WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Christine Filler Warren Hall

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: 29 April 2015

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is April 29, 2015. This is Therese Strohmer. I'm actually in the Hope Mills Library and I'm with Christine Hall to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Christine, I know we talked about this a little bit—about the way you want your name on the collection—could you go ahead and tell us what you'd like?

CH: If we could put Christine Filler Warren Hall that would be great.

TS: Okay. We'll try that.

CH: All right.

TS: Well, Christine, thanks for meeting me today. Why don't we start out by having you tell me a little bit about when and where you were born?

CH: Well, I was born in Washington, D.C. in Freedmen's Hospital [renamed Howard University Hospital], and it's no longer there, but I used to live on Rock Creek Church Road, which is right near the Soldier's Home in Washington, D.C.

TS: And when were you born?

CH: In November [22] 1971.

TS: Nineteen-seventy-one?

CH: Yes.

TS: Okay.

CH: I was the—after the wild days of the sixties. [both chuckle]

TS: That's right. And so, do you have any brothers and sisters?

CH: I have two half-brothers and two half-sisters, and I didn't grow up with them, I grew up as an only child. My grandparents raised me—my paternal grandparents raised me—and it was a little different. I had my great aunt and great uncle, they lived right above us, and my cousins used to come over and we'd play dolls or house or whatever and it was pretty neat. I went to public school until seventh grade and then I went to Catholic school right there in D.C. I kind of—After that I kind of moved around a little bit, but I went to Catholic school for a few years.

I went to a boarding school for one year. It was after my grandmother's brother passed away, and she was dealing with a lot of grief and stress. So I went to boarding school for one year; that was my eighth grade year. It was pretty—It was pretty—It was just different because I had always been at home and my grandmother, she was a beautician, so she always washed my hair—my hair was like really, really long. So I had to learn how to do that and it was—it was like wow. My daughter is in eighth grade this year—my next to the youngest is in eighth grade this year—and she has really long hair, too, but she's been doing her hair for years. [both chuckle] But I just—My grandmother was just like, 'I'm going to do your hair.'

TS: It was something you had to learn.

CH: Yes, it was something I had to learn. I didn't have to do laundry because my grandmother, she did the laundry and everything. I mean, I didn't really have to do anything but homework and piano lessons and that kind of thing. It was always, "education, education, education." So that was like the big thing in our house. So—

TS: Now, it was just your grandmother that raised you?

CH: My grandmother and my grandfather.

TS: And your grandfather. What did your grandfather do?

CH: Actually, my grandfather was a veteran too.

TS: Oh yeah?

CH: Yeah. Actually, I'm the fourth generation army, and my two oldest daughters were also in the army, so they made the fifth generation army.

TS: Holy Pete. So you go back to your great-grandparents?

CH: My great-grandparents, yeah.

TS: Oh, wow, that's pretty neat.

CH: As a matter of fact, my grandmother was born in The Philippines. Yeah.

TS: Wow. What service were they in?

CH: Army.

TS: All army?

CH: My dad was in the army and the air force. I think his last bit of service was the air force. I mean, cousins, great-uncles, lots of army; lots of army.

TS: Definitely a tradition there.

CH: Yes, it's very much a tradition.

TS: So your grandma, she's raising you, and actually you're a nice only child.

CH: Yes, I was raised like an only child.

TS: And you had piano lessons?

CH: I did. I had—

TS: Do you still play the piano?

CH: I don't.

TS: That's okay.

CH: I think I would like to go back to playing—doing music. I do sing in the choir, and my son, he actually plays sax [saxophone] and guitar and a couple of other woodwind instruments, so music has continued.

TS: That's pretty neat. Tell me a little bit more about boarding school, then. Where was it that you went to?

CH: I went to Notre Dame Academy in Middleburg, Virginia, and I don't believe it is there anymore, but we actually had sisters there running the boarding school. That was my first time away from home, and learning all those things that, of course, my kids now take for granted. So it was just one of those things; I had to, like, hurry up and grow up to be—

TS: Did you have your own room, or did you share a room?

CH: No, I shared a room. My—When I first got there I shared a room with, I think, like, twelve girls.

TS: Oh, okay. Kind of like a bay?

CH: Kind of like a bay. And then as you moved up in responsibility and showed that you could take care of your things then I went to a two man room. But we were in the little cottage because I was in the eighth grade and then—I actually was a seven-day boarder. They had five-day boarders and seven-day boarders. So for, like, the first quarter all the eighth graders were in the little cottage. And then they moved the eighth grade seven-day boarders to the main building, and then I was in a room with five other girls.

TS: Okay. A little smaller.

CH: There were six of us. It was smaller than the bay but there was just six girls in the one room, and it was fun then because you didn't have to go walking to the cottage in the rain or anything else. You could be in the same building that we had our classes in and it was pretty cool. It was pretty fun.

TS: Did you get to go back home?

CH: Yeah. For some of the holidays I got to go home, but for the most part I stayed at the school for the whole year. I think I had two big breaks.

TS: Well, did you like school?

CH: I did like school. And I was nervous because when you grow up as an only child your parents are there—or my grandparents were there—and they were like, "Oh, you have to study, you have to study." Well, there I did have a senior, because they paired you up. So the eighth graders had a senior that would buddy up with them, and so I had my senior buddy, but they're your buddy, they're not your parents saying, "Hey, you need to do your homework." [both chuckle]

TS: Right. True.

CH: And I almost failed science. I was so nervous. And I was like, "Oh, my grandmother's going to kill me. I'm going to fail science."

And my teacher—Sister Mary—I can't remember—but anyway, she would look at me sternly and she goes, "You know you can do better than this." [both laugh]

And I was like, "Yeah, I know. I know." And I did. I had to buckle down and I actually—I passed, I went to ninth grade, so it was good. But I almost failed science. It was like, "Oh. What are we going to do?"

TS: Was that because you weren't studying as much as you would have been?

CH: I wasn't studying, I was off goofing off. I was in eighth grade, I was like, "This is so much fun. My parents aren't here!" The sisters were regimented. You had planned study hall and all that other stuff, but I was goofing off.

TS: What kind of stuff were you doing for goofing off?

CH: Oh, running in the hallways, playing with my friends. Or I'd sit and watch TV or—whatever it was.

TS: We don't have the texting or—

CH: No, there were no cell phones then; I was still using the pay phone. I would call my brother who was in Nevada—living with our aunt in Nevada—and I would use my laundry money to talk to him on the phone. I'd be putting, like, three dollars in the pay phone just so I could talk to him for about five minutes. And that's how I kept in touch with my older brother. But it was fun. It was a fun time. But I did learn, okay, you've got to buckle down and you've got to do the work in order to pass the grade, or else your grandmother will be really upset. [both chuckle]

TS: Yeah, you had to keep her happy, I'm sure.

CH: Oh yes, because like I said, her father was in the military and you didn't just spread the bed, you had to make the bed. Even when I was a little kid.

TS: Really?

CH: Oh yeah. It was like do the quarter thing on my bed when I was growing up [military standard in basic training is to keep the sheets and blanket very tight using hospital corners so that if you drop a quarter on the bed it would bounce]. So when it came time for me to go to basic training and everybody is like, "Oh, the drill sergeants are so picky."

I'm like, "My grandmother was so much worse." [both laugh]

TS: You were well prepared.

CH: Oh, yeah, I was well prepared. I said, "Oh, these drill sergeants have nothing on my grandmother. You wouldn't really want her to be here because she'd tear you a new one."

TS: Well, tell me a little bit about, then, before you went to the boarding school. What kind of things did you do for play as a young little girl growing up in Washington, D.C.?

CH: Well, my grandmother was very, very cautious. She would say all the time, "No, you're not going out front to play with those hoodlums out there. You don't know what they're going to be doing."

So I would be in the backyard and if my cousins weren't over I'd be playing with the dog and the cat in the backyard. [both chuckle] And we had a fenced-in concrete back yard and I would ride my bike around in the backyard, and I'd be by myself or I'd be with my cousin when she'd come over for spending time with her grandmother. It was a little lonely but—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: She tried to control your environment pretty well.

CH: Very much. She was very controlling, very strict, but she had her reasons for doing that, and I know it wasn't, like, out of meanness or anything like that. She just—She wanted me to be prepared for the hard way of life but—I mean, I think she prepared me.

TS: Yeah?

CH: Yeah

TS: Was your grandfather, like, the go—

CH: He was the easy-going—

TS: I was just going to say—

CH: He was the easy-going guy. Grandpa would sneak me bags of Cheetos and he'd be, like—take me to Church's Chicken and we'd be eating—sneaking chicken on the way home and then we'd get home and, "Oh, I'm not hungry, Grandma."

And she'd be like, "I just cooked this big meal. What do you mean you're not hungry?" [both chuckle]

Everything she—Everything was fresh made and my grandfather, he was a baker; like the master—chef master.

TS: Oh, nice.

CH: Yeah, and he worked at the Jewish bakery, and all the time we had fresh bread and fresh pastries and fresh cookies. I mean, you would have—think I was three hundred pounds because—

TS: I would have been had I been there. [both chuckle]

CH: —all of this fresh baked goods would be coming through, and I mean—so he worked at the Jewish bakery and he also worked at Hogates, which was a—

TS: What was that called again?

CH: Hogates.

TS: Hogates, okay.

CH: It was a restaurant on the water, downtown D.C., and part of the Marriot [hotels] corporation. I don't think it's there anymore. But he used to make these rum buns that were like small plate size with the—they looked like hot cross buns with the icing overflowing.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh nice. Like really big cinnamon rolls but they're rum buns.

CH: Oh yeah. With raisins and everything—

TS: Okay, now I'm hungry.

CH: Oh my gosh. [both laugh] I mean, he would bring those home, he would make those. And I remember my oldest brother, he would be like, "Grandpa, you've got to give me the recipe to those." He passed on. He didn't pass—

TS: He didn't pass the recipe on.

CH: He didn't pass the recipes on. I mean, you would think when he makes them he's making them by these huge trays, so okay—five pounds of flour and three pounds of sugar, and so you can't make it for home size.

TS: No, that's true. You can't reduce that to just two people or something.

CH: It's not easily converted. But all the time we'd have all this bread and cakes. It was just amazing. I had my confirmation at the boarding school and my grandfather made the cake—our confirmation cake—because of course it was a whole—almost a whole class of us with our confirmation, and we had this huge sheet cake with the icing and the lettering and all that. He did all that, and he made this big batch of brownies for all of us girls for our confirmation.

TS: Nice.

CH: Yeah. So our class lucked out for our confirmation. [chuckles]

TS: I guess so. What's your confirmation name?

CH: Bernadette [Saint Bernadette Soubirous].

TS: Bernadette.

CH: Yes. She spoke to me.

TS: Is that why you picked her?

CH: That's why I picked her. I mean, like I said, there were a lot of areas where my grandmother was very strict, but my grandfather would sneak behind and he'd be like, "Here you go." I was very spoiled, I really was; I was really spoiled.

TS: But she just wanted to make sure you were in a real safe environment.

CH: Oh, a very safe environment; I never had to worry. Basically, she would take me to school, and then she would pick me up from school, and I never had to ride the school bus or anything like that in D.C. I mean, she protected me as best she could. I mean, when I was born she was in her late sixties, so—

TS: Oh, is that right?

CH: Yeah.

TS: So she was older when you were going through high school.

CH: She was older. Oh, yeah.

TS: Where did you end up for high school?

CH: So when she was—when my father was young she bought this property in Caroline County, Virginia, and she bought a small piece and then she bought a larger parcel of land. And so, I think it was my sophomore year—the end of my sophomore year—we actually moved to Caroline County. My junior and senior year I spent at Caroline County High School.

TS: And where is that?

CH: In Milford, Virginia.

TS: Milford, Virginia. Okay.

CH: Yeah. Near Fort A.P. Hill.

TS: Near—

CH: Fort A.P. Hill.

TS: Oh, okay. Oh, A.P. Hill. Okay.

CH: Here I am surrounded by military installations; from my great-grandfather and my great-great uncle to my grandfather being in World War II, and then my dad with Vietnam and other little things, and then myself with the First Gulf [War], the Second Gulf, and then—

[The Gulf War took place 2 August 1990 to 29 February 1191. Codenamed Operation Desert Shield for operations leading to the buildup of troops and defense of Saudi Arabia, and Operation Desert Storm in its combat phase, it was a war waged by coalition forces from thirty-five nations led by the United States against Iraq in response to Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait]

TS: Right, a long history.

CH: Yeah. And then my two oldest daughters with OIF, OEF [Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom].

TS: Have they been deployed too?

CH: My second oldest, yeah, she was deployed to Iraq. But it just—it really makes me proud that we continued that tradition on. Even though my grandmother, she was adamant, adamant. "No, you're not going in the military. Women don't do that."

And I was like, "Really? Sure they do." [chuckles]

She was like, "No."

TS: Well, when you were going along through schooling, what did you think that you were going to do?

CH: I didn't know. I was so nervous about just growing up, period, because my grandmother was very regimented and she was very strict, and I was like, "What am I going to do?" When I went into eighth grade, like I said, I didn't know how to wash clothes. I didn't know how to wash my hair. I was like—I had to learn all this stuff. And of course, you go from eighth grade to ninth grade and you're building all on that. But then I was just nervous. I was like, "What am I going to do when I graduate high school? What am I going to do?" I didn't know, and I didn't really decide until after I graduated.

TS: Yeah. Well, had you considered going to college?

CH: I thought about it. Like I said, education was really, really important in my family. My dad was a nurse, but I didn't want to be a nurse. I mean, I do have that compassionate, caring aspect, but I didn't think I wanted to be—I didn't think I wanted to go in the medical field. I just thought that was too cerebral for me or something. I don't know. It was just too much to think about.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Yeah. It just wasn't something you wanted to do.

CH: I was just nervous. What if I dosed somebody wrong or whatever—

TS: Oh, too much pressure?

CH: I wasn't great in math, so I was like, "Oh, what if I make a mistake and somebody's life is on the line?" So I was like, "No. No, I can't do that."

But I was twelve when I went to the recruiting station for the first time.

TS: Twelve?

CH: I was twelve.

TS: Who'd you go with?

CH: I went by myself. [chuckles]

TS: You did?

CH: I did, I went by myself. And I went and I saw this recruiter and he was like, "What are you doing here?"

I was like, "I want to see how I do on this test;" the ASVAB test [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] that you go in and you're—

TS: Yeah. You don't take it at twelve!

CH: I took it at twelve.

TS: You did?

CH: He said, "Sure. Why not? Go ahead." And I took it and, yeah, I don't think I did very well, but—or maybe it was like the little pre-thing they give you, whatever. He was like, "What are you doing here?"

And I was like, "I just want to see if I could do it?"

And he said, "Yeah, you could do this. You could do this."

And I was like, "Okay. Well, I'll think about it."

He goes, "You've got plenty of time. You're twelve. Why would you even—" And that's when I went to downtown D.C. to the recruiting station—

TS: By yourself?

CH: By myself. [chuckles]

TS: Now, did your grandmother find out about this?

CH: Oh, much, much later; much, much later.

TS: Oh, but not until later. Oh, you kept it hidden.

CH: Oh, yeah. I was a sneaky devil. [both chuckle] Yeah, I was a sneaky devil.

So I went downtown and I talked to the recruiter and he was like, "Yeah, come see me when you're eighteen." And of course I didn't see that same guy when I turned eighteen but—

TS: Well, when you got out of high school, then what did you do?

CH: Well, kind of got to backtrack a little bit because I got married at sixteen. I got married at sixteen and I had my oldest daughter between my junior and senior year. And then graduated high school. And then I got pregnant again and had another baby. So before I even came in the army I had two kids already. And of course, I did the whole—you've got to take the tests and everything—talk to a recruiter—and I did that, and it was because I couldn't—I couldn't find any work. I was working as a waitress at Cracker Barrel and I sucked at being a waitress. [both chuckle] I was terrible. I hardly got any tips. I was like, "I can't do this. This is hard work." My wrist was hurting and I was tired and I said, "Oh my gosh. I have two kids at home. I come home and they're screaming still," and I'm like [unclear] what to do. And I said, "Well, I mean, if I go in the military at least I'll be able to—medical and I'll be able to feed them and we'll have housing and—"

TS: Did you think of all that yourself or did anybody say, "Hey, did you think about this?"

CH: No, I kind of knew about that already. I think even—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Were you a single mom at this time or were you still married?

CH: No, I was still married; I was still married. And my husband at the time, he wasn't really thrilled about it. We were having our own little difficulties at that point anyway, but I was just like, "Look. We need work and we need money. We're still living under Grandma's thumb," because she made sure that I got through high school and living with the kids—

TS: So you're still living with your grandmother?

CH: Well, yeah. I mean, we were living in the house she had. I mean, she wasn't in the same house with us but she—we weren't paying really rent or anything like that, so she just made sure I had a roof over my head still, even though me and my husband were married. I mean, he was working, but he was traveling, like, an hour to work every day so it was just like—oh my gosh, we were gone more than we were at home. We weren't making a whole lot of money and it was just like, "Okay. What do we do?"

And so, I talked to the recruiter and he was like, "Your scores look great. You have really great scores. You can do whatever you wanted to do."

And I'm like, "Okay, so what are the options?"

TS: Right.

CH: And he said, "Oh my gosh. Look at this. You could be a programmer."
And I was like, "Well, what is that?"
And he said, "You can work with computers."
And I was like, "Okay. And? Whatever."

TS: It didn't sound that interesting?

CH: No. I was like, "You're trying to pull a fast one on me."

TS: Is that what you're thinking?

CH: Yeah. I was thinking, "He's trying to pull a fast one on me. It's probably something that's god-awful."
And he goes, "No, no. Look at this. You've got to watch this video."
And it showed this tent and all this other stuff with all this equipment, and I was like, "I don't know about that."
And he goes, "Well, it's better than all these other jobs;" I mean, almost every job that I got selected for was in the Signal Corps.
So I said, "Well, obviously communications is where I should go if my test scores showed that I have a propensity for that." So I said, "Well, let me see this programmer thing again." [both chuckle]
And so, I thought about it, and he goes, "Yeah, the only thing is, if you sign up for this programmer job you have to sign up for six years."
And I was like, "Six years? Gosh, that's a long time."
And I'm like—He was like, "Well, you better take it because you don't see this every day. This is not something you see every day."
And I was like, "Okay, well—"

TS: Did you get a bonus or anything for signing up?

CH: No, no bonus. You got six years. You got to sign the dotted line for six years. Well—I mean, he wanted to make sure that this was something I wanted to do—go in the army—and he's like, "Do you think you're aggressive enough to go in the army?"
I was like, "Aggressive enough?"
He goes, "If somebody came in your house and pulled a gun on you or whatever."
I was like, "Do I have a gun?"
He goes, "Yeah."
I said, "You're shot first." [both chuckle] "You're down. You're down for the count."
And he's like, "Really?"

I go, "Oh yeah. My family comes first. Before anybody else, my family comes first."

And he goes, "Okay. I think you could do this." And then we were talking about the programming thing, he's like, "But you have to sign up for six years." And I didn't tell my husband that.

And I said, "Okay;" signed the dotted line for six years.

And I came back and I told my husband and he had a cow. He was like, "What? What were you thinking?"

TS: What part did he have a cow about? Just signing up?

CH: Six years.

TS: The length, not just signing up.

CH: Oh, yeah.

TS: He knew you were going to maybe sign up.

CH: He knew I was going to sign up, but he thought two years or four years or something like that. Six years. Like I said, we were really rocky at the start anyway. And I went to basic training, and he came to graduation with the kids, and proceeded to argue, argue, argue.

TS: At the graduation?

CH: Yeah, at my graduation. I mean, after all the ceremony and everything.

So then I go to AIT [advanced individual training], and we're on the phone all the time, and that's still pay phones back then. There were no cell phones—

TS: Right. It's 1991, right?

CH: Yeah. There was no cell phoning going on back then. So it was always, "Call during this timeframe," and hopefully I wasn't on duty and—because we had fire guard. Nobody could go to their floor because all the females were on the third floor, and you didn't know who these guys were on the second floor and stuff; you couldn't let them upstairs.

I remember one drill sergeant, she got on us really, really hard, and I was like, "Why does she have to be so mean?" And she really, really tore into this one girl. She had the girl hyperventilating and—I mean, her eyes were bugging out and she was—I thought she was going to have a heart attack and she's, like, younger than me. And I finally went to the drill sergeant, I was like, "What's wrong with you? Why did you do this?" Because she let the boys—the young men—come up on the landing where we were supposed to be pulling fire guard and they were talking. She didn't let them upstairs, but she was talking, and the drill sergeant had a fit. And I was like, "You shouldn't do that. Why would you do something like that? Now she's so afraid she's not going to want to do anything." She literally was so nervous that—and right then and there I was like, "Yeah.

I'm already knowing some of these NCOs [non-commissioned officer] I'm just not going to get along with." [both laugh]

TS: Yeah. Did you get chewed out by the drill sergeant when you—

CH: Oh yeah, she had me—she had me in the front leaning rest too [a physical training position where the soldier lays in the prone position with arms extended as if about to do a pushup]. But I was just—Grandma was a mean cookie, so I was just like, "Whatever."

TS: How was basic for you? I mean, just the basic training.

CH: So basic training, I had this short little female drill sergeant, and then we had this really tall male drill sergeant. But the short little female drill sergeant—her name was Drill Sergeant Sanders, and everybody hated Drill Sergeant Sanders because she was mean. She wasn't really mean, she was just very "by the book." So if you went by the book, everything was cool.

But she would yell at you when you were in the chow hall line and—"Get in line. Stand at attention. Stand at parade rest while you're standing in line." And she'd come by and she'd inspect and—"Oh, your t-shirts weren't folded right," or whatever; "Your boots were scuffed," or what have you. She was just "by the book." And that's the way she wanted things, and if you did that you were good for her. But she used to yell up and down, "You're getting on my nerves, Third!"—because we were in Third Platoon [both chuckle]—"You're getting on my nerves, Third!" She would yell at us, and she wouldn't call cadence, because she said that we weren't squared away enough, so we had to be squared away for her to call cadence.

TS: Before she would call it?

CH: Yes.

TS: That's an interesting reward, huh?

CH: Yeah, because we always loved to call cadence; that was, like, really awesome.

I remember we had to go to Victory and I am deathly afraid of heights. I am deathly afraid of heights. I'm like, "Oh my God." I'm almost hyperventilating as we're doing the ropes and we're climbing and rappelling and all that. And I'm like, "Oh—" And when the day was over, and I could look back, and I'm like—I look at this huge, massive Victory Tower and I'm like, "I conquered that. That's awesome. That was—"

[Victory Tower is a basic training exercise where recruits must navigate through several obstacles at extreme heights, including climbing and traversing rope ladders and bridges. They must then rappel down a 50-foot wall]

TS: That was something.

CH: That was something, yeah. That was really something, because here I am, I'm nineteen years old, and I'm like, "I don't—" when I get there I'm like, "I can't do that." And when I leave I'm like, "Yeah, I did that." That was—

TS: Was that empowering for you?

CH: It was; it was very empowering. It was like—and I mean—and we all helped each other out. It wasn't just, "I did that singlehandedly," either. I mean, it was team-building, but it was also confidence-building for your own self; self-confidence building. So you knew that you could do it, and you knew that you could help your buddy make it through.

TS: Was that the hardest thing for you then, was the Victory Tower? Was there anything else really hard physically for you?

CH: I had some difficulties with sit-ups, and I learned later that I had to kind of retrain my abs, because I was using tendons and stuff instead of using my actual muscles to do the sit-ups. And I had to see the doc [doctor] about that, because it was like, "I don't know why I can only do, like, twenty-five sit-ups. Why am I struggling?"

She said, "Have you had kids?"

I was like, "Yeah, two."

And she goes, "Yeah, that's probably why."

TS: Really?

CH: Yeah. And so, she gave me some exercises to do, and after that—eighty sit-ups? No problem.

TS: Is that how many you had to do?

CH: I can't remember, but eighty-two or eighty-six was, like, the max at the time.

TS: So you maxed out?

CH: No, I didn't max out, but I was getting close. I was getting close.

TS: That's pretty good from going from the twenties to [unclear].

CH: I know. I know. It was another one of those confidence-building things. It's probably what ultimately ended the marriage—the first marriage.

TS: Oh, because you started to gain—

CH: Because I started to gain that confidence and become a more—

TS: Assertive?

CH: Assertive, and just more sure of myself, because at sixteen when I got married I was just like, "I don't know what I'm doing." And then here at nineteen and I passed basic training and I passed AIT and I'm like, "Okay. Now I know what I'm doing. This is the plan." It didn't work out too well.

TS: But it worked out for you.

CH: Yes, it worked out for me, but it didn't work out for the relationship.

TS: Right. Tell me just a little bit about AIT, then. That training, that's for your schooling?

CH: That was for my schooling, and I came in the army and was supposed to be—well—and I was a 74 Foxtrot, which was a programmer analyst. And so, I learned COBOL [common business-oriented language; a computer programming language] and I learned all about programming languages and how to write code, and all kinds of signal stuff. I want to say my training was twelve weeks. I think that's how long it was. It wasn't very, very long.

TS: Right.

CH: So I think April to June was basic training and then June to August was my AIT. And then my first duty station was Alexandria, Virginia. I went to work at the Department of the Army Personnel Command.

TS: Oh, okay.

CH: PERSCOM.

TS: Did you apply for that?

CH: No. No. And then when I got my orders the drill sergeants were all like, "Well, who do you know?"

And I'm like, "I don't know anybody. Why would I want to go back to Alexandria? I just came from there." [chuckles]

TS: Yeah, no, really.

CH: But I didn't know anybody in DA [Department of the Army] at the time, so I don't know how I got that assignment. Just luck of the draw I guess.

TS: Was that good for your family to have it?

CH: It was good in the fact that I was close to family because, like I said, my marriage ended and there was a lot of traveling back and forth with visitation with the children and everything. But I learned a lot while I was at PERSCOM. I mean, I was there for five and

a half, almost six years. It—Because I got there the end of August and I left—I want to say I left in January of—

TS: Ninety-six.

CH: —ninety-six, yeah.

TS: So you caught part of the Gulf War when you went there?

CH: Yeah. My job when I was at PERSCOM was—I worked in the accessions branch, so I was working on programs that helped the people who were making the assignments after soldiers came in. So I would run this program on a weekly basis and it would show the number of personnel coming out of AIT in these different MOSs [military occupational specialty], and then it would go over to distribution branch and they would assign the orders to wherever they needed to go. And that would kind of filter back to the folks in accessions branch to say, "Okay, we need now more infantrymen," or, "We need more signals people," or, "We need more ordnance people;" whatever. So I didn't really get into what each of the data categories were. My job was just to make sure that program ran on a regular basis, and that it was—

TS: So the program behind all that data to keep compiling that information. That's what your job was.

CH: Right. That was what my job was. It kind of evolved from there, because I got a new officer that came in, and he was like, "I want you to learn how to swap out components in these computers."

And I was like, "What is that all about?" Because I didn't know anything about that. I didn't learn that in AIT.

He's like, "Oh yeah. Okay. Come here. Let me show you this."

And I was swapping out cards in computers and new hard drives—

TS: All the hardware stuff?

CH: Yeah, all the hardware stuff. I was like, "I never touched the hardware stuff." It was all the internal aspects; coding, and writing out spreadsheets, and charts, and flow diagrams, and all that other stuff. This is new. It was interesting. So I was like, "Okay. Hey, great."

And then I got into documenting. So then I started documenting a lot of this stuff; a lot of the processes on where the numbers go. And then I did PowerPoint presentations and all that other stuff. So I was doing all kinds of things by the time I left.

TS: What was the most interesting part of your job for you at that time, during that period?

CH: I think the coding was pretty interesting to me.

TS: COBOL?

CH: Well, actually, as soon as I got to PERSCOM—here I'd been twelve weeks learning this programming language to come to a job where I didn't use that programming language.

TS: I was wondering about that.

CH: Yeah. So I had to go to another class—I think two weeks or whatever—to learn this fourth generation language called FOCUS [For Online Computer Users], and that was all fine and dandy but you had to use another language to kind of get to that language. It was—Well, what I eventually did was I automated myself out of a job, because when I got to PERSCOM I was running these reports every Tuesday, but I had to sit at the computer and hit the 'escape' key every time the screen filled up, because the computer I was on was an 8088 [Intel brand central processing unit used by IBM and other computer manufacturers], which was—I mean, it was huge. It was a big honking box.

TS: About the size of a desk or so? Maybe less? Not quite?

CH: Not quite the size of a desk, but it took the majority of the desk. I mean, it was pretty big. So when the screen would fill up on this big CRT [cathode ray tube, used in TV and computer screens] I'd have to hit 'escape' or the program would just halt. It would just pause.

TS: On every page?

CH: On every page. So I'm like, "This is getting old.' I'm sitting here for hours hitting the 'escape' key."

TS: That's pretty boring, right?

CH: It was pretty boring. So I learned—Oh, I don't even remember what language it was—but it helped me—I had to find some really old books that were out of production in order to use this coding to automate the program to run in a mode where I didn't have to be there; unattended mode. So I would have it run at, like, 5:00 in the morning so when I got to work at 7:30 it'd be done. And if I needed—

TS: You just went and did this on your own?

CH: I did. I did. So that was my—My aspiration was to automate myself out of a job, and I almost did; I almost did.

TS: Yeah?

CH: Yeah, I almost did, because still it would do that, and I would email the report to myself and to other people who wanted it emailed to them. But then some people wanted printed copies, so then I still had to take it and send it to the printer. And at first the printer was in the room with me. It was a high-impact printer [dot matrix printer]. It had this cover over

it and it still was as loud as could be with the little holes on the side [of the continuous form paper].

TS: Right, tear roll.

CH: Tear roll. Eventually I got it down to the basement printer where I didn't have to hear it print out. [both chuckle] So like I said, all this—automate myself out of a job. When manpower came—I don't know, I'd been there a couple of years already—manpower came and they were asking people basically, "How many hours do you put in and what do you do to veri—to basically say, 'Yes, this is a valid job'?"

I'm like, "Oh, yeah, well, I do this and I do that and I do this," but it wasn't all just the programming anymore. By the time they came I was doing a lot of other things.

TS: Yeah.

CH: I was doing administrative stuff, and keeping calendars, and doing flow charting, and I was doing other things other than hitting that 'escape' key, [both chuckle] because I didn't want to do that anymore.

TS: Yeah, I don't blame you.

CH: Yeah. But it was fun; it was fun. I remember I had a female NCO and she was like, "You should—" because by that time I had made specialist. I had gotten to specialist and she's like, "You should be—you should go to the promotion board."

"No, no, I don't want to be a sergeant. That's too much responsibility for me. I don't want to be a sergeant," because by that time I had child number three—I had my son by that point—and I was just like, "No, no. That's too much responsibility. I've got three kids I have to worry about. I don't need to be responsible for anybody else. Just me." And I was married again by that point, and I was just like, "Yeah, I have too many kids at home. I really don't need any more responsibility."

And they were like, "No. No. You need to go."

And I mean, I did a couple Soldier of the Month boards, and I was just like, "That's too much stress. That's too much responsibility for me." I was like—I was still kind of like pushing that responsibility—

TS: Just wanted to do your job.

CH: I just wanted to do my job and nothing else. And then it was time for me to get my assignment to go someplace else, and I was almost done with my six year enlistment and I was like, "Okay. What should I do?" And of course, the kids have their medical and their dental and I have a roof over my head, and I'm like, "Okay. I think I'm too nervous to get out of the army now." [both chuckle]

TS: Because you had that sense of security.

CH: Because I had that sense of security, yeah. I mean, the only thing I hated about being in the military was the PT [physical training]. I hated push-ups, sit-ups, and the two mile run. I hated running. I hated running. That was the biggest struggle for me, and it remained the biggest struggle for me because it just hurt so bad, just running. That was like my nemesis right there. [chuckles] But then you start thinking about it and you're like, "If the worst thing about being in the army is just the run, then why not stay?"

So usually if you work PERSCOM you can kind of pick your exit assignment, and at the time my son was still—my son was eight months old when I left PERSCOM, and the assignment manager wanted to send me to Korea for a year, unaccompanied, and I was like, "Are you kidding me? No way. My son's only eight months old. Why would you do that?"

And my sergeant major, he was like, "Where do you want to go?"

I said, "Well, my family's in Caroline County. How about I go somewhere close? Somewhere on the East Coast at least. I can at least visit family."

So I ended up going to Fort Lee [Virginia]. I was like, "Oh my gosh, I didn't even get out of the state." [both chuckle] But I mean, I learned a lot at Fort Lee as well.

TS: That was in '96, to '98?

CH: Yeah, '96 to '98. They finally convinced me, because when I got to Fort Lee my boss was a civilian, and then the next ranking—the highest ranking military was this corporal, and eventually we got a sergeant in. We had a sergeant for a while but then he got orders to go somewhere else. So this is this corporal, he's there, and he's annoying the heck out of me, and I'm like, "He's a corporal. He's an E-4 just like I am. Just because he has stripes and they say he could be in the leadership position or whatever, he gets to tell me what to do? Forget that." [both chuckle] And so, I was like, "Ugh. I can't stand working for this guy. This guy's driving me nuts." So that was my motivation for making sergeant, because I didn't want him to boss me around anymore. It was like, "Ugh. I can do a much better job than he can."

TS: Well you must have known, too, when you re-upped that you're going to have to make rank, right?

CH: I was going to have to do something.

TS: Yeah.

CH: Yeah, I was going to have to do something. I only—Actually, to get the assignment to Fort Lee I only had to extend—I extended my contract—so I didn't re-up for, like, two years, or four years, or six years. I just extended my contract for—I don't know. It was to make the assignment so it was probably just—

TS: It was another year almost.

CH: Right.

TS: Okay. So you hadn't re-upped yet.

CH: I hadn't re-upped yet. [chuckles]

TS: Okay.

CH: It was like, "Hmm, that was kind of the best of both worlds; I get to stay in but not at a whole big—"

TS: Commitment.

CH: "—commitment to—" Because it was like, "Do I stay? Do I go?" Because at that time I had gotten an offer to go work as a contractor for forty thousand dollars a year. And I was like, "Forty-thousand dollars a year? That's it? How much is forty-thousand dollars a year?" [chuckles]

TS: What were you making?

CH: Well, I was a specialist with over four years—yeah, a specialist with over four years—so I was making a little over a thousand dollars a month, I think. I mean, it wasn't a lot, but—

TS: But you had your benefits and a roof over your head.

CH: Yeah. I was thinking, "Okay, all these benefits; forty-thousand dollars a year.'" I just didn't see the correlation.

I mean, you get those little things from the army saying, "This is how much you would be truly making if you were in the civilian sector," but I heard all the stories about, "Yeah, but that's not really true," and all that. I didn't know what to believe.

So I'm like, "Could I make it on forty-thousand dollars a year with my three kids and still have an apartment and a car and medical and dental and all that."

TS: Was your second husband in the army?

CH: He was at one point, but he wasn't by the time it was time to move to Fort Lee.

TS: You went to Fort Lee?

CH: Yeah, he wasn't in anymore, so it was like, "What to do? What to do? What to do?" And so, I extended and went to Fort Lee, and then my second husband and I, we parted ways while I was at Fort Lee. So three kids; single mom; making sergeant; going to PLDC—

TS: What's PLDC? Like a training?

CH: It was training before you made the rank of sergeant.

TS: Oh, okay.

CH: Primary Leadership Development Course.

TS: Okay.

CH: And that was at Fort Knox [Kentucky], and by that time it was well established that Specialist Warren—because that's who I was at the time—Specialist Warren had terrible feet; I had horrible feet. [laughs] I had fallen arches and everything else, and at PLDC, and for my whole tour at PERSCOM, and for basically my whole tour at Fort Lee, I wore my Class "B"s, which is you wear a skirt or slacks and the green top with flats or concords[?] or whatever. Normal kind of shoes.

TS: Right.

CH: You go to PLDC and you're in boots. You're marching, you're—I hadn't been doing any of that stuff. I hadn't been doing any of that stuff. Yeah, formations? Got it. Marching? No. Boots—

TS: And you were just running in regular tennis shoes.

CH: Yeah, running in regular tennis shoes, but lots and lots of marching. And my arches fell and I went to sick call, and they made me cork arch supports, and I ended up with bruises on my feet. Our small group leader, he was actually a medic in the army—regular army. His special duty was being a small group leader at PLDC, but he was an actual medic when he finally went to his regular job. And they were all wondering, "Where did Warren go?"

I'm on my bunk. I'm like, "I don't want to move. My feet hurt so bad."

And they were like, "What is up with you? We're hanging outside. We're going to do this. We're going to do that."

I was like, "I can't stand."

They were like, "What are you talking about?"

I was like, "Look at my feet." I had these bruises on my feet.

They were like, "Oh my gosh."

And I said, "I'll be—"

TS: When you say it hurt, it really did hurt.

CH: Oh, yeah. I was never one to say—I was never one to just complain to be complaining, and I would tell you straight up I'm always cold, and if I tell you my feet hurt, my feet really hurt. That was just the way it was. But I was always cold, and I still am; I'm always cold.

TS: Well, you're in computers.

CH: I know. You're always in the air conditioning and everything else, right?

TS: That's right.

CH: So they're like, "Oh my goodness. Your feet hurt really bad."

I was like, "I'll be fine tomorrow morning. I just don't want to do anything tonight." And they went and ratted me out to the first sergeant. [chuckles]

They called the first sergeant and they were like, "Warren's feet are, like, bruised. They have wide bruises on her feet. What is she going to do?"

And he came, he's like, "What are you going to do?"

I'm like, "What do you mean, 'What am I going to do?' I don't have time to do this over again. This is—I'm going to do it, I'm going to get it done, and it's time to move on."

He said, "Are you sure?"

I'm like, "Heck yeah, I'm sure. I don't have time to come back here. I have kids to see. I'm missing out on a whole month of seeing my kids."

And he's like, "Okay."

And so, at the end I guess there was a lot of grumbling going on about things weren't fair, what have you, at PLDC. I'm sure you get that anywhere you go, but I guess it was more than what the first sergeant was used to and he called me out. He was like, "You see this soldier right here? This soldier right here—"

I was like, "Oh, no."

TS: [chuckles]

CH: "What did I do? Why is he calling me out?"

"This soldier right here, she could have gone home. She could have just quit. She didn't quit. She pushed through. She persevered."

And I was like, "Wow. Okay. All right. I could do with that pat on the back." [both chuckle] That was pretty good.

TS: Right. Sure.

CH: And I made the Commandant's List [analogous to an honor roll]. So I made the Commandant's List, first time going, everything—Did land nav [navigation], and a lot of time, although I was popping Motrin like candy because my feet hurt so bad. [chuckles]

TS: Right.

CH: But he was like, "She never complained. Not one time."

I was like, "Yeah. The only time I complained was like 'I've got to go to sick call,' that was it. I just had to go to sick call." And then I got my arch supports and then they just tore me up. I was like, "Oh, great."

But made it through, and by the time I got back to Fort Lee, my duty station, in less than a month I got pinned E-5. And then my first—my first duty as new sergeant was to go and counsel the corporal on him not doing what he was supposed to do. [both laugh]

TS: And that was a good day, I'm sure.

CH: I was nervous.

TS: Were you?

CH: Yeah, because here I am, I'm now the section NCO and he was the section NCO, and I had to have the platoon sergeant in there. My platoon sergeant had to come in there and she was like, "Are you ready to do this?"

I'm like, "Why do I have to do this?" [laughs]

"Well, you're going to be the section NCO. You have to give him his counseling."

I was like, "Oh my gosh." And he blew up.

TS: At you?

CH: He blew up at me, with my—

TS: Your platoon sergeant?

CH: —with my platoon sergeant sitting right there. Yeah, it was a hot mess. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah.

CH: But I went on to kind of learn that a lot of things that happen to a female enlisted or to a female—female soldiers was, you kind of had to wonder where these guys were coming up with their—whether they had common sense or whether they had—what was screwy in their mind where they didn't want to listen to you because you were a woman.

TS: Oh, really? Okay.

CH: Yeah. That wasn't the first time that happened to me. That was—

TS: That had been ongoing?

CH: Yeah, throughout my career it was kind of—not everywhere—not everywhere was it like that, but there were certain situations, it was like—

TS: Where it was really bad in certain places.

CH: Yeah, it was really bad in certain places. Like, when I was at PERSCOM it wasn't a problem. Maybe because I wasn't an NCO, or I wasn't telling people what to do, so to speak. I mean, I would tell them, "Hey, we have to get this accomplished. I need help making it happen."

But when I got to that level of being an NCO, where I had to direct junior soldiers and they were males, they were like, "Why do I have to listen to you?"

I'm like, "You have to listen to me because I have the chevrons. You don't. So here we go." [chuckles]

TS: And then would they do it, but grumbling?

CH: Sometimes they would do it, no problem. Other times they would do it with grumbling. Sometimes they would do it with a lot of grumbling.

TS: Yeah. But they'd do it.

CH: Yeah.

TS: Well, were there a lot of women in your career field at that time?

CH: I didn't see—I didn't see a lot of other soldiers—female soldiers, even male soldiers. A lot of times I was very isolated into what I was doing because of the nature of what I was working on. When I first got to PERSCOM, I was the only person to do what I was doing. I didn't have, like, a team of people. The specialist that was there before me, he was like, "Oh, I'm so ready to get out of the army." He taught me what I needed to know and then he was gone. And for a while I didn't have an NCO, and then I had an officer, and then I had an NCO.

TS: So in your field, you're actually responsible for helping other people facilitate their job through the computer.

CH: Right.

TS: You're not working with a team of other computer programmers or whatever.

CH: No, I was literally—

TS: You're like *the* one.

CH: *The* one, yeah. I was *the* one.

TS: Okay, so you're in a lot of different environments that aren't your—Well, it's your field in what you're working on, but that bigger environment is something different.

CH: Right.

TS: Okay.

CH: Yeah. So a lot of times I was solo. Yeah, I was in a platoon or I was in a squad or whatever, but what I did was very solo. I mean, it was by myself. Or later on—like when I came to [Fort] Bragg [North Carolina]—I had a team, but—

TS: Working on a special project, or something like that?

CH: No, actually the job was more of a team effort. But when I was at PERSCOM, and even when I was at Fort Lee, it was just me; me and civilians; or me and one other soldier. And that soldier may or may not have been mine. So for a while I didn't have any. And then after that corporal left I didn't have anybody for a while. [chuckles] And then I went to Korea after Fort Lee.

TS: So you did have to go to Korea.

CH: I did have to go to Korea.

TS: Was it unaccompanied?

CH: It was unaccompanied; I had to leave my kids behind. Yeah, it was a hard year. It was a really hard year for me. Yeah, I left my kids behind and I went to Korea and I was, like I said, single mom, divorced twice. I was like, "I don't know about this relationship thing. I must not have that down." [both chuckle] So I said, "Well, I'm going to stop looking, because obviously I don't know how to pick them." And then I met my current husband in Korea.

TS: In Korea? Did you?

CH: He picked me, so it worked out. Yeah, so I got over there in February—

TS: This is '98?

CH: February '98, and I stayed until February—well, January, actually—January '99; I left early by a few weeks. And I went—While I was in Korea I worked in the consolidated building. Basically I was the exchange administrator, so I worked email. I had two soldiers—I had two soldiers working for me—but I was also given the responsibility of being the barracks NCO, so I was responsible for the entire female floor, [chuckles] making sure the latrines were clean and the hallways were clean and nobody got locked out of their room.

TS: And you were living in the barracks?

CH: I was living in the barracks. Yeah. But, I mean, that's—you've got some pictures of me in the color guard in the—

TS: Oh, right, in Korea.

CH: In Korea. That was fun times. That was the first time I had done something like that. It was more like—it was more military stuff, I mean, because —

TS: Okay.

CH: Yeah.

TS: Explain what you mean by that. Why was it more military than back at Fort Lee?

CH: Because at PERSCOM it was like going to your 9:00 [a.m.] to 5:00 [p.m.] job. I mean, yes, you did PT on your own, and, yes, you had times when you had to go to the company for certain things—training or what have you—but for the most part it was, you get in your car, you go to work, you work your eight hours, and you come back home.

TS: Right.

CH: And then at Fort Lee I worked at the headquarters garrison, which it was a little more military because you definitely had to meet for PT every morning, but still it was, you meet for PT, you go back home, you change, you come back to work, and you work 9:00 to 5:00—or 8:00 to 4:00, whatever you did—and then you go back home. Whereas when I went to Korea it was military 24/7, in a sense that it wasn't like you could drive down to the mall.

TS: Right.

CH: It was—You were safe on the installation and when you went off the installation you had to deal with local people who you couldn't talk to. I mean, you could try to talk to them, but they were speaking in Hangul [the Korean alphabet] and you're speaking in English, and you don't look anything alike, and so you're thinking—I mean, it was total culture and language—it was every kind of barrier that you could think of, and I mean, I had never been out of the country before. I had never been off the East Coast before, so I was just like—total culture shock. I was very, very nervous.

And so, I was hanging out with some other folks that came in around the same time. And we would be doing stuff together but it was like we were always on the installation. We went bowling. Okay, everybody goes bowling. Or we went to the movies, and everybody does that. But when I met my current husband he was like, "Oh, no," because he had been in Korea for a year already. He's like, "Come on, we're going to go eat at this Korean place."

And I'm like, "Is it safe to eat?" [chuckles] I'm like, "I don't know. I know it's probably safe for them to eat, but is it like Mexico where you don't drink the water?" I mean, that's what you hear, right?

And he's like, "No, no. It's all good. We're going to go here and we're going to go there." He took me downtown and we went in some underground shopping whatever. It's just total culture shock.

But while I was there I learned that there's no place like home. There's no place like the USA.

TS: What kind of things taught you that?

CH: When I saw—I saw this Korean mom put her two year old out on the sidewalk and went in the house and closed the door, and I was like, "Oh my God. If somebody did that in the U.S. they'd be going to jail."

And he said, "Yeah, you see that all the time because the little kid wasn't listening or whatever, and it's a big deal in their culture to be shunned by their family."

And I was like—

TS: At two years old?

CH: At two years old? I mean, that would be total shock. I couldn't imagine doing that to my kid, because at the time my son was almost two, so I was like, "I couldn't imagine doing that to my boy." It was just—They eat differently. They have this jjigae soup [a type of kimchi (fermented vegetable side dish) stew] that looked like dirty wash water and they were eating it up like it was going out of style. And I was like, "I don't know if I could do that." Here I'm learning to eat new stuff—and the language—and we had KATUSAs that were trying to teach us the language and the culture.

[Korean Augmentation To the United States Army, or KATUSA, is a branch of the Republic of Korea Army which consists of Korean enlisted personnel who are augmented to the U.S. Army, and was developed during the Korean War to cope with a shortage of U.S. Army personnel]

TS: Explain what the KATUSA is.

CH: Well, they're like—they were more like college-aged guys that were serving their requirement in the military. So in Korea, the requirement is for the men to serve two years in the Korean army. So if you were lucky enough you were sent to the KATUSA program, which—those particular men worked directly with the U.S. in certain aspects. helping the U.S. soldiers with learning culture, learning—acting as basic liaison between the Korean army and the U.S. Army.

TS: Are they assigned to particular units?

CH: They were embedded in our units.

TS: Okay.

CH: Yeah. They had their own barracks and everything, but we—they sat next to us in the offices and everything.

TS: Worked with you.

CH: Yeah.

TS: Did they help you learn the culture? Were they useful?

CH: Yeah, they—That was kind of like their—part of their job description was to help us out. [chuckles] We got to learn a lot. They were lots of fun.

TS: Did you ever learn to like Korean food, or kimchi or bulgogi [grilled marinated beef] and all that?

CH: Oh yes. Oh yes. My husband, to this day, if he could eat Korean food every day he probably would. [chuckles]

TS: He loves it?

CH: Yes. Even the kids love it.

TS: Yeah?

CH: Yeah, even my kids love it.

TS: Speaking of your kids, when you went on this unaccompanied, what did you have to do with your children?

CH: So I had to—I had to make sure that I had a family care plan. All the single parents, whether male or female, they have to have a family care plan. And so, I had to basically implement my family care plan. So my first ex had the oldest two kids, and then my second ex had the last one, and basically I was calling from Korea going, "Hey, how are the kids doing?" Still no cell phones at that point [chuckles]; still no cell phones. You still had, like, long distance calling.

TS: You had email though.

CH: Yeah, we had email then, so a lot of emailing back and forth. A lot of pictures coming back and forth over email and stuff like that. But it was a challenge—it was a challenge—and I came back for my mid-tour, in the middle of my—in the middle of my—

TS: Now, you had re-upped somewhere in here?

CH: Yeah, I had to re-up to go to Korea. [both chuckle] I did; I had to re-up to go to Korea. It's like, "Well, if I've got to go I guess I need to pick when I want to go." So I re-upped to go to Korea. I think I did two years.

TS: Yeah, two years.

CH: Two years, and then when I was in Korea I re-upped again.

TS: For how long?

CH: I re-upped, I think, for three. And I called my buddies at PERSCOM, because at the time, like I said, I met my current husband in Korea and he had re-upped to actually go to his hometown, which was Tampa. And so, he re-upped to go to MacDill Air Force Base. And so, he's like, "Well, I'd really like for you to come down to Tampa."

And I'm like, "Well, we'll see if it happens. How about that?" [both chuckle] And—So yeah, when it was about time to leave Korea, I called my buddies at DA and I was like, "Hey, can you get me to Tampa?"

And they were like, "You don't want to come back here?"

I'm like, "No."

TS: "I met somebody." [both chuckle]

CH: "Maybe next time." Because I'm from D.C., so it's not like I didn't know how to get around, and that kind of thing. But I wanted to do something different. I'd already been—

TS: You'd been in Virginia.

CH: I'd been in Virginia twice already. I was like, "Ah!"

TS: And then you went to Korea without your family.

CH: Without my family. So I really wanted to go somewhere where we could have some fun. Go to [Walt] Disney [World Resort] or something.

TS: Yeah. So MacDill.

CH: I went to MacDill afterwards.

TS: Now, that's an air force base.

CH: It is an air force base, but there are two joint commands at MacDill, and we were at Central Command, and of course got there before September 11th.

[The September 11 attacks, or 9/11, were a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda on the United States on the morning 11 September 2001. The attacks killed 2,996 people and injured over six thousand others]

TS: Nineteen-ninety-nine.

CH: Nineteen-ninety-nine. And from '99 to 2001 we had quite a bit of family time.

TS: Oh, you did?

CH: We had quite a bit of family time. I mean, we got to go sight-seeing and stuff in Florida, and get the kids settled and all of that. It was good. We had weekends, and I'd work eight hours and come home, and it wasn't bad.

TS: Back to that 9:00 to 5:00 job for a little bit?

CH: Back to the 9:00 to 5:00. You PTed on your own and you didn't have to really worry about anything else.

TS: Now, did you get married there?

CH: Yes, we did. We got married in 2000 and at the MacDill chapel by the CENTCOM [Central Command] chaplain. And we had—I don't want to say it was a cheap wedding—it was an inexpensive wedding. [chuckles] It was a very inexpensive wedding. We had our reception right there on the marina on MacDill. It was very—I think it was quaint. It was really quaint. We just had a really good time. We had friends that did my make-up and hair, and I had my dress actually made in Korea; my wedding dress was made in Korea. It was just—We went to my husband's favorite little bakery, and we had the cake done there, and they did all the little finger foods and everything there. It was just—It was just a really, really quaint wedding and reception. My friends, they did the decorations, and had their buddy be the DJ [disc jockey], and bubbles, and—it was just really, really sweet. I mean, it was—we had people from work, and friends from where my husband grew up, and it was just really, really—

TS: Really neat.

CH: Really neat, yeah

TS: Well, had your grandmother ever come around to you joining the army?

CH: Yes. Actually, I think—While I was still at my first duty station, her cousin, who was in World War II—and he actually married a Japanese lady—and he explained to his cousin, he goes, "That's probably the best job she could ever have. And she should stay until she retires." [chuckles]

And I was like, "I don't know if I'm going to stay for twenty years, but while it's still good I might as well just stick it out and see how long it goes."

TS: Right. Right.

CH: Because I didn't—Of course, when I went in the military I wasn't thinking—

TS: Going to make it a career?

CH: —I'm going to make it a career. No. It was, "Hey, I need money to feed the kids and medical and dental and stuff."

TS: Right.

CH: And then as I stayed in it was just like a security blanket during the middle part, and then by the time I got over that ten year hump I was like, "It's downhill from here." [both chuckle]

TS: That's right.

CH: It's like, "I might as well just stay." And then of course after fifteen I was just like, "Yeah."

TS: That's it. Cruising till the end.

CH: "I'm cruising till the end," yeah; "I'm cruising till the end."

TS: Well, talk about 9/11. What do you remember that day and what was going on?

CH: Yeah. I was in class. I was in class that day, so I was in civilian clothes because I was in a class. It was in—I don't remember the building but it was in a high rise building in Tampa, and one of my classmates was in a chat room with his wife while we were in class.

TS: Oh, okay, because now you do have cell phones.

CH: Right. No, we were on the computer, actually, in a chat room.

TS: I see.

CH: But yes, we did have cell phones then. But I mean, I—he was like, "Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh."

And we were like, "What are you talking about?"

He goes, "Check this out. Check this out. It's on CNN [Cable News Network]."

And we were like, "What are you talking about?"

TS: This is during class, right?

CH: During class. And so, we're all kind of huddling around him going, "Oh my—"

And then we get the word that we had to evacuate the building. And so, we're standing around going, "Should we go back to work? What should we do?" We're kind of like confused. I'm calling up work, "Do you want me to come in?"

They were like, "No, because the base is on lockdown."

TS: So you can't come at all.

CH: So we can't come to work. So I'm at home and basically I'm glued to the TV and watching in utter shock what happened that day. And then from that point on, twelve hour shifts, seven days a week for months; months. I had night shift; my husband had day shift. We were passing—

TS: Never saw each other.

CH: We hardly ever saw each other. Again, we implemented the family care plan, because single parents and dual military had to have a family care plan put into effect. And I had to get my mother-in-law permission to drive on post—on base, because the younger kids were going to the child development center on the installation. My son and my second oldest, they were going to the elementary school on the installation. So it was like, how are we going to get them to school if we're at work. I mean, we have to be there. So we had to get her special permission to come and do all that. If it weren't for my in-laws fixing dinner, traveling with the kids, that would have been a nightmare. That would have been a true nightmare.

TS: Right. It's good that you had family close by.

CH: Yes, it was very good that we had family. And it went like that for months; months and months. I can't tell you how long it lasted; it just was like a blur. And then at a certain point—I think it was at year four—year three for me when I was there—

TS: At MacDill?

CH: —at MacDill—my husband went to Saudi Arabia for a year. So just like Korea is an unaccompanied tour for a year, Saudi's an unaccompanied tour for a year. So for a year he was gone, and then he came back to CENTCOM again for another three years. We're like, "Ah, can we go? Can we leave? Can we go anywhere else?"

But yeah, stayed at CENTCOM for the entire seven years straight. It was an interesting time. I did move from one job to another while I was in there, so it was kind of good.

TS: What job did you move to?

CH: So when I first got to CENTCOM I was the GCCS [global command and control system] administrator; don't ask me what that stands for because I don't remember. But basically it's a program that helps all the components work together to achieve common goals. So everybody has that same picture of, "Okay, this group is here. This group is there." So it was the way they did command and control for everybody.

But anyway, that system is on a UNIX [type of computer operating system] platform, so I had to learn UNIX, and it was something I hadn't done before. I did that job for four years, and then I moved over to the server/networking side for the last three years. So it was back to kind of Microsoft and that kind of thing. And that's where I got my first touch of information assurance. And that's where I stayed—information

assurance—pretty much for the rest of the time I was in the military, except for a short time at Fort Bragg.

TS: Did you enjoy that?

CH: Yeah, I do. I do like doing information security. It kind of fits into that structure—it fits into that structure—like with programming. Programming, if it's not a certain way it doesn't work. It kind of fits into that structure.

TS: That you like to have to work with. So what kind of things did you do for information security then?

CH: Lots of scanning and patching, and more scanning and patching. [chuckles]

TS: You're the person people call for—

CH: I would be the person they would call if they had classified material on the unclassified system. And then I'd get to kind of berate them and go, "What were you thinking?"

TS: Right.

CH: I think I'm pretty nice about that. But it's something that—it's a necessary thing. Just like we have police. Basically, I'm like the computer police.

TS: Yeah?

CH: [chuckles] I think—I equate it to that anyway. I'm kind of like the little watchdog.

TS: Did you have an opinion about Snowden, with everything that happened with him?

[Edward Joseph Snowden was a government contractor working for the National Security Administration when he copied and leaked numerous classified documents about US surveillance programs.]

CH: Yeah, well, that guy—yeah, he should be totally behind bars. I mean, there's—okay, certain things weren't done right, you're upset about it. There's a way to go about that. The way is not to let everybody know.

TS: Just the idea of him taking that information and nobody noticing it.

CH: That just—Yeah, that's—

TS: How does that happen?

CH: Well—I mean, everybody—When you get your security clearance you're told, "Hey, you might see this information, but if you don't really need to know you need to police yourself and say 'Okay, I don't need to know that.' If it's out where anybody can see it then you need to let somebody know to put it away." And if it's something that you're supposed to be seeing then you're responsible for making sure that stuff gets put away where it belongs, or disposed of properly. And I mean, they drill that and drill that and drill that when you go and get your clearance and get read on and all that other stuff. It's like, you promised the government that you wouldn't be doing this and then you turn around and do it? That just—

It's just like I couldn't imagine being a thief. I couldn't imagine doing that. Yeah, when I was a little kid I stole candy and—

TS: [chuckles]

CH: —but that wasn't putting lives on the line. And that's how I feel about my job now. That's why I'm in computer security because I want to make sure that, hey, the secret stuff stays secret. And the stuff that's supposed to be for official use only, it stays official use only. Even though it's not classified it's still important that you keep it under wraps. It's not just for everybody to know. We don't need it on the *Fayetteville Observer*. We need that stuff behind closed doors. We can talk about it over here but not to the public because our soldiers are out there—the sailors, the airmen, the Marines, are out there—you don't know. One little tidbit of information just—it can hurt somebody. That's just how I feel about it. That's just how I feel about it. I just—If he could be locked up for the rest of his life, or, "Hey, go out on the front lines with all those folks that you just compromised. How about you stay out there with them so if they get shot at you get shot at too." Kind of tit for tat for that.

TS: Maybe a different resolution to that.

CH: And then to just like, "Oh, I'm going to escape. I'm not going to even own—I'm going to say, yeah, I did it, but then I'm not going to take the consequence for that." That just irritates—Sorry.

TS: No, it's okay. You're in a field where that had to have been an affront to—

CH: Yeah. It almost—It almost feels personal. But then again, I really take the computer security personally. I do. My bosses, they're like, "Don't get up on your soapbox. I know how you feel."

I'm like, "Yeah," because while I am—I'm sitting in a freezer for an office and I'm sitting behind a keyboard and monitors, but I really feel like if I could just do this one little thing to make sure that those guys that are on the front lines are safe, then that's my little piece.

TS: Right. Well, your little piece of a couple of deployments to Afghanistan too.

CH: Yes.

TS: Do you want to tell me about that?

CH: Yeah. When I left Central Command I came to Fort Bragg, and that was—

TS: Oh, right, I forgot about Fort Bragg.

CH: Yeah. I came to Fort Bragg and I—Well, when I was at CENTCOM I did go to Qatar.

TS: Oh, you did?

CH: I did go to Qatar for a while. I spent a few months out there, and I did some work out there, but it wasn't major or anything like that. And along the same lines; "Hey, I'm here for a job, and we're going to get this all squared away, and it's going to be better than when I found it."

TS: What was Qatar like? Did you get—

CH: It was hot. It was very outside, but it was very, very cold inside [both chuckle], so you really, really—while you're out there you had to make sure that when you were inside, even though you were freezing cold you were drinking lots of water, because as soon as you went outside it was like a hundred and thirty something degrees outside and you're like, "I can't breathe, I can't do anything, and oh my gosh, I just broke out in a sweat and I just sweated buckets." Yeah, because you go from freezing to hot to freezing to hot and it's just—it was a challenge; it was a challenge.

But I got to do some really cool things out there. They gave me the government credit card, so I had to go out on the economy [off base] and buy printer cartridges and stuff like that. Another culture lesson, because they do things differently over there. They want to socialize before they conduct business, so you had to—and the fact that typically they didn't socialize with women.

TS: That's right.

CH: I didn't have to wear an abaya [head covering worn by Muslim women] or anything like that, but I had to have long sleeves and long pants and be—my extremities had to be covered; couldn't show skin except for hands.

TS: But not your head?

CH: But not my head. But, I mean, you had to go, and the guy you talked to, he—"Would you like some tea? Would you like some coffee? You want a sandwich?" And you had to do that, and he had to ask you about your family and all—it's total, total culture shock, whereas here you're like, "Okay, let's get to it."

TS: "Here's my credit card." [both chuckle]

CH: "Here's my credit card, this is what I want," and no, it wasn't that way.

He was just like, "Okay. So how are you doing? How are your kids?" and this and that and the other.

I'm like, "Oh, we're fine." and fifteen minutes, twenty minutes later, I'm like, "Okay. Can I get the printer cartridges now?" [chuckles]

But that was interesting, learning about the culture in the Middle East, or at least that part of the Middle East.

So I left MacDill, came to Fort Bragg in 2006. And so, I came here in August, to North Carolina, and then in January I deployed to Afghanistan first time. And very different being at Fort Bragg. I went to the 82nd [Airborne Division] and I was just like—I'd never been in an infantry unit. I'd either been at a higher echelons; Department of the Army, Central Command, those are all higher headquarters. Even at Fort Lee I was at the garrison command, which is, like, the highest place you can be at Fort Lee. And while I was at company level in Korea, it was kind of small and it was a signal company so everybody you knew you talked communications and it was fine.

TS: You talked the same language?

CH: Talked the same language. I get to Fort Bragg and the 82nd and I'm like, "Okay. These infantry guys are just—I don't know—out there. They do not like women NCOs." They just didn't. Luckily I came as a sergeant first class because if I hadn't I think I would have been walked all over.

TS: Really?

CH: Yeah, I got comments like if you were a female sergeant first class either you got there by some unsavory means, or you were crazy, or you were just a bitch.

TS: You couldn't have just been competent.

CH: Really? Those are the only options? I said, "Okay. Well, I guess I can act the crazy bitch because the other one is just not me." So I did. I had to kind of come out of my own persona to get things done, and bark in people's faces and cuss at them, and it was just like—I'd come home and I'd be like, "Oh, I'm going to get an ulcer doing all this stuff."

I mean, from August to December it was prep time, prep time, prep time for this deployment in January. And we went to Louisiana for JRTC [Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk] to practice how they were going to do things. And most of the practice didn't revolve around the communications part, though that was an important piece, because tactically if you can't communicate you're not going to get anything done. But it was more infantry movements and that kind of thing. So my job was to make sure communications stay up. It just so happens I was slotted to go as their automations NCO, and there was supposed to be another E-7 who was supposed to be the commu [communications] chief. He decided he didn't wasn't to go, so I kind of got thrust in that position as the commu chief, being the ranking NCO for our communications section.

TS: What kind of chief?

CH: Commu chief; communications chief. But as the commu chief you had to know about tactical radios and COMSEC [communications security] and all of these things that I had never done. I had never seen a radio other than the fact that I knew what the nomenclature of a few of them were. I didn't know how to fix them. I didn't know how to—I knew my phonetic alphabet, okay, but we all learn that; every soldier knows that. But there was so much stuff I didn't know about the tactical side. I'm the only female in my office. They didn't like it and they were—I mean, they made things very difficult.

So here I am, I'm at JRTC. I had this staff sergeant under me. He didn't want to take direction, and he was very disrespectful inside the area where we were conducting operations. So I took him outside and I'm like, "Okay. You need to listen to me. We're only going to get through this exercise if we work together." I'm trying to be cordial about it. I'm not trying to be crazy about it. And I've got papers in my hand and he just lashes out. Papers go flying. And I'm looking at him like, "I cannot believe you just did this." And I'm like, "You need to stand at parade rest." And he's like just yelling and hollering at me, and finally a chief warrant officer comes around and he starts barking at the guy. And I'm just standing there in shock going, "I can't believe you just did that."

Finally they asked me, "What do you want to do? Do you want to go to the sergeant major with it?"

And I'm like, "Why would I go to sergeant major with it? We're going to deal with this after I count to ten or something." Because it was very childish. The guy was bigger than me, so if he really wanted to pull on me he probably could have. We weren't isolated where we were outside. I just didn't want to berate him in front of the junior soldiers. I wanted it to be more of a one-on-one thing. And he made it into this huge altercation.

Eventually the sergeant major did find out about it and he was like, "Well, what do you want to do?"

And I was like, "Listen. I'm not trying to break up the unit before we even get to Afghanistan. We need work together as a team. Let's just deal with it. I'll give him his little counseling thing or whatever and we'll just move on."

And so, it was like a lesson for me—kind of how I'm going to deal with these signal soldiers who have only been exposed to the infantry mindset, because that's not how the signal world works everywhere else, just at 82nd. And it turned out that that was one of many situations like that, but it's just like with anything else; being in the military you learn how to overcome certain stuff.

So we finally got downrange [deployed overseas]. I'm a mom, so in my mind I'm like, "Okay, we've got a job to do, but if I can get one or two people off for half a day for them to decompress, because we're in a stressful situation, we're in a war zone. I got twelve to fifteen soldiers with loaded weapons and they're not having a break. They are twelve hour shifts, seven days a week. Maybe one day a week at least give them a six hour shift, or an eight hour shift even. Let them sleep in or whatever. I don't want to get shot in the back. That's what I'm thinking. Go have a coffee, or go do extra reps in the gym or whatever. Do something. But go away from here.

And I went to the mat for them with the signal officer and with the sergeant major and everything. I'm like, "Look. I can't have my guys strung out. You guys have got the

ops officer on the floor yelling at my guys because they can't install a printer on their own computer. That's ridiculous."

And so, finally I got them their time but it was just like pulling teeth. I'm like, "We're set up. We're doing good. Let the guys have a few hours; four hours, five hours away from here."

TS: Right.

CH: Work, work, work. And eventually it came to bite me. They did not want to have me work with them. They made up all kinds of stories.

TS: Who? Which ones?

CH: My soldiers.

TS: The ones that you were trying to go to bat for?

CH: Yeah, yeah. They made up all kinds of stories.

TS: So they tried to undermine you?

CH: Yeah, they did, and eventually I was like, "I've had enough." They got me to the point where I was like, "I'm done."

So the commander, he let me go and I could go work at division. And so, I left the brigade, which is—at 82nd level there's divisions, brigades, and battalions. So I was at brigade, and so I moved up to division and I went and I worked directly for the information assurance office at division. That was a good move for me, because then I worked for a CW2 [chief warrant officer] and a major, and I had a couple of NCOs under me, and it was kind of smooth sailing from that point.

TS: How long was before you made the move?

CH: I got to the brigade in August, we deployed in January, and in April I moved, because in January we deployed to [Forward Operating Base] Salerno, Afghanistan. We got rocketed every day; every day we were rocketed. It was nerve-wracking; very nerve-wracking. And then of course the stress from working.

TS: Right.

CH: Here I'm barking at captains because they're thinking that we're going to fix the microwave and the fridge and I'm like, "Hey. My commu guys don't do that. I'm sorry. Go find an electrician somewhere, but my commu guys aren't going to be the ones."

TS: Right.

CH: It was me doing a lot of barking at the infantry guys for a while, because they figure because—not that I'm a loudmouth or anything like that, but I try to stay calm, but you push me into a corner I'm going to come out fighting. You're not going to walk all over these guys. I'm supposed to be—I'm supposed to have their back. I'm supposed to be looking out for their best interest, and you're not just going to steamroll us just because you think I'm a woman and I can't handle it. Because they're infantry guys; they think they're tough man on campus or whatever. I don't know, but I was like, "You're not the end all, be all."

TS: But you got it from both ends. You got it from above you and below you.

CH: I did. I got it from above me and below me. But I think in the end some of the officers—they kind of came to an understanding. Because while we were at JRTC an incident came up where the colonel wanted to do a COMSEC changeover, which is—COMSEC is the security stuff so that you can communicate with everybody, everywhere. And as long as you have the right keys the communication stays open. You change the keys, everybody has to change the keys. Well, you can only change the keys during certain times. So they wanted to do it early. They wanted to do it like a day early or whatever. And I was like, "You can't do that."

"I don't care. The colonel wants to do it," blah blah blah blah blah.

And we're getting graded on this, because this is a training center. And I go back and I'm like, "Tell them in the TOC [tactical operations center]—" I'm like, "We can't do that. You just can't do it because if you do a COMSEC changeover here, you're not going to be able to communicate with anybody."

"I said—" blah blah blah and da da da. And he's yelling. Everybody in the TOC can hear him yelling at me.

And I'm like, "I don't care if the President of the United States says to do a COMSEC changeover. I am not doing a COMSEC changeover. I'm not going to jail for you or for anybody else." And he was just floored that I was going to backtalk him, and I was like, "Well, with all due respect, sir, I'm not going to jail for you. Period. End of story. You can't tell my guys to do it. They're not going to do it. I'm just letting you know that right now."

Later on he comes back and he whispers his apology, but I was just like, "Okay. You apologized. I'm not going to get into a pissing match over that," because it's not who can yell the loudest or who had bigger muscles or whatever.

TS: But apologize the quietest.

CH: I'm like, "Okay." I kind of understood by that point how things were going to be, and it just—it kind of put a sour taste in my mouth, but still I was just like, "Okay. We're just going to roll with it." I don't know how I got that—maybe I got that from my grandmother; we're just going to roll with the punches. Keep going on. You do the right thing no matter what. That's what she instilled in my growing up. And know what you know. If you don't know it, say you don't know it. But know what you know. And that's something I could go back and say, "I know what I know and you can't do this."

TS: Right.

CH: And I think because I stood up to them, that later on they did come to respect the fact that—because after his apology I said, "Look. I'm not here just to say no to be saying no, or to put you in a bad spot. I'm here to make sure your butt doesn't get in a sling. That's what you have to trust your NCOs for." And why I had to teach a major that, I don't know.

But you start thinking if you don't have their trust in your junior soldiers—if I don't have trust in my specialists to do what they're supposed to do—yes, I'm going to check up on them, but that's how they're going to learn to be sergeants and how they're going to learn to be staff sergeants, and then ultimately take my job, because that's what I was doing as a specialist; I'm automating myself out of a job. This is just using personnel. I'm going to retire and you're going to be doing.

TS: Right. Right.

CH: So I kind of equated it with that and I was like, "Look. If you don't trust the people under you to do the right thing, then why are we here? Do you want to go to jail? I don't want to go to jail. I'm not going to go to jail because you say I had to go to jail. Trust when I tell you that I'm telling you the right thing, and I'm doing it in an open and honest environment."

So later on the colonel—the brigade commander—or—yeah, the brigade commander, I met him a few years after that, and he was like, "Oh no. I want Sergeant Hall. Sergeant Hall is going to help me. I know Sergeant Hall is going to help me. She's going to tell me the right thing."

Because before I would just tell him—I was like, "Okay. Do you want the truth or do you want me to lie to you?"

And, "No, no. I want the truth."

"This is it. You can do this. You can't do this. You do this, you'll get in trouble. You do this, you'll be okay."

And so, he knew that from the few years before when we had our little craziness in JRTC, because he had finally moved up to division. And he was like, "Okay. Sergeant Hall is going to tell me the real truth." [chuckles] And sure enough, I mean—

TS: So it was like a hard-won respect.

CH: It was. It was, but it's almost sweeter that way because—Not saying that I wanted recognition or anything like that. I just wanted them to know that always, always, always, I'm putting the army, I'm putting the soldiers, ahead of myself, because that's the way leadership—leaders are supposed to do it. And I learned that from my grandmother. I learned that from some of the first people I worked for, whether they were civilians or officers, or sometimes some of the senior enlisted. I had quite a few senior enlisted that were kind of iffy—

TS: Other ones that were good.

CH: —but you learn what not to do in that aspect.

TS: Use that as a bad example; "Don't do that," sort of thing.

CH: Right. I know people now that were my soldiers before that still say, "Hey, Chris—" because now I'm retired—"Hey, Chris, what would you do in this situation? Can you give me some advice?"

And I'd be like, "Oh yeah. This is what I would do. If it were me—I don't know about your situation, but this is what I would take into account."

And I can tell that they're listening intently and they're like, "Yeah. She's still giving me sound advice," and that's what touches my heart; that really touches my heart.

Or when somebody comes up to me and says, "You really had my back way back when. You really were looking out for me back when we were stationed in Korea," or whatever. That really—That's what really touches my heart, and that's what makes being away from the family or being stuck in another country, that's what made it all worthwhile.

But when we were over in Afghanistan, it just was scary. My husband and I were there at the same time.

TS: Oh, you were?

CH: Yes. It was hard. My mother-in-law had the two youngest kids, and my second ex had my son, and the older ones were either staying with friends or some other family members. So it was—The kids were spread to the four winds, and my husband and I were in Afghanistan. When I finally moved up to division we were both in Bagram [Airfield], because I started out in Salerno. He left the States and got to Afghanistan in February, where I left in January. And so, in April we kind of met up, because I went up to Bagram to be at division and he was already there. And so, we got married quarters in Afghanistan. And then in—That was in April, and then in May they put us on a special assignment to go to Kandahar. I'm like, "I'm doing more traveling in Afghanistan than I ever did in the States." So I moved from—

TS: You and your husband together?

CH: Yes. We went together to Kandahar. So January I was in Salerno, April I went to Bagram, May I went to Kandahar, and stayed in Kandahar until September. And I worked for a NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] unit when I was in Kandahar, and so I got to work with Canadians, British, Germans, and I think that's it. I worked with the Canadian army, the British army and air force, and the German army. But then we got to meet a whole bunch of other military folks from different countries, so that was pretty awesome.

TS: Was it?

CH: That was probably the best part of the whole deployment, just meeting other—kind of with that cultural exchange.

The hardest part was the fallen comrade ceremonies. It seemed like every day, every other day, we would be out there at a fallen comrade ceremony where they would be putting the bodies on the aircraft to send them home.

TS: At Kandahar?

CH: Yes. Well, at Bagram too. We had them at Bagram too. Not as many in Bagram as we had at Kandahar, because it was very volatile down there. We got rocketed quite a bit down there too. But it just seemed like so often we would see the flags at half-staff, or we were out on the tarmac doing the salute. It just—After a while my husband and I were like, "We can't go anymore." It just—It was just dev—

TS: The ceremonies?

CH: It was just devastating, because so many people, and you were like—it almost seemed like it was senseless. I mean, we knew we were there for a mission, but it was just like—so many people. And we had gotten back to Bagram in September, and I don't remember how long after but—so we had a—our married hut was—we were at a B-Hut [Barracks Hut]—they're called B-Huts—and a B-Hut was kind of like a rectangular building and it's divided into four rooms, and each couple had a room. So it was maybe twenty feet—eighteen feet by maybe twelve feet.

TS: The whole room?

CH: The whole room. That was the two of us in there with a fridge and a microwave and a crockpot and a TV and all of our gear and a bed. So we'd have to—right outside our B-Hut was—I don't know—five or six porta johns—that was the bathroom—and then if you wanted to take a shower it was a five minute walk to the showers. And the B-Huts are all over; all over the place.

TS: And these are all for married couples?

CH: No, they're for the single ones too. The B-Huts for the married couples were divided into four rooms. The B-Huts for the single soldiers were—it was like an open bay and there were eight people. There were still eight people per B-Hut.

TS: But just an open bay.

CH: Right. So this is made with quarter-inch plywood, half-inch plywood, whatever. And they would cut the paint with JP-8 [jet propellant 8] fuel and paint the B-Huts. And they would tell you, "You can't have candles in the B-Hut because it will go up like a match." There were a few fires and there were a few people who got out by the skin of their teeth. Of course, we didn't have that problem, thank goodness.

But we'd get rocketed in Bagram as well, and one particular incident the rockets came onto the installation and it actually destroyed some B-Huts, and we found out later

that it had hit a B-Hut—a married B-Hut—and the husband was in the B-Hut and he was lost. And the wife had barely escaped, because she had gone to the showers.

And so, when you're over there—and it is a life/death situation because you just never know. We had the bombing at the gates. We had the rockets into the compound. So you never knew. You always had to plan. You had to have a will. You had to have—plan this out, plan that out. And I found out later—she rode home, back with her husband, and they had to sedate her. I told my husband, I said, "Yeah, they would probably have to sedate me too." Because it takes twenty-four hours to get back home, for one, and her husband is in a casket in the plane she's in. And lost to her violently. And we had to discuss it. We had to talk about it and we had to analyze it, overanalyze it—I don't know—but it just does something to you. It just—I don't know how to explain that part. It just was shocking, bizarre, frightening.

TS: But you changed.

CH: Yeah. I mean, I came back from Afghanistan the first time, I was just yelling all the time. I was yelling all the time. I was mad all the time. It took me a while to get over that, and then I got turned around and went back to Afghanistan. [chuckles]

TS: Well, was that PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]?

CH: Yeah, or anxiety disorder.

TS: Something along that spectrum.

CH: Yeah.

TS: But you turned around and you went back?

CH: Yeah, I didn't have a choice. Went back in '09. Basically twelve, thirteen months after we left, because the first time we were there for fifteen months. And then turned around and went back after—

TS: Did you go back together?

CH: No. He stayed home with the kids that time.

TS: And then you went back by yourself?

CH: I went back by myself.

TS: Where did you go the second time?

CH: Bagram; went back to Bagram. Yeah.

TS: The same place that you had been before?

CH: Pretty much, yeah. Except I wasn't in married quarters, I was actually on the compound where I went to work. I wasn't that far off. It was basically on the flight line so you'd hear all the jets. When I was there before we'd hear all the jets, too, and the whole B-Hut would shake, but we were in these CONEX [a type of military shipping container] boxes—metal CONEX boxes—closer to the flight line so the whole CONEX would shake. So I was taking sleeping pills to go to sleep, because it was just, like, impossible to go to sleep with jets flying. But yeah, I had to do something to get to sleep.

It was very lonely being there without the family—without my husband—because of course the family couldn't go. But the first time I was there with my husband; at least I could grumble about him snoring or whatever. [both chuckle] We could commiserate in our misery. I mean, I had a roommate, but it's different when it's your spouse. Your spouse knows your ins and outs and can kind of see either you're spiraling down into depression or you're watching him do that. And you're bringing each other up and keeping each other going.

TS: So was it a lot harder the second time?

CH: It was a lot harder the second time for me, because even the first time around, my husband was on the phone with the kids for five, ten minutes every day going, "Hey, are you on your way to school?" Or, "Are you on your way home? How was your day?" That kind of thing. He could do it. I couldn't handle it.

TS: You couldn't talk to them?

CH: I couldn't do it. I could talk to them maybe once or twice a week.

TS: It was too hard?

CH: It was too hard for me. So when I was there by myself he would call me.

TS: And tell you what was going on?

CH: And tell me what was going on. Or he would send me emails and we'd do it that way. And I stayed busy; I worked like eighteen-hour days.

TS: Just to get—

CH: Just to get—Yeah. And then I'd take the sleeping pill to go to sleep, wake up, and then go back to work.

TS: You just wanted to get through it.

CH: Yeah.

TS: But you also knew more of what to expect, I guess.

CH: I did. I did.

TS: And that was probably scary.

CH: I knew exactly what to expect. I knew exactly what to expect. I basically knew exactly what I was walking into because I was going to do the same job I left. I was going to talk to the same person I trained to do the job. [chuckles] Yeah, it was—So I got there, and they'd moved a few things around but—

TS: Other than that, it was the same?

CH: It was all the same. It was all the same. It was very monotonous. But instead of working—Like I said, instead of working, like, twelve hours—what I did before—because my husband was like, "Okay, it's time to go home. Time to go to the B-Hut. Let's go walk and do PT or whatever. Let's get out and do something." I just worked.

TS: Worked and slept.

CH: Worked and slept. And went to church.

TS: The whole time. How long were you there the second time?

CH: Seven months. I had to come back because when we left Afghanistan the year before I had had a previous hernia, and it opened up again. So when I got back I ended up having surgery, and they fixed it, and I went back to Afghanistan. And I thought it had opened up again. So when I came back they did exploratory and they're like, "No, it didn't open back up. It's just scar tissue pulling," or whatever.

And I was like, "Yeah, sure, but I have this bulge. What is that?" So it was mesh malfunction.

TS: So they had to fix that?

CH: No, they said it was inop [inoperable].

TS: Oh, no, really?

CH: Yeah.

TS: Unfixable?

CH: Unfiaxable. So no fixey for me. [chuckles]

TS: How are your feet?

CH: My feet are the same. I still have bad feet, but oh well.

TS: You don't have to run anymore.

CH: No, don't have to run, so I'm good to go there. But hey, I know that I can outwalk my old chief and the sergeant major, because they both were like, "Never ever again. We're not walking with the Halls," because we outwalked them.

TS: Is that right? Because you're good walkers?

CH: Oh, we're good walkers, yeah.

TS: Well, do you mind if I ask you just some general questions?

CH: Sure. Sure.

TS: Because you really have answered quite a lot. Did you receive any memorable decoration or award?

CH: I think I got just about every general award. I got an MSM [meritorious service medal]. I mean, I didn't get, like, a Bronze Star or anything. I didn't get anything like that.

TS: Well, sometimes women say a certain award isn't the highest one they got, but something is memorable just because it recognizes something that they did that was special.

CH: I think I really got a kick out of getting my NATO award, just because I thought it was pretty cool working with the other countries. I thought that was pretty awesome. And of course, whenever I made rank that was pretty awesome, too, because I was just like, "I made the next step. It's great. I can't wait to mentor somebody to bring them up." I've always thought of—when I made sergeant, when I made staff sergeant, when I made sergeant first class—I always thought about, "Who's going to follow behind me?" I always thought about teaching them and bringing them into the fold.

TS: Did you always have your eye on certain people for things like that?

CH: No. Whoever—

TS: Not really? Whoever was there?

CH: Whoever showed an interest. If they showed an interest in whatever I was doing, I was so happy to share. And I still do that, even though I'm a contractor now. I still do that, so if you want to know about anything I do, "Come on, I want to show you. And here, and here. Let me—" And people tell me, "You can't tell all your secrets. You have to have job security."

I'm like, "No, I don't want job security. I want somebody else to do it. Come on. Let me teach you." [both chuckle]

But I always think about that, because when—I guess because when I was in Korea and I was the buck sergeant, it was always trying to explain to the junior soldiers, "I don't have the big picture. I have my little slice of the picture. Maybe the battalion commander has the big picture. I don't know who has the big picture. My part of the picture is that we've got to clean this area. Okay? And so it's my responsibility to make sure this area is clean. Does it seem like a big deal? No. It doesn't seem like a big deal. But your part of this picture is that you have to sweep this little section of this big area that I'm responsible for." I said, "So whoever's dignitary's coming or nobody's coming. I don't know. It'll be nice, clean, and presentable for whatever reason."

TS: Right.

CH: It's not because, "Man, we got to clean up something else. It's just our little piece of the picture. It's not the complete picture." So if you take life in general—and that's how I tried to explain it to those junior troops. And I guess I remember talking to them about that, because I do the same thing now. "Why am I doing this? This is so mundane". And then I have to remind myself, it's not the big picture.

TS: Just have pride in that piece that you're responsible for.

CH: Yeah. Right. If you just have pride in that piece, you do your very best. If it's not perfect, it's not perfect. But if you did your best, then that's all I can ask of you. Just do your best and your best will be okay. And so, I tried to pass that along and I think that's why, like I said, all those soldiers that I had before, they're like, "Yeah. I remember her. She was really cool."

TS: So mentoring was important to you?

CH: To me. I don't think I thought about it then.

TS: Right. You didn't think about it as, "I'm mentoring this person to do this."

CH: Right, I didn't think about it that way, but I think that's what I have the most pride in for my career; that I brought some people to see that they could do what they could do really well.

TS: That's cool. Well, you described, when you were dealing with the airborne, some of the harassment that you received, and really, insubordination. Did you experience any type of sexual harassment?

CH: I did early in my career. And I did get over—I did get over that. That's stuff I try not to remember, just because it's just so negative. I think what I had to deal with in the 82nd was more sexism; just because I was female I had to be the crazy one. Or I had to think outside the box and start barking at people so they would actually think I was being serious instead of, "Oh, she's just being nice."

"No, I'm not being nice. You need to just do what I told you to do."

Or looking at me like I wasn't competent just because I was a female. But I think that was just all sexism. It wasn't—And I was an equal opportunity representative, and I did all of those things, and I did classes on making the guys aware that this really is not acceptable behavior, because you're going to go out in the real world. You'll not be in the military forever. You'll go out in this real world and you'll say something like that to a civilian person and they're going to slap you with a lawsuit. You can't be talking like that.

That, and the fact that I couldn't lift what they could lift, and I couldn't carry what they could carry, and I couldn't jump out of airplanes or anything like that. I said, "But my mind is all there, and that's why I'm here: for my mental capacity, not my physical capacity." I'm not—I can't deadlift three hundred pounds.

TS: But it didn't take that for your job.

CH: It didn't take that for my job. My job was very intellectual. And I told them. I said, "That's why I'm here. I'm here because I know what I know. You can jump out of airplanes and more power to you, but I know how to deal with that computer right there."

TS: Well, the issue of sexual assault and harassment and things like that are really in the news a lot.

CH: They are.

TS: And so, some people have talked about it as a systemic problem within the culture of the military. Did you see it at different places—not necessarily that it happened to you—but different places that you were stationed, or do you think it was better or worse in certain places than others?

CH: At the higher echelons, didn't really see it, I think because of the culture. I mean, it was 9:00 to 5:00, you didn't see any, like, people getting their butts slapped, or chubbying [chumming?] up to the new girl because she's got makeup on or whatever.

TS: Catcalling or anything like that.

CH: Yeah. There wasn't a lot of that going on. I didn't see that, I think because they expected a higher level of behavior in those locations. At the company level, at the brigade level, it was a little different. When I was at the signal company there was a little of that going on, but it wasn't—the females knew, if they didn't like it, didn't want it or whatever, they could just tell the guy off and that'd be it.

At 82nd I think the sexism was more—it wasn't the harassment or the assault or anything, although I know those things happen, I was—in Afghanistan I was on the team that assisted with the sexual assaults. And they did happen, to males, to females; it didn't matter. Red, green, blue, purple; it didn't matter who it was. But it wasn't like I was seeing an assault victim every day. I might have seen one every other month, or every three months. It wasn't huge. It wasn't out of proportion, especially when you kind of figure it as military being a subculture of a larger culture. I see more of that on the street

than I see—and I think it's because of the respect that one soldier has for another, for one. I'm not saying it doesn't happen, I'm just saying—

TS: There's bad soldiers.

CH: Yeah, yeah, there are bad apples everywhere.

TS: But there's a lot of good soldiers.

CH: There are a lot more good soldiers than bad. And I think because of the awareness factor, that the good soldiers call the bad ones out; they call them out on the carpet. Or if they do—if some bad clique gets together or whatever, I pray that they get caught quick. Luckily, I have not had to see that during my career. Like I said, I've had a couple of scenarios early in my career where I was assaulted, but you put the kibosh [stop]—then you—

TS: Did you report them?

CH: No, because back then it was just like—it wasn't like it is now. Now there's a system. You can go and you can talk. You have an informal way, you have a formal way. Back then it was kind of—you dealt with it on your own. You didn't really—I mean, if it got really bad you could go to your first sergeant, but I'm saying it wasn't—back in the early nineties it wasn't like it is now, where there was a support channel and there was—I mean, if I felt like I needed to go see a chaplain, or if I needed to go see the first sergeant, I didn't feel like I had to hide it, but I just felt like I could do it on my own and put the kibosh on it on my own.

TS: That you could deal with it yourself.

CH: That I could deal with it myself.

TS: Did it help that you knew that maybe you could go somewhere too?

CH: Of course. I mean, because being in the military you're not isolated. It's like a family in itself. Even though I was in that 9:00 to 5:00 at PERSCOM, I still knew that there were certain people I could go to. I trusted my sergeant major that he was looking out for me. I trusted the colonel was looking out for me. And then when I had other NCOs, I knew the ones I could trust to look out for me and the ones that would be like, "Yeah, whatever." I knew that. And I always knew—like you mentioned earlier, you learn from the bad ones as well as the good ones—that I was going to be a good one, and that anyone could come and talk to me about anything.

TS: So you had an open door for those kinds of things?

CH: For everything. For everyone. Even if you weren't my soldier.

TS: Well, let's see, you started in '91.

CH: Yes.

TS: And then the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was implemented, and then it was repealed during the whole time you were in, wasn't it?

["Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was the official U.S. policy on military service by gays, bisexuals, and lesbians. The policy prohibited military personnel from discriminating against or harassing closeted homosexual or bisexual service members, while barring openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual person from military service. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was repealed September 20, 2011]

CH: Right.

TS: What did you think about that whole scenario of homosexuality and homosexuals in the military?

CH: You know what? I don't care what you do. If you can hold a rifle and point it in the right direction and shoot the enemy, or do something in support of that effort, I'm all for you. You like guys, you like girls, I don't care. It doesn't bother me in the least. I know for a lot of people that I talk to, they're like, "Eh, not a big deal." Most of my friends, they were like, "Eh."

TS: It's just a non-issue for this later generation?

CH: I think, yeah, for the later generation it's more of a non-issue. I know some of the older NCOs were like, "Oh, heck no. We can't have those kind of people serving in the military. What do you think—They'll be in the showers looking at you or whatever?"

I'm like, "Okay." I'm in the shower looking at this chick over here and I'm like, "Let me hurry up and get out. I don't want her looking at me, she doesn't want me looking at her and we're just going to go." Because at basic training we had the open bay showers. You didn't have any privacy. At PLDC I had the same thing, open bay showers. Luckily, further on—ANOC, BNOC [advanced and basic noncommissioned officer course]—In Afghanistan, yeah, you had—

TS: A little privacy? A little?

CH: Well, in Afghanistan you had a little more privacy. They had dividers, but it was pretty kind of open; you could see the person across from you. But still, you were—it was—you kept to yourself in those situations.

TS: Trying to get your shower and get home.

CH: Get your shower and get out. I don't think—Even if there were people of that persuasion, in those kind of scenarios they're not looking for the hookup. They're looking for—"Let me get in the shower, get cleaned up, and go and rest or do whatever, go to work or whatever." They're doing the same thing that you're doing. I know I got a lot of, "Oh you're so lucky your spouse is here," when we were deployed together.

And I was like, "Really?" Because sometimes it's harder and sometimes it's not. I had it both ways.

TS: Right. What made it harder when you were together?

CH: Basically you're, like, 24/7 together. I mean, normally, you're here, "Okay, I'm going to Walmart," or "I'm going on my motorcycle ride," or I'm doing whatever, and you have some time apart. When you're there, that's it. There were even some of the warrant officers, they were like, 'How do you guys stand each other?' [both chuckle]

TS: Well, you made it through that.

CH: Yeah, so if we made it through Afghanistan fifteen months together, we can make it through anything, right? I'm not saying we didn't have any time where we didn't argue, because there were times when I stuck earplugs in and turned my back to him and was like, "Don't talk to me." And him too.

TS: You had to have some space.

CH: And there was none to be had over there. There was none to be had. Breakfast, lunch, dinner together. PT together. We worked right down the hall from each other. It was just—you always saw each other. It was—Sometimes it was nerve-wracking, other times it was comforting, so you just took the bad with the good, and that's how you got through it. It was almost like, "If I can get through the next day we'll be okay," and that's how we got through the whole deployment.

TS: Well, why did you decide to get out when you did?

CH: I was tired, and I was broken. I had been on permanent profile for over ten years; no running. And you get a lot of pressure in an infantry unit about not doing PT. And I wasn't able to do sit-ups anymore because of the hernia situation, and push-ups for the same reason, because that's all core; you've got to hold yourself up. And so, instead of them putting me out, better that I leave on my own terms and go out in a good way.

TS: Did you think you were ready to?

CH: I was, because my husband and I did have the discussion whether or not we'd retire. We could retire together. I came in before he did—he retires this year—and so that would have put me at twenty-four years if I retired this year. I don't know if I could have handled that. Because the last couple of years were kind of tough physically.

TS: And emotionally too.

CH: And emotionally, yeah. And I was just tired. I was drained. And I was like, "Okay, you've got twenty years. Twenty years and twenty-one days. I'm good." [both chuckle] "I'm good."

TS: Yeah. Was the transition to the civilian world difficult in any way?

CH: No. And I think it's because in my mind I knew that the military didn't define me, you know what I mean? Yes, I'm a soldier, I'll always be a soldier. Just like Marines, they're always Marines. Because at some part I was a soldier before I became a soldier, with the way I was raised, but I knew it wasn't forever. And I think it's that way for a lot of the women because—I mean, statistics show we hold more jobs than men do over the course of our lifetime. And the nature of how we live our life. We're women; we're sisters; we're mothers; we're grandmothers. We're constantly being caretakers, or providers, or whatever. Our spouse drops the ball, we're picking it up, we're rolling with it. We're always moving. We're always on the go. And we're always morphing into whatever is necessary.

So for me, it was just a morph to do something a little different, because really I do the same thing now that I did when I was wearing my green suit. I still do the same thing, only I wear a pretty dress, or a pair of socks, instead of a uniform. There wasn't a huge change for me in the fact that, okay, I'm not waking up at 4:30 to be at formation at 6:30, and I'm not rushing to get the kids together for school, and doing this and that and the other. I'm still doing some of those things, but now I can say I'm coming in at eight o'clock to work and maybe I'm leaving at three because I've got something else to do with the kids. They've got a soccer game or a basketball game or whatever, and I'm going to spend some more family time.

I know that I got to take a lot of time from my military duties to do stuff with the kids. Whenever I needed the time I could do it. And it's a little bit more challenging being a contractor, but the transition to do it was so simple for me. I just made my new boss aware of—"Hey, this is what I've got going in my life. If you can accommodate, great. We can work well together. If you can't accommodate, maybe I need to find something else." You don't have that option in the military, but I felt freed when I did that.

TS: To be able to say that. So it's like the same work, different structure?

CH: Yeah, same work, different structure. And I still get the respect of my senior leadership because they know that—

TS: You've done it and been there.

CH: —that Chris Hall will give them the straight up answer.

TS: That's right.

CH: Because I haven't changed any.

TS: You still do it.

CH: I still do the same thing.

TS: Well, this whole thing with women going into combat positions now. What do you think about that? Is there anything that they shouldn't be doing?

CH: One of my girlfriends, before she left the military, she went through the SERE [survival, evasion, resistance, and escape] training. Now, I mean, personally, I wouldn't want to do it. She wanted to do it to prove to herself she could do it. If a woman is ever in a position where she wants to do something as challenging as being in a combat career field, or in a training for SERE or SEALs [U.S. Navy's "Sea, Air, and Land" Teams] or whatever, if they feel they can do it, let them have the opportunity. Let them at least attempt to succeed in their dream. And then if they make it, great. Let them continue as far as they can go, because eventually they're going to come to a point where they're going to be like, "Okay. I'm going to take a step back." But let them have that opportunity. Because I know when my girlfriend said she finished SERE training, she was like, "That was the best diet ever."

TS: [chuckles]

CH: And I was like, "Really?"

TS: I can think of a few other ways.

CH: Yeah, I can think of a few other ways to do that. But she did—She came out with the self-satisfaction that she accomplished something that few women accomplished. And while I commend her, and I really am really, really proud of her, I would never want that for me. So there are plenty of women out there, just like there are plenty of men out there—there are plenty of men out there who don't want to go through SERE training, or Special Forces training or whatever else. They don't want to do it. It's not in their interests. But for those that are interested in that, I think they should have the opportunity. So I think those women, if they think they can handle that, they know their constitution.

I mean, just like I knew my constitution when the recruiter came in and said, "Hey, if I came in here with a gun—"

I'm like, "Yeah, you're toast [slang for "doomed"] man."

We all know our limits, and sometimes we want those limits stretched so we can see how far we can accomplish—how far we can go. And if there are women who want to do that—because there are women in combat situations now. They might be in noncombat MOSs, but they're right there on the front lines. I mean, look at the supply people. Who do you think supplies those infantry guys when it's time for them to get their stuff?

TS: They've got to get there.

CH: They've got to get there. These truck drivers and these logistics people, I mean, they're there already. So what difference does it make whether or not they're eleven bang bang [military slang for 11B, an infantryman] or whether they're eighty-eight mikes [military slang for 88M, a motor transport operator]. It doesn't matter. We're all in that situation. I was in a combat zone. I was carrying a weapon, loaded, ready to rock. Was I prepared to shoot somebody? Hell, yeah. If they were coming at me shooting, they were going down. Did I want to be in that position to have to shoot somebody? No. Because I like sitting behind my keyboard and working my magic behind the keyboard. But I know that there are people out there who love to shoot. I could see women being snipers. Heck, we have better hand to eye coordination than guys do. So why can't they do it? I think they can. I think guys want to be protective, so they want to keep their moms and sisters and daughters at home.

TS: They want to be protective of their buddies too.

CH: Sure. Sure. I think it's a—maybe it's a little piece of that sexism going on. But I think women should be able to be afforded the opportunity. If they want to do it, let them do it. You'll find that most of them won't want to do it. And the few that do, they'll excel.

TS: Now, you said two of your daughters went into the army?

CH: Yes. Yes.

TS: Are they still in?

CH: No, they're both out.

TS: Okay. What jobs did they do?

CH: One was in communications like me, and then the other went into admin [administration]. Actually she's out, going to college now, getting her degree in human resources. So what she did in the army, she's now getting her degree for.

TS: Did you encourage them, or did you counsel them on going or not going?

CH: Well, I think I kind of pushed my second oldest in there. She was kind of being lazy and I was like, "Look. You can't stay home forever. You've got to do something. Make a choice." And she chose to go in the military.

The oldest one, she said, "I want to go in. Can you help me go in?"

And I said, "Sure. Sure. It's not for everybody. And if you find it's not for you, then it's not for you."

And she didn't stay in very long. She stayed in just at a year, I think, then she got out. She said, "I can't hack it.'"

TS: It wasn't for her?

CH: It wasn't for her. And then my second oldest, she stayed in four and a half years. She was deployed to Iraq and she came back. She was injured over there, so she came back. She got a medical discharge. But she liked it. She would have stayed in if they could have kept her. But she said, "I did my time and I'm ready to move on."

My son, he's like, "Yeah, I don't want to go in." [both chuckle]

I'm like, "Okay. That's fine"

TS: It's a female tradition now. But your husband, too.

CH: Yeah, my husband too. But it's—it is—like I said, it's not for everybody. If you—I think it helps to mature you. If everybody could do a couple of years like they do in Korea that would probably be a pretty good thing. I mean, I think the maturity level with some of these young people would jump. Yes.

TS: Now, have you used the Veterans Administration for anything?

CH: Yeah. I've used my VA certificate to purchase a house. I used my GI Bill while I was still on active duty, but I still have some left and I still plan to go back to school.

TS: How about the VA for hospital or anything like that?

CH: I finally—Well, it's kind of a weird situation because my husband is active duty still so I get to get seen as a dependent, and that's really faster than being seen as a veteran.

TS: Is it?

CH: It is. It's a lot faster to be seen as a dependent than to go to the VA to be seen. But I did go through the process and now I am registered at the VA and I've seen my primary care manager. But it took me a long time. It took me three months to get an appointment. It's a struggle, but luckily for right now I still have—

TS: For the dependent a few more years?

CH: No.

TS: One more year?

CH: I have one more month.

TS: Oh, one month. Oh, he's getting out this year?

CH: He's getting out in June. The end of June.

TS: So that's why you had to set everything up as a veteran, and retired.

CH: Right. Yes. While I'm established, and he will be established after he retires. And since he's medically retiring, he'll be established right away. It took me a while.

TS: Did you have any medical retirement from the injuries that you suffered?

CH: I have disability.

TS: Disability.

CH: I do have disability but I didn't get medically retired.

TS: Okay. So you have some?

CH: Yes, I have compensation, but I didn't get medically retired.

TS: This is a pretty broad question, but how do you think your life has been different because of choosing to go in the army back in 1991? When you were twelve, really.

CH: Yeah, really. So when I was twelve I don't think I could have ever, ever imagined being where I am today. I really don't believe that even when I joined the military at nineteen that I really imagined what I would be like today. If you sat Christine Filler right next to me at nineteen years old—right next to me at forty-three—oh, the things I would tell her [both chuckle]

TS: What would you tell her?

CH: I would tell her persevere. It will all come out in the end. And to—Some of the same things I tell my daughters now—even my son now—have a plan, work your plan. Your plan's going to change.

TS: I was going to say, revise your plan.

CH: Yeah. Your plan is going to change as you move through life, but always have a goal in mind. I remember one of the first things that they tell you when you start counseling your soldiers: where do you want to be in five years? Where do you want to be in ten years? That's a good rule of thumb to even just ask yourself every year—like on your birthday—ask yourself: Where do I want to be in five years? What do I want to be doing? How do I want to be financially? How do I want to be spiritually? How do I want to change my way in a positive manner? And then move that a little bit further. In ten years where do I want to be?

And I think if—if my kids decide that they're going to do it—because I didn't start out that way. When I was nineteen I wasn't thinking what I was going to be in five years. I was stressing over six years in the military. I wasn't thinking about where I was going to be in five years. I wasn't even thinking where I was going to be in two years. I had such a short, short view of everything. I was just—it was like, "Okay. What's next month going to be?" I had no goals, aspirations, or anything for the next five years. I was just trying to

struggle to stay within my means for the month. But everything came to an awareness for me when I started doing that; "Okay, in five years, ten years, this is what I want."

TS: When do you think you woke up to that? When did it snap on and you said, "Oh. I can actually have these plans and goals" and things like that?

CH: I think it was when I finally decided that I was going to be an NCO. When I finally said, "Okay. I can be responsible for somebody else. I can be—" because in my mind I'm thinking, "A sergeant? Oh my gosh, that's—that soldier—that other soldier's life is in my hands. I'm responsible for him, to make sure he gets to PT on time, that his barracks room is squared away. He's going to chow. He's like another kid." But when I put my mind to that and I said, "Okay, I'm going to be a sergeant. What have I got to do? I've got to do this and that and the other, and okay, from that point on now I'm responsible for a whole slew of things that—when I was a specialist I was only responsible for me."

And you would think—I was such an early mom that my mind, I wasn't thinking that way about my own kids, even though that's what I was doing. But even now with my job, my kids are a little bit older—my youngest is eleven—so I'm like, "She can do that. She's old enough to handle that." The other one is fourteen. She left this morning—at five o'clock this morning to go on a D.C. trip with her class, and I'm like, "You can do this. You can do this. Remember, you're representing the Hall house, so be on your best behavior please."

And she's like, "I'm going to miss you, Mom." I got more hugs this morning than I had in a week, but I know that I prepared her, because when I was in eighth grade I had to learn how to wash my hair. This girl, she's got her debit card, and cash, a cell phone. She's got her goody bag all packed in her bag. She's got water and tea and everything else. She's squared away. She's ready to go.

I'm like, "I wasn't like that at fourteen. Gosh. I must be doing okay then."

So every once in a while you've got to pat yourself on the back, but you've always got to look ahead. You've got to look ahead and prepare. And I think when I—I think it was '97, '98 when I had made that decision. God, I had been in the army for six years. I was like, "Okay. I'm a grown-up now." [chuckles] "I'm a grown-up. It was really scary getting here, but now I'm a grown-up. Now I have to do grown-up stuff."

And my eleven year old, she's like, "I don't want to grow up."

I'm like, "But you're going to. You're going to. You're going to be okay."

TS: Yeah?

CH: Yeah. But it just—Yeah, when you plan, and you work your plan, and you revise your plan. And you keep going, and you keep going. Every year, just take a look. Am I on track?

TS: Persevere.

CH: Yeah. Am I on track? Am I doing well? Alright. I'm not on track. Let's move. Let's divert. Let's get back on the right track. And if every year you do that, by the time you get

halfway through your life, you look back and you're like, "Wow. I did that." Because honestly, I look back and I'm like, "Wow. I did that."

TS: Yeah. And you did. It's like when you were looking at the tower, right?

CH: Right. Exactly. It's like, "Yeah. I did that."

TS: So you had lots of those moments along the way.

CH: I did. I did. I did.

TS: Well, do you think there's anything that you would like to say to a civilian who may not know or understand about what it's like to serve in the military or appreciate about it?

CH: Like I mentioned, the military is a subculture within the wider culture. We have our own lingo, and even when you're retired, or even if you didn't retire, you just was in for a short time, you have that lingo, and you meet other veterans out there. Every veteran I've ever met, whether it's my daughters or other people that I know, they always look back on their military career as a point of pride; that they accomplished something. It might have been a small, insignificant thing, but they're really proud of the service that they provided. And they did it for you. They did it because they love our country. Yes, I came in the military because I needed to provide for my family, but when I was twelve I had that patriotism that hasn't been diminished since.

TS: What does patriotism mean to you?

CH: It means that—When you can walk the streets and not have to worry about a bomb going off. Or you can walk down the street and see a multitude of different cultures come together for a common purpose. When I came back from Afghanistan, God, I just wanted to kiss the ground. It was just—I was so happy to be home. Even when I came back from Korea. I mean, Korea, it wasn't a war zone. It was just a tour of duty. But when I came back to the States I was like, "I know all of this. This is comfort. This is home." That's how I feel. I feel like this is where I belong. This is exactly where I need to be. And I would do anything to make sure that everyone is safe here, whether they live on the wrong side of the tracks, on the right side of the tracks, in a mansion, in the mountains, or down on the river in a shack; it doesn't matter. They have the freedom to come and go; believe what they want to believe; work how they want to work; and be safe when they do it. That's what it means to me. It means home. Patriotism means home.

TS: Well, unless you have anything else you want to add, I think that's a good spot to end on.

CH: Well, thank you. I appreciate that.

TS: Do you have anything else that we haven't talked about that you want to mention?

CH: No, I don't think so.

TS: Are you sure?

CH: I think I'm sure. [both chuckle]

TS: Okay. Alright. Well, I'll go ahead and shut it off, then. Thank you so much. This has been great, Chris.

CH: It was great.

[End of Interview]