WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Cherise Miller-March

INTERVIEWER: Kimber Heinz

DATE: 8 August 2016

[Begin Interview]

KH: Hello. This is Kimber Heinz. I'm here with Cherise March. Today is August 8, 2016, and we're here at the VA Hospital in Durham, North Carolina. Okay. I'm doing this interview as part of the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Cherise, would you say your name how you want it to be read for the website?

CM: Cherise—C-H-E-R-I-S-E—Miller—M-I-L-L-E-R—March—M-A-R-C-H, like the month.

KH: Right. So that's Cherise Miller-March. Alright. We're just going to go through this questionnaire, and just get some background on you. We already did this a little bit just now, but—So your last name—we're going to use C-H-E-R-I-S-E Miller—M-I-L-L-E-R M-A-R-C-H., right?

CM: Yes.

KH: Okay. And your maiden name is Miller?

CM: Yes.

KH: What college did you go to?

CM: I went to Oklahoma City Community College [Oklahoma].

KH: Okay. And Branch?

CM: Air Force.

KH: Air Force. What were the years you were in the air force?

CM: Nineteen eighty-five through 2000.

KH: Two thousand, okay. What was your highest rank in the air force?

CM: Staff sergeant E-5.

KH: Great. Is there any name that you go by, prefer in any way? Or any name you'd like to be used within the interview that we should know about?

CM: Nope. March—Cherise March.

KH: Okay. So that's just the name that you're using.

CM: Yes.

KH: When we write you a letter, we should say, "Dear Ms. March," in response to this interview.

CM: Yes.

KH: Are you married, single, partnered?

CM: Married.

KH: Do you have kids?

CM: Yes.

KH: Okay, great. Alright. How did you find out about this program?

CM: At the Women Veterans conference in Durham.

KH: That was this past year, right?

CM: Yes.

KH: Okay. I'm assuming in the photos that you gave us—we have a photo of you in there, right?

CM: A lot.

KH: [chuckles] Okay. Have you used the GI Bill at all?

[The GI Bill provides educational assistance to servicemembers, veterans, and their dependents]

CM: Yes.

KH: Okay. How do you identify your race or ethnicity?

CM: Caucasian.

KH: Do you have a religious affiliation?

CM: Lutheran.

KH: Lutheran?

CM: Yes. 6-19-1964 [date of birth].

KH: Nineteen sixty-four. Okay. What was your MOS [military occupational specialty]?

CM: I had two MOSes. One was security specialist, in the security police, and the second one was airfield management.

KH: Did you serve during any particular conflicts?

CM: [Operation] Desert Storm.

KH: Where were you born?

CM: Brooklyn, New York.

KH: Where did you enlist?

CM: Fort Worth, Texas.

KH: I know you just went over this with your photos, but can we go back over the different places you were stationed?

CM: Okay.

KH: You can start with basic training if you want.

CM: Yes, basic training was Lackland Air Force Base [Texas], and that was August 1985.

KH: Okay.

CM: My tech school was at Lackland Air Force Base, Median [Training] Annex, September 1985 through November 1985, security specialist. I was one of the very first one hundred females allowed in the security specialist career field.

KH: Yeah, we'll come back to that.

CM: Sorry.

KH: No, that's great.

CM: My first duty station, when I enlisted, was Carswell Air Force Base Reserves [Naval Air Station Fort Worth Joint Reserve Base], and I was only with them for a few months, due to getting pregnant.

KH: What year was that when you went to your first duty station?

CM: That was 1985.

KH: Okay. Great.

CM: And after that, in 1986, I moved to Louisiana and I joined the 917th Tactical Fighter Wing, and remained with the 917th Tactical Fighter Wing Security Police until I went on active duty in 1990.

KH: Okay.

CM: Following—In 1990, I was brought on active duty because the air force needed more personnel because there was the conflict, and I remained at Barksdale Air Force Base [Louisiana] but I just got moved to the second bomb wing as a security specialist. And at the time, that was considered a strategic air command base, and I remained with them until I went to Japan in 1996, and that was Misawa Air Force Base [Misawa Air Base], Japan.

KH: In '96?

CM: Yes. In 2000 I transferred to Luke Air Force Base, Arizona.

KH: Great. Tell me where was the Louisiana unit when you joined the 917th Tactical Fighter Wing.

CM: I was in Shreveport, Louisiana.

KH: Shreveport. Oh, okay. Great. Alright. Thank you for going through all that stuff. Great. Let's just kind of generally start out with a little bit about you. You said you were born in Brooklyn; tell me a little bit about your early life at home.

CM: I was born in Brooklyn, and when I was about one years old we moved to upstate New York, to the Hudson Valley, and lived in a little, small town called Bloomingburg. And it was out in the country. We did a lot of things, like sleigh riding, and just living on a farm with my grandparents next door.

As I grew up, we moved to Westbrookville, New York, and that's where I went to grade school. I was free to roam the mountains. We grew up in a time when children were allowed to be outside. We were barefoot in the summer, and snow up to our waist in the winter. We were swimming in rivers and, as I said, climbing mountains. I remained there until we moved to Fort Worth, Texas, in 1997—or 1979, sorry.

KH: Why did you move to Fort Worth?

CM: My mother was in a car accident on the ice in New York and she had broken her hip, her legs, and she wanted to move to a warmer climate due to that. I went to Boswell High School, and I graduated in 1983.

KH: What got you interested in joining the military?

CM: We lived right on the flight path to Carswell Air Force Base; the planes flew over us all the time. My father was a marine. And all my friends, their parents were military, and it just sounded really exciting.

KH: What was your father's experience like in the Marines?

CM: He was a marine in the Vietnam Era.

KH: Did that impact you at all?

CM: He used to tell stories and, of course, he only talked about the fun stuff and the little shenanigans he pulled, but he never talked about the combat aspect of it.

KH: Why did you choose the air force aside from other branches of the military?

CM: First of all, I liked the uniforms, and we grew up in an air force town. Actually, I really—I tried to join the navy and the army, but they had such long shipping dates, and the air force was the closest shipping date. I wanted to go on active duty but they didn't have anything available for, like, almost a year, so I just did the reserves and then went on active duty after.

KH: Do you remember the day that you went to enlist? Oh yeah, you have a photo, don't you?

CM: Yeah, there's a photo in there. Can I just say something funny about my enlistment?

KH: Definitely.

CM: When I went to the recruiter's station, I scored high enough [on the ASVAB; Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] to do the admin field, however, they were really pushing women into the security specialist career field. As I said, they'd just opened it up to women in 1985. But the recruiter showed me the law enforcement video, which showed, like, the elite law enforcement dressed in their dress blues, with their dogs, and I

did not realize until I got to tech school that I was in the combat section of law enforcement; security specialist was the career field. And the way we found out was we were in our formation and the law enforcement marched by, and we're like, "Who are they and why are they dressed like that?" And that's when we found out that we were the first one hundred women in the security specialist field, and that there actually was two career fields at the time.

KH: The difference was combat versus non-combat?

CM: Combat versus your standard law enforcement people who stand at the gates and drive around in their cars policing the base, where we were the ones in the field, toting around the M60s [machine gun] [unclear] grenade launchers. Basically, we were the combat unit, yes.

KH: And you didn't know until you were at—

CM: No, none of us females knew that, and we didn't even know we were the first one hundred in there until we got to tech school.

KH: Interesting. Why do you think that happened, in terms of your recruitment experience?

CM: That was during the era where women were fighting to be in more career fields than just your standard admin and medical fields. So there was a push.

KH: And the military was, in a way, trying to be proactive about getting women into those positions.

CM: Yeah, women's rights and all of that.

KH: Okay. Great. So going to your first time in the military. You found out, you said, not until tech school.

CM: Yes.

KH: During basic you didn't realize you were in this.

CM: No, we did not know.

KH: What was your basic training experience like?

CM: Basic training was really easy for me because my father had told me all of the stories about the marines, and I kept waiting for it to happen, and none of it happened. There was a point when—my recruiter was shorter than me, and I'm only five foot two [inches], and we were all lined up on the flight line—excuse me—on the jewel pad [?], and she's like, "Number one, step back. Number two." Well, nobody stepped back so I thought it was me that was supposed to step back, and she got in my face, with her nose maybe two

inches from mine, and stuck her butt out and her arms back, and she's like, "[yelling noise]," like right in my face, and I started laughing. I just—I never did—ever really get scared in basic training. Like I said, my father told me so many stories about how tough the marines were.

KH: Right. The people you met there, did you build relationships with folks that lasted, or what was your experiences like with people like there?

CM: Yeah. The women that were in basic training with me, I really didn't keep up with any of them because we were all spread out nationwide. And that was back in the era where you wrote letters, and phone calls were long distance. There really wasn't social media and the stuff we have today.

KH: So overall you're saying good experience, nothing too remarkable about basic training.

CM: Yes.

KH: What kind of stuff did they have you do?

CM: We did a lot of marching; a lot of drill, and back in—I'm going to call it the olden days—but back in the eighties women didn't have the strict standards that men had. So our run was, like, a mile and a half; we didn't have to do as many push-ups, sit-ups, and we—what's funny is, back then we had, kind of like, a class that men didn't have; like, how to wear your hair, and what type of makeup and stuff that you had to wear. Which I don't think that is actually existent anymore. It could be, but. Should I go on to tech school?

KH: Sure. Yeah, that'd be great. What was your tech school experience like?

CM: Tech school was a slap in the face. That is when I had to stand up to the male standards, which meant longer runs, the runs were not in tennis shoes, they were in our boots, with our full gear on, and over rocks, and the exercises that we had to do were very strenuous. I actually built up muscle and stuff during tech school.

The weapons firing range, when—the first time—there's a difference between firing your M-16 during basic training and then the security police qualification course. That was really strenuous. And I think that due to my really small frame, and a lot of us women, they were trying to—I think that we had to work harder—work so much harder than the men did because we had to prove ourselves that we could do it, so we were given, like, the heaviest weapons to carry around, like the M-16 machine gun, and when you carried it, it was almost as long as me. And at times we had to run with it, like at port arms [the rifle is held diagonally in front of the body with the muzzle pointing upward to the left] The other thing that—oh my gosh, it weighed me down in to the ground, was carrying the rounds for the M60. It was so heavy, and it strapped around our body in bandolier style. What do you call that when it comes down and around like that?

KH: I don't know, but I know what you mean.

CM: Kind of like a mailbag style. And the ammo can, oh my gosh, it was so heavy, and we had to walk and run with that to keep up with the other person who was the machine gunner. We swapped places on and off.

The other thing I really had a hard time—I was terrified of throwing grenades. I was always afraid I would drop it next to me, so it was like a hot potato. My heart beat, like, the entire time that I had to throw grenades. The grenade launcher, that was easy; I didn't have a problem with that. What else? Oh my gosh, something just slipped my mind. What the heck was it? Oh, we were laying down on the firing range, and they were kind of tiered, like you have the first row, the second row, that's behind you, and I—it was Texas, and there was red ants on the ground underneath me, and I jumped up, and that was live fire so they just—I'm so lucky that I didn't get shot. But that was, like, a pretty scary moment.

KH: Because the ants were all over your body and you just jumped.

CM: Yes. And I had to—

KH: You said "we had to work harder," talking about the women in your group, so what are some examples that you can remember of that happening?

CM: Well, back then, there was a, kind of, stigma attached to it. A lot of people were open to it, but then there was a lot of men back then who were not open to that sort of thing. So we just had to really work hard to prove that we were worthy to be in that career field.

KH: Do you remember any incidences of that, or not so much?

CM: Yeah. Like, carrying the M60 rounds around my body, and the ammo can, just trying to shuffle and keep up. The runs in the boots, I was short, so five foot two, trying to keep up, running in formation, was really hard. And then in your boots with your flak vest on and all that. I did it. I graduated.

KH: Now that you've had this experience, do think that men and women should be trained in the same way?

CM: Yeah. I think we did good, and as long as you're not, like, a wimpy woman who wants to get over by whining and stuff, I think that women should be allowed to be equals.

KH: After tech school, tell me again where the first place you went was.

CM: It was Carswell Air Force Base, and I really—I wasn't there very long.

KH: What did you do there? When did you really start moving into your MOS?

CM: That would be at the 917th Security Police [unclear] in Shreveport, Louisiana. It was a reserve unit, and we did typical reserve—I think back then it was one drill a month and

then two weeks a year. However, I got a lot of temporary duty assignments; like, I traveled a lot with them. That was in addition to our regular drills.

KH: At this point, you'd found out you were now being trained for combat.

CM: Yes.

KH: So you're saying that your time at Carswell Air Force Base—

CM: It was like nothing; it was just standard drills and book learning kind of stuff.

KH: Okay.

CM: Working on my—I was working on my—There's a five level, seven level, and to get your five level you did workbooks, took tests, and then you took a major test to earn your five level. That's considered the bottom of your rank and structure.

KH: Oh, okay. Gotcha. How was what you were doing in Shreveport at that base different from Carswell?

CM: Oh, my gosh. We trained every weekend, and twice a year we had to qualify on our weapons, and the Security Police qualification course—oh, my gosh—it's not the typical "you fire your M16 down the range". You had to run, like, I think an eighth of a mile, jump down into the prone position and fire your weapon. Meanwhile, your heart is racing so your firing is kind of all over the place. Then you jump back up and you ran another eighth of a mile, jump back down into the kneeling position, and so on and so forth, it went through all the positions.

It's funny, because I actually didn't qualify and the first—on the first time after tech school. It was August, it was so hot, and we went in rounds, like heats, so many people went at one time, and they put me in the first round. I failed it. Had to do it with the second round of people, the third round of people. Meanwhile, the day is progressing on, and when it got to the last round of people, everybody just wanted to get out of there, so everybody sacrificed one round and shot it into my target [chuckles] so that we could get the hell out of there. Sorry about the "hell."

KH: So then you passed?

CM: Yeah, I passed. Then that following—Like, six months later I got expert. Don't ask me how, but I got my act together. I was in probably better shape by then. During the 917th, we had to go to what's called an Air Base Ground Defense School, and that was in Texas, trained by the army at Fort Hood. We were in a little annex called Camp Swift. It was a horrible place, and it seems like everything we did always landed in the summer months, like July and August. When we were there, we were housed in these little trailers, and Camp Swift—I just want to add this to the record—was the place that they kept the Japanese during—when they interred the Japanese during the—I guess it was the Pearl Harbor era, and it was really a very small place. We had an outside chow hall. They

threw us in trailers, and it was coed in these trailers with no partitions, but we were so dirty and hot we slept in uniforms anyway.

Our shower and bathroom experience was horrifying. They had—the commodes was like four across, back to back, with a piece of plywood in between the male and female side. And the showers were the same ways, so you could see through this crack and see each other. At that time, there was only myself and one other female, and I would, like, hold it, having to go to the bathroom, until the middle of the night.

KH: Wow.

CM: When we arrived our first time at Camp Swift, it was pouring down rain, and the army had us stand on a hill and dig fox holes in the rain. You can't do it. It's red clay and it kept filling up with water, and they made us do that for the whole morning. And then they finally stopped it, walked us to the other part of the annex where there was, like, professional dug fox holes for us to do the rest of the training in.

We had to live in the fox holes for four days, and we're in a field exercise. The first thing that we did was a compass course, which was an overnight course, and our packs were so heavy. We had everything to spend the whole weekend with us. My friend Rhonda and I, we were tiny, and as we were going along we're thinking we'd come back the same way. We started hiding some of our gear under the bushes. We'd go a little bit, hide the entrenching tool, which was a shovel, go a little bit, hide our tent[?], so on and so forth; we were just hiding our stuff. We never did find that stuff going back. And when we got to the final space, which was our little camp, the only thing we had to sleep in was our poncho liner [unclear]. That was funny. We never did get in trouble. Everyone just kind of laughed it off.

KH: Yeah. You were two women in a group of how many people?

CM: Oh, my gosh, maybe thirty, forty.

KH: Overall, what was that like?

CM: It wasn't really bad; they were like our brothers. I mean, they embraced us, and there was no discrimination in that unit during the reserves. Active duty was a different story. I'm trying to think of—There was a lot of hilarious stories. We lived in the fox holes at Camp Swift for three or four days. We had no showers, we were filthy, and we were females so we used baby wipes to keep clean. And when it was really dark we would sneak out and go under what's called a water buffalo. It's like this great big tank that—where we get our water from spigots. We would go out there and illegally use that water to get refreshed.

KH: So you didn't have to go into the showers that had—

CM: We weren't allowed to during that four day—the four days living in a fox hole. When we got out of the fox holes, then it was back to the showers and stuff. Oh, my God, we were so dirty; dirty and hot.

KH: And you did use those showers after?

CM: We had to. I mean, you couldn't not take showers. Yeah, it was a little unsettling. I'm trying to think what else. Oh, during that 917th I got to travel to Alaska and—I'm getting it out of order. Let me start—There was this exercise called Wild Stallion [a search and rescue exercise], and we went up to Michigan, into the forest, and what that was, was the pilots had to get the training—I can't think of the training—the name of it right now—but they would be dropped out of airplanes, and they had to go miles and miles on the ground, and we, the Security Police, were the aggressors; we had to capture them. So we lived in the woods for a lot days. Thank goodness the weather was cool. It wasn't hot. And that was a lot of fun. I actually made it—my picture into *Soldier of Fortune* magazine [*The Journal of Professional Adventurers*] during that, and I took a copy of the picture and put it in there. My name wasn't mentioned but my picture was, like, in the left, kneeling, putting a weapon on the female. This didn't really pertain to me, but we had to capture the pilots—like I said—and we captured one of the female pilots, and they had her turn around backwards, and we were standing—or actually, they had her close her eyes and I had to take off her uniform and put on her prisoner uniforms, because they did this, everything was totally realistic like it would happen. But the men were standing back with their backs turned so they couldn't see giving the orders, so they thought it was the men doing that, and the women, they really freaked out, and they basically told them in the end, "What do you think is going to happen to you when you're really captured?" So they made the exercise as realistic as possible; like, they rappelled down out of the airplane and had to live on their own in the woods.

KH: And for you, in general, you would do these kinds of exercises?

CM: Exercises.

KH: And you were never airborne at any point?

CM: No.

KH: Okay.

CM: Well, airborne, as in helicopters looking out, that sort of stuff, but I wasn't—I slept through the rappelling training that I was supposed to take. It was optional at Wild Stallion, and I just overslept and missed it. I was disappointed about that, but it happened.

KH: Wild Stallion was the one in Michigan, right?

CM: Yes.

KH: And then you said after that, you went to Alaska?

CM: Yeah, Alaska was my next TDY [temporary duty], and that—we were in the middle of Alaska TDY. There's pictures in there of me standing on the wing of an [Fairchild

Republic] A-10 [Thunderbolt II], and I did a lot of flight line duty. We were chasing moose off the flight line.

But it was beautiful because it was in the month of August. I already knew I had orders to go on active duty when I returned from that, but while we were in Alaska [Operation] Desert Storm was heating up so bad they had to send us back early and everyone deployed. I went to my active duty spot, and the rest of my unit deployed overseas to Saudi Arabia.

[The First Gulf War occurred from 2 August 1990 to 29 February 1991. Codenamed Operation Desert Shield for operations leading to the buildup of troops and defense of Saudi Arabia, and Operation Desert Storm in its combat phase, it was a war waged by coalition forces from 35 nations led by the US against Iraq in response to Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait]

KH: They deployed without you?

CM: Yeah, because they remained reservists and I went on active duty. There was a handful of us that went on active duty, and I stayed at Barksdale Air Force Base. And that is when the negative outlook on females started. It was—That was pretty bad.

When I went on active duty, they—first of all, they took my rank away because they said you earn rank faster in the reserves, which was all wrong because no one else had to have their rank taken away. So I actually went backwards from a senior airman to an airman first class. They made me start all of my training over again; like, took away the qualifications and made me start over again.

KH: What did that look like?

CM: That was humiliating, and there was a lot of racial stuff going on at the time. I was put on a nightshift—I was a single parent of a four year old—I was on the nightshift, which wasn't bad. I mean, it was actually easier than the day shift; a lot of less action. But I was put—the only female—the only female on an all-men flight. It was racially segregated. I was put on the African-American flight, which doesn't really—all the African-Americans were—the majority were on the night shift, and the day shift was all the Caucasians. I didn't like it. I mean, I was—it was pretty bad. I actually got cross-trained, and after I got cross-trained the commander was fired, and they put all the names in a hat and they redrew the names and mixed up the races.

KH: What does cross-trained mean?

CM: That means I went into the Airfield Management career field.

KH: Oh, okay.

CM: Yeah, I just had a lot of anxiety with that. At Barksdale Air Force Base, we were a Strategic Air Command, which no longer exists. We were on alert. We had an alert facility where we had to do [unclear] sentry, like, lock[?] the air path. I worked in the weapons—the nuclear weapons storage facility. There was this one occasion where I was on a night shift, and to be qualified on training they did a perimeter check. They called it and I had to go check the perimeter because an alarm was going off. And I was walking up and down the fence. I couldn't find anything, and they were just getting on to me, "Find it! Find it! Find it!"

And as I was walking, it's in the middle of the night, somebody grabbed my leg from underneath, and they buried themselves underneath and grabbed my leg. I mean, they're lucky that I didn't shoot them.

KH: Who did that?

CM: I think it was my sergeant; it's been so many years now; this is back in the nineties. But yeah, it was stuff like that. Like I said, this is when they really started—on active duty was like—females were marginal.

KH: In terms of what the Women's Rights Movement pushed?

[The Women's Movement, or second-wave feminist movement, refers to a series of political campaigns during the 1960s and 1970s for reforms on issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, equal pay, women's suffrage, and sexual harassment]

CM: Yeah, they just made it harder on us with that kind of stuff, but a lot of it was me just, kind of, being inexperienced. I really didn't like the work at all. When—I liked the times—There was no women on—when I got moved to day shift, there was no women working in the law enforcement half, and if you remember, that's the other half—the noncombat half. So they pulled me all the time to work the gates, and when there was females that were arrested or something like that they called me because you had to do, like, the body checks. And the gate duty, that wasn't so bad at all. I was fine with that.

KH: What was the breakdown in terms of numbers of women, men, in that situation?

CM: Oh, gosh. In the Security Specialist—when I was working the weapons?

KH: Yeah, really your time at Barksdale.

CM: In my Security Police Flight, there was a lot of us. I can't—I don't really remember the amount of female—I was the only female on my flight, so that wasn't—that wasn't very well—That was on the night shift. The one thing that—historically, that happened while I was at Barksdale was, we had the alert facility and that's where they had the planes on alert, ready to go—the crews [unclear] pilots and stuff—and we guarded them. During—

Sometime during my time at Barksdale they stood down the alert facilities and our name changed. They took away the Strategic Air Command. I'm trying to think what the—And then we went—I think it was tac [tactical].

KH: So Barksdale, there was that, and then you started doing the nuclear weapons perimeter work after that.

CM: Yes. That was what I did—When I went from reserve to active, that is—the combat part was escorting the nuclear weapons when they were being taken from the facility and put onto the aircraft.

KH: And then you did MP [military police] work as well, at the gates.

CM: Yeah, law enforcement at the gates. That wasn't too bad. But I applied for my cross train and I got it, into airfield management, and airfield management, we were in charge of the whole airfield. We did the lighting checks, made sure everything was running smoothly. We gave permission for aircraft to come into—into the facility, and we—I was a trainer for—a flight line driving trainer, because you had to get qualified to drive on the flight line. Whenever there was emergencies—in flight emergencies—we were the ones who responded to the emergencies on the flight line.

I remember—I was the one to receive a call from the—you had the air traffic control at each base, but then in the middle—we put in the flight plans for the air—I call it the "roads in the sky," so the pilots brought us their flight plans, and we put it in and you'd send it to different air traffic controllers, like, along the way, and I received a call for a—one of our airplanes crashed and everyone perished. So I had to call that out on the emergency phone. That was pretty sad because we knew those pilots; like, we talked to them that morning.

KH: What happened with the plane crash?

CM: They were flying over their relative's house—it was a jet—A [Northrop] T-38 [Talon]—and they were flying over their parents' house and they were kind of hotdogging it [flying recklessly; showing off] while their family was on the ground photographing it. So that wasn't pretty.

In airfield management, I actually got a couple of awards at that job. I was chosen as Airman of the Month for—Airman of the Quarter for our flight. We were in the same flight as air traffic control, whether operations and airfield management; we were all in the same control. That was a pretty big accomplishment. I ended up—Because of that I received a T-38 incentive award where I could fly in the T-38, and we had to wear g-suits, and the pilot took me up to Mach 4—I think it was Mach 4; I have a bad memory; it was so long ago—and did the barrel rolls. When we landed, I had to go to work; I was so sick. I mean, I couldn't walk straight. It was a pretty [unclear] thing for me.

[A g-suit, or more accurately name anti-g suit, is a flight suit worn by aviators and astronauts who are subject to high levels of acceleration force (g)]

KH: Okay. Let's circle back and then bring us to where we are now, in terms of just, kind of, what your experiences were over the time that you started active duty; like, that whole time, in terms of being a woman and facing different challenges. You were stripped of your rank, and you had to redo training.

CM: Yes.

KH: Were there any specific experiences within that you'd like to highlight during that time?

CM: It was a lot of sexual comments and stuff like that, that went on during that time at night in the alert facility. There was, like, a gag order back at that time. If anything happened, the women had to be quiet. Like, you were not allowed to say a word, because of reprisals back then, it was the good ol' boys club. So a lot of that sort of stuff went on that we were not able to talk about, or turn somebody in, because we were always being [unclear] back in those days, which actually got worse when I went to Japan. So there was that, and like I said, we always had to do more and go out of our way more to prove ourselves.

[Reprisal occurs when a responsible management official takes (or threatens to take) an adverse personnel action against an individual, or withholds a favorable personnel action, because that individual made or was thought to have made a protected communication]

KH: You were told there was a gag order.

CM: Well, you weren't told, but you learned from people before you, so you just didn't talk about stuff back then; any kind of things. A lot of comments made, and a lot of—just different stuff like that, that you just didn't—Off the record—I don't want this on the record.

[Recording Paused]

KH: Okay, so we're recording again. I was going to ask you a question. Not to go into specifics, but did you feel safe, overall, during that time period?

CM: I felt—I got orders right after that. I felt betrayed and ashamed, and I just learned not to put myself in any kind of compromising positions. But gosh, I just think—that was the 917th—going on to active duty is when that happened, and on active duty, there was things that happened to other women, but that wasn't my time. And they just—you didn't talk about it; you were labeled whores and such, so you didn't talk about anything back then.

And when I moved into Japan, I—there was lot of—I was pretty and small, so there was a lot of comments made, and the one that really upset me—I was always an achiever. I received awards—like, different Falcon Standard[?] awards; just different stuff over there—and we had to test to make staff sergeant. You had to make staff sergeant by your tenth year or you were separated—involuntary separated. I was always good academically. When I had to test for different career fields, I always scored on the commander's list—it's kind of like the dean's list—scored really high. In Japan, for making E-5, I made it early; like, before my tenth year. And there was a guy who I worked with who did not make it, and he was [unclear] in getting kicked out, and he told me that I didn't deserve to make it because I was a female. In Japan I had a supervisor who had—who had gotten into trouble, thank God—but he would call me and say, "If you want a good evaluation, you need to come over and sleep with me."

And I stood my ground. I said, "Absolutely not. I'm not going to do it," because I knew I had my scores and stuff like that. He ended up hitting the commander in the face and got kicked out, so thank goodness for that.

KH: Did you feel you had any support back then?

CM: No, I just kept things to myself in Japan. And after he left, there wasn't really any more of that stuff going on. What I found hardest in Japan was, there was a period when—like I said, a single parent—and what really, really upset me was that the other—the higher ranking people, they could take off of work to go to their children's, like, things at school, and they could—when their kids were sick, they never took leave. But me, we were shift workers, so I was working [unclear] swings[?], kind of a rotating schedule, and I had to take leave for every single incident that went—with my children, which meant that when it was time to go back to the United States, I never had enough leave saved up, and I just felt that was totally—it wasn't right. And this was—In Japan I worked with a lot of females so that wasn't—I don't know. It was just the same for all the females. It's like we had this feeling that our kids weren't allowed to get sick because, "Oh, you're a female and you can't—can't do your job because you're a female and you have children."

I have so much regret—just so much regret—from missing out on my children's life in Japan. My whole military career I felt like I wasn't the full parent that I should be. If I wanted to go on things with my children, I had to—I was on mid-shifts, so I would—what we call—just "swinging the mid;" we just didn't go to bed. Mid-shift life was really hard. I mean, every time there was commander's calls, or anything like that, we had to come in during our sleep time. So I walked around for four years never really seeing daylight, and just asleep for four years of my life.

There was actually a year in Japan where I worked day shift—we worked off of the base. I was assigned to a bombing range, which—oh, that was the coolest job. We would go into the towers and clear the aircraft on hot—what's called "hot"—and they would drop their bombs on the different targets that we had set up. And we also had fighters out there who strafed [to attack repeatedly with bombs or machine-guns from low-flying aircraft] with bullets onto the targets. We were right on the ocean and worked with the Japanese Air [Self-Defense] Force. That was a good experience for me, but the air force turned over the contract and that's how I ended up back in airfield management.

KH: What most attracted you to enjoying that part of it?

CM: It was day shift, number one—Monday through Friday; there was no shift work—so I could be a mother.

A couple of funny things that happened. We were in Misawa, Japan, which is way at the top of Japan. Snow was—Oh, my gosh, it was like the Alps. So you had Winter Olympics up in that part. The snow was so high—feet high; like really high; taller than me high—and I had to learn how to drive a snow cat. I learned how to drive dump trucks, front end loaders, forklifts—like, everything—because we had to clear the—we had to clear the bombs out of their—when EOD [Explosive Ordnance Disposal] came, they would defuse them, check them out, and then we would be the ones loading them up. We had to drive the—I can't think of the name of it—front end loader—that machine that goes and moves the dirt and lifts it up with the—I had to drive that. We had to rebuild the berms [an artificial ridge or embankment] on the strafing panels, and use magnetic things to pick up the rounds that were on the ground. We—Gosh, going back and forth from the main base, I had to drive a dump truck. In Japan, the roads are, like, very narrow, we're driving on the wrong side of the steering wheel, and there was benjo ditches that you would fall into. So I was always in fear driving back and forth from the range, which was, like, thirty miles.

[A benjo ditch is an open-air, gently sloping Japanese sewer system used to direct water and human waste to growing fields as fertilizer]

I was going out to one of the towers one time and my dump truck got a flat tire, and I would call on the radio and say, "There's a flat tire."

And they're like, "Change it. Change it."

Well, that was another thing. If it was one of them, everybody would come running, but because I was a female, "Let her change it."

And I was like, "I'm going to do this. I'm going to do it myself."

But the jack that was in the dump truck was not the jack that goes with the dump truck, and they were like, "Yes, it is. Yes, it is. Get that tired changed. Get that tire changed."

And finally, there was more aircraft coming in hot, so they had to come out, and then that's when they were like, "Oh, there is no jack for this." So it was things like that.

It was fun though. We got to—just riding all that heavy equipment everywhere, it was—

KH: Just to talk more about your whole experience of being a parent during your military service. When were your kids born?

CM: I had a daughter who was born in October 1986. When I went on active duty at Barksdale Air Force Base, I worked at mid-shifts, which were twelve hours. You had to be—Twelve hours was on the flight line. You had what was called guard mount [pre-shift official formation] before, and that's where you weren't—had to be there before, in

formation, to listen to the day's orders; that was before your shift. And you had to check out your weapon. After your shift, you had to clean your weapon and turn it in. So it turned into, like thirteen, fourteen hour days.

My daughter, she was four or five at the time. I would take her to—across town to one of the sergeants on—that was on my schedule, so she would go there, and I paid to sleep[?]. I would pick her up and—this was really bad. Financially, I was not receiving child support or anything for her, so I was on a A1C [Airman First Class] pay. And I would just plug in 8-tracks [sound-recording tape format popular in the U.S. from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s] and sleep on the couch and let her watch movies. Never got any sleep. And at—I finally got so bad that I put her in a regular daycare center during the day. So she was at night with a babysitter, and during the day in daycare for me to sleep for a couple hours.

When the—Desert Storm really revved up—revved up really bad—and half of our people had to go—we deployed. I was not deployed. But they said, "You have to be ready to go at a moment's notice." And the people who were already—got deployed, they were wherever they were—in the dorms and at home—they were called in, and they weren't told they weren't coming back, and you had to come with all your bags and stuff, ready to go when they called that. So they never got to say goodbye to their spouses, and in their dorms was, like, bowls of cereal—everything left undone, rotting food. They were shutting down those barracks, we had to move them into the brand new barracks, so we were going in their rooms and just gagging over food and stuff left out.

My daughter, she ended up having to go live with my mom in Fort Worth, Texas—my parents—during that time so that I could be ready to deploy at any moment.

KH: Wow. There's a period of some time, you're saying, where you really just didn't see her much at all.

CM: Yeah. And then in Japan, by then I had a son and—

KH: When was he born?

CM: He was born in '92. I got married again; ended up getting divorced from that marriage; military life wasn't conducive. We were separated due to the military for a long time. I went to Japan. But I brought the kids with me to Japan, and I made friends with a navy girl who was Monday through Friday days. She had a set of twins, and she took my children—we lived in these high tower base housing, so all I had to do was shuffle the kids down the elevator to her house. They slept there. In the morning, I got off of work and picked up all the kids—all four kids—and took them to daycare. Her child—Her son—Her twins and my son, who were three and four, or something like that, they—we put them in a Japanese school actually—a Japanese kindergarten is was it was called—for—in Japan that started at four years old. That was a good experience. The kids learned to speak Japanese. And we had to have a sponsor who spoke Japanese who could tell us everything that was going on. But that was a really, really good experience for the kids. So we covered each other. When she had to go TDY her kids stayed with me, and we had a really good system going until she got orders.

KH: What happened after that?

CM: After that, I just managed. Another girl who I worked with, we babysat each other's kids. Basically, we never had time without other people's kids. And she had a baby; it was really hard on me; I didn't like taking care of a baby. She had it easier with my kids because they were maintenance-free.

Japan was a good experience overall. I loved it. And working with the Japanese air force, I learned to speak Japanese over time because one of them wanted to learn English and I wanted to learn Japanese.

KH: Do you still get to speak any?

CM: I haven't used it. I wish that my son and I would have kept talking to each other in it but we didn't. I only remember a little bit of stuff. By the time I left, I was writing in Hiragana and Katakana [components of the Japanese writing system] on a kindergarten level, so I learned a lot of Japanese over there. Our children would go and spend—We made friends when we were out camping. Japan was beautiful up in those parts. We made friends at a campground, and they were Japanese navy, so we would swap kids, so—like on holidays, so our kids could go to school with them and their kids could go to school with us.

We would go to the onsens, which is hot water springs, and they were outside, some of them, and you'd sit in that hot water—you'd wear a towel around you, get in the water, and then hide yourself under the water. But it was crazy, because when you got out you had to walk through the snow, back in the dressing room. Overall, that was my favorite assignment. I loved Japan.

KH: That definitely sounds, from your story, that it was a really special time. Okay. So you were never deployed during Desert Storm, right?

CM: No.

[Extraneous comments redacted] [Recording Paused]

KH: I had asked you if you had ever been deployed and you said—

CM: Okay, I was not deployed on active duty, but I went to Iraq as a contractor. I was in Kirkuk, Iraq, and that was after the military.

From Japan on, I went to Luke Air Force Base, and nothing happened until I got a medical separation. So I got medically retired at Luke Air Force Base in 2000.

KH: In terms of the medical retirement, was it for any particular condition that you'd like to share?

CM: No, it was kind of a personal condition.

KH: Sure. Sure. Okay. Medical retirement in 2000. Alright. After you were stripped of rank when you went onto active duty, how did you regain the rank that you left with?

CM: Oh, I tested high, and I actually went through two more ranks. I went from an E-2 [Airman First Class] to a E-5 [Staff Sergeant] [unclear].

KH: Through testing?

CM: Yeah.

KH: That was during your time at—

CM: Both Barksdale and Misawa, Japan; both of them; I got all my rank back. The first one, when they busted you—it's not busted for any punitive action so you just did that. As soon as I got my qualifications back then I got that, so it wasn't the same amount of time as everybody else would have to; I got it back really fast.

KH: Right. And this was also including the story about your testing as staff sergeant, and the kind of competition within?

CM: Yeah.

KH: And so, you felt like, as a woman, the process of testing into those higher ranks was different for you?

CM: It was easy for me. I mean, if you studied and you did good at your job, you got your promotions. If you didn't study and you didn't do good on the tests, you didn't get your promotion. And I always studied, so.

KH: So you weren't facing any challenges in that regard?

CM: No.

KH: Or from other people?

CM: No, just like with that one guy who was like, "You shouldn't get it. You're getting it early. And you're just getting it because you're a female. You're getting rank because you're a female." Like, accusing me, but he didn't study. It wasn't my fault that he went to ten years and didn't get promoted. It's on you. You've got to do the work, and you'll get promoted. You can't—They can't change testing scores, but in your evaluations, that's the part—do your physical fitness testing.

KH: Overall, you were a woman in the military at this time, where you're saying there's a lot of shifting happening [unclear] women's roles.

CM: Exactly, there was a lot of shifting going on. A lot more women in all the different fields, besides the medical and all that.

KH: Is there anything overall that you would say just about that time period; like, observations that you made overall?

CM: In the beginning, it was a little harder, but going into the nineties it got a lot better. And I don't know if it's just because I was in a career field with a lot of women or what, but I did really well.

KH: Did you get more support, did you see more support happening, in terms of child care, support for [unclear].

CM: That never happened. It was just support with women, with each other. As far as, like I said, all the way until I got out, it was always shift work.

KH: In terms of the child care end of it, not progress, but you saw progress in terms of how women were treated.

CM: We treated we each other—yeah. And yeah, like, the men, it seemed like they could always get off the counter and go take care of their kids and not be charged rank[?], but I had to take leave—I'm sorry—take leave for every one of my trips. Which it wasn't a whole heck of a lot. Once I put my son into the Japanese daycare, I don't—he did better there than in base. In the base daycare, when we got to Japan, he had a nervous stomach so when I would drop him off—it was his first time with a different babysitter. He had the same babysitter from birth until we moved to Japan, and that newness of going to a daycare, his stomach would get upset, and he still to this day has a nervous stomach; throws up before airplane rides. But the base daycare said he can't come back for twenty-four hours, even with the pediatrician saying that you're feeding into it, he's getting his way. Japanese didn't play. The Japanese didn't care. They were strict and he—actually, it was a good experience.

KH: Okay. And you were saying overall for women in the military, aside from the child care piece, you saw in the nineties that conditions were improving.

CM: Exactly. Yeah. Things got better and—There was still a lot of—not for myself after Barksdale—but there was still a lot of sexual harassment stuff going on, which now—which to this day is starting—men are being trained now; men are being trained and there's a high—women are able to come forward without reprisal, and there's a lot more support for women to come forward.

KH: Yeah. Have you gotten to have conversations with folks about the outfacingess[?] of military sexual trauma, and the media around it?

CM: Actually, I—when I got out I went through occupational therapy school—I was an OT—and I worked for, I think, six years on the outside world. In 2007, I got a job at Fort

Bragg, working with the active duty in therapy, TBI [traumatic brain injury] clinic, an inpatient psych [psychiatry], and I was back around that military climate so I actually started feeling a little bit better. But during that, there was so much training we had to go through, and I could see the shift in mentality. Women's roles were a lot more. There was respect. Training for what is—exactly what is sexual harassment. It was a big climate shift—big climate shift now—compared to back when I was in.

KH: You left Japan and then you—

CM: Went to Luke Air Force Base.

KH: Went to Luke, you were discharged.

CM: Separated.

KH: Separated. And then, is that when you did contractor work, or you went to school first?

CM: No, I went to school. I went to school, worked in the civilian field in medical. Got the job at Fort Bragg. We moved here. And while at Fort Bragg, working in the OT clinic, my husband got a job at Fort Eustis [Virginia]. In order for me to get preferential placement, I had to go on leave without pay; showing that I was ready to go. It was during that year that I contracted in Iraq in Airfield Management, and I just made sure I came back at eleven months, and just took my old job back because I never did get a call to start working at Fort Eustis. My husband, then he got a job here at the VA [Veterans Administration], and then I got a job here at the VA, so we were together again.

KH: That's great. What was it like to come out of the military and go to school, and adjust to civilian life?

CM: I'm going to tell you that from diagnosis to discharge was about a period of eight weeks. I went in to the deepest darkest depression. I gained, like, fifty pounds. I couldn't get out of bed. I mean, it was so bad. I just felt like I had no role in life anymore. I was stripped away of the person that I was on active duty. I mean, it was—that was me. I love the military as a whole—I loved it—and I was just getting into where I was an NCO [non-commissioned officer], so I was supervising and—I just felt so accomplished, and to get all of that stripped away—yeah, I got retired, but I wasn't working with military. I didn't know how to act.

After seven months, my—I finally got my VA disability and I was able to go to rehab [rehabilitation] and go to school, and I started feeling like I had a purpose in life again, so it got better as it went—and when I got to Fort Bragg and was back in that military climate, I was more at ease. Working with civilians, it was just hard. I just started getting a sense of purpose again when I got to Fort Bragg.

KH: How did you get through the time when it was hard?

CM: Medication. Medication, counseling, yeah. And when the VA picked me up and I—Because when you get out of the military, where are you going to get a job? You know what I did when I got out of the military? I was a substitute cafeteria woman at my children's elementary school—my son's elementary school. I mean, feeling embarrassed and—oh, my God, it was awful. It was just terrible.

After a while I got a job at the base daycare center, but that still wasn't me. I mean, I wasn't working at the potential. I was back down at the bottom of the food chain, not making any money, and once I—like I said, once I went to school I felt like I had a purpose in life, so that was better.

KH: So you got something from the military—You want me to pause it?

[Recording Paused]

KH: Alright, we're recording again. My question was, you got something from the military in terms of retirement, and then you used the GI Bill, you said earlier.

CM: Yeah. [unclear] rehab with the VA, and as the years went on things just got better. I worked in OT until I got—at Fort Bragg I worked in OT, and I maxed out my potential when—this new career field for the VA came open, peer support specialist, so—what it is, is it's veterans who have overcome therapy, like counseling and stuff, and we're role models to veterans who are—like PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] and mental illness, substance abuse. We're like—We have groups, and we do individuals, and we're here to support, give hope, and show veterans that they can get better. And so, it's the most rewarding job, besides getting a raise, which was a three step raise, so it was a huge raise to come do this job.

But I feel like I'm really, really serving the veterans. And I didn't have this when I got out; I did not have it. I was dumped alone, and cut off, and this is such a wonderful program because veterans are coming together, and they are coming out of their isolation, and they're meeting people, and they're knowing that someone else is going through those experiences. Especially in the women's groups that I have, people are able to talk about—you're able to talk about what happened to you, and just by talking about it and knowing that others are going through what you've been through, supporting one another, making those connections with people. So you come out of the house and you're doing things in life again; you're participating in life.

In my women's group, I do a lot of empowering. I—During my time here, I have coauthored a peer-support writing-to-wellness curriculum, and that just went nationwide.

KH: Congratulations.

CM: A couple weeks ago, last month. And we did—There was a lot of outcome measures that we did, myself and another peer-support from Iron Mountain, Michigan. We just are training people now; it's going nationwide. Our curriculum is being implemented, like I said, in all the VA hospitals, and I—the feedback I'm getting from the psychologists and

counselors is phenomenal. I have a veteran who's been in my group for probably eight months, and he was contemplating committing suicide, and he wrote about it and said—and brought that writing to his doctor. So we're just receiving so much. Our veterans that are participating in this group now are able to tell their recovery stories in detail and are facing—getting those skeletons out of the closet [idiom for confessing secrets]. It's a wonderful program. And that brings us to today.

KH: That's great. Well, it sounds like you're feeling much happier with your career now than you did when you first left the military.

CM: Yeah.

KH: In terms of PTSD, we hear a lot about that in the news now, or military sexual trauma; that's another new phrase. These are both things that have been happening for a long time. Do you think there's a difference in those types of experiences from when you served to what you're seeing now?

CM: I will say—I don't think I said this earlier—I was the victim of military sexual trauma, and I couldn't talk about it. I felt ashamed, and I felt really bad about myself, and now I believe the statistics right now are showing women are going forth with it; like, they are beginning to talk about it. But there are also those women who don't talk about it, and in my groups I see a difference between—I have women from the Vietnam Era all the way up to OIF/OEF [Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom; refers to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq], and I also have men who are victims of military sexual trauma, and the older ones, they don't really talk about it till now. I mean, we share stories, so I'm hearing the stories from Vietnam all the way up to the OIF/OEF era.

KH: Just in terms of people's current day experiences, we're clear that it's still happening. Do you see there being any changes, to where you possibly see the culture shifting enough to make this type of stuff stop?

CM: The culture has shifted a lot. It is making—There has been a decrease. But I think a lot of it has to do with the age of men. Like, during Vietnam and during the seventies, you had those men who had a different mindset about females. You got to remember, back then, women stayed home; you were a mother first; you were a wife. You cooked and you cleaned, you didn't have a career field. So as the years have progressed, women in general are beginning to work, and with the younger generation—the new generation of military men, and women, because it goes on both ways—military sexual trauma—the changing is starting early, and you don't have those old-timers that have that mentality; they're all retired now. I mean, there's still stuff going on out there but—especially deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. There's been a lot of incidences with it overseas, because there's a lot of threats that go on over there. In general, it's getting better.

KH: And you've been seeing that in your world now as someone who supports folks going through a similar experience as you had.

CM: Yes.

KH: Okay. I know we didn't actually talk about when you were in Kirkuk, but did you want to talk about Kirkuk?

CM: Yeah. Kirkuk is—I think what's really important about my experience in Kirkuk, in relevance to this job, is the PTSD portion of the soldiers. Now I tend to at least identify with that half. In Kirkuk, I was embedded with the air force—I worked with the air force—and—with the air traffic controllers, and the weather, and airfield management. Our job over there was basically the same as active duty: make sure the lighting was working, that navigational aids—which is the pilots' navis [navigational tools] and stuff.

What wasn't the same was the fact that the flight line was the place that got hit a lot. Our chow hall got hit. That was my first day—my very first day—in Kirkuk. We were standing in our little metal hut where all the women were housed in the air force. I heard something—We were all standing, actually, by my bed, and there was this whistle that went by and then a bang, and it was across the street; the storage unit of the DFAC—which is the dining facility—got hit. And that was like, "Oh, my gosh. Welcome to Kirkuk." I mean, that stuff, it went on all the time.

When we arrived there, was the time when this guy—this man in Texas burned the Quran [Islamic sacred book], and we really paid the price. I don't know what he was thinking, because he put all of us in danger, that were over there. We really, really got hit. In that one month we had forty hits; forty hits in that one month; I'll never forget it. We were the ones—We found out first. There was—The command post called us on what's called the red phone—the hotline—and gave us the [unclear], which is the point of impact, and—I forget what the second one was—but they gave us the plots for where the stuff hit. And we had to call it out, we had to account for all of the people on our flight in the air force. We called the dorms[?] and got a headcount to make sure that everybody was still alive and nobody got hurt. Then we had to—We suspended flight operations, which were twenty-four hours at Kirkuk. We had to drive all over the airfield and look for—pickup whatever was out there, except for the unex—the UXOs [unexploded ordnance] and stuff, we couldn't touch them. But we were always cleaning bullet rounds off of the runway.

There was a day I got pinned in the bathroom, which was like these little metal trailers that were out there, and they were pinging off it and I was hiding in the stall, and couldn't come out until the pinging stopped.

KH: Those were bullets?

CM: Yeah, because the wall to the base was just this low wall that separated the street, and I'm telling you, it was probably—not very far. Across the street from this old raggedy air traffic control tower that we were housed in, there was—it was scary when you got stuck in [unclear] with incoming.

That was a good experience. I rode in helicopters and stuff like that.

KH: And you learned about PTSD just through the fact that you were under fire, and the people around you are experiencing it.

CM: Yeah. I wasn't going off the FOB [forward operating base], but—I stayed on the FOB—but even you meeting people and you're—you at least got a good feel of what was going on, because we were getting hit. I think the scariest part was, us females, we had cipher locks on our doors, and it was like eleven o'clock, my friends and I were walking back from—we were on shift work so we were walking back from eating breakfast at eleven o'clock at night, and there was a—it was like sirens[?] going, "Incoming! Incoming!" I heard this bang, bang, bang, and they were falling, like, right around us, and I got nervous and couldn't open up the cipher lock. As soon as I got through the door, bam, and my trailer shook. We all thought—It was our bathroom that got hit, but it was the one that was right next door to us, and they were pretty close. That was the one that got hit. But all the dirt kept coming off the ceiling.

So we continued to get hit. I mean, it was constant. And finally, we had to go out into what's called a bunker, and the army eventually came and got us during a little pause and took us across the street to a brick shelter at their headquarters. And what was interesting is, they have this big balloon in the sky that can see—we called it the "eye in the sky"—can see off the FOB, and there was these Iraqis that had one on the rails, we called it, and they were kicking it; they couldn't get it to launch. But we spent the night in the army building until it was—until our military police got over there and took over control.

We actually—One of our female contractors went home after that. She couldn't handle it.

KH: You told me where you were, but what was your actual job title?

CM: Airfield management.

KH: Okay.

CM: Airfield Management Specialist. It was the same as when I left the active duty one, but we just had a lot different role. We had a whole bunch more inflight emergencies. We saw aircraft coming in from all over. We had the Russian "Bear" [Tupolev Tu-95; "Bear" is the NATO reporting name] come in. We had a lot of aircraft from different countries come in to Kirkuk. The flight line was raggedy—I mean, raggedy—because it was the old Iraqi flight line. A little history about Kirkuk. It was taken over and it was built—it was in bad shape. The building we lived in was in bad shape. We had mice jumping over us.

The—Everywhere you went on the base, the FOB was, like, evidence of blown-up vehicles that were on fire. It was a little eerie. There was parts of the FOB that we were afraid to go by, because you would see the Iraqis outside the fence with their sheep, but you never knew what was going on. I used to get nervous, like really scared, taking the garbage out on the mid-shift. I didn't like doing that by myself, because you just never knew. That wall was so low and it was, like, right in our parking lot so anyone could jump over that wall and abduct you, so I was always nervous about that stuff. That was my experience.

When we went over there, we were taken first to Iraq, and we had to go through our, like, mini-training on different levels of security issues, all of our gear. Then we took a C-130 ride over to Kirkuk; we stopped in Balad first then went to Kirkuk. On one of those rides, the pilots brought me up front so I could sit right in the front of the C-130, and they were pointing out, like, the different locations; you could see the walls and the stuff that was going on. It was interesting. I don't regret it for a minute. I think it just has enhanced my job.

KH: Your current job?

CM: Yes.

KH: Were there any other big takeaways from that that you've learned, that you really feel grateful for?

CM: I think it made me a stronger person. Just—The whole time I was in the air force, I felt like—kind of cheated out of—I know this sounds ridiculous, but kind of cheated out of a combat experience. I felt like my time was kind of a low time. I watched all my friends—my best friends—deploy while I was on active duty, and I got to see them but it was never my turn—I never got to go—so I think this—I don't know. It just made me feel like at least I did serve a purpose for everything.

KH: Those are all my questions. Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you would like to share?

CM: You know what I forgot to say was, as security police I got to rappel down water towers and—action, stuff like that. And then getting back to the MST—the military sexual trauma—back in 1992—I just remembered when I said my best friends went to Saudi Arabia, one of them was sexually assaulted and, I mean, it changed her. She came back a different person, and she was not able to talk about it. And then another friend of mine, she was gang raped in her dorms, and that was another drinking incident. Where several people got her, and then after the baby was born she was threatened that if she talked about it the father was going to take the baby away, so she just hurried up and got off of active duty. Because I guess when I say "the father," one of the guys said he—the baby looked like him, and he was going to say if she spoke up that he was the only one that slept with her, and it wasn't rape, and that he was going to take the baby. So it was a gag order on her. [unclear]

KH: It was her commanding officer?

CM: No, no. These were just flight members—security police flight members. So that was—When I said, like, kind of, the gag order—"You turn us in and I'm going to say it was only me and you gave consent for us to sleep together, and I'm going to fight for custody of the baby because you can't afford to take care of him." That was like one of the incidents.

KH: What ended up happening with your friends?

CM: With the one friend that was—that came back, she—I think she just got out. And another friend from Saudi came back to an empty house with a dog left in it. The dog—The husband put a great—when he knew within a week or so she was coming back, he filled a kiddie swimming pool up with dog food and left the dog in base housing, and when she got home it was a mess. I mean, you can imagine the damage that was done. And her husband left her for another woman. There was a lot of that kind of stuff going on too.

KH: Do you feel like other people that you were in training with got support getting out of the military, and dealing with all that stuff of just experiencing their own trauma?

CM: Back during my era nobody talked about anything.

KH: But now that they're out?

CM: There was—I only keep up with one friend—well, now on Facebook [social networking website] I have connections with other women, but none of that was spoke about. My one friend, Pam, who worked with that girl who was deployed with the girl [unclear], I keep up with her because she lives close by here. We found ourselves on social media, on Facebook, so she's the only one that I keep up with face-to-face. Another one of those women from security police days, she lives her as well, by Greensboro, but she's been contracting over there for years, so I only get to see her every once in a while when she comes home. She was one of the first one hundred [women], too.

KH: Is like a group of some kind, like a profile, of these one hundred women?

CM: [SAC Fighters?], [unclear], we have air force female veterans site, an airfield management site, that I keep up with people on. Some of my friends I haven't been able to find.

KH: That's through social media mostly?

CM: Yeah.

KH: Alright. Is there anything else that you wanted to share?

CM: I think I covered everything.

KH: Yeah.

CM: It was a lot.

KH: Yeah, it was great. Is there anything that you would want—for people who are listening to this interview, that you would want them to take away—particularly civilians—to take away from your experience serving?

CM: I think it was [unclear]. I was part of a—just an important part of military history, as far as women.

KH: Yeah, it's an important time for folks to hear about. Great. Well, thank you. I'm going to turn off the tape now.

CM: Okay.

[End of Interview]