has a committee sheet with all the committees and who's on everything, and I'd highlighted all the names in this one family and took it to our senior pastor and said, "Dude, you see what I see?" I was told I was being paranoid and didn't understand all this stuff. And I said, "Okay, well, I'm out. Been there, done that. I'm done." About six months later they targeted him and he was gone within a year.

So—But then, when—while I was recovering from my burnout [unclear] local church ministry, I managed used bookstores here in Raleigh, and that's initially how I ended up moving to Raleigh, was I managed Edward McKay's Used Books & More on Capital Boulevard.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh, yeah? I know the one in Greensboro.

MC: Yes, well, that—Greensboro was the second Edward McKay's that was opened up. The first one was in Fayetteville, Greensboro was second, Raleigh was third.

TS: I see.

MC: So—but—

TS: About what year are you in now?

MC: That would have been '98.

TS: Okay.

MC: So ninety—

TS: So it was before you actually finished your divinity school?

MC: Yeah. February of '98's when I—I went, "I just—I can't—I can't do this fighting in the local church anymore."

And—And that was—I've never—When people say, "Wow, we've never done it that way."

I think, "Oh my God. Cool."

Most—There's a lot of churches who think, "Of course we've never done it that way. How dare we do it [unclear]."

TS: Right. So it's always their—the way that they're addressing that change.

MC: Yeah. Yeah. So I'm all—Yeah. I don't follow the status quo very well. But—So yeah, this is '98 and I started out just working at Edward McKay's, and then ended up becoming the senior manager there for several years. That's where I met my husband. He walked in the bookstore one day and we ended up going out, and were married for nine years. And that's where I was when 9/11 [September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks] happened.

TS: What'd you think about that?

MC: It—It's a day I will never forget. Like I said, as a kid I'd always been intrigued by the military, had wanted to join the military. My parents didn't want me to.

TS: Oh, you had wanted to join pre—

MC: Yeah.

TS: —previously?

MC: Yeah, I'd wanted—My dad was—was in the air force for several years—

TS: Oh, he was?

MC: —and I'd always had a fascination with planes; that's why I joined Civil Air Patrol.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh, that's why you wanted to go through the—

MC: And that's why—

TS: Air Force Academy.

MC: Yeah. Yeah.

TS: I see.

MC: And like I said, I did Civil Air Patrol; just loved the idea of flying. Still do.

TS: Did you fly in the Civil Air Patrol?

MC: Yeah, we got to fly with our—and actually, our commanders were teaching part of the cadet program; is to teach you the basics of flying. You can actually—Kids can actually worked toward their pilot's license, which is really cool. And my husband at the time, I had—we had started dating one month before he went to basic training, so by this time he was out and he was a [unclear]—a part-time National Guardsman—with the 514th Military Police Company. And my—the owner of the store—of Edward McKay's, Phil, called and said, "Hey, something's happened in New York. Go get an antenna for the T—" because we had TVs there because we tested video games, but we didn't have antennas for them.

TS: To get the signal?

MC: So he said, "Go run, get a TV antenna so that people coming in the store and you guys can keep up with what's going on." And I ran down to Target, here on Capital [Boulevard], and was standing in Electronics with my antenna at the checkout—Oh, that's my phone. That's my mindfulness bell on my phone that reminds me to breathe. I kind of like it. But I was standing in Target, with the wall of TVs, when the first tower fell, and it—I'm sure—I'm sure every American, their stomach dropped and all that kind of stuff, but there was just something about it being there on fifty different TVs across the whole wall, to go, "Oh shit." And in the back of my mind I'm thinking about my husband, who—he ended up—he didn't have to go to Iraq, he ended up in Kosovo, but he was deployed two of the first four years we were married, because it—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: For how long?

MC: Solidly, for two years, he was—He was gone. He went to Fort Bragg and his company backfilled a company from the 16th MP [Military Police] Brigade that was going over, and they were there for eight months. And then he—but he was only—He came home, like, one day a week, maybe; maybe every other week. And then as that—that was ending, they ramped him up to go to Kosovo. So for—It was just under two years he was—He visited a few times—

TS: Right.

MC: —but he—he was gone. And so, that was my—my initial interest in—that was my initial interest in becoming a—By this time I had my Master of Divinity. I was still at the bookstore but it was one of these—Well, no, take that back. I left the bookstore and I was running at-risk youth programs. I'd gotten through my—my burnout from the church phase and—[speaking to dog] Hey!—and had gone—because I've always—Working with people's where my heart is. It's where I [unclear] And so, I was working with at-risk youth programs in Wake and Johnston counties. But I saw through that deployment the needs of National Guardsmen soldiers and their families.

TS: How did you notice that?

MC: Well, for one, I was one of them, during the train up and what it's like when you think your soldier's coming home and then suddenly it's delayed. When he was coming home from Kosovo we had six separate dates of when he was supposed to be home. Initially, he was supposed to be home, like, two days before my thirtieth birthday. He ended up getting home, like, two weeks after, and just the way that jerks families around.

TS: So there weren't enough National Guards people in North Carolina to fill—like, was there—there was a need for more?

MC: Yeah. There—There—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: [unclear] more?

MC: Yeah, we've—this—recently, since I got back from—we've—from Iraq, in the past couple years we finally have filled up the chaplain ranks in North Carolina. But when I came in—and this was several years—It took me a little while to get to this point. Actually, I was running at-risk youth programs and began to think about something in the ministry again, and did my clinical pastoral education, which is civilian chaplaincy training, at WakeMed [Health and Hospitals] here in Raleigh. It's a level one trauma

center, and fell in love with the idea of being a chaplain, and the natural next step was to join the North Carolina National Guard.

TS: Why was that a natural next step?

MC: Because of, again, I'd been intrigued with the military my whole life.

TS: Yes.

MC: Then my husband at the time deploys and I'm seeing how families of National Guardsmen are—are left hanging because of the disperse nature, and—

TS: So you felt like you could fill a need?

MC: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

MC: There was—there was a huge need for—and still is—for support for these—these sol—these citizen soldiers who make tremendous sacrifices but don't have access to the resources that active duty soldiers have.

TS: Was there a reason that you picked the National Guard over the [U.S] Army—active duty army or the Reserve or anything like that?

MC: Yes. One, at the time I didn't—I didn't want to do it full time. I liked what I was doing. I liked the civilian side of it as well. I chose the [National] Guard over the Reserves because of—the Guard is unique in that we have two missions. When I swore in, I swore in—I swore my allegiance to the President of the United States and to the governor of North Carolina. When things like Hurricane Katrina happened, it's the Guard that responded. Federal troops can't respond to stuff like that. Federal troops have no authority within our country. So the Reserves and the active duty, their first mission is stuff overseas. With the Guard, we get to help here too, and that meant—that was important to me. As a—When I worked with at-risk youth, I'd help—I'd helped respond to some of the Katrina stuff, and we had in Cary—We had one of the shelters, and I was able to help, and I wanted to be a part of the state active duty missions, as well as—as the stuff overseas.

TS: What year was that, that the Katrina happened? I forget that. So you joined the Guard in—

MC: Two thousand six.

TS: Two thousand six.

MC: Yeah, it was—That—That was—

TS: Two thousand seven maybe?

MC: No, Katrina was before that.

TS: Before that, okay.

MC: That was when I was still civ—like, civilian side.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh, I see, and helping out. Got you.

MC: Civilian side. And—But I'd seen that, and I'd seen what the Guard had done. And so—

TS: What did you family and friends think about you going—

MC: [laughs] My parents did—were less than thrilled.

TS: Why?

MC: I was—Okay. So there is—there is the Southern mentality of what a female's supposed to do, and I've not done any of it, ever. I'm not the—the Southern—little Southern belle; Scarlet O'Hara [central character in Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind*]. I didn't grow up and get married and have a family and—I tried to live on the family farm; it didn't work out well. I've just always been—Like I said, I don't follow the status quo well, and my mom's image of her little redheaded girl that she used to like to dress up in green dresses, although she thought I looked great in green, army green wasn't exactly the green she was hoping for. But on the flipside, the—our going away ceremony—I tell everybody, and I joked around with my mom, but she didn't believe I was actually in the military until I was going to Iraq. But they showed up that day at our going away ceremony in—in Fayetteville.

TS: Did you father feel the same way as your mom?

MC: Dad's quiet. My dad is the—is the ultimate—he doesn't say a lot, and he—he always let mom do the talking. I always got the impression that—[speaking to dog] Hey! Rock. No. Hey! Come!

TS: It's okay if he—I can just pet him.

MC: Okay.

TS: [speaking to dog] Come here.

MC: My dad was in the military and I think he—My dad, I've always been a lot like my dad, so while he never said it I always got the impression that he was proud of me. And then—And then they showed up to the going away ceremony, and I wasn't expecting them to. And they were there, like, two hours early.

TS: Yeah.

MC: So that meant a lot. And then when—[speaking to dog] Hey! My mom died March—suddenly—March 2011—[speaking to dog] Come. Sit. And when we were cleaning out stuff in the house my brother brought me—brought me this white notebook, and I opened it—three ring binder, and I opened it up and Mom had printed out all my pictures from Facebook and had them in there, along with emails I'd sent her, and a map of Iraq.

TS: While you were deployed?

MC: Yes.

TS: So she kept track of you real carefully.

MC: Yeah. And even though she never said it, and she always fussed at me—I mean, we were—[speaking to dog] Hey!

TS: Lay down. Lay down.

MC: Rock Rock, come.

TS: Here, I'll pause it for a sec.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay, I'll turn it back on.

MC: Yeah.

TS: Okay, so your mom had kept a nice, like—

MC: Yeah, and she always fussed about me being in the military and having to go to drill and—because it—if—any—anybody in the Guard or Reserves know drill is always going to fall on a weekend that you have something else you want to do; it's inevitable.

TS: Right.

MC: So.

TS: Well, before we gone on there, could you tell me about, like, when—So when you signed up in 2006—

MC: Yes.

TS: —and it was in Raleigh, you said.

MC: Yes.

TS: Tell me—So you went—So you went to basic training after that, right? Did—Where'd you go?

MC: Yeah—Well, that—With the Guard, I actually started drilling with my unit for a little while.

TS: Oh, you did before?

MC: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

MC: With the Guard—[speaking to dog] Okay. Hey guys?

[Recording Paused]

TS: —back in. Okay.

MC: Yeah, I actually started drilling. When I swore in, a couple days later I actually went down to my unit and was hanging out with my unit and started drilling. And I went to my chaplain—at the time it was called CH-BOLC, Chaplain Basic Officer Leader Course, and—at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, in June of 2007. And I was there—I did it all at one time; three months. The initial month is your Chaplain Initial Military Training [CIMT], so for all of us direct commission flunkies that's our mini basic training. You had NCOs [non-commissioned officers] that—yes, they yelled at us; they yell at chaplains. The whole PT [physical training], all the hooah—hooah stuff.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So you went through with the other chaplains that were going through the same time?

MC: Yeah.

TS: So your basic and your advance course for your MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] basically?

MC: Well, my—the basic—the initial and then my Officer Basic Course.

TS: Okay.

MC: So they—for direct commission officers—chaplains, medical, and JAG [United States Army Judge Advocate General's Corps]—they kind of mush that into—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Put that together?

MC: —into one. So you spend—the first phase is your Chap—or Chaplain Initial Military Training. CIMT is the first month where you do—they cram all the—the basic training stuff: the land nav [navigation] and the obstacle courses and night infiltration course and all that kind of stuff. Everything except firing a weapon is crammed into that first month.

TS: And how was that for you?

MC: Oh, I loved it.

TS: Yeah?

MC: I mean, I got to go play in the woods. I mean, it's why—It's why I joined the army over the Air Guard. Because I looked at the Air National Guard as well, but the difference between the chaplain's mission in the air force and army is, in the air force you're tied to a base, because if you think about the air force's mission, they fly somewhere and come back. So everything is centered around a base. In the army, we're assigned to a unit, and that unit becomes our church, so to speak. And we go and we do everything they do. So if my guys are out in the field sleeping in tents, I'm right there. If they're doing land nav, I'm right there. In Iraq I went on convoys with them. Everything my guys do, I do, and it—One, I'd get bored silly if I had to sit on base the whole time, and two, you build a bond with those soldiers that's beyond anything I can describe. So that's why I chose the army.

And I—my ba—My month of basic was nowhere near as hard as regular basic training; I know that; I don't even claim. Because we had fifty year old Catholic priests, and they didn't want anybody falling out. But I liked doing all the hooah stuff, as we refer to it. I think it's fun.

TS: Was there anything that was challenging at all for you?

MC: Columbia, South Carolina in June, July, and August, when it's a hundred and six [degrees] with 90% humidity; I'd rather be in Iraq.

TS: So the temperature was bad?

MC: Oh yeah. And our field exercises, I mean, you would—you just sat in your sweat. I mean, you just—you were wet for four days.

TS: Did you have a vision for what you were going to do?

MC: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I kind of had that going in. My basic course and my time at Fort Jackson solidified that for me because, again, it was just like I fit at school. School was something I know how to do. That's the way the army felt; is that it's something that worked; I knew what to do; I knew how to—to fit into this new community; and loved it. I mean, it—There's long days. There's days that are crappy in any job, but this is one place where things just made sense.

TS: But you want to be able to continue what you were doing on your—on your regular daytime job.

MC: Yeah. Yeah. I liked the idea of choosing where I was going to live. At the end of the day, I liked going back to Fort Living Room and Camp Couch.

TS: [chuckles]

MC: And that was—That was the joke that my ex and I made, is that, "Why don't you go active duty?"

"Well, I'm kind of attached to Fort Living Room."

So—And I was still finishing up my Civilian Clinical Pastoral Education at WakeMed, and I actually took three months off from that to go do basic, and then I was coming back to finish up my year of Clinical Pastoral Education. And I toyed with the idea of maybe going active duty down the road. As it was, I finished all that, came back, two things happened. Two wee—one—First, two weeks, I came back—I graduated one weekend, the next weekend I had drill, the next weekend I had a twenty-four year old E-5 shoot herself, and I had my first military funeral.

TS: In your unit?

MC: In my unit. Sergeant Summer Gillespie out of Alpha Company, 230th [230th Brigade Support Battalion of the North Carolina Army National Guard], out of Benson [North Carolina]. And it was an incredibly sad situation because she left behind a four year old little girl, who's the cutest little thing on the face of the planet. But also, I was doing what I was—what I was there to do, and the one thing I've learned as a chaplain is you've got a bunch of crusty, hardcore infantry guys that are always ready to go to the enemies' ass, but when it comes to dealing with emotions, they're really happy to have a chaplain around. And again, I was in my element. I was—had a crisis situation. We had a mom driving up from Florida, it's where I—autopilot takes on and I just—I know what to do, and that's when I earned my placed in my unit. My battalion commander, when I came back from basic—he's a full colonel now, he was a lieutenant colonel then, but [Bernard] Bernie Williford; he's six [foot] eight [inches] and played linebacker at [The United States Military Academy at] West Point. He's a very large and loud man, but he looked at me and said, "This just makes me angry," because she didn't give us a chance to help her. And again, I earned my place, because when they didn't—They were at a loss as to how to proceed. I was flying by the seat of my pants because I've never done a military funeral before. I also learned a very valuable lesson; that if you act like you know what you're doing, people will follow along. [chuckles] Act confident and drive on. So got through—

TS: Well, can—Oh, go ahead.

MC: We got through that and I—it's like I said, I really bonded with several people from my unit, and that incident, as awful as it was, gave me the foundation I needed to be effective in that unit. And in October we were alerted we were going to Iraq. So I haven't had a lot of time to think about active duty, because out of my eight—almost eight years in the Guard I've been active duty five of them.

TS: Right.

MC: So that's been—Post 9/11, when the Reserves and the Guard were transitioned from being a strategic ready reserve to being an operational part of the force and in the regular deployment rotations with active duty, so many Guardsmen have spent the past decade doing this fulltime, because the operational tempo required it. Otherwise, they'd have had to institute a draft. No way our country could have kept up the op [operational] tempo we've been at without utilizing the Guard heavily, regarding Reserves. Which is what's so disappointing about our—the way things are happening around the Pentagon and with active duty versus Guard and Reserves right now. It's actually very disappointing.

TS: What's happening right now?

MC: Well, General [Raymond Thomas "Ray"] Odierno has said that because money's tightening and all that kind of stuff, the active duty has—has gone on record and said the Guard and Reserve—the Guard and Reserves haven't—We didn't get the dangerous missions during the past decade. I really wish they'd say that to our families of our KIAs [killed in action], because we've got—it's about twenty—twelve of them that I actually

helped with in some capacity, but I think it's about twenty overall that we've—that North Carolina—the North Carolina National Guard has lost in the global War on Terror.

I wish—I wish Odierno had to look in the face of our wounded guys who lost legs over there, and the guys who have come home and just will never be the same. They carry invisible wounds. I wish—I wish the active duty guys had to look them in the face and say that we didn't do our part, that we didn't carry just as much weight as they did.

Because the unit I deployed with—the 30th Air Brigade Combat Team, which has now transitioned into the 30th Armor Brigade Combat Team—our history goes all the way back to World War I. We were the first National Guard brigade to deploy and actually run an area of operations in a combat zone since World War II when they did it in 2004, before I got in, and we were the first brigade to do it twice with our deployment in 2009.

TS: So what was the context of him saying that you hadn't—

MC: Funds. It's all about money.

TS: So they—the Guard should get less money or—

MC: Yes.

TS: Is that what—

MC: Yes.

TS: —the bottom line was there?

MC: Yes. They're trying to—

TS: So if you're going to make cuts, make cuts here?

MC: Yes. Yes. Even though we're a more—We're more economical for the government, because you don't call us up unless you need us, so we actually cost the government less money than active duty. But they're, like—they're trying to take all of the Apaches [helicopters] out of the National Guard and pull them up to active duty. We've actually—they've stopped that and they're—got a commission. This has all been going on. They've actually finally drew up a commission to study it before they make these—these drastic—because in 2001—well, shortly after 9/11, they transitioned the Guard into an operational part of the force, and they spun us up with all this equipment and all this training, and now they want us to go back—They want to decimate all that, which is stupid. You've invested all this in us. Now, why would you go back to previous—Because as we see overseas, it's not like we're not going to be needed again. And so, yeah. But that's my little soapbox.

TS: Well, let me ask you a little bit about—Before you got called up to go to Iraq—

MC: Yes.

TS: —what kind of things did you do when you were on your duty for the National Guard? I mean, you've told me about the experience with that young woman who died.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

MC: Yeah, it varied. We had weekends—Well, before I went to my basic, I was just learning what it meant to be in uniform. I was trying just to learn what it meant to be a soldier. I went to my battalion commander—battalion command sergeant major, Pat Gill—he's still [unclear] Sergeant Major Gill—and said, "Okay, Sergeant Major, help me learn how to be a soldier and not make a fool of myself," and we became close. And it depended—a lot of counseling. Initially, it was a lot of getting to know my soldiers. At the 230th, we had armories in Goldsboro, Benson, and Dunn, which is about an hour—

TS: Looping around?

MC: —looping around. Benson and Dunn are closest; they're probably twenty minutes or so, maybe. Goldsboro's an hour from either one of them. So on drill weekends I would hit all three armories and make sure all the soldiers had opportunity to come to our religious—the religious service that I led. If—There was a couple of—As we were getting [unclear] up, conscientious objectors, people trying to file that paperwork, and one of the things is an interview with the chaplain. A lot of counseling, because—I had my initial introduction to my unit, I went to basic, I came back and we were alerted we were going to deploy.

And I really think telling people a year out is way too much time for people to think about it, because you've got families that, over that year, they start—with National Guard, they're pulling us in and out, a week here, a week there, to do medical prep, to run us through all the medical stuff, and all of this stuff. And you're jerking these soldiers back and forth, and all it does is—It's hard. It's—

TS: How did it effect you?

MC: Well, it's hard to go from—and my last year of clinical pastoral education, it's why when I had the opportunity to come on orders full time I jumped at it. Because there's a military mindset, and the way you function in the military, and the way you function in the civilian world, two totally different things, and it's like switching gears.

TS: How is it different?

MC: Things are simpler, things are more cut and dry.

TS: In the military?

MC: Yes. We walk around with our rank on our chests; you know where you fall in the food chain. Army math's simple, O5 beats O4. You can make your case, but at the end of the day this person outranks you. Okay. [unclear] You have a mission, you know what you're supposed to be doing. It's just—It's a very simple world to live—for me, it's a very—and I think I speak for a lot of soldiers I've counseled too—It's a very simple world to live in. You don't have to think about what to wear [chuckles], you—if you're out in the field they feed you. You have a mission, you have a job, you have people on your left and your right that you know are going to have your back. It's a very structured world. When you move out of that, back into the civilian world, it's very disorienting.

Even drill weekends you feel it a little bit. I noticed—And I noticed this before I got in with my husband going to drill and coming home. I would—Inevitably, he'd get home on Sunday night, and sometime between Sunday night and Monday night, I would look at him and say, "You're not at drill anymore. You don't give me orders. Stop that." Because you get in this mindset, and we talk to each other differently in the military than we do in the civilian world. It's like all the clutter gets boiled away, and it's just kind of a—what comes out and—

TS: Like the small talk?

MC: Yeah. You don't—there's just—there's less—There's less fluff. You kind of—And especially when you deploy with each other, you develop this bond that goes beyond anything the civilian world—police officers, firefighters, EMS [Emergency Medical Service], folks that do that crisis kind of work, get some of it, but still, at the end of the day they go home to their families. When you look at the fact that you live with these people 24/7, and you don't get to go home to your family, they become your family, and that's the other neat thing about the National Guard. And, like, my—when I was at the 230th, both of the sergeant majors—command sergeant majors we had during that time, had been in the unit, in that battalion for twenty-five-plus years, so they knew, they grew up with these—with the unit, they had been there. The KIAs we had in Iraq—well, one set of them—They had all been in their unit twenty years. One guy was going to retire and didn't because he didn't want to see his guys go downrange without him. There's a bond there that you just aren't—I haven't found anywhere else, and none of my buddies seem to be able to either, so.

TS: Well, how were you received—as a woman and as a chaplain—into this unit?

MC: It was interesting. This was a support battalion, so there's a higher percentage of females in a support battalion anyway. There were the guys that—"Females can't be ministers. What do you think you're—" But it was—It wasn't as much as the civilian world.

TS: You'd already faced that in the civilian world, right?

MC: Oh yeah. It was so much less than the civilian world. It was like, "Okay, whatever. Sure," and you drive on, because in the end, when the shit hits the fan and you're there for people, they don't care. They don't care if you're Baptist, or Methodist, or male or female, they care that you're there and that you're walking with them through this really crappy situation. I've had atheists before have a family crisis, and I was the first person they called, and to me, that's a sign that I was doing the right thing. We also used to joke around, I called him my favorite atheist, but that's a-whole-other—whole-other story. He was an awesome mechanic.

It—again, you become—you become family. And I've sporadically had—When we were in Kuwait, I had a—I was covering down—again, we were short-chaplained so I was—for about six months I was covering two battalions for our brigade, and the other battalion that I was covering, their command sergeant major—we were in Kuwait, one of our kids, his wife back home had had a miscarriage—or stillbirth, and so I'd gone to deliver the Red Cross message and get him, bring him to a phone, and he was on the phone with his wife and this battalion sergeant major—command sergeant major was talking to me and he—"Well, I don't think women should be ministers."

I'm like, "Kid. Baby dead." And I look at him, I'm like, "Oh, okay, Sergeant Major. Your choice, dude."

And he went on and I just, kind of—"Sure. I'm going to go check on the kid now."

TS: So he just, kind of—

MC: He just—He felt the need to tell me that and—

TS: Right before you were going to go talk to this person?

MC: Well, we were in the middle of it.

TS: Yeah?

MC: We had got him to the phone, he was on the phone with his wife.

TS: And he's talking to you about it at that time?

MC: And we were standing over—Yeah, we were standing over to the side. And it's like, "Okay, whatever." It's one of those things that it never—it has popped up from time to time, but it's always one of those things that you go—I've always just gone, "Okay, you're entitled. Can I do my job now?" And I found—and—

TS: You didn't try to debate it with him, you just—

MC: No. I've never tried to—I've found that if you just do your job, and do it to the best of your ability, you—people see. My current command's a good example. Brian—Colonel Brian [C.] Pierce is my brigade commander. When they were talking about moving me to aviation, Colonel Pierce was the battalion commander, and they were talking about

moving me there with the goal of ending up moving me up to the 449[th Theater Aviation Brigade]. And he didn't want a female chaplain. He's a Catholic, Catholic mindset; "I don't—I wouldn't even know what to do with a woman—a female." And several people talked to him and talked him into having me there, and it took—And it ended up that instead of going to the battalion, they shifted around and I went to the brigade and he became the brigade commander.

TS: So you're right in the same—

MC: Yeah, so we ended up moving—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: He's in your chain of command.

MC: Yeah—well, he—No, chaplains work for the commander, so he is my—he's my direct—

TS: Right.

MC: —direct supervisor.

TS: That's what I mean.

MC: Yeah.

TS: He's, like, right above you.

MC: Yeah. At my—And several things happened. We had a couple of domestic violence things, we've had a suicide in our battalion—the battalion underneath our brigade. I did my job as a chaplain, and I—when I got promoted to major last year, Colonel Pierce said—he actually—me and a couple of my senior chaplains who were there, he started out his little speech and we were going, "Oh crap, where's he going with this?"

Because he started out his speech at my promotion ceremony by saying, "I didn't really want a female chaplain—"

"Okay, where are we—"

And then went on to say that—How he'd seen me dealing with my medical issues, and being with the soldiers, and being there when people needed me had won him over, and I think it's true. When I was in Iraq, I had hardcore infantry companies that weren't real crazy about their chaplain so they came to talk to me. It's all about listening and being with people. If—As a chaplain, if you're just handing out scripture and telling people, "Just trust Jesus and everything will be okay," you're not going to get anywhere. But if they're having a hard time and you sit there and you listen to them, and you just walk with them through it, now you're doing what you need to do to be a chaplain.

And one time when my fellow male chaplains got pretty frustrated with me—I was the officer in charge of our chapel on FOB [Forward Operating Base] Falcon—

TS: That's in Iraq?

MC: This is in Iraq.

TS: Okay.

MC: We were standing there—There were four chaplains on Falcon, and we were standing there one Sunday, we had just done—got finished with service, and our brigade chaplain was standing there—lieutenant colonel—and then the other two battalion chaplains that were on our post, and this kid comes running in and he's crying and he's, "I need to talk to a chaplain! I need to talk to a chaplain right now!"

I go, "Okay, okay. Well, what unit are you with?" He tells me and I go, "Okay, here's your battalion chaplain. Cool."

"No! I don't want to talk to him."

"Okay."

And so, Chaplain Glick[?], being the lieutenant colonel, steps in and says, "Well, I'll talk with you, son."

"No! I don't want to talk to—I need to talk to Chaplain Hale[?];" my married name.

And all of the boys turned and looked at me like, "Why is this infantry guy wanting to talk to you?"

And what it was is, back in the barracks when all this had hit, several of the other guys that had come to me and talked, said, "You need to go talk to Chaplain Hale. You need to go talk to her." And so, there's—

TS: They're going to trust their buddies, who to go to, right?

MC: Exactly.

TS: Yes.

MC: Exactly. And that's probably—honestly, that's where I felt the most frustration, is with—My senior chaplains have all been awesome, but my fellow battalion chaplains—

TS: The peers?

MC: The peers have been the biggest struggle, because we are in North Carolina, we have a large percentage of very conservative churches here, and our chaplain corps reflects that. The good part was that I outranked them all, because I kind of came in at the top—at the front of the wave of chaplains that came in behind me, so I outranked them, and so they could only take things so far. But—

TS: But have you tried—Has anyone tried to undermine you or your position?

MC: Again, not directly because of army math; I outrank him so there's only so much they could do. But it's just one of those things where, "You don't have to talk to me, you don't have to like me, just let me do my job." I don't—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: It's not like you have to coordinate with them to talk—

MC: Sometimes.

TS: Well, I mean, on a—

MC: Yeah.

TS: They're not—Your peers aren't the one that are going to write your evaluation.

MC: Exactly. Exactly.

TS: So you have to, like—

MC: I've always—I've always amazing senior chaplains.

TS: Yeah.

MC: There's friction there sometimes, but I don't—I don't argue with them. "You don't like me, great. Fine. That's your choice. Just let me do my job, and let me take care of soldiers." And I found that if you take that attitude with[?] other people, they end up looking like the stupid ones because, "All I'm doing is trying to take care of soldiers, guys."

TS: Well, let me ask you about when you were called up, when you got the orders to go to Iraq—

MC: Yes.

TS: —you had said—you went a couple different places before you actually went to Kuwait and then Iraq.

MC: [chuckles] Yeah.

TS: So you said you were—

MC: Okay.

TS: Let's see. You went to Fort Bragg for training in November of 2008 to December?

MC: Well, I take that back.

TS: Okay.

MC: Let me adjust that a little bit. November was our war fighter exercise at Fort Fish—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Was your what?

MC: War fighter.

TS: War fighter?

MC: Yeah, we fight war on paper. We go through the paper exercise of the order comes down through brigade staff to battalions, to companies. It's fighting a war and going through all the decision making processes that happen and reacting to—you have a [white sail?] that sends down different missions, and it's working out your—

TS: The kinks and things?

MC: Yeah, how your staff works together in an environment.

TS: Okay.

MC: So that was November, we were at Fort Fisher [National Guard Training Center in Kure Beach, North Carolina] for two weeks.

TS: Okay.

MC: Came back for two weeks, then we all went to our armories December 1. That first week was, kind of, getting oriented, and then we spent the month of December that year out in the woods at lovely FOB [forward operating base] Patriot, Fort Bragg, which was just a makeshift FOB out in the woods in the middle of the ranges where there's absolutely nothing, so. Then we got Christmas break for ten days, came back, and on January 2 my unit, being the support battalion, because we needed our vehicles at Camp Shelby, convoyed 843 miles to Camp Shelby, Mississippi from Goldsboro, North Carolina, me and my assistant alternating driving every hundred miles. Dobbins Air Force Base was

kind enough to let us sleep on their tarmac overnight. They didn't want us to get their hangars dirty, because we—we're army; that was actually what they told us.

But we made it to Camp Shelby and we spent January—It's about the end of February is when we went to NTC [National Training Center], Fort Irwin, middle of the Mojave Desert.

TS: In California?

MC: Yeah. It was the beginning of March so it's really windy, so yeah. You don't want to be in the Mojave Desert in March. We actually had to park our—support battalion, so we have the big—the military equivalent of a transfer truck; we call it a head[?]. But we're parking them around our tents that have our—because one night the [A Lock?]—the logistics where my—I worked out of, the tent tried to blow away, so we're trying to block—

TS: To block the wind with the trucks.

MC: —to block the wind.

TS: Got it.

MC: We had one night where all the porta-potties on the FOB blew over. And the thing that makes the Mojave Desert worse than Iraq is that you get sand blasted by wind, because the sand pelts you. Iraq sand is more like baby powder. So yeah, even in full battle rattle [The maximum amount of gear that a soldier can be expected to carry] I was—our operations center was here and our medical facility was up this little hill, and I—one day I was walking down the hill back toward with one of our sergeants who was one of our trainers, and we were literally getting blown apart. And I was in body—my IOTV [improvised outer tactical vest], my body armor, Kevlar, the whole nine yards, and I was literally getting blown, and it's like, "Okay, I'm not in command of the ship anymore. So yeah, March is not the time to be at Fort Irwin. But from there we came back to North Carolina for our going away ceremony. Again, it's—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Did you convoy back—Did you convoy to California?

MC: No, no, we flew.

TS: Okay.

MC: We flew, because, see, that was the other piece, is now we're at Camp Shelby with all of our equipment.

TS: Right.

MC: So the end of Camp Shelby was, "Okay, what stuff is going to port in Texas to float over to Iraq? What stuff is going back home that we don't need anymore? What stuff is going forward to Fort Irwin?" So our supply people and our foreshop[?], God bless them, because I don't know how—because again, this is a whole brigade, and to coordinate all that is just phenomenal. And not all of the states have been able to do that the way we did here in North Carolina. There were some National Guard BCTs [Basic Combat Training] who weren't able to make it all happen, but in North Carolina we did it twice, so I'm rather proud of that.

TS: So you got back to Fort Bragg?

MC: We got back to Fort Bragg and, again, it was for our going away ceremony—Cumberland County Civic Center—fourteen speakers, because everybody and their brother wanted to come and say goodbye.

TS: A long ceremony.

MC: Oh yeah. And I was the lowest ranking battalion staff officer, and we had twenty person contingents representing each of the battalions that were on the floor of the coliseum, and then behind us was everybody else. And so, in those twenty persons they wanted enlisted, NCO, and officers. Well, I was the lowest ranking staff officer so I ended up in the formations standing at parade rest, for fourteen speakers. Yeah. The Secretary of the Army at the time was Pete Geren [Preston Murdoch Geren, III], and I remember this because when he got up to speak he said—well, during rehearsal our deputy brigade commander had basically threatened us within an inch of our lives if we moved or wiggled or anything during the ceremony, because, I mean, it was televised.

But Pete Geren gets up there and says, "Alright, everybody on the floor, rest."

And we're standing there going, "What? Do we really?"

He's like, "I'm the highest ranking person in this coliseum right now. I am Secretary of the Army, and I said rest." So we all relaxed and—trying to shake it out. He's like, "Alright, is everybody good? Alright. Square yourselves back away and we'll move on with this. I just figured you all needed a break." And then when we were marching off the floor he was standing there handing out coins. So I actually got a coin from the Secretary of the Army, which, again, was pretty cool. He was—it was neat, but yeah, we will remember that because—yeah, standing at parade rest for—who—I don't know how long it was—was rather interesting.

TS: [chuckles] Well, let me ask you about before you then go over to Kuwait.

MC: Oh yeah.

TS: Let me ask you—So your civilian job, how are you dealing with that?

MC: Okay, for me it was easy because I was doing that clinical pastoral education. I was—It was a contract thing.

TS: Okay.

MC: My contract was ending in August of 2008 anyway.

TS: Okay.

MC: So in March of 2008 they were looking for a chaplain to come on orders full time to help with all of this stuff, getting the brigade ready to go, and I went, "I'll do it," and so, I came on orders in 2008. So I didn't have a job coming back—

TS: Got you.

MC: —which, in the end, worked out for the best, but we'll get to that.

TS: Okay. Okay, so that did work out, and then you—So you're on your way to Kuwait.

MC: Yeah, and I'm—we're—I'm in the support battalion so we're the first out the door.

TS: Okay.

MC: We have to get there, prep, get everything ready for the infantry guys. So yeah. So we were—we had the ceremony that—well, on the fourteenth, and my unit was scheduled to fly out at midnight that night. Now, it ended up getting pushed and we ended up at, like, four in the morning on the fifteenth or something; some ungodly time. So yeah. We flew out, flew to Kuwait, and then spent—It's about two or three weeks in Kuwait.

TS: What were your first memories of being in Kuwait?

MC: Dust. It was—and it's kind of surreal, too, because I grew up—I was in high school during [Operation] Desert Storm, watching 9/11, watching all that—all that stuff. This is 2009 now, so I watch the news, and you see it, but then suddenly you're there. We were at Camp Buehring [staging post for U.S. troops in Kuwait, formerly Camp Udairi], and it was just—it was kind of surreal. You're still sleeping in tents with your, like, hundred and fifty closest friends, so—

TS: Are men and women mixed up in those tents?

MC: No. No, it's female—female and male. And so, yeah, I mean, it's surreal. I was the first chaplain there so I was making contact with the post chapel, and kind of getting the lay of the land. My brigade chaplain was—I think he was two days—he got there two days later maybe. So I could report and give him everything he needed, and figure out, kind of, how

we're going to operate as chaplains out of—out of Buehring. It was—Buehring's nice, it's like a little city. I mean, it had Starbucks [Coffee Company] and it's like a little city.

TS: What was the food like?

MC: Great there, especially considering we'd lived out of MKTs [mobile kitchen trailer], which are the military popup kitchens, basically, and—

TS: During your training?

MC: Yeah. The food during training—

TS: Training was not good food?

MC: No. No, it was army chow. Even the caterers that—I can't imagine the caterers that we had at Shelby actually had businesses and made a living—

TS: [chuckles]

MC: —because—and we hadn't had hot lunch, we had MREs for lunch for six months. I mean, now, granted, when we were on leave we ate; [chuckles] we made up for it. But yeah, the food had been awful, so yeah, food was like, "Oh my God. We actually have real food."

So—but it's kind of—You're doing training stuff but it's also a time to get acclimated to the time change and the heat, and we get there just as a sand storm starts, so—So yeah, it's just a—

TS: You're there for about three weeks or so?

MC: Yeah, it was—Again, they leave you there long enough to adjust to the time zone, get acclimated to the heat, learn that you carry a water bottle with you wherever you go. It's more humid in Kuwait though so it actually feel hotter in Kuwait than in Iraq. But yeah, it's just a lot of—a lot of classes, a lot of boredom. That's the problem for a chaplain, is that bored soldiers are never a good thing, because that's when people think and get in trouble, and all that kind of stuff. I did, though—One of my—I had two assistants—I had kind of scavenged and gotten a second one—but one of them—My two assistants, Johnny Young, who actually reenlisted to deploy with me—he had deployed with the 230th the first time as a chaplain assistant, and he kept seeing the kids I was getting sent from AIT—the Advanced Individual Training, 56M school and he's like, "I'll go with you, ma'am." So—But then we got one of—another—a staff sergeant, who was a mechanic but he played the guitar, and he had helped out—he had deployed as a Chaplain Assistant in 2004 as well, and we were, kind of, reuniting the dynamic duo, but he did decide that he couldn't work for a female—

TS: Oh really?

MC: —and told me that in Kuwait, yeah. Yeah, he got through—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So what happened?

MC: I said, "Okay." I went to my commander and said, "Send him back to being a mechanic." It was good—It was for the best, because I was very frustrated. He didn't—He just, kind of, wanted to do his own thing and—

TS: Wouldn't take orders from you?

MC: Yeah, and I needed—I needed somebody that was going to do—be where they were supposed to be, and relay information.

TS: That you could trust.

MC: Yeah, and he just—he wanted to do his own thing and drink coffee, so we sent him back to where he was going to be—

TS: Did you get another one or was that—

MC: No, I just—at that point, brigade, I didn't want—I didn't want another one. Johnny and I were getting along fine, and I had enough frustration, and again, I'm covering two battalions now so I already have another one that I'm dealing with as well, and I'd already been through—While we were at Fort Irwin, I'm covering two battalions, because as we were leaving to go to Fort Irwin, one of our chaplains got sent home for family stuff, so I'm covering the brigade support battalion and the brigade special troops battalion.

TS: About how many people are you—

MC: That's about a thousand-plus, which our combined arms battalions, those chaplains, those are about nine hundred anyway, so people-wise my trouble was I had two battalion staffs, and that's where it gets frustrating, [chuckles] because—

TS: You mean, like, to—

MC: Coordinate.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: —to negotiate—

MC: To coordinate with. So you've got two different staffs that you're trying to help plan religious services for two separate sets of soldiers. I've got two—

TS: Two separate physical locations?

MC: Sometimes, yeah, and keeping up with—like, when we were at Buehring my guys—or the 230th barracks were in one location, the STB [Special Troops Battalion] barracks were in another location, so it's just—It's a lot more logistically.

TS: Right.

MC: Soldier-wise, I didn't have—I had about as many soldiers as, like, one of the infantry battalions, but logistically there was a lot more moving parts. The crazy part was at Fort—We were at Fort Irwin, the day we rolled out to the box for our exercise, the active duty engineer battalion that was attached to us, their chaplain had to go to the hospital for an emergency, he had a staph infection. So during that rotation I covered three battalions, which was probably closer to sixteen, seventeen hundred soldiers. That FOB—FOB Keene[?]—where they typically had four chaplains, had two, and it was—I actually ended up with five chaplain's assistants during that time because I—we had a kid who had just come to us from AIT that was assigned to brigade but our brigade chaplain and brigade chaplain assistant were so—trying to figure out this whole exercise thing that the kid wandered around the post for, like, two and half days and didn't even know where the showers were so I went, "Come here."

TS: [chuckles] Right.

MC: "Johnny, don't let him hurt himself or anybody else. Here you go." So—Which was cool because Virgil is a good kid. I still call him a kid. He's got kids now. But he celebrated his twenty-second birthday in Iraq. He ended up being—We called him our chapel rat, so he was—He was a good kid.

TS: When you're in the FOB Falcon, is that where you were centered then the whole time you were in Iraq?

MC: Yeah. That was—That was where our brigade—

TS: Where is that located?

MC: It's southeast of Baghdad.

TS: Okay. What's the war situation at that time?

MC: That was during the drawdown. I mean, a lot of our—By the time we left we had collapsed our area of operations almost entirely into Falcon. We were pretty spread out as a brigade when we first got there, but all of the JSSs—the Joint Service Stations—a lot of them in our area had been turned over solely to the Iraqis. We had closed COP Meade—Combat Outpost Meade. We had closed Dora. We had closed several of the outlying—so really Falcon and [Camp] Muqdadiyah, south of us, were the only army contingents left. So my guys had spent a lot on the road, not only initially delivering supplies out to everybody, but then at the end consolidating all the American stuff back at Falcon.

TS: Bringing it back.

MC: Yeah.

TS: Well, what kind of support did you give to provide the soldiers? What—

MC: Well, being in support battalion I con—did a lot of convoy prayers, a lot of Red Cross messages. Like I said, I was the officer in charge of our chapel on our FOB. I backfilled [Reserve units and individuals recalled to replace deploying active units and/or individuals] our brigade chaplain when he was traveling. And being the support battalion I was also the chaplain for our medical facility and mortuary affairs. The most dangerous place in Iraq is the roads with IEDs [Improvised Explosive Device], and so when con—When folks were hit with IEDs and they came into either a medical facility or mortuary affairs I was the first-line chaplain to deal with that.

TS: So people in your brigade got—did you lose people or—

MC: Yes.

TS: You did?

MC: Yes.

TS: Many injured?

MC: Not as many—We had—During that rotation we had seven killed in action, and we had one who actually dropped dead in the Atlanta airport on her way home for R&R [rest and relaxation], a blood clot.

TS: Oh, like in her legs or something—

MC: Yeah.

TS: —from sitting through the flight?

MC: Yes, and just—I was actually acting brigade chaplain that night because our brigade chaplain was traveling so I was—I coordinated the initial stuff for that, but—

TS: How does it—the process work for when those notifications come out when you've lost a soldier?

MC: Which end, because I've done it on both ends?

TS: You can describe it any way you want.

MC: Well, from—I'll work backwards. From—When you're in country—

TS: In Iraq?

MC: —In Iraq, yeah—it—I carried a SINCGARS [Single Channel Ground and Airborne Radio System], a walkie-talkie, and that's how my operations center, or anybody, got up with me, and I got—The night we had four killed I got a call, I was at my CHU, containerized housing unit. Imagine a singlewide trailer divided in three, ten by ten [foot] rooms, which my husband at the time and I lived in together. Never live with your spouse in a ten by ten room for nine months, bad idea. But yeah, I was back at my room, they called, I start running toward the TMC, Virgil, my kid, meets me—

TS: What's the TMC?

MC: The medical center.

TS: The medical center?

MC: The medical center, yeah.

TS: Okay. [chuckles]

MC: And Virgil met me, he was looking for me and he was running out toward my CHU, so he spun me up on what had happened, and the Alpha 120th had taken— an IED had hit a Humvee. So we were spinning up [setting up?] mortuary affairs that night. We didn't have as many injured—not severe injuries. We also—The severe injuries that we had were some air force kids that were on our base that were SPs—the air force equivalent of an MP—and they got hit several times and had kids who had legs blown off, stuff like that. EFPs, explosive formed projectiles [also known as an explosively formed penetrator], are the ones we've never figured out how to stop. They punch right through our armor. So—But—So I dealt with both—Again, for FOB Falcon, we were—We ran the base but it wasn't just us there, we had the DOD [Department of Defense] civilians, third country nationals, local Iraqis, air force, navy.

TS: Right.

MC: So I dealt with casualties and wounded for air force as well as for—

TS: For the whole base?

MC: Yes.

TS: When you get the notification of the death, what is your responsibility then, what do you have to do?

MC: Well, I'm—as the chaplain I, again, respond either to the trauma room or mortuary affairs, and in the case of a death I determine—well, I would help my—our mortuary affairs team recover anything [unclear]. I would be there with them, one, to support them in the process. I've helped recover whatever we could off of the remains. I determine, if at all possible, what faith, background, of the person is and say a final prayer over the remains, honoring their faith. I have a—in my pocket I carry that had the Catholic ministration for the sick, the Islamic prayer, the Jewish prayer, all of it, because in my view it's not about me, it's about them. It's not about my beliefs, it's about the beliefs that they held. And when I got home, another advantage of the Guard is that one of the—one of the guys that is actually in the 120th incident [?], when I got home I was doing one of our gold star events and met his wife, and his wife said, "When his IDs—ID tags were sent home they said Protestant. He's Catholic."

I was like, "I know. His chaplain knew him and knew he was Catholic, and relayed that to me, and I was able to say the Catholic prayer."

And so, it's important. It's important to the families back home that these things are done, and that's been one of—That's helped me in coming home, is meeting the families of our KIAs [casualty classification killed in action] and being able to say to them, "I was there. They were taken care of." That was—That's been important for me, and I think for the families.

TS: And then either also for—counseling for the soldiers in the unit?

MC: Yes. Well, that's a given.

TS: Right.

MC: That's before, during, and after. That's—Again, the cool part about being a chaplain is I spent my time wandering around our base. I could walk into the shop and wherever my soldiers were, I was there. And that became the challenge, is carving out time for myself. I would sometimes let my husband go on the end to where he worked. He'd worked in the electronic warfare.

TS: So you're deployed together?

MC: That's the other unique feature of the Guard, is we actually had eleven married couples living together on FOB Falcon. I helped coordinate that with our command. But yeah, we called it Lover's Lane, because they stuck us at, like, the back corner of the FOB, because one of our JAG officers—and I quote this, because nobody believes that somebody would actually say this—but one of our JAG officers looked at me and said, "Well, we can't have married couples living around everybody else because it'll make the other soldiers think about sex more."

Thankfully at the time, it was still the beginning of the deployment and I still had my filters, and I just went, "Okay, sir—" because how do you resp—Anyway.

TS: Did you lose your filters towards the end?

MC: Oh, yeah.

TS: Give me an example of that.

MC: [chuckles]

TS: Please.

MC: You just—Again, everything becomes—once you've been through enough stuff with people, you come into a what comes up comes out kind of thing. Once you've been there with a kid with his—a twenty-something year old kid with his leg blown off, it makes other stuff seem really miniscule. It puts everything into perspective. Things that seem like problems, "Pff. Okay, whatever." Again, I worked for a six-eight battalion commander who played linebacker at West Point. Once you've been yelled at by him nothing else really scares you. And it's—Yeah, it's just like, "Eh." So yeah, it's a lot of just what comes up comes out. I—And I think—I think it's one of the things—I kind of surprise some of my professors with things I actually say to clients, but I think people who need help appreciate not pulling punches and just whatever is, is.

TS: Just the honesty of the situation?

MC: Yeah. Yeah.

TS: Who's helping the chaplains cope?

MC: [chuckles] Well, there's a picture over your head.

TS: Where I'm sitting?

MC: That orange—Yeah.

TS: Okay.

MC: The one that's really orange up there.

TS: Yeah.

MC: That is Father Tyson Wood, he was our Catholic priest that covered our FOB. He came every Wednesday, and he stopped staying overnight because he kept getting—The sand storms kept making him have to stay there for several days. But he'd come, and he'd come early, and we'd sit. We had a little gazebo out behind my chapel, and he'd have his cigar and I'd have my Coke, and—or coffee or whatever caffeinated drink I was drinking at the time , and we'd sit and talk. And Tyson was—He was my battle buddy, he was the chaplain to the chaplain, and remained that way. We still talk from time to time; not as much as we used to. But when I got medevaced [Transport of persons, especially by helicopter, to a place where they can receive medical care] home he kept up with me.

I was also fortunate enough that Chaplain Barbara Sherer, who was the highest ranking female chaplain in the army at the time—or—and still is unless she's retired. I don't think she's retired yet. She was our division chaplain, and she was a big—a big help as I ran into—with the—with the boys, my struggles. Chaplain Sherer was there when I was being medevaced home and I was stuck at Striker, which is the—part of Victory Base complex [a cluster of U.S. military installations surrounding the Baghdad International Airport (BIAP)]. That's where the division headquarters was, and she came and had lunch with me. She gave me one of her 1st Calvary Division patches. And so, I was fortunate to have two senior—at the time—well, I think Tyson's still a major so we're the same rank now—but at the time, senior chaplains who really looked out for me, because—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Did you recognize that you needed someone to look out for you?

MC: Yeah. Yeah, because it was tough. I mean, I'll be honest. It was—

TS: I would think so.

MC: I was the support for [Army Colonel] Chaplain [Phillip] Glick, who's my brigade chaplain; awesome chaplain. He is an amazing pastor. His administration skills lacked some, and that's where I was able to step in and help him a lot, but it put a lot of pressure on me. There was one point there in our NTC [National Training Center] rotation that Colonel Williford, my battalion commander, looked at me and said, "You're—He's getting sleep and you're not. You don't do another damn thing he tells you to do unless you come talk to me."

"Roger, sir."

So now you've got two lieutenant colonels and you're a captain going, "[makes noise to seem uncomfortable]."

TS: Well, why don't you talk a little bit about what happened with your medical issue?

MC: December 6th of 2009, I had just finished—we had finished chapel services that night, that Sunday night, and I was getting in the shower and I found a lump in my—top of my left breast. Went back to my room, showed it to my husband, we went, "Nah, probably nothing." Go to sleep. Get up the next morning. My—One of my other supports, my battle buddy over there, John Willoughby, he was our S4 [logistics officer] at the battalion level, which is logistics, he was on advanced party so when they got our battalion headquarters he made sure my office was right next to his. And John was good people. He was—He actually wrote my desk number at the chapel in marker on his wall so that he could—and he had just gotten back from Sather [Air Base], from the hospital there, because he got mad and punched the door and moved his pinky knuckle back up into his wrist, so.

He had just gotten back the night before and he comes in and we hug and he's like, "Yeah, I've got to go to the TMC and check in."

And I went, "Hey, dude, when you go make sure I go with you."

And he went, "What?"

And I went, "Remember that issue your wife had last month?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I might have the same issue." His wife had had a breast cancer scare the previous month so he got it.

And he's like, "Okay, well, we're going now."

"Crap."

TS: [chuckles]

MC: So we walked in and he went to do his thing and I—Being it was my guys running it, I went and grabbed one of our physician's assistants and said, "Janelle, walk with me."

She examined me and said, "You're going for an ultrasound."

And I went, "No, I'm not." And yeah, I didn't really get a choice in that.

Went to Sather Air Force Base, which is the—where everybody flies in and out of, coming out of Victory Base complex, and where the CSH [pronounced "cash"], the Combat Surgical Hospital, is. They did an ultrasound, were 85% sure it was cancer, and wanted to medevac me on the spot, and I went, "No, I'm going back to my base for a couple of days," because we were packing up to leave. We were within sixty days of going home, and that weekend happened to be the weekend we were packing the containers that we're going to sh—float back home.

And so, I finagled my way back to Falcon for the weekend, and helped get everything packed—all my personal stuff, my unit ministry team's stuff—got all that packed and was supposed to fly out that Sunday night but air went red [?]; we had a sandstorm so we couldn't fly. So we ended up convoying out Monday morning, back to—back to the hospital where I sat for a week because of military craziness.

TS: What do you mean? What happened?

MC: The air force decided not to stop and pick up the medi—the guys being medically evacuated for a couple of days, and then there was—there was fog one day and then there was, like, one day they just decided they weren't picking up people from Sather, and—

TS: So it wasn't just you, it was some other people.

MC: Oh, yeah, there was about fifteen of us sitting there—

TS: Okay.

MC: —waiting to go, because you go from there to Balad [Air Base, Iraq] to Landstuhl [Germany].

TS: Okay.

MC: And—

TS: Where's Balad?

MC: Iraq; northern Iraq.

TS: Okay.

MC: I may have my geography screwed on that one, but that's where the CASF, the Contingency Aeromedical Staging Facility, for Iraq is. And—so yeah, it was just—It was traveling with the army, it's hurry up and wait; every—nothing's going to happen like it's supposed to.

TS: So how are you feeling? What are you thinking about all this, and what does your husband think?

MC: Well, I'm thankful that the radiologist there, who actually specialized in breast cancer back home, was cool. He's the one that had done my ultrasound so he spent—We had breakfast together every morning, and he spent the time educating me on breast cancer, and the questions I needed to ask and the things that needed to happen and what should happen, which was good, because when I got to Landstuhl I got this jacked up air force surgeon who read my report and said, "Oh, well, we'll just cut it out and send you back downrange."

"Excuse me, don't we need to do a biopsy?"

"Oh, no, no, no, no; we'll just cut it out and send you back downrange."

"My guys are going home. I'm not going to catch up with them. They're—By the time they'd be—" and it took about thirty minutes to get her to just—" Screw you. You're sending me home. Walter Reed [National Military Medical Center], Womack [Army

Medical Center], don't care, send me to the States. You're not touching me." I really like navy docs [doctors], not so much on air force. I just haven't had good experiences.

So ended up going back to Womack. When I landed there, Chaplain [Major] Stephen King—he's still in and he's actually in the process of retiring but he's been our fulltime State support chaplain—fulltime chaplain [unclear] for the Guard—my whole career, and I love Chaplain King. We were—You're coming off the plane and you're exhausted, because we left Landstuhl and flew to [Washington] D.C. and stopped there briefly before we flew on to Womack, and we'd been—it was a—almost like a bus. We'd flown—We'd hit several stops before we got to Bragg. And they were leading us off the plane, off the tarmac, into the—into Womack, and the lady leading us had just turned around and said, "Anybody got any family meeting them?"

And there was—I had said—And about the time I said, "No," and the "No" echoed through the little group of us, we turned a corner and there was Chaplain King and his wife. And I said, "Wait, yes, I do. Right there."

And he and his wife made sure that I slept in my bed that night. Every which way we turn—every doc that came in my—in the little room where they put me, Chaplain King was like, "She can go home tonight, right? Because I can take her. If she can go home tonight we—"

So—Which was cool because the house had been empty for fifteen months so it was nice to see it again. And I did—Because of all the chaos of arm—of military travel, I didn't tell my parents exact—I told them I was coming home, I'd let them know when, and I gave them, like, "Sometime this week," because my mom was very high strung, so if I had told her I'm coming home on Tuesday and it got—

TS: Right.

MC: It would just not end well. Plus, she's already freaking out, "Oh my God, my daughter may have cancer." My mom didn't—I was the stress person in our family, I took care of people, so I didn't' tell them. I got home, dropped my gear, Chaplain King and his wife left, and I look around the house and go, "I want to see my dog." So I hop in the car and drive over to my parents and just knock on their door; it's like, nine o'clock, 9:00, 9:30 at night. "Hi, I'm home."

"Ah!" Hug them and then go to sit on the floor with my dog briefly. She was my girl, she was fourteen. I ended up having—this was December, the following December I ended up having to have her put to sleep because hip dysplasia, but yeah, I wanted to see my girl.

TS: Now, had you had surgery anywhere?

MC: No, I had not had surgery yet.

TS: Okay.

MC: This was all—

TS: Preliminary—

MC: Yeah.

TS: —diagnosis?

MC: They hadn't even officially been diagnosed yet.

TS: Had you had a biopsy?

MC: No.

TS: Okay.

MC: I had an ultrasound, because they can't do any of that in Iraq.

TS: Okay.

MC: So I'd had an ultrasound, and what they do is they rate it in BI-RADS [Breast Imaging-Reporting and Data System] from one to four—or one to five. Well, in Iraq mine was rated a four, which is 85% sure it's cancer. What happened was, I go in through the entry—entrance process at Fort Bragg into the Wounded Warrior transition unit—the Warrior Transition Unit [WTU - support to wounded, ill, and injured soldiers who require at least six months of rehabilitative care and complex medical management]. I'm sure it's a great concept but I didn't have a very good experience there.

TS: Why not?

MC: Because it was just poorly ran. They were worried about checking the boxes and keeping themselves out of trouble, rather than making sure people got the care they needed. If you fought to get the care you got the care, but I didn't get any help from the command there. I was facing having major surgery in two weeks, I didn't have a vehicle, and I was needing some time to get the house, kind of, back going after being empty for fifteen months, and the company commander there—I was living—I was in Smithfield and I—Granted, I could have stayed there on Bragg, but again, there's lots of moving parts that need to get figured out here. I needed—And I was supposed—they wanted me to report to formation at 7:00 in the morning, and sixteen hundred [4:00 p.m.] in the afternoon, every day. And I'm like, "I got—I kind of got—I'm a captain. I need some leeway here."

And I told the company commander, I said, "Can you help me out? I need to go buy a vehicle."

He's like, "Oh, well—" they call it the lemon lot, on Bragg, where people that are moving sell—"Oh, just go to the lemon lot and get one. That's what I'd do."

I was not a happy camper, and plus, they—You have to have a job while you're in the WTU, and I said, "I've got three thousand soldiers coming home. Let me be accountable to them."

Chaplain King's like, "Please let her be accountable."

I was like, "Being accountable to them, they're going to get mad at me if I don't take care of myself a hell of a lot quicker than you are, because I've already been ordered to get well."

"No, you don't need to be doing chaplain stuff, you need to be taking care of yourself."

"Okay." And then the next day, their battalion chaplain called and asked me to backfill him so he could go on vacation, and I went, "No. No. I'm not doing it. So it was just—basically what happened was my—I had the absolute best breast surgeon on the face of the planet, Major Garth Herbert. I'm sure he's a lieutenant colonel or colonel by now. But he put me on quarters, so I didn't have to report in.

He's like, "I'll fix this. You're on quarters. They can't make you do anything. Go take care of what you need to take care of."

But I got there—Because it was getting around New Year's and all that, Dr. Herbert actually ordered the biopsy before he ever even saw me physically. Ended up having to have two biopsies because the first time they actually missed the lump and it came back benign, and they're like, "That's not right," so they came in, did it again. Dr. Herbert was able to rush all the results, and it was cancerous. And everybody, even from when they did it—did the first ultrasound at Sather, pretty much knew what it was. I mean, it had all the—all the signs.

So a couple weeks—Once we found out it was and we scheduled a surgery date, I sent the Red Cross message for my husband to come home, and, like I said, he got home in three days.

TS: Now, wasn't he scheduled to come back pretty soon anyhow?

MC: Yeah, but it was going to be, like—this is—my surgery was January 14, my guys got home around February 14.

TS: A month later?

MC: Yeah. So it was—it was a—He didn't go back. He ended up—Once we got through my surgery and his emergency leave ended, he went down to Fort Stewart [Georgia] to [unclear], and Sergeant Major Pat Gill, my first battalion command sergeant major, he was in charge of everybody coming home down at Stewart, so he got me a room down there, and I eventually got permission from the WTU at Bragg after I threatened going AWOL [absent without leave] if they didn't let me go see my guys come home. But I got to—I went down to Stewart and was there—stayed there for, like, five days while everybody was coming home. We'd get up, go meet the flights coming in.

And the cool part was—is that the first night I was out there, Colonel Khan[?], who was our state personnel officer—our J1 [Manpower, Personnel and Administration] at the time—Technically there was only supposed to be three people at the bottom of the

ramp when the soldiers come off, and it was whatever general from our state was there to meet them, a high ranking sergeant major, and then Colonel Khan or another O6 [colonel] type. As we were walking out that night I was going and kind of scoping out a place, because they had a cone set up to funnel them in, because they all had their weapons. So they had to funnel in, turn in their weapons before they went inside the building. And so, I was scoping out a place along the path, and Colonel Khan says, "Where are you going, chaplain?"

I'm like, "I'm just going over—"

He's like, "No, come on, you're with me." So I got to stand at the base of the ramp, and it kind of set a precedent [chuckles] because I got to do it.

I was like, "Well, Colonel Khan let me last night."

"Oh, come on then."

TS: [chuckles]

MC: So—Which was cool, because the night that—We had—Our military intelligence company was too undermanned to go with us, so one from Bravo 86 [Colorado Army National Guard Unit] Colorado got pulled and attached to us to go with us. So the night that my headquarters company was coming home, with my assistant and my battalion commander and all—the brigade staff was also on that flight, and Bravo 86 was on that flight, so the world showed up that night, because the brigade commander's coming home.

And so, I got—we got to the—got there early, and our deputy brigade commander, Colonel Thompson, who—awesome guy, gruff, rough, but when he needed a chaplain for anything in Iraq he ended up calling me. And so, Colonel Thompson was there and I walked up to him knowing that it was going to be a circus tonight because of everything. I was like, "Hey, sir, so Colonel Williford and everybody's on this flight. I'd really like to be able to go out to the base of the ramp again like I've been doing."

He's like, "You're fine, Chaplain, just stay close to me."

"Roger, sir!"

So we get out there, and we thought the plane was coming in and it wasn't so we all—we were standing outside the building and they were—I mean, everybody—it was a zoo that night, and I'm just, kind of, hanging close to Colonel Thompson, being low key. And a lieutenant colonel—who I will leave unnamed—comes up to me and goes—who hadn't been there any of the previous nights but now was there because of the brigade commander coming in—comes up, says, "Now, Chaplain, here's what you need to do. Now, they're going to come, and they're going to be going down this walkway, so if you station yourself over her you'll be able to—"

And I'm like, "Yes. Yes," and I just—

Colonel Thompson's standing here and he turns and he listens, and looks at me and looks back at this guy and goes, "Will you just be quiet? She's with me."

TS: [chuckles]

MC: And I'm standing there—By this time I'd just [unclear] kind of a relaxed, at ease, parade rest halfway, and I'm going—trying not to laugh as Colonel Thompson starts snickering. But—So yeah, so I got to be at the bottom of the ramp and that night, like I said, it was, like, three people from North Carolina, then three people from Colorado, and then the little captain battalion chaplain. And I ended up having to move down a little bit because I was holding up the line, because everybody's sleepy, they've been on a twelve, fourteen hour flight, and, "Yeah, yeah, welcome home, welcome home, welcome home, welcome home."

And then I'd go, "Hi, guys!" And so, I got taken off of my feet [hugged] a couple of times, and it was cool. It was awesome.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: I'm sure they all wanted to know how you were doing and—

MC: Yeah, yeah. Well, they also wanted to go inside, but yeah. But it was—it was healing for both me and them—

TS: Right. Well, that's great.

MC: —because the hardest thing I ever did was leave my guys in country.

TS: Right.

MC: I didn't—I didn't want to come home, Colonel Williford told me I had to. But no, I'd have stayed there and said, "Screw it. We'll deal with it when I get home," because I didn't want to leave my folks. So yeah, seeing them come home, I finally felt like, "Okay, I'm home now." But yeah, that was—that was—will always be a memorable night.

[chuckles] I don't know if this is appropriate for the tape, but when you have a mastectomy you have a prosthetic, and driving down to Fort Stewart, the buddy that was taking me, we had stopped in Fayetteville to pick up my prosthetic that had came in.

TS: [chuckles]

MC: Well, my medics from Charlie—from Charlie Company—Charlie Med—medics just have an odd sense of humor, and I understood it; I'd been in the trauma room at Wake Med, it made sense; I was—we'd spent a lot of time—we'd bonded. So I was hanging out with Charlie Company at one of their out-processing stations, and one of my medics went, "Can I feel it?"

I went, "Sure."

And so, she went— [both chuckle]

And somebody hit her and said, "You're not supposed to—"

TS: So she had one on each? [chuckles]

MC: Yeah. Yeah.

TS: One of the prosthetic and one on not the prosthetic?

MC: So—And then one of the other medics said, "We ought to sign it, like a cast."

TS: [chuckles]

MC: And I went, "Okay. Here you go."

TS: You took it out and they signed it?

MC: Yeah. So it became a thing—

TS: Everybody signed it?

MC: —that everybody signed it, and it's packed up around here somewhere. But yeah, there was a picture of it on Facebook for a while. Somebody wrote "Front Toward Enemy" on the front it, like on the Claymores [a directional anti-personnel mine] and—

TS: Right.

MC: But again, it was that laughing about something that in a lot of places they would have gone, "You what?"

TS: Right.

MC: It's a sense of humor that really sounds weird saying it now. [chuckles] It sounds—Wow.

TS: Military humor is—

MC: That—Yeah.

TS: Yes.

MC: Yeah, it's just a—

TS: It's a different animal.

MC: —off color kind of thing, but at the time it made perfect sense.

TS: But it's a stress reliever, too, right?

MC: Yeah. Yeah.

TS: What—When did you—How long did you stay on active duty then, in the Guard?

MC: Until—Well, I was broken army equipment. They had to keep me until they fixed me.

TS: Okay.

MC: So I didn't come off of active duty until November—Okay, so I had a—I got through all of my initial treatment, and August of 2011 I had a recurrence.

TS: Okay.

MC: So they had to keep me on active duty. I finally came off active duty November of 2012, and they tried to put me out and I fought to stay in, because I'm not a chap—now I'm to the point I'm going to be a therapist and stuff like that, but at the time it's like, "If I'm not a chaplain, then what—who am I?" And so, I fought tooth and nail.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: It's part of your identity.

MC: Yeah. And it still is and always will be.

TS: Yes.

MC: But I fought to stay in, they wanted to put me out, and after the recurrence, active duty did. But I fought to get back to the state [North Carolina National Guard], because I knew if I could get back to the state then it would—once I fell back under the state jurisdiction I'd be—I'd be looked after, so.

TS: That was in 2012?

MC: November of 2012.

TS: What did you do from the time—They were just taking care of you? And what were you—Did you have duty?

MC: Well, what happened was, I got out of the Warrior Transition Unit at Fort Bragg and got transferred to the Community-Based Warrior Transition Unit—

TS: Okay.

MC: —which all of my paperwork went out of this little place in Virginia Beach, but I was attached back to my state, so I could do what I wanted to do, and as much as possible help out in the state but, I mean, honestly, the first year, during chemo[therapy] and radiation—

TS: Right.

MC: —I didn't—I had a few drills. I did. I went to change of command bald, which was funny, so.

TS: Now, you said you had a number of people that shaved their heads?

MC: Okay, when my hair started falling out—I'm, again, a fairly stubborn individual, so if something's going to happen it's going to happen on my terms. So my husband and I got the idea of throwing a head shaving party, and I trained in martial arts at the time so a bunch of my martial arts buddies came and we trained all day, and then after we got done training we started shaving heads. Some mili—A bunch of my military folks showed up, and I think at—the end total was, like, seventeen people shaved their heads, which was cool. And again, for me it was a way of taking control of something. And—Because you don't realize how attached you are to something. I'm the red-headed chaplain, and we were sitting—I was sitting in Chaplain King's office prior to the beginning of chemo or prior to chemo starting, and our family programs person had walked in and we were talking about it. She's like, "I heard that after chemo your hair can come back a different color."

And Chaplain King spun around in his chair and said, "Wait a minute. You—That can't happen. You're the red-headed chaplain."

And I was like, "Sir, I'm attached enough to my hair. I don't think you can be too."

TS: [chuckles]

MC: But anyway. You realize how much of a big deal it is.

TS: Right. How did it come back?

MC: Well, when it first came back it came back, like, two year old Melissa, red and curly.

TS: Yeah?

MC: So it was—It was lighter. It's come back with more gray. The curls finally grew out. It's pretty much back to normal now, so.

TS: Is it? Yeah.

MC: A little browner and a little more gray, but I tell my soldiers the gray is partly due to him—them, it's only partly due to chemo.

TS: Right.

MC: That, and being Colonel Williford's chaplain for three years.

TS: Well, when you think back about your experience in Iraq, what were the biggest challenges that you faced? Your personal challenge of having breast cancer was certainly one.

MC: Being short chaplains.

TS: Being short?

MC: Because the first six—Like I said, from March of 2009 until—No, it was—For six months I covered two battalions. And even in train-up[?], when I came on orders as the fulltime chaplain for the brigade, the whole brigade only had two chaplains. Our brigade chaplain and me. Chaplain Glick would call me his favorite chaplain, and I would remind him I was his only chaplain. So the shortage of chaplains the whole time, and even as we got chaplains, everybody was moved. I was the most experienced and I'd only been in a few years, next to our brigade chaplain. So we took a bunch of green [inexperienced] chaplains to Iraq. And just learning how to manage everything. I mean, because it—I was juggling two battalions, being the officer in charge of the chapel, and learning how to take care of myself in the middle of that. And in the middle of that my husband and I were having issues, so that didn't—that obviously didn't help anything.

TS: That ten [feet] by ten, or ten by eight or whatever?

MC: Ten by ten room.

TS: Ten by ten room.

MC: Well, and it was a lot more than that—

TS: Right.

MC: —but that didn't help anything.

TS: Right.

MC: But yeah, those were the—those were the big things, is just you're living—you're living in chaos 24/7. There is no getting away from the job. Like I said, I carried a walkie-talkie so even when I was off, I wasn't really off. And any time, day or night, they—if a Red Cross message came in or something happened—

TS: What was the most common type of Red Cross message that you would get?

MC: Typically a death in the family. There's always, "Johnny hasn't called home in two weeks." Stuff like that.

TS: Worries from parents or—

MC: Or spouses. People have a fight and—It's easy in Iraq, you just don't call. [chuckles] But yeah, parents get worried, but mostly death in the family, or a kid falls down and has to go to the hospital.

TS: Has to notify the other parent?

MC: Yeah, and with technology now, a lot of times the soldier may have already known, but for—Like, if it was a go-home situation we had to have the Red Cross message to start that process.

TS: I see.

MC: So—But I didn't always know if your soldier had knew—

TS: Right.

MC: —had known. And—But yeah, typically it was either something—Grandma died, or little Johnny fell and broke his leg and they were trying to get up with them.

TS: What about the—when you talk about the ways that—of communication back and forth to family from Iraq, what kind of communication did you use to talk to your family, or did you?

MC: I would call my parents every once in a while, kind of, once every couple of weeks or so. Email. I had a group that I emailed home; kind of, updates to people that had—that were praying for me or whatever. So email—

TS: Did you say you used Facebook?

MC: I did—That's when I set up my Facebook account, because the Internet over there, even though we paid ungodly for it, was so slow that uploading pictures—or that emailing pictures was just not possible, so I set up a Facebook account.

TS: It was easier to put them on Facebook?

MC: Yeah. Yeah. And again, in between your CHUs and stuff over there, communication is—it's not like you've got a cellphone—

TS: Right.

MC: —to send a text or something, so Facebook became a way of communication, and Farmville [Facebook game] during the boring times was always a good distraction.

TS: I was going to ask you if you ever had any time off.

MC: That—Time off is kind of a weird—it's hard—Thursdays were my day off, and it was the day I declared I was wearing PTs [Physical Therapy Uniforms] and not my ACUs [Army Combat Uniform], just to make that day different. Because it's kind of like *Groundhog Day* [1993 movie starring Bill Murray]. You get up, you do the same things, you eat the same food on the fourteen day rotational menu, which was good food for the first, like, forty-five to sixty days. Then it just all became the same. You just—You're doing the exact same things over and over and over, so that was my way of making Thursdays different; I wore my PT uniform.

TS: What's the PT stand for?

MC: It's just black warmup pants and a gray t-shirt.

TS: Okay.

MC: And in Iraq we could wear our boonies [boonie hat: a wide-brim hat, similar to a bucket hat but with a stiffer brim] with them just because of the sun.

So yeah, part of it was just making the day different, but my duties didn't stop. I still went and prayed for convoys, I still had to check on the chapel and make sure things were good there. I would do more—I might take an afternoon out and just go and chill in my CHU, or I set up in my—we had an extra room in the chapel so I set up a prayer room that represented all the faith groups, and we had a little sign on it—a "Do Not Disturb" sign—and my assistants knew that if I was in there with the "Do Not Disturb" sign, that either I was having quiet time or I was counseling somebody, and they didn't knock unless the world was coming to an end.

So they—my two assistants would help me, kind of, carve out time, but as far as, I mean, time off, well, I did—my husband and I went on our four day—You could either come home for two weeks or go on a four day R&R pass to Qatar; [Camp] As Sayliyah is in Doha and it's a little, basically, recreation base. There's all sorts of, probably *Secret Squirrel* [Hanna-Barbera cartoon character] stuff there, too, because there's a lot of nondescript buildings, but they have a spa with masseuses, and there's a pool with a Chili's [restaurant], which I was very fond of because you'd swim and then go eat. I ate five molten chocolate cakes in five days.

TS: [chuckles]

MC: And it was just, kind of—kind of chill. So—

TS: So you did that instead of coming home?

MC: Yeah, I did that, because, again, my husband and I were there together so there wasn't—the travel and everything to come home, and honestly I didn't want to be away that long, because the travel takes us—I mean, people would get stuck trying to get back, if a dust storm, stuff like that, had happened, and I was there—

TS: Did you not want to be away from your troops very long?

MC: Yeah, and you're there, you're in the mindset, I didn't want to come home and say goodbye again. I mean, let's just go ahead, get this over with, and then when we're home we can be home. So that's what we did.

But yeah, you carved out your time. We had a martial arts training group there that—we'd get together a couple of times, me and a buddy—Todd Tetherow[?]—who I actually became really good friends with. We were—We were support for each other a lot there, and we led a martial arts training group there. So we would get together and throw each other around and blow off steam that way.

TS: Did you ever get off FOB Falcon again?

MC: What do you mean?

TS: I mean were you just there all the time or did you get off?

MC: Yeah. I mean, I went on convoys with my guys.

TS: Oh, you did?

MC: I would go on convoys, and plus, I moved around a lot because I'm—being the support battalion I had soldiers scattered all—

TS: What was that like when you went on the convoys?

MC: I mean, it was—It was always a little different, because I was the one without the weapon, I'm a chaplain.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: I was going to say, chaplains don't carry the weapons, right?

MC: I'm a noncombat.

TS: Right.

MC: So I was always very aware that if I was making a decision to get on a convoy I wasn't just putting my life at risk, I was putting Johnny, because he was the one I took with me because he was the only one—He was the one I trusted. We had trained together, we knew each other. I did have to go off a few times without him, with another assistant, but I always—I always grabbed one of the MPs that I knew and took them. So—Because it is—it's very—It can be very disconcerting. I mean, you're going out and it's obvious that I'm the—[chuckles] I'm the one without the weapon.

So—But I also wouldn't have traded. I got to do some of the women's initiative stuff they were doing with the Iraqi women.

TS: Like what did you do?

MC: They had a big conference that we went to. It was a lot of the—they were trying—The Iraqi women were trying to start businesses and, kind of, empower them. And then I got to go to an orphanage. In fact, that's probably one of the pictures I'll send you, is I'm at the orphanage with one of the little kids, but—where we handed out school supplies and soccer balls because they all loved soccer balls. And a bunch of stuff like that, just doing community—community building stuff.

But yeah, I would travel around to where I had soldiers, and then do stuff like that. So I'd get off not as much as a lot of folks, but I did my time on the roads.

TS: Did you ever face any kind of bombardment or—

MC: There was a couple of times that IEDs went off while we were out but nothing close enough that—I mean, I heard them but—and then we were coming back from [FOB] Striker one time and one—we went under a bridge—I was actually—I was with the 120th [120th Airlift Wing, Montana National Guard]; I wasn't with my guys because my guys never took this route. But we went under a bridge on Route Irish [U.S. Military designation of a highway in Baghdad, Iraq], and as the last vehicle cleared the bridge—basically, there's equipment that we turn on, and when you turn it on it forms basic—you're not supposed to call it a bubble—but a bubble around the convoy that any radio controlled, like, cellphone initiated IEDs, or radio, it basically kills the signals, so you can't—either[?] you do that within a certain radius of our convoy, and as the last vehicle cleared the bridge and that bubble passed the IED went off and flew over top of the convoy.

But no, I was never under any direct fire. I was—I'll be honest, I was never scared for me.

TS: You weren't?

MC: I was scared for my guys. I knew every time I did a convoy prayer that some of those guys could potentially not come back. Now, for us, we brought everybody home. We had—We did have one convoy that got hit and nobody lost any limbs or anything like that, but we had a guy that had hearing damage, his teeth all got—his teeth got shattered,

and then I had some—several soldiers that have PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] from some of that, but thankfully my battalion, we did not; we brought everybody home.

TS: What was the most rewarding part for you?

MC: Being with my guys.

TS: Why?

MC: Because when the shit hit the fan and they needed somebody, I got to be—I was the one that got—that got to walk with them through it.

TS: When you started out being a chaplain you said you kind of—well, I guess you didn't say it—these words exactly, but you, kind of, faked it till you made it, sort of, right?

MC: Well, you have to. I mean, it's starting something new as you learn—You're learning.

TS: Yeah.

MC: So you just kind of—

TS: That's an old business expression, fake it till you make it.

MC: Yeah. Yeah. And that's true. You're learning, you figure out—You figure out what not to do. I was fortunate to get to work with Colonel Williford for three years, because I could figure out how he operated. I knew that when he was yelling his volume was directly proportional to how much he cared about the situation. He wasn't always angry. If you reacted to his anger then you just shot yourself in the foot. I—[chuckles] He and I still actually laugh about this. I tell him he—First of all, he's the only person I've ever known that used the word "fucking" and "chaplain" in the same sentence. And one of our majors—Major Richards—who I was really close to; he got killed in a motorcycle accident in 2011.

But one of the stories that Colonel Williford and I were telling at his—was that the worst time Colonel Williford ever yelled at me was over Major Richards. Major Richards was a [unclear]—he was a fulltime Guardsman, and basically he had come up for review while we were deployed, and the political within the organization, they had ended his job. He had pissed off the wrong person, basically. So here he is in Iraq and they say, "Oh, by the way, when you come home you don't have a job." Major Richards was devastated. I mean, he's got a wife, three kids, this was his retirement—basically you're done.

So I had spent a couple of days with Major Richards trying to—and he's scared that nobody's going to support him and all this; he kind of feels left hanging out to dry. And so, I was like, "Alright, I'm going to go talk to Colonel Williford." And I walk in and say, "Hey, sir? I'm aware of what's going on with Major Richards. Just—I'm concerned about him. I'm just wondering how we're going to help him."

And Colonel Williford lost it. "How dare you question me! This is none of your business, chaplain! This is a chain of command issue!" Blah, blah, blah.

So I just went to parade rest and said, "Yes, sir. Yes, sir." I let him run out of air, and then I went, "Well, sir, with all due respect, this is about the welfare of one of our soldiers, and that is a chaplain issue, and I really hope we support Major Richards. He deserves it after what he's done to—for this battalion and this brigade." I did an about-face and I walked out.

A couple days later Major Richards was leaving Colonel Williford's office and I bumped into him, because they always kept my office very close to Colonel Williford's so people didn't have far to limp once they came out after a barrage. And Major Richards comes up to me and goes, "Chaplain, you went and talked to him?"

"Yes, sir."

"He yelled at you."

"Yes, sir."

And that was the first time I'd seen Major Richards smile in, like, four days, because somebody had stood up for him; that's what it was all about. And for me, that's what it's always about, is standing up for the soldiers who—that's why the chaplain has a direct line to the commander. The only people that do are the sergeant major and the chaplain. Then there's the executive officer and it kind of branches out from there. But the sergeant—The command sergeant major and the chaplain are personal staff to the commander for that reason, so we can stand up and be that conscience for the soldiers.

When I was being medevaced home there was a—They were talking about, "Well, let's just send her husband with her."

And I went, "Time out. That's not Rex[?]. If I was at home and he was here, this—Having an ultrasound that's 85% sure it's cancer isn't a "coming home" thing. You've got to actually have a diagnosis and surgery scheduled and all this stuff." And we actually—My husband and I actually fought over this. But I couldn't—But they were wanting to make special consideration because of who I was, because I was the chaplain that had been there when there were dead people. I mean, I know why they were doing it, and I couldn't let them do it, because two days earlier I'd been sitting there with a guy whose son was in Intensive Care, and because he'd already been home on emergency leave we couldn't send him home again. And I couldn't sit there and say, "Man, I'm sorry. We can't send you home," and then let them break regulations and send my husband home; I couldn't do it. So yeah, that's why I do what I do. It's about taking care of our soldiers.

TS: Well, have you received any memorable decoration or award?

MC: I got a bronze star for my "end of tour" award in Iraq, and Major Richards, actually, put me in for a meritorious service medal for—During that time when I was fulltime, before Iraq, we had an MP company—the 1132nd—that was in Iraq and had five deaths in six weeks, and I was the chaplain back here who covered the return of the remains and the funerals and the casualty assistance chaplain for those, and Major Richards had actually put me in for a meritorious service medal. So I guess yes, but for me it—Those are nice, they make your uniform look pretty, but it's about the soldiers. It's about getting a

message on Facebook, and knowing that when they—When they need something they know they can pick up the phone and call. That's the most important things for me.

TS: Do you think your life has been different because you joined the—

MC: Yes. Yeah. I wouldn't—I wouldn't be the person I am today. I mean, being a—I can't imagine my life not being a military chaplain, it's just part of who I am.

TS: Are you still doing it today?

MC: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

MC: Yeah, I'm—got drill next month, in July, with the 449[th Theater Aviation Brigade, North Carolina Army National Guard]. Eventually, I know because of my medical stuff I'll probably get medicaled out [discharged for medical reasons], but I'll hang around as long as they'll let me.

TS: Yeah. Did you ever witness any kind of, like, sexual harassment, either yourself or through—where you had to deal with that as a chaplain?

MC: I have not been; I think they all knew better. [chuckles]

TS: Why do you think; you're position insulated you from that at all?

MC: Well—And I think my—I think my position, but also my attitude.

TS: How did your attitude help?

MC: Well, I'm—Again, the military taught me you stand up, and you draw the—You draw those boundaries. You don't stand up to a six [foot] eight [inches] linebacker from West Point and not have an air of confidence about you. Plus, I was also known as the—Well, the martial arts chaplain; let's put it that way.

TS: [chuckles] They had a different term for that?

MC: Well, my husband called me the ninja chaplain, but that was—We're not going there.

TS: Okay.

MC: But yeah, so I think I—I think I carry myself differently. I think, again, they go—This one scout platoon from the 120th, when they found out I had left my husband and—their platoon sergeant called me and said, "Ma'am, is there something we need to take care of?" So I never had to worry about that. However, within our battalion we did. We had

some sexual harassment cases that the battalion commander and I, we sat and talked about, several times. And I do—There has been a problem, off and on, with that. I think it's twofold. Again, you've got men and women living right there together 24/7.

But we also—I think it's a culture thing that—and I saw this working with at-risk youth. When you look at the military and you look at the socio—the demographics—and I know, like, in the National Guard a lot of the young kids that we had come in were from a lower socioeconomic background. They hadn't been given a lot of the skills they needed to be adults, and now we had them in the military, and not only do we have them in the military, we had them in a combat zone. And we had some young females that didn't have—They didn't understand what boundaries were, and so there were some things that got too far and they didn't report it, until all of a sudden one said, "Wait a minute, this is wrong," and reported it, and then all of a sudden there's an avalanche. And my commander was like—

TS: What do you mean by "there's an avalanche"?

MC: There were several more.

TS: Oh, okay, after she reported it.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

MC: There was a snowball—Yeah.

TS: Then others started—

MC: Then two or three others went, "Well, that happened to me too. Well, that happened to be too." And my commander's like, "What the—"

TS: "What's going on?"

MC: Yeah. Like, why wouldn't they have said something in the beginning? And again, if you look—If you look at society a lot of our young kids aren't being taught those basic skills of boundaries, and what they see going on in their communities and in their homes growing up, if you grow up in an abusive situation it's all you know.

And so, I think there's a twofold thing here. Not only do we need to address the perpetrators, but we also need to address our young people and help them learn, what are healthy boundaries, what are healthy relationships? Because that's one thing I—is relationship issues, number one, always. Any time I've ever kept any records of statistics it's always relationship issues. It's also the number one reason soldiers commit suicide; or actually pretty much anybody, is relationship issues. It's because we don't teach our kids today how to do relationships, and we set pretty poor examples for them.

So we did some psycho-educational stuff to try to help these young ladies learn, what are appropriate boundaries?

TS: What kind of—When they reported things, what kind of things would they report? I mean, just in general.

MC: That's confidential.

TS: No, I don't mean a specific instance, I just mean was it an issue of like sexual—were there sexual assaults as well as sexual harassment, and things like that?

MC: As a chaplain, the things I know are— that's not—That's kind of out of my area. I'd rather not—

TS: Okay, that's fine.

MC: Yeah. I've been very careful in some of the stories I've told to make sure I didn't say some things, because as a chaplain I have 100% confidentiality—

TS: Right.

MC: —and I take that really seriously, so I don't even like to go into gray areas.

TS: Okay.

MC: And for me that's a gray area.

TS: Okay. What do you think about—In general then, when you talk about the culture of the military on this issue, do you think—You talk about young people need to understand boundaries better, and to deal with perpetrators, are there any tools that can be put in place to do those things?

MC: I think within our state—And now realize, my experience is North Carolina Army National Guard. I know—I've had some contact with active duty world, but I know very little about it, and I know that that's a very different culture than I've experienced, and in our state we deal with it. We have an excellent SARC, our Sexual Assault Response Coordinator, Staff Sergeant Kristian Hall. He actually—He was part of my—our JAG team when I was at the 230th, and now he's part of our JAG team now that I'm at the 449th [Theater Aviation Brigade, North Carolina Army National Guard]. He's passionate. He does amazing things to help educate our folks. And at least within the North Carolina Guard, I—any—The incidences I've known about are isolated and they've been dealt with, regardless of the rank of the individual.

TS: So they're being addressed?

MC: Yes. And they're addressed quickly and definitively. I have a lot of respect for our command here in our state when it comes to dealing with things like that.

TS: Now, do you have any heroes or heroines that you look up to, either just in the culture or in the military or—

MC: I guess I refer to them as mentors. Gen—Brigadier General Beth Austin [Elizabeth D. Austin] has been an amazing example of a female officer for me. She's the first female general that the North Carolina Guard's had. There's another, she's now a lieutenant colonel, Sarah Dix[?], whose another amazing female senior officer. I think they have paved the way in some very tough fields. In fact, Colonel Dix is an MP—[unclear] MP.

TS: What attributes do you think that they have that are worthy of your admiration and respect?

MC: Well, it's being a female in this environment. In the military environment, being a female can be tricky, because you're—it's a male dominated culture, and it's, how do you stand up and be your—be yourself? I think that's the one thing I saw in Colonel Austin—General Austin, sorry, I met her as a Colonel—General Austin and Colonel Dix, is that you just be yourself. If people want to bad—like, the friction of experience being a female chaplain, if people want to talk about that, fine, let them talk about it. "That's fine. Go do your stuff. I've got my job to do. Do your job and do it well," and people respond, and that's the attitude I saw—I've seen them take, and that's what I've done and it works.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So you've used them, kind of, as a role model for that kind of thing?

MC: Yeah. Yeah.

TS: Well, let me ask you about one of the controversial things like—it would have been—I can't remember what year it was repealed, but the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

MC: Yes. Oh yeah, that was a couple years ago.

TS: Right. When you were in though they still had it in—you've been in while it's been in play—

MC: Yes.

TS: —and then it's been repealed. What are your thoughts on that?

MC: Some of these women served their country, we're all green in the military; we're all green. I have no—We're—We all serve our country the same. Sexual orientation doesn't make a difference in—when you're pulling a trigger or doing your job.

TS: What about the idea of women maybe serving in combat and infantry?

MC: If they can do the job they need to be allowed to do the job. I think standards need to be upheld. That I don't—I don't agree with lowering the standards for a job so that a female can do it, but if they can—they can do everything the guys can do, let them do it. One of our—our best convoy commander for the 230th was a female; twenty—Nicky [1st Lieutenant Nicole Ebert] was twenty-three, twenty-four when we were over there; Ebert was badass. I know some MP—female MPs that are in Afghanistan right now that are—I'd put them up against anybody. Our female medics; one of our female medics won the best soldier competition while we were over in Iraq.

But the females need to be able to toe the line. I mean, they need to be able to step up and do everything the guys can do. None of—The female PT standards in the army are severely lacking, and I think that's part of—I think that's part of the problem, is, as a female, if you just scoot by with the female standards, then you're not going to get the respect . But if you hold yourself to—Like, I've always held myself to the male PT standards. I can't now because of all of my medical crap, and that's one of the reasons why I think they probably should medical me out, because if I can't—If I can't hold the line and I can't be right there beside the guys then maybe I don't need to be doing my job.

TS: Well, some people would argue, though, that some of the PT standards have to do with physical conditioning, and it doesn't really necessarily have to do with the actual job that you would do.

MC: But it's a requirement.

TS: Right.

MC: And when you're in Iraq and some of these combat arms jobs, you're talking about people who are on the front lines, and you need to be conditioned, you need to be able to pull your buddy. If your buddy gets shot you need to be able to pull him out of the kill zone, and if you can't you don't need to be there, because those guys, they have to be able to trust each other with their lives. And if you can't hack it, the physical conditioning becomes essential; it's a mission essential to be on—in our case in the 30th—be on those Bradleys [Bradley Fighting Vehicle] and do the things they do as dismounts. To be an MP and to do the missions they do, you have to be able to do it, and if you can't then your battle buddy can't trust you and you become a liability.

TS: Well, right, but I'm not saying that they can't actually do those things.

MC: Well, the PT test is part of that. That's part of proving that you can do that.

TS: But isn't the PT test the same for everybody, or is it job related?

MC: No, it's the same for everybody.

TS: Yes.

MC: In the army it's push-ups, sit ups, and a two mile run. But condition—Is it the best? Is it the only indicator? No. But it is an indicator of your physical fitness—

TS: Right.

MC: —and your ability to do your job. And I think that's important, but, I mean, I know guys that shouldn't be in combat arms positions, too, for that very reason, but it's one of those things that hold the standards.

TS: Right. Well, when you were talking earlier, I wasn't thinking I was—when you were talking about when you went through the officer training and you had those chaplains that were older, that they didn't push the physical part of it because they didn't necessarily—it sounded like you were saying they didn't really want to lose the chaplains because they were in need of them so they—

MC: Right, but that didn't—but the PT standards go down as you get older.

TS: Right.

MC: They're graded by age, so their PT standards weren't as strenuous as the younger guys.

TS: But what I'm saying is—Right, but that's—

MC: Well, I'm talking about—I was talking about the actual basic training for the enlisted where they run everybody ragged.

TS: Right.

MC: They still kept us up all night, they still did—they still played the mind games, but they didn't run us through basic like they would the actual basic training units.

TS: Right.

MC: That's what I meant there.

TS: Right. No, I understood that, but that's what I was saying, the different standards that you have, as far as things like age and gender, are based on—Well, I just—from what—

MC: Yes.

TS: —people have said to me, have been based on things like making sure that person is in the best physical condition for their particular—

MC: Right. And when infantry men get to a certain point they are no—their rank, and they're first sergeants, and they aren't going out kicking in doors either, so.

TS: Right. So that changes over time.

MC: It does—Just like in any job, you get promoted. I love Colonel Williford to death but he's—He's an O6 now. He's not doing the same things he was when he was a second lieutenant commanding a Bradley. That's—The age thing's a given. But I think to be in combat arms you have to be able to uphold that physical standard, and if you can't, there's just too much on the line.

TS: Yes.

MC: And I've seen what happens when the shit hits the fan, and I wouldn't want anybody out there that couldn't carry their own weight.

TS: Right.

MC: And I know women that can and do and I'd put them out there any day of the week, but I also know ones that can't, and then they don't need to be, but there's also guys that don't need to be in those jobs either.

TS: Right.

MC: I think it has to do with ability levels and mindset more so than gender.

TS: Would you recommend the service to young men and women today?

MC: Every time.

TS: Do you?

MC: One of my kids I taught martial arts to, I had the privilege of swearing him in. He's going to Appalachian State [University] and he's doing the SMP [Simultaneous Membership Program], simultaneous enrollment where he's in ROTC and the National Guard while he's in college, and then once he get his commission he'll go active duty. I've got another kid, he's actually my dog sitter, who—he's going to college this year and he's going to join the Guard. He wants to get a year of college under his belt first but then he's going to join the Guard, and I've told him I'd swear him in.

TS: Yeah?

MC: The Guard's my family. So I—With the way the VA [Veterans' Administration] is going right now, that part worries me. That's probably my biggest concern. My biggest concern about recommending the military to young people isn't the military, it's the government support of the military that I really question right now.

The VA's a fiasco. I've been fighting with them for two years and I'm still not getting the care that I need, and our political—with the stuff going on in Iraq right now.

TS: So you have to use the VA services?

MC: Yes. Because my cancer was found in Iraq I am service-connected [disabled due to injury or illness that was incurred in or aggravated by military service], so—I'm also a fulltime student, plus, if you had an employer and they promised you healthcare and you got hurt on the job, you'd kind of expect that healthcare, wouldn't you? Well, mine's service-connected. They promised me healthcare.

TS: Right, but I mean, you're still in the National Guard, so you—but you—so your healthcare is through the VA? I'm just trying to understand the process.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

MC: Right, because it's a service-connected disability.

TS: Got it.

MC: According to the VA, I'm 70% disabled. But see—Because with the Guard, that's why we're cheaper than active duty; they don't pay for our healthcare.

TS: Okay.

MC: It's just a part time—We—forty to forty-five days a year.

TS: So unless it's service-connected injury or something, then you—

MC: Unless we get hurt during that two days.

TS: Well, that's what I mean.

MC: Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly. Yeah, we're only covered while we're physically doing Guard stuff. So yeah.

TS: I usually ask this question about the military in general but I want to ask it two ways for you.

MC: Okay.

TS: Is there anything in particular you would want a civilian to know or understand about what it's like to serve in the National Guard that they may not understand or appreciate? You kind of—You answered that a little bit but I want a specific question for that for you.

MC: Yeah, there's—Actually, one of my professors and I are writing an article on this to get it published. General [Martin Edward] Dempsey was being interviewed on NPR [National Public Radio] and he—it's been several months ago, it was back in January I think—He talked about the gap in understanding between what civilians understand the military's capable of doing and what the military knows we're capable of doing. And he was referring to Iraq, and that we can set the—set the conditions for them to develop a government, we can—we can hold the space. It's almost like a therapist; I can hold the space for somebody to do the work and do the healing, but I can't make them do it. And in Iraq we set the conditions, we set the standards for that country to set up their own government, but they've got to do the work, and I think that's what we're seeing.

TS: Right now?

MC: Right now. And on the flip side, for reintegration, when soldiers come home, when servicemen and women come home, there's a gap in understanding. They're not the same—We're not the same people as we were before we left. Well, hell, we were going—if [you're going to here?], your family's not the same people they were either, but the change is—they expect—a lot of civilians it seems like, from my perspective—You're supposed to come home and just be the person that you were, and it doesn't work that way. There's a wealth of experience and knowledge and skills that I bring with me now as a veteran, but there's also baggage.

If you look back in native cultures, when their warriors were coming home, they all had—They all had reintegration rituals. The Indians were amazing. All the—All the native cultures like that did. If you look, even through the years, soldiers coming home from World War I, World War II, floated back on ships. Think about all that time they had to decompress. Even Vietnam, Korea, they flew back, so it was several days, it was—it was an extended.

We have soldiers now that can be in a combat zone engaging the enemy one moment and Skyping with the wife at home the next. Think about how that screws with their head, that the battle zone is so—it's—You're almost living in two worlds. And then you come home and—I use the example, kids that enlisted after 9/11. They're graduating high school, they see 9/11 happen; "I'm going to join the military. I want to serve my country." Okay. It's a decade later. These kids now are twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty years old, they've got a high school diploma, but that's all the education they have so what jobs do they qualify for? What are they going to do, go work at McDonald's, Walmart?

Education-wise, it's why the unemployment rate for veterans is so high right now. Last time I checked it was, like, 17%; almost three times what the civilian population is.

Because how do you go from doing things that you know mean something and make a difference, if nothing else, to your buddies on your right, to your left, to come home and then do a job that—"Eh." And I mean, those—that's the—is that—is that gap, is that helping soldiers find that meaning and helping—helping veterans find their way back. Because "Thank you for your service," doesn't do it. It's a nice sentiment, and I'm glad people are saying "Thank you for your service," and not spitting on us like they did Vietnam vets; I'm very grateful for that.

TS: But it has to go deeper.

MC: But those are empty words, and I get—for news I watch Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert [satirical news program hosts], and then listen to the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] broadcasts on NPR, because watching the politicians on the regular news and watch them build up from both sides—from far right to far left—I don't leave anybody out. They talk a great game but they haven't shown me anything about actually doing something about the issues for the military.

Everybody wants to say "Thank you for your service" and shake your hand. I don't need a handshake. I need somebody to step up and help the homeless kid I was talking to on Facebook the other day. I need somebody to step up and help some of my soldiers get jobs, because they have families to support. I need folks to understand that not all wounds are visible, and that just because they see a veteran walking around with a service dog, don't—don't go up and question them; "Why do you have a dog?" Wounds—War wounds go deeper than anybody can ever imagine, and a lot of us don't talk about it a lot because it's not fun to talk about, but it doesn't mean it's not there, and it doesn't—It's not something we deal with every day.

TS: What does patriotism mean to you?

MC: I think that—I'm—Because of some of the things that are going on in the media, in Iraq, and our government and things right now, that's—that's actually a tough question. I've—I'm a little disillusioned with our government and our country right now because of the way veterans are being treated. We stepped up, we did a job—we did a damn good job—we did everything asked for us, and now all people are offering are empty words.

When I think about the oath I took [U.S. Oath of Allegiance], and defending the country against all enemies, foreign and domestic, it comes back to standing up for those that can't stand up for themselves. That's what I do for my soldiers. The people I care about here, I think about my friends that I consider family, I think about the kids, and I think about creating a space where they can grow up and be who they're meant to be. I have a very different perspective than I did pre-Iraq. Peace means something very different now than it did then.

TS: What does it mean now?

MC: After 9/11, I was one of those that was, "Hell yeah, we need to go blow shit up." I'm much—I'm much more hesitant; war means something very different to me now. Killing means something very different to me now. So yeah.

TS: Well, is there anything that you want to add that we haven't talked about today?

MC: No. I mean, I think, for me, it comes down to family, and for me the National Guard is family. I think that's one thing the Guard has that active duty misses out on, is that they move around all the time; we have guys that have been together for twenty years. At the end of July we'll have the 30th Infantry Division Association reunion, and we'll have World War II vets and Iraqi vets from the 30th hanging out at the Ramada Inn on Blue Ridge [Road, Raleigh] for four days. It's that sense of family. For me that's what it's about, and that's why I do what I do.

TS: Is that—Because people in the military call it a family, too, but is that family community different?

MC: I think it goes deeper because we're together longer. Again, three to four years in active duty you're moving all around.

TS: Yes.

MC: The National Guard is community based and community driven, and I think that—while it's harder to get support services and different—different things like that, and you're in a community that doesn't always get what you do, the network of National Guard and the—I think we bond together closer. Like I said, guys are in units together for twenty years.

TS: Right.

MC: That—There's folks I know that those are their friends, [chuckles] that's who they hang out with.

TS: Would you do it again; would you join again?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

MC: Yeah, without a doubt. I'd do it earlier.

TS: Do it earlier?

MC: I wouldn't wait till—

TS: Yeah?

MC: Yeah, yeah. I don't regret anything I've done or [unclear] —Yeah.

TS: Do you feel like this is where you belong?

MC: Yeah. Yeah.

TS: Well, I think I'll—Unless you have something else to add we can end it right there.

MC: No. Okay.

TS: Does that sound good?

MC: Yes.

[End of Interview]