WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Natasha Sudderth Schoonover

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: February 4, 2013

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is February 4, 2013. My name is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the home of Natasha Schoonover in Gibsonville, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Natasha, could you please state your name the way that you would like it to read on your—on the collection?

NS: Natasha Sudderth Schoonover.

TS: Okay, thank you. Well, Natasha, could you tell me first of all when and where you were born?

NS: I was born in Blowing Rock—well, I was raised in Blowing Rock, North Carolina but I was born in Boone, North Carolina in—in 1978, in April.

TS: Okay, and what was it like growing up in Blowing Rock; is that where you were at?

NS: Yes, I was in Blowing Rock. It's a very small town. Everybody knows everybody. And it was a wonderful experience, but at the same time it was a—it was definitely a challenge; a challenge for me especially.

TS: Why was it challenging?

NS: It was a challenge for me because, for one, everybody knew my family and knew my parents, so I was, you know, this child that everybody expected a lot things from. But I struggled with learning disabilities that they had not diagnosed when I was younger, so school was difficult. I constantly failed in classes; didn't—didn't do very well. I was quiet; withdrawn. You know, just really struggled. I—I wasn't—I didn't really grow up the whole time.

TS: Okay. Now, what did your parents do?

NS: My mother was—She worked at a bank fulltime, but she was also a fulltime music director; she directed the choir in the local church. And my father was director of public utilities in Boone, and he was also a fireman and fire chief for a very long time.

TS: Oh, so everybody knew—

NS: Yeah.

TS: —them both for those kind of connections with the community, I'm sure.

NS: Yes.

TS: Now, do you have any brothers or sisters?

NS: I do. I have a brother; his name is Chip, and he is now a fireman and paramedic; just like his father and my dad's father, and it seems to be a family thing.

TS: So, you have a—Is he younger or older than you?

NS: He's younger.

TS: Younger?

NS: Yes.

TS: Okay, so you have one brother then?

NS: One brother, that's it.

TS: Okay. So, what was it like growing up? Like, what kind of things did you do for fun as a young girl? You said you were quiet.

NS: I was very quiet. When I—I guess when I was little I had the—the ability to run wherever I wanted to go in Blowing Rock. It's just so small that I could walk to town; I could go to Kohlman's[?] and get ice cream, or I could go to the church and play, or I could go to park. We played around town a lot. We would get in teams and we would run around Blowing Rock hiding in the—in the—in the town; just play with the other kids. It was just safe.

And I would withdraw. I liked art; I liked to draw and sketch. I was really good at it. It was one of the few things that everyone thought I was really good at, so I did that a lot.

TS: Did you, like, take your notebook out into the—like, outside and sit and draw like that, or did you do it in a—inside, or how—how did you do that?

NS: I really had never been—I had never been told or presented that art could ever be something that could be admired in a way; like, "Oh look. This could be something that you do forever. It's something valued." It was more of a hobby, and it's something I just did to pass the time. And actually I looked at it negatively, because when I would sketch in class or things like that, you know, I would be scolded, so I didn't—yeah, you know, like—

TS: Oh, like—during, like the—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

NS: You know, like, "You're doodling and—"

TS: —the lesson plan; while the lesson was going on?

NS: Yeah, right.

TS: I see.

NS: Yeah.

TS: How many—How big were your—was your classroom growing up? What schools did you go to?

NS: I went to Blowing Rock Elementary School in my younger years, and I—because they figured out that I was a slow—more—you know, I learned more slowly than other students, they put me in a learning—a class where I could probably learn a little better, so I was—I always pictured it as the closet in the back of the school where they put the kids; they just, kind of, tucked us away. And I knew that wasn't really the case, but that's how I felt.

And there was, maybe, three or four of us in there. Ironically, the—one of my classmates was Roy Graham, who is Billy Graham's grandson, so that was interesting being in a class with him. But it was a good experience.

[William Franklin "Billy" Graham, Jr. is an American Christian evangelist]

TS: Did you get to meet Billy Graham, then?

NS: I've never met Billy Graham.

TS: No?

NS: No, but I got to know his grandson very well. [chuckles] I did, yeah.

TS: So, what kind of—Did—Was there anything—Even though you had difficulty learning a little bit, was there a teacher that you really liked or some—like, did you have some figure that you looked up to?

NS: I had lots of people in—in my younger years that I looked up to, but nobody in school as much as—as I—it was my family that really helped me through all that. My grandmother was a kindergarten teacher. She taught down in Lenoir, North Carolina, and she was the most gracious and amazing woman. She could teach—She could teach a snake how to fly. I mean, she was just talented, and she was patient, and she loved me, so she was—she was probably the one help. And then the other one was—

TS: What was her name?

NS: Her name is Joyce Cantrell[?]. And my grandfather; he taught at Caldwell Community College. He was a professor there. He—He was also one that was always there for me; more spiritually than—than anything. And then my mom, who—she believed in me no matter what. I was always perfect in her eyes. So, those three people, kind of, pushed me along.

TS: So, what was your grandfather's name?

NS: James Cantrell. And then my mother's name is Evelyn Sudderth.

TS: Okay. So, they helped you, kind of, feel a little bit more comfortable with your environment and things you were doing? Did you have a sense of—So, as a young girl, did you have a sense of how you wanted your future to be? Did you ever, like, think about those kind of things?

NS: I always admired my grandmother, and I didn't know what I wanted to be; I didn't know what I wanted to do. I knew that the world told me I needed to know those things, and so I just, kind of, picked my favorite, most beautiful, wonderful goal, and I thought that—that was she did was what I wanted to do; I wanted to teach; sure, that seemed fine.

I now realize that that was just my way of, you know—it was a crutch. You know, there's nothing wrong with what she did, but that's probably not—not what was best; not what was meant for me really.

TS: Right, but you admired that.

NS: I did.

TS: You admired her and that was, like, her—

NS: Absolutely.

TS: —her story.

NS: Right.

TS: So, in school, then—So, you weren't—were you un—I don't want to use the word uncomfortable, I guess, but it was difficult, you said.

NS: It was incredibly difficult. I remember being told that I wasn't trying hard enough. I would sit in the floor in the kitchen at my mother's feet and I would cry, and try so hard, digging in the depths of my soul, to learn to do the things that seemed so easy for these other kids, and I just never could do it. And I couldn't see what my mom saw; I couldn't see this brilliant little girl. And all I saw was the girl that wasn't trying hard enough, because that's what they told me. I didn't realize that I had learning disabilities; that I was dyslexic; that I had ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder]; and I had things that were, kind of, making it difficult for me to learn. So, that was hard.

TS: Do you think that that—I mean, since those are in your formative years, do you recognize that in younger people today, or think about that in schools today, or anything like that?

NS: I'm very conscience of it, and it's become a huge part of who I am now. It's become part of my identity. Not—Not that I was disabled, but that I was actually able. That I was capable of doings that I never thought that I could do, just because someone told me that that was the way it was.

I'm very careful what I tell my kids, because kids believe adults. They think that everything they say is right. And had someone told me then, other than my parents, you know, that—that I was smart and that I could do whatever I set my heart on, I think things would have gone differently for me, probably.

TS: So, was it like this all the way through elementary and high school too?

NS: Yeah, it—it—elementary school, they—they—the solution during that time which is, kind of, learning separately. You were learning—they were trying to get you to rebuild how to learn, or learn a different way.

Once I got to high school, I don't remember any accommodation for my disability, and I, kind of, fell through the cracks. I—I remember a very amazing woman. She was a guidance counselor there who was there the day I left for service. And the day I left for Iraq she prayed for me daily, but she was my high school guidance counselor. Her name was Jane Rogers[?], and she—she fought tooth and nail for me through high school. And she saw me slipping through the cracks, and she fought for me, you know, with passion, but some things just—it just wasn't there. I wasn't—I wasn't capable of keeping up. The system didn't help me figure out how to make it through high school, so I dropped out.

TS: When did you drop out?

NS: I dropped out just a few months before my senior year graduation, and it was in 1995. I dropped out because they told me that the math class that I had struggled to get through was not adequate to—for me to graduate, so I—and I was—I—I really didn't know what

else to do. I didn't want to go to school for a whole 'nother year; it was torture. And so, I decided that I would join the military.

TS: Okay.

NS: Yes.

TS: Now, how did you come to that decision? How did you decide on, you know, the military?

NS: A friend of mine—my best friend during the time—her name was—is Angela Miner[?]. She—She was looking at the navy. Her dad had been in the navy and she was looking at joining, and so, you know how girlfriends are; we're like, "Let's do this together!"

So, we both decided to go talk to recruiters, and I chose to speak to an army recruiter and she went in the other direction. And because I was underage at the time, we managed to get the recruiter to come talk to my family, who said, "No. Are you kidding?" [chuckles] But I finally got my parents to approve of me joining, so—

TS: How old were you?

NS: At the time I was seventeen. I was seventeen, and they had to sign a waiver to allow me to enlist.

TS: How long did it take you to convince them, and was it, like, your mother and your father, or one—

NS: My mother and my father.

TS: Both of them were opposed to it?

NS: Right. Now, let me say that my father is a huge influence on me now. When I was younger my father and I didn't have a perfect relationship because he worked so much. I didn't see him—I don't—I'm not excluding him. He's more—He's more to me now than ever, but I don't want that—him to get forgotten.

TS: Oh sure.

NS: But they were both there, and they both—they both agreed that the only way that they would allow me to do it is if I did the reserve. They never would have allowed me to go full—you know, to go full army at that point in time. So, they allowed me to sign up for the Army National Guard, and I think the recruiter helped. His name was John Carter. [chuckles]

TS: So, when—when you say that your friend—Angela?

NS: Yes.

TS: Said, “Hey, let’s think about the military,” what did you think when she said that to you the first time?

Did you think, “Oh sure. Let’s go do it”?

NS: I think I did because a—it just appealed to me. It appealed to—Anything other than the dead end—that world that I felt like I was in—was appealing to me. It was everything that her dad described; his name’s Denny[?] Babcock[?]. He—Everything he described to me just sounded like what I needed; you know, where I needed to be; the kind of—the kind of things that I needed; and everything from it appealing to my family through the education benefits, to seeing the world, and the adventure; things like that.

TS: So, Denny Babcock; that was Angela’s—

NS: Father.

TS: —father? Was he in the military then?

NS: He was—I believe he had been in the navy—

TS: Okay.

NS: —for a while.

TS: Now, had your father or any other relatives been in the military; that you were aware of?

NS: My grandfather, James, had been in the military. He—He was in Germany or Austria; I cannot remember which. He was a cook. But—And then I—Maybe my grandfather; my dad’s dad, but I cannot remember.

TS: Yeah? Did they support it? Do you remember? Or was that not discussed with them?

NS: They supported it. They—They pretty well, my entire life, had stood by and supported me no matter what. Whether I was going down to the depths, or whether I was flying high, they were always there for me.

TS: What—how about your friends?

NS: Funny, Angela decided that she—she just really didn’t want to do the military thing [both chuckles]

TS: So, after she got the hooks into you—

NS: Right.

TS: —for thinking about it.

NS: Yeah. But I don't—I don't hold—I don't—That was fine, because it worked out well for both of us. It was a—I needed to be released. I needed to go away and find myself without any intervention from my family and my dear friends, so it was okay.

TS: When was it that you decided to go ahead with this?

NS: I enlisted—Well, I enlisted on—in December; December twenty-eighth.

TS: What year was that?

NS: Nineteen ninety-five.

TS: Okay, so did you go immediately to, like, a basic training? What happened? Describe the process for, like, going into the National Guard.

NS: Sure.

TS: Or was it the National Guard or the—

NS: It was the National Guard.

TS: Okay, Army National Guard; that's right.

NS: It was—The army had just started a different program. I think they had started a program where you enlist and you become part of your unit, but you don't go to basic training until—it's like a—you go to basic training a little later. So, I enlisted and I became part of my unit, and within—within that year I went to basic training. I think I was at Fort—Where was I? In July I was in Columbia, South Carolina, at Fort Jackson; in July—wow—for basic training. So, it wasn't—it wasn't very long. But that gave me some time to, kind of, get—you know, meet my unit that I was going to be placed with, and get involved.

And they had asked me what I wanted to do. I had taken the test—the ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery]—and to be honest, everything was green. I didn't see any difference in the jobs, so I pretty much let my recruiter pick the job that he'd put me in.

TS: What do you mean by "everything was green"? I'm not sure what you mean.

NS: Nothing appealed to me any more than anything else, because when—you know, at that age I had no concept of the world. I didn't understand the difference between an engineer or a truck driver or—I had no knowledge of that, so it didn't matter where I was. I think what did matter was me going and leaving that—that small town that I had been in and going—leaving and finding myself on my own.

TS: So, it didn't matter to you what you did, you just wanted to get away.

NS: Yeah, to get away, yeah. Not because it was a bad thing.

TS: No.

NS: But because I think I was—I think I sensed that—that there was more—that I needed to be left alone to, kind of, find myself on my own.

TS: So, your—who—how—who was it that picked your job, then, if you didn't?

NS: Sergeant Carter. My recruiter did, yes.

TS: Okay.

NS: I remember—I—Now, he's a—he—I love the man to this day. He somewhat looked like a little bit of a chicken. He was real tall and real skinny, and he smoked like a freight train. And I lived—I didn't live with my parents at the time. I lived in a broken down trailer in Boone, with no water, no electricity, right on the edge of Appalachian State [University], and it was bad.

I was in a fight with my parents and I was, you know, being stern and tough, and I remember him knocking on the door during the period that I was enlisting. And he knocked on the door and I opened it up and he came in and looked around this dump that we were living in and he said, "Natasha, you're life sucks, but I am going to make it better," and he did; you know, he did. In a way he did; he absolutely did.

TS: Yeah?

NS: Yes, but I'll never forget him saying that. [both chuckle]

TS: Now, did you consider any of the other services?

NS: I—I had a very limited—I didn't realize how big the table was. I didn't know how far the choices stretched. All I could see was the small little thing in front of me, and that's what I grasped for.

TS: Was there a reason you didn't look at navy, though, because you knew about that one on the table.

NS: Sure. Because my parents wouldn't allow me to go active duty, so in order—a lot of—I was—and because I was young. I was below the age that I was really allowed to enlist. I had to go by their wishes and choose something that was more reserves. They liked the education benefits. I didn't really care about that because I never thought I was good enough or smart enough to get an education. I was—

TS: You'd had enough of that, right?

NS: Yes, exactly.

TS: That's interesting.

NS: So—And the navy's not represented in the mountains of North Carolina, so probably the reason I ended up with a truck driving unit is because that was a local unit and it was close by, and that's just where I fell.

TS: So, tell me about basic training.

NS: It was—It was an eye opening experience, and amazingly enough, it was the first time in my life that I did well. It was a benefit to be quiet. It was a benefit to be meticulous and to be cautious, and that's exactly who I am. I listen; I learned to listen. I just didn't know how to—to learn, you know, and everything in basic training was visual and physically hands on, and I did very well. I did.

My hair was down to the top of my backside; it always had been, up until recently. And I remember being chosen by the drill sergeants, about, "Look how wonderfully she keeps her hair up. All you ladies need to learn from her to keep your hair up," and my hair was always that long, until I went—until I was sent to Iraq

TS: I bet that made you feel pretty good—

NS: It did.

TS: —to be pointed out in a positive way.

NS: Yeah, in a positive way. It was a first.

TS: Well, that's interesting the way you describe it as, you know, visual and hands on, and that—and how you were quiet and a listener. Did you recognize at the time that you were benefiting from, you know, your own characteristics of yourself? Did you—Did you realize it at the time or is this upon reflection?

NS: It's reflection.

TS: Yeah?

NS: It's looking back. It's being able to look back and see, because I didn't see very clearly then. I'm not going to pretend I see clearly now, but I can look back now and see—and see that very clearly. Had I known things that I know now, I think that I would have gone about things differently, but—

TS: Yeah? What kind of things would you do differently?

NS: I would probably have stopped listening to the world, and what I would—I would take what people say less to heart. You know, those teachers that hurt me; that told me that I

was not capable. They really—They really affected how I saw myself and—and they really—without realizing it; no condemnation on them. They really limited what I felt like I was capable of doing, and if I'm limited in that perspective, I'm not going to go anywhere. And the military gave me a place to go. They—They—The military gave me the confidence that I needed that I was denied in school.

TS: Was basic training difficult for you in any way?

NS: No, not really.

TS: Not physically or—

NS: No, it was—

TS: Had you done things physically? Were you a—

NS: I was pretty—I was pretty active. I'm a pretty—you know, I was a pretty active kid living in the mountains, and running around, and I was healthy, you know. So, I didn't have a hard time—I mean, I didn't go in being able to meet the standards, but I don't think anybody goes in with that. But I met them easily, and I exceled; I did very well. I wasn't the top of my class, but I was—I was—I did very well, so.

TS: Yeah. So, you—a lot of times, when you read about the army and basic training—

NS: Yes.

TS: —they say they break you down and they build you back up again. But it's like they built you back—they built you up. Did you—

NS: Yeah, I was already down. [both laugh] Yeah, they did.

TS: Yeah, that's interesting.

NS: I felt somehow safe. I knew that I just felt safe. Even in basic training I knew— I knew—maybe it's because I knew where I was going. Maybe it was the first time in my life I had a goal that I could see and visualize myself in my mind's eye walking across that field and graduating from that. And more than anything I wanted my family to be proud of me, and my dad to look at me, you know, with—with a—you know, and be proud of me. I had watched my dad be proud of my brother my whole life, and I had never experienced that, and I wanted it so much. Maybe that was what I looked to, but yeah, it was building up the whole way.

TS: So, did—you went to—was it South Carolina; Fort Jackson?

NS: Yes, Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

TS: So, when you graduated did anybody attend your graduation?

NS: My whole family, and Angela and her friends. And they—I had a lot of people come to my graduation. It was a very joyful—a joyful time. It was—It was a good graduation.

TS: Very nice.

NS: Yes.

TS: Then you went to—so you had—you're on—you're in the National Guard, and can you explain—like, is it a fulltime job for you?

NS: Okay. I then went to Fort Leonard Wood for a special—like, a specific training in my—in my MOS [Military Occupational Specialty]. That was more—a little more challenging to me because I had never been on an air—I had never been on a plane; I had never been—that was my first time on an airplane. I had never been that far away from my family. And it is cold in Missouri.

So, I went there to learn how to drive a tractor trailer, and learn all of those things. So, I did that for—I think that school's pretty short; it was three months. And then after that I was brought back and put back in my unit.

TS: And that was in Boone?

NS: Yes, that was my—Boone, yes.

TS: Boone? And I forgot to ask you this question. When—In basic training, when they get—you know, you get your hair—well, you [unclear] get your hair cut, but obviously you put your hair up—

NS: Right.

TS: —and then they give you your uniform, and like, your fatigues and then you get your dress greens and things, right?

NS: Yes.

TS: Do you remember when you got to put the uniform on for, like, the first time?

NS: I remember getting my uniforms; I remember that. And I remember the smell, but they have this smell. I cannot—I cannot put it into words. It's, kind of, a turnout gear, musty, weird smell, just like a fireman would have a smoky, acrid smell to his clothes. There's a certain smell to most military equipment, and—and I loved that smell. And it became very comforting to me, even in the ten years—even still it's specific and it just that smell triggers those memories in my head.

But I was so excited to have a uniform, and to be able to put it on. But when I first received it, it didn't—it's almost like the image of soldier didn't mesh with the image of Natasha.

TS: Because you weren't at that point yet.

NS: Exactly; I hadn't gotten there yet.

TS: Do you remember when you got there?

NS: I remember when I got there was probably when I graduated and I actually could look at myself in the mirror and I had actually filled out those clothes, and I was healthy, and I was radiant, and I had my—my family was with me and they saw me in a good light, and I had a purpose. And I felt great; I did.

TS: Alright, so you're—then you went to Fort Leonard Wood and you learned how to drive these big, huge—how big were they? What were some of the big ones you learned to drive?

NS: We—They were, like—I can't remember—like, fifty-two foot trailers. We learned to drive them and back them, and we learned all the parts of the trucks, and we were tested. And that was actually the first time that I learned to drive a stick shift. [chuckles] My dad always tried to get me to learn in the mountains and I never really grasped that. I wish I had. He was a lot nicer than my drill sergeants were.

TS: [chuckles]

NS: But I learned how to drive in the mud and—and sand and drive, drive, drive. That's what I learned to do.

TS: Now, as a woman in this field, how were you accepted, or what kind of treatment did you get?

NS: I—At this point in time, I was there with a lot of women. There was no—I was not a minority, and we were also there with marines.

TS: Yeah?

NS: So, we were being trained with a group of marines and army mixed together, which was complicated, because if you know anything about the Marine Corps you know that they're demands are very different from army command. So, it's more guttural when they're calling out, you know, movements. It takes a little—There's a little translation issue going on, so—

TS: Can you give us an example?

NS: I—There's—I really couldn't. I can try. So, let's say they were going to say, "Left face." In the army it would be more articulated. In the Marine Corps it would be more like a grunt, or [makes noise], and you've got to learn how to—

TS: So, tonal?

NS: Exactly, it's much more tonal, and we—we weren't used to that. So, it took—

TS: "Which way do we go?" right?

NS: Right.

TS: Okay.

NS: And there was a little—you know, we were a little intimidated to be there. The marines come across a little—a little brash, but in the end I think we both learned a balance from being together. We both learned a lot about the other; that, you know, we're both on the same page really, it's just a matter of translation.

TS: Now, were there a lot of women marines too?

NS: There was, maybe, one or two women marines. There was more army—army women, and—

TS: And you said you weren't in the minority, so were there more women than men, then, in your training group?

NS: There just—There were—There were a lot of women in my—in my training, when we were going through Fort Leonard Wood, in my particular group. I don't think that that's normal. I think that that was just—it happened to be the group that I was in.

TS: That class?

NS: Yes. But yeah, it was—it was a pretty balanced group for then.

TS: So, you felt like everybody was—there was no gender issue?

NS: Gen—There was not a gender issue. If not—There was almost—It was almost a fear that—of there being a gender issue, you know, because we were in during that training and you're trying to mind your Ps and Qs, and so there was almost an exaggerated response, you know—you know, very very strict. So, there was no problems.

TS: Okay, so then you went back after, like, three months or so. So, we're looking at—so in the fall of 1996 now, or—we're still in—

NS: Ninety-six, yes; yes

TS: Okay.

NS: It was around Ch—I believe it was close to Christmas when I came home.

TS: Okay.

NS: Or right after—close to Thanksgiving, because I remember I missed Hal—I had missed Halloween and so my brother, when I came home, carved a pumpkin, because I love Halloween. So, when I came home at Christmas I had a pumpkin waiting.

TS: That's nice. So, did you—when you got back to Boone—and what was that station? It was—

NS: It was 1451st.

TS: Is that a transportation company?

NS: Yes.

TS: Okay. And that's where you spent most of the time that you were in the—the Guard, right?

NS: For the—For the most part. With the Guard it's somewhat complicated, because you're almost—you do whatever you're told to do and you go where you are told to go, but that was, yes, my base unit, up until—up until they shifted me to Illinois[?] unit to be sent to Iraq, and that was—I had never met that unit; I was sent to Iraq with a unit I had never been with; brand new. So, yes, that Boone unit was my home unit.

TS: Were you fulltime?

NS: I was—At that point in time, I—I just went—I did the once a month. But a dear friend, she was a female, and she was the admin, and her name was Dolly Welch; Sergeant Dolly Welch. To this day, she is that woman that will and always has meant so much to me, because she took me under her wing, because she understood what it meant to be a woman in the military, and she understood that even though they say things are always going to be easy for a woman, it's not always the case.

And she—she tried to help me. She would try to get me jobs through ADSW [Active Duty for Special Work][?], so if they needed workers in Raleigh to go and help with, you know, clean up for some disaster, then she would call me and get me on those rosters. So, I was always doing something with the National Guard that kept me moving and constantly going; going to classes; things like that. So, I did a lot fulltime just because she was doing that for me; helping my career along; doing what she could to beef me up and help me.

TS: So, did you have a separate job from the National Guard?

NS: I had lots of jobs, but the National—National Guard was the one that was consistent and always going. I was searching for myself, but I was only happy in the National Guard, because National Guard gave me the ability to go out and be creative and resourceful and help, and I love helping; I love it. And I've had so many experiences with the National Guard where I got to do that.

But other jobs just seemed to be just dreary and they drained me. I worked in restaurants and bars; I worked—I've done a lot of things; real estate and insurance; retail.

TS: Were they always accommodating to your—to the time that you had to spend with the National Guard, or were some of them—

NS: They—

TS: They were all?

NS: They were. I think that, up in that region especially, people are very aware, and—and it's not such a they don't understand the military, because it's not—there's not a base close by, so when they do come in contact with something like that they're happy to honor that. So, I didn't really have any problems getting off of work. But there got—there became—it got later on that—that Dolly would—would get me on longer assignments, so my assignments became more permanent, where they put me on a permanent ADSW, I think, is what they would call it.

So, I was constantly doing something for the unit, just as a—just working for them; like, we got new trucks. So, they needed forty trucks to be brought up to this unit, and I had to drive down and pick up every truck one by one, just—

TS: Where was that—did you have you drive?

NS: I think I drove from Morganton[?] to Boone, and I drove every truck up to Boone as we got these new units, which ironically, we never did take into Iraq. [chuckles] But we did get nice new trucks.

Or a national—a natural disaster would happen and they would send us out. Snow; people would be snowed into their homes and we would go and we'd get them out; we'd take them food. Flying in helicopters during floods and dropping food to children and schools and helping people. It's what it became for me. It became this expression that I could help out.

TS: Do you have a memory of one incident in particular, that really sticks in your mind for those kind of helpful scenarios?

NS: I have so many. I think the most—I think the most difficult one was Hurricane Floyd. They actually sent us to Raleigh before the hurricane hit because they thought it was going to be so bad. And actually what happened is instead of the hurricane being so bad, the flooding was what so devastating. And they had sent us down close to Tarboro[?] and—and—and I think they call it Prince—Princeton or—I can't remember the town, but

it's right on the river, and the river loops up and there's this little teeny town right in the loop. Well, when—right after the hurricane hit the floods just wiped out these towns, and there were people dead everywhere. And they had—

TS: Was this in North Carolina?

NS: It was in North Carolina.

TS: What year was that?

NS: This—Hurricane Floyd, I believe, was in 1997 or eight; I can't remember.

TS: Okay.

NS: But I think—I think what was so difficult about that is they closed the area off. We—And they—they—you know, they had us working within these perimeters to—but they wouldn't let people leave, so we were trying to feed all these people but they were cut off. So, the flood would keep them cut off in areas, so we'd have to fly in food. But I think the devastation and the death, and people trying to find their loved ones, and us helping them was probably the biggest and most difficult.

And then I ended up working for nine months with FEMA through ADSW—programs through the military—to help people who had lost their homes to find, like, temporary trailers for housing, so that was the government putting trailers on homes so that they had time to rebuild. That was a huge, huge experience for me.

TS: What was your part in that? What did you get to do?

NS: In the beginning when the floods happened, we actually—it was, kind of, sort of, a martial law; we had to—we had to make sure people weren't getting out and—and looting and hurting other people, so we enforced that for first few days. Then after that water became an issue. We—

TS: Were you carrying weapons for that?

NS: We were, yeah. And then after that we did water. We were driving incredible amounts of bottled water and dropping it in places so that people would have water. And that's when the helicopters came in and we started dropping food in the middle of highways that were cut off, and I remember going—them putting me on a helicopter and flying me into a school somewhere down on—you know, close to Tar—you know, Tarboro, and dropping me there for a few days. And all these people had, kind of, gone into the school and they were eating the food out of the school's cafeteria, and it was a whole community that was trapped inside this school, and all they had was the school and the football field, and that's where they—and then we would switch out duty there. So, the helicopter would come in and they'd fly a new person in to help those people, and—

TS: Were you by yourself?

NS: I think there was maybe three of us—

TS: Yeah?

NS: —on the island.

TS: Were you scared at all?

NS: No, I wasn't; there was women and children; I wasn't. It was—It was—It was a good thing for me because I was being able—I was helpful and I could help them. I was their connection to something tangible that showed that they were going to be okay. I was that connection for them; that—they they're country had not forgotten them.

TS: Well, you had mentioned that Sergeant Dolly Welch—

NS: Yes.

TS: —that she helped mentor you through some different—difficult times, as a woman in the army. What kind of things would come up that she would help you with?

NS: I think that it was—it—she didn't sit me down and directly state things as they were. She was gentle, and she watched me closely, and she tried to prepare me for what I was facing, especially in such a secluded area and a unit of good old boys. You know, these are—these are men that—that know each other; they're family; they've been raised together, and there is—it's in[?] country, and there's not a lot of understanding when it comes to dealing with women in a respectful way. There's almost a—I really don't know how to put it. It's a culture; it's a culture of their place and mine[?].

And so, I would never have—at that time, I wouldn't have said that it was sexual harassment. Now, after getting an education and looking back on it, I can say, "Yeah, I experienced that." But—But to them, and to myself, I don't think that it was ever intended to hurt me or intended in a negative way. It was what they knew. It's how they knew how to handle a woman. It was uncomfortable. So, they resorted to whatever means they had to to deal with a women being in their truck or in their unit.

And it was difficult. It was—It was difficult, because I was faced with a lot of different struggles, like accusations; tons of accusations.

TS: What kind of accusations do you mean?

NS: "Did you—Did you—" I was accused of sleeping with my commander. I was accused of filing sexual harassment complaints on someone that I had not done that. Everything was about my gender. It—And my sex. It had nothing to do with my ability to do a job, or you know, it—my placement within the unit was centered on that fact. Whereas others, it was on the job that they did, and how well they worked with others, and whether they had been through certain training. For me, it was all centered around my sexuality. And I—I see that now, but at the time I would have never noticed.

TS: So, how did you handle it?

NS: I handled it how any seventeen year old, eighteen year old would; immaturity. At first I think that I dealt with it in a defensive way; like, "No, I didn't. I've not done these things," you know. Then I went—I kind of went into a phase of, "Watch how manly I can be." So, it was almost this time where I was incredibly masculine and incredibly—I would challenge and try to—try to do everything equally to them, and I was competitive, and I would smoke, and I would argue, and I could cuss with the best of them. And I met them where they were. I tried to show them that I was one of them. I was tough. And then that didn't work either. I was still presented in the same way. Nothing changed until I went to Iraq.

TS: Okay. Was it the same for the guys that you were working with; like, you know, your peers, as your superiors? Did—

NS: It's different.

TS: Was it different?

NS: It was different. The superior—My superiors were wonderful, but they were so distant. They—And you know, maybe that's the tragedy; that they are so high up, and yes, they're educated, and yes, they understand, but they are so out of reach from us—from the enlisted—that there was no real way for me to articulate, "Hey, this is a—this is a problem." Because in order for that to happen I had to realize it was a problem, and in my mind I was so thankful to be there. I was a woman; I was in the military; I was given the same rights as them; so I needed to step it up and I needed to be like them. And if that meant suffering through catcalls and groping and the things that I experienced, then that's what it meant, because that's what it meant to be in the military to me, at that time.

TS: So, that's, like, the—the trial that you had to go through to be part of the team, sort of.

NS: Right; kind of, yeah. That's how I saw it; yeah, absolutely.

TS: So, the—you're talking about the officers were, kind of, removed. What about the NCOs [Non-Commissioned Officers]? Were they also—

NS: I think it was depending on the individual. I was blessed to be around some amazing NCOs, but then I was also—you know, people are people, and it just depend—it just depends on the time and who I worked with. But the ones that were compassionate, and the ones that were moral and—and did the right thing, will always stand in my memory for that always, and I remember their names. They—They were amazing mentors to me, and I'll always remember them for what they did.

TS: Was there any particular mentor that you'd like to point out?

NS: Well, I mean, Dolly being one, and then Sergeant Carter. I know that that seems strange to keep bringing that recruiter, but he was a crutch for me. When I had a hard time I would call him and he was there for me. He helped me through a lot. He—I spent a lot of time with him during the enlistment, and so he understood where I was coming from.

TS: Yes.

NS: And that's—I mean, that's all that I could—I could—I probably could list several more, but those are the two that were instrumental.

TS: Were there any other women in your—in your unit?

NS: There were. There were a couple; there were not many.

TS: Not many?

NS: No.

TS: Out of how many, like, people who were there?

NS: Oh gosh. Forgive my memory, but—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Well, just ballpark it.

NS: I would say, ballpark—at the most I could say, maybe, there would be maybe five women total in the company—or in the—in the Boone unit that were active and working with the unit. But that—the numbers seem much lower than that to me. But yeah, five, probably.

TS: Five? Now, did you feel that you were being treated fairly for promotions?

NS: No, I don't. In fact, I—In fact, I—you know, I was in almost ten years and I just made a E—to E-5 by the time I got—by the time I was sent to Iraq, and they did that just because—and I enlisted as an E-3. So, I came in with a higher rank. I came in—I went through basic training as a, I think—no, I was a—I was a P—I was a private first class when I went through basic training.

TS: But once you graduated then you got the E-3 rank.

NS: Right.

TS: You skipped the one.

NS: Yeah, I skipped it, so by the time I got to my unit I was already—I mean, I was a specialist forever. And then to even skirt me going into—becoming an NCO, they gave me corporal. They don't do that in the army. That's not normal. I was a corporal. [chuckles] You know, I was a corporal for a very long time.

But the males in my unit didn't have that problem. They—They made their rank quickly. In fact, one gentleman who enlisted with me, he was an E-6 by the time that we were leaving to go to Iraq.

TS: So, did you have performance evals [evaluations], or did you have to test? How does it work for the National Guard to get promoted?

NS: The same—We do—You're tested yearly on, you know, everything. I mean, you have to qualify. You have to do—meet physical tests and challenges. You had to take a PT test every year. You do qualifications. You—I mean, everything. It's pretty much the same thing. You're held to the same standard as the regular army. You just meet those standards with less training time. So, you don't work every day of the week; you—you work on the weekends, and you still meet the same standards. And I met the standards every time.

TS: Right.

NS: In fact, I never missed the standard, but I was always overlooked for a promotion.

TS: Did you feel—because some women say this a lot; that they felt like they had to be, you know, twice as good to be seen even at an equal status.

NS: Yes.

TS: They couldn't just be good, they had to be extra good.

NS: Right. I was always watched. I wasn't—Everybody constantly watching, and so I felt like that; that I had to, yes, be—be twice as good, but that didn't last long because I think I realized pretty early on that my wheels were spinning and nobody was going to be able to stop that; that I was stuck where I was, and I was not going to go any further where I was at the time. I had maxed out in that unit.

TS: So, how long were you in there, then, before—when you started feeling that way? Like, "Okay, this is not—" you kind of sound like you're saying you were a little stuck.

NS: Yeah, I think by the time I got corporal. [both chuckle]

TS: Okay.

NS: I think that once they gave me that corporal rank it, kind of, was very clear to me. You know, "Wow, they're going to a lot of trouble to deny me that E-5."

TS: Really?

NS: So, I got—I think I got frustrated; definitely. But I still loved what I did, and I loved being with them, and I loved what it did for me, and—and it was worth it. That's fine, if that's what I have to do, I'm—

TS: It's all part of the package?

NS: Yes, that's part of it.

TS: Getting through it?

NS: Yes.

TS: Even though you feel—I mean, you used the word discrimination. Did you feel discriminated against?

NS: Now I see that I was. At the time, I had a hint that I was being discriminated against. But it was such a huge monster; I could not take that monster on.

TS: Right. So, you just, kind of, went about your day.

NS: Yes.

TS: Did your job.

NS: Right.

TS: Was there any kind of special training that you got to go to, or anything like that?

NS: I did all kinds of interesting things. I remember going—I think every National Guard unit gets to make a trip out to Death Valley in California. [chuckles] That was fun. That was interesting. It was hot. We—

TS: Hot?

NS: Yes, hot. Let's see. We did that. We—I did—As far as a, you know, education, I did things in field[?] sanitation. As far as media—I went through a lot of different types of training. Anything that came up, I did it. "I—I'll do that. I'll do that." I was on the list for everything, probably because the admin, Dolly, always put me on the top of the list. She understood, and she made sure I was there.

TS: So, the more jobs she gave you, the more, like, duty you had, so the more pay you got, too, right?

NS: Exactly, and the bigger—and the better chance I had at promotion. Never did work.

TS: [chuckles]

NS: I always did much more classes; I was much more active than most people in the unit; but I never did get that recognition, so—but that's okay.

TS: Did you ever supervise anybody else?

NS: I did. In that particular—In that unit, I—they gave me responsibilities, and things that I did. It just depended on the situation. My—The larger part of my responsibilities came when I went to Iraq.

TS: Okay. We're going to get there pretty soon.

NS: Sure, yeah, it's—but as far as that, it depended on the day. Sometimes—

TS: Did you ever have any trouble with people not following your instructions?

NS: No, I didn't. There was—No, there was no problem with that. I didn't—I didn't—I wasn't challenged by that.

TS: I see. Okay. It was more of the other small things and—okay. Well, not so small necessarily.

Do you think—So, you were in the National Guard for ten years. Did you see any change over time of the attitudes towards women in your unit?

NS: Not in that unit.

TS: Not in that unit? It seemed the same the whole—

NS: It—No, it didn't change. It didn't seem like it changed. It might have, but over time—looking back it's just in my mind just a short period of time even though it seemed so long. I didn't notice any significant changes.

TS: The people didn't really change either, right?

NS: No, they didn't. It's a very solid structure. The same people that were there when I got there were there when I left. It'd—It doesn't move; it's slow.

TS: Well, you were in—so '95 is President [William Jefferson "Bill"] Clinton.

NS: Yes.

TS: And then Colin Powell and—who else is—is during that period? Did you—Did you have any political con—you know, ideas about politics and what was going on for the military at that time, because it was like—people talk about, like, the "peace dividend", right?

[The "peace dividend" is a political slogan from the early 1990s, claiming to describe the economic benefit of a decrease in defense spending.]

NS: I didn't. I believe that—and this is my personal perspective—you have to be able to understand your world before you can really understand the politics of it, and I didn't understand the world. I hadn't even made any attempt to understand the world; I was still trying to figure out myself. So, I didn't.

I remember being able to—during Hurricane Floyd I remember Clinton flying in and—and—to check out the damage and stuff, and getting really upset at him flying in for such a short period of time and then leaving. But that's about the extent of my politics during that time.

TS: Yeah?

NS: Yes. I didn't—didn't go there. I just—I did what I was told.

TS: Well, let's talk about Iraq, then. Okay? Well, actually, before we talk about Iraq, let's talk about 9/11. Do you remember where you were on that day?

NS: Yeah. I was down in Morganton. We had just got new trucks, and they were training us on the new trucks. We were outside and they were giving us the information on the new trucks, and we were going over and learning, you know, just basic stuff; how they worked and—

TS: What kind of trucks were they?

NS: I don't even remember.

TS: [chuckles]

NS: I think we got, like, nine—no, I can't remember. It—I can't—I really cannot remember—

TS: It's okay. That's fine.

NS: —because I don't think we drove them at all. By the end we ended up driving [M]915s, so I don't even remember what the new trucks were. They looked pretty. [both chuckle] They were new and clean and they had all kinds of neat little contraptions, but we ended up not taking them.

TS: So, you're in Morganton.

NS: Right, and we were looking at these trucks and we were closing the session and someone came out and said someone has attacked the Pentagon. And so, we—I think I had a flash of that moment—of the moment that I raised my hand when I was in—in Charlotte when I was at MEPS]Military Entrance Processing Station] and I enlisted, because at that

moment, anybody as young as I was, even up to the age of twenty-five, doesn't really ever think that they will ever experience war. And then when the glint of that—of reality is coming into their view, it is a very sobering thought. So—And then we all went in and watched it unfold.

TS: So, the first news you got was about the Pentagon; not about the World Trade Center?

NS: Right. It had already happened, because—I mean, we—they don't sit and watch TV around [unclear]; we were actually working. So, I think it took someone—someone's spouse calling and having them bring it—yeah, it was the—we came in watching at the end of it. We weren't—We weren't watching it all unfold. In fact, right—and it might—well, no. I think we watched the second tower fall; I believe we watched that. But at that point I think the Pentagon has been hit, but—

TS: It's always hard to see—

NS: It's—Because it went back and forth so much I don't know exactly. I do know that—I do know that—that we all came and watched it and it was very—very sobering, because we didn't know what was going to happen.

TS: Did things start to change after that, as far as the military went?

NS: It did. The changes, as far as the military, it—because all of a sudden it wasn't—things got tighter and more serious. For, you know, so many years we had—everything was—had the potential to ever act this out, or we trained with that possibility, but never took it in any seriousness; not until there was a threat, or the threat was there. So, things did get much more complicated.

I remember my son was one; he was very young, and I was breastfeeding him. And it wasn't long after that they told me I needed to wean him because we would be going; that there was—something was going to happen. And so, they were putting things into play that would—so that we could go when we were called. And I think emotionally I started changing as well; started separating, my family tells me; said that I started drawing away from them without—almost, like, building a wall.

TS: Right.

NS: Creating a space so that I could separate from them. But yeah. The world changed color that day. Everything—Everything changed color, and everything was affected by it.

TS: So, the towers and the Pentagon; all that happened in 2001.

NS: Yes.

TS: And then you weren't activated to go to Iraq until when?

NS: Okay, I was activated to go to Iraq in—it was 2000—the end of 2002. My son was born in 2002, so—

TS: Okay.

NS: So, let me get my dates straight. I don't want to get them mixed up. He was born in 2002, and he was three months old when he was—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Wait, you would have been pregnant then.

NS: Right, so he was three months old when I was weaning him—

TS: I see.

NS: —when they told me to wean him, so that—and that was—he was three—he was born in October. January; so it was in January.

TS: Of 2003?

NS: Yes, right. And we—

TS: And we went in March, right?

NS: Yes, right. So, it wasn't—wasn't a long period of time.

TS: So, how did you feel as a mother about that? Do you remember—I mean, I know it's hard to separate everything that happened and what's a reflection on what's happened at that time.

NS: I think—This is my honest belief, that one of the hardest things any mother will ever have to do is leave their baby. But I believe that God gives us what we need, without us knowing what we need. We don't have to ask for it. That it's there, and I don't know where I got that kind of strength, because I am not strong on my own. But God gave me that ability; the ability to do what was right for my son and leave my family.

I—I went through a process of saying goodbye to him, and that was hard. I recorded books I would read to him. I would sit in the bed and I had a recorder, and I would take his books and I would read them so he could hear my voice. I recorded my voice on my picture; on my picture so he could push it and hear my voice. I did—I just did a lot of things so that for him I wasn't gone.

And the hardest book I ever had to read was—there's a book, it says, "I love you forever. I love you for always. As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be." And I recorded that book, probably, fifteen times before I could get through it without crying, because I

didn't know how long I had to live. I didn't know if this is the last that I would ever get to see him and love him and hold him. But—But I did get to come back and see him and hold him.

TS: Yes. So, you're doing a lot. You're not just preparing for a war; you're preparing to leave your child and—now, your husband, was he in the military at this time?

NS: He had—My husband got out of the military when we—right as we met. He—He got out three days after we met in Fort Bragg. He was in the 82nd Airborne [Division], and I always had a thing for that red beret. [chuckles] We met in a coffee shop on Fort Bragg.

TS: What were you doing in Fort Bragg?

NS: I was—I was down there doing work for—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Like, training or something?

NS: Yeah. I just was there a lot. I did a lot with the National Guard, but I think I was down there for training. But we met in a coffee shop called The Coffee Scene, and he was in there; I remember seeing him quite a bit. He would—The only guy that would wear a suit to the coffee shop.

TS: [chuckles]

NS: But, yeah. But he was out then and he was in school. He was going to school, and so he was a fulltime student, and he was preparing to be a fulltime dad and mom and student.

TS: And how was he for—I mean, I know you can't really speak for him, but the interaction that you had at that time with him; you know, his wife is going over and he's staying home. There had to be something, especially in airborne.

NS: [unclear] What a strange place to be for him. I am amazed at my husband for his ability to sense and support my needs, and no matter what, be selfless. And I think he knew that I felt that I had to go, and I was torn because I think that I could have very easily gotten out of going. I was sent to a doctor because I'm very tiny person. I only weigh a hundred and fifteen pounds, when I'm at a good weight.

TS: Soaking wet, right?

NS: Yes; I'm a little gal. And—And they sent me to a doctor because they thought it was something wrong with me, and that doctor gave me that option. He said, "You can—You can get out of this. You don't have to go. You're breastfeeding." He gave me that option.

And I told Chris and I told my family, "I don't know why I have to go, but something deep inside of me says that I do, and I have to go."

And it was almost like I was being drawn out, and it was the scariest thing for me. I was being drawn into this place of death. Why would anybody make that choice? And I don't think I've ever revealed that, because I don't want people to think of me as the mother that abandoned their child or husband. Now I think it's more spiritual, but I made the choice. And so, kind of revealing something about my heart, I just felt like I had to go.

TS: Do you think, maybe, it was because you had made this commitment, and it had done so much for you that you felt like you had to give back, too, and fulfill it?

NS: I do believe that that's part of it, and also at the time I didn't know that I was going to be taken away from the people that I had trained with. So, even though there was the situations I discussed earlier, there was also a closeness. These are people I've known for years and years and years, and I know them very well; their wives, their—their children. We've—I've watched them go through trials, I've been on training with them, I've seen them at their best and their worst, and I could not imagine them going into this without me, and the thought of living with myself abandoning them in the moment that I always promised that I would be there, and—and my husband understood. He got that; he understood.

And so, I actually paid to have another doctor say that I was fine. I had to go and pay my—out of my pocket to get another evaluation so that I could go, and was able to go. End of day, I know that is one of the most intelligent decisions I've ever made in my life, but I don't claim it for myself; I think it was a God thing. [chuckles] You know? But—

TS: Why do you think it's the most important thing you've ever done?

NS: Because it made me who I am. It defines me. It clarified the world. It clarified my understanding of God. And it clarified every—it just made everything clear to me. I did not see clearly how the world worked. I didn't see how devastating it could be. I didn't see the tragedy; the possibility; I didn't see the hope. I had no idea any of that existed, because I lived in this beautiful dome we call the United States; this perfect Utopia society. And I am thankful that I could step out and see what political decisions mean to real people, and what actions look like when they're on the ground, and it's not about what's on the news; what reality is, you know? And it gave me my calling, too, so that helps. It gave me the vision of what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

TS: You could say what that calling is, because that's not on tape yet; if you'd like.

NS: Okay. My—I felt, after my time in Iraq, that I wanted more than anything to become a minister, to—and not necessarily just evangelical-type minister. I want to be someone that can go out and minister to people, both physically—help, you know, in a life giving way; in a way that's—that's beneficial to them both physically and mentally, and be a balm[?] rather than a—a bullet, I suppose.

TS: That's an interesting way to put that; yeah. Well, so let's talk about the experience in Iraq. So, do some nuts and bolts things and some, you know, overviews.

So, when—You've really done a great job explaining how you felt about, you know, the tension between not wanting to leave your family behind, but need—feeling you had had a need to go. So, when—Did you go in March? What did you go, the first call up, or when did you go?

NS: I didn't go in the first—the first group; I was in the second that went, and I cannot remember the exact time.

TS: That's okay. Those are things we can look up.

NS: I believe it was around March, because I remember getting in country and forgetting my birthday, and my birthday's in April, so I remember the day completely going by.

TS: Oh, you—

NS: And we were just so—

TS: So busy?

NS: It was so busy and so intense that I completely went an entire day forgetting that it was my birthday, and that's never happened before. So, I believe that was about right; March.

TS: Yeah? Now, you had said you—you didn't end up going with the unit that you had been with for about, what, seven—six or seven years?

NS: Right. When we got the—the calling the assignment they—they gave us our assignments, and my group—my—the corps unit was divided into platoons and they took, let's say, twenty of us and they put us in with a unit in Lenoir [N.C.]; it's the 1450th Transportation Company. And that group of twenty people that came from that larger unit, I felt okay. I'm like, "Okay, well, these are a group of people I've been with all along." However, they took me and they pulled me off of the group and put me in a platoon on my own. So, they took me out of my unit and put me in and made me one of the only females in this platoon. There was one other female in the platoon; me and one other and that's it. And I had never met any of them; not one, and I was the only one that they placed in that—in that platoon.

Never, to this day, have figured out why, but I was not happy, and I was—I was panicked. I didn't know these people and it—I was disillusioned. I didn't know how to go forward. I'm thankful that that happened now, and I see why it did, but at the time I was not happy about it.

TS: Right.

NS: Yeah.

TS: Was your job going to be the same?

NS: It was. I was still going to be—All of these groups were divided into platoons, and we were all going to be in the same company. I was still in the same company, I was just attached to a platoon that was not familiar, and the platoon is where the heart is; that's the people you spent night and day with. Those are the people that you—those are your buddies the rest of the time.

So, all of us, our job was to run convoys, and when we got into country we didn't know where we were going; we didn't really understand the purpose. All we knew that we were going to be running supply convoys somewhere. It could have been in Kuwait, Iraq. We didn't know. They put us on a plane and dropped us down. And we had one day to acclimate, and we got our first call—or our first order to go on our first mission. And it was abnormal because we had no—we had no armor. We had no armor and they were sending us into Baghdad [Iraq], and I think that that moment was, for all of us, just unbelievable; "Really? You're going to send us into Baghdad with no armor?" It was scary.

TS: What was the response? Did you—I mean, I'm sure there was a discussion and probably, like, gossip and—

NS: There was—There was a discussion and a response and it says, "We—We are country people. God bless the country people." So, we decided to make our own. Our country wasn't going to give us what we needed, so we started researching and making phone calls. We filled sandbags and we layered them in the bottom of our trucks. We piled them up in the doorways. We reinforced our windshields with tape so that the blasts wouldn't blow the glass in on us. We—We welded. We welded our own armor to our trucks and thus "hillbilly armor", was born. [chuckles]

TS: How quickly did you have—did you do that?

NS: We had three days, and it wasn't—it was a twenty-four hour a day routine. We had guys working in a shop. We had access to welding equipment, and we picked up scrap metal; things like that. I can't claim any responsibility for the welding side of it; I filled sand bags. And each group was responsible for their truck. So, I—me and one—the soldier that I was with, we were responsible to enforce our truck and to harden it in whatever way we could, and that was on the longest and scariest convoy I've ever been on. But we all came back okay.

TS: Yeah.

NS: But after—It took us maybe—we ran two or three convoys without armor before they decided that they would harden all of the—the vehicles; all the transportation and all the trucks. So, then the military came in and all of our trucks were sent in and they were actually put proper armor.

TS: Armor? Not the “hillbilly armor”?

NS: Not the “hillbilly armor”.

TS: When you—So, the first mission that you went on—

NS: Yes.

TS: —you’re doing—you guys are, kind of, putting band aids on your vehicle for—right; for that?

NS: Right.

TS: And you’re with a unit that you’re not familiar with. How long did you get to train with them before you left?

NS: I can’t really remember; a month at the most, maybe. It wasn’t long. It wasn’t long. And we had been crammed—they—we were sent to Georgia, and they had so many people going into those—that barracks; they had the bunk beds touching. So, you could not get into bed. You had to climb on top at the end of the building and crawl across all the beds in sequence to get to your bed. It was awful. It was incredible, horrible conditions through—through all that. So, we were close, because we had been through some stuff already but not—not anything like we were about the face.

TS: Was it coed living conditions?

NS: No. We were all divided; the males and the females, during—during the training. Once we got into country the base sight was divided, so the tents were divided for males and females, but the convoys were not. And usually—In fact, for me, I was the only female on every convoy that we went on, and that was a challenge. That was definitely a challenge.

TS: And so, you were the driver?

NS: It depended on—We actually—We would go back and forth. These convoys, you can’t pull over, you don’t get a lot of breaks, so you take turns; one would drive one day, one would drive another. And a lot of times—Both jobs are difficult. Either you’re holding a weapon out the window, you’re pulling security, or you’re just driving. And to be honest, I preferred—I preferred holding a weapon because it made me feel more secure. But once I got a little bit more comfortable I would drive. I tied string in the windows so that I could actually pull security with my right hand and drive with my left. There’s pictures with a loop in the window.

TS: What does it mean to “pull security”? I don’t understand that.

NS: Okay, when—let's—your—our mission would be to get our—our cargo from one point to the next. And we were driving through these Iraqi towns and we would be attacked. We would—We would receive small arms fire, IEDs [Improvised Explosive Device]; mortars were less popular on the road as they were in the camps, but rockets, RPGs [Rocket-Propelled Grenades]; things like that.

And so, our purpose was to get through it, and so our—our main motto was to: "Go, Go, Go", because we're not there to—to do anything other than get through; we need to get through safely. And so, we would hit the gas as hard as we could and go pull security.

Let's say they're shooting at us. Well, as long as I'm not shooting back, they can shoot. So, we would lay down suppressive fire. So, if we were in an area and there were no civilians around, then we could pull the trigger and lay down suppressive fire, and then that small arms fire would cease while we were getting through. So, we didn't really have to aim a whole lot, but that's—it's just suppressive fire; a way for us to get through.

TS: Is that what the—the little string was?

NS: It would hold the tip of my gun up.

TS: Oh my gosh, okay.

NS: So, it's a rifle; rifle's long. And you're driving with your left hand. You can't hold the gun up with your right, so we would—I would tie a string out on the window to hold the tip of the rifle out so that all had to do was hold the buttstock and I could pull the trigger if need be.

TS: But you didn't have to look, you could keep driving.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

NS: I didn't have to look; I could drive. All I had to do was recognize where I was, if I needed to lay down suppressive fire. It's the desert. If they're shooting at me I doubt there's much out there to receive it other than them. And we could do that and it would help us get through the area without—without any trouble. Although, that didn't always work. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah?

NS: Not always.

TS: So, you had trouble?

NS: We always had trouble.

TS: Yeah?

NS: I don't remember ever going on any mission that we did not get hit, attacked, shot, in some way. Some were worse than—

TS: And you did this for eighteen months?

NS: We were thirteen months.

TS: Thirteen months.

NS: Yes. Thirteen months of driving, yeah. The rest was just prep beforehand, so a total of eighteen, including all the training; but in country, thirteen.

TS: So, how were you—how were you coping?

NS: I think I went through stages. Initially, it was—it was a preservation, you know, of whatever I have to do to make it through this. You know, this is going—I'm going to fight and I'm going to make it through. And then once you start realizing the ways things—the way of things, you're still cautious and you're still—but you're—but you're—you don't become complacent; you're more aware.

When you go into a foreign country and you don't understand the culture, and you don't know the land, you don't know the terrain, you don't know anything about it, and you know that you're probably going to die there sometime, your imagination runs wild. You don't trust anybody. You don't really understand what's going on, and you feel very vulnerable. But once we were established and we had done a couple missions, I think that I felt—I felt more secure in what I could expect of—of this situation that I was in, as well as the best way I could respond to it to live and make it through.

So, I did okay while I was there. I don't recall ever breaking down or crying or being concerned that—I was focused. Looking back, I don't know how I didn't break down and cry.

TS: Maybe you had those walls up in ways that you really didn't even recognize they were being built.

NS: Exactly; exactly. That's probably it.

TS: Did your husband know what you were going through at the time? Did you tell him?

NS: Yes, I did. I think he heard it. There were several occasions we would be on the phone and we would take mortar attacks or there would be firing, and—and he couldn't—there was no way to hide it from him. And I think that my family was in a worse state than I was, because they were enslaved to the news, and—and completely vulnerable to whatever the news said. And they would know, "Okay, Natasha's out on a convoy. This is—" They would know, kind of, the destination. And so, they would hear, "Convoy's been attacked in Fallujah or Tikrit or Al Basrah," and then you—they worry until I—until

the convoy would end and I could come back and let them know that I was okay. So, sometimes that would be fourteen days or more before they would hear from me, and that was hard for them.

TS: So, your convoys were over a period of weeks?

NS: Weeks. It depended on—

TS: Where you were going?

NS: —where we were going. Obviously, if you drive from the Persian Gulf all the way up the Iranian border, it's going to take a lot longer than just driving into Baghdad, central Iraq.

Also, the conditions. There was a—There was a—we called them "The Sheriff's Net"[?]. They—They were kind of like the—the logistical gods. They would tell us, you know, where to go, when to leave, what time. They directed the traffic in the convoys, and they kept it moving. It was—It was this—people we never saw but they were very much in control of us, and they would lay down the law; "You must leave now, at this exact moment, and you are going to go here." Or they would say it's too dangerous; "You can't go that route. You're going to do this, or you're going to do that." They were the—They had the big picture; they knew where the attacks were happening, and the—and the—you know, they protected us, but at the same time I think there were many occasions that I thought they were trying to have us killed, [chuckles] you know?

TS: Like, you go out; "Go this way," and then you're attacked really terribly.

NS: Right. I remember leaving a gate in Fallujah and—not Fallujah, it was up in [Contingency Operating Base] Speicher, and they said, "You have to leave." And there were mortars just pouring in this gate and hitting right inside where we were going to be leaving, and there was no—somebody's obviously going to get hurt, but the orders stood and that's what we had to do.

TS: Did somebody get hurt?

NS: Luckily it stopped. Luckily that—That's where my dragonflies come in.

TS: Do you want to talk about that?

NS: I think, for me, it—I think, for me, the dragonfly experience is something that I grasp on to to recognize my own change, and my own metamorphis [sic]; my own development into something that when things were out of control in my life. And I think that—I think that during—it was during Ramadan and we had been through all kinds of—of just a lot of bad stuff, and it was really—I think it was the first time we had been hit. One of our guys—our convoy had been hit severely and, you know, we had to call—it was our first time of calling in a medi-vac and having somebody be injured and dealing with all the questioning and "I should have done this."

And all that happens when you meet—when you're in combat; when you're in a situation like that. And I felt like I wouldn't make it through that. I felt like I was never going to make it through the Ramadan time. It had nothing to do with their religious—it wasn't to do with Islam. It was just happened to be that time that they chose to make things a little bit more difficult for us.

But I prayed for the first time, gutterly [sic], from deep inside; not surface prayer. Surface prayer being, "God, protect me." You know that's something that you just shoot out of your mouth when you—when you just need a little bit of something to say; you're just wondering if somebody's listening. This was from the depths of my being, and a cry out that I want to go home, and I want to see my son again, and I want—I have a life to live. I can see now what an amazing gift it is to live, and I just want to do it. I just want to go home and live.

And I remember standing outside and all of—all of my unit standing outside with dragonflies flying down and landing on our hands and our heads and our trucks. And I have photographs of these amazing dragonflies that weren't swooping; they just actually landed on us. And it's a personal thing. It's something that I felt God telling me that, "No matter where you are I am with you, and I am—and I am—even in Iraq. Even in the most negative, horrible, tragic places you can imagine, that's where you're going to see me most clearly. And I'm not going to leave you." And I felt like God was calling me into something different, and I didn't know what that different was then.

And so, dragonflies have, kind of, become my symbol; something—I call them my God kisses. When I see a dragonfly I don't think of God. I don't worship them. I see them as God's reminder to me of how far I can actually plummet into the depths of life and tragedy and never be alone; that—that it doesn't matter; that I can still—I can still change and I can still grow out of that and become something—something else, and I still have the chance to become something else and change. And that's why I love dragonflies so much.

TS: I can see why.

NS: Yes.

TS: Did you feel transformed?

NS: At the time I did not feel transformed. At the time I felt indescribable, I don't know, elation; just this amazing peace; this amazing settling. Somebody could have been shooting continuously through that, but the shooting had stopped and I wouldn't have known. It was—Nothing else mattered, and I felt like God was directly talking to me. I really did feel, the first time, this direct contact with God, and I had never felt that before. God was—To me, God was that thing in church; that—that—that fake, you know—that thing we do that's tradition; nothing real would ever come of that. This is a real connection, and it wasn't just me. I watched all these guys experience the same thing. To see these gruff, hard guys reaching their hands up to the sky to these delicate little insects, that—that—it just—it was amazing. It wasn't just me. It was amazing. It was life changing.

TS: Well, did you feel like—because faith and war and horror and tragedy; people don't talk about faith a lot, and their spirituality and—but, I mean, it's certainly something that is—it's there. And so, I'm wondering—so, did you have, like, this deepening feeling for, you know, faith in—I didn't know—I don't know if you mean like you felt like you were—God, you know, was there, but was it like you felt like you'd be protected, or that no matter what, everything would be okay? I mean—Or is it none of those?

NS: I think at the time I felt that God was going to protect me; that's what I felt at the time. Now looking back on that, I don't—I don't know that that's really what—I think I needed to feel that; I think I needed to feel that protection. I don't see that now; that's not how I read the moment. Now I read it more as coming face to face with God. To—That God doesn't necessarily, you know, pick and choose who God wants to protect. You know, God's not going to protect me above someone who practices Islam; that's not what I believe.

At the time, I needed to feel protected, and the reason that I saw God was because nothing else was there to stand in the way, and for the first time in my life I had no other excuse. No—I needed God to lead[?] and completely, and I believe that's when you see God more—more clearly. I think a lot of people that experience war; that see the tragedy of war; I believe they do have religious experiences. And I will say, for the thirteen months that I was there, out of all of the units that I worked with, out of all of the camps that I went to, there was never a unit that did not leave that camp that didn't bow their head and pray. It was a visible sign of the United States Army that blew me away. It was their choice to pray. I watched units bow their head daily in prayer before they left the—left the—

TS: To go on their convoy?

NS: Exactly, and it wasn't just us, it was—this was something I saw everywhere. It—It was—You're faced with mortality. You're faced with mortality, and a lot of the people who are faced with this mortality, they're young; were young; were babies, you know? And—And it's really hard to—when you're just starting your life, to be faced with the thought that it's going to end. And so, you want to make things right. You want—You want to see God and everything.

TS: What other things did you recognize about your experience there?

NS: I think I real—I think I recognized the—the inner-play [sic] between us and the—and the people; the misunderstanding of the American people. I believe there is a huge misunderstanding of the Iraqi people; that there's a negativity that's been placed on them that's not accurate; that they are good people; they are wonderful people; they just want to live their lives and go about their day and raise their children and have food on their table. It just so happens that they're impoverished and live in an area where politics have made that—made their home a battleground.

And I think that—I watched an Iraqi man hold his son and watch him die in his arms—his very young son—and all I saw was my son. He's no different than me and—and I watched him watch his son die. And what do you say? You can't say anything, you

know. All—All for the sake of—I think that people misunderstand the war, and that makes me sad. And people think that it's against Islam, and the people think that it's against the Iraqi people, and that's not the case. We are not fighting a religious war. It might have religious undertones, but the war itself was something completely separate from religion, and it makes me sad because it hurts the people more; it hurts the Iraqi people more, and it is people that practice Islam. And it brings a negativity into the United States, you know, when you've got all these undertones of Americans who practice Islam. That's just—I realize that clearly.

TS: So, what did you think the war was for?

NS: Oh wow. I heard—I heard all kinds of things. I didn't really know—I know that I heard a lot of people say, "Oh, it's about oil." And I remember watching as tankers—hundreds and hundreds of tankers—would bring oil in to the country. The United States was pumping oil in to the country.

TS: Into Iraq?

NS: Yes, they were bringing in oil because there was no—there's no way to get oil in Iraq, you know, and so—I—I'm—I don't know all the details. I don't know, you know—I don't know what's true and what's not true.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Was there the refined oil, you mean, they were bringing—

NS: Right.

TS: —not the crude that—

NS: Right, exactly.

TS: I see.

NS: I don't know what all the details were about the war. I do know that the people themselves were not to blame. Now, there was a huge difference in the people that we're talking about; Sunni, Shiite—you know, you could tell where you were. Once you—When you're in the lower country, you know, you're in—you're down closer to Kuwait, you experience the people who had—who have realized the wrath of Saddam [Hussein]. They had been impoverished; they had no clothes; they had no food; they—they were—they were—they needed us; they loved us; "We love you, madam. Hello madam, we love America." They would wave American flags and they would ask us for water, and they would touch us and hold us, and they just—tangible proof that their help was there.

Once you got past the—the last camp before you get into Baghdad, the people changed; then you could sense the hatred. You felt—You could feel the animosity, and a dark shadow would be cast. Everyone looked at you with such hatred; you could just sense it. That's when you got serious. You know, we could relax on our convoy when we were in lower countries. Not giving up completely, you know; we would be more relaxed. But the moment we got through that one barricade going up into—an hour or two before Baghdad, that's when it got serious, and that's when we were facing mortality. You know, we're driving into this really—that's when it got serious.

And human intuition is much more refined than we give itself—give credit. I know every time that I sense something, it was always dead on; from a look; from a situation; it's amazing.

TS: What kind of things would happen when you would have those intuitions?

NS: You—Something would just come over you. You would realize that something wasn't right. You felt something was to happen—something is negative—and we would be attacked; we would be hit hard; there would be an explosion; there would be an IED.

One particular time I remember standing—there was a roadblock, and we knew that—that we were going to be attacked, but we had just gotten into the country and I was—I was—this was the first—one of the first times we had been attacked, and there was a man sitting on a barricade right next to our trucks, and he was just looking. And the look on his face is so vivid to me even now, and at the time I didn't think anything about it. And he pressed a button on his cellphone, and at that moment he blew the truck up in front of us. And the guy—his name is Sergeant Cook—Sergeant Cook threw himself on top of me to protect me from the blast; in a chivalrous move, I suppose. But the—the guys in front were hurt severely, and the brother of the guy who was hurt severely was in the truck behind me, and he had seen the same gentleman with the phone, and I remember watching his angst; going through, "I should have done something. I should have said something. Why didn't I? Why didn't I—Why didn't I shoot that guy," you know? "Why didn't I do that?" You second guess yourself a lot, but—I got lost in what I was saying.

TS: No, no, I don't think you got lost at all—

NS: Okay.

TS: —in what you were saying, no, because it's—well, you know, why don't we take a little break, because you've been talking for quite a while? Is that okay?

NS: Yes.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Well, Natasha and I took a little break and we're back, and we've been talking about—you were talking—really wonderful stories about the way you articulated your experience in Iraq. Can you speak about your—you talked how you went into this unit and you didn't know anybody and you, kind of, got thrown in with them. How was it going with them?

NS: It was—In the beginning it was—it was a little scary. We—The—The—Our—Our platoon leader, Sergeant Ervin[?], was—he was a very intimidating African-American man who had just come off of active duty —full time active duty and he had just retired. So, he had been active duty for a very long time, and that intimidated me. And he was—he was just, kind of, intimidating person. Not that he was a mean person, he just—his demeanor. He was commanding and he had a presence.

And then as far as the people within the group, there was no real connection. I had no—There was no real stories; there was nothing to really connect us, until—until—I think until that first mission in Iraq we were really not fully connected and—

TS: Were they all—Did they all know each other? I mean, were you, like, the one person thrown in?

NS: [chuckles] Yeah, I was the one. They knew each other and I was the one foreigner.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: You were the one outsider?

NS: I was the outsider, yes.

TS: Okay.

NS: Yes, and that first mission, it was intense and emotions were high and we had a lot on the line, and that really did a lot for us; we really brought us together a lot.

TS: What was your role in that particular mission?

NS: I was just—fell into play with one of—one in the convoy. So before, as far as the prep, my role was to get my—my vehicle ready and to get it loaded, to get it—to get it hardened, and to—you know, to load it with water and everything I needed. And then after that it was just—it seemed after that that things just kept getting worse on that convoy. We would go into an encampment, and we were transient, so most people would have a tent to go to, but because we were transient we were outcasts.

TS: By who?

NS: Everyone in—in country. So, we would go—let's say we'd go into a camp and there would be signs: "No transients." We weren't allowed to go into certain places. We weren't allowed to sleep—

TS: Like other soldiers?

NS: Right.

TS: So, you're talking about—

NS: We were seriously treated like—like scum, [chuckles] because we were transient, and these convoys—these supply routes—were major throughfares [sic] through these camps, so they constantly had a influx of people coming in and out of these camps. But it—they don't remember that that is their sole purpose and their job, and that there is no place for us to go. And imagine how safe they felt in a camp. Not—They were somewhat vulnerable, but how much more safe—how would we feel not having a place to go. So, we—I slept a lot on my truck. They wouldn't give us a place to sleep, or they would only have one tent, so they would offer it—who—first come first serve.

TS: And how many people are in your—

NS: In the whole group in our—

TS: Yeah.

NS: There would be—It depended on the convoy. The first convoy was incredibly large and it turned out to be a mistake. We had—The convoy was a hundred trucks long, and that was an incredibly bad thing because—

TS: It was strung out for a long ways?

NS: It was strung out. When one end was getting hit the next end wasn't. We would lose half the convoy. The radios signals were—were—were messed up. They were—There was—It was really bad. We got—It was just a logistical nightmare. And not only that, it wasn't all military soldiers in the convoy. We also had—We had Pakistani and Indian hires that they had brought in from other countries to drive commercial trucks. And so, for every one of us there would be three of them, and it was our job to protect them. And they were driving regular civilian tractor trailers that were brought in for them to drive. And many of them I doubt had a driver's license, let alone knew how to drive a tractor trailer. And it was also that the cultural barrier with—as far as male/female; that was a challenge as far as them.

But—So, the unit mostly, on average, through our entire stay, the longest a con—we tried to keep it to fifteen—fifteen trucks; military trucks. And then for every fifteen we would put in—for every one we'd put in three—

TS: Commercial?

NS: Three commercial, yeah. But the first one was very long. It was [unclear].

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Were you a driver in that?

NS: I was a driver and I was a rider. I think it was such a long convoy and it took so long that it seemed like three or four convoys connected, just—because it just took such a long time.

The first camp we came to, they didn't let us go inside. They—We pull in—We were driving down the highway and there was a gate at constantino wire[?] we drove through, and it's saying, you know, "Coalition Forces Be—Only Coalition Forces Beyond This Point," and so we drive in. And we're still on the same road and there's no—anything around us, it just drove through constantino wire and then we stopped on the road. And they're like, "Alright, this is where we're staying. This is it."

And I'm like, "Wait a minute. What do you mean this is it? We just joined constantino wire. There's nothing around us." We could just walk back out, you know? And that was—That's where we spent the first night, and that was scary and interesting.

TS: Did you sleep at all?

NS: Not well, no. We tried to—I tried to put the cot up, and that's not comfortable. It's hot. I was worried I felt exposed. We were just out, and not only that, I was the only woman in this encampment and there were hundreds of men of all nationalities around me, and doing really weird things. Because it—you've got Pakistani, and we're not really used to that culture at that time. I think the most jarring thing that they did would be they just go to the bathroom wherever they are. If they have to go they just go; that's just how they are. But to me that was kind of shocking, you know. But I didn't feel very safe. I definitely didn't feel safe.

Some of the camps we would get a tent, and I think the majority of the time we slept in our trucks. And on occasion we would—probably not supposed to do this, but we would be hauling tanks—little—little smaller tanks that would actually fit on our trucks, and we could get inside the tanks, and tanks have heat, so especially in the dead of the winter when it's cold you're thankful to have that tank, you know.

I remember spending Christmas in a tank while in Iraq. I was up close to Mosul and it was so bitter cold and it was Christmas day and I had heat, and I was thankful for it. And I spent that whole day so thankful for that heat. And we drank hot chocolate that we cooked on a Sterno can, but that was such a special Christmas. I had so little but I was so thankful for what I did have.

But we—we never really had a place. We were always just wherever they put us, and most of the time it was outside the gate or in a staging area that was exposed. We were pretty exposed all the time.

TS: One thing I guess I was going to ask you about was, was it the 507th Transportation Unit [507th Maintenance Company] that got—the—

NS: Fourteen fifty-first or fifty?

TS: Was that—Well, the one where Shoshana Johnson and the—Jessica Lynch and—that episode.

NS: I believe that that is when—I don't remember. I don't recall that. Is that the female that was captured or—

TS: Yes.

NS: I believe that happened after me. When I was there I think the biggest threat was the—I don't—I really don't know what the—the proper term for them would be, but for the insurgents or, you know, who—they would—they got this idea that they would look for females in the convoys and they would pull them out of their trucks because they saw attacking the female in the convoy as a way to attack the entire convoy. So by taking out the female they were also—they were offending all the—they were hurting all of the males.

TS: The men?

NS: Yes.

TS: Getting them all riled up and—

NS: Right, and that was also during the time of the beheading so they were threatening pulling women from vehicles and then threatening to, you know—the beheading of these female soldiers. So, that time—

TS: Did they actually do that?

NS: I believe—I don't remember hearing—I remember hearing of them pulling a female from a truck, which might have been Jessica Lynch, if that's correct, but I—but I'm not—I'm not up to date on that. I do know how my unit responded to that.

TS: How did they respond?

NS: Amazing; they were amazing. They were not obnoxiously protective, but they were incredibly aware of where I was at all times and what was going on with me, and if we got stopped they were aware of where I was and what truck I was in. But they didn't—they didn't overtly take over and treat me as though I was incapable as a soldier because I was a female. I was still allowed to do my job, they were just aware of the threat, just as though the threat—what if the threat had been to men; it was, you know, "We're going to attack men. We're going to pull men out their truck." They treated it well. They did—

They did very well, and that only lasted for a short time—that specific threat—then it, kind of, progressed on to other things, but it was always shifting; we always had a specific thing that we—you know, information that we knew that they would be trying or doing. And I think we experienced every bit of that.

TS: Was that a lot through briefings or was some of this, like, rumors or—

NS: It would be briefings; things that were going on; rumors. It—Most of the stuff was through briefings; things that—that we needed to watch out for or things that we should be—consider. And there were specific periods of time, you know? Like, you know, during Ramadan things got much more complicated; times when the beheadings were going on; when Saddam [Hussein] went—was captured, that was a particular time of difficulty. When—Let's see, there was one other. I can't remember what it was.

TS: That's okay. So, there was a—Were they—The other soldiers that you were with treated you like—maybe, like they were your brothers, sort of, you know; that kind of protectiveness and yet, like you say, it's still letting you do your job but keeping an eye on you in that way? Did you ever feel that?

NS: It progressed. It progressed, the way they treated me, yes; very much so. And it was, I think, the—you know, the offense of their protectiveness at first, kind of, changed into a mutual balance, so that first attack when—his nickname was Cookie—Sergeant Cooke, you know, through himself on top of me to protect me—

TS: Yes.

NS: —I had two emotions: "Well, that was really sweet," A, and then B, "That really hurt, and why did you do that?" you know, "I can do this. I'm fine." And I was—

TS: Did you say that to him?

NS: No.

TS: Oh. [chuckles]

NS: No, no; you didn't talk back to Cookie. No, he was—he's a very tough, you know—that's fine.

TS: Okay.

NS: But from that point on I think that I read my—read the guys in my unit a lot better, and I think that they responded to me in a better way. But his—his—his moment—at that moment his first instinct was to protect me, and yeah, I am a woman and yet probably was because of that, but later on things—it—it—it was not about that. Later on it became more a—a family-type protection and—and it wouldn't have mattered if I was a male or a female; it was a unit.

TS: Right, because males jump on top of each other to protect them from—

NS: Exactly.

TS: —the same thing.

NS: Exactly. I think that Cookie responded that way more—I think, though, that it was more—

TS: Because you were a woman?

NS: —because I was a woman, and because it was so close to us; the explosion was very close, and I think—I mean, I was touched. Now thinking about what he did, it was his instinct; was to protect me. And sadly, my instinct was to get mad at him. But it—But it's that—when you're with a unit and you're with a group of people and you are facing things like this, you go through a sort of—a development. You grow and you have to learn how to be together without—without putting anybody at risk, but at the same time letting everybody do their part to make—to allow us to go forward, and that was difficult.

TS: There's always the—the criticism of having women in these kinds of positions; is that—one, that the man will do that; won't do his job because he is going to be protecting the woman, or two, that there's going to be a lot of sexual activity or sexual harassment or—you know, on the positive and the negative side. And so, you—it's interesting that, you know, like, you're the only woman in this particular—in this particular convoy that you're talking about; the first one. Was that—

NS: It was that way throughout my time there. There were very few convoys that I was with another female.

TS: Yeah?

NS: There was a few that we would get together with another platoon and we would meet up in these camps. So, let's say the convoy would go by itself, then we would all get to the encampment and then there would be other females and we would get sent to the female tent, you know, and we were lucky at that point in time because the guys didn't have a tent because there's so many. So, that was a benefit—

TS: Special privilege, sort of.

NS: But out of all of the other things that was a—just a small price to pay. Most of things that we faced were—were not easy; not easy to be a female during this time on the convoys.

TS: You want to talk about some of those reasons?

NS: For—For me, I think the most complicated was getting over my own—this was a personal thing—getting over my own bashfulness, as far as people—you know, I hear people talk about woman in the military create a problem for soldiers. They're going—All they're thinking about is sex and there's this sexual tension. I will say that the last thing a man is thinking about when someone is shooting at him is sex. That's just not on the top of his mind.

TS: Or a woman?

NS: Exactly. In fact, what they are thinking about is preservation and how to go forward, and—and you've got to make it through situations that are difficult. There are no 7-Elevens in Iraq. You can't pull over and just go to the bathroom; you can't just stop when you need to. And a guy can, kind of, just step out on the running board of the truck and use the bathroom no problem. Well, what does a girl do? In Iraq you're drinking a bottle of water every thirty minutes; you're just drinking tons of water. There's no air conditioning so you're just drinking lots of water. And I learned very early how to pee in a bottle, [chuckles] but I had to get over my own bashfulness, because the people in your truck change. One week it would be one male, the next week it would be another male, and so before the end of it I had to be able to do what I had to do in front of whoever was there. And guys had to do the same thing; it wasn't a one way street. They had to get comfortable with the fact that when I had to go to the bathroom they had to deal with it.

TS: Oh right, okay.

NS: Right, you know, I'm—so I can drive a tractor trailer and pee in a bottle at the same time, and this is one of the most amazing things I've come back with, although I've not used it since.

TS: [laughs] Okay.

NS: I remember the convoy commander going, "No, you are not really going to do that while we're doing this." We couldn't stop and I had to go to the bathroom so bad, and it made me so mad because they got to go. He held his clipboard in front of his head and cussed solid while I—I did it, but I think that it helped them realize where I was. Well, how they feel in that situation? I think females today actually have things that they can wear so they—they actually can just—it's a body suit that allows them to go to the bathroom, and it's much more sanitary, but—

TS: Like what the astronauts kind of had.

NS: Right; yes, exactly, and that would have been helpful. Another thing that—about the bathroom things is, yes, we did pull over. The convoys would pull over and take a short break, but when you pull over you had to pull security. And so, we pull over in these small towns, and you know, when you pull into a small town in your military convoy you have to—you know, you have to pull security; you have to hold your gun on these people, and they get curious. They start walking around and there's, like, ten, fifteen

people standing there, and I had to learn to pull my pants down and pee, holding a gun on these people that were watching me pee. What a strange dynamic that is, you know; what a strange play of power. "I'm vulnerable because my backside's showing. You're vulnerable because I have a gun on you. Don't make fun of me." [both chuckle] No, I'm just kidding.

TS: Right.

NS: It just—It was a difficult thing for me to do.

TS: Yeah.

NS: And the guys too. The guys could turn around, you know, but I actually had—I didn't have that benefit. But—So going to the bathroom was a big thing I had to overcome. That, and then just learning to—to just get on, and—and how to deal with people and how to talk to people; the male/female relationship, especially to Pakistani and Islamic men is very different, and I had a really hard time protecting the Pakistani hired truck drivers that—that came in that I was told, "Okay, you have to protect these people. They don't have weapons. They don't have armor. Protect them."

So, in order to protect them I had to ask them to do things. Well, you don't—as a female you don't tell them what to do because that is not culturally acceptable. I remember us being shot at and having this little man with his little turban, and he had his arms crossed and he was desperately not going to do what I told him to do out of sheer principle, and all I asked him to do was change his tire; [chuckles] his tire, on his truck. We were getting shot at. "Please change your tire," you know. No, he's not going to do that because a female is asking him to do it.

And so a guy would—you know, a male in my unit would have to come step in and say, "Change your tire," and then he would do it. That was frustrating.

TS: So, the power; [unclear] power?

NS: Yes, yes. And it wouldn't be frustrating if it weren't the fact that we were in danger.

TS: Right.

NS: We were in a bad situation.

TS: Well, it probably would be still—

NS: Right.

TS: —but a different—

NS: Yes, exactly.

TS: Yeah.

NS: It was frustrating. It was—It was an amazing experience to experience that country and then—and gender issues. The women; watching how they were—I got to watch them get the vote, and run around with purple ink on their fingers, holding their hands up so proud of that ink; that they had gotten to do this thing. It was such an amazing experience to see them take that step.

And then at the same time you see how set back they are; the clothing; the violence against them; the desperation; how far they would go to—to just—it just seemed like they were in a desperate place to—to get away from what they were in and the situation that they were in. It was just a bad place for everybody, because of the war; because of the situation.

TS: Did you ever get any R&R [rest and relaxation]; downtime; a break?

NS: We would run convoys straight, and once we got back we would get a few days of a break, which we had to do our laundry; get everything cleaned up, and then begin the prep for the next rotation to go out and we'd get our orders. The break usually included a drive to—into Kuwait, down to the Persian Gulf to pick up supplies, and then head back up. So, our break included a convoy, [chuckles] but we weren't getting shot at so it was all a break to us.

TS: Yeah.

NS: And in Kuwait it was very different. The—It was so amazing to drive from Kuwait into Iraq. So, you're in Kuwait and this is such an amazingly rich country. Beautiful, amazingly paved roads; decorative everything; everyone in Lexuses; bleached white clothes; beautiful, you know, Rolex watches. It's just such a rich place; you wouldn't imagine that in your head.

And then when you get up to the border and you get to the—the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone], and you're getting to that area where you're driving into Iraq, and you drive and the road starts rutting. And it's—And it's so rutty that you can't even barely hold onto the steering wheel. And you finally get in and you're poured out into this small, little impoverished town, and you have children running around with no clothes. You have no food. People living in small thatched huts and—and begging at the roadside for a scrap or water or anything they can get. All within five miles; the difference of Kuwait and Iraq; it was just amazing.

TS: Were all parts of Iraq the same?

NS: No. The lower portion, down close to the border, you have lots of settlements and areas with, you know, towns, and these are the people that probably experienced Saddam in such a negative way; that were just—

TS: Oppressed?

NS: Oppressed completely. Salt fields. Fields of salt where women would stay out—stand out in the fields and they'd scrape the salt up and put them in bags to make money. Then would have a long period of just desolation and desert. That's where we would consider Mesopotamia, or you know, that ancient civilization, but there's nothingness there. And then once you get up past that area it starts becoming a little bit more populated; the closer you get to Baghdad. And then within an hour of Baghdad you get more urban setting. You get roads and overpasses and signs and it seems a lot more like you're actually coming into—to an industrial country; a country that has, you know, normal things; power, electricity, industry. It seems more normal, except for the people are not normal. People are aggressive and angry and it's—it's a—it's a scary place to be.

TS: Did you have to stay there very long or you're just always moving?

NS: It—We were always moving but we would—we did stay in Baghdad many times.

TS: Yeah?

NS: We—There was—There were many camps in Baghdad we stayed at, and outside. But the camps that were from Baghdad on were the ones that—that were incredibly dangerous.

TS: Up above.

NS: Up above, yeah. There were several occasions that—in lower encampments that we were attacked. One was significant to me. In that area I talked to you earlier about; that road that we were, kind of, exposed, and this one particular time they—they gave us a tent and we were so excited. And we go into this tent, which was in—within the perimeter of the encampment; it wasn't outside where the trucks were. And me and my friend, we're so excited to have a tent. We went and got showers, and we were walking back to our—our bunks and—specifically I remember my weapon had been broken and they were trying to fix it, but they hadn't been able to fix it on my rest[?], so my weapon was still broken, and the thing that was wrong with it, it still would shoot but the problem was the pins would come out and it would fall in two; it would just break in half.

And we were walking back from the shower and we'd just gotten inside the tent, and we were pulling out our books to read and it was so nice. There was electricity in these tents. And you hear a slight—like a, "Whoomp, whoomp." And it—It's just a low poof sound, but very very clear to me; we knew exactly what that was. And I looked at her. I said, "Did you hear that?"

And she said, "Yeah." And she said, "I heard that too. Let's get ready to go."

Because once you hear that noise you don't have long before you start hearing the whistle, and wait a few seconds and then you hear the—you know, the [makes whistling noise] of the—of these mortars coming in. And we jumped up and we ran out the door to go get into a bunker, because we knew they were incoming. And as I ran out the door the tent strings that go straight down to the ground were in my way—the bunker was to the right—and it was light in the tent and dark outside and I had a weapon, and I ran out and the tent string caught me right around the neck and I landed flat on my back and my weapon fell in two, and we busted out laughing like a bunch of little elementary school

girls. We were about to wet ourselves laughing so hard. We had been in country for a very long time, and we'd experienced this repeatedly and we knew the danger, but it was so good to laugh, you know? We understood that laughter was central.

And we get to the bunker and it's full of all these people that had just gotten in country, and we are laughing so hard, tears strolling down our faces, and—and to me they probably thought we were crazy. But I—It—That moment stands out. But once it hit it was—that was probably one of the closest that ever hit to us. It—That—

TS: The mortars were coming in close?

NS: Very close. It came in—It actually came over the barricades and it hit close enough to a—it knocked everything down around us and it would—had I been standing we would have been knocked to the ground. That was—It was scary, but laughter broke it up and it—it made it tolerable.

TS: Yes.

NS: But—So, that—that was one of the few attacks in that camp, but most—most of the camps up past Baghdad were very dangerous, and that was a common noise; you heard that; the mortars; you heard the rockets; you heard small—You didn't really deal with small arms fire until you got on the road, but the mortars were always a problem.

TS: So certain sounds you had a sense for?

NS: Absolutely; that [makes thumping noise]. It's the sound of, like, something going into a tube, and it's faint; but yeah, that particularly. And then there's that sound, that whistling; that high pitched whistling of what I suppose is the descent of something incoming.

TS: Coming in?

NS: Right; very, very, very scary sound. Because sound doesn't allow you the benefit of knowing where it's going to be or hit. You hear it and it sounds like it's right there, no matter where you are. You can be really far away, but that sound, everybody in the camp can feel like it's right there. So, you—you just don't know where it's going to hit.

TS: What was—Was there anybody there who, like, really impressed you?

NS: There were people that really—yes, there was one person that, to this day, I will always look up to and I will always admire, but it was—I think it's more for the experience that he went through and then how he came out of that experience. I was not in this particular convoy; it was my unit. They—They were—I don't remember the time. I believe it was close to July; and that time it was in July sometime. And they went on a convoy and they were attacked so severely that it was—I mean, they were just annihilated.

They had—They had police with them which was—they had guards. These are Humvees with people up with—

TS: MPs [Military Police]?

NS: Right, exactly; MP security. And this was up in the Baghdad area, and basically the IED that happened to go off with this one particular convoy, it was a daisy chain con—IED. And what a daisy chain means is it is set up to only—it's several IEDs that go off measured out so that when one goes the next one goes, and they're measured so that one would go off in front of each truck within a convoy, so maybe sixty, seventy feet apart, and they're all linked together, and the one thing that they all have in common was a 155 [millimeter] artillery round that were connected to propane tanks. That is one bad, bad situation.

And what happened initially was that daisy chain went off and it took out the MPs in the front; it killed them. It killed the—It killed the civilian drivers, it killed a lot of people, and it—this one particular person, Huey—wasn't in my platoon but he was in my company, and I remember specifically them saying that the shrapnel went into his head and went over his Kevlar and down the back, and they didn't think that he would live. There were two gentlemen that—in that truck that were flown out that day. But to hear the stories of the people that were there.

So, you have tanks that come in. These are tanks that normally sit in Baghdad and pull security in these areas, and they came in to pick up the pieces of this convoy, because they were just being annihilated; my con—my company; you know, something so close to me. And they brought them into these tanks where they were safe and started trying to take care of the guys that were left.

One of the gentlemen in my unit talked about—he's actually a prison guard in normal civilian life, but he talked about holding one of the MPs head—brains as he held—in his head so that he—so that his—he just couldn't let—he knew that there was nothing else he could do, but he said that was something that he never thought that he would ever have to do. I guess that you're put in a position like that—that you're put in a position where you're doing things you never thought that you would ever have to do, or that were not possible for a human being to do.

But Huey came out of it a hundred percent. He was just a huge—He was like a mascot to—to our company; like, look what he could go through and then still be okay, and this person that made it through. He was a moral person. He was somebody that always did the right thing, and I didn't know him personally but I admired that. I admire hearing of him. And everybody had days that I admired them. And everybody had days that I just wanted to sock them. [both laugh] When you're that close to people—

TS: Sure.

NS: —and that's what you have. We—I washed my laundry outside in the desert and hung it up to dry on—between our trucks, you know? I ate food that I had stashed in my truck. I drank water that was hotter than boiling water. You know, we—we were always living in these close quarters until we got to know each other really well. And they did annoy me to death, but they also became dear, dear friends. I—It's a friendship you can't describe or match.

TS: What—Did you know when you were going to be able to leave? Did they extend you, or were you originally supposed to be in country for eighteen months?

NS: No, they extended us. We—We were—We had gotten—We'd got quite efficient. So, in the beginning it was taking fourteen days to run convoys and by the end we were running them in five days max; we were doing very well. We—I think we—we clocked over—over a million miles in country, which is just phenomenal for our—for what we were doing.

And they brought in—they brought in the new—the new group that was going to replace us, and they sent them out on one convoy and it was kind of a disaster. All I heard was a bunch of cows died; that's all I know. [both chuckle]

TS: Okay.

NS: So, all I know at the point in time is they said, "Okay, this is unexpected, but you're going to have to stay while we train them in country." So, even though they had been through that part of training in the United States, they sent they back into Kuwait to undergo more intensive training. So, I don't really know that we were happy.

TS: Right.

NS: Because most soldiers start hearing this right before they go home. It's always right before you go home that you die. It's always right before you leave that you lose your life, and for some reason that's in the back of everybody's mind; that's when the stakes are highest. You've made it all the way through. You've made it through things that you could never imagine, and you know that you're this close to going home. And so, everything is so important during that time. It's just really, really interesting; it was.

Another thing that was really interesting about this—you know, the country—it's a little off topic—but was also the fact that we were not the only soldiers there. We were there—we were coalition forces. We were there with people from all different types of cultures; soldiers; fascinating.

The Italians. I remember the Italians, they wanted us to come and drink their wine, because they're rationed wine, you know? Well, we weren't allowed to drink anything, so it was completely just the coolest thing to think, "You mean they actually give you wine to drink every day?" [both chuckle]

TS: Did they?

NS: "Really, they do that?" They did. The Italian army got their wine ration. The—I became dear friends with the British. I was lucky enough the female tent was close to the British Royal Marines, and so at night we would sit outside and we would talk to them and just drink in their experiences as, you know, the Royal Marines. Hearing how they came in and they were part of the surge, and talking about their jobs and what they had been through and what they had seen, and getting their pictures and their perspectives as part of, you know, the coalition.

And they were fascinated by us. They gave us an idea of who we were. They're like, "Yeah, Americans are this way."

"Really? We had no idea."

It was really eye opening to get to experience all these different countries in—united, going into a territory and trying to do—trying to do something together. It was just really a fascinating thing to watch.

TS: Did you—Did you run into any women from any other countries?

NS: I did not see other women from other countries. I don't—They didn't come into the chow hall so our—a chow hall being a place that we would go and eat. I never saw—Other countries didn't come into the American soldiers' places that we ate. And that's most of the time you would see people without their gear.

TS: I see.

NS: If they had gear on it was difficult to tell.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: To tell?

NS: Yeah. There were many occasions that I was approached by—by female or male Iraqis, and them seeing that I was a woman they would just, kind of—struck. Like, "Oh—

TS: You could see in their eyes or something?

NS: "—you're a female. What's wrong with you?"

TS: Do you ever feel like a token female; like, the token female or—at all? Like, because you're—pretty much were on your own as a woman in this.

NS: I do now. Then I didn't realize because there was a lot of women there. I feel like the truck driving women were token women. I think that people say women can't be in combat. What is combat? Is combat when we go and we—we're attacking into an area; we're going to take this area; we're going to take control of it? Is that combat, or is combat—which is my own definition—any type of conflict where there's—where there's flying bullets and explosions and—and death and defending your own mortality; your own life? That's combat to me.

And I would say that a lot of women that were in Iraq experienced that, because where are the borders? Where are those lines? You know, where is the enemy; the line of the enemy? There is none. Not in this situation. And you're sending women in trucks and as MPs. Tons of women MPs going to protect these soldiers. But yet, they come home and are denied the ability to say, "Yeah, I was in combat." And that's a challenge. That's

a challenge when it comes to getting benefits, and when it comes to medals and awards that are freely given to male soldiers that—that might have sat right next to you during this—you know, during a certain—you know, during a certain conflict.

TS: Did you have a personal experience with that?

NS: I do. I have—When I came back and I was trying to get benefits—medical benefits—I sent off my paperwork and when the paperwork came back it requested that I prove that I had been in a combat situation, and that would have involved me giving dates, names, times; everything about one specific event that had happened. Well, there are numerous, but at the same time, the dates are mushed together. If I couldn't remember my birthday, who can remember what date it happened. So I was able to, kind of, get all that in and they go back and they research it and they make sure that all my dates line up, and that I was telling the truth, because they didn't believe I was ever shot at, or that I was ever in any danger. It—I—It just—

TS: Who's they?

NS: Well, I assume the government, or whomever I am coming—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Like the VA [Veterans Administration] or through—

NS: I guess the VA. Now, this isn't a problem anymore, as I understand it. This, you know—This happened to me a while ago and I think that a lot—

TS: Like 2005 or six or something?

NS: Right, and I think that that's changed; how they go about that. However, I will never receive any type of medal or a commendation for being in a fire fight, or shooting a weapon, or for defending an American soldier. Or I could drag somebody out and—and have—I could have done anything and—that would have been deserving of that, but—but because of the rules in play I will never be allowed for—I will never be allowed to have that. I'm a woman, I'm not allowed in combat.

TS: Yes.

NS: The thing is—The funny thing about it all is, really, the problem is not about the combat. The problem is in garrison. The problem is when you're in—when you're—when you're home, it's—it's—it's establishing a balance and—and a way to go about day to day life with males and females. If that—If it's not established there then—then it's not going to get any better. But once you get into a war that never is a problem. You know, that—that—you know, that's just not a problem. And it's frustrating. It's definitely frustrating.

TS: But there are incidents where there's been, you know, sexual abuse in the war zone.

NS: Absolutely. Absolutely.

TS: It's not necessarily, like, on the job but, like, on the down time, I guess.

NS: Exactly, there has been, and I am not—I don't deny that. I never experienced any type of abuse, physical aggression, anything like that, but I've heard of women who have. I also know that the military did do a very good job, while we were in country, trying to protect us against problems like that. They warned us of certain times that we might be more vulnerable. In the showers if, you know, we were back in—in our home camp and we were going to the showers we were always required to go with someone else, or always be vigilant. They were very cautious and they tried to caution us, but they also tried to educate other soldiers.

But this only happened after the war began. There was never any discussion about this during my entire career in the National Guard. There was not—There was no courses given to soldiers about what is the proper way that we respect women in the military. In fact, it was—it seemed almost like—like it was a—like it was a gift; like, "Well, we've let you in so now you do it our way, and this is the way it is, and if you don't do it our way, too bad." Once you get into the war, you've got a little bit more power behind the structure and the way things are working; things are more—there's more at stake.

I—I don't—There were many times I was vulnerable and I felt very—I was scared about situations like that, but at the same time my core unit saved me every time. They kept me—They were vigilant. They knew I was a female. They knew the challenge. And they—they protected me. Not in an outward way, but in a—in just a—

TS: So you didn't really feel threatened by the people in your unit necessarily?

NS: Right, yeah. I never felt threatened by them. And it—I didn't have to feel threatened by everyone else, but when you are with so many male soldiers—you go into a Marine Corps encampment where there are no females—no females—and it is—it is—it—the tension of me walking into that chow hall, it got hundreds of guys—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Is that where you experienced it, like, the most?

NS: Oh my goodness.

TS: Because it's visible that you're a woman because you're—

NS: Right. That—That was—That was intense. That—But it was only intense because there were no other female—they weren't exposed to any other females. Of course that's going

to be—It has nothing to do with, "Well, a female stepped in here." It has to do with, "Let's—Let's just bring females in occasionally." That's the problem, you know? "Let's only—Let's not deal with the problem fully. Let's only deal with it partially." Had they had females they worked with all the time they would know how to deal with females. They would know what to do and what not to do. But it was uncomfortable.

I still get very rigid if I go into a restaurant or if I go into a place that I'm walking in to a room and it's primarily males, I get very rigid and uncomfortable and awkward, and I—I don't like it. I—It's just one of the situations I'm not—don't do well with. I'm traumatized by that.

TS: Right.

NS: Yeah.

TS: Well, you had said earlier when you were talking about how the unit that you're with in Boone and then you go pulled out of that unit and put in this other, and you had said you didn't—you were upset by it but later you understood why that was a good thing. Do you want to explain that?

NS: Because it gave me a chance to—it gave me a chance to learn about a new group of people without—without a history. You know, it was a blank slate. Not that I did anything wrong in my unit, or that they did anything wrong, but there was a history there that—that would have made things more complicated, you know? We gave each other a hard time. We made fun of each other. We had—you know, they were, "Oh, do you remember this time about this and this and that?"

But the new unit that I went in with, I didn't know any of them, and it put me at a—in a state that I was somewhat cautious about everything, and it made me more open to the situation, and it also helped me adapt. Had I been there with a unit that I was so familiar with I don't think I would have adapted so well. I think I adapted very well to what was going on because—because I was put in a position that I had—

TS: You were forced to.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

NS: I had to.

TS: Right?

NS: Yeah, absolutely. I—I will say that I had amazing experiences while there, and one that I definitely can't—can't leave out, it has to do with just me seeing now how—how it was just an amazing thing that happened.

While we were there—I told you about the children, right, on the side of the road that were so cold? Well, Americans were so drawn to send us—we got care packages;

tons of care packages. I had so many care packages that I was tired of care packages. I didn't—you know, it wasn't that I didn't appreciate it—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Were they addressed to you personally?

NS: Some of them—Some—My favorites were when children would write me letters. So amazing to receive a letter from a child. That meant more to me than all the boxes in the world.

So, I have—I'm a visionary. So one day we were driving into—we were getting ready to go on a mission and we're driving across the border. It was bitter cold outside. People can't imagine how cold the desert can be, but there's nothing to hold the heat, right? So when the sun drops so does the temperature, and it was like thirty, twenty-nine degrees and it was bitter cold. And I remember looking out and seeing this little boy about the size of my son, as old as my son would have been, standing on the side of the road, barefooted, in a cotton-looking—like a smock T-shirt, with bare legs, ripped, holding his little tan hands up, wanting water, and looking at him and just—my heart just broke for this little boy, and I said, "You know, if every one of these packages was turned into something else I could—we could just throw them to these kids on the side of the road."

So, I wrote a letter home to my community and they printed it in the newspaper, and the letter pretty much—it just asked people—it said, "If you're going to send me care packages, send children's clothes, send toys, send something for kids other—I don't need anything right now."

Well, I went on the next mission, and I came back. I was coming in so tired, I was so exhausted, and they're like, "Schooney[?];" that was my nickname; Schooney. "Schooney, you got enough mail to—you wouldn't believe." They were making fun of me about all the mail I had and I'm—I could not imagine what they were talking about.

TS: Right.

NS: They're like, "Now, you just wait. You just wait. Go up to the mail truck." And so, I went up to the mail truck, and I have a picture of boxes—I'm—I mean, just boxes upon boxes and boxes; a truckload of boxes all addressed to me—

TS: [chuckles]

NS: —coming in full of children's clothes. Well, they kept coming and they kept coming and finally my—I went to my first sergeant. I said, "Look, I was going to just throw the clothes out the window but I think we need to do a mission. We need to do a mission to take these to the schools.

So, he helped me organize. The British came and helped us organize a place where we would actually go on a mission. And we went to three different schools and—

in the lower portion of Iraq, and I had to get volunteers to go on this mission. And we got—we got the mission planned; we were going to go; I was very scared because it's the first time I've actually—I've been on the roads and dealt with the people there, but I've never actually been into the community and into the schools and things, so we planned on going to three schools.

And we loaded up and we go to the first school, and we get in there and it is a coed school, this particular one, and it was—it was an amazing experience. We took pictures. I have tons of pictures. But the soldiers—It was close to Christmas time but we were putting shoes—fitting shoes on these little children's bare feet, and we were giving them coats, and it's such a surreal thing to see a little Iraqi child wearing a North Carolina—you know, an NC State [University] T-shirt—

TS: [chuckles] Right

NS: —or a, you know, Blowing Rockets[?] or you know, all these that are so significant to us that they had no idea about, but they are so thankful for these little things that we brought them; toys and blankets and clothes, and we managed to get—we had enough to go through three different schools, one of which was the—I guess the equivalent of the mayor, his son—the mayor—I don't—wouldn't call it a mayor in that culture but what would be; him and his son were there in the nicest clothes they had, which was a suit that was probably too small. And they were there to present themselves, and he strutted around, and it was an all-boys school.

But that experience gave me something that I can't even describe. First of all, it told me that the people here wanted to do more than just support their troops. They want to be involved with—with what's going on, and they really made a difference to that small community. And it also told me that something so small can turn into something so huge. All I did was make one small request and my home town, which I hold dear for it, turned it into this amazing opportunity to show love and grace to these kids, and I will take that with me forever. And then afterwards I got to write a thank you note to them. But that was—that was just an amazing thing that happened while we were there, and I felt so insignificant, you know, in that but that God—I feel like God used me in that and it was awesome.

TS: Well, when you're—when you're talking about—in the beginning, you know, you were talking about how you're shy and quiet [chuckles], and I can picture you being the—like, the—one of the few women and then you have this truckload of stuff in your name. That's like you're—everybody knows who you are now.

NS: Right.

TS: If they didn't know before, right?

NS: Right, yeah. And then it grew into not just me and my unit, but the mission had to be done through the British and through—so it grew into this huge mission, and it wasn't—it was little ole me that, you know—it's—it's not about me.

TS: No.

NS: It's about the idea. But the funny thing is that it grew into something so huge from somebody who's so mousy and so quiet.

TS: That's what—That's what I mean, right? So, the ripple in the—you know, from the puddle going in the water and spreading it out, it—

NS: I learned there that I might look little and I might look like I can't drive a big heavy truck. I've heard so many people say, "You're too little to drive a truck."

And I want to say, "I'm not pulling it. I'm driving it." Or, you know, I am little and I am mousy and I am quiet, but God has put something powerful in me and I have this incredible need to give back what I've been given. And—And all I wanted to do was—was protect those kids I saw in my son, and it turned—and God let that happen. But yeah, you're right, it is kind of an interesting dynamic.

TS: [chuckles] There's a little irony in there.

NS: Yeah, there's a lot of irony in my story. I think the biggest irony coming out of it is—is the way that God has used my—my imperfection to show his ability, or God's ability, of perfection. So everything that I was not, I am now. So—

TS: Or maybe you really were.

NS: Or maybe I was, yes. Maybe I was all along.

TS: And it just—

NS: Right.

TS: —sprouted.

NS: Right. I just needed to get out and allow that to happen. I—When I came back—Wow, to come back and to drive into this little town. When I drove—When I got back—I have to share this. My brother's a fireman, and when I drove back I noticed that my grandmother, who cannot hide anything—she's so bad at hiding anything—she was acting weird and she kept whispering to my mom in the backseat. And I'm like, "What are you guys up to?" They had driven down and picked me up—

TS: Right.

NS: —and they were driving me back up the mountain into Blowing Rock, and right as you drive into Blowing Rock there's a big "Welcome to Blowing Rock" sign, and then you drive in and there's a—there's a estate on the right. It's a place—a golf course and a beautiful place to stay. And as we drove up there, we crested over the hill and there's a fifty foot American flag hanging over the road, and it's hanging from the top of a fire

truck, that it's ladder is—it's going all the way up, as far as it can, and there is a huge sign on the top that say, "Welcome Home Natasha," and my brother's there in his uniform. And the—And the newspaper is there and all my friends are there, and they're there right at the edge of my hometown to welcome me back into this town.

And the irony of that is I was such the black sheep. I failed at everything. I was a disaster. If there was a way to do it wrong, I did it wrong. I was—I was all parents nightmare, to be honest. I've not shared a lot of what I was, but this made it right. This made—It gave me a way to be who I was. It gave me a way to come out; a place to come—a place that the education system had failed, the military picked up and made it right.

And so, it was—it was really powerful. But it also gave me the courage to go back to school, and I—I didn't think I would get in. I had never graduated from college—from high school. So, I applied and I held my breath, and I got an acceptance letter from Greensboro College and they let me in, and the child that made straight F's and D's made straight A's. And—And then I applied to divinity school, and more irony, I received a letter from Duke Divinity [School], which is, you know, a place that I never thought that I would ever grace the halls of, and I received a full scholarship—merit based scholarship—because I wasn't as stupid as I thought I had been. [phone ringing in background].

But it just—it—the whole—the whole story from beginning to end, it just shows that—it just—it's just the flip side. It's just you have to hear the whole thing to really be able to appreciate how much that experience did for me and how much the military has done for me, completely.

TS: But I would like to point out that you were part of that story, and without your agency in it none of those things would have happened.

NS: I—I think now—I just recently did a—a personality study. I'd never done a Myers-Briggs [Type Indicator], and it talked about—it really clarified for me a lot of things about my personality that I didn't know, and—and it—it helped me see that I do have gifts in that way; that I do envision things and I do—I have this desire to go and do things. I think the difference now is that I realize that my disabilities—dyslexia, ADHD, PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder]—those don't define me. In fact, they make me better at what I need to do, because they tune me in to everything. They make me watch everything. They have—It has taught me that I need to be aware and conscience of everybody and everything. Too many times you see people that just walk through life with their head in the clouds, and they can't understand what it's like to be there, and it's—

TS: So, you have great empathy?

NS: Exactly. It's given me that.

TS: So, tell me about why you decided to get out.

NS: Well, it wasn't that the military didn't try to keep me. While I was in Iraq they—my ETS [Expiration of Time and Service] date came; my—the date that I was supposed to get out, and they gave me—they offered me ten thousand dollars cash, tax-free money to stay, but unfortunately it was a really bad time to be doing that because it—you know, I was still in country and I was still under the threat of—of—of imminent death. So, I just—I called my husband and we talked about it and I decided that—that I had—I had learned a lot and I had gone as far as I needed to go and I had done my service, and I'm—and I decided to—to go ahead and get out.

I miss it. So much I miss it. But at the same time I think that it gave me enough—enough experience and enough to go on and do things that—that I feel like I need to be done; other callings. It was my primer[?] school, it was my education; it gave me everything I needed.

TS: So it gave you a lot of tools for—for the way that you're—you're living your life now?

NS: It did. Absolutely, it did.

TS: I have a couple, like, general questions, if that's okay? Well, first of all, how do you feel like you were treated when you got out, then? How was that? Was that—I mean, after, you know, spending so much time in a war?

NS: I felt—I felt like a hero. [chuckles] They—I definitely got this feeling from everybody of just so incredibly, you know, proud of me. My family just—I—Actually, I felt very unworthy, because I feel like anybody could do what I did. I really—I saw a lot of people go through it. A lot of people have done it in the past, and they'll do it again.

So, I didn't feel worthy of that, but I had to understand deep down inside what that meant for my family, you know; what they needed, and how many prayers they had said for me. My community; how many prayers they had said for me. My success wasn't just for me, it was for them. A little, small town girl, a female, of a little town in Blowing Rock in the Appalachian Mountains, and she made it through a thirteen month war in Iraq, in a combat zone. And these people just needed—needed that.

And they also knew my story. You know, what God did for me, you know, and—and for them. It lifted them. It—The Story—That—That lifted them up, you know? That—"What an amazing thing God's done for you. Well, if God does that for you, then can't God do that for me?" You know? And I make sure they know how broken I was. I've not quite shared that much, but my hometown's very well aware.

TS: So, you—So, you went in—you went to Greensboro College and then now you're at Duke Divinity School.

NS: I am, yes. Yes.

TS: How has your adjustment been to, we'll call it, civilian life?

NS: It was hard at first. I'm fine now; it's been long enough. I have—I do have PTSD; I suffer from PTSD. When I came back—When I came back, that was the most difficult, because

they didn't train us and we didn't know what PTSD was. We knew that if you had PTSD you were a wimp; that's all we knew. And that that's what people would claim if—if they wanted to get out. And I didn't know what it was.

And so, I came back and I knew something was wrong when I came home on my R&R. Because I came home in January—I mean in July. Over the fourth of July I came home, and I remember my mother took me to hear the North Carolina Symphony play in—at Chetola [Resort at Blowing Rock], and while we were there they so sweetly announced well wishes to me. And I was leaving that night on a plane so they—I got to hear them play and they wished me well, and—and then while they were right at the end of what they were playing they started shooting off fireworks. And that was the first time that I realized that fireworks are just like incoming artillery, and—and that—and I—and I responded to that, and it was—it wasn't to the extreme that it was when I came home, because that was really in the beginning of my tour that I took my R&R. I left from R&R and then I stayed in country another nine months. So really, the damage was more done—

TS: Later?

NS: —in that last—yes. But when I came home the second time, that's when it got incredibly bad; that my trigger—my—my triggers came only from loud noises. Some from smell; certain smells would trigger. But the majority of it would be any type of startling loud noise. And any startling loud noise would put me into just inconsolable—just hyperventilating and panicking, and I didn't do this in country; it was just after coming back, and that safety, I guess. Maybe it's the safety that that danger is threatening. You know, you come home and you're safe again, and all of a sudden that loud noise penetrates in on what you hold dear, and that you're safe and home and you made it, and that loud noise is a threat to you. It's telling you, "No, you're not." You know? "Remember this?"

I didn't realize it was PTSD until some of my family members said, "Look, you might—might have PTSD and you need to go have this checked out." And I remember in church sitting on the—one service and somebody clanged together some symbols in the microphones and I triggered in front of everyone in the choir, and that's when I decided that I needed to go, but—and see if I had PTSD. It was embarrassing. I—I felt like such a hero and, "You're so strong. Look at what you did. Look at—You know, you made it through this difficult thing, and then you come home and then you act like an infant when there's fireworks going off." And it—I was just humbled by it. I couldn't under—I just felt awful. "What's wrong with me?" And it was embarrassing for me. And so, I started avoiding people in places and my husband stayed with me the whole time, but that did get better.

Another thing I—I—I experienced was anger; an anger at American people for ignorance. I—I—There was this animosity to them because they spout off all this knowledge about what's going on, and they're so knowing and knowledgeable about what's going on, and they—they sit in front of the news and they have no idea, you know? I was angry at them. "You're not there. You have no right to say that or do that." And I would get most angry at the ones that would lash out at soldiers, you know; few and far between. There weren't many, but I did hear them. Or at politicians for what they

did, or you know, it's really easy to criticize without understanding. The difficulty is being a part of it and understanding and trying to make sense of it, and that's what I was doing. I've made my peace with that.

TS: Yeah? Do you feel—How was the VA for helping you with the PTSD, or I'm sure that it still—you're still ongoing.

NS: Yeah, it's an ongoing treatment. I didn't—At first I—they wanted to medicate me. I really feared medication. I've seen so many people addicted to drugs that I didn't—I was afraid of that. So, they tried the medication and it didn't work well; I didn't like that. So, they started trying something, it's a treatment for ADHD, which I already have, and what it—it actually did help. More than anything what's helped me is conversation and talking, and the promise to myself that I don't hide anything about my experiences there.

A lot of soldiers come back and they don't want to talk about it, and I promised myself that I wouldn't do that, even in the most harsh moments, you know. Watching soldiers burning or, you know, seeing people die; children die, you know; all the—every bit of it is—is freely spoken about, and that helps me. I don't know why but it does. It helps me.

TS: Do you speak—I know you spoke at Greensboro College, right?

NS: Correct, I've spoken quite a bit. I've spoken for the United Methodist women, Presbyterian women, lots of—lots of churches, especially women's groups like to hear my story and have asked me to speak. I've spoken to many college classes.

TS: What is it that you're trying to convey when you speak?

NS: I think that I just want people to—that—that aspects of my story I think that are important are, you know, understanding a woman's perspective and women that are in that situation, how limited it is. We just can't understand what—where we're sending them and what they're doing, you know, and we need to be more aware of that. But most of all, I want people to hear the hopeful side of it and hear how much the military has done for me, how much God has done for me, and—and how far you can go with nothing.

A lot of people who join the military, they do it because they find they hit those walls in education. They—They can't go any further; there's just a wall; whether it's financial or with their grades, and they use the military as a way to propel themselves. It's important for the military not to take advantage of that, A, and then B, at the same time it's important for the military to continue, you know, helping people in that way. But we can't—I just—women can't be limited, you know? The military's done a lot for me, and my parents will vouch for that.

TS: Yeah?

NS: They think it's a good decision.

TS: Yeah?

NS: There was only thirteen months they thought that it was a bad decision. [both chuckle]

TS: Right. Well, do—would you recommend it to other young women?

NS: That's kind of a catchy question. I would.

TS: What about your daughter?

NS: It would depend. I would suggest it to—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: I mean, I know she's only, what, three?

NS: She's six.

TS: Oh, six, she's a little older.

NS: The problem with my daughter is she's such a—adventurous that I'm afraid that she would enlist for the infantry or, like, you know, she'd go straight for the big guns; something, you know?

TS: Okay.

NS: I—I think that it's an individual's choice and an individual's decision, but the one thing that I would say to men and women both is that when you make that choice it's more—it's a big deal and you need to understand that—that you are making a huge decision and you need to really work—work out what that means.

I just wanted out and so I accepted whatever job was placed in front of me. Come to find out there are two jobs that you are put front and center of combat situations, and that is in truck driving and an MP, and—and I didn't know that then. Perhaps I was trying to play off the, "Oh, women don't go into combat."

TS: Yes.

NS: It's not the truth. It's a lie. That's not true. Women are in combat. It's just whether we acknowledge that or not.

TS: Yes.

NS: I just think that people should be—know what they want and—and think that out. It is a—It is a huge decision.

TS: Do you think the seventeen year old Natasha, if somebody had sat down and talked to you about that, would have actually been able to make those kind of choices differently at that time?

NS: No, I never would have. I never would have made those choices properly[?], but that's, I think, where I think the military needs to be responsible, too, in understanding I do believe that seventeen year olds are really young to be making a choice like that. Any—I think, you know, you're twenty-two years old before you're really prepared to understand what your own mortality means; what does it mean to really be a living person and that you really can die, and that you—your life is—is very, very, very fragile.

TS: Sometimes people have described some women in the military as trailblazers. Do you see yourself in that, you know, cat—category, I guess?

NS: Trail—What is a trailblazer? I suppose I—I—Or is it just—Is that kind of open; a trailblazer?

TS: It's open.

NS: Well, if—if trailblazing means that you are trying to break into new territory and you're trying to make the woman—the—the woman's issue something that—that eventually we live in a world that—that there's no difference between male and female—that we're treated equally—then absolutely; I absolutely am.

Women—I see this in male and female, and I've really looked at it deeply. The only time there is an issue is if there's imbalance. When there are no women there's an imbalance. Only in that balance—that—that—that completeness of male and female—can we be balanced and can we be effective. The reason the military faces problems with women in combat is because women are being introduced into areas of combat that they are supposedly not involved in. Nobody knows how to deal with that. Nobody knows how to respond. Like my unit, when I was young; they put me in this unit of good old boys, and here they throw down a little girl in the middle of it. Like, what are they going to do with that? They don't know how to respond. There's no education.

But when you have situations where there's women and men, and they know how to go forward, and they're trained and they know how to respond to each other, and everything's well thought out, it is so powerful; so powerful. Women have things about them that men do not have, and vice versa, and—and as a unit such a powerful force. The military would be—the military would not being doing itself justice if it didn't—if it didn't take that into account, especially right now.

TS: Do you think, then, that training and leadership are really key elements of making, like, a company successful?

NS: Absolutely, I do; I believe that. I also believe that leadership needs to be more involved in what's going on with their unit. I experienced a lot of separation between the hierarchy and the—and the enlisted. So, you've got the—you've got, you know, officers that you

see them occasionally. It's kind of like the president on TV You're like, "Oh, there's the commander," but you don't have any interaction. There's no—You don't really understand what's going on, and so you have this perspective of them as though they're not doing anything, they're lazy, they're—and that's not the case.

And then on the other side, they need to be more involved in—with their soldiers. And I saw a separation especially in Iraq with that. That might not be the case now, but I do think that leadership is key.

TS: What do you think about the—[United States] Secretary of Defense [Leon Edward] Panetta had just announced that women in combat, they're going to repeal that restriction?

NS: They're going to allow women in combat?

TS: Yes.

NS: I think that it is—I think it is a good thing. However, it is only a good thing if it is done in a way that honestly and fully wants women to be in combat. If you say, "Yes, I want women to be in combat," and then you just throw it out there, and there's no organization behind it and no forethought and no care given to it—kind of like throwing me into a truck with a bunch of guys—where's she going to go to the bathroom? Well, what are—you have to think through those things.

I think that if that happens, women need to be educated. Men need to be educated. The military itself is going to have to go through a whole new facelift on—on balance and—and a new dynamic, because right now it is—it is—it is completely pat—patriarchal; it really is. It's all about the male, and it's—and it's—and it's based off of that; the uniforms, the—the vehicles, the—everything is male centric. So, when we—a female tries to step into those shoes, if she doesn't conform, she's got to suck up—suck in her gut, you know; she's got to conform. If they're going to do that, they need to do it balanced and with—with every bit of intention that—that they want it to succeed.

Because I think a lot of people don't want that to happen. They fear it, and I think my fear would be that they're like, "Okay, well, let's make this hap—let's let it happen and then watch it fall." Because it will. It will be a [unclear].

TS: Set women up to fail?

NS: It will. It will if it's not done properly.

TS: Interesting.

NS: Just my perspective.

TS: No, that's an interesting perspective. I haven't actually heard it put that way before so that's interesting. What about the—also the new policy where they repealed the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"? So, when you went in it had—"Don't Ask, Don't Tell" had been

implemented for a few years, and so pretty much the whole time you're in that was the policy.

NS: Right. I think it is an amazing—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: What are your thoughts on that?

NS: —step forward for the military. I think it's wonderful, and I'm thankful to be—to be a part of a country that is stepping in that direction and—and really—it really—it's hopeful for me. It's—There's a sense of irony in that as far as the—you know, the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and then the women are coming right after. I would love to see—I would love to see the military be opened up because I really think that it would—it would be a benefit to—to the military. But I think it would be great. I—It's amazing. It really is.

Now, once again, it kind of falls into education and understanding, and how our units and our soldiers told to deal with situations like this. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" originally it's suppressing the issue. It's saying, "This doesn't exist," and "Put our fingers in our ears and say, 'La la la la.'" But—But that's hiding what humanity is. We are who we are, and the military can only be successful if it embraces that and uses it to its benefit. It's excellent.

TS: You've actually answered this one question throughout your—your story, but I want you to have an opportunity to answer it in like—more directly: How has your life been different because of your time in the military?

NS: Wow. [chuckles] I mean, I guess it's just shaded everything. It's changed everything. It is—It wasn't a—It was the education that I didn't get. It was the family that—that I needed. It—It—It became for me a place to grow and to become who I am now. Every bit of my outcome is due to the military's—being there for me. Now I believe fully that God is the root of all of that. I do believe that.

But it changed everything. I would not be married to my husband. I would not have the children that I have. I would not have my education. I wouldn't have confidence. I wouldn't—I would—I would not be at all who I am, and I am every day thankful for that opportunity, and I would suggest it for other women. I do want other women to have that opportunity. I don't want them to have the early experiences that I had.

TS: With the discrimination?

NS: Right, yeah.

TS: And the harassment; things like that?

NS: Exactly. I want them to have the experience I had when I was in Iraq; not the death and the pain. I want them to realize the unity and the family and the—what it did for me to see all the world and—and everything, I think all women should have that opportunity. And I think women should be able to come back and be able to wear a—a bar or a badge saying, "Yes, I was in combat," or "Yes, I was in this situation."

TS: The combat infantry badge?

NS: Exactly, it should be—it should be equally available to both male and female of a unit that is in an experience; as long as it's equal, you know, to both sides. Maybe that is the case now but I don't—I don't know if it is; I don't.

TS: Is there anything that—in particular you would want a civilian to know or understand about what it's like to serve in the military that they may not understand or appreciate?

NS: I would—I think—One thing that I've said to—to other people I've spoken to, I've tried to put into words what it would be like to be in—in a war and what it would be like to have that feeling, and the only way that I can put it to anybody is imagine as a child, or even as an adult, that day that you wake up and you are so exhausted and you are so tired and you can feel it deep in your bones, and you just would do anything to stay in your bed, and all you want to do is just call in sick; "Just today. I promise I'll just—just for the day;" one day off. Imagine waking up that early in the morning with that same passion and that same desire say; "I just don't want to die today; not today. I don't want today to be that. Please God, just one more day. Can I have one more day?" And I believe that is every soldier's prayer who'd been in a situation like that, and that is really lacking but it is as close as I can come to describing that for civilians, and I would just say that is the ultimate sacrifice. It is so difficult to be that, because you can't call in sick and you can't lay out; you don't have those options. It takes an incredible amount of strength to stand up, put on a uniform, and to face things like that. And every soldier—every soldier—deserves honor and respect for that decision. I think that's [unclear].

TS: I think that's a very good answer; it's not lacking at all. Okay, how about—what does patriotism mean to you?

NS: I—That's a difficult one. Patriotism, to me, is both a good thing and bad thing. I believe patriotism—or in in my own perspective, I think it's a good thing in the fact that it helps—it helps unify. It helps us find one thing that we can identify, as far as a country and a people, that we can all stand behind and agree on. We might all have different homes, different jobs, different everything, but it's one thing that we can all stand underneath and propel forward.

On the negative side, if it becomes us; if it becomes the only thing that we see; if it—if it becomes all we are as the United States and all we are are you know, people who push forward—the United States—and that's all we see, then we're limiting—we're limiting the United States; we're limiting what we can be. So, I'm afraid—I hate to say it, I'm a little afraid of the word patriotism. I think it can be a dangerous thing. I've seen danger—dangerous—people who are so passionate about—about country; God—you

know, God and country, that—that it's turned into something negative. So that's—I guess that's why—

TS: Double edged sword sort of thing.

NS: Right, yeah, exactly; exactly. However, I've benefited from patriotism so I can't talk bad about it too much. I—When I flew back from Iraq I was coming home on R&R and I was getting on the plane and the stewardess said, "I—" you know, "This man would like to give you his seat in first class."

A man gave me his seat in first class, and then every flight I took between Iraq—or back from country, back and forth, before I got off the plane the pilot, every time—and these are civilian planes with civilian people; it wasn't all military—would say, "Would everyone please remain seated. We have a soldier on board and we would like to wish her Godspeed, and we would like to bless her with our prayers, and we would like to let her stand and get off first. We honor you and we thank you." And I would stand up and the whole plane would erupt, and it wasn't once; this is every time I got on a plane. It was actually three times, and it just—what a humbling experience to—they—they needed to be a part of this action; the American people needed to be a part and that was their way, and that's healthy patriotism. It was a good thing.

TS: Well, we can't cover everything, right? [both laugh] But we've certainly covered a lot, and so I don't have any more formal questions. Is there anything that you would like to talk about that we—that I haven't asked you or that you would—would like to add?

NS: There's just—Not that I can think of. There's just a—There's not really a lot that I can say. I think I've said most everything. I'm sure that something might pop up one day, but—that the experience I came home with was something that I have allowed to—to be a part of who I am, and I guess the last thing that I would say is that not—not all soldiers who come back can talk, and my experiences are only scratching the surface of devastation and pain of some soldiers, and that I just—I would hope that other people—that, you know, anyone would have an understanding of that. But war is something that breaks—it's brokenness, and all we can do is find that brokenness—find something within it and then build ourselves back up again and try to grow from it. And that's probably the biggest thing I've taken from it; turn something desolate into life.

Thus my dragonflies; something that starts in the mud and in the mire; something that is formed under the water in the depths, in something dark, a place that nobody wants to be, and after time it can rise up and become something that's completely different and separate and transformational; something that gives us life and form and freedom. And it's just—it can be a positive thing for those who've experienced it.

TS: Well, thank you. I think that's a good place to end. Thank you so much. I appreciate your time, Natasha.

NS: Thank you.

TS: I've go ahead and shut it off here.

[End of Interview]