WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Deyanira Cabrera

INTERVIEWER: Tamara Shovelton

DATE: April 8, 2021

NOTE: THE TRANSCRIPT HAS BEEN HEAVILY EDITED BY CABRERA

[Begin Interview]

TS: Okay. All right. Today is April 8, 2021. My name is Tamara Shovelton, and I will be interviewing Deyanira Cabrera via Zoom to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. If you would please state your name the way that you would like it to read on your collection.

DC: Deyanira Modesta Cabrera.

TS: All right. Can you tell me a little bit about when and where you were born and about your family?

DC: Okay. I was born 7 June 1968, in a city called Aguadulce, in Panama—the country of Panama. The youngest one of two kids from my mom and my dad. I have older siblings. I have two sisters from my mom's side and four brothers and two sisters. Unfortunately, most of them, my brothers and sister from my dad's side, are deceased, so I only have one that is alive. My dad was actually sixty-three when I was born, so I'm the youngest one, and I'm fifty-three right now. I grew up as a just normal kids in a normal family. Happy child; a very good childhood.

I come from a family of military—we can say police—in Panama. My dad was a policeman. My brother was a policeman. My older brother was also police. I didn't have the opportunity to actually do anything in the military in Panama because I got married and I came here to the United States. That is why I later on decided to join the army.

TS: I kind of had that same thing, because my husband was already in, we were stationed in Fort Drum, New York, and I was like, I need a job. The army base is right there, so I might as well just join the military.

DC: It was a little difficult for me because I was married. I had two kids. My youngest one was three years old. My oldest seven/eight. I heard from another lady that was married

also that a few military spouses were trying to join the military. So I say, "How do you guys are doing it?" So I inquired about it. My husband deployed so much, so when I talked to the recruiter and he said, "Oh, you have to submit a waiver, and here is what is needed. I did all the paperwork, and out of the four, I was the last one that submitted the paperwork, and I was the only one that the waiver was accepted.

TS: Oh wow.

DC: And I was told that it was because I had a college degree, even though that it was from Panama. And they also looked at my financial disclosure. I remember the last interview was a Lieutenant Colonel—I was already working on my MOS [military occupational specialty] with the Red Cross. He gave me an interview and what he asked me, how was the weather in Panama? And I said, "Beautiful, warm."

And he said, "Okay, I'm going to sign this for you, but you have to be in basic training in a month."

And I was, "Oh my God," I cannot even do a pushup. You know how that goes? [chuckles]

TS: They teach you.

DC: Yeah. That's exactly what happened.

TS: They do teach you, that's true. When you were in college in Panama, did you go to college to get into the dental industry, or did you go to college for something else?

DC: No, I actually went for something totally different. My plan, was to become an architect but I only completed the three-years, which is a technical degree. Well, I don't remember how to draw now because it's been so many years, but I have a degree in architecture design/architectural drawing. My job would be to assist the architect and do all the drawing.

But since it was a degree from Panama, when I came to the United States, Panama University was not accredited in the United States, so it put me down to zero. So I had the credits, I have the college, but I couldn't use that. Plus, language, it was a barrier. When I was in Panama, I did not speak English at all. So I came here with no English, nothing.

TS: Was it while you were here in the United States that you took the courses through the American Red Cross for Dental Assistant?

DC: No, I did it in Panama. I kind of, like, self-taught myself English. I remember I bought a little book and I started learning word by first because—I had my son when I got married, so it was very difficult for me to help him in school. I couldn't. I didn’t understand the language. So my son struggled a little bit, I'm not going to lie, because I couldn't help him as much with school. And my husband deployed so much, so kind of like I was by myself with him. So I knew I had to learn the language. But to tell you the truth, it was not easy.

When I went to basic training, my English was not good. I was the quiet girl in the whole platoon because I knew if I opened my mouth, whatever I was going to say, it

was not going to be correct. So I did my basic training by watching people. I was never the first one; I was always the last one. So I memorize everything before it was my turn to do it. And that's how I made it through; I made it through like that.

And so, when I came here, there was the same situation. I couldn't write in English. I could read and understand a few things. But talking, it was hard. It was hard, but I decided I cannot keep like this, I have to learn. I decided—I say I have to go to college. So I registered in school; I went to college. And then I was terrified about English 101 and English 102. I was terrified. I'm not going to lie to you. I was terrified. And so, I say, this is the first classes that I'm going to take because I need to pass this class. And I took my English 101 first and I got a D. I went in and took it again and I got a C. It was like I graduated from college for me. Took 102, I got another C, and I said, that's it. I can make it now. For me, it was psychological. And I said, if I can pass those two, I can make it. And those are the only D and C that I have through my whole college; those two.

TS: When you decided to go to college in the United States, where did you go?

DC: Here at Fort Bragg, first, I went to FTCC [Fayetteville Technical Community College] because I wasn't sure about what I wanted to do. I did an Associate Degree. At the time I if you had a college degree from another country, a foreign degree, you can bring your official transcript and the college would give you a few credits to continue your education. I came in with a hundred—I think it was a hundred and sixty credit hours; FTCC gave me, like, thirty. So I finished my Associates.

TS: Were you going to FTCC while you were in the military?

DC: In the military, yes.

TS: And had two small children?

DC: Yes.

TS: Okay.

DC: With the FTCC, I received an Associate Degree. It was a General Education. Then I Campbell University [North Carolina]. When I was in FTCC, for me, my associate degree was very difficult. Well, it is normal, with the first time in college because I have to translate everything in Spanish and memorize everything in Spanish to be able to take a test in English because I wasn't used to memorizing in English. I couldn't, because all my life was Spanish. So I took each chapter and I translated and memorized it in Spanish to take a test in English. It was very hard.

TS: No, that makes perfect sense because your brain sees everything in Spanish. Same way for me, I cannot speak French. I can read French, but when I read it, I read it in English. When I have to translate something like from English to French, it takes me a while, but it makes total sense. When you went to Campbell University, what did you major in?

DC: I did Applied Science with Campbell University because it was the shortest degree, with a minor in Criminal Justice. My goal was to get a Master degree first in Human Resources and Management and later a PhD but I stopped after my master's.

TS: Did you do all of your education in the United States while you were active duty?

DC: The majority, yes. Yes, through the whole military career, I was in college. I was working, I was a full-time mom, and I was in school, yes.

TS: Now, when you were going to school while you were active duty, there were some military benefits for that, right? Did they have the seventy-five percent?

DC: I used TA. I used Tuition Assistance. And also, since I was a dental assistant, I was lucky that I was part of DENTAC [Dental Unit], and my unit had a program that you can sign for—What is it? They call it—Wow, I forgot the name—where you actually have to cover emergencies at night. They usually need three enlisted to cover. The enlisted duties is to cover the hospital emergencies either Tuesday night and Saturday all day, or you go Thursday and Sunday, and the other one goes Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Then the remaining of the time, you don't have to report to work or nothing. Your duty is to go to school. I only had to report that I was going to school, show my grade, I'm passing. I stayed in the program until another enlisted wanted to come in and do it. Then they said, "Well, you've been here for too long. We have to take you out. We have to give the opportunity to somebody else."

It is funny because at the time there was not many volunteers wanting to do the program. I was E-5 and they needed somebody. And I say, okay, if you don't find anybody to do it, I do it. And no one enlisted wanted to do it. So they send me; even that I was E-5, they sent me to cover the position and because of the program I was able to almost finished my bachelor's degree at the end, and before I actually got out of the military.

TS: When you got out of the military, then you use your GI bill to pay for the rest?

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

DC: Then I used my Montgomery to finish it. And then the remaining, I used it for my master's degree. So technically, I went to college for free, I was able to use all my Montgomery GI bill, and I didn't have to sign for any loans or anything. It covered everything all the way to my master's.

[The MGIB-AD (Montgomery GI Bill Active Duty) program, sometimes known as Chapter 30, provides education benefits to Veterans and Servicemembers who have at least two years of active duty]

TS: That's phenomenal, because you went to a private school too; Campbell's a private.

DC: Yeah, Campbell was a private school. Exactly.

TS: That is phenomenal. Wow. You were married before you joined the military?

DC: Yes.

TS: What was it like being the spouse of a military member.

DC: Well, when I'm met my husband, I remember—first of all, I wasn't planning to get married; that was not the plan but it happened [chuckles]. We've been married for almost thirty-one years, so I guess it worked. And I told him I think we still married because we got married Friday the thirteenth. So that's the reason why we're still married. [chuckles] So I remember I got married, I never thought I was going to leave my country.

I wasn't. I said, okay, we got married. So when I got here, reality kicks in. I was coming to a new country, no English, I was really hesitant. When I got here—I remember I got here November 1990, and my husband left for deployment in January for six months. So I stayed by myself.

It was a rude wake-up call from the beginning. But you know what? Now that I think about it, it really prepared me for everything. It is a very hard in the beginning but I was committed and I knew I had to make it work for my family.

I used my time wisely. I knew I had to learn English and learn how to drive if I want to bring my son. Being a military wife is not easy. You have to be prepared for a life of being alone most of the time. My husband used to tell me sometimes, "Okay, I'll be leaving on this day. I'll be back six months later on this day." And that is how it was sometimes I can go four, five months, six months, and I don't hear anything from him. But because I knew where he was; he was in the middle of the jungle of Colombia or in the middle of the jungle of Bolivia, where they cannot actually call or anything. And so, I only knew the days he was coming home. That is how it was the first thirteen years of our marriage, were like that.

TS: And so, you were married for six years before you decided to join the military?

DC: Yes. Yes. I joined the ARMY for several reasons. One, because I like to challenge myself. I cannot sit around. And then for me, I went to college in Panama because I wanted to do something for me. And I cannot be a person that is dependent on somebody else, even if it is my husband. And I'm not a type of woman that is going to sit in the house and wait until my husband get paid every fifteen or every first of the month so I can go to the commissary, go shopping, and spend the money, and drive a nice car; like, that's not me. So I needed to do something for and the both of us. I wanted to—If you're

going to buy something we're both going to pay for it. So I didn't want him to go and break his back for us and then me sitting in the house. Even though he probably didn't mind to do it. So I decided join the ARMY. I wanted to see how it was. I wanted to try on my own. I wanted to see how it was to be soldier

I remember he asked me, "I want you to give me three reasons why you wanted to do this."

And I told him, "Well, one, because I want to go to school. And right now we don't have the money for me to go to school for you to pay for it. And I don't want to get into debt. That's one reason." Two, I wanted to be independent within my marriage. Okay. I want to be independent here and when I want to go side by side with you, I don't want to you to drag me. And third, and I said, "Well, you never know, maybe you find the grass greener on the other side and you decide to leave me." [chuckles] And I said, "I don't want to work [unclear]."

And he started laughing. He said, "Study, do good, get a good job, and then I'll support whatever you want to do."

TS: And he's very supportive of you joining the military?

DC: He was very supportive from the beginning, yes, he was.

TS: What were your parents' reactions to you joining the military, in the United States?

DC: My dad was already deceased—I was born when my dad was sixty-three-years-old, and he passed when he was eight-six-years-old. He walked me through the aisle when I got married. That was 1990 when I get married, and he died in 1992.

TS: I'm so sorry.

DC: But he always told me, "You are like me." He always say, "You going to do good. I know how you are.". Especially when I had my son, and he say, "This is not going to stop you, because I know how you are. This is going to make you better. And I know one day you're going to do good." My parents always being really supportive of me. And then my mom, my mom was proud; "My daughter is in the military, in the U.S. Army. [chuckles]

TS: What about your siblings? How did they feel?

DC: Yes, they feel really proud of me, because it's—Actually, to tell you the truth, my whole city—the whole city where I'm from, because I come from a really small city—so when they found out I was going to join in the army, they couldn't believe it. They saw that a girl from their little city was going to join and it was in the army. They were proud when I used to go there and visit, they were asking me, "Did you wear the uniform? Do you wear the same boots?"

And I said, "Yes."

"Do you shoot the rifles?"

"Yes, I do all that."

And they couldn't believe it, that I was actually doing all those things. I was also asked, "Do you jump from plane?"

I say, "No, I love my legs too much. I don't do that."

TS: [chuckles] "I'm not jumping out of a perfectly good plane."

DC: I'm not just going to jump from a perfect plane. I love my legs too much now. Yes.

TS: Let my husband do that.

DC: Yes, let me husband do that. That was the only thing my husband did not want me to do. He said, "I'll give you the one hundred and fifty dollars, so you don't have to jump."

TS: Nice. Now, joining the military for you, at that time were you a citizen of the United States?

DC: No, I was a permanent resident of the United States, that was all I need to actually become—join the military. You didn't have to be a U.S. citizen. Now, it did help me to—when I submitted my paperwork, it helped me to become a U.S. citizen faster.

TS: Because you were permanent resident, when you joined the military, did you have to give up your citizenship of Panama?

DC: No, I didn't. I have dual citizenship.

TS: And so, when you joined the military, did you just have the one child or two at that time?

DC: Two.

TS: You had two. That's looking a little different too, because when you join the military and you have kids, it's a little different if your spouse isn't in the military, but when your spouse is in the military, it's a little bit different; there's different things that you have to go through. Can you sort of explain what you had to go through to be able to join the military, being that you were married to a service member and you had children?

DC: Yes, I had to submit a waiver. I had a good recruiter in Panama at Fort Clayton. And he told me exactly everything that I had to submit; all the paperwork that had to submit from beginning to end. And like I mentioned earlier, the financial disclosure was a big deal. Showing you were not in debt means that you're not using the military as a financial tool. Also it helped me that I had a college degree, even though it was from Panama. And that I was already trained in my MOS. So it shows that I was actually trying to do something. I'm assuming that's what they actually saw in me, that I'm trying to do better. And also, I was going to save money to the army by not having to go to AIT.

[Advanced Individual Training (AIT) is where enlisted soldiers go after basic/boot camp to learn the skills for their MOS (Military Occupational Specialty/ job).]

TS: Now, you had come to the United States, and then, did your husband get re—

DC: Yes. Yes. We PCS-ed [permanent change of station] to Panama for assignment. He got assigned to a unit in Panama.

TS: As part of you coming into the military being that you were going to be dual military family, did you have to fill out paperwork in terms of your children? Like, who was going to have guardianship of them and who was going to take care—

[All military members who have dependents and are either single or part of a dual-military couple must have a Family Care Plan. It is the means by which a military member plans in advance for the care of his/her family when they are deployed, TDY, or otherwise not available because of military duty]

DC: Yes, I had to do it. I have to do a so-called Family Care Plan, which, at the time I put my mom, in case of emergency that we both have to be deployed at the same time, my mom was going to come and take care of the kids. Thanks God I didn't have to ever activate my Family Care Plan. I had my mom in Panama and then had my husband's family here, as a back-up too. I had to have a Family Care Plan, my husband had to have Family Care Plan. So the only time that actually I have to use something like that was when I was sent to Puerto Rico and my husband had to go somewhere else. But it was only for—I think it was two weeks.

TS: What did you do when you went to basic training? Who took care of your kids?

DC: Oh, my mom was there. My mom was on base, and my mom took care of the kids.

TS: The kids stayed in Panama when you came here?

DC: Yeah, because we were in Panama.

TS: Yeah. Okay.

DC: My husband was in Panama and he was not deployed at the time. And then my mom was in Panama. She was taking care of the kids while I was actually gone.

TS: When you went to basic training, you went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, in September of 1996 and you graduated in November of 1996. Were your initial orders when you graduated to Fort Bragg? Was that because your husband was PCS-ing to Fort Bragg or did you—

DC: Yes, I wanted to come to Fort Bragg—this was where my husband was going to come back. My husband was part of the 7th Special Forces group the only place that my husband can actually PCS was Panama and Fort Bragg. So, when his time was up over there, he came back to Fort Bragg. So I wanted to come to Fort Bragg. I didn't have to go to AIT. After basic training, I was supposed to be sent straight to Fort Bragg. But instead, I was sent to AIT. When I finished basic, I was told you're going to AIT, so they cut me orders to go to Fort Sam Houston [Texas]. I tried to tell them, "No, I have a pinpoint assignment and I to go to Fort Bragg. I'm trained in my MOS"

They don't listen to you, you are a private, so nobody pulled my file. They bought me the tickets, put me on the plane to go to Fort Sam Houston. Got to Sam Houston, and I'm telling everybody, my squad leader, I said, "Can you please pull my file? I'm supposed to be in Fort Bragg. I'm not supposed to be here." Nobody listened because I'm a private.

I remember I in-processed and everything. And when we were in the last meeting, and I remember the person in front say, "Okay, well—" because it was November—"the next class begins in January.

And I'm like, "Oh no, I'm not staying here until January for a class, when I'm not supposed to be here." So I raised my hand and I say—[speaking to TS] You know how they treat you when you are there? And I was like—The funny thing is, I'm so used to—My husband was an E-7, so I was not afraid to—the other soldiers asked me, "Why you not afraid of them?"

And I say, "My husband has more rank than them." [chuckles]

TS: That'll do it.

DC: So I asked, "Can you please pull my file. I'm supposed to be in Fort Bragg."

He say, "You have to start AIT."

I say, "No." They did not listen.

When we finished that, I just went straight to the command and I said, "I need to speak to either the first sergeant or the sergeant major."

And everybody asked me, "Why do you want to speak to them?

I say, "I'm sorry, I need to speak to them. And I'm not talking to nobody else, only to them." So they left me waiting for about three hours in there, and finally, the first sergeant came out and talked to me, and I said, "Can you please pull my file." And I said, "I'm not supposed to be here, I'm supposed to be at Fort Bragg, North Carolina."

And he looked at me, and I looked at him, and then he told me—I remember it was an E-4, and he said, "Can you bring her file?" And when he opened it he said, "How was this overlooked? She's supposed to be in Fort Bragg."

I said, "I've been telling everybody since I left Fort Leonard Wood. Nobody has listened to me."

And then he said, "Do you remember every single place that you've been processed this morning?"

I say, "Yes, First Sergeant."

He said, "You need to out-process now, and we're going to get you a ticket, and you need to go today to Fort Bragg."

And I said, "No, no, no, no. My husband is following me, so he's here." I say, "You can give me my ticket and everything and I leave tomorrow with him because he's going to Fort Bragg." Then they sent me from Fort Sam to Fort Bragg without orders, so I was able—I'm so glad that nobody caught that. [chuckles]

TS: Oh my goodness. That's crazy.

DC: Yeah, Fort Bragg had no clue that I was coming because they never saw my name in the roster.

TS: What happened when you got to Fort Bragg?

DC: Well, I got here, it was Thanksgiving, so everything was closed that Friday, so I had to wait until Monday. On Monday, I went and I reported to DENTAC because I had no clue where I'm supposed to report. I was supposed to report to the 19th replacement section, which is where all the soldiers go. And I have no clue where we're supposed to go. I have no paper, I have no orders, I have nothing. So I went to the headquarters for DENTAC and I just walk in and say, "I'm supposed to report here, and I need something so I can in-process. And they were looking at me like crazy.

And they pulled me up in the computer and say, "You are nowhere here in the computer; that you're supposed to report here or reporting nowhere. But we're going to grab you because we need you, because if we don't get you right now, they're going to send you through a field unit." So they put me in DENTAC and said, "Here, take these and in-process, then come back." So that's how I ended up in DENTAC. It was an adventure.

TS: Well, certainly it was. Now, when you enlisted into the army, did you enlist for five years?

DC: It was actually six years, but I only did five years, eleven months, and one day, if I re-enlisted, I was on my way to Korea. I had to get out at Fort Bragg because I've been here for six years. So I couldn't at the time because of my kids.

TS: Right, unaccompanied.

DC: Unaccompanied. So I just signed in and I said, " What is the soonest that I can get out?"

And they said, "Well, you can get out right now if you want."

And I said, "Sure." So they let me out under parenthood, and I just got out right away.

TS: But you stayed at Fort Bragg?

DC: Yes, and then I stayed here at Fort Bragg. I got out of the military Friday, and I just went and enrolled in college and continued college right away.

TS: Now, when you got stationed at Fort Bragg, did you live in base housing, or did you live on the economy?

DC: We lived on the economy just for a couple months and then we got housing.

TS: What was the housing like at Fort Bragg?

DC: I love it. For me, it was really peaceful, I felt safe. You talking about when I was in the military or after?

TS: When you were in the military.

DC: Oh, no. When I was in the military, then—Since I came here first to Fort Bragg, then my husband was TDY here, so we found a house, and then we bought the house. So I actually stayed outside until my son finished school, until May, June, and then I brought them to stay with me. Because my husband still had to stay one more year in Panama before he can actually return.

TS: Oh, okay.

DC: So I just brought them. I just had to wait until my son actually finished school to bring him. We bought a house outside. But it was convenient for me. It's right outside Fort Bragg, so if something happens, I can make it to the school real quick, or I can make it to the house real quick. For me, everything was convenience with the kids. From the clinic to my house, I can be less than ten minutes, or to the school, less than ten minutes. And the babysitter and everything was really close to the house, so that worked perfect.

TS: When you moved with your husband, when he PCS-ed from Panama to Fort Bragg, when you first moved with him, was that the first time you had been that far away from home on your own, without your family?

DC: Yes, on my own—You're talking about from my family, with my husband?

TS: No, with your parents and your siblings.

DC: On no, the first time I came to the U.S. I was—when I married my husband. I always said that I was going to move away from the city where I was born, but I never thought it was going to be so far away. It sink in when I was in the plane, when the plane was leaving. When we were actually departing Panama, that's when it actually sank in, I say, "Oh my God, I'm leaving Panama for good." I'm going somewhere else to live.

TS: When you left your husband to go to basic training, was that difficult for you to transition into basic training?

DC: From a wife to basic training, to a soldier—Well, since I have so much experience from military, because I learned a lot from my husband. I'll be lying if I tell you that it was not difficult, because you are away from your kids, you're away from your family. But I

knew what had to be done. And I always put in my mind, I had to do this for me, for my family, for my kids.

What it made it more difficult for me, it was actually the weather. Because remember, I came from Panama. Panama is summer all year round. You don't see cold weather over there. You can wear shorts all year around and it's a hundred degrees every single day, three-hundred-sixty-five days of the year. Then you take me out of Panama in September and then you send me to South Carolina, which is seventy degrees; I'm freezing already and it's only seventy degrees. And then from there, you put me in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, where the temperature drop to twenty degrees. And then you're talking about somebody that is actually had to acclimatize quick. That was the worst for me—Yes, I missed my kids, my family and everything, but dealing with that, it was hard.

I knew what I had to do, I came in the military when I was twenty-eight, so I was older. I knew it was two months, so I had to do this, and I had to move on. I just have to play the game, keep a low profile, and just move on. And so, in a way I became—how do you say?—the girls looked up to me as an example. I'm the first one to get up in the morning. So they used to say, "Well, if I look to her bed and she's not there, get up because I'm already late." So I used to get up and wake everybody up, go get ready, then come back and wake everybody up again, like I was their mom.

TS: True.

DC: They used to say that they look at me and they say, "If she's not in her bed, get up because we already late."

TS: When you were in basic training, though, you lived in barracks, co-ed, with male and female.

DC: Yes.

TS: Males on one side females on another. Can you describe a typical day in basic training for us?

DC: We help each other a lot. That's one thing that we did. I think we all were there—wanting to finish—no competition between my group, not that I can remember; I didn't see it unless we were training or the obstacle course or something like that. But other than that, I think for my group, we actually became really together as a group. We were there for a purpose, we were there to make it happen, we were there to go along.

And I can say that I was able to see how much the guys actually cared about the girls, especially when we were doing the roll marches. If they see a girl struggling, they didn't hesitate to pick up the ruck sack and say, "Keep going. Give me your ruck sack, you keep going." So for me, it was great. I didn't notice anything that was at all out of the ordinary.

I think there were two ladies that were older than me there. So I think they looked at us for guidance sometimes, I remember—the PT uniform, the elastic of the shorts always gave away so I had to fix them. So I went to the little shoppette, I bought some shoestring, boot strings. So I went ahead and put it on mine and tied it up so they

wouldn't fall. So then everybody started buying them and then they started coming to me, "Can you do it for me?" And of course—and I did it real quick, I'm a mom, I know how to fix this thing. So everybody used to come to me and say, "Can you do it?" We help each other. So, for that part, it was pretty good. I think it was really neat. It was pretty good experience for us; at least for me.

TS: Your first duty station was Fort Bragg, and you worked where, again? I'm sorry.

DC: The what?

TS: Your first duty station was Fort Bragg and DENTAC.

DC: Yes, and that's it; that was the only one.

TS: It was the only one. What was a typical day? What did you do for your job at DENTAC?

DC: Okay. My typical day, in the beginning, I was assigned to a team, and we were seeing patients. We were responsible for the dental readiness, let's say, the units, and made the servicemember ready for combat. Class one, class two, class three, and track whoever. It was a class three, there was a non-deployable, or a class four, and make them come to the clinic—contact the command, come to the clinic, so they can have an exam or everything that was done. I used to assist them with cleanings or fillings and things like that, but that didn't last long; probably the first, if I can say, six months, something like that.

[Dental Readiness: **Class 1**, Patients with a current dental examination, who do not require dental treatment or reevaluation. Class 1 patients are worldwide deployable. **Class 2**, Patients with a current dental examination, who require non-urgent dental treatment or reevaluation for oral conditions, which are unlikely to result in dental emergencies within 12 months. Class 2 patients are worldwide deployable. **Class 3**, Patients who require urgent or emergent dental treatment. Class 3 patients normally are not considered to be worldwide deployable]

Then I got promoted to corporal, which is the lower enlisted, considered kind of like a sergeant. So they moved me. I was then the assistant NCOIC [non-commissioned officer-in-charge] for one of the clinics; Joel [Health Clinic &] Dental Clinic. So then I became the assistant for the clinic. Then I was the one that, let's say, run the reports for the units. I used to go to the front desk and help because it was very busy place with appointments coming in, calling people, tracking people, calling the first sergeant, "I need this servicemember here to make them deployable." So that was an actual day.

We did not do PT every single day, because that was not—Our mission, it was not to be combat ready. We did not have weapons assigned to us, my TA-50 was Kevler, a canteen, a LBE [LBV? Load Bearing Vest?], a laundry bag, and a PT belt, that was it. So when you go to pick up—everybody gets their big bags for everything, that was all that I had. So it was a little bag with everything and then walk away. So no M16 for us to go

qualify, nothing. Because our mission is to be in the back, preparing the service members to go to combat, and that's what I did the whole time.

So I can say I was one of the lucky ones that I didn't have to do PT every day, we did PT once a week, and then we started complaining because it was not enough. And then they said, "Well, twice a week." And before I left, we were doing it three times a week. But I heard that they pushed that back because we have to start working at 7:15 in the morning, and we needed to be in the office for that. So you did PT on your own. But we still have to do the same requirement that everybody else, you still have to do your lineup training, you still have to do your qualification, PT every six months, you still have to qualify with your weapon. We still have to do all that as every other soldier.

TS: I think that's fair.

DC: So the mission, like I said, was just stay in the back and get the servicemember ready to go.

TS: Was there anything that you particularly enjoyed about what you did? Did you have a favorite thing that you did?

DC: Well, I'm a people person, and I like to help people. If I can make it easy and make it better for somebody. As long as we follow the rules and regulations, that's me. So I guess helping when the people come to the office, and be nice and polite to them, help them then go from category four, category two, to make them deployable. I remember I used to get people coming in, they're going to give me a letter of reprimand because I let this thing go. Please, can you help me, and then I help them move the status and fix it in the system after treatment was completed.

And so, I guess I enjoy helping the people, doing that. And I didn't really enjoy going to the field or anything. I don't. That was not my thing.

TS: That was going to be my next question. What was the one thing you disliked the most?

DC: Oh, no. I went to the field four days when I was in. Two days when I was in basic training and two days when I went for AIT to get made my E-5, that was it. So that's, all my military career, my field experience. I was not a person—If you tell me you have to go for a week, I will probably die. I will hate it every single minute, because I'm not an outside person. My husband likes to go outside, play with the garden, and I say, "No, I don't play with dirt."

TS: I try to get my husband to—"We should go camping."

And he said, "No, I did enough of that outside stuff when I was in the army, I'm done. No more sleeping in tents."

Now, you did do a special duty where you went to Puerto Rico, you said, for two weeks?

DC: Yes.

TS: And so, what was that special duty? What did that entail?

DC: I went to Puerto Rico for two weeks. There were different armies from different countries. They were coming—They were going to all going to meet in Puerto Rico. We went with the—I think it was the 3rd Special Forces Group, they went over there. And then it was army from Bolivia; all the South America with different people. What we're going to do, it was—we were going to help them if they needed any type of dental treatment. So if we have somebody that, let's say, needed an extraction, then we're going to do that. If they need a filling, we did that.

Actually, I have pictures, I'll need to find that, where our barracks, it rained so hard that the water got all the way to the bed. And I'm with the broom, trying to get the water out of the place where we were actually sleeping. And that was horrible. The same way how the water rise up, when it stopped raining and went down, that it was just unbelievable.

And so, that's what we did. It was actually two-weeks and it was enjoyable. We had a little clinic. I was there with a female doctor, but she didn't speak Spanish. And that's why they needed a Spanish speaker, because everybody that was coming in, it was Spanish. They speak Spanish. We saw a lot of them, that they come in, and did as much as we could for them. That was a good experience.

TS: That's totally fair. Now, how did you communicate with your friends and family back in Panama while you were in the military?

DC: Well, at that time in the 1990s, there was a phone and it was very expensive. When I got married, I remember, and I came here, my phone bill at that time, it was coming at three-hundred, four-hundred dollars a month because I was homesick. When I came here it was the same situation. I came here in the winter, it was dark, cloudy, rainy, cold, miserable for me, and summer, it was just starting in Panama. So my phone bill was expensive. The phone company used to send me letters saying that I was spending too much—Yeah, they used to send it, and I said, "But I'm paying the bill." Like I said, I didn't care about it.

At that time, it was very, very expensive, so the only thing that we can do, was either send letters, it'd take forever, or a phone call, and you had to keep it short. So it was very difficult because it was really a separation. It's not like now that you have Zoom or I can use WhatsApp [instant messaging web application] and I can talk to my friends and family now, and it's so easy, for free. During those days, it was not even a cell phone yet. It was very difficult, and the computer was just starting to come in. It was starting and you had Dial-up. Remember?

TS: Oh my gosh. Dial-up was the worst. I don't even know how we survived. I think all the time, my kids, I'm like, "You guys are so lucky. You didn't have Dial-up, or cell phones that, literally, were the size of a briefcase."

DC: Or you don't have to go to the library to do the research for the homework that you have to submit, you just go the computer and do it. Exactly. So it was a culture shock, we can say that, because—And I guess everybody that came in on the same situation, the girls, that if anybody got married, then something happened to them. I think if I came here

during spring or summer, maybe it was going to be a little bit different. But since I came in in December—and like I say, December, summer is starting in Panama.

TS: Right.

DC: So it was very, very, very, very depressing, but I made it through. Now I look back and I say, "Well, it had to happen."

TS: That's true. Now, because you were already married and you had children, what was the typical downtime on your weekends or your nights off? What did you do?

DC: Well, I spent a lot of time alone with the kids—I don't know if you have kids, if you have boys or you have girls, but having boys is a little bit difficult, because mom is mom and mom doesn't know anything, and they don't want to do a lot of things for mom. But they were playing sport like always; they play sports. I spent a lot of time with them, take them out. I remember Chuck E. Cheese [American family entertainment center and pizza restaurant] was the big thing back then, so we used to go a lot of Chuck E. Cheese. And it was another place here where they have a lot of games; they can play games and things like that. They used to love going there.

And at that time, it was said that if you want, you can just drop them off, you leave him in there, and you can do it all through errands and everything that I have to do. And then come back later, play with them, and then would take them home. And I used to do that. And then after that, then I took them home, study if I had to study for tests.

And one thing that I did have to do, and I don't have to lie about that, is I had to totally separate from my Hispanic friends. I had to actually just push them away, I can say that. And the reason that I did that is because—I don't want to say they were holding me back, because that will be unfair, but if I wanted to move forward, I had to let some things go. You know what I mean? Because I cannot spend two, three hours on the phone talking; I just can't; I don't have the time for that. And so, I had to actually—And talking too much in Spanish, it wasn't helping me. It wasn't really helping me. I noticed that; I figured out soon. So I had to really completely separate from that and concentrate on me to be able to learn English and go to school.

Because I remember if I used to get with my friends, when I have time, we used to get together, and I said, "Hey, well, I have to go because I have homework that I have to finish for next week."

And I remember they used to say, "Oh, you with your school. You with your homework.

TS: No, that's totally fair.

DC: Yeah. So I had to do that. But that's how I did it. And when my husband came back home, then we used to go out all the time; we used to go eat, do the family thing together. And I spent a lot of time with my kids. Also, my kids sometimes said, "No mom, I don't want to go with you because you spend too much time in one store."

TS: [chuckles] I've heard that a time or two.

What's the most memorable decoration or award that you received while you were in the military?

DC: Wow. Let me look at here, I don't remember.

TS: Okay, that's fine.

DC: Let me see. I got the [U.S.] Army Lapel, [U.S.] Army Commendation Medal, [U.S.] Army Achievement Medal, National Defense Service Medal. I don't know. Which one is the highest here?

TS: I don't know.

DC: I don't know either. Like I said, since I was not in a, like I said, combat MOS or things like that—I know I got the Army Lapel, Army Commendation Medal, Army Achievement Medal, two awards, Army Good Conduct Medal—

TS: What did you get the Army Achievement Medals for?

DC: I don't remember. I'd be lying to you. I don't remember.

TS: That's all right. And the highest rank you received while you're in the military was?

DC: E-5.

TS: Which is a sergeant.

DC: It's a sergeant.

TS: When you were in the military, how were your relationships with your supervisors?

DC: Great. And I actually bumped into him, well, probably about two years ago, and I thank him because he pushed me, and his name was Sergeant First Class Lewis, I remember. I look at him as the person that actually gave me the encouragement. Or give methe confidence and lead me so I can become who I am right now. Because, to tell you the truth, when I was given the rank of corporal, I had no clue. So he took me under his wing and he teach me and show me, this is how you have to do. He teach me everything.

So I think that if it wasn't for him, I wasn't going to be able to—or I wasn't going to feel capable to do the things that I have done, maybe. Or maybe the outcome—Maybe I was still going to able to do a bit, but probably I was going to struggle a little bit more. But I always look at him like he's—and he's—out of all the NCOs [non-commissioned officers] and everything that I had, he's the first one that I have that I remember. And he retired many, many years ago, and I bumped into him in the commissary. He's gained a little bit of weight, though, but that's okay, I still recognized him. And he actually—he looked at me, and he's like, "I remember you."

And I say, "Yeah, you remember Cabrera."

And then when I say "Cabrera," then he remembered me, he said, "Oh my God!"

TS: Now, how were your relationships with your peers?

DC: I was always quiet, and I've always been a person that I always stayed to myself. I went and did what I have to do, and I always believed that what you do shows, and people can tell. I don't really like to brag a lot about what I do. I think my work can speak for itself. That's what I did. I never had any issues with anybody. I never heard anything that anybody's saying anything. I'm assuming that was good. I never had any issues with anybody, to tell you the truth. I don't know. Maybe I intimidate people. I've been told that I intimidate people sometimes, so I don't know.

TS: Now, you received mentoring while you were in the military. Did you mentor any other soldiers?

DC: Oh, yes. Yes, always. Yeah. Since I did that, I mentored the junior enlisted when I have a little bit more experience. About what to do to get promoted. We had a conversion of points, that it actually hurt my MOS to get promoted. I had a lot of points they did one more pickup before they actually changed the point, and they picked me, only; I was the last one that was picked to get promoted. They went down, "Let's see who's the one that has the highest point up to this month, and we're going to pick one person." It was my name; I was the last one that got promoted under the old system. Then, the next month, when the point system came up, I lost, like, a hundred points because of the new conversion of point. Since I was a—kind of like a medical MOS, it was difficult for you to get points. That's the only way how I was able to make E-5.

So every time we got a new enlisted I use to tell them, "You need to do correspondence courses. You need to make sure that you do this. You need to make sure that you do that." I say, "You're single. Don't be afraid to go deploy somewhere else. Don't be afraid to take other stations or wherever, because that's what is going to help you." I used to tell them, "Take advantage of the program that you can work at Womack [Army Medical Center, Fort Bragg], and take care of the emergencies," because the remaining of the time. I always encourage that to everybody to do it, because you can actually go to school. I cannot remember what the name of the program was called. CQ duty, that's what it's called. Yeah. I always encourage them. A couple of the privates, actually, from the clinic that I was working went for CQ, and I didn't mind to actually take the loss, because if you send somebody, you're not going to get it replaced, but I didn't mind to take the loss as long as they're going to go do something for themselves.

TS: Absolutely. Absolutely. Now, I know you had to go to PLDC in order to get your E-5?

[Primary Leadership Development Course, now known as the Basic Leadership Course (BLC), is the first course of study in the U.S. Army noncommissioned officer Professional Development System (NCOPDS). It is a month-long course that trains specialists and corporals in the fundamentals of leadership]

DC: Yes.

TS: Did you go to any other special training, or get any other education aside from what you did on your own that the military gave you classes on?

DC: No, only PLDC to make the E-5 rank.

TS: Were there any schools that you would have liked to have gone to?

DC: Well, actually, I did, went to school, now that I remember; I tried to forget that one. I applied to go to the dental hygiene school with the military. I did get selected to do it. I did not want it to do it here in Fayetteville because I knew that it was very hard here and you get no help. I wanted to do it in Texas. Unfortunately, we were thirty-five that started the classes, and out of thirty-five, sixteen of us were removed from the program because of one class that took everybody out. You could not get a D in any of the classes, you have to get at least a C, but the teachers make it so difficult.

I remember it was a guy, he had a 4.0 GPA [grade point average] when he went through the program, and he was doing worse than me. We had a dentist that came in from Columbia. He was an E-4 in the military, but he couldn't practice as a dentist because his degree was from Bogota, Columbia. He was kind of, like, in the same situation that I was. He went for that, and he was actually struggling and he was a dentist. But it was not because we did not study, it was because of the way how the teachers actually were making the course. And the excuse they used to say was like, "Well, we have to prepare you for the state certification and you have to be prepared for everything."

I could fight it at the end, but I already made up my mind, I said, "I don't want to do this. I really don't want to do this." The army actually was paying for that, but I decided this is not for me, I just dropped everything, because they give us the opportunity to go ahead and retake the class and do it again, but I say, "No, I'm not doing it. I don't want to do it." So I decided to withdraw. The girl from Virginia that was also in the army, withdraw as well. Only the dentist and one girl that came in from Georgia stay, and they did graduate at the end, but I was like, "No, I just can't do it."

TS: As someone who is a professor and teaches in college, I think any class that you teach where half of your students fail is really more, it's not about the students, it's about the teacher. It's about the one presenting the information and how they're giving it to you. They're clearly not doing a good job.

DC: They always said, out of thirty-five people that always start on the first day, maybe about twelve would graduate.

TS: See, I don't think that's something to brag about.

DC: I just couldn't. I say, "I don't have any more brain cells alive in my brain to study. I just cannot do it anymore. This is not what I meant to do."

TS: Right.

DC: I went to support them because they had a meeting with the dean of the school and everything, and I went in there to support the other students that wanted to go back in, and everybody was like, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," and I was quiet. I was quiet. I remember that the guy actually asked me, said, "I'm going to ask a question, but I want her to answer," and he pointed to me because I wasn't saying anything.

I don't remember the question that he asked, but I told him, I say, "I'm here to support them because they wanted to come back in the class." I said, "I don't want to come back in class. I'm just here as another body to support them. I'm withdrawing from the program. This is not for me," but I didn't say anything negative. I just say, "It's not for me. That's it." I walk away.

TS: Now, while you were in the military, either while you were working on the job or when you are off on your own time, did you ever experience any type of discrimination, either because you're female or because of your race or anything? Do you remember witnessing discrimination to yourself or to someone else?

DC: No. No. No. I can say no. No. I remember one time—it was just a conversation and it's strike me now because there's so much in the news that I remember—I was describing somebody—there was a new private that came into to the unit. And then I was trying to describe the person because there was a lot of them came in at once, and I was trying to describe him because one of them was going to come to us.

Then, at the time, I was the Assistant NCOIC, and then somebody asked and I said, "But which one is the lady that is coming? Which one is the one that is coming?" I say, "Yes. Is this the lady that is like this? She's tall. She's like this. She's like this." I mentioned the color of her skin, which I'm not going to say what color it is, but I mentioned the color of her skin.

Then somebody that used to work in the clinic, I remember this person say, "Why does it have to be a color?"

I just thought about it. I reply and I say—I remember I reply and saying, "How else are you going to describe somebody? Can you please give me the correct terminology, so I can describe this type of person? So I can use as official reference." The person walked away, but that was it.

I think it was funny. It was funny that this actually happened, but I didn't take it personal. It was just somebody that wanted to be a little bit smart about it, but to tell you the truth, to me—I come from a country that is Hispanic. Hispanic, we have a different point of view about different things. Okay. We have different types of culture, and I have a different type of mentality about how I look at things. I pick and choose my battle sometimes, and I give importance to the thing that I think is really going to affect me. If it doesn't affect me, why? If I let it affect me, it's going to control me. For me, it's a matter of option.

I pray every day, I do what is right, I treat people with respect, I—the way how I like to be treated. I always remember I have two sons, I have a husband, and whatever I do to others, sometimes it's not going to come back to me, it's going to go back to them.

I'm doing it not for me, just for them. No, I cannot say that I have been treated in the military, bad. No, I cannot say that.

TS: What kind of changes did you see in the army over the almost six years that you were in?

DC: Changes that I see? Yes, a lot changes, So many changes that are necessary, Some are helping, others not so much. Who will know what is the right thing to do? I hope any decisions that are made always focus to change things for the better and not for the worse.

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TS: Do you think that attitudes towards women in the military changed while you were in the military, in terms of the acceptance of women being in the military?

DC: You mean, in general?

TS: Yes. In general, because we were in basic training at the same place at the same time, but I know when I went in, the military was still very much a "boys' club." Even my first duty station, my unit was like 90% male and 10% female, so there weren't that many women in there. Some people may have thought, like, back in the nineties, "Well, women really shouldn't be in the military," or, "They should only be doing this. They should only be doing desk jobs. They shouldn't be doing this or that or the other thing." Did you feel like the attitude towards women in the service changed while you were in, or what do you think the attitude was? What did you think that people thought about women being in the military when you were in the military?

DC: Well, I guess I didn't experience the same thing as you, because my unit, it was mostly females because of the type of job. I guess if I was putting it in a position like yours where it's over 90% males, and just a couple of females, maybe you will feel—Especially when you're running PT, and then you have to run and you're running, you cannot run as fast as the guys. Maybe somebody is going to complain because of that, "Oh, now we have to wait for her." Maybe something like that. I did not experience that because my unit was mostly females.

I really cannot say that I experienced that, but I can say that a lot of things has changed for the good. I think that women are doing great these days. It has opened a lot of doors. That's one thing that I can actually applaud the military, because, hey, we have the first female that actually made it through Special Forces. My husband wasn't too happy about it, but—No, he was really; he was really proud. He said, "Man, I feel we got one." Because at the end, they had, like, an honorary female, but then now, this one actually made it, he was actually following up all the news and everything and said, "Man, only one is going to make it." He was the one that was telling me.

And I used to mess with him, and telling him, "Now, she's going to be wearing a green beret." [chuckles]

He was like, "Shut up." No, no, no, but he was really proud.

And we have so many pilots and things like that. I think that we can do everything just like the men can do, but I cannot say that I was in a position where I was treated

different, and I think it's because of the unit where I was. Maybe if I wasn't in that unit, that was going to be different. I did not experience that, no.

TS: In recent years, reports about, and congressional investigations into, military sexual trauma and sexual harassment have increased awareness of these issues. What is your reaction to the spotlight on these issues?

DC: It should be investigated a little bit more, but the issue, I think, is how we're going to investigate it to the point that we can actually stop it. I know it happened, I know it probably does happen.

I just don't know if—I don't know. It has to be investigated. It is a problem, but I don't know how they're going to find a solution, it is a very difficult situation.

TS: No. No, I completely agree with you.

DC: I have [unclear].

TS: Yeah. I think the military, like everyone else, should take accusations of sexual misconduct and harassment and trauma very seriously, which I would say until recently, they didn't take them as seriously as they probably should have, but at the same time, you want to do your due diligence.

DC: Exactly.

TS: You can't just say, "Okay. This person came to me." You have to have some impartiality, so that you can really investigate both sides to find out what did happen to make sure that you're convicting the right person.

DC: Exactly. Actually, it is exactly how you actually have seen. That's the part is that is so confusing, and I think because—because it is happening, but how are you going to stop it? It's becoming more and more difficult. You see it every single day, and I feel for these ladies, because for all these—Not only in the military, it's just overall, because it don't only happen in the military. You can be a civilian, it can be happening to you too.

TS: No. Absolutely.

DC: It's just the military is the one that taking all the focus right now. But I also think that sometimes we must have the capacity to put themselves in situations that they shouldn't. Sometimes, I don't know. I don't drink alcohol; I can tell you that. I don't drink it because it's my option, my choice. It is difficult. It is a difficult situation, and it should be investigated really thorough, and it should be—I just don't know how we're going to find a way to stop it.

TS: I don't either, but I hope that they will figure it out.

DC: Yeah. But somebody have to figure it out how to do it, and take it very serious, and investigate everything really, really serious.

TS: I think that's the key. I think the key to stopping it, or at least bringing the numbers down, is going to be investigations and an actual reporting, because so many—I don't want to just say women, because men are sexually assaulted in everything is well. There's so many people that are in that situation, they don't report it because they're in fear of like, "Is it going to hurt my promotion? Am I going to get ostracized?" You know what I mean? "Are people going to think I'm to blame or I did something?" When it goes unreported, that person who did something to person A now has the opportunity to do something to person B and person C because person A [unclear].

DC: Exactly.

TS: And so, in the military, I think we have to get the military to a place where across the board we make sure that people understand by reporting an incident, you are not going to suffer any sort of catastrophic effects on your military career, you are not going to be ostracized, we're going to protect you from that. I think that's where the military has got to go, and we're certainly not there.

I've spoken to many women during these interviews, and I hear some of the worst things about this topic, and being that I work with veterans as my students, I have students who have had situations, and one student, she reported I, and then she was very much terrorized by her unit, to the point where she finally had asked to be sent to another unit. It just got so bad for her. I think that's the problem. Women see that. Not just women, people in general, see what happens when someone reports something and they say, "Well—"

DC: "I don't want the same thing to happen to me."

TS: "I don't want the same thing to happen to me. I'll just deal with it." You know what I mean? In dealing with it, you're not really dealing with it, right? It really has to come down to making people feel like they have a safe space within the military to report these sorts of incidents. Right? And making sure that those people that are reporting them are protected, and that reporting key is, like, a key factor, right? Because if you don't report it, we can't investigate it, right? I need you to report it, so we can investigate it, and then we can follow the trail.

Because nine times out of ten, someone who has been accused of something, when you can prove that it happened, you can probably look at different posts that they've been at, and you might find other people that they harassed also, and so it's a trend. It's that reporting piece that is really super important. Then, like I said, the investigation, because if we can weed out those types of people from joining the military, or from getting them out of the military, that's going to make it safer for everyone in general.

DC: I think also, like I say, the media is actually taking a lot of credibility from people. When you go to the media and you start telling, then it takes a lot from people, I think, and then it makes you doubt about, "Is it really happening? Did it happen?" I don't know. It's a major issue and, like I say, I'm afraid things are not getting any better, [they] are getting

actually worse. I know that one day I'm going to have grandkids, I'm going to have my granddaughters or whatever, grandsons or whatever, and then situations are going to be out of control, and if we don't stop it now, it's going to be worse for them.

TS: I will.

DC: If you know the person that is involved, you will report. Yeah. But some people don't do it even if they know because they don't want to get involved.

TS: That's true. Yeah. Right. No, that's the other thing, at what point do you get involved?

DC: At what point do you get involved?

TS: Yeah. It's the whole thing, and I do think the military is working on it, but definitely, they have a long way to go, for sure.

DC: Yes. Exactly.

TS: What do you think the hardest thing physically that you ever had to do while you were in the military was?

DC: Physical. You're talking about exercises, or you're just doing all—

TS: It could be exercise. It could be road marching, maybe going at a gas chamber. I don't know.

DC: I think it was actually passing my PT test when I was in basic training to be able to get out of Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, because I couldn't do the pushups. [chuckles] That was the hardest. I had to do ten push-ups to get out of there, and I couldn't do that. I remember I —Because I was so skinny. I had no muscles and I can run, and I can do the sit-ups forever, but I couldn't do the pushups. And so, I had to actually—every afternoon I have to go and lift the weights. I failed every single PT test, the push-ups, until the last one. I don't know if it was because I was terrified that I was going to be recycled for two more weeks or what.

And also, I twisted my ankle on the last road march. I ended up in a hole. It was covered with leaves and I twisted my right ankle. So my right ankle swelled up when we went to the last training during basic training—and then we have to take the PT test after. So I didn't go to the doctor because I knew if I go to the doctor, they're going to put me in the quarters. I went to the shopette and I bought some gauze, and I wrapped it real good, and tied it real good, and I ran my two miles like that, hurting. But I passed. And so, I say, "If I can pass the run, I can pass the pushups."

So I think that was the most difficult, because after that—it was fine after that. I would say, well, I was actually surprised that I was able to run for so long. We used to run when I was in DENTAC. We used to run like seven, eight miles, and I was able to run it without stopping. So that was actually—my husband couldn't believe it. And one day he went and ran with me, and I was like, "Yeah, we're running eight miles."

TS: What was the most emotional thing that you had to do while you were in the service?

DC: I guess separating from my family. It's always—That was the hardest part, leaving my son, but he was three years old. And my oldest one, just to come and do what I have to do. I think that was the hardest part for me, being by myself, without them for almost—Because I came to basic training, I went back to Panama when I graduated basic training, and then I had to come back and spend six months without them, too, so that was the hardest part for me, would be without them.

TS: What was most rewarding about your military experience?

DC: That I did it, that I was able to accomplished my goal. Now nobody can tell me stories. People see me now, I go places and they see me with a T-shirt saying, "I'm a veteran." And they ask me, "Are you a veteran?"

I say, "Yes, I'm a veteran."

Some of them say, "You don't look like a veteran; you look too delicate to be a veteran."

I say, "Well, I am a veteran."

"I was in the military?"

I say, "I don't know what that means, but yeah, I was in the military."

Even though when I joined the military, my husband was Special Forces, so everybody from his unit was telling him, "Are you crazy? You're going to let your wife join in the army? You know how the army is crazy."

And my husband said, "Listen, if she's going to do something, she's going to do it in the army or out of the army. So it doesn't really matter."

And everybody was like—And then later on, they said, "Man, I should have let my wife join in the army when you joined in." [chuckles]

So just to prove myself that I was able to do it. And now I look back and I feel really proud of myself because it was worth it, every single minute.

TS: That is awesome. Now we're just going to look at like some of your personal views and experiences. While you were in the military, I'm going to ask you what your impression was of some of the political and military leadership at the time. You went in in 1996, [William Jefferson] "Bill" Clinton [42nd President of the United States] was the president then. What did you think about Bill Clinton?

DC: Well, I'll tell you one thing, I have never been political. Okay, this is my philosophy. If you look at me, you Google me on the computer, it's going to say that I'm a Republican. Okay my family in Panama is Republican, so it come in my blood. I come here, I'm a Republican. I don't know. I heard my husband say, "Oh, the Republicans has favor of the military, the Democrats are not." I don't really know. I'm not—I don't follow politics; I really don't. So to me, I feel like whoever wins, we have to follow the rules and that's going to be my president; that will be my president. And I hope whoever is in power, do what he's supposed to do for the country, for the people. They are there for a reason, the people like them, so let them do the job.

I remember what happened to Bill Clinton. I don't really—I was not involved into the news or anything too much. I remember—I don't think I knew what impeachment mean at the time because—my English wasn't that good. I figured that out later on. Based on conversation with my husband, he's the one that said, "Well, this person was good. This person was not."

And I said, "Okay. I don't know. I don't know."

I know we made it through—he made it through—well, he didn't made it; I think he was impeached, so he has to get out, I think. You see how much I know.

[William Jefferson "Bill" Clinton was the 42nd President of the United States. After a House inquiry, Clinton was impeached on 19 December 1998, by the House of Representatives. The House voted 228–206 to impeach him for perjury to a grand jury and voted 221–212 to impeach him for obstruction of justice. Impeachment proceedings were based on allegations that Clinton had illegally lied about and covered up his relationship with twenty-two-year-old White House (and later Department of Defense) employee Monica Lewinsky. The Senate later acquitted Clinton of both charges]

TS: He went through the trial, but he wasn't actually impeached.

DC: You see how much I know about it, right?

TS: That's okay. What are your memories of 9/11?

[The September 11, 2001 attacks, or 9/11, was a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda on the United States on the morning of 11 September 2001. The attacks killed 2,996 people and injured over 6,000 others]

DC: Yes, I remember 9/11, and I remember my husband was—was a combat diver, he was a scuba [self-contained underwater breathing apparatus] diver, and he was in training, they were practicing at the lake. They were doing a scuba thing. I was at work. And I get up that morning like always, got my kids, and did what I had to do. I was in school at the time; I was in FTCC. We got an alert and then we have to report to work; everybody had to report to work. So I had to go to work, and that's what we were told. And then I remember watching it in the news. I was devastated, I guess like every other American. And I knew that what was coming, it was not going to be pretty. We knew that it was not going to be pretty.

I remember—Something that I cannot take out of my head is that, I remember clearly the face that President [George Herbert] Bush [the 43rd President of the United States] did put [on] when they come into his ears and they told him what was going on. He composed himself and he keep—he stayed there, but you can tell in his face that something was going on. I remember that. And then after that, it just—it was a disaster for everybody. And I knew there was something that was going to last for a while, and that we were going to be in danger, and it was really sad.

TS: Now, there's some other that's worse. In 1999, there was the war in Kosovo. Do you have any memories or comments about that? It's okay if you don't.

[The Kosovo War was an armed conflict in Kosovo (February 1998 - June 1999), fought between the forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Kosovo Albanian rebel group known as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)]

DC: My brother-in-law went to Kosovo. Whatever I watch in the news, like I said, I try not to get really involved. I'm a very emotional person, and I'm one of those that take things to heart. I don't like to see people suffering, I don't like to see people crying, I don't like to see people—kids. And then I remember it was horrible. The little things that I remember seeing, it was devastating. It was just really bad. I remember the amount of people that die; it was just daily. And I always, I don't know, for some reason, every time something like that happened, what we all do, we think about the family. Even up to today, when I hear, I always try to—I look and see, wow, how young; look at the age to see.

TS: What are your thoughts about Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, or Operation Iraqi Freedom; either/or.

[Operation Enduring Freedom is the official name given by the U.S. government for the Global War on Terrorism between 2001 and 2014]

[The Iraq War (March 2003-December 2011), also known as Operational Iraqi Freedom, was a conflict that overthrew the government of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The war began when the United States invaded Iraq due to concerns that the country was manufacturing and harboring weapons of mass destruction, a claim that was later proved erroneous. Iraq's support of the Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda, who were behind the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, was also a factor in the war.]

DC: That we've been there for too long, I guess.

TS: Fair. What was your reaction to the shooting at Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009?

[On 5 November 2009, Nidal Hasan, a U.S. Army major and psychiatrist, fatally shot thirteen people and injured more than thirty others during a mass shooting at Fort Hood, a military base near Killeen, Texas.]

DC: You're talking about the doctor?

TS: The soldier.

DC: The doctor soldier that killed the—Is that the one you're talking about?

TS: Yeah.

DC: That he was, I think, Muslim? Is that the one that you're talking about?

TS: I know there's been so many, right?

DC: Yes.

TS: Fort Hood, let's see. A U.S Army Major psychiatrist, yes.

DC: Yes.

TS: Killed about thirteen people and injured thirty more, yeah.

DC: It was wrong, and only God knows what was the reason that he actually did it. He was a psychiatrist, so he probably was dealing with his own demons, too, his own personal issues, because you're a psychiatric doctor does not mean that you are perfect.

TS: Right.

DC: Those people need help too. And it was wrong. I don't think that what he did was the right thing to do. He should've known better. People that he killed, somebody's son, somebody's father, somebody's—Killing anybody, that's unjustified. That's not—

TS: What are your thoughts on the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"?

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

DC: It's your option. I think it's a personal option, a personal preference. If you don't want to do business out there, it's just options, I think.

TS: Yeah. What are your thoughts about Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, removing restrictions for women in combat arms in 2013?

[Women in Combat refers to female military personnel assigned to combat positions. On 24 January 2013, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta removed the U.S. military's ban on women serving in combat.]

DC: It's also an option. If it's a woman that feel that she can do the job, why not? We know what kind of danger we getting ourselves into. And I don't feel that a man's death is less valuable than a woman; I think we are all equal. It's a human life, regardless of how you look at it. So if there women, they feel that they can do the job, and they want to put themselves in it—I personally would not do it myself because I don't think I would have the courage, but I know there got to be somebody, another female in there that feel strong minded, that think that she can do the job, they should be given the opportunity— equal opportunity—for them to do it as well.

TS: Absolutely. At what point did you decide to leave the army?

DC: I was going to be separated from my family, and I knew that if I reenlisted, I was going to go to Korea. If my husband was retired, I probably was going to continue, but he still had four years to go, so I—At that point, my Family Care Plan was not really actually working, because my mom was having health issues, so in the event that I needed her, she wasn't going to be able to actually come in and do what she was supposed to do, so I had to choose between my family and the military. And I think six years was good; I did my part. I did more than the most, I think. So it was time to go.

TS: How did your family and friends react to you getting out of the military?

DC: Actually, in a way, my mom was actually happy that I actually get out because of what happened in 9/11. And she knew that it was going to become very dangerous. And another thing that I actually decided to get out because of my husband's job. I couldn't risk it to put both of us in a situation that was going to maybe take us both, and then having kids, so I have to actually—because he was going to continue deploying, he was going to go to war, and we had the conversation, and I had to say, "No. One of us have to stay to raise the kids just in case something happened."

TS: Yeah, absolutely. Was it hard to adjust back to civilian life after being out of the military; going from the military to being a civilian again, was that a hard adjustment for you?

DC: No, not really. No, not really. My feet had a hard time adjusting to heels, but other than that, no.

TS: [chuckles]

DC: Because I was wearing boots all the time, so when I start wearing heels, I was, "Oh my God, my feet hurt so bad!" I didn't know there was Plantar fasciitis, because if I knew I would have up a claim with VA, but it went away.

[Plantar fasciitis is a disorder of the plantar fascia, which is the connective tissue which supports the arch of the foot. It results in pain in the heel and bottom of the foot that is usually most severe with the first steps of the day or following a period of rest]

TS: Many people consider women in the service to be trailblazers. Do you feel this way?

DC: What is a trailblazer?

TS: Someone who, sort of, clears the path for others. The woman who made it into the Special Forces, she's helping to clear a path for women to come after her.

DC: Yes, I guess. I don't think that the military actually has anything, well—I don't think it's any MOS in the military, as of today, the women cannot go in; I don't think so. Because we have pilots, [unclear]. I think that the—Yeah, at one point, probably it was a woman that actually opened that path, that she actually insisted, insisted, "I wanted to go this school," until finally somebody listened and let her in. So yes, we can say that we, as women, we—yeah, I can see that. I can see it that way, yes. Because if one of us did not speak up and say, "This is what I want to do," then the other ones will not be able to come along.

TS: That's true.

DC: Somebody had to start that, yeah.

TS: I know you used your Montgomery GI Bill for your education. Have you used any other veteran benefits, like mortgage benefits or benefits with the VA?

DC: Yes, I used the home loan to buy the other house that we have, that we just—we moved from there. Yeah, I used the home loan.

TS: And have you ever used the VA for medical or anything?

DC: Yes, I use the VA for medical and, also, I applied for disability as well. So yes, I have used VA benefits.

TS: How have your experiences been with the Veterans Administration?

DC: Actually really good. I think they are—I have a great—my provider, she's a sweetheart. She's really attentive. I actually like to go to the VA, because I have the option to either use TRICARE and use the VA. And I actually, I like to go to the VA better than go to my TRICARE, because I think my primary doctor is just there for the money. That's what I was telling my husband, because every time that I get the bill and I'm like, "He didn't treat me for this." But you know how TRICARE is. They snatch[?] a lot. They only pay what they want to pay. [chuckles]

[TRICARE, formerly known as the Civilian Health And Medical Program of the Uniformed Services (CHAMPUS), is a health care program of the United States Department of Defense Military Health System.]

TS: I agree with you. I think my VA doctors, I think they take more time with me than if I go to a non-VA doctor. It's like they're in and out like that. I'm like, "We didn't even talk about anything." So, yeah, I love my VA doctors too.

Due to the recent conflicts and conflicts, the media has focused a lot of attention on post-traumatic stress disorder with service in men and women. Have you had any personal experience with PTSD?

[Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a mental and behavioral disorder that can develop because of exposure to a traumatic event, such as sexual assault, warfare, traffic collisions, child abuse, domestic violence or other threats on a person's life.]

DC: No.

TS: How has your life been different because of your time in the military?

DC: It has opened a lot of opportunity to me just to having the veteran background. It has helped me, too, with jobs. It has helped me just in general. When people know that you are a veteran, they look at you different. Somehow it changed everything. I can be talking to another veteran and they don't think that you are in the military, but the minute that you say, "Oh yeah, I was in the military for six years," the whole—it's like you're part of the team now. [chuckles]

TS: It is. We are our own special sort of community.

DC: Yeah, exactly. And then all the people that they don't know that they had never been in the military, and when they know that you are actually in the military, or you have been in the military, they look at you like, "Wow."

My son, especially when my youngest son, when he was in college, I used to go to his school, he would play in the band and everything, and he told his friends and he'd say, "My mom was in the military. My mom was in the army."

And all his friends were like, "What? Your mom? She doesn't look like she was in the military."

And he says, "Yeah, she was in the military." [chuckles] And they look at it different, like we are like superheroes, like something that nobody can do”

I say, "You can do it too."

TS: Absolutely. Have either of your children joined the military?

DC: Well, my oldest one wanted to join the military, but he couldn't because he has a medical condition that doesn't let him join. But that was his goal; he wanted to join in the military. Now, my youngest one is planning to join in the military. He wanted to—He took the test and everything last year, but then COVID hit. Now he and his girlfriend is going to join in the military, they both wanted to do it, we're just waiting to see what exactly he wanted to do or not. He does—

[Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a contagious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The first known case was identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. The disease has since spread worldwide, leading to an ongoing pandemic. Several COVID-19 vaccines have been approved and distributed in various countries, which have initiated mass vaccination campaigns.]

TS: You support them going into the military?

DC: I do support it, if that's something that they wanted to do. I will not discourage him because nobody discouraged me. If it's something that he wanted to do and they wanted to do, of course I will. It will open a lot of doors for them, too, if they do it. It will put them in a different category. We can say that they will become part of the team. And he really had been thinking about it. In the beginning he wasn't, but now he said, "Yeah, I really wanted to do it. At least keep the tradition and do a [unclear] do it. I wanted to do it."

And I said, "Okay, well, just let me know when you wanted to do it."

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

DC: I do. I think it is a good experience for everybody to at least go in there and learn. I think they will look at life a little bit different. There are some other countries, they have like a mandatory, I think one, two years of military for children to do—for the kids to do it. And I see—I have recommended the military as well to a lot of people, especially when I see them—they're—you're struggling, and then you have never thought about just doing this. This can open a lot of doors for you, getting a job, you're going to apply for a job. Everybody looking for veterans. It would put you in a different category, if that's what you wanted to do.

And sometimes they don't know. A lot of people don't know that they can do it. A lot of the young generation don't know they can do it. But I do, if I have the opportunity, and my husband do the same thing. People approach us, look for advice or something—and then we start telling them what is good; "This is something that you can do. It worked for us. It may work for you as well. And we'll see." It's not for everybody. That's another thing. The military is not for everybody.

TS: True.

DC: It's not for everybody. But it teaches you discipline.

TS: Yeah. What does patriotism mean to you?

DC: To me it's, do what is right, follow the rules. They're made for a reason and a reason only, to keep—to maintain control. Like I say, I have two countries, but I consider this one my country. Because I'm being out of Panama for so long, so I don't know how things are over there. Because I haven't been there for a long time. So I consider the United States, this is my country, and I will do anything for this country. And I think it shows that I joined in the military, I did what I had to do, and I will go the extra mile to make sure that if it's anything that I can do to make it better. I think that's summarizing for me what it means.

TS: Is there anything in particular that 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?

DC: That you will feel proud, because if I feel proud—If I wasn't born here in the United States, if I'm from another country, and I feel proud to serve, and to have done what I have done for this country, if they can actually experience a little bit of that. One thing that I noticed is a lot of the people that are not affiliated—well, I cannot say "a lot"—some people that are not affiliated with the military or some type of military background, sometimes they don't know what they have to do. It's like they don't know that if you see the American flag on the floor, and so you have to pick it up. Some people don't know that.

It was one time that I remember, I was in this place and I saw the American flag on the floor, and there was a whole bunch of people, nobody pick it up. And I went ahead and pick it up and put it—hang it, where it supposed to go, and everybody looked at me like I was like, "Why are you doing that?"

They don't know what is the significance actually of just picking up the flag, and the respect that it means. I knew what to do because I was part of the military, so I know how to respect symbols.

TS: Right.

DC: I think people should know a little bit of—history has been like—we losing history little by little, maybe, and the significance about what is to be proud of something, be part of something. Because I feel very better proud of what I did. I've been proud of myself for what I have accomplished, what I have done.

TS: Right, absolutely. I don't have any more formal questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add to the interview?

DC: Nothing. I think we actually cover everything. I don't know what you're going to do with that. What are you going to do with the recording? [chuckles]

TS: I'm going to tell you that in just one second.

[End of Interview]