WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Megan Leighann Mead

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

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[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is June 21, 2016. My name is Therese Strohmer. We are at Jackson Library in Greensboro [North Carolina] to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I'm here with Megan Mead. Megan, how would you like to have your name on a collection?

MM: Megan Leighann Mead.

TS: Okay. Why don't we start out, Megan, by having you tell me a little bit about where you are from, when you were born?

MM: Okay. Well, I was born on the sixth of October 1989. I was born in Phoenix, Arizona, to a single mother, which probably colored my goals, considerably. So we actually moved from Arizona to Henderson, Nevada, when I was about ten or eleven, I believe it was. So I went there for middle school and high school. Which it was a little bit difficult to move and to try to readjust. Although it doesn't seem to be a difficult age for it, I found it to be a little bit difficult.

TS: Did you have any siblings?

MM: I—I did not. I know I did—I technically had one sibling that, unfortunately, I was not able to meet. He was mentally handicapped. And so, unfortunately, my mother being a single parent, wasn't able to support him in the way that he deserved. So she put him up for adoption when he was very young. And I learned that he passed away when he was eighteen, so unfortunately, I wasn't able to meet him. Of course, considering the subject matter, my mom didn't speak about it very much. I'm sure it was a very painful, sensitive subject for her.

TS: I'm sure, I'm sure. Now, what did she do for a living?

MM: My mother was a federal agent. She worked for the—and I'm going to try to get this right—the SSAOIG—which I believe stands for Social Security Administration of the

Inspector General. And I think she generally worked with people who were committing Social Security fraud.

TS: Right, investigating fraud and things like that?

MM: Yes.

TS: Interesting, okay.

MM: Of course, at that time, I was younger, so there could very well be details that she didn't want to share with her young daughter. But that's what I was told. [chuckles]

TS: Okay, so your formative years, maybe some of the bigger memories are from Hendersonville?

MM: Henderson, yes.

TS: Henderson.

MM: I would say absolutely. As far as school, I was a little bit more troubled, I guess, I would say, in my later teen years. Nothing that I guess most people would consider very troubled; no run-ins with the law or anything like that. But I guess just a little bit aimless. It is hard. My mother was very ambitious. And I don't mean that in a bad way. She did very well for herself and for me, considering that it was just her. But in that same sense, she was a little bit absent. And so, I was a little bit troubled in the later years.

TS: What's trouble to you?

MM: Well, I had some troubles in school. Just a little bit—I would say—listlessness.

TS: Not interested in class.

MM: No. And it's unfortunate, because I did—as a freshman in high school I took interest in a program at a local community college that was a community college, high school program. And obviously, that's a wonderful opportunity. And they required you write a paper for admittance, which I did, and was accepted. And I was over the moon [idiom for "very pleased"]. But I then got in over my head in college level courses that I wasn't ready for. And so, rather than seeking help, I kind of just allowed it all to fall. And so, because of my poor performance in the program, they said, "I'm sorry, we don't think it's a good idea for you to return next year." And at that time, I just kind of decided to enter the workforce instead of finish school, which probably wasn't the best decision.

TS: How old were you then?

MM: I was sixteen.

TS: Okay.

MM: Yes, at that time.

TS: What kind of things were you doing for fun as a young girl?

MM: As a young girl, I was very introverted. I read a lot of books. I spent a lot of time just by myself. I grew up with a—my mom—we had a lot of dogs, cats, so I really love spending time with animals, or just spending time with friends. But I was always very shy. And that changed a lot after I joined the military because they don't really have any patience for shyness; they really need you to speak up. So—But in high school, definitely, I was very reserved.

TS: Yeah?

MM: Yeah, very much.

TS: You're not one eagerly raising your hand to—

MM: No, I was the kind of person who would be mortified if I were called on to answer a question in class.

TS: Oh, right. Well, was there any subject that you actually liked in school, even if you didn't do as well as you hoped to in it?

MM: I want to say I was always really drawn to, I guess, classes of logic, like math and science classes. Looking back now, I probably couldn't tell you how well I performed in those classes, off the top of my head, but it's always made more sense to me; the things that have definitive answers.

TS: Well, did you participate in any kind of extracurricular activities? Either inside or outside of school.

MM: When I was in middle school I was in the orchestra. I played the—

TS: What did you play?

MM: Violin. I enjoyed that a lot. I actually don't know why I stopped doing that, because I know I didn't continue with that in high school.

TS: Yeah, we all drift away from those kinds of things sometimes.

MM: I guess at the time it doesn't seem very important, but looking back you wish you would have taken those chances.

TS: When you were sixteen, what grade would you have been in? Sophomore?

MM: Yes, it was my sophomore year—was it?

TS: Sophomore or junior.

MM: My junior year was—my junior year was the one I spent in the community college high school program. I did—I completed two years at my regular high school before going there.

TS: Okay. But after that, then you didn't want to go back to high school?

MM: I think I was a little bit embarrassed.

TS: Sure.

MM: Because at that time I would've had to go back to my regular high school—

TS: And you hadn't been going there.

MM: Well, no, and just to have to go back because you failed at something, I guess, is kind of embarrassing. I think that's probably a large reason why I didn't.

TS: What did you end up doing?

MM: Well honestly, I just got a job at a local restaurant. I think it was actually a Panera Bread [Company; American chain of bakery-café fast casual restaurant]. [chuckles] The humble places we all come from. And I just worked and I spent time alone and—I think it was actually a harder time for me in life just because not going to the school that a large part of my high school class was in. I had really—distance had grown between me and friends, and then I didn't really make very many friends in the community college program because I wasn't doing very well. And so, it was a little bit lonely at the time for me.

TS: And you said your mom was gone a lot too?

MM: Right, yeah. She worked fulltime, so she would be gone all day. She would get home pretty late, maybe around 6:00 [p.m.].

TS: What did she think about you dropping out of high school?

MM: I can't imagine she was very happy about it. And the odd thing is, looking back I don't remember anything that she did, really, about it. I'm sure that she said something to me about it, but she didn't really do much about it.

TS: Try to change it to make you go back in or anything like that?

MM: No.

TS: You're working at Panera Bread. You're kind of isolated, a little bit, in your life?

MM: Yes.

TS: Is there anything that you're doing to keep yourself positive?

MM: No, no, unfortunately not. I think it's a large reason why I did end up joining the army, was I was a little bit aimless. And the army provided this potential goal for me and it was something that I could be really proud of. And they were going to provide me with training in a specific field. And at the time, I didn't know it, but they were going to instill a lot of really great things in me. So at the time, I think I was just more interested in the fact that, "Here is a direction that I can take my life and be proud of it. Whereas, right now, what am I doing?"

TS: How did you end up getting into the army?

MM: It was actually completely by chance; the recruiter just called my home one day.

TS: Really?

MM: And I think my mother got the message, and I am sure she was very eager; at this point she was probably concerned about her daughter. [chuckles] But she was probably very eager for me to speak with him. So I just went in and sat down and it all went very smoothly. Of course, at this time, in 2007, we were at war, so I'm sure they were eager for anybody that didn't mind that fact to come in and talk to them.

TS: Did you think about that at all?

MM: I did. And I've always really been very appreciative of my experience with my recruiter, because a lot of people have little quirky funny stories about how they entered the military. But I asked him out right, "Does this mean that I'm going to end up in a combat zone?"

He said, "There's always a chance that—not, but I'm going to say it's very likely that you will and you should expect that, because I wouldn't want you to enter thinking that you're not."

TS: That was good. Did you ever consider any of the other services, then?

MM: I did. I did. Actually, my goal or my—something that I had really wanted—like a dream, if you will—was to be a pilot. And so, I spoke with the army recruiter. And at the time, I thought, "They're all one big happy family. I am sure they all work together really nicely." And so, I said to him, "Maybe I should go talk to the air force because it seems like it would make more sense. I want to be a pilot."

He said, "No, no, come here. We have an aviation branch as well." [chuckles] And, I mean, looking back, I don't really regret my decision, but I do think it is a little bit funny. I never did end up becoming a pilot.

TS: Did you ever talk to an air force recruiter?

MM: I didn't. No, I did not. So I don't know what would have come of that if I had.

TS: Well, the choice you made was your own.

MM: Yeah, I think was born a little bit of—I think the word is naiveté; a little bit. But I think everything worked out really well for me so I don't regret it.

TS: So you are in with the recruiter, how old are you?

MM: At the time I was speaking with him I was seventeen.

TS: Seventeen. So you had to get your mom to sign for you?

MM: Yes. And she never hesitated. She was very supportive of the decision. But then her father, my grandfather, had also served, so it was a little bit in the family.

TS: Had you ever really talked to anybody that had been in the service before?

MM: No. I mean, my grandfather, he was there through a lot of conflicts. He was a retired lieutenant colonel, and he had served a considerable amount of time, so he—

TS: Was he in the army?

MM: Yes. Yeah, he was a pilot. And so, although he did serve, it was just one of those details that a young girl never really pays attention to. Because—I am sure he had his reasons. He never really talked about it. He is actually deceased now, but up until his passing he never really did talk about it.

TS: No?

MM: So I am glad that I made the decision, because I feel like it did make him proud, but it's hard to really know how he felt about it because he never really wanted to share his experience.

TS: He wasn't emotional about it at all?

MM: I'm sure he was. He had very severe hearing loss from his time in. But I think that he came from that generation where, one, they probably saw a lot of things that were not making for great dinner conversation, and also, that generation of men, where the idea of masculinity is that you just handle it; you don't talk about it.

TS: With your recruiter, then, did you decide at that time what job you wanted? Or how did you end up with the job you got?

MM: Well, I was very interested in the aviation field. I wasn't really sure quite how it works. I had done a little bit of research and I knew they had mechanic jobs, and that really appealed to me because I had been told I am a little bit of a universal learner. I only recently learned what that means. But I really wanted to have an understanding of what I could potentially be flying before I became a pilot.

TS: Okay. That makes sense.

MM: So I essentially went to the recruiting station with a list, and I said "Hey, I've recorded all of these. They are aircraft mechanic jobs. Whatever you have available, that's what I'll take." And so, that's what I did.

TS: Okay. Well, tell me about basic training, then.

MM: Oh, basic training. Well, basic training for me was very difficult. I think a lot of the drill sergeants found me very amusing. Because I'm five [feet] three [inches tall]. At the time I was barely there—I think the term is—slip of a girl [small, thin young person]. I weighed a hundred pounds. It was just—

TS: Soaking wet, as they say, right?

MM: Yes. Yeah, I was just tiny. At the time, I had no real perception of how small I was, but I think if I could see myself then as I am now, I would understand why they found me so amusing. But it was hard. I think a lot of other—For a lot of other people I don't think it might have been quite as a challenge, but.

TS: What parts of it were hard? Was it the emotional part, like being singled out?

MM: Well, no, I would say they—although, they were very hard on you. They were hard on all of us, but there was always this sense of you were part of something. You never felt like they were singling you out as something outside of the pack. You were always a part of the pack, even when you messed up. And when they came down on you, there was this sense of, they were not going to let it break you, while it was very hard. Which sounds really strange. It was an incredibly supportive environment, as strange as that sounds. But for me, I want to say the hardest part, honestly, was the marches. Just because of the amount of weight they wanted me to carry, at the time, was darn near 50% of my body mass, and then to keep up with other people who were much taller than me, it was very difficult.

TS: Was this gender integrated at the time in your basic?

MM: It was.

TS: Okay. So you have the guys who could have long steps—

MM: Oh, yes.

TS: —and then your stride is much smaller. That was tough, I'm sure.

MM: It was. There was one other female who was as small as I was, and so we kind of banded together in those situations. And while it was a march, we usually ended up running them. But we always stuck together through those; we would make sure the other would make it. I guess, as they say, you never leave somebody behind.

TS: You kept motivating each other to keep going.

MM: Yes.

TS: Was there anything emotionally difficult about being away from home, or anything like that?

MM: I was kind of homesick, but I was just—also, it was exciting. It was a lot of—They were pushing you to do things that you never imagined that you could do.

TS: Had you ever fired a weapon before?

MM: No, I hadn't.

TS: How was that?

MM: It was difficult. It was difficult, just considering the weapon they wanted me to fire was almost as long as I was tall. It took me a while to master that skill, I won't lie, but once you get it, then it's kind of like riding a bicycle.

TS: Because you have to hit the target a certain amount of times, right, to qualify?

MM: Yes, and at the time they were using an automated pop-up system. So rather than—Every time since then I have fired at paper targets, but that first time, it was these automated pop-ups, and if you didn't hit them, then they didn't go down.

TS: I haven't even seen that. That's interesting they did that.

MM: It was very reactive. Whereas with the paper target system, you have the time to focus, control your breathing, and then aim. With the pop-ups, not so much. You get a matter of seconds and then the thing's gone.

TS: Oh, okay. So you have to shoot at it quickly.

MM: Yes.

TS: Okay, gotcha. Is there anything else you want to say about basic training?

MM: No. I mean, at the time it felt like the hardest thing I was ever going to do in my life, but, I mean, then you go on to the regular army and it only gets more difficult. But it's challenges in a different way. Whereas basic only—it does have a mental element to it, but basic really challenges the physical; really the body.

TS: Were you regretting it at all or having second thoughts?

MM: The funniest thing for me was the very first day, because they take you as a civilian and they put you in a barracks room before you ever go to basic and they issue you your gear, or your equipment, and they give you a duffle bag and they say, "Stuff it all in there. Put on this uniform." And you have no idea how to wear it, because they don't really take time to teach you that till you get to basic. And then they bus you over to basic. And I am sure that they thought this was the funniest thing in the world because looking—if I could see it now, I would.

But you basically had these civilians getting off a bus in uniform with this huge duffel bag of stuff that's incredibly heavy, and the first thing they did was they immediately started screaming at us. And they wanted us to hold our duffel bags over our heads, and I was just in shock. I was just thinking, "There is no way I could ever do that. I couldn't lift this duffel bag over my head." It was mayhem. It was complete and utter chaos. And at that time, that one brief moment, I thought to myself, "What have I done?" [chuckles] But after that—It might have been the shock that I rode through a little bit, but after that I was okay.

TS: Well, then, how was your training for your mechanics for the aviation?

MM: That was fun.

TS: Yeah?

MM: Yeah.

TS: You went to Fort Rucker, Alabama? Okay.

MM: Yes. The humidity was terrible.

TS: Oh, I bet.

MM: Being a southwestern girl was absolutely awful.

TS: Yeah, because you get the dry heat and then the wet heat, right?

MM: Yes. It was the first time in my life ever experiencing something like that. But it was just fun because now you knew what you were doing. So there wasn't really that constant threat of getting in trouble because you are going to mess something up. And now you are learning a skill, and for me it was learning about aircraft mechanics, which I find to be incredibly interesting. There was a little bit less—you had a little bit more leeway with your day. You didn't have to be escorted to meals; you could go to them on your own.

TS: [chuckles] Right.

MM: I just—I enjoyed it. I think what I enjoyed the most was that they allowed us to wear civilian clothes one day a week on the weekends, and I really enjoyed that day because during the week we're a single unit. It didn't matter who you were, we all had something in common. We were all there for each other all the time; very supportive, motivated group. And then on that one day you can just really see where everybody came from, and it's just kind of amazing to see how all of those people come together. I always really enjoyed that, and just appreciated how these people that, before I joined the military, I would probably never think to speak to because they didn't look like we would have a single thing in common. And now here we are, all doing this thing together, and I really liked that.

TS: That's pretty neat. What kind of ratio of men to women were there in the training that you were doing?

MM: Oh goodness. Well, I was in school with air traffic controllers, and there was another job title that was training there as well. I can't remember what it was. I know it was aviation related. I believe they handled flight records. But mine was the only mechanic job there. And in my class, honestly, there were only two women there to learn that job, and it was me and my roommate. And that was including the class ahead of us and the one behind us. She just—We just happened to land two women in the same class, and we were the only ones.

TS: Did that make a difference at all? Do you think?

MM: I think so. At the time, I think just the way that I was raised, very much so, considering my mom's job. Sexism was not a thing to me. I just—It was something I was completely blind to. I was just like, "What do you mean somebody thinks women can't do this? I mean, my mom did this." I began to see it more, a little bit. Not that it was overwhelming, but I learned to recognize it.

TS: Like in subtle ways?

MM: Yes, but at that age I didn't really—in fact, I felt like people were very supportive, considering my small stature, and they always told me, "Be very careful, because there will be men who will try to do your job for you and you can't let them. Because, one, of course, that means they don't respect you and they won't respect you, and, two, if you allow them to do your job for you, how will you ever learn to do your job?"

TS: You had some mentors kind of telling you that?

MM: Yes.

TS: Were these males at the time?

MM: Yes.

TS: Did you have that happen? Did you have guys that were trying to help you?

MM: Oh, absolutely.

TS: How would you handle that, personally? What was your interaction like with them?

MM: It was a learning experience, I'll say that.

TS: You're barely eighteen, now, right?

MM: Yes. And it was a bright new world. I get to my first unit and I'm meeting all these new people. Everybody is very friendly, very welcoming. And so, at my very first unit—my first out of the three that I served at—I was a very friendly person, I was very outgoing, and I don't mean that to sound like a bad thing, but it is not a trend that I continued. Because—

TS: Does this mean when you were at Fort Hood [Texas]?

MM: Yes, when I was at Fort Hood I was very friendly with everybody, and when I left there I decided to change that. It's just—It is odd. It's like men, for some reason they just feel like maybe you need their help or something, I don't know. And I don't mean that to sound like an unkind thing to say towards them, but I do think it's something that they could maybe be a little bit more conscious of.

TS: How did your friendliness relate to that, do you think?

MM: Well, I think it's just a perception of the soldiers' personality, in this case mine. Just being, I guess, outgoing, maybe perceived as bubbly, not what you would think of a mechanic, really, and just not the general personality that I met in the field over my years working in the field was not generally—

TS: Did you feel like you had to have a more serious demeanor?

MM: Absolutely.

TS: Is that serious or is it a more professional relationship within that unit with people? How would you describe it? I'm just using words, but I am not sure what you're trying to project differently.

MM: Definitely serious. I feel like it wasn't necessarily a question of professionalism at my first unit, as much as just people can at times—because the military is a way of life. It's not just a 9:00 [a.m.] to 5:00 [p.m.] job. And so, your co-workers are your friends and they're also your family, and it's such a strange dynamic because they expect you to draw professional lines in your friends and your family. Which I learned how to do and everybody else had to learn how to do. But I feel that maybe it was that, specifically, that was not mixing well with the very friendly and outgoing demeanor. It was very hard for people to maybe—in the way that you don't necessarily take your best friend seriously, sometimes in a professional setting. If you're too friendly, in a professional setting they have a hard time remembering that right now you're not their friend. You're an equal, you're a co-worker, you're also a mechanic.

TS: I see. Okay. That's an interesting way to put it. When you were at Fort Hood, how was your initial experience? You lived in the barracks?

MM: I did.

TS: Okay. Like, was it a co-ed barrack, like with your unit?

MM: Right, it was. Yes, it was my unit all in one area. They kept, of course, female soldiers with other female soldiers, and then the males with males, but the rooms were not necessarily separated. They did keep all of the female soldiers on the first floor; I guess as just a way of keeping them together. That was, of course, my first experience with living long-term with somebody that I didn't necessarily know or choose to be my roommate, and so that was interesting. She was not in—We were in the same battalion, but not in the same unit, necessarily. She had a very different job, a very different work dynamic, than I did. And so, in that regard she was able to have a very different personality in the military. And I'm not—I don't honestly know why that is, but she was—I want to say she was commo; I believe she was communications.

TS: Well, you've got to be bubbly in communications, don't you? [chuckles]

MM: I guess so. I guess maybe they just had a little more of a—leeway, I think, in being able to be themself at work, because they worked very closely with the command team. And so, they were able to share that with the command team, whereas the rest of us—I call us grunts. We're the mechanics; we're the ones that get dirty. And then the crews that actually fly the aircrafts and their pilots were always the golden boys or the flyboys. They definitely got, I would say, preferential treatment, but I don't feel like that's really accurate because they definitely worked very hard. It's not like they were coddled in any way. But because they were the ones conducting the missions and actually, I guess, out there doing the groundwork they were—we called them the flyboys. And it was always kind of in a little bit of a joking manner, that we would say that.

TS: Were they all men?

MM: For the most part. Yeah, it's always been a male dominated force. I will say I have met women who were crew chiefs on those aircrafts, and they always seemed very professional. They never seemed to—I'm sure they did. It was kind of an unspoken thing that I think women in the military always understood about each other. But of course, we all had our ways of being recognized as equals; what we had to do to be recognized equals. But they were all highly professional women and they were very knowledgeable in their airframes and it was actually impressive; it was very impressive.

TS: Was it helicopters you worked on?

MM: Helicopters, yes.

TS: What helicopters did you work on?

MM: My job didn't require me to be specific to an aircraft, so I was just—I would work on the hydraulics systems of any of the aircraft, really. The job title is pneudraulics; it's considered to be a pneumatics hydraulics job and we always found that kind of funny. If you ever ask for a pneudraulics mechanic, nobody would know what you were talking about because we were just hydraulics mechanics. We never worked on any of the pneumatic systems, and we weren't even trained on it, honestly, so it's kind of amusing.

TS: Well, you hear stories about—from back in the seventies—where the complaints were that women were not strong enough to even to lift the—what do you call it?—the box—

MM: Oh, the tool box.

TS: The tool box. And so, as a mechanic, how would you respond to them?

MM: I would respond to them that that thing was incredibly heavy, and a majority of men could not lift it either unless they wanted a back injury, which is why they began issuing them with wheels. [both chuckle]

TS: There you go.

MM: Yeah, back injuries coming out of the military are incredibly high, and that is because people are not lifting smart. And that doesn't have—not a lick—of anything to do with whether you are a man or woman [chuckles]. Those things are very, very heavy.

TS: Yeah.

MM: Yeah.

TS: So they put them on wheels?

MM: They did, yeah.

TS: That's cool. Did you ever find that there was anything physically that was difficult for you to do for your job?

MM: There were jobs—There were other mechanic jobs that required a lot of strength. Specifically, the power train guys who had to work on aircraft transmissions. They worked with bolts that had to be twerked to a very high level, and there were times that those would take more than one person to twerk that. So in that situation, yeah, absolutely. But honestly, my size seemed to be beneficial to me. I have very slender arms and small hands, and the aircraft was not always accommodating in where it decided to break, and they can't just peel the whole thing apart to get to what is broken. And so, being small actually is incredibly helpful. And there were times that people would come to me and ask me to do things for them because I had small hands and I could access those places that other people could not. I feel like it's—it's really about the fact—we all have strengths, weaknesses, it's just about how you bring those strengths and weaknesses together to get it done.

TS: So you're working as a team and whatever skill that person has to help you accomplish it; one person might not be able to, but this other person can. It doesn't really matter on gender, it matters on what the skill is. Is that what you're saying?

MM: Absolutely, yes.

TS: That's interesting.

MM: Just the way that they split the aviation units is—I always found it a little bit odd. They have different levels of maintenance. Which is to say that some units are allowed to do a higher level than others, even though we all get the same training. So somebody that I went to school with could then go to one of these units that's considered to be a higher level than the one that I went to, and then they would be allowed to do more than I, coming from the same training. I always thought that was really interesting. And so, we obviously—we PCS [permanent change of station–the official relocation of an active duty military service member to a different duty location], we move around, and so somebody coming from one of those higher levels could then meet you later at a lower level, and you just really have to play to the knowledge and the experience, because it's really not the same for everybody. We all walk a different path, we all have different specialties. Maybe this guy has worked really well with the Apache Helicopter, and so we're going to lean on him heavily if we have questions about that, and so on and so forth.

TS: Was that one of the interesting things that you found about the being in the army; because people are coming and going all the time that you gain knowledge in different ways?

MM: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. And I think something that I really appreciated, too, was that, yes, there is a system in the military, but when it comes to on the hangar floor, as it were, working on the helicopters, you very much so recognize the experience level of who you're working with.

TS: Regardless of rank.

MM: Regardless of rank. It's an unfortunate truth that when you become, I guess, a managerial level, if you will, or an NCO [non-commissioned officer]—in my case, sergeant—you don't get to work out on the floor quite as much; you have to handle a lot more paperwork. And in those situations, my specialists were on those helicopters more than I. And so, you really have to—you have to know how to manage your people. You have to recognize when this question is being put to you as the leadership, and say, "I am going to refer my specialists on this one. He's been working on this helicopter. He knows it better in this situation." It's a team sport.

TS: That's a really interesting way that you're describing it, too, because even as a manager or a supervisor, you're not like—you would think in the army it's so hierarchical—authoritarian—"You do this, you do that"—but you're describing it as more of a team kind of effort to finish whatever mission needs to get accomplished.

MM: I saw both. I did see some shops that were run very much so that way and I always felt like it was not the best way to do it. I am not going to say that necessarily that way of running things didn't have, I'm sure, its own pros, if you will. But I've always felt like—And just especially, I know when we are deployed the ground pounders—the infantry—you know they're out there every day, and you know they're getting shot at, and they are in the direct line of danger, and they have days that don't necessarily end. What is a work day when you're deployed? There's no such thing.

TS: Right.

MM: And so, for them, however, when they are in the United States, they don't necessarily have a job; they train, they stay sharp, and they stay ready. But for us, we did, and those work days were very, very long. We would have people sometimes at the hangar as late as eight, nine o'clock at night. Because the point is to make mission happen, and if the helicopter is not fixed yet, it doesn't matter if it's five o'clock. And so, I always felt like you got more out of the soldiers if you recognized them as part of the team, instead of just saying, "I'm in charge here, therefore this."

TS: Is that something that you learned along the way?

MM: I would say yes. Yes. And it might be my job as well. Just the hydraulics mechanics job was always very much—and all of them, honestly—we worked together on the aircrafts. Your shop was very much your team or your family. I mean—

TS: You had to get it right, too.

MM: Yeah, absolutely. You have to be able to work hand in hand. And that's how you see that special bond that people develop when they deploy together, is you have to be able to work seamlessly together to make things happen. Failure is not an option. It really isn't. I mean, what are you going to say? "I'm sorry guys, we couldn't show up to work today"?

So you're running twenty-four hour operations, one person is there during the night. You need to trust that they're going to do the right thing and to tell you everything you need to know, and you need to speak each other's language. And so, you get really intimate in that way. When you work side by side like that with somebody, the rank on your chest doesn't really matter as much. I mean, you're both just mechanics trying to get a job done. Working the same number of hours getting—well, maybe not necessarily the same pay, but.

TS: [chuckles] Right. Right. Well, you deployed pretty quickly, then, after you enlisted, right?

MM: Yes.

TS: Do you want to talk about that deployment, and how you prepared for it, maybe? And how you found out about it and what you thought.

MM: I—My first deployment, I have brief memories about it. I—Going over there I was not really sure how to mentally prepare for it. I think you admit to yourself that there is a level of fear. Maybe you don't admit it out loud, but you have to admit it to yourself. And just entering—entering into the country was a little—It was a little bit frightening for me.

TS: Where did you go?

MM: Oh gosh, right now—It's worth mentioning that in my very first deployment I deployed as almost the lowest of the low. I was just one step above the bottom rung on the totem pole. So nobody told me—

TS: As far as rank goes?

MM: Yes. Nobody told me a whole lot [chuckles]. It was just kind of, "Hey private, we need you to be quiet and be where you need to be right now because there's more important things to do than answer all of your questions." Which is understandable. I'm not—

TS: So you had a lot of questions, but they weren't necessarily being addressed?

MM: Right. I'm not sure where exactly we flew into before we were then flown to our final destination at Camp Taji, Iraq [also known as Camp Cooke]. But I do remember the flight on the [Boeing CH-47] Chinook [helicopter] because the Chinooks have systems installed on them—flare systems—that are supposed to help with—when the aircraft takes fire. So they basically—they're supposed to divert heat away from the aircraft. The flare system—they're called flare buckets, I believe. The avionics mechanics would know

better because it was their bread and butter [main knowledge]. And so, we're flying in and these flare buckets are going off and all I see is red shooting off all over the place out the windows, and at this time I don't know much at all about these combat systems that are installed on the aircraft or how they work, and so I was afraid. [chuckles] But everything—we made it in safely, thankfully. And I asked one of the higher-ranking mechanics and she explained it to me. And so, I was a little bit embarrassed after that because there was no real danger to us. There's a possibility of it of course, but the danger that I perceived was not there.

TS: Right. But you didn't know what was going on.

MM: I didn't.

TS: What were your housing conditions like? And maybe, where did you go to eat? Describe the housing, and then, maybe, like a typical day. Although, I'm sure they weren't typical.

MM: Well—My first deployment, unfortunately I was—my very first unit was an air assault unit, and so it had specifically [Sikorsky UH-60] Black Hawk helicopters, which does not have an extensive hydraulics system on it. So for—the army is very much so "needs of the army". You will do what you can do for the army to best serve the army. And in this situation, they didn't have much need of a hydraulics mechanic.

TS: Did you go over with your unit?

MM: I did, but I was serving as a production control clerk, which means that I was working in the office that organized and planned the maintenance. So they were—I guess you could call them "puppet masters." And I was working that office and doing the little work that needed to be done in order to keep that machine going.

TS: Right. Since you didn't really have a job to actually work on the helicopter itself.

MM: On the helicopters, no. I would go out every now and then, and it was a little bit of a running joke, not a mean one so much as—just that they recognized that unfortunately my MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] didn't have a lot of mechanic work, hands on work, in this unit, and so every now and then I'd go out and my co-workers would let me get my hands dirty doing one of their tasks. Because I did—that's what I joined to do, and it was hard for me to go to my first unit and essentially be told, "Hey we don't really need that here, but you can do this."

TS: Was that what was happening at Fort Hood too?

MM: Yes.

TS: So you were doing the production even before you deployed?

MM: Well, before I deployed I was working for the command team of my company. So I was an orderly room clerk, and I just—I helped them manage all of the soldiers; the information on the soldiers, helped them handle the paperwork and documentation, keep the data organized that they needed in order to successfully run their company. And honestly, I was resentful of that. That's not where I wanted to be.

TS: There are some cases where women were taken out of their MOS and just put in slots like clerks and things like that because the commander didn't want women—

MM: On the floor.

TS: —on the floor. Do you think it was that, or do you think it was more just there wasn't a—but you were assigned there, so you'd think there'd be a slot ready when you got there.

MM: Yes. Well, yes, and there was a slot. It's just—and I filled that slot as far as the official army documentation was concerned. But then they can then, essentially, put you where—

TS: Do what they want with you.

MM: Yeah. And so, there was a lot of perception that that was done to me because I was a young female soldier. And honestly, for a large part of it, I thought that it might be true. I don't know if it may have been because they questioned my abilities, as much as that that was perceived as the appropriate place for a woman to be working, was as a clerk.

TS: Right. Hard to prove either way.

MM: It is. It is. It was—My maintenance—My platoon sergeant, when I first arrived as a mechanic, was helping me learn—work with others in the platoon to help them then do one of their jobs. Because I could still work as a mechanic and not necessarily do hydraulics work, because goodness knows they get overwhelmed with work as well. They could always use an extra hand. Which was the main reason why we really questioned the command's decision to put me in as a clerk, because it's not like I couldn't have been used where I was. And I'm sure they could have taken somebody—because injuries happen in the military and it's a very common practice to have injured soldiers serve in those capacities while they heal, and they can't be out there doing the very physical labor. So it was always a little bit of something that I resented at my first unit.

TS: How did you react to it, I mean, personally? Did you just go with it? You said you were pretty introverted, so I don't know how—

MM: I was. Yeah. I didn't really know—at the time I kind of just went with it. And I think that had a lot to do with it, as well as, with that friendly personality that I talked about. And I just kind of went with things. And I made a very conscious decision to change that when I went to my next unit. I think I got a little bit away from the question.

TS: Yeah, no, it's okay, because when you started talking about where you were working, I actually realized, "Oh, that's what you were doing back at Fort Hood too," and I hadn't realized that.

MM: Well, both clerk jobs but just a little bit different, because they didn't have as much need of an orderly room clerk in a war zone. So I was helping out instead in the production control office.

TS: I got you. Well, let's go back to Iraq, then. You're deployed there, you're a little nervous.

MM: Yes.

TS: Maybe a lot nervous. I don't know.

MM: Yes. [chuckles]

TS: How did your mom feel about you going over? And your friends?

MM: My mother was worried about me, but—and just even knowing my mother as a person, she was always kind of tough as nails. She was worried about me, but it wasn't in her nature to be overtly—an overt show of emotional concern. It wasn't who she was and it wasn't really who she raised me to be. So she was. And the funny thing about joining the army— and it probably has a lot to do with the fact that I had become a little bit isolated before I joined the army too—but when you join you just become so changed. And so, I grew apart a lot from my friends that I had had prior to the army. I think I could probably dig up some letters from that first deployment, but after that, I didn't really hear much from anybody outside of the military. They really became my family.

TS: How were you housed?

MM: We were housed in, what they call, combat housing units, or CHUs [containerized housing unit], and it was essentially like a shipping container, with windows and little installed wall air-conditioning units, because, I mean, it was very hot. It was a need to survive the situation. They weren't very high functioning wall units so you would still be in severe danger of dehydrating during the day if you were inside of those metal boxes, because that's what they are. But it wasn't bad. You had—if you could call it—a roof over your head. And the main thing about any less than pleasant situation, to put it politely, in the military, is that you're always in it with these other people. It's never something that you are going through alone. It was never something that we really felt like, "Oh, this horrible situation."

TS: Were you there in—what year?—2008?

MM: That was 2008.

TS: And so, was it 2007 when they had that initial surge? I can't remember when the surge was.

[In the context of the Iraq War, the surge refers to U.S. President George W. Bush's 2007 increase in the number of American troops in order to provide security to Baghdad and Al Anbar Province]

MM: I don't know that, because I wasn't "in the know" in 2007.

TS: [chuckles] Right. You're just trying to keep your nose clean, right?

MM: I was. I was still learning, very much, the ins and outs and the histories of everything.

TS: Well, where you're at in Iraq, are you in a small isolated unit? Is it a big place? What's it like?

MM: It was a big place. There were a few isolated airbases, but the majority of air bases, just because of the nature of what it takes to run an airbase, were fairly well established. So in that regard, I would say that I am grateful. It's not something that you can support without having immense support already established. Just the parts alone, that you are constantly having to bring in and take out in order to keep these machines running, it's not something you can do without having some sort of established base. So Taji itself was fairly large; probably larger than I ever saw. Because you don't have much time to sightsee—

TS: Were you working six days a week, seven days a week?

MM: I want to say we worked thirteen days and then we would get a day off. And then, of course, that's as allowed.

TS: Sometimes not allowed.

MM: Right. I don't think it was very often that they would take the day off from you, because they did work you very hard. They were twelve-hour work days in name, but the work needs to be done, so however long it takes for the work to be done.

TS: Right. It might be longer.

MM: But of course, there's also regulations on that now, where they can't work you past a certain time. Because the truth is, you can't have people working on aircraft that don't have a modicum of rest. They'll die if they make a mistake doing their jobs.

TS: When did they put those regulations in? Just more recently?

MM: Well, I know that they were there when I was deployed the first time, but they were not as strictly regulated as they became later in my career. Later in my career it was very serious to make sure that people had the required amount of rest. And it was not so much that first time in Iraq.

TS: [chuckles] I would think that would be a good idea to have the rest. When you think about you experience that first time, I mean, everything is raw and new, right?

MM: Yes.

TS: Did you ever go outside the base?

MM: I'm sure that they weren't necessarily supposed to do this, but it is an aviation unit, and so the aircraft all have different missions. Sometimes it's to move personnel, sometimes a higher-ranking person needs to get an aerial view of an area, and so they will take those people up and they'll fly them—called VIP [Very Important Person] missions—and sometimes we—at the time we were also doing leaflet drop, or propaganda. And so, I was able to go on one of those flights and it was just exhilarating. And I know a lot of people who really do not like military flights specifically because it's not smooth at all, but I just—I loved it. The way of life is just something that it calls to you or doesn't. And I actually—that could be something I could submit, is I have two of the leaflets still.

TS: That'd be neat!

MM: I have no idea what they say—

TS: They're Arabic?

MM: Yes. But I kept them from that one time that I was able to go up.

TS: That's neat. Was it a helicopter?

MM: Yeah, it was a Black Hawk.

TS: A Black Hawk?

MM: Yes.

TS: And you said it was exhilarating?

MM: It was. Just—I can't even put it into words. To know the machine that you're flying in, and to know that you have a certain level of, I guess, power over it; because that's what it is to be a mechanic, is to just know the complete ins and outs of what is keeping you in the air. And it's all just really amazing when you consider it, because the things that keep helicopters in the air is just very—it's not—it was, I loved it. I wished it was something I could have done myself, was to be a crew chief on helicopters.

TS: Well, is there anything about that deployment that you want to add?

MM: I would say—Well, my first deployment was my first real experience with incoming artillery. At that time, from what I understand, from people higher than I, our unit worked very well with the locals. And so, thankfully, we were not hit quite as much. I guess they had a way of—a presence outside of the wire that wasn't rubbing people the wrong way. Of course, there are the people that we're after, but that's not every single local national.

We did get hit though. The airfield was a high value target, so it was hit several times. Thankfully, nobody was lost. But it was just that—I remember the first incoming artillery and it was just—they tell you about it, and they have these mock-trainings for it, but nothing really compares. Because it is almost like a—you kind of know what's happening, but at the same time you're just like, "Is this really happening?" A little bit.

I remember being amused, of all feelings, at the time. Because there was a civilian contractor who worked with us, and he was a specialist on one of the systems on the helicopters, which is why he was there. But being a contractor, this was not his first rodeo [idiom used to indicate that someone is not inexperienced], as it were. And he recognized the situation immediately. And I remember that I was speaking with him and I heard the whistle, and I turned around like, "What is that?" Obviously. "What—" and I turned back to him to say, "What is that?" and he was not there [chuckles]. He was already in the bunker. And obviously, I got there as quickly as I could. But I just—he was very quick and he was not—a very small man. The quickness with which he moved was impressive. And I still remember that vividly. It becomes normal, as weird as that sounds, but I remember that first time with amusement, thankfully, of all things. I am sure a lot of people don't—can't say the same.

TS: It was kind of like a shock at first and then it became a new normal to hear it and to feel it?

MM: It was. And I don't want to sound cynical, but the fact that you begin to face in that situation is that, if it's coming for you it's coming for you. And there's not a lot you can do about it. So after the initial—the first few days in country we stopped; we stopped going to the bunkers. You recognize that there's only so much that a—I mean, it was maybe a six-inch-thick—six, eight-inch-thick concrete bunker. If it's your time, it's going to be your time. And wasting the time that you could be using to get the mission done, to stop what you are doing and go run into a bunker, was just not time that we had to give anymore.

TS: You didn't go back?

MM: No. No. I think the first few nights, if something happened, they had leadership waking us up and having us get in the bunkers, but that stopped. That stopped pretty soon after that too.

TS: That's interesting. Did you ever become complacent about that danger; in that it's not in the front of your mind anymore, it's just in the back of your mind, or something along that?

MM: I don't know if I would use the word complacent, but it was no longer a pressing priority. Of course, there is the situation where it's very, very close to you. But for the most part, it was just—not necessarily a morbid line of thought, but you just kind of have to—they say that veterans have a very strange sense of humor, and we do, of course, because you learn to laugh; because that's just how you deal with it. So that's why I can say with, what seems completely carefree, "if it's my time then it's my time." But it was kind of a fact.

TS: Very interesting. Was there anything else that struck you? I'm sure there were many, many things that struck you while you were on deployment, but anything you want to share?

MM: One thing that I learned on my first deployment, and of course it's in every deployment, but was just the level of camaraderie. And you don't have much. I mean, most of the time, the only thing you have for entertainment is maybe a deck of playing cards. But it was some of the best days and nights of my life. And I couldn't really even explain that now if I tried. But I had some of the most fun with some people that came from so many different walks of life. And we all had different beliefs and it didn't matter. Deck of playing cards and you are never alone; you're always—there's always somebody there who's looking out for you. It's very—It's a nice feeling. It is, yeah.

TS: You were there for about a year?

MM: Yes.

TS: And then you came back, and you went back to Fort—

MM: To Fort Hood.

TS: Fort Hood, right. Did you continue as that capacity or did you get back into mechanic work at all?

MM: Well, I continued in the capacity that I was in, but at that time I did become pregnant with my son. And so, in that regard I would agree with their decision; soldiers should not be working on the helicopters, working in that capacity. But I did, I had my son and then—before I went on to my next unit. And that next unit is where I was really able to dig in and get my hands dirty and begin working in that capacity.

TS: Okay. How were you treated when you were pregnant?

MM: I would say it was a hit or miss situation. Some soldiers didn't treat me any different, but there were definitely some people that were very unkind. There's a real stigma on women—on female soldiers being pregnant in the military, as far as they think you are

trying to get out of something or—which I always thought was the oddest thing. I thought that was just so ignorant to say; you're really going to make this decision that's going to change your body forever. It's going to live with you, literally, for the next eighteen years, but then it's not—it's a decision that changes your entire life. And to suggest that a person would make that decision just to get out of maybe a field exercise or even, heck, a deployment is just absolutely absurd. It really is. I don't think people who make that claim really think it fully through before they say it.

TS: They just see lighter duty, less PT [physical training], things like that.

MM: They do, yes.

TS: But they don't necessarily see that for somebody who maybe broke their foot doing something dumb.

MM: Yes. Honestly yes. There definitely was a stigmatism [sic, stigma] on that, which is unfortunate. It really is. It's—The military is its own microcosm, and it's like you have to learn the culture and the way of life in order—all anew; completely scrub everything you had from before you joined and rebuild just to make it.

TS: Now, did you put in for another assignment or was it just something coming up?

MM: Well, my—the father of my son—we got married, and then he came down on orders to go to Fort Drum, New York. And so, they have a program for married soldiers where, if at all possible, they keep them together. And because he was also an aircraft mechanic, wherever he goes, there's going to be a position for me. So it took them a couple months to cut my paperwork for me to be able to follow him, but I did eventually follow him up to Fort Drum, New York.

TS: And you said this is where you learned more about being a helicopter mechanic?

MM: Yes.

TS: Do you want to talk about that, then? Did you have some mentors?

MM: I did, yeah. Honestly, of the three units that I had the honor to serve in, this one was my favorite. I feel like this platoon, this unit, had—as you say—the most cohesion. They just worked really well together. It was—they did a fantastic job of creating that atmosphere for the soldiers. It's funny, actually, because my mentor ended up not being of the same MOS as I; he was actually an engine mechanic. And it was through a few incidents that happened, the NCO in my shop was moved. A few things happened, and for his privacy I won't say much on that, but he was moved to a different capacity. But that left my shop in a very strange position because we had no real leadership to speak of. We had—at the time it was three specialists, one of which was me, and one private. And we had the experience to do the job, so they weren't too concerned about that. But—

TS: You didn't have any NCOs?

MM: We didn't. And when you have three people of the same rank, there's going to be a little bit of in-fighting, as trying to figure out—

TS: Who's in charge?

MM: Yeah, who's top dog here? And it's very much so that kind of culture too. It's not something where they—it's very much so—who's going to take the reins, and they kind of create that—not to paint—

TS: Like, more competitive.

MM: Yeah, it is; it's definitely more competitive. But they want to see who has that alpha personality; who has the drive; who has the natural characteristics that's just going to be that leader. Of course, over the course of deployment we didn't get another leader. It remained in that awkward state where we didn't really have a defined—they never said, "Hey, this person is going to be this." There was a point where they did—they placed me in charge, but I feel like the dynamic remained, even though somebody had said that I was in charge. And it could be because I'm a woman. It could be because the two other specialists had more mechanical knowledge than I did. And I'll admit that, that's definitely true. But for whatever reason, the man in charge of us felt like I had more of the leadership characteristics than they did. But it was hard because they were more experienced in the job than I, and they did not want to listen to what I had to say. And like I said, that could be probably for a few reasons.

But the man that ended up mentoring me was an engine mechanic NCO. And he really took me under his wing and he taught me a lot about aviation in general, and how things work, and how you need to be in order to be a successful leader. So that deployment was a very rocky start for me, as far as learning a lot of things the hard way, as to how to be a leader.

TS: We didn't actually mention that you went on deployment, well, half a year after you got to Fort Drum. You went this time to Afghanistan, right?

MM: Yes.

TS: FOB [Forward Operating Base] Bagram [correction: Bagram Air Base]?

MM: Bagram, yes.

TS: Bagram, in October 2010. So you are just with them six months and then you deployed, especially when there's this little bit of turmoil in the unit.

MM: Yes. Actually, that turmoil didn't begin until we deployed. There was a gentleman who was an NCO who was in my shop up until we deployed, and then he had a little bit of a—a few issues and his boss chose to move him.

TS: So it was happening during the deployment. Okay. You were saying that, but I wasn't—

MM: Yes. Probably the worst time for it to happen.

TS: Yeah. But this NCO that was the engine mechanic helped mentor you, not only in the job, or as far as aviation mechanics go, but also as a leader.

MM: He did. He was actually—It's really odd the way they set all these things up, but some shops were individual like mine, and then others they combined to make sections. And so, this was one of those situations where they had taken the engine mechanics and the powertrain mechanics and they combined them to make a section. So he was actually the section sergeant, and so they all just kind of took me under their wing a little bit. And so, I spent a lot more time with engine mechanics than I did, honestly, with my own soldiers, because, honestly, they were much kinder to me. The guys in my own shop, they did not appreciate that I had been placed in the position I was in. And they did not appreciate—I'm sure—my—what they perceived as my attitude; that I was trying very much just to instill some level of stability in the shop. But they perceived it the way that they did, and so I chose to spend a lot more of my time with these other mechanics.

TS: And you learned a lot.

MM: I did. I was—and I remain incredibly grateful to them. A lot of the NCOs in that section helped me achieve many, many different things, to include—one of them—I believe it was two of them actually—they took turns having me—well, we ran to and from work, which doesn't sound like much, but we worked and lived on opposite sides of the base, and so it was a fairly decent run. I want to say the run—the direction that we went was three or four miles. And I—running had always been a very—my weak point, as far as my physical fitness. And now that I was in this leadership position, they said, very much so, you need to work on this. And so, like it or not, that's what they had me doing. I appreciate all the time that all of those people put in to help build me in all these many different ways. I think it was the first time I really felt like somebody was invested in me—like they cared what became of me.

TS: Yeah. That's powerful.

MM: It is; it really is. I feel like if a soldier doesn't appreciate what you're doing for them, and if you don't take the time to recognize what they're doing, then why are they going to feel like they ought to at all? Because very much so, if you don't see your soldiers then the army isn't going to see them, because we're all just a bunch of numbers.

TS: Well outside, even inside, what's going on in your unit, how was this deployment a little bit different—or maybe a lot different—than in Iraq?

MM: Well, I mean, it was a different country, a different time. This deployment was a lot harder for us. We did suffer a few losses. We lost a few aircraft and thus a few air crews.

And it was harder. But the thing that happens when it is harder is, it creates stronger bonds between the people that you are there with. Which also might be a part of why I, very much so, appreciated my time with this unit more than the others; is we built those stronger bonds. In this unit, I had more friends who were going out, and they were out there on those aircrafts, and it was—it could be very difficult wondering if they're going to come home at the end of the day. Especially, when you—you hear about the trouble, I'm sure, before they do. Because, of course, you have several different missions running at one time and you hear about trouble out there, but you don't know specifically where they are, or if they're part of it or not. So it could be very much so that they had a fairly routine—if you could call it that—routine mission and they come home—if you will call it that—and they had no idea of the turmoil that was going on.

TS: You have a lot more worry because you're invested more, too, now, right?

MM: Right. And I think it was just the position; the fact that I had to be—I was able to be out there working with the crews on their aircraft and meeting them—a lot more chance to do that than I did when I was in the office environment. I didn't get to meet those people as much and really build bonds with them, working side by side, through honest to goodness blood and sweat, because—banged up knuckles and it's not fun out there, but you're side by side with each other making sure these things get fixed. You can't really build that relationship with somebody when you're in a clerk position.

TS: Right. Well, did you go outside the wire at all from here?

MM: I do not believe I had the opportunity. Or wait, no, that is not the case. I did. I had one opportunity in Afghanistan as well, and I—actually I took a flag out with me and we flew it for my relatives. I wanted to give that to them as a sign of appreciation for watching my son while I was gone. Actually, I had the wonderful opportunity to go with two of my very, very best friends, and so it was a wonderful experience. It was actually—I could probably—I can try to find that photograph as well. We—They were both crew chiefs on the Chinook aircraft, and so on that aircraft you can put down the back ramp and sit on it, and your legs are dangling off, and it's terrifying and exhilarating at the same time, because you know, on the one hand—logically you know you aren't going to fall, but it's very hard to keep reminding yourself of that. But, of course, they have, what they call, "monkey tails" that attach to the back of your equipment, and then to a D hook in the floor. So that's how you know you're not going to fall but—

TS: [chuckles] Okay, because my heart is going, "Whoa! My goodness! That would be hard!"

MM: Yes. Oh, yeah, it was scary! They found me kind of amusing, because it was my first time doing it, and so I was moving very carefully. But, of course, to them, they're just—this is their airframe and they know it like the back of their hand. And they're just moving around with complete comfort and ease, and I am just very cautiously moving, trying not to fall out of this helicopter. They just thought I was the funniest thing.

TS: [chuckles] Oh, my goodness. Did you have artillery coming into this camp like you did earlier in Iraq?

MM: We did. I want to say—FOB Bagram was very large. And so, we did—and we did actually—we lost a few buildings. Thankfully, we did not have any come into our living area, and we did not have any come into our—or not—it was a very limited number of times that it came into the flight line while I was working on it. We did have several other incidents where we had the people that would hit the gates with vehicles loaded with bombs. The flight line was not very close to these gates. But there were things that were happening around us. And of course, we had people who would go out in the helicopters and then they're outside the wire. And there was just—it was a much more active deployment, if you will, than my first one. And so, we did have a couple of aircraft that we lost.

Most memorable for me, and probably every single person there with me, was I was told—and I don't know if it's still true, because this was in 2011—but I was told that one of the aircraft that we lost was the single greatest loss of life at any one time in the entire war, because of the number of people that were on this specific helicopter when it went down. And honestly, the media and people here stateside would probably even recognize this incident because on that helicopter was SEAL Team six; a large portion of SEAL Team six. Which was, of course, the team that was involved in the location of Osama Bin Laden.

[On 6 August 2011, a U.S. Boeing CH-47 Chinook military helicopter, Call Sign "Extortion 17," was shot down while transporting a quick reaction force attempting to reinforce an engaged unit of Army Rangers in Wardak Province, west of Kabul, Afghanistan. The resulting crash killed all thirty-eight people on board, which included twenty-five American special operations personnel, five U.S. Army National Guard and Army Reserve crewmen, seven Afghan commandos, and one Afghan interpreter, as well as a U.S. military working dog]

And so, that was very difficult for us. It was one of our aircraft. I was not very personally invested—is the word I choose to use—and I know that sounds cold in logic so I apologize for that, but you have to deal with things in specific ways. And any of those people, they were not—none of them were extremely close friends, but they were known, so it was hard. And we had aircraft from units that were attached to us—aircraft that went down. So it was a more somber, I think, environment. But it only made us take our jobs more serious and recognize the importance of what we were doing even more.

And it was—for one of those helicopters that went down, I actually had the honor of being present to see those personnel off on their final journey home. It was one of the most touching and just emotional experiences of my life, and when I say the honor of being there, I truly mean that. I would like to say everybody there probably felt the same way, and I can only imagine, because you could just feel the raw loss as if it had been a piece of each of us individually that had been taken from us. But just the way that they honored these soldiers, in just what appears to be just a simple task of moving their

person from the vehicle to the aircraft to then transport them home, it was a very big to do; it was a very big affair. And it really—it highlights the importance, I guess, of what we do. And just to be able to give them that. Because you are just a number when you're in the military, but we never take the losses for granted. You take the time to recognize each individual, and it's in a—it's very—it's going to sound strange—but in a way it's almost comforting, because you know that what you're doing means something.

TS: It's honorable.

MM: Yeah. To the machine, if you will, to the army, to the man, you are a number, but you know that to your people, you're not. You know that they're going to recognize you if something happens. You're never going to be just another number on a tally of who was on the roster of those lost.

TS: Well, as you're going through this much more—I guess in a way there is more tension, you're also away from your little boy.

MM: I was.

TS: And he's just little, right? He's, like, a year old maybe?

MM: He was. Yeah, he was one actually. I returned in time for his second birthday. Because we came home in October and his birthday was then in November.

TS: Okay. How was that for you?

MM: Well, that's a very strange thing to talk about, because it was immensely difficult for me on one level, but because of that—it's almost like you just have to disconnect. You can't go throughout your day feeling that, so it's almost like you have to turn it off. You take a part of you and you put it away, and you tell yourself, "I'll open this box back up when I can use it again. But right now, I can't. So I'm going to, very much so, assume this persona of Specialist Mead and I'm going to be her. And in her world, we don't have time for feelings that are going to get in the way of getting the mission done." And it's very much a "no fail" attitude, and it's a very pointed lifestyle like that. And I did have the opportunity to see him about once every two weeks—once a week to every two weeks on Skype. But he's one, so it was helpful for me. I don't honestly know how helpful it was for him. I know that when he did see me again there was a period of time where he had to warm up to me, which was hard.

[Skype is a telecommunications application software product that specializes in providing video chat and voice calls between computers, tablets, mobile devices]

TS: Sure. It almost feels like rejection, right?

MM: Well, it did a very little bit. I was—It took him about a day.

TS: Oh, that's not too bad, then.

MM: He wasn't entirely sure of what was going on with me, but it took him about a day to not seek out my relatives instead of me.

TS: Well, that's not as long as I've heard from some other women who have had that experience, so that's good.

MM: I would attribute that to his age, so I am very grateful that was the one and only time that I had to be away from him like that. There was a couple months, later, where we were separated, but he was older and able to understand, "Hey buddy, I'm not going anywhere for very long. It's going to be, like, a couple of weeks and then I'll be back." But nothing like a full year, so that was lucky.

TS: Did you get to come home half way through or anything?

MM: Oh, from Afghanistan? I did—They did allow—what they called it?—it wasn't emergency leave—

TS: R&R [rest and recuperation (or recreation)] or something?

MM: They called it EML, and I think it was Environmental [and] Morale Leave; was the term for the acronym [chuckles]; they have one for everything. But I actually ended up taking that early on in the deployment to come home; there was a little bit of a family emergency. And so, I came home and dealt with that and then I went back. So I didn't—Essentially, I ended up taking it about—after being in country for maybe a month, month and a half.

TS: So you had the rest of your time that you couldn't come back.

MM: Yeah, that—I didn't really get that break, and that was hard.

TS: That's a long time.

MM: Especially when you start seeing your pals and they're leaving, they're, "Hey, I'll be back in two weeks to—" I mean, it's an actual two weeks at home, but it translates into about three weeks, sometimes a month if they have bad weather on their way back. And it's hard to watch them come and go and you know that—

TS: You're not going anywhere.

MM: No. No.

TS: Well, is there anything you want to add about Afghanistan?

MM: No. I think that's all of it.

TS: So you went from Afghanistan back to Fort Drum?

MM: Yes.

TS: And you were there a couple of more years. And you continued to learn about the—

MM: Yeah, actually, I was lucky—I was very lucky actually—one thing that I did fail to mention about Afghanistan—I'm terrible; you just asked me if I had—

TS: You can't remember everything [chuckles], it's okay.

MM: I know. But they did—they hosted promotion boards, even though we were in a combat zone. And so, I was sent to a promotion board when I was in Afghanistan, and I was then promotable. They said, "Great! You did a good job. We think that you would make an excellent NCO." And then at that point it was back in my hands to make sure I had enough points to get that. And this is pertinent to coming back, because about a month or two after I got back, I did finally get picked up and I was then promoted to sergeant.

TS: Oh, good.

MM: It was always—It was kind of a point of amusement for me, because although they put me in that leadership position while we were deployed, one of the other specialists in my section for my shop was promoted one month before I. And so, it was always just kind of an amusing little rivalry, I guess, and I thought it was kind of funny. Looking back, it is a little bit funny.

TS: It is funny, because rank means stuff. [chuckles]

MM: It does, it does. And especially, date of rank; if one month—

TS: Exactly. Or one day. [chuckles]

MM: One day in the rank longer than I and you out rank me, it doesn't matter if we were at the same rank. So it was kind of funny.

TS: Well, did you enjoy the rest of your time at Fort Drum?

MM: I did, yeah. I did. I was actually—I was put in charge of my own shop, which—funny enough, because that gentleman was promoted before I; he was in our shop and then I was placed in charge of another shop, which was actually not my job or a job that I knew much about at all, so it was a period of very large growth for me, trying to learn how to—one, I am all of a sudden placed in charge of soldiers that I didn't really know that well because I had not been working with them. So you don't know who has the strengths or

the weaknesses, and it's hard to pick up who has the strengths and weaknesses when you don't know the job very well because it's not your job. But I chose to take it as a nod to my potential that they put me in this position and I just kind of went with it. And I think I did fairly well for the position that I was put in.

TS: You feel like you are growing in your leadership skills, and in your technical skills?

MM: Yes, definitely a period of—I think you could call it—forced growth.

TS: [chuckles] Forced growth.

MM: Not always the most comfortable, but.

TS: Well, a lot of times I hear people say they were thrown into a position that they never thought they could handle, but whoever it is putting them in that position believed in them and gave them the support they needed to be successful. Did you feel that way?

MM: Yes, I did. I felt that way even when I went before the promotion board. Because the very first time that I went, I did not perform very well. It's a very nerve racking experience, because the rank system and the hierarchy is very ingrained—very ingrained—and then they put you, as this lower ranking individual, in front of all of the highest-ranking enlisted personnel in your unit, and they say, "Okay, now we expect you to dance," essentially. Not—

TS: Literally.

MM: —literally, of course, but it is a performance, in its own way, because you do need to—no matter how you're feeling, exert complete and utter confidence, and even if you can't tell them exactly what they want to hear, or do exactly what they want you to do, you need to impress upon them that if you were in a leadership position and you did not have the exact answer, you could still handle that situation. So I did not perform extremely well my first time in that position, and my leadership expressed the utmost confidence in my abilities. And they said, "Listen, you didn't make it this time, but don't think that means that you're going to get off easy because we are sending you right back. So you had better go back to the drawing board."

TS: So they believed in you!

MM: They did, yeah. And it was—it was a source of motivation, because you don't want to let them down. You represent them, in a way, because they are the ones that raised you and trained you, and you don't want to go in there and make it look like they're not doing a good job of doing what they do.

TS: Right, exactly. Well, then, your last assignment, you went to Fort Bliss [Texas]?

MM: Yes.

TS: What time do you have to leave?

MM: I think we have about fifteen minutes.

TS: Okay. So you went to Fort Bliss. Now, is that associated with your husband at the time?

MM: No. Unfortunately, my husband and I, shortly after my arrival at Fort Hood, we went our separate ways.

TS: You mean at Fort Drum?

MM: Yes, at Fort Drum.

TS: Okay. So when you deployed you were no longer together?

MM: No, which is odd—it was an unusual situation because we were both on that deployment.

TS: Oh, really?

MM: We were working very close to each other but with separate units. So we didn't necessarily have to see each other. We saw each other briefly a few times, but it was an odd situation to be in, so we didn't exactly seek each other out constantly.

TS: That's interesting. Okay, so you're single again, and you are with your son, and you go to Fort Bliss.

MM: Yes.

TS: You said Fort Drum was your favorite assignment. Where does Fort Bliss fit in?

MM: Fort Bliss was—I think it's funny that they call it Fort Bliss, first of all, because it's on the border [with Mexico], which doesn't really affect it as much as the environment that's on the border affects whether or not it's blissful. Because it's very much—it's very arid, very desert. Not the desert that I was born and raised in, that I love very much, and I happen to find very much beauty in, but it seemed to be a very dusty and desolate, not beautiful desert. But the base itself was actually very nice. It had every commodity that you could ever want for. So, in that regard, I guess I can understand why they tried to call it Fort Bliss.

My time at Fort Bliss, though, it was—it was one of the harder times for me. I mean, my first unit was difficult, but my last unit, I want to say it kind of sealed the deal for me on the decision to get out. I don't want to say anything bad about the people that I worked with necessarily, but it just wasn't—first of all, the military was moving towards a much more garrison-oriented attitude in the day to day workings of soldiering.

TS: Can you explain what that means to people who might not know?

MM: Right. I mean, we were drawing down from the war. They had pulled a lot of soldiers out. So we weren't training necessarily to be prepared for deployment anymore because deployment was not happening as often. We were focusing more on what they considered to be garrison skills, which kind of translates into very small, detail-oriented things that had never really been what made me really love my time in the army. I really loved getting the job done and how it was the focus, and the fact that we did it no matter what it took. And from there it went to, perhaps you have a smudge on your boots.

TS: So it became Mickey Mouse [slang for insignificant or unimportant] stuff?

MM: A little bit. A little bit, it did. And I didn't really enjoy that.

TS: You said this is what helped you decide that you wanted to get out?

MM: It is. Along with the fact that at Fort Bliss, they then sent me to the next level of promotion board, which I am proud to say I aced the very first time. You learn—You pick up a few tricks along the way. And so, at the time I was promotable to staff sergeant. I did not get promoted to staff sergeant before my time ran out. But it really made me think about where I wanted to be and how my decisions now are affecting my life now and in the long run. And I had to admit to myself that the hardships of being a single mother in the military were having too much of a negative effect on my family—which is to say me and my son—and so—but that goes both ways; it was creating hardship for me at home and hardship for me at work. Because if you can't give what is required in either place, they're both getting a split effort. And so, I chose to separate and to not pursue becoming a staff sergeant. Mainly because I felt like I could not give the appropriate amount of effort and time required to be good at doing that job. I felt like it would just take more than I had available.

TS: Did you feel too—and I don't mean to put something into your head—that maybe you'd gotten a lot out of the army at that point?

MM: I had, absolutely. And I've always been—You meet—There are a few different categories of soldiers you're going to meet after they get out of the army, and I've never been the one who has something bad to say. Because there are people who had bad experiences, or maybe the army just wasn't for them, and they separate, and they do have some not very nice things to say about their time in. That was never me. I've always been very aware and appreciative of who the army made me, which is what allows me to be successful today.

TS: Well, did you feel like you were treated fairly for promotion and opportunities during the time you were in the army?

MM: In my second unit, yes. My first unit, no. I felt like the fact that they were hindering my learning was hindering my forward movement in my job, because how can you progress

when you don't know how to do your job? Or anything even remotely related to it. So I was—

TS: Yeah, because you test on your MOS.

MM: Well, yes. Well, that's air force, but in the army you don't test but they ask you questions at the promotion board. And if you don't know—

TS: Your job.

MM: Yeah. And, I mean, how are you going to lead soldiers in doing your job if you don't know how to do your job? So I resented that a lot; that that was several years of my time in the military lost, when I could have been growing immensely as a soldier. I choose to look at it as time when I was learning other skills. Because I did learn other skills that were useful to me. Networking; networking is a huge one. Paperwork. Where to go in order to get what done, was a big one. So I chose to look at it that way. But I was; I was a little bit resentful of those years lost.

TS: Sure, because where would you have been just two years later?

MM: Yes.

TS: You described some circumstances where you had good relationships, and you haven't described any really bad relationships, but your relationships with your peers. Did you ever work with any women? Was it mostly men?

MM: It was. It was mostly men. At my first unit there were a few women that I met and worked with, but we had different jobs, and so we didn't spend a lot of time together. Mostly, we knew each other because we were housed together.

TS: Right. But you didn't really have any mentors in your field that were women.

MM: No. At my very first unit there was an NCO who was a woman who was, in a way, a mentor to me. But unfortunately, because they had moved me out of my job as a mechanic—she *was* a mechanic, so I wasn't really around her as much. But she was always really wonderful, and we actually—we're still in touch now. She's out of the military now as well. But none of my major mentors were ever women.

TS: They were men, right?

MM: Yes.

TS: Well, did you ever see or experience any sexual discrimination, harassment, in that sense?

MM: Yes. There was the instance at my first unit. I don't feel like that was a prob—there was a issue at my second unit at Fort Drum, where I was promoted and given my very first position as a leader. And there was a soldier who outright said that he did not want to follow a woman. He did not want to listen to me. And so, that was a large issue for me.

TS: Did he say it to you or did he say it to somebody above you?

MM: The funny thing about it is, is he said it to me, but he said it several months before when I wasn't in charge of him and when I was still a specialist. It was when I was discussing my difficulties with being put in a leadership position as a specialist with some other soldiers, and he said, "Honestly, I wouldn't like it either if I were them." Basically, "I would not want to follow a petite female. I would not want you to be in charge of me." And then a few months later, I was, so that was a little funny.

TS: Yes. Was he still resistant to it?

MM: He was. I had—he was my most difficult soldier, I think I want to say, almost ever. He very much so wanted to progress, and he very much so felt that he was not being given ample opportunities to progress, and he felt that he was ready. Due to some of—some things that I observed behaviorally, as well as overt sexism, I felt that he wasn't necessarily ready yet. He had a lot of things he was doing well in and some things he could work on. And then I expressed these—I guess you would say—observations to my boss, but my boss then chose to side with him essentially. And he progressed in many ways. And so, that was very much so a situation where it seemed like what I had to say was not as important because I was a woman. Not only was that the wrong way of going about things, but they essentially took this soldier and they said, "Hey, it's okay to circumvent the system. You don't have to listen to what your leadership is telling you."

TS: Right, and you weren't backed up. That's tough.

MM: I wasn't. They said, "It's okay to be sexist, it's okay to do this, okay to do that, we are going to progress you anyways." But then I left that unit and I left that soldier behind and I washed my hands of it, because you can't win all the battles, unfortunately.

At my third unit—my last unit, Fort Bliss—I did have an issue—my—the beginning of my time at Fort Bliss was great. I felt like I was settling in, I was becoming a lot more comfortable as an NCO, and this unit was the first unit I had been in where I arrived as an NCO. I did not have to climb up out of who I used to be as a specialist. I arrived as Sergeant Mead and this is who people saw me as. At first, everything was going very well, I felt. When I began to have difficulty was when a portion of the unit that had been deployed returned, and a large portion of this unit was higher-ranking NCOs who then returned and kind of took charge from NCOs such as myself, a base level sergeant. And I had a lot of difficulty with the gentleman who came back and took charge of my section; where I had not had any issues, but now I was having issues. I feel very much so—and he did admit that I was his first real female soldier and he was—this was a growing experience for him as well, but I was just very upset with the way he handled it.

Because I think that there is—A lot of men are—and they cite the way they're raised. They have this—a real difficulty with working with women professionally, and they call it being raised with manners, if you will, but what it translates to is a complete inability to communicate with women on a professional level. Which was his issue and he was in charge of me, and it's very hard to work for somebody who won't speak to you as a professional. He doesn't want to hurt your feelings; he doesn't want to say anything that he perceivs as mean. And so, there was definitely a lot of tension and rubbing of the wrong way because I was clearly not doing things the way that he specifically wanted them done, but he was not able to communicate how he wanted them done, for whatever reason, and I'll leave that open-ended. But it was clearly the issue of working with a woman that he was having, and I only had so much tolerance for it.

At this time, I was six or seven years in the military, and we just don't—we don't dance around issues like that. That's not how we handle business. You get business done. Nobody has time for your feelings. Nobody has time to be nice. You say things frankly, because if I'm doing something wrong, then, frankly, fix it. Because I want to better, I want to be good at what I'm doing. Rather than have my feelings spared, fix it, so that I can then be progressed and I can be more professional, or how have you. So that was never really resolved. That remained an issue for us until the day that he left the unit, but—

TS: And by then you had decided to get out?

MM: I had, yeah. It placed a bad taste in my mouth, it had created a lot of issues for me inside the unit, because it—That unit had a very strong good old boy system in place, and that was from the deployment. And I had not been on that deployment. And apparently, one of the soldiers that I was working with back home, who was getting out and so he had very lax discipline, did not like my correcting him. So he chose to deal with that by telling the people who were still deployed stories about me.

TS: Undermining you.

MM: Undermining me, essentially telling lies. Which I have always had a very hard time understanding why it's so easy for people to believe that women in the military are sexually promiscuous. It's always just taken as an absolute truth. And so, that was always going to be a wedge—this was the stories he was telling—that was always going to be a wedge between myself and the gentleman who was now in charge of me, because instead of coming back and working with me as the leadership in charge of this specialist, he came back and failed to recognize me for who I was, how hard I'd worked to get there, and he took these high school [immature gossip] stories at face value. Never spoke to me about them. I learned about them roundabout of course, and it put a bad taste in my mouth for working with the whole unit. Because I know that people in this unit believed these nasty stories about me for, essentially, no reason, because there's no evidence to be found for something that is not true. So you're just taking it at face value; that because I'm a woman, these stories about me being sexually promiscuous are true.

TS: And single mother.

MM: A single mother, yes. So it was really just I was a little bit done with it. I was. I mean, it's hard to climb out of that. I mean, that's the culture.

TS: Yeah, until you leave and go to another place, but what's going to precede you there, right?

MM: Aviation is a tiny world. You're constantly meeting the same people, and if they're not somebody that you knew, they know somebody that you knew. I even had situations where one time I became romantically involved with a gentleman in one of my units, who then happened to know somebody from a past unit who didn't like me because *his* friend didn't like me, and then—so this gentleman told my current romantic partner that I was bad news. And the man that I was seeing at the time was enough of a gentleman to not tell me exactly what was said, but he said that somebody had something to say and it was—it's just frustrating. Because you work so hard and for some reason you are never perceived as equal. You do something to upset one person. And it could be anything; it really could. It could be turning down a gentleman for a date, and then next thing you know, for the rest of your career, whatever story they decide to tell about you is just going to be taken at face value.

But I was always really grateful to that—to my partner that one time because he is probably the one situation where I saw that somebody did not take it at face value. He said—despite the fact that he had not had the opportunity to get to know me yet, he told him, "Listen, I don't believe that. I think that you probably shouldn't be saying those things because they're not true. I've met her. I don't know her very well yet, but this is not how she presents herself at all." And he is the only person who gave me, I guess, a chance to show him who I really was. And in this case, it was in a personal situation rather than professional, but—

TS: But it affects the professional in that world.

MM: Oh, well, yeah, it does. He was also a soldier. So the same mindset can be applied to the professional world. It's not that hard. But for some reason it's just the culture is that—I've had gentlemen that I've worked with in the past who have told me—I've expressed frustration with them over this, and they told me that it is very much the rule of the masculine community, is that—and they were—they even said, "I'm sorry, Megan, but it's ingrained. We will always take the word of a man over the word of a woman when there is a 'he says, she says' situation." And I don't know why that is, but it did create a lot of problems for me, sometimes.

TS: That's a terrible situation for you, but a great explanation of the way that culture can sometimes be so draining for women in that way.

MM: Yeah.

TS: Well, I know you have to go soon. Can I ask you just a couple more questions?

MM: Yeah, sure.

TS: Is there anything you think women should not be allowed to do in the military? Any job or role, position, unit, they shouldn't be in?

MM: I'm sure the answer to that is—

TS: It's your thoughts on it.

MM: Right. On that, I want to say that today's society, I feel like women are really striving for what they call "equality." And my favorite thought on it that I've heard expressed so far is that—I rea—Somebody said, "I don't know why women are trying so hard to do the things that men can do when women have always been built to do the things that men can't do."

Women are capable of more than men are in their own way, but for some reason they view men as something that is above them, and therefore, a level that they need to reach. And in that way, they place men above them. But men have never been above us. And we are, yes, physiologically different in the way that we're built, but we—when *we* enter into something with that mentality *we* are placing them above us. And that's my personal opinion on it. Have I ever strived to do something that in my view I thought I should be able to do just because a man could do it? Yes, I have fallen victim to that mindset, but today I don't. I don't agree with it anymore. I feel like in the way that my team of mechanics all had different strengths and weaknesses, it's the same with men and women. You have women who are built in such a way that they are very, very capable in the way of physical strength, and they could best any man in a competition between the two. And then you have men who don't fit the, I guess, heteronormative—I think is the word we use today—role of what a man is supposed to be; i.e. very muscular, strong; very capable of doing hands on tasks, and these men are better at doing other tasks. It could be working with computers; they're very oriented in that. And so, along those lines, I feel like the drive for women to do these jobs that are restricted to them is—I feel like they're—the reason that they're going after it I don't agree with. Do I think that they should open it to women? Yes. But I think that it's very important that they make sure that the women who choose to enter those fields meet all of the requirements.

TS: What do you mean by you don't think they are going into it for the right reasons?

MM: Well, from what I have read and from what I have seen in today's world, the reason that women want access to these jobs, such as infantry, is because—"We can do anything a man can do." And I don't think that's necessarily the right reason to go after it, because the fact is, is that not every man is capable of doing that job, and the same goes—not every woman is capable of doing that job. Which is why I say I believe they should be open to women, but I believe that the standards should remain very strict. In a situation where—because women have actually—they've been in combat for some time. Women who are in the military police line of work, when they deploy they're on the ground. And so, if those women can meet the standards, and move and stay with the unit, carrying

however much weight they need to carry for whatever mission may require, then absolutely, they should be allowed to do that. You know what I mean?

But not all of us are built that way. Myself particularly, I would, honestly, probably not pursue a job along those lines, and that's just my personal decision. I mean, I enjoyed my time in the military immensely. But a pack of the size that I would need to carry in order to be able to have what I need would probably be a little bit much for me to carry around day to day. And I don't believe that that shortcoming is necessarily because I am a woman, it's just the way I'm built.

TS: Right. Well, do you think there's anything that you would want a civilian to know or understand about what it is like to be or serve in the military that they might not understand or appreciate.

MM: Yes. From what I've seen, since I've gotten out, which has been difficult to say the least, I have noticed with my family and with other people, sometimes we are judged along traditional cultural normal lines, and that just—it's not going to fit. We have some behaviors that we can't lose. It's from the culture that we were part of, and I would just say—I guess I would just ask people to be a little bit more aware of that. I have been accused by my family of being—what was the word that they used? Maybe—I think it might've been along the lines of aggressive or hostile. But we don't—we are not out here trying to be jerks. We made the decision to rejoin civilians and to try to reintegrate, so I would just—I would say that people should try to show a little bit of patience, and recognize that although we are not exactly the same, it's not for lack of trying to be. We're not trying to be, I guess, arrogant and set ourselves aside and that kind of thing. We only know how to live the way that we have been living, and we don't necessarily always recognize the overt differences in cultures. Although, they can be pointed out to us, especially just here in the South. It's very, I don't want to say slow moving, but it is very friendly. If you run into somebody, you should stop and you should have a brief conversation. In the military, it's very much so not like that. Just for a small example. It's very businesslike. And I have come across rude, unintentionally, several times.

TS: Are you working in the veteran center here?

MM: Yes.

TS: Does that shape some of how you interact with people too? Because you're working for veterans with veterans, in a college where they're trying to—assimilate is the wrong word—but to acclimate themselves to a new normal with school and stuff, and it's not easy.

MM: It's not. It's—I am very grateful for my position at the center. I feel like the people there are a very large part of my support channel. And something that I have really appreciated just since leaving, is that when you're in, there's this rivalry between the branches; I am very much army and this person is very much navy or air force or marines. And once we come out it's very much so all one family. That is no longer—I mean, there is a very joking rivalry about it, but it's like you joined an even larger family and it bridges all

gaps. Where you came from, your age, gender, none of it really applies because we recognize that this is my family out here in this world. And I don't care who you are or how old you are or where you came from, you are my brother or my sister and I will look out for you.

TS: What does patriotism mean to you?

MM: Well, I—That's a really difficult question, actually, and it shouldn't be. I mean, to me, I think there's always going to be that sense of duty. Even though I'm no longer in the military I'm always going to have that sense of duty to country. I think it is just something that's ingrained in you. So I couldn't really say outside of the military what patriotism would mean to me, because to me the country is forever changing, and the views on where—our forefathers, even, forever changing, and where we came from forever changing, and where we're going forever changing. And patriotism, to me, is just like an unwavering loyalty, I guess I would say. Whether we're coming from low or coming from high, and we're headed towards low or headed towards high, I would remain loyal to the country and whatever it needed from me.

TS: How do you think your life is different because you answered that recruiter's call from the army way back in 2007?

MM: Yes. I couldn't even begin to imagine where I would be today. I mean, I just—I really—I had no direction, and the values that have been instilled in me because of my time in the army.

TS: Do you think sometimes, though, the values were in you, but the army helped—

MM: Bring them out?

TS: Yeah.

MM: Yes, absolutely. I agree with that, but I feel like a lot of them are—they're just really forged in the hard times. And so, I could say that maybe the military just really has the tools to bring those things out. That, like you say, it's already there. I provide the material and they forge you, and I don't think I would have the opportunity to be who I am today without that. And so, I am grateful. I would never change it ever. Even if I could go back, I wouldn't change it for all the good experiences and the bad experiences. I just—I would not be who I am today, with the drive that I have today, and the sense of purpose that I have today, without my time in the military.

TS: I don't remember if we said this on tape or not, but you're in pre-nursing? Is that what you call it?

MM: Yes, pre-nursing.

TS: Pre-nursing. And so, you're here at UNCG [University of North Carolina at Greensboro] attending school for that?

MM: Yes.

TS: That's great. Has it been difficult to transition into a school setting? I mean, it was just a year ago that you got out.

MM: Yes. It was very difficult for me. It's just an entirely new world. Where even in the military—It's not like it was social hour, we were working, but you're very aware that you're among your people, I guess. And they know who you are, and where you stand, and what you do, and everybody knows where everybody lies, I guess, if you will. And you know you have people looking out for you too. But once you come out it's just very much more so a situation of every man for himself, and it's jarring. Even knowing everything I went through to go into the military, I would still say that the transition coming out has been the hardest period of my life. Going in I was, as we say, ready to be molded; fresh material. And that's what happened. And coming out, I am not so much ready to be molded. I am already molded, and now it's like I don't necessarily fit into the shape of the puzzle that it needs me to.

TS: You have certain expectations that were different than when you were a seventeen year old girl, right? About respect, about accountability, those kinds of things.

MM: Yeah, and in that way it's really hard to relate to the people around you. And considering that I am in the beginning of the degree program, and so I'm there with people of an age that just came out of high school and then they went straight into college. We have very different ideals and things that are important to us and our priorities, so it's next to impossible to connect with any of the people around you, which is why without the veteran center—I have attributed a lot of my successes as a student to the veteran center, because without it—it's a common place for us to come together, whereas all of us veterans would just be out there in the sea without it.

TS: But there is your sense of family that you can get from that.

MM: Yes, exactly.

TS: Well, I know you got to get going, and I have probably kept you longer than I should have.

MM: Oh, yeah, I do need to go.

TS: Is there anything you want to add that we haven't talked about, or that you might want to say in your final words for this interview?

MM: I don't know. I mean, honestly, I think I could talk about the army forever. I think we've covered the major bases. Yeah, I think we've gotten most of it. And I think—Even with

the areas of discrimination that I did meet during my time in the military, it's almost—it's funny, because you don't really think about it too much until you get out. Because while you're in, it's just the culture of it.

TS: What would you say to a person that came to you and said that they want to join the army?

MM: Well, I mean, I would tell them it was wonderful. Honestly, I would probably try to give them a little bit of counseling and guidance that I didn't necessarily have. The only thing that I would change if I could go back is, I would have chosen a different mechanics job. I wasn't actually that fond of hydraulics. [both chuckle] Although, it was a nice job. Nothing against it really. But I think that I would have enjoyed working on a different section. But, I mean, that wouldn't have really changed my trajectory in life all that much.

So yeah, I would tell them it was wonderful, and I would give them a little bit of advice, because not all recruiters are as honest as mine, and not all of them care as much about their recruits as mine did. You have to look out for yourself. And very much so, if it's not in the paperwork, it doesn't matter what they said. They can tell you all kinds of flowery stories, and if you don't make sure it's in the paperwork, then, unfortunately, your name is still there. And you're still going to give them what you promised them, which could be however many years of your life.

But, I mean, with all of these stories that we tell like that, it does make time in the military sound just very unlikable. It's still—I still think it's a wonderful thing for anybody to do. And honestly, I think these are pitfalls you could run into in anything in life. It could be as a civilian trying to buy a car and the car salesman is not going to be entirely honest with you because he—you've got something that he wants. It's the same thing with the recruiter. A lot of the hardships I ran into during my time in the military are just—are somethings that aren't necessarily military specific. These are threads that run throughout society, because you get good eggs and bad eggs in everyday life, and it's the same thing when you're in. That's my take on it.

TS: Okay. Well, Megan, it's been great to talk with you. I really appreciate it. I could talk with you all day too. [chuckles] Well, if you don't have anything else to add, I go ahead and shut it off.

MM: Okay.

[End Interview]