

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Nicolle M. Brossard

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: May 29, 2012

INTERVIEW PART ONE OF TWO

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is May 29th. This is Therese Strohmer, and I'm at the Jackson Library here with Nicolle Brossard in Greensboro, North Carolina to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Nicolle, could you state your name the way you'd like it to read on the collection?

NB: Nicolle M. Brossard.

TS: Okay. Nicolle, why don't you start out by telling us when and where you were born?

NB: I was born in Portland, Oregon on June 3, 1983.

TS: 1983, so you have a birthday coming up?

NB: I sure do. Thank you for reminding me.

TS: You're welcome. It's a great birthday. What was it like growing up in—did you actually live in Portland?

NB: We lived in Sherwood, which is about thirty minutes south of Portland.

TS: Okay. Do you have any brothers or sisters?

NB: I have two older half-brothers we didn't grow up with, and one older full brother that I did grow up with, and now I have two younger step-brothers; we didn't grow up with them either. So, it was just an older brother and myself and my parents.

TS: In your household?

NB: Yes.

TS: What did your parents do for a living?

NB: My dad worked repairing copiers for IBM [International Business Machines] and Kodak and then while he was going to school, and he's now a mechanical engineer at Xerox. And my mom unfortunately was diagnosed with brain cancer when I was three years old. So, she went through treatment for that, was in remission for six years, and then the tumor grew again and she had several surgeries and radiation and stuff like that. Then the tumor ended up being in remission by the time I was, like, twelve or thirteen, but she's pretty much changed and disabled after that.

TS: Yeah. Is she—did she survive—has she survived her—

NB: She survived for twenty-three years and she passed away in August 2009.

TS: Wow.

NB: Yes, sad.

TS: Yes. That must have been—how hard to grow up with that, knowing that she was so sick.

NB: It was challenging to grow up with, and different. You don't really realize how different it is until, you know, you're an adult, or the different things you go through, or different challenges you have. But looking back I think it made me a stronger person, and I think it really developed a deep level of compassion that I have today.

TS: Did you—So, what kind of things did you recognize, now, looking back?

NB: Just the—that I didn't really have a mom to kind of bond with and I didn't really have a lot of teaching about dating or make-up or, you know, those types of things. I missed out on that but luckily I had a lot of good women mentors and friends in the military, so I caught up with all the rest of that later.

TS: Later? After you joined the army?

NB: Yes.

TS: Well, how about with your dad, then? Did he take on a lot of roles?

NB: He worked a lot and he also went to classes at night to try to just better his employment position and better—be a better caretaker for our family. So, he—I think that was hard for him, too, but he, you know, did the best that he could for our family.

TS: What was it like growing up in Sherwood? What kind of town was it?

NB: It was a small town. We have our Robin Hood Festival every second weekend of every July, and—

TS: What do you do at the Robin Hood Festival?

NB: We have dunk tanks and there's some little jousting competitions and they have the Maid Marian pageants for the girls from elementary school to high school, and food and—

TS: Oh! Like Sherwood Forest. Okay!

NB: Forest, yes. [both laugh]

TS: Okay, that just struck me. I'm a little slow. That's kind of neat.

NB: Yes. So, we have that and then there's just—when I was growing up there was just one little elementary school, one junior high, one high school, but it's definitely grown a lot since I became an adult. Very small town, everybody knew each other. Part, kind of, agricultural and part town. Even when I was in high school I was part of the Future Farmers of America, and so we had, luckily, a lot of different people in Sherwood involved in that program too.

TS: Did you—So, did you walk to school?

NB: Some days I would walk to school but mostly just took the bus.

TS: Yes?

NB: Yes.

TS: Did you have, like, a neighborhood where kids played a lot and played games?

NB: Definitely, we had the neighborhood of riding bikes, playing hopscotch, playing outside, being home by the time the last streetlamp turned on, and—

TS: Oh, was that the rule?

NB: Yes, all the different stuff. Picking blackberries, and my mom would make blackberry cobbler. Going down to the little store to get a candy bar and a soda, the little Rainbow Market in Sherwood. So, lots of fun just normal kind of childhood things then.

TS: Rode your bike a lot?

NB: Yes.

TS: Now, did you say your brother that lived with your family was younger or older than you?

NB: He was older by three years.

TS: Older by three years. Okay. What kind of relationship did you have with him?

NB: We had the quarrelsome older brother younger sister relationship growing up, well, during our teenage years, but as we became older we had a very close relationship and did a lot of stuff together. My dad was also a Boy Scout master, and so I went on different Boy Scout trips, and —

TS: Oh, you did?

NB: Yes. And camping and learning, you know, how to tell north and south and east and west by the sun. Did stuff like that with my brother, but I was always, kind of, the annoying little sister [chuckles] that went on all the little trips.

TS: So, I guess the army—you were preparing for the army for that in some ways.

NB: Yes. Yes.

TS: What about school? Did you like school?

NB: I liked school, but I didn't do very well; certainly not like how I do now. Just—it was just hard with not having a mom really there. My dad was more absent from working and school. I didn't have the passion to learn as much as I do now. I think that's one thing the army kind of helped me with, is being more focused and stuff, so I did okay but not something I would tout now, that's for sure.

TS: Well, for some—for some young people growing up, school is social; it's more about the social environment rather than the academic.

NB: Yes.

TS: Was it more like that for you in some ways?

NB: I had some good friends there, and close friends, but it wasn't as, probably, social as I would have liked or anything. It was just, I had a lot of hard stuff dealing with my mom's illness and everything.

TS: Did you play any—You talked about the FHA? Or—

NB: FFA.

TS: FFA, right. Future Farmers, right, of America?

NB: Yes.

TS: Did you—were you involved in any other sports or anything like that?

NB: Nope. I didn't do any other sports or anything before I joined the military or in high school.

TS: Well, what did you do in FFA?

NB: In FFA we did different competitions for our district, which I really enjoyed agricultural sales, agricultural speech, and debate teams. We also did soil judging and dairy judging and getting under there; looking at the udders, making sure they line up, and testing the

milk, and—for soil, clay, or loamy, sandy soil. Just traveled around and did competitions for that.

We also had a greenhouse and we would sell plants to raise money for the FFA and what we were doing. Every year that was kind of a big deal in our town; like a plant sale. Then we also had two cows that we had raised; Ham and Burger. Not named by me. But I remember going in, we'd feed and bottle feed them, and we dehorned them and castrated them. Just kind of did all the basic stuff for that. We had rabbits. We had some chickens and a rooster, until the local neighborhood complained about the rooster waking them up early.

TS: Was this out at the school?

NB: Yes, it was behind our school. One year we had a petting fair—petting zoo, and we brought in little animals from all over and had buses of kids come in to pet them and teach them about the different animals and stuff. We did that, and we also had leadership with officers there, so I was the secretary one year and then, I think, treasurer maybe. I forget. I know it was secretary and then I became the district secretary for our FFA district, which was kind of the north-eastern—north-western part of Oregon was our district there.

TS: That had to take some sort of organization to do that.

NB: Yes. Looking back you're amazed at how much you did, or what you did, and you're like, "Wow, I was pretty, you know—kind of did good there." Yes, it took some organization for that, but it was really fun. We went to state conventions, district conventions. We were close to winning some state competitions, so we had competed and won, like, a lot of district competitions and stuff, too, for our debate team. Different stuff like that.

TS: How did you guys do?

NB: Well, we didn't win state, but that's all right. We felt really proud for what we did because nobody had done as good as we had.

TS: Up to that point?

NB: Up to that point.

TS: That's really great.

NB: Yes. Yes.

TS: So, did you have a sense then as a young girl growing up in Sherwood, like, what your future might be like? Did you have any dreams about what you wanted to do?

NB: I know that I loved my psychology class. We had a little mouse that we trained to choose between a triangle and a square and all this different stuff. It was for an AP [advanced placement] psychology course, and we had a great teacher. So, I liked psychology. When I was in high school I wanted to actually do genetic engineering of plants. I was thinking about that and then hadn't really thought anything past that until the army opportunity came about.

TS: How did that come about?

NB: Because of my mom's cancer, our trust funds for college were spent on healthcare and—which is very reasonable. I have no resentment or anything towards that. But we didn't have really any money for college, and I had wanted to get my degree in psychology from Northwestern University. So, I had—my dad had taken me up there and we looked at it, but the tuition, I remember, was over \$20,000 and we had no money for it. I remember it like it was yesterday. I was in the shower thinking; you know, some people great ideas come in the shower. I was thinking, you know, "What am I going to do? How am I going to pay for college?" Just a lot of, I think kind of, responsible thoughts for a seventeen year old to have to consider.

Then, just the idea about the military came in my mind, and I am the fourth generation in the military, and so my dad had mentioned different things about when he was in the army before. I was actually scared that he wouldn't support it, or he wouldn't like it. I think sometimes when we, kind of, tell war stories they sound bad or we don't like it, but it's really more of a badge of honor what you went through.

TS: When did your dad serve?

NB: He served during Vietnam; he was drafted.

TS: Did he go to Vietnam?

NB: He did not go to Vietnam. He ended up having an ulcer, and he had two young children, so he was discharged due to health conditions after he completed basic training and his advanced individual training.

TS: Then—what are the other generations?

NB: My great-grandfather served in World War I, and he served in Austria. I do have an enlist—a copy of his enlistment sheet, too, which I am going to try to bring in for the archives.

TS: Neat.

NB: It's just, like, can you ride a horse, your name, your enlistment number, and your address. It was pretty basic. Then, my grandfather drove trucks on the Burma-India Road during World War II.

TS: Oh, wow.

NB: Yes, so I have a proud lineage. And out of all my brothers I'm the only one in the military too, so I get total bragging rights for that.

TS: I guess you do. Sure you do.

NB: Yes.

TS: It that what made you think about the army? I mean, what brought it to your mind do you think?

NB: I didn't really know any of that until—

TS: Oh, really?

NB: —after I had already joined. Other than my dad had kind of been in and that was it. So, I'm not really sure what brought it to my mind.

TS: Had there been recruiters at the high school?

NB: No.

TS: No?

NB: I just—No. I, kind of, believe in fate and I honestly do believe spiritually that God has a purpose for my life and has led me to the different places and things I've been doing, which are far better than I can honestly plan. So, I kind of feel it was a little divine intervention. And I thought about it and I thought about women in uniform, specifically the skirt, and how respected they were, and how neat that was. I even wrote in my diary about it, like, I wonder—I have this idea. I wonder what it would be like. I think it's so neat, and I didn't give it a second thought after that.

So, that was a Sunday and the next day I went to school. I was walking down the hallway to go to lunch in the cafeteria and I looked to my left and there were two recruiters at a table there, and my heart sunk. I knew—I never knew nothing was so right in my entire life, and even to this point I still remember how strong that feeling was; that I have to go and talk to them. I went and I said, "Okay, what's your spiel? Tell me your, kind of, selling points here."

And Sergeant First Class Mendolovich was my recruiter and very, very nice, awesome recruiter. A lot of people say they don't like the recruiter, but he was just awesome. He said, "Well, you know, let's get together over coffee or whatever and we'll talk more about it."

So, okay, so a few days later we met for coffee and he did a little interview and found out what some of my interests were and what I had done and what I want to do. I told him about psychology and I want to travel. Then we told me about the mental health specialist job in the army, and that I would go to basic training, and then I would go to San Antonio, Texas. And I—Texas was probably my number one favorite state at that point that I wanted to travel to.

TS: Why was that?

NB: Just, kind of, big and country and, you know, I was in FFA and everything. So, I liked the thought of big open spaces and—so, he told me about that and money for college and it just answered everything for me. I thought about it, prayed about it, went home and had told my dad about it, and he was really supportive. I was surprised. He thought it was a great thing.

And now that I'm thinking about, I also remember my brother was going to enlist in the military, too. So, he—there was that exposure before. It's coming to me now.

TS: It's okay.

NB: He was going to be an intelligence analyst, or working something with intelligence before, and he was all set to go and very, very smart, but unfortunately he decided he didn't really want to go. He's made some other choices in his life which have led him

down a worse path, with drug use and abuse and different stuff like that. So, there was some exposure about the military a few years before, because when he was seventeen, eighteen, he was thinking about it.

TS: I see.

NB: Yes.

TS: Why did you choose the army? Did you consider the other services?

NB: I didn't, no. [chuckles] I mean, I love the air force blue—

TS: So, you saw the green uniform walking down the hall, right, in school—

NB: Yes.

TS: —and that was it.

NB: I guess that because what I had seen before with my brother, and I didn't know about the mental health opportunities. I have come to find out later that, like, for the navy you have to be a corpsman first and then you can go to the mental health school, and I just hate blood and body fluids so that wouldn't have worked out for me. And the Marines don't really have a mental health technician. Most of their assets they use from the navy. And then the air force, I think, has a few but it just wasn't really anything I had considered.

TS: So, really, the army would have been the best; the most ideal.

NB: Yes, for sure. And I also thought, because this was in January, February 2001, you know, I'll be medical. I'll be far behind the front line. I'll be in a hospital. If anything—if there was to be war, because you obviously have to consider that, we wouldn't be close to where a lot of the action was happening, probably.

TS: What was it you liked about Sergeant First Class Mendolovich?

NB: He was so calm and very trustworthy. He was also very, very upfront about everything to me, and as I had said, I didn't play sports or anything. I was a little overweight for the army standard, and he, you know, helped, kind of, teaching me a little bit about physical fitness and he helped teach me about the phonetic alphabet, about facing movements. He just invested in me. He was honest about everything, except for there is one thing he did

not tell me and that was that when I go to MEPS, which is the Military Entrance Processing Station, they will give you a drug test, a urinalysis, and they will watch you very closely pee in a cup, with no privacy. [chuckles] Other than that, he told me everything.

So, he just really cared about me, and I even remember the day he took me—the morning to go, I was supposed to do my processing and then stay overnight and the next day leave for basic training. He knew I liked coffee, and I liked fufu [meaning fancy or complicated, probably] coffee, and he's like, "Oh, you know, just get Seven-Eleven coffee," or whatever, and no, he brought me a nice coffee. He really knew me, and I even found some letters from basic training a few days ago. He had wrote me a letter and just told me whatever I do, do the absolute best that I can in it and good things will happen for me in life, and that, I realized, I adopted as a core value and have taken with me wherever I have gone. So, he was just very honest and trustworthy.

TS: That's really neat. Have you ever stayed in touch with him?

NB: Once I came back from basic training I did. He ended up being a recruiter for military medical officers for the combat support hospital I became a part of. So, he just was proud of me and we talk once in a while, but then he retired.

TS: I see, okay. Well, so, you went through a delayed entry program, right?

NB: I did.

TS: So, you signed up in, was in January, February?

NB: February 2001, and my parents had to actually sign off for me to go.

TS: Because you were seventeen?

NB: Because I was seventeen. My mom was a little ambivalent, but she signed off on it because that's what I wanted to do. My dad was supportive. Funny thing also, my dad's a gun broker, so as soon as I signed up he went and bought an AR-15, and I think he thought, "If my daughter's going to go to, you know, off to be in the army she's going to at least know how to shoot." And that's so like my dad. He's going to teach me the best way to do something to protect myself and in order to take care of myself.

TS: That's the boy scout in him, right?

NB: Yes!

TS: So, did you—did he take you out and shoot on a range to learn how to—

NB: Yes.

TS: How'd you do?

NB: I did pretty good.

TS: Yes?

NB: Yes. I did pretty good.

TS: Had you been shoot—shot any weapons before that?

NB: Maybe once or twice, but not really as much as practicing with the AR-15 before I left.

TS: I see. Did that help you then when you were in basic?

NB: It did, I think, yes, because I was already familiar with the weapon. I already knew how it operated. I knew about aiming. So, it definitely helped with that.

TS: Really neat.

NB: Yes, and he's so proud. In fact, before I had—when I mobilized he had—I had shot my first, like, qualifying on the range for sighting in. I had shot my first six shots in very tight shot group, and so, and qualified and didn't need any adjusting or, you know, didn't need to work on getting tighter shot groups or anything and they said, "All right, you're done; you're off the range," and [I] wanted to shoot more and they said, "No." So, it's one of his proudest stories; he takes credit for it.

TS: [chuckles] And probably he should.

NB: Yes.

TS: In some ways. That's really neat. So, your mom wasn't so sure about—it was such a great idea?

NB: Yes. I think that she just, you know, worried about me going off.

TS: And you're leaving home, too.

NB: Yes.

TS: At the same time, right?

NB: Yes, but we weren't very close at all and, like I said, for me I had the best mom from when I was three to ten, and that's who she was. But due to all of the medical procedures and radiation, chemotherapy, everything, I think that in conjunction with depression and her just, kind of, making some choices to not really try to get help at all, really changed her. So, we weren't very close at all after, or when I was leaving for the army.

TS: I see. Well, what did your friends think about it?

NB: I remember one of my friend's dad was like, "You know, you shouldn't go. Are you sure you really want to do this?" And some of my friends, they were kind of supportive, but it was kind of scary for them, too. So, there was a few people, and like my psychology teacher, I think he had served in Vietnam, so he obviously knew what war was like and kind of would caution me. I remember that, and some of my other friends were just, like, "Okay, this is what you're going to do," and they wouldn't do it but they were supportive of me.

TS: Supportive of you.

NB: Yes. Yes.

TS: And your choice.

NB: Yes.

TS: So, you signed up and then you graduate from high school.

NB: Yes.

TS: Then you have the summer.

NB: Yes.

TS: And then 9/11 happens.

NB: Yes.

TS: Do you remember that day?

NB: I do. From when I had enlisted for the delayed entry program, we can go and—we can go to the reserve unit and start doing our drill there. It's kind of funny, the first time I went I had worn a dress [chuckles], and everybody who knows me remembers that from that day because, you know, silly girly girl wearing a dress to an army training. Anyways, so we had—you go there and we couldn't fire our weapon and we couldn't do other things, but we could participate in all the other training. So, I was doing that and I had a little uniform and everything and there was one person, Colonel Clarkson, who was the chief nurse—or assistant chief nurse at the combat support hospital there, and she just really took me under her wing; called me Bubbles, and—

TS: Why did she call you Bubbles?

NB: Just for my effervescent personality. [chuckles] And taught me a lot about being in the military, gave me good advice, and she also put me to work doing stuff. So, we could come in for extra days, like, to paint the hallways of the unit, or to help with paperwork, or whatever; kind of come in in orders[?]. And so, I was doing some of that, and the weekend before September 11 we had had a—what we call a “dining out.” There's either “dining ins” which we do on the base, or “dining outs” which we do some at, like, a restaurant or something in the civilian world. So, people dress up in their formal attire and it's a nice dinner, and then there's traditions. We had a bunch of extra toe tags left over from being in a combat support hospital. We made people's name tags, you know, on the toe tags, and came up with funny little things of, oh, you know, why they died. Like for a motorcycle rider, you know, went out blazing fire on their motorcycle, and stuff like that. We had a grog, which is a whole bunch of different alcohol combined in a bedpan. [chuckles] Just—I just remember that so vividly because it was so fun but it was such tradition, and I just knew on September 11 that there was not going to be that anymore. There—That was the point, the line of departure, if you will, of where the fun army—you're training, but it's also a lot [of] focus on fun, also had changed.

On September 11 I woke up at home and I was getting ready to go in to Fort Vancouver [Vancouver, Washington] and work. I heard about the planes crashing, because I was on the west coast, so I remember driving to work at seven-thirty in the morning and they said a tower had fallen. I was so naive and sheltered I didn't really

know about the World Trade Center; what it was in New York or anything. I hadn't really traveled outside of Oregon at that point. I do remember when we got to the unit we had radios on and there was still a plane flying in the air. We also knew that the President was flying, too, into Camp David, so we were kind of talking about where the President was going to be, what was going to be happening, you know, what it meant. Everybody knew it was a big deal and knew, obviously, we had been attacked, but nobody really knew what it meant going forward. At that time we didn't really know who had done it or anything.

I also remember not seeing any of the imagery of the planes actually crashing. So, for me, I know September 11 was a very important and traumatic day in our history, but it didn't have a lot of emotional anchorage because I was just working and helping out and we were just trying to go about as normal as we could.

TS: So, a lot of people have talked to you have said how they were just totally fixated on the T.V., but that's not—wasn't your experience? You didn't watch any T.V.?

NB: I didn't watch any T.V. except for maybe five minutes of it in the afternoon. I do remember there was other people who had been to Desert Shield/Desert Storm, or deployed to Saudi Arabia. They were watching the T.V., like, our operations center was watching the T.V. all day long. I think they just had a better concept of what it meant, and I just didn't.

But I loved to help out any way that I could, and so we had worked throughout the day and then at night we were at Fort Vancouver, so we had no idea where anything was going to be attacked, or by who or whatever, and we had planes grounded everywhere. But we have an air base in Portland just, kind of, over the river from us, so I remember the jets leaving every so often, patrolling our air space. We had to, kind of, pull security. It was twenty-four hour security now on every military installation, even though Fort Vancouver is a national historic reserve, whatever, we still have military people there. So, now it went to doors always being locked. That's another thing that changed. Before we had doors open and you could come in. Then now it was everybody who wanted to get onto our little base had to show ID; they had to have a driver's license. Nobody got on who wasn't military or who worked there—didn't work there.

TS: Did they put those cement concrete blocks at the entryway that they have pretty much everywhere now?

NB: They did after I had left. Initially, they had just put chain-link fence up as soon as they could have after the event; after September 11. Then they had put up the concrete blocks and blocked off certain roadways and stuff.

TS: So, you're noticing this change in tone in the military?

NB: Yes.

TS: Like, more—going towards more military footing in some sense?

NB: Yes.

TS: More secure?

NB: Yes, noticing things are changing.

TS: Yes.

NB: Yes, and I guess at that point it doesn't really matter that it's changed because you've signed up; you've committed. This is what you're going to do, and—

TS: You're kind of new to it anyhow.

NB: Yes. Yes. So, you know, it's like going to college and you get your first job; your dream job. That's the best way I can relate to people in the military. I think with going to war it's kind of like you're going to do what you've trained to do. You get to serve your country. You get to protect your nation. So, I think in some ways there's that aspect, but like I said, for those operations guys who are watching the T.V., who had deployed before, for them they're the last ones who want to go to war because they know the cost of it. They know the seriousness of it. So us naive, gung-ho soldiers, you know, we kind of, "Let's do this."

TS: What was it like, I mean, when you—so, you didn't take the summer before you actually had to go in. You're already working.

NB: Yes.

TS: Why did you do that? Why didn't you, like, say, "Oh, this is my last summer free before I—"

NB: I didn't really have anything else to do.

TS: Yes?

NB: Yes, and it was great because I learned how the army reserve really was. I learned already how to salute and how to stand in formation and how to do a lot of the basic soldiering skills and tasks, we call it. So, when I went to basic training I had more of an idea of what to expect, and I knew that basic training was not what an entire army career was going to be like.

TS: Right.

NB: Yes. And I was, kind of, working and earning money and—

TS: Where did you—yes, I was going to ask you that, too. So, you went in the reserve and you're thinking, okay, this is, like, a part time gig,—

NB: Yes.

TS: —you're going to get money for college.

NB: Yes.

TS: So, what other career path were you thinking about taking at that time?

NB: Well, at that time we have—my initial contract was six years long of active reserve, which meant I would go, you know, once a month—two days a month, or one weekend a month, and then two weeks out of the year. I was seventeen, so I would have been out by the time I was twenty-five, and then we have two years of—it's called Inactive Ready Reserve, or IRR. That's where—it's like in between the reserve and the draft, so you don't have to actively drill every weekend, or, you know, the one weekend a month, but you can be mobilized and deployed if the country needs you.

So, I thought, "Okay, this is great. I'll go to basic training. I'll get my skills. I'll come back. I'll go to college. I'll get my degree in psychology. I'll get married and probably be ready to have children by time I'm twenty-five, and my enlistment contract is up."

TS: That's a pretty good plan.

NB: Yes! Great plan.

TS: Didn't work out quite that way?

NB: No, it did not. [chuckles]

TS: Well, nothing ever works out quite the way you want it.

NB: No. But you know what? I love the way it's turned out. Yes. It's far better than I could have ever imagined.

TS: So, when you finally went to basic training you'd been learning. You'd fired the, what is it called again, the—

NB: AR-15.

TS: AR-15, thank you.

NB: Yes.

TS: So, you're prepared that way, you'd learned the rules of the army, right?

NB: Yes.

TS: Rank, and how to salute, and how to—military bearing, I'm sure, right?

NB: Yes. Yes.

TS: What were you feeling about this? How was this—was this, like, were you comfortable with this?

NB: I loved it. I just loved it. It was fun. It was adventurous. It was new. It was honorable. It was, just, awesome. I really liked it.

TS: Did you take a certain pride in being in the military after 9/11?

NB: Definitely. I took a pride being in the military in general. I remember the first day I wore my uniform, and, you know, people obviously noticed that. After September 11 I took a pride in wearing it, but I was also a little more fearful of being targeted, too, by wearing it. So, I really only had one drill between September 11 and going to basic training.

TS: Tell me about basic training, then. You finally get to go to Texas.

NB: Or, to—Yes, we went to Fort Jackson, South Carolina first.

TS: Okay, Jackson, right.

NB: First, basic training.

TS: How was that?

NB: It was great. I cried when I left. I know people think I am crazy for it, but we left. We have—What you do is, your recruiter picks you up early in the morning and you go to your processing station, and you just get, kind of, final height and weight and drug test and medical; make sure everything is okay to go. Then you stay a night in a hotel, so my parents came to see me; we had dinner. Then you get up the next morning, you get on your plane to basic training. We flew into Atlanta and we're picked up, and then we had a bus ride throughout the night. It's just kind of funny because I have always been very much willing to follow authority. So, they say, "All right, if cause any trouble there's going to be drill sergeants waiting for you when we get there, and you sit every other seat, and no talking, and no this, no that."

It's just, kind of, like, "Whoa, okay. Serious," you know. So, we had our bus ride and then we got off and they had—there weren't drill sergeants, but there were people, like sergeants, at reception, it's called. So, you're—they fed us and you're at reception for a few days where you get all your uniforms, you get all your shots, you get your dog tags. You have to do, like, a basic—a few push-ups and sit-ups and run, like, a mile or so just to, kind of, make sure you're physically fit enough to go into basic training. Then the drill sergeants came and picked us up, and you take your bags and you get on a bus, and they don't really say anything to you. I remember thinking, "This is probably—this feels like," you know, "the ship's going into the beaches of Normandy," right, that—from *Saving Private Ryan* [motion picture]. That's what I was imagining; as close as I'm going to come to this.

Then, the buses pull up. The drill sergeants are yelling, "Get off my bus!" And they are, just, trying to make mass confusion for you. So, you take all your bags, you throw them in a pile. You're running around in circles and they're yelling at you to run faster, and then they tell you, "Go get your bags! You have thirty seconds to get your bags!" So, they set you up for this impossible task, and then you fail, so then you have to do push-ups. Then they try again and then you fail and you have to do push-ups. And so, you know, it just, kind of like, "You'll listen to us. Failure is not okay," and you just get smoked, we call it.

Then we went and we got our bunks set up, and since my last name is Brossard, I was one of the first people. So, my bunk was all the way in the front of a bay, which is a big, like, large room, and on two sides of it they have bunk beds; just running along the side of it. It would be all the females from first platoon and all the females from second platoon of our company, were in this bay.

Then myself and this other woman who was there, we were—her last name started with “B” too, so we were the first two chosen to be on guard duty. So, then we stood out there, I think with, like, a flashlight or something, and just, [chuckles] out in front. Not really knowing what’s going on or—we just stood there, and then ended up coming back and they shook down our bags to make sure we didn’t have anything we weren’t supposed to. Then we put our civilian clothes we traveled in, and everything, into a big room and locked it.

The next morning we woke up and it was Thanksgiving Day, and so, that was kind of a blessing because I feel like they went a little bit lighter on us that day. We still got smoked a little bit and we got gear issued to us, but for Thanksgiving dinner there were all these officers serving us our Thanksgiving dinner, so—

TS: You don’t see that every day in basic training.

NB: [both chuckle] No! But I think about it every year I am with my family on Thanksgiving. I think about how grateful I am for that, to be with them now, and for the opportunity of military service and stuff.

From then on we had just basic things, like, how to wear a uniform. We had classes about ethics. Just different classes about the law of war, and then we went and we did, like, victory tower, we call it, where we rappelled off of this tower. We did rope climbs, and then we would work on marching, and went to do first aid and learned how to do that; learned how to do map reading. So, we did those different tasks and, just, soldiering skills. I remember with, like, the land nav[igation], the map reading, though, I had gotten really, really sick, like, a 104 degree temperature. So, I had to go into the hospital for a few days and missed land nav and, still to this day, it is not my strength. But we had that and then one of the scariest parts of basic training for me was the gas chamber. I just dreaded it, and I even thought about hiding out in the porta-potty until everybody had gone through. But you know, I was like, no, it’s not the right thing to do, and when we get issued our gas masks and you try them on, you can feel the CS gas [commonly known as “tear gas”] tingle your skin a little bit. It’s just [makes noise indicating unpleasantness], it’s just, like, maybe a sunburn, you know. And so—and they make a big deal about it, like the green mile, and, you know, the last [chuckles]—last area you’re going before your death sentence. I, again, I take that stuff so seriously. I always—Throughout my entire military career, I know that I am not intuitively—these

soldier tasks don't intuitively come to me, so I've always paid attention and used the asset that I do have, of knowledge and learning, to pay attention; to listen to what they say; to really think about it and memorize it, so when they are harassing us with that I take it seriously. And you go in and they have CS gas, which it makes your nose run and your eyes water and it makes you cough, and produces a lot of respiratory fluids. You take off your gas mask and you say your name and your social security number, and then you put it back on and you clear it and breathe out. So, it's supposed to, kind of, help you build faith that your gas mask works. That's what, at least, they told us. I would have believed them without testing it, but [chuckles] some people, I guess, just have to learn the hard way.

Then you have to take your gas mask off; in groups of five they have you take your gas mask off, and they make you breathe in the gas and just, kind of, feel it, and you have to yell. They tell you when you're running out you need to run in place and flap your arms to get all the CS particles off of you. So, I'm already doing that. I'm ready to go. [laughing] Just ready to go. Then they finally open the door and let us out, and you're just coughing and drooling and snot running everywhere. We even had one girl who threw up on the back of the other girl. And they have it on Chili Mac Road, so they give you this big lunch of chili mac first on Chili Mac Road before. I mean, they just loved this stuff. But it's funny, it's like a badge of honor, you know? So, that shoots any hopes of ever having any romantic interest with any of the guys there, obviously. [Therese laughs]

So, I remember the gas chamber. Another thing I'm grateful for, even though it was over the holidays, we had a two week break to go home for Christmas. You kind of got a little break in between basic training—

TS: Which you don't normally get?

NB: Which you don't normally get; very much appreciated. I got to go home and see my family, and really enjoyed that. Then went back to basic training, and we would do FTXs, which were field training exercises.

Also [unclear] overnight, so another vivid memory I have is, we would go to an overnight training, or like, staying overnight. We, kind of, put our tents all up in a circle so you have a perimeter of an area, kind of guard, and it was so cold that night. The tents they give you, we call them pup tents. So, what you do when you get there is, you get issued, like, a piece of cloth with snaps on it, and you have to go around and find somebody who—your snaps match their snaps, and you know, obviously another female for me, and that's who you're going to be your battle buddy with. [chuckles] And so—it was so cold though, and we had to get up, my battle buddy and I, had to get up and do our little guard for half an hour, whatever, in the middle of the night, and then go back to

sleep. Our canteens were frozen; it was like ten degrees that night. Then they say, “Okay, when you get in your sleeping bags—” the drill sergeants would say, “—just take off your clothes and just sleep in your tee-shirt and underwear because your body heat will heat up your sleeping bag. Well, our sleeping bags you’d kind of get a lump of stuffing here and a lump of stuffing there. They’re not as nice as we have now. It was just freezing, freezing, freezing and you just—it was my first lesson and you do what you have to do to survive, and so my battle buddy and I got in the same sleeping bag and pulled the other one over us; had to keep our body heat just to stay warm.

TS: To keep warm.

NB: Yes. It was just crazy to me though that they had us out there for training, but now I look back and you think—basic training is a form of stress inoculation. If you cannot handle different stressful situations, or I think if our army doesn’t put soldiers in a situation where they can experience stress and they can learn ways to cope and deal with it, then they are doing them a disservice when it comes to actually having to go to war. So, the ideal is that basic training will, kind of, be part of the worst experiences of your entire army career; that nothing can be really as stressful as that. It’s not necessarily true, but I think it’s pretty close, and it does kind of inoculate you, you know, against future stress.

So, I remember that and then we’d gone back and we did a lot of weapons training, lots of marching again. And I had struggled with PT, physical training. Every morning I would fall out of the runs. I hated running with a bunch of people, you know, who haven’t really brushed their teeth or anything in the morning anyways and very close formation. So—But I definitely struggled with that. Like, my very first run in the military was twenty-two minutes for two miles, and that isn’t passing. I needed to be, like, eighteen minutes, I think. My drill sergeant had put me in a group that ran faster than what my time is, because if you have a certain window of times you’re supposed to be in this run group. I was like, you know, kind of angry, like, “Why did you put me in this group?”

He’s like, “Well, you need to be pushed.”

I’m like, “Okay.” So, I feel like he set me up for failure, but he really, you know, had pushed me more and wanted me to be set up for success in the end.

He’s like, “People who are in that lower run group where you’re in, they will not pass, and you know, it’s just—you’re not going to pass if you stay there.” And I really appreciated—I felt like that was—like he really cared. And he did.

Then we—so, going back, you know, we had weapons training, and our final three day exercise, field exercise, we marched out to a field site and we put up our little tents, our pup tents. We—no showers or anything for three days, and you’re sweaty. We just practiced doing, like, digging a fox hole. So, we dug a fox hole and practiced going

out on little missions, and protecting and pulling security [duty]. And sometimes they would pull the little CS gas canisters, like, you know, we were really getting attacked from gas, and it was just a culmination of everything.

Then we also did this one exercise where you're low crawling and then—through this dirty field at night, so everything is kind of disorienting, and they have speakers out there, like, grenades going off. They also have—they're firing over your head, like tracer rounds. You don't ever really know how far up they are or not, or—it's a little scary. A lot of trust you have to have that, you know, they're not going to just—one's not going to go down or whatever. That was pretty scary to me, and serious. So, we'd done that and that went well, and obviously it had to have been safe and approved, I guess, now if they went through it, and marched back. Then we were—we were done, so, with basic training and I had taken my PT test, and I had passed everything; I had done really well. I remember my drill sergeant came up and was like, "You know, you did really good."

And I was like, "Thank you. Thank you. You know, you really helped me. I couldn't have done it without you."

He's like, "You know why you passed?"

And it's like—"Because I worked?"

He's like, "Because you wanted to. You wanted it." And that sticks with me too. There's, like, so many words of wisdom.

TS: Was it a co-ed?

NB: It was co-ed.

TS: Just you slept in different quarters?

NB: Yes.

TS: But other than that you did everything together?

NB: Yes. We slept, showered, and had latrines in different quarters, but other than that everything else was together.

TS: How was that, I mean, for—because you hear in the external outside world that, you know, women and men shouldn't be doing this together, sometimes.

NB: Yes. I have—I can see both sides of that. I think it's unrealistic for—okay, let me back up. For our MOSs that were at Fort Jackson, typically they're more combat support, so medical, administrative; different MOSs like that. For infantry, if you're going to be

infantry you're going to go and you're just going to be infantry with men only. So, I think it's good that we—that they do have that separation. I think it was good that we have co-ed training because when you're in the day to day life of the army, men and women have to work together. We don't go and fight a women's war and then we go and fight a men's war, we fight the same war all together.

I know that there's always been conflict, or controversy, over women in combat. Even recently some of the political candidates have said that they don't think women should be in combat. But women are in combat, and whether there is a piece of paper that says we are there or not doesn't really matter, because there are plenty of women who have lost their lives. There are plenty of women who have been on convoys and hit by IEDs [improvised explosive devices], and that have flown attack helicopters, that have done just a lot of different things. And I'm [at] no less a risk of dying as is a man, and I think that we should have the same training, and so—and there are plenty of great women I have seen that have earned the faith and trust of the men below them. So, I think that, you know, it should start out in basic training; you have to work together.

And if there are to be men leaders there are certain issues you have to deal with with women, too. Like, you have to deal with, for the most part, separate restrooms were allowed. During deployment was that possible for some of the FOBs [forward operating base] we went to? No. There was only one restroom and one shower. Or there's different issues with, maybe, women to become pregnant or sexual assault or sexual harassment or equal opportunity; different stuff like that. So, you have to have that training and integration.

Kind of on the other hand of that, during deployment I have never experienced a more chivalrous environment. The guys, almost all of them, were so awesome. Opening doors, want to carry my bags, want to help me. We went to a restroom—we went to a FOB where there's only one latrine and one shower. They would clear it out for us, and they would stand guard in there until we told them not to. On patrols and missions, they would tell us everything that was going on and what to do, and which one would be there to help me if something happened; if we were hit by an IED. But with that, like that situation, I fully realize that I could be a liability for that platoon, or for that truck even. Because if you have to have one guy that's helping me, even though I may or may not need it, I feel that it is most of men's nature to protect the female. And that's one person you're taking out of the fight; to kind of divert some of their attention, if that makes sense.

Also, we did have a female casualty on my deployment, and the way it affected men emotionally who weren't even—she had died in a helicopter crash, but her body had come back to our forward surgical team for, you know, resuscitation and to be declared dead at that point. That's kind of the only point where you have the first doctor declare that. So, even the men who had just taken her body off the helicopter to the aid station

there, or the different men on the FOB who heard about it, they were so emotionally impacted by it and really bothered by it. It just blew my mind, because to me my life is no more precious than anybody else, but for them it's the fact that women can give life, and that women are the mother of their children, that they feel they need to protect us. It's just, kind of, an innate sense, and that's how they have described it to me, so—

TS: How did you personally deal with that?

NB: The loss of the woman?

TS: Yes.

NB: I dealt with it the same way I dealt with every other death we had during deployment. Every death is hard. It was, just, interesting and different. It was fascinating. Again, I love to learn so it was just fascinating how they thought about it, and that it was different. I got such an inside understanding of men and respect for them. I mean, I just—it was amazing to get to know them and it was amazing that they trusted me with that, but beyond that, it was another death and another trauma.

TS: Did the men try to confide in you at all, like, talk to you about it?

NB: Yes.

TS: How they felt, in that way?

NB: They did. Some of them did.

TS: Do you think that they might have been more comfortable talking to you than one of their buddies about, you know, their vulnerability in that?

NB: I do. I don't know what I don't know, so if there are men that don't, you know, felt that way, but there have been men who have come to our combat stress clinic who have said, "You know, it's nice to talk to a woman," or—you know, kind of another way I think about it is, I am not in their unit so I kind of have an unbiased perspective. So, I think that that probably—probably was an asset that I used during deployment.

TS: Yes?

NB: Yes. And I'm not going to lie, I fake cried sometimes to try to get them to talk to me about whatever was going on, because they wouldn't. So, if I could—it's so bad, but if I could, kind of, psychologically exploit that weakness of them wanting to try to comfort a crying woman, then I did that because it opened them up talking, but it also showed them that I'm vulnerable too. And I have those feelings too.

TS: So they weren't just out there on their own with those feelings too?

NB: Yes.

TS: Isolated with their emotional reaction.

NB: Like, one guy shut himself up in a toolshed for a whole day and wouldn't leave at all. So, I tried talking to him and I tried, you know, asking him different feelings. I tried sharing with him my personal [unclear]. Nothing was working, so, you know, I did feel that emotion too, but most of the time I would close off my own emotions and tears. But I did allow myself to cry and show that to him to try to get to a deeper emotional level, maybe. And I know that this guy really—it was so out of character for him, because he had lost, really, kind of like, a father figure during deployment. I asked him—you know, I said, "Well, I don't really know if I should walk all the way across the FOB by myself," and you know, "Can you walk me over to the other side of the FOB because I just wouldn't want anything to happen to me," even though I'm carrying a knife and an M-16. He still left the toolshed to walk me out, and got him out of that toolshed for the entire day. So, that was, kind of—

TS: So it worked?

NB: Mission successful for me, yes.

TS: What about the part where you said that sometimes you felt like a liability.

NB: Right.

TS: How did you deal with that?

NB: I sometimes felt like that, but then I would remind myself of the other things I've been through in the military, and then I know I can handle myself. Honestly, there's nothing I can do about it because if something's going to happen then I'm going to do the best that I can, and I can't change how somebody else is going to feel towards me or what they

are going to do. So, —And according to the Geneva Convention [treaties and protocols that established the standards of international law for the humanitarian treatment of victims of war], because I am in the medical field, I cannot have an offensive role. So, I cannot fire a fifty caliber machine gun, and I can only fire if fired upon, or to protect myself or my patients or our base. That kind of helped with some of that, like—

TS: So, you can be more protected by others in that sense.

NB: Yes. Like, I wasn't expected to have an offensive position. And they had to trust me too, and had to trust that I would do what they told me to do. So, I think if I was in their position I would want to know that whatever I'm going to tell somebody to do, they're going to do. And that's part of leadership and understanding, kind of, who's running that show at that time.

TS: Well, let's back up a little—

NB: Okay.

TS: —because we jumped kind of forward there, —

NB: We did.

TS: —but that was very interesting. You did a good job talking about your basic training, and so, you're—you're all in, right? You're in the reserve, but you're all in.

NB: Yes.

TS: I mean, you're really enjoying this.

NB: Yes.

TS: And at what point—Did you ever think, you know, "I maybe should go active"?

NB: No.

TS: Why not?

NB: Because I guess I just—never crossed my mind, and I always, kind of, had my plan of coming back and going to school, and was in the reserves, so—

TS: What was your job outside the reserve?

NB: Outside the reserve? I had worked doing retail and worked at a mortgage company doing secretarial work; little stuff like that. So, no real job.

TS: You're sticking to your plan of—

NB: Yes.

TS: —being able to get to college and all that.

NB: Yes.

TS: Okay.

NB: So, from basic training—do you want me to go on from there?

TS: Yes, let's go on from there.

NB: Okay. So, we have basic training and we had finished basic training and graduated, and then from there we had—I remember my drill sergeant, because we were going to San Antonio for medical training. He said, “I almost lost my wife in San Antonio.”

And I thought, “Oh no, what happened?” Like, bad neighborhood, car accident? No. From going out too much, partying, and who knows what else.

TS: She almost left him, is what he meant?

NB: Yes. Yes.

TS: I see.

NB: It's kind of funny because throughout—you're getting your military training, right? You're learning how to fire; you're learning how to march. But you're also learning the culture of the military. Part of being coed, too, is that, you know, some things are talked about with infidelity. Like, some people have an agreement that if you're deployed you do what you need to do to meet your needs, a.k.a., you can have a sexual relationship, or whatever, but when you—you don't bring it back home and you don't talk about it. Some people are like, no, if you're away, you're away, and you're faithful and that's it. So, it's

just kind of interesting because that was another part of the cultural indoctrination of it, and it was a funny thing to me. Again, so naïve and not really knowing with that.

But then we went to San Antonio and went to the Fort Sam Houston, and they have the AMEDD [Army Medical Department Center and School] Academy. So, that's where we did our MOS [military occupational specialty] training. For me that was a 68 X-ray [68X], which was a mental health specialist. And it was a really great post, because when I had gotten there I kind of fell in this gap, because we were the first class that didn't do this, but normally every class would go and they would spend two months at this other part of the base. Everybody was going to become a medic first. So, a basic, you know, medic, then you go up to get your other specialized training.

Well, they had just done away with that, so we went through just two weeks of a medical course. But when you went down to the other part for the medic, is when things were tighter and you, kind of—excuse me, you kind of earned your freedom. But—and then when you came up more to this other area of the base, you had more freedom to go out and—you know, passes and stuff.

So, when we got there they didn't really have any rules for that, and there was a lot more freedom. It was a little more party-like, but for the first few weeks they had this—where we would have to go—we had to go to, like, four of these, kind of, services. It was like, kind of, a church service, but it was also a—I want to say a mental, spiritual fitness type thing—

TS: Okay.

NB: —we had to go to. So, you could go to, like, four of those. You could do three and like a prayer breakfast or whatever, and then some days you got a one day pass or an eight hour pass to go out in our Class B uniform. Once you had completed that, you could go out every night until ten, or—and you could go out from Friday when class is done and you're released until Sunday night.

I remember one—I had gone to a prayer breakfast and there was a former prisoner of war speaking there, and he was actually a prisoner of war with John McCain [former Republican presidential nominee who was a prisoner of war for six years during the Vietnam War]. And he had talked about how—just sharing their religious beliefs, kind of, through a crack in the wall, and some of those different experiences. I just—you know, that stuck with me, and I really remembered that.

Then when we got there it was three people, four people to a room. So, we had these nice rooms. They had a little microwave and a refrigerator in them, and bunk beds, and it's kind of the life. Then we had class, so we would go to—it was just, like, a block away. We would go to this academy, which is a really big building, and there they have everything from physician assistant school, occupational therapy school to every kind of

these specialized, like, pharmacy technician, x-ray technician, dental technician; all these different little medical trainings there.

So, our schedule would be, we'd get up in the morning, we'd do PT, come back, have breakfast, shower and change, go to class until about four, and then come back and get our mail, get our little lecture for the day, and whatever we needed to do. Make sure our rooms were clean, do our homework. Sometimes we went out for dinner. We went out to do whatever; go see a movie. Then we would have bed check at—I think it was either nine or ten we had to be in bed by. [chuckles] I just think that's so funny. The drill sergeants come around and make sure we're in bed and this and that. That's kind of one of the funny things about basic training, too, is we were in this big room—big rectangular room with all these bunk beds. So, at night you line up and you toe the line, which means you put your toe on the line that's painted on the ground. Then we'd sing the national anthem, "Star-Spangled Banner", and do the Pledge of Allegiance, every night. Talk about a star-spangled heart we would have. Then the drill sergeant would give the command, "Prepare to mount."

So, you run back and you flip back the covers on your bunk, and then you run back to toe the line; the position of attention. Then he'd say, "Mount."

And then you'd run up, climb up in your bunk, lay down at the position of attention, and he would say, "Goodnight," and all these girls say, [using a feminine voice] "Goodnight, drill sergeant." Off he goes, you kick off your shoes, and you go to sleep. It was just—nobody thinks about, "Who does that?", you know?

TS: Right, go to sleep. Go—Jump into your bed with your shoes on, at attention.

NB: At the position of attention, yes.

TS: Did you usually leave your shoes in your bed?

NB: No, we would just kick them off onto the ground, and pick them up in the morning, you know?

TS: Gotcha.

NB: So, yes. We would have our little bed checks. A funny story from that, too, is we had cockroaches in San Antonio. I had never seen a cockroach till I went to Fort Jackson, and I had KP [kitchen patrol], and they were frozen in the ice machine. So, I never ever had ice again. Yes, and everywhere. And then in San Antonio we had cockroaches

everywhere, and they were just so gross. So, we made a little bunk bed and we put on our little name tag on our door, you know, PFC Roach. [chuckles] Our drill sergeant came in and was like, “Where’s PFC Roach at?”

We’re like, “Um, we don’t know Drill Sergeant. He’ll come out in a little bit.”

“He? He? What is this he? Are you cohabitating in here?” [chuckles] So, then we all had to get out of bed and do push-ups for cohabitating with a male in our room.

TS: That’s funny.

NB: But it was just, like, I—to me, I take away that you make the best out of everything, and if a drill sergeant can kid-around with you, you know, then you can do the same as a leader, too. It’s not always just marching orders all the time, but it really is a relationship of trust that you build in getting to know the person, you know.

TS: Well, was there anything particularly difficult at your training; the training that you were doing for your MOS?

NB: The only thing that was kind of hard for me was PT, again. I had failed a PT test—the standard was up a little bit more, so I would have remedial PT. After class I had to do PT until I could pass a PT test, so that was for a few weeks. Other than that, there wasn’t anything very difficult. I loved the classes and the way they break things down, and you just—whereas, in college you take, maybe, four classes of different topics, everything’s integrated and you move at a faster pace because the army’s going to take what’s most important for that job and that position, and they’re going to give you more skill based than a lot of the theory behind things.

TS: Right, the knowledge base.

NB: Yes.

TS: So, you had said earlier, like, school wasn’t really your thing?

NB: Right.

TS: How—So, you’re doing a ton of learning.

NB: Right.

TS: How are you feeling about all of that?

NB: Loved it.

TS: Yes?

NB: Loved it all.

TS: What do you think was the difference?

NB: I think that I had discipline from the military. I think I had something I loved doing. I think that, probably, a big part of it was, I was away from home, and coming home from school to maybe not the best family environment. And also, because of my family's financial situation, I had worked since I was sixteen. So, I already had a job a week before I turned sixteen at a retail store, and you know, if I needed school clothes or lunch money or whatever, I worked for that. Here, I didn't have to work after class every day.

TS: You got, kind of, a break?

NB: Yes.

TS: In some sense.

NB: Yes. Sometimes I say that the army is America's best welfare system. Well, the military in general. Because you can take pretty much anybody, you give them a job, you give them clothes, you give them food, you give them a place to live, medical care for themselves and their family, social support system with—you have friends or you have people around you all the time, and you have pride in what you're doing, and you learn an amazing set of skills and a diverse amount of knowledge. Everything from first aid to weaponry to what your job is to, even, cleaning. And so, I guess, in that way I think I am a little bit of the American dream; going from hardship to something really good in life.

TS: When you mention the—you know, that you had this discipline and, maybe, a structure—

NB: Yes?

TS: —what was it about that, that you embraced so much?

NB: I just—I embraced the predictability of what was going to be going on, and knowing what the schedule was, knowing what expectations were. You say, “Jump” I say, “How high?” You tell me, I will do it. So, I really liked that.

TS: Some women have said, you know, that you know the rules.

NB: Yes.

TS: It’s not—like you say, it’s more predictable, I guess, in some sense.

NB: Right.

TS: And, I guess, that’s something that some people in the military, when they get out, find much more chaotic.

NB: Oh yes, for sure. Yes. So, in college, if I don’t have a clear syllabus, clear deadlines for homework, clear expectations, it’s very frustrating to me, because I don’t know what to do or what to expect, and I can guess, but it’s taxing to me to have to try to guess somebody I don’t know and how they are going to grade and what they are going to want. I mean, you learn after your first assignment or test, but I like to know in the very beginning so I can be successful.

That’s one thing I do for my soldiers coming in, too, is I give them—or if I take over a new platoon or I get soldiers for my clinic or whatever. We have counseling statements that we use a lot, and it’s an initial counseling, and I tell them, “Here’s what I expect. Here’s what I will not tolerate.” And I also, kind of, let them know my pet peeves, like, “You know, this may not be big for somebody else, and I really don’t care if you, you know, want some more down time, or you need a day off, where somebody else might, but I cannot tolerate—I don’t know. I don’t tolerate you saying you’re going to do something and you don’t have it to me by your deadline.”

So, there’s just those certain different things, and I think even in psychology that has been proven; that people feel the best when they have predictable outcomes.

TS: And the expectations are clear.

NB: Yes.

TS: That’s interesting. Well, what was it about your training that you really enjoyed?

NB: I loved—I loved learning. I loved the friends that I had there, because I really—I had good friends, but it wasn't anything like how it was in the military. They don't really, or they didn't really ID a lot in San Antonio, so. [laughs]

TS: You're eighteen, now, probably?

NB: Eighteen, yes. So, we went out, had a good time.

TS: What's the drinking age there, twenty-one?

NB: Twenty-one, yes.

TS: Okay.

NB: So, we went out and—you know, it's a city, it wasn't Sherwood, and it was really fun. I had, kind of, my first boyfriend when I was there. That was great, and then in the—at the end of our training, we had one month of clinicals. So, we wore civilian clothes every day and we went to a few different sites around San Antonio, and I went to an adolescent center. They had, you know, anger management, or—I guess they had, predominately, kids with disciplinary and behavior issues, so you used your training that we've been working on there. And it's kind of funny, because you're just, like, listening to this stuff and asking people how they feel. You're like, "No way, that's never going to work." Then it really does work and you're like, "Wow!" So, that was pretty exciting, too.

TS: Is that where you got interested in the adolescent obesity, too, or is that some place later?

NB: No, some place later.

TS: Later? Okay.

NB: Yes.

TS: So, you enjoyed—you're enjoying the learning? You're acclimated pretty well, looks like, to the army. Your social life is going well.

NB: Yes. Kind of a coming of age, for sure.

TS: Yes?

NB: Yes.

TS: Did you—you talked earlier, too, when September 11th happened, you weren't really—didn't have a world awareness of political, maybe—was that developing at all, or are you still in your, like, "eighteen year old, this is my little space"?

NB: Yes.

TS: Was much penetrating it?

NB: Not really, since we were so sheltered from—in basic training we didn't—I didn't see a TV the entire time I was in basic training. So, sometimes we'd get news from the outside, like, if somebody went to the doctor, like the hospital, you know, they'd bring back news. So, no, I really had no idea, much, of what was going on in the world. Even, kind of, today, I don't really have any idea, other than I know we had an extensive bombing campaign in October, and other than that, I really had no idea what was going on.

Same thing with in San Antonio, we couldn't have TVs or anything, but it was, just, we weren't so much at war then, I think, as what came about after Iraq.

TS: In 2003?

NB: Yes, and that could just be my, you know, ignorance to it.

TS: Or just your perception of—

NB: Yes.

TS: —what you were having to deal with, too. So, you—we talked about—you answer so many questions so I don't have to ask. How was your relationships with, like, your superiors?

NB: Yes.

TS: How was that? Is there a male/female dynamic, at all, that's different?

NB: We had—in basic training we had two male drill sergeants for my platoon. We had one female but she wasn't in our platoon, and so we didn't really see her. Then when we left at the end, like, the last few weeks, we had a female come in. She wasn't very strong, but she developed more strength of character over the few weeks she was there. So, that was

kind of interesting to see her develop that and hold her ground, you know. With the male drill sergeants, I never had any problems with them. They were just respectful and caring and really great for basic training.

When I went to AIT [advanced individual training] we had more instructors, and we had one female instructor. She wasn't really, like, for our cycle, because we had some overlap of cycles, but she did come in to lay out, you know, females will keep their hair like this, and your uniform like this, and your nails like this, and was very adamant about—girls aren't going to—or, women, whatever—females aren't going to slide and bend the rules with uniform, and stuff like that. The males were good instructors, again, no real issues at all for me, then.

TS: Did—Were there issues with dating?

NB: No.

TS: That was allowed, at that time?

NB: Yes. Some people—we call them AIT romances. They would be, kind of like engaged at the end. It's just weird because you're in this intense environment where you're with somebody every single day, and so, you find somebody you can relate to, and you, I guess, really bond with them. So, some people, like I said, had gotten married or were getting married or whatever, so they could try to be at the same duty station, and stuff, together. Most of the time they didn't really pan out.

TS: No?

NB: No.

TS: So, then, you were there—you're in training through July of 2002?

NB: Yes.

TS: Then you go back to Fort Vancouver?

NB: Vancouver, yes. Back home.

TS: Back to your home. So, what—that's when you did your one day a month, or two days a month.

NB: Yes.

TS: And then two weeks a year.

NB: Yes.

TS: You did that for—not that long, looks like, maybe. Then we’re gearing up for the Iraq war, I guess.

NB: Yes. So, I came back home, and then went to college at Portland State University, and—while still doing my drill and a few extra weeks of duty here and there, where I could, you know, be put on orders and stuff. Then, yes, we have the lead up to the Iraq war, and that, I was a little bit more engaged in, with the weapons of mass destruction and blah blah blah.

College was hard, because I was in the military. I do remember being in one class and we had small groups afterwards, like discussion groups, and one of the girls was like, “Okay, you’re in the military, so you’re going to say why we should go to war, and we’re going to debate why we should go to war or not.” So, that really rubbed me the wrong way, and I did feel offended by that.

TS: Why?

NB: Because, just because I’m in the military doesn’t mean I want to go to war. Because now, I’ve learned a little bit more about the seriousness of war and experiences, and was like, “You know what? We’re, kind of, the last people that really want to go to war.” That’s when I adopted more of that later feeling, like I said. You know, you want to go because you want to do your training and you want to do this and this. But then you start to realize the reality of how serious it is, and you realize that we bear the biggest burden; we bear the biggest scars of war. So, the soldier is, kind of, the last one who wants to go, I think. Especially ones who have been to war before. And I just didn’t think—it’s a misperception that because you are in the military, you support war. It’s kind of like saying that because you are a police officer, you support firearms, or—you know what I mean? Different things like that. Or you support the death penalty. Because it’s not—it’s a generalization.

So then, we had, like, the fall term I was at PSU, and we had Christmas, and the kind of going into the beginning of January and the winter term, there—things started gearing up a little bit more for our unit.

TS: This was in 2003?

NB: In 2003; January 2003. They put us in what we call—we're in the "box" now. So, being in the box means that you can't—nobody can transfer out of a unit. You know, you're on your warning to go and to deploy. So, getting your paperwork ready; stuff like that. And I had worked up the unit more, too, with just helping out with whatever different administrative stuff. I was out of classes more, and then we got the—we got the order to go, and—that we were leaving.

We got it on a Saturday, and I believe our report date was the twenty-seventh. So, I think we got it on, like, the twenty-second or twenty-third. We had three days to get together three hundred and sixty people to deploy. Three days to say good-bye, pack up my apartment, maybe see my family for the last time, get my legal stuff in order, decide what I'm going to bring to combat with me. It was insane to do that.

And, they had stop-loss then, too. Like I said, in the box, nobody can retire, nobody can transfer. So, some people, that was their retirement date. And women who had had babies two months before had to go, even though they're still, like, breast-feeding.

We had those three days, and I remember I just went, went, went and was working with the unit, and then also trying to get my apartment stuff packed up. Then, my dad had gotten ulcers, or like, bleeding ulcers. So, he went to the hospital, and I had said good-bye to him when he was in a hospital room. I think it just, kind of, stressed him out, too. That was, you know, a different kind of memory; vivid memory.

Then we left. We got on buses, we had a bag-piper, and we also had a few people who were conscientious objectors and didn't go. We went to Fort Lewis.

TS: Well, on the conscientious objectors, how did your unit feel about them?

NB: I think it was—I'm not really sure how they felt about them. I—If I were in that position, I would think that it's, kind of like—kind of another hassle you have to deal with in the midst of everything, and I think, at that time, it was fair if you decided you were a conscientious objector, because you may have joined during peace time. Although, I personally think, when those metal things come up that look like people and you're supposed to shoot at them, that's the time you need to decide if you're a conscientious objector or not; in basic training.

And I dealt with some of that with mental health evals [evaluations], you know, later on when we went to Fort McCoy. So, I understand that now. I understand if you deployed and you had to kill somebody, and you may have mixed feelings afterwards about that and you become a conscientious objector then. I do not understand enlisting in the military, serving two or three years, and getting benefits, and then not deploying and

saying you're a conscientious objector then. Like, if you enlisted in 2005 and then in 2008 you decided you are, because the whole time we are in war time, so.

TS: Right.

NB: Granted, you know, you can have children, you can have life altering experiences to change that, but it's still a little bit hard for me. So, I understood that, and then, and at that point, you know, it's like when the rubber hits the road, you feel different.

Then we went to Fort Lewis, and we were told, you know, "Don't really unpack. Don't get comfortable, because we're leaving in two weeks." We had to pack up our entire hospital, so all of the tentage. And we just don't have a tent that we put up. We have a tent, we have the framework, we have the inner shell, we have two layers of flooring, we have heating and air conditioning, we have generators, we have big metal containers of x-rays and operating rooms. So, it's—it's like taking a diva on vacation; you don't go easily, you know? [laughs] So, we had every—I mean, people just worked twenty-four hours around the clock, packing this stuff up and loading it, then sending it on a ship with a few people.

And our original war strategy, from what I understand, it was that our combat stress hospital—or combat support hospital was to be supporting the fourth infantry division out of Fort Hood, moving into Turkey, and from Turkey we were going to be moving south. We were also going to have about two-thirds of the troops—or three-quarters of the troops from Kuwait moving north, and we were going to, kind of, marry up in the middle.

So, our hospital floated off Turkey for a long time, and we had air force that were, you know, paving the area to put our hospital and stuff, but we never—it's when more political things were coming up with the United Nations and other countries, and from my understanding, Turkey came under pressure from Russia and France and some other countries, and did not allow us to use that as a projection platform. So, we sat and we waited.

TS: Back in Washington?

NB: In Washington, in World War II barracks. And see, my dad I told you, was in, you know, enlisted. He did basic training and lived in those same barracks, there, in Fort Lewis, Washington. He'd tell me about the movie theater; it cost a nickel for movies, a dime for new releases, and this and that. You know, same area. So, it was kind of funny and, like, you know, taking on that history.

TS: Sure.

NB: But that was difficult because there was no certainty on what we were going to be doing, where were we going to be going, and just, like, “Send us home. Send us anywhere. Send us to Afghanistan.” So, you know, we did different training, like, obviously, firing and field training, we got all of our immunizations, and those kind of things.

TS: How long were you there?

NB: From the end of January until the end of May, so—

TS: It’s a lot more than two weeks.

NB: Four months. Yes. Four months. [unclear] We made those barracks so comfortable with rugs and drapes and kitchens and cookouts, and some people even went to Rent-A-Center and got a big TV and recliners and paid monthly. We—You know, groups of people would go and do paintball or deep sea fishing or this or that there. It was just crazy. Or we had margarita Wednesdays and Thursday formation was an hour later, you know? So, it was just interesting and different.

TS: Very surreal in some ways, that you’re waiting for war and you’re doing all these different things.

NB: Yes.

TS: Where did—So, in May where did you end up going?

NB: At the end of May we went to—well, I was going to say, also Fort Lewis, my dad came up to visit me a few times. The hardest part emotionally of that, other than the lack of control, was that every time you said goodbye, you didn’t really know if it was the last time or not. So, there’s some uncertainty with that.

TS: Right.

NB: Also, I know that I had felt that we were going into Iraq, there wasn’t a lot of things established for bases, security, stuff like that, and so, I thought, what happened if I was raped there? And I started on birth control, because at least if I was raped, there wouldn’t be a pregnancy out of it.

TS: Is that something other women do, too? Is that something you had talked with other people about?

NB: Yes. There is a few other ladies we had talked about with it, so. It's a shocking statement and feeling, but it's very realistic, I think, because you just don't know. And you hear stories and you hear things, and so, you're going to do whatever you can to protect yourself.

TS: What was your fear of rape—from who?

NB: I was afraid from enemy; from enemy, so—because I didn't—

TS: Getting captured, and—

NB: Right.

TS: I see.

NB: Something like that, yes. Because nothing had really been established at all then.

TS: So, you did start to have some fear about what might happen?

NB: Yes, for sure.

TS: You had a lot of time to think about it, too.

NB: Yes. Four months of down time. And I had cut off all my hair. I have long hair now, but I had cut it off, because with the, kind of, chemical weapons, if I had to put my gas mask quickly, I didn't want to have to worry about adjusting my bun, or if I braided my hair, or whatever. I just wanted it short, easy to wash, and easy to put gas mask on. So, yes. Then—so, those are some prominent thoughts on that.

And then we finally got, kind of, a mission for the States. They took a lot of our people and divided us up across thirteen different sites across the country. There was Fort Polk, Louisiana; Fort Knox, Kentucky; Fort Dix, I believe, in New Jersey; all those different sites. I went to Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. And then they sent some other people—individually went with units to Iraq. Then the rest of the people they demobilized and sent home. So, we went to Wisconsin, and we had—when was it? We went there and got in-processed in our, like, group of ten or fifteen people, augmented a unit. I think it was the 7228th, 26th, from Missouri, and they were a medical support unit.

So, Fort McCoy was usually base use only for reservists during the summer, but it had become a site, now, where they were mobilizing soldiers in and out of, and deploying soldiers in and out of. They had, like, medical stations, you know, where you're processing people; their legal paperwork, their medical paperwork, immunization, blood draw, vision, family support. All these different areas you have to make sure are okay. And they're doing their weapons qualification and their training; all that different stuff to get ready to deploy there. So, usually units would usually come there for about a month, and then from there they would fly out there to go overseas.

TS: I see.

NB: So, we got there to augment that unit, and there was a TMC, which is a troop medical clinic, and then there's an SRP, which was a soldier readiness processing. Those were two buildings across the street from each other, and half the people worked the SRP and half the people worked at the TMC.

I had worked there a little but doing just the, like—the in processing when people would come in for—to see a doctor for medical equipment, or whatever. Then we had Major Pipler, and he was the, kind of, chief of physicians there. He knew myself and another soldier were mental health specialists. So, there was another person to—Major Vassar, who came through, and she was supposed to deploy with the MP [military police] company, but she ended up not going.

So, she ended up staying there, and she was a social worker, and she took the other girl and myself and we were—became a mental health clinic. We started from nothing, because before, people would have a mental health problem, it would have to be pretty serious, like, a suicide issue or if they did have something they would talk to the doctor, or they would mostly be sent—like, it's thirty minutes out, was the closest hospital. So, they would go to the hospital.

TS: Like a private hospital?

NB: Yes.

TS: Or community hospital.

NB: Yes, community hospital.

TS: Not military.

NB: Yes, non-military. And so—and it's just kind of funny because this girl who I was with, we hated each other. We were just, you know, oil and vinegar. And we'd gotten in little fights; we were immature. So, they—our Captain, or Major Vassar, she got promoted while we were there, was just like, "Look. We are a family. You two will get along. You won't be stealing each other's boyfriends. You won't be doing this. You won't be doing that. We are all we have here, and we will watch each other's backs, and this is how we're going to run the clinic, and we're going to do this." She was just awesome. She came in and was like, "You know, these are going to be our hours." And when people would try to, kind of, tell us we need to work on Sundays and stuff, she was like, "No. There's no emergencies, you know, there's no—we don't have any units coming in. We don't need to be there." She would protect us, too. So, it was a very strong woman, and—who, you know, was hard on us, but she was good on us, and good to us, and taught us a lot, and she also protected us. It was really cool because it was, like, the first time we really did our job.

So, she was there, and we had to stay there—we were going to go home in October, and then it was January, and then it got pushed back to July of 2004. Then you could decide to extend another six months if you wanted to. So, I decided to stay another six months.

TS: Why?

NB: It was good money. I loved the experience. It was going to be more educational benefits for me, and I just liked it. Some of my other friends were staying, too, and so, I decided to stay. But my friend who was there—well, we ended up becoming friends, because often—

TS: The two of you that didn't get along so well at first?

NB: Yes.

TS: Okay.

NB: What the military likes to do with two people who don't like each other, is put them together. [laughs] So—

TS: Work it out.

NB: Yes. So, we ended up—when we first got there, we stayed in a hotel. So, I've had a very *Private Benjamin* [1980 comedy film about an American woman who joins the army]

army career, right? I stay in a hotel, I have my own hotel room, I have people come clean it, come make my bed, whatever. So, we stayed in a hotel for the first five months, and then we moved on base, and her and I still—we weren't very good friends, but we were getting along, you know, but we would still talk behind each other's backs, or whatever.

Then we had to share a bathroom, right. Oh my gosh, end of the world; sharing a bathroom. But, you know, we became good friends, and we really learned, like, I'm more book smart and she was more street smart, and we really learned to balance each other out. We really learned to take from each other the different good qualities, and help each other with our weaknesses, and it really worked out well in our mental health clinic, too.

TS: Excellent.

NB: Yes, it was good. And her and I, we call each other sisters to this day, because Major Vassar was like, "We are family." So, to this day we still call each other sister, you know.

TS: That's really terrific.

NB: Almost ten years later, yes. That's—Those bonds you get, you don't get that in the civilian world.

TS: Were you disappointed that you didn't deploy to Iraq, or overseas, during that period?

NB: Yes, that's a great question. I was. I wanted to go. Then, as I learned about the casualties and what was happening, I was grateful I didn't go. I felt, kind of like, in God's favor, in that.

TS: Did you feel a little guilty?

NB: No.

TS: No?

NB: Because I felt like we had a good purpose. I just felt more, like, gratitude for being spared, I guess.

TS: Well, in this clinic you set up, what kind of patients did you see, I guess?

NB: We saw soldiers before they deployed, or if they were sent back from deployment in the middle of the tour, or once they came back. So, you know, by May 2003, May, June,

July, I would say, everything was still pretty exciting, from what I remember. You know, we were being successful, we were taking down the statue of Saddam [Hussein, former President of Iraq], we were doing this, we were doing that; everything was good.

But then, towards the end of that year, you know, they started having IEDs [improvised explosive device] more, and I remember learning about them, and you know, taking casualties, and going through—traumatic experiences soldiers were going through. So, initially when units were deploying to go, some of them still had that three day notice, or they only had a few weeks' notice, and that's very, very stressful. But we would see—I would see soldiers who would come in and say, "You know what? This isn't what I signed up for. I didn't sign up to deploy. I thought I would just be in the National Guard, and helping out in case of floods or emergencies." And so, that's kind of difficult because, again, you get those training with those silhouettes, and we're now at war, and I think it—it was just—it's not like how it is today where you expect to deploy.

So, some people, it was just, kind of, working through with them about deploying, and finding out what that major concern is. Is it that you're afraid to lose your life? Is it afraid for your family? Is it that you don't feel prepared to go? There were also a lot of cross-unit transfers. So, were you the only person in your unit that, you know, is here? Do you feel isolated?

Some cases that stick out in my mind was that, we had one soldier who had served during Vietnam, and was in combat, and he had been in the army and stuff. When he—they went to the range to qualify, he had actually wet himself, because, I think of, previous trauma. So, in situations like that you can either just say, "All right, well, we're not going to deploy you," or you can help them make their own decision that they probably shouldn't go. Sometimes command referred people, sometimes people came in on their own.

Also, we had a case with a gentleman who had grown up in Syria, and had family in Iraq and Turkey, and he had joined the army. He loved America, loved his country, but wasn't expecting to war with his homeland. And his nametag, obviously, has a name, and the name is more of a family name, and it's easier to recognize groups of families with the name. So, he was very concerned, because he was going to be an amazing asset to this unit, because he knew the cultural customs, he knew the language. He could be a translator. He could really help the unit, but he felt so torn, because he was—he felt like he was putting his family in jeopardy, that was still in Turkey, still in Syria, because if somebody there had recognized him, and then went to go and threaten his family, so, he was very concerned about that.

That's a hard position, as a counselor, too, that's, you know—I'm not here to make decisions for people, but it's—I mean, you can appreciate his circumstance.

TS: Sure. Sure.

NB: So, he ended up deciding to go, and deployed with them. And sometimes for people, they just have to work through it, or you get stuck. They just need somebody unbiased, or to listen, or to help ask questions, and you know, help them to make decisions. So, —

TS: Well, do you—with all the people that you counseled, you know, you don't have, really, a connection with them later. Do you wonder about how they turned out, if they survived; all those things? I mean, do those things go through your mind at all?

NB: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, I do. I—There's, kind of, a difference in people from who I saw in Wisconsin to the people I saw on deployment. Because the people on deployment, I lived with them, ate with them. So, some of their units I've kept in contact with; we've gotten back to see how they're doing.

TS: You mean when you were in Afghanistan?

NB: When I was in Afghanistan. As far as Wisconsin, I really didn't hear back from very many people at all, but I do wonder how they are doing, because they're such personal, deep experiences they've had.

TS: You're sharing some intimacy, too, when you're doing this.

NB: Yes.

TS: I would think that would be difficult, to just, you know, have a release from that somehow. I don't know.

NB: Yes, definitely. So, it's—you know, I had my friend and I had my captain, and stuff like that, to talk to. I want to make another point, though, about the people who came in and thought that they, you know, just signed up to help out in floods or emergencies.

TS: Sure.

NB: I think why it's such a strong emotional point for me, because I am in mental health, I feel like I am here to provide a service to everybody in the military. So, I always try to do a good job about being professional, and about trying to be unbiased, and about trying to make sure that, you know, even if you never need me, you know I'm here and I'm open and I'm available. One of the hardest things I struggle with is that, here am I, away from my family. Even though it's not deployment, I'm here away from my family. I'm serving

my country. I have answered the call. And I'm looking at somebody else who is trying to get out of doing that. So, it's—

TS: Hard to check those biases?

NB: Yes, it's hard in that position to really have sympathy. Do I do my job and I do it to the absolute best ability? Yes. Do I still provide them good services? Yes. Do I still try to help them see, you know, like I said, isolate what it is for why they don't want to deploy? They have family issues? "Absolutely, that makes sense. Let's look at what we can do for your family that you may not have been aware of, so that you can feel better going forward."

But for the people who just come in and are like, "Well, this isn't what I signed up for, and I don't really want to leave home for a year." It's—I've got to dig deep for some sympathy for that one. And that is such an interesting dynamic with mental health, because, you know, you're treating those that you are. So, I think, yes, it's an interesting dynamic.

You had asked about the other people we saw in mental health. So, we saw people pre-deployment. Also, for people being chaptered out, certain chapters for personality disorders, or at that time, homosexuality, had to have a mental health interview completed—

TS: Oh, really?

NB: —by a psychologist, psychiatrist, PhD level provider. So, that was kind of interesting to me, too. I don't really know if it's because—find out if somebody's really lying or not, or just trying to get out of deployment or not, or because you're really verifying this, or because you're attaching a mental health stigma to being a gay, lesbian, transgendered, you know, the whole alphabet soup of the acronym now, LBGTQQ [lesbian, bi-sexual, gay, transgender, queer, questioning] for it. But it was just an interesting other part of that mental health umbrella.

TS: Were the ones that came—that came through for that, for homosexuality, were they self-identified or were some of them outed? Or was it a mixture?

NB: It was all self-identified.

TS: All self-identified.

NB: And it was only two or three. So, yes, I think one person I know, I think the stress of being gay and being in such intimate quarters on deployment for a year, the thought of that and possible retaliation, whether there was or not I don't know, but I think that was very stressful for them. So, yes, there's that.

We also saw people when they were in the middle of their deployment, so, if they had a suicide attempt or gesture. One person was on lithium and was deployed. So, the danger in that is that, in a hot environment, lithium is a salt, so if you're dehydrated the levels can rise. Also, they have to be constantly monitored for damage to other internal organs, and so, this person had actually started hallucinating because of the medication imbalance. So, they came back. Good. Rightfully so.

Some people actually had problems related to the malaria drugs that were given at the time. And that's been another, kind of, thing that's been—that was in the media at the time. Then, some people had family—very severe family issues, or loss of life, or something like that and they came back. So, then we would, you know, just help them and make sure they have the support services they needed as they went home.

Then, we saw soldiers when they came back from deployment. Initially we didn't do this, but as we started to realize, kind of, the effects of war, we would give debriefings for every unit that came back, about mental health services. At that time they also had the—what was called the Fort Bragg killings, where soldiers from Fort Bragg were killing their spouses. There was, like, three or four cases of it. So, this was very alarming.

So, we gave, kind of, post-debriefings; created them. And then for certain units that we knew had seen combat—a lot of combat, or war transportation units, we would do one on ones with them, like, five to fifteen minutes. They all had questionnaires to fill out; like, are you experiencing nightmares? Did you see death? Was it coalition? Was it enemy? You know, have you ever had thoughts about harming yourself? There was about six questions with that.

So, we would go through the questionnaire, and certain people that we saw, you know, had experienced, maybe, more combat, more trauma, more family stresses while they were gone, would, kind of, do a follow up with us one on one in our clinic. Then, we didn't want to keep them at Fort McCoy because that's not—you know, it's punitive to keep them back—from going back home. But we needed to make sure they had the services they needed. So, I would call whatever VA, Vet Center was in their area, and set them up with an appointment—an initial appointment, before they left my office, so that way there was a continuity of care for them. That, I think, is something that Captain—Major Vassar had that was very—she had terrific foresight into the need for that. Because now, it's standard and it's required and, kind of, every base does that, but at the time it wasn't.

TS: It was—That was new?

NB: Yes.

TS: Wow. I was thinking, too, about how—how many skill sets you have, and all this that you're juggling, with the different types of patients that you're getting coming through.

NB: Yes.

TS: I don't know if you call them patients.

NB: We usually call them clients, or service members.

TS: Clients.

NB: Yes.

TS: So, the clients that you have—that are coming through, whether, you know, like a suicide or homosexuality or serious mental condition, you're juggling all sorts of different personalities, but also, like, I'm sure, family issues, that you talked about. So, I'm thinking at the same time now, you had said you started school.

NB: Yes.

TS: What happened with that; for yourself personally? I mean, did you have to withdraw then, and—was that—emotionally, how did you feel about what was happening in your own life for things like that?

NB: I had to withdraw from school when we went—when we left in January. I had the option—I could have taken classes if I wanted to, like some of my friends did, but I didn't. I just never thought about it. But I did a lot of other, like, hobbies. I had taken a few martial arts classes, and I had—let's see, what else had I done? Fitness classes, travel to Chicago, to Madison, to the Mall of America. I'd have an ice bucket to cool down my charge cards in between stores. [chuckles]

TS: I guess. [laughs]

NB: Yes. You know, I went kayaking for the first time. Really had a lot of different experiences, and stuff, there. I bought my first car. So, for me, I was fine. I was good. I

had friends, I had—that's, kind of, when I learned probably a lot more about clothes, make-up, and more about being a women.

TS: Yes?

NB: You know, dating, and stuff like that. So, I really—to the point of how it was impacting my later deployment, it was very miniscule. What I did realize, though, how this job affected me, was that it's very serious, and these are real people, real lives, real things happening. When I went back to school, after coming back from all this, I took every class seriously. That's probably when the major shift happened, because even though what I was learning in the psychology class may not apply to me personally, or for another student that didn't have those experiences, they didn't see how what they were learning applied to what they were going to do. They maybe didn't have that foresight. I already had the experiences. I already saw how important it is to know what you're doing, how important it is that you are knowledgeable, because you're dealing with very serious things; with people's emotions, with their lives, with the worst experience they probably will go through in their life. So, if I could give them something, or help them in a way, then I took that as a very serious responsibility to do that. And therefore, that translated into me taking school very, very seriously, because I never knew when I would need something, and call upon what I had learned.

TS: You're like twenty now, right?

NB: Yes. Twenty. Big change from eighteen to twenty. [chuckles] I was going to say for soldiers coming back, some of the experiences, or things we dealt with, was—soldiers units where they were told they were going to be there nine months, they were extended to twelve months, and then from twelve months they were extended to fifteen months. Or they were told twelve months—they were in Kuwait, they had their trucks washed, they were getting them on the plane two days later, and they said, “Nope, you have three more months. Go back up.” And then they lost three casualties—or they took three casualties.

So, the anger at that. That if you would've left then, if we wouldn't have been extended, and just a lot of frustration with people feeling like their lives were just, kind of, toyed with, and no predictability. I think that was very stressful. There's a lot of mistakes that we've obviously learned from the beginning of the war, and extending people and extending people, I think, was a big one, psychologically. So, frustration at that.

Stories, like—for medics who had people die in their arms. One person I remember said, “You know, here are my boots. My boots still have their blood on it.” Because now we have suede boots. Black leather boots, polished, easy to clean blood off

of. Suede boots; blood stains the suede. I don't know why they haven't changed that, or thought about that at all, because it's almost impossible to get blood out suede boots. It's like, "What am I going to do with these?"

So, then it's kind of like, you know, memorialization, that's probably where—a good example to use that. Memorialization is one of the largest parts of coping past the tragedy; is the never forgetting that person. And I think naturally we would do that, and you would, kind of, just some ways—in a kind of guilt, not forget them or what happened. But honoring them in a good way, and honoring their sacrifice, is a very important part to overcoming that.

So, you know, there's the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and there was World War II Memorial, but where was the place, kind of, for us coming back, dealing with our tragedy? I think that that person was going to leave the boots, either at the Vietnam Veterans wall, or there was an exhibit at the Women and Memorial Service [The Women In Military Service For America Memorial in Arlington, Virginia] building, with pictures of the casualties up to that point. I think that they were going to leave them there, too. So, that's kind of hard and I wish I could take away all that pain for them, but I couldn't, and I could only be there to help them process and educate, and help that continuity of care. But I also think it was healing and therapeutic for people to work through this stuff, and try to dump some of it at Fort McCoy, before they went home.

Also dealt with a case of a soldier in a transportation company; transportation company was ambushed, or hit by an IED, and then ambushed. And this soldier's responsibility as the rear vehicle, was to clear all the rest of the vehicles; go up and clear all the rest of the vehicles, and then pull forward, because different—we had different rules of what to do when you're ambushed from an IED. At that time it was, you know, leave the vehicle and pull forward out of, like, the kill zone, we call it. So, you know—because if they daisy chained them, or whatever—so, you're going to pull forward.

So, this soldier had cleared the vehicles, and went on, later to find that there was another soldier and a civilian contractor in the vehicles. Civilian contractor became a prisoner, and then he ended up escaping a few days later. And the soldier became a prisoner of war and was killed, and his remains weren't returned home for another few years. They didn't find him. There was a video of him being killed, and I'm not sure if that was released or not, or all the rest of the details, but I do remember the day that they announced on the news that they had found his remains and brought them home. I just cried, because it was final closure.

One of the things about being a soldier is that you know if you are missing in action, or a prisoner of war, that everybody will do everything that they can to return you to your home. And so, it was beautiful in that sense, but it was also beautiful in the sense—you asked do I keep in contact with the soldiers after they come back. No, but I

could only hope that he got some type of peace knowing that, and the homecoming. So, in that situation, you know, I had to play through fifty different scenarios, well, and help them try to see the different faucets [sic, facets] of the pictures. Could it be that, maybe, they were hiding and bent down in the vehicle because they were being ambushed, and you couldn't see them because of that? Could it be that they had gotten out of the vehicle and were hiding underground where you didn't know to check? You know, could it be this, could it be that? See, there's all these different scenarios.

And what happens in a trauma like that, in every trauma is, it's called an amplification effect. So, you have the trauma, but the decisions circling that trauma immediately before and immediately after, are amplified and are given far more credit than I believe they deserve, because you can make a decision to turn down this road or turn down this road; made the decision of clearing the vehicles. Says, "Why didn't I see him? Why didn't I see him? Maybe I should have done this. Maybe I should have done that. Maybe I should have done this other thing." So, they get far more credit, even though he was doing the best he could in that time.

TS: He probably did fifty other things in that short span of time, that he made decisions about, that were great.

NB: Yes. Exactly. And so, part of this counseling is playing through the whole scenario again, taking time to go through it all, taking time to look at what could have been different, what couldn't have been different, what you did right, you know. And again, memorializing them. So, there wasn't really too much I could do for this soldier in my office other than that, and other than just try to be a support and somebody there to comfort them at this time, and to listen. Of course, I sent him up with services to return home, but how good does it feel to be this person who comes home, and you feel responsible for the fact that one of your buddies is still out on the battlefield. So, you know, it's—these are very real situations that people are dealing with.

TS: Right. Well, let me ask you about—yesterday was Memorial Day.

NB: Right.

TS: How do you feel about how it's celebrated, I guess is the word?

NB: Well, it never bothered me until my deployment to Afghanistan, and coming back. But I'm not a fan of the fact that we have school in that day, and I have voiced my opinion as such, and it is my understanding that in the future Memorial Day will be a day off. But I do understand there's only so many days they can have as holidays, and designate that to

try to benefit the most of the student population. So, that's for UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro]. As far as everything else, it's—I had people thanking me; “Thank you for your service and your sacrifice.”

And that's hard because I—some people I responded I just said, “Okay, thanks.” And some people I corrected. I think they might have gotten a little, kind of, not understanding, and so I just stopped, but I said, “You know, today isn't about me. I have Veterans Day. Today is about the people who have died, and honoring them.”

You know, so, they say, “Happy Memorial Day,” it's like, “Happy funeral.” And—but then, all I can do, like, with the Student Veterans Association here is, we had a Prisoner of War/Missing in Action table, that has many different symbolic aspects of it, out at a barbecue that they had for the students.

So, you know, all I can do is try to educate people, and try to understand that the freedoms that I have promised my life to defend of our country; we have the freedom to barbecue, we have the freedom to go camping, we have the freedom to be on the beach, and so, you know, that's what people have died for, and what people have said they will give their life for. I just have to look at it like that, and that's a coping mechanism, because if I really expressed how frustrated [I am] and how ignorant I think people are, then it won't turn out good. But really, in some ways, I can't blame other people because they just don't know.

TS: I guess the one thing, and I don't normally put my own on here, but the—

NB: Yes, please, do.

TS: —the idea of a Memorial Day sale—

NB: Yes.

TS: —doesn't sit really well with me.

NB: Right.

TS: I just wondered, you know, from everything you've experienced, when you see that in the paper, you see that in a store.

NB: Well, I did get a good deal on some tires this past weekend [both laugh] because of the Memorial Day sale.

TS: There you go.

NB: So, you know, I—

TS: Mixed feelings then.

NB: It is mixed, but I look at what I can change, what I can affect. There's a lot of things I can't change.

TS: It's our culture.

NB: It's the culture. It's the way people are. And this war, I think, is so removed from people's forefront that, you know, it's not really memorized. So, people who have lost somebody spend that Memorial Day, and they do memorialize them and stuff, and that's good, and I say, you know, Memorial Day is for the rest of America, because I remember every day. I don't need a day to remember. There's nothing I can change and affect with it, so I'm not going to spend my energy and time—

TS: On that?

NB: —being frustrated. It does anger me, but I just do what I can to change what I can.

TS: Well, let's see. You originally signed up for six years—

NB: Yes.

TS: —in the active reserve.

NB: Yes.

TS: And then—so that would have put you—let's see, you went to Wisconsin, you got out of there in 2005, January? And then you went back to your reserve unit in Vancouver.

NB: Yes.

TS: So, you're getting close to cutting your ties with the—

NB: Military.

TS: —military.

NB: Yes.

TS: So, tell me the process from there, when you went back and—

NB: We went back and had just worked.

TS: Did you go back to school?

NB: Not initially. I went—I worked for a while as an assistant manager at an apartment complex, and I ended up—one of my friends became—from Wisconsin, her and I moved in together and—

TS: Is this the one you weren't getting along with or somebody different?

NB: Somebody different.

TS: I see, okay.

NB: She's actually my first sergeant now, too.

TS: Oh, how about that.

NB: So, yes, I—her and I—she's just awesome. I think as a woman, she's had the most impact on my career, and me coming up as a woman in the military.

TS: Like a mentor?

NB: Yes, and, kind of, an older sister and friend and all that, you know? She isn't afraid to tell me when I'm wrong, and so, you know, you want that in somebody. So, we had moved in together, and she was a nurse, so she worked as a nurse and I worked [unclear] departments and stuff. Then had gone on a nice vacation and I realized, you know what? I really want more of this and I want a career and I don't want to, you know, kind of, just be working somewhere where I can't really advance or, you know.

So, I refocused, again, and started going to Portland Community College in the fall of 2006. At that time, my friend was also getting ready to deploy to Afghanistan, and so, in January 2007 she ended up going. So, I went back to school and started with psychology and statistics, and I had gotten some credits from my classes. I had also done some additional training to become the drug and alcohol counselor in the army. So, I

went to school and I drilled, and we were told, you know, we were safe for a while because we had spent so much time being mobilized. I had some friends that deployed and came back. I did other additional training. Since I was the only mental health specialist in my company at the—there—we had some in a different company, and we had a mental health detachment that was in Seattle, and a different company was in Spokane, Washington, so I would just do whatever I could to find a job. I liked to be gainfully employed, so I learned how to drive the trucks, and I would—whenever we needed to take a convoy somewhere, I would be on the convoy. And see, everything has its benefit, because our platoon would take over driving the convoy, but we would also pack our barbecues and food in the back of our trucks where there was room, or we made room, and we would grill out on the nights, you know, we had to spend overnight somewhere; the range.

I became an ammo handler, so that's just, like, you know, how we get the ammunition issued. You have to weigh it, you have to weigh the shells, you have to—you know, just accounting for it all and stuff, and planning; planning out for your training year, how much ammunition you're going to need to qualify and stuff.

I became a company training NCO. I went to two weeks for that course, and that's just, like, you know, planning your training cycle, looking at—a hospital has—the United States army has said this combat support hospital has these, for example, thirty tasks they need to complete. They need to be able to put up a hospital. They need to be able to transport a hospital. They need to be able to defend a hospital. And so, I would say, “Okay. Here are these large tasks. What smaller tasks fit under this, and you know, we need to—

TS: Break it down?

NB: —break it down. Also, we have mandatory briefings and stuff like that, so, putting that stuff together. I was also, like, voice of the soldier, this, kind of, program they have. Sometimes they have little things that come in and fade away, but it was like—I was supposed to go and survey soldiers and find out if they were general for a day, what they would do. Then report that to the general for the second med brigade. So, that was fun.

TS: What kind of things did they say they would do? [pause] That were useful? [both chuckle]

NB: Yes, that's the key. Some things were like, “Well, I don't want to use this uniform, and I don't like the Velcro, I don't like this.” And some people had really good things like, “You know, for the reserves I would give every reserve soldier a twenty dollar reimbursement for a gym membership,” because we have to still maintain these PT

standards, but it's an incurred expense to have to pay for a gym. We don't have a lot of bases where I live so you can just go use a gym, and yes, you don't need a gym in order to do physical—to do pushups, sit ups, and a run, but—

TS: It's raining all the time in Washington. [chuckles]

NB: Yes. That doesn't encompass complete physical fitness, you know, so. Yes, you've got to like the rain. So, that, I thought, was pretty useful. That was only kind of for a month or two that we did that. Then, it was great because I saw a lot of other medical training, and that ended up coming in handy later on; understanding how a hospital works, and other different medical procedures and stuff. Those are the types of things I did there, and would just, kind of, go to school and do my drill, extra training, whatever, if I could.

TS: So, trying to stay as active, to get the pay, as you can?

NB: Yes. Also, if you aren't going to your drill, you don't get to have tuition assistance, benefits, and stuff like that. Then I worked, as well. So, I worked for a product promotions company, for like, the ladies at the grocery store who give out samples, or for like make-up events, or different stuff like that; just staffing them, kind of doing accounting with invoices; hodgepodge of stuff.

I worked there for a year and a half, and then I had, from Portland Community College, transferred to Pacific University, which is a private school, for psychology. When I got there, they had a really great professor who was teaching classes in neuroscience, and, kind of, neuroscience emphasis you could get. So, I started taking those classes, and just loved it. Again, [unclear] to love psychology, it just made sense, and it was easy. And I had so much experience to base the knowledge on.

TS: Right.

NB: And to tack it to, so it was very—

TS: Reinforced the things that you had experienced.

NB: Exactly. Then we had done some different volunteer stuff for, like, [Susan G. Komen] Race for the Cure, AIDS March, Special Olympics; it's just part of our psychology club. And then still drilling and everything, and trying to decide what I was going to do, and you know, I was thinking about getting out. I did have a concern that I don't want to be in the military—I don't want to be, like, a hardened woman in the military, and not be able to have a family or relationship or this or that. You know, I just didn't want to isolate

myself like that. And so I thought, you know, I don't want to be changed a lot. I think that's a concern people have, because they worry about how the military can change them. And so, I was like, "You know, I think I'm going to get out," and blah blah blah, and my contract was set to—I think I had reenlisted for a few years, but at that time you just say you're going to actively drill with your unit for those two years of inactive ready reserve.

TS: I see.

NB: So, I really only extended my contract by ten or twelve months. It had a good bonus with it, so that paid off. Then, when that contract was about to expire, is when the opportunity for deployment came up to Afghanistan. And so I, at this time, was finishing my degree and when we had—I had first transferred to Pacific University in winter of 2008. They said, "What degree—What population do you want to work with in psychology?" And try to get you focused on that. I was just going to get a degree in social work, maybe commission in the army as a social worker and still do work on the outside. I hadn't really thought about a specific population.

That's when I had—was watching TV shows, and they had a show on TLC; a documentary about Wellspring Academy in—they have a campus in California and one in North Carolina, and they were just showing, you know, obese adolescents going there and the different physical exercise programs they're going to, and how they were, kind of, changing their lives, and the integration with family and counseling and that component.

I had always been interested in eating and psychology. I had worked at an eating disorder facility for a little bit, and so, that was interesting to me, but I didn't like the anorexia and bulimia. To me it's hard because it's like every day you're fighting not to do something, which can get better. But with weight loss, I thought it was such a positive change, and I thought it was such a pivotal point in life, because children who are growing up, they don't have as much liberty to choose what they're going to eat the entire time they're growing up. So, in some ways, I think they're victims to their circumstances. And while I'm certainly a person who understands being a victim of your circumstance growing up; not having a lot of finances, having an ill mom, and, I guess, how pivotal a positive change was in my life.

So, I thought about that and I just really liked that. Then I watched this show with Shaq's Big Challenge, where Shaquille O'Neil was giving money, and had this trainer come in to work with this group of kids after school, and they were documenting it. These kids were exercising. They were starting to feel good about themselves, and he had paid for doctor's appointments and stuff to track their weight loss. I vividly remember this one guy, teenager, whose parents were obese, too. He had lost weight and had

moved—with the medical equipment doctors were telling him he had moved from morbidly obese to just overweight. And he was so happy, and just so happy, but his parents refused to go to the medical appointment with him. I just thought “That is so sad. So sad.” I think it’s probably because the family had to face the health behavior, too. I just thought, “You know, here’s a population that needs support and somebody to encourage them.” And I wish I could have reached through the TV and given that kid a pat on the back or something, you know.

TS: Right.

NB: But I just—in life, you have to look at the things that pull on your heart and that encourage that emotional response. That’s what I had, and so I decided I wanted to work with that population, and you know, researched it more. I was always very fascinated about the neuroscience behind eating, reward systems with eating, or how something could apply to health behaviors and eating. So, I was interested in that, and again, my professors were just so awesome at Pacific [University]. One had worked with different cultures, and she, you know, “Oh, look at this Hawaiian culture and there’s this diet that brought a lot of more native Hawaiian food staples back to this population and they became healthier.” So, in my nutrition class, my nutrition professor was amazing and brilliant and really had a way of making things so understandable. And we have senior research projects also that we had done, and so, my professor for that had worked with me, and I wanted to answer the question: Does stress cause you to eat?

NB: So, I was like, “All right, here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to put people under these really big stressful conditions, and then we’re going to see how much they eat.” And it became this huge thing, like, “Well, what about food choice? Should we put out, like, carrots and cookies? What about if people don’t like carrots, and what about if people don’t like cookies? What if we put out grapes, and then this, and then, you know, what about different types of candies?” And it was just all these different variables.

TS: Sure.

NB: So, what we ended up doing was taking people, and we got their blood sugar to account for if they had eaten recently or not, and I told them, “Okay, I’m trying to see how blood sugar levels are related to your performance on a math test.” So, I had three different levels of math exercises. One of them was actually a psychological test, or battery, given to measure memory, but it was very mathematically stressful. And then, everything was modeled after that, for moderate and really super easy.

TS: Very tricky. [chuckles]

NB: Yes. So, I took their blood test, or their blood sugar, and I just happened to have bowl of M&Ms, that I had weighed, sitting there next to where they were taking their test, and so, they did four—four sessions of two minute math tests. Then, at the end, just throw out the test; doesn't even matter.

TS: Right.

NB: Then just asked them, you know, questions about when the last time they ate was. Tell them the truth about the study, when the last time they ate was. Did they find the M&Ms appealing or not? Stuff like that, and then measured all those. So—then presented my research at the Western Psychological Association and to our college, and I actually got an inverted u—no, an actual u shape, not inverted. But—So, we kind of drew the conclusion that the people who were the highest stress condition ate the most, and then the people in the lowest stress condition ate half the amount of the highest, and then the people in the moderate stress condition ate the least. So, we said, “Well, it's kind of like, you know, if you're really stressed out you'll have more. If you're not—or if you're bored you'll eat, if you're stressed you'll eat, and then if you have the right amount of stress you won't. You'll be good.

TS: Interesting.

NB: Yes, and that's based on the Yerkes-Dodson research with stress. So, we had done that and that was fun and it was an awesome opportunity, experience. And my professor had encouraged me to apply for PhD programs. And it's—when you apply for PhD programs in psychology, first off, a very small number of people get admitted usually, and you have to find a professor who's—somebody who's doing research in the area you want to work. So, you, kind of, have to sell yourself, and they have to want you. There wasn't really anybody doing research on obesity, or any type of psychological, kind of, health, obesity type things for psychology PhD programs. Mostly it was focused on anorexia and bulimia and different eating disorders.

But I had applied, and one of the schools I had applied to was USUHS, the University—Uniformed Services University [of the] Health Sciences, in Bethesda, Maryland, and that's tricky because it's kind of like, you have to be in—an officer in the military in order to get accepted, or you can go as a civilian, or you know, kind of some tricky—and I wasn't accepted. So, that was crushing, of course, because I hadn't really failed at too much.

TS: Right. Weren't expecting not to be accepted.

NB: Yes. So, I just didn't know what I was going to do, and figuring it out, and then I got a call, "Hey, do you want to deploy? This unit's going to deploy and they need people."

I was like, "Yeah," you know, "Let me call my dad and ask him."

My dad was like, "You know, you should take an opportunity to take this year off and grow and maybe do some different things."

So, I told him, "Well, I just got a call to deploy. Remember how you said maybe I should take a—"

He's like, "Well, that's not what I imagined. I meant within the US, but okay." And my dad had supported me, and so, I decided I would go. It, kind of, ended up working out, and I did want to deploy in my career. I was done with school; it was a point I could do that. So, I signed up, and then—it was the 113th Combat Stress Control that was supposed to go, and they're out of California, so we did a four day weekend there, and—

TS: Do you need to take a break, because we've been talking for two and a half hours?

NB: Do you want to?

TS: Do you want to take a break before you get—talk about the rest?

NB: Sure.

TS: Okay. Let's do that.

[recording paused]

TS: Okay, I'm back here with Nicolle. We took a little break. Now, you're getting ready to get deployed, and you'd just talked to your dad. He's supportive? [Nicolle chuckles] Although probably cautiously worried about you, there, a little bit.

NB: Yes. Said it would be a great adventure to have. Boy, was it. But, yes, so we were—

TS: Now, this is not with your regular unit?

NB: No.

TS: You're going with a different group?

NB: Yes. I'm being what's called "cross-leveled" into another group from a combat support hospital to a combat stress control detachment. So, it's a smaller number of people, and it's just mental health specialists, occupational therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, nurse practitioners; mostly mental health specialties.

TS: What's your rank at this time?

NB: At this time I am a sergeant.

TS: Okay.

NB: We had gone and—pause and think because, one of the soldiers who I had served with, when we came home, he was one of the soldiers at my combat stress control clinic during deployment, mental health specialist, and he also had committed suicide after we got home. So, it brings of a memory for me about him is, I had known him since before he went into basic training. He would come and drill with our unit, like what I had done, and, you know, trained physically and went away for his training and come back, and now he was going to deploy with us, and had volunteered to go, too. So, we get off the bus and we're all in line to go in this building, and out comes this big sergeant and he's handing out pads of paper and pens and books and he's like, "I am going to give you the tools to be successful," and just, very stern, very direct. "You will take these tools and blah blah blah and be successful." You know, pen and a pad of paper, right? So, I was coming out and [unclear] he gets to—

TS: Where are you at when this is—

NB: In line.

TS: No, I mean where in—

NB: Oh, in Southern California.

TS: Okay.

NB: Yes, where their unit was. So, we're waiting to go in the building, and he's coming out saying all this—my soldier is to my left, Specialist Gildersleeve[?], is his name, and

he—sergeant comes up and he tells him, you know, “Thank you sergeant, but I have my own pad of paper right here.” It turns out, I later find out, that he has a certain type of paper he likes for his note taking, or whatever, and he’s like, “I got this. I’m good.”

He’s like, “Listen. You’re going to take this because I’m going to give you the tools to be successful.”

So, I’m kind of watching this interaction. He’s like, “No, see.” And he pulls it out. He’s like, “I already have the tools.”

He’s like, “I am going to give you the tools to be successful. You will take this. Just take it.”

And so, we’re all like, “Just take the pad of paper. For crying out loud.” [chuckling] “Just take the pen, take the pad of paper.” You know, “Don’t try to be nice. Don’t try to think through it, all right.” It was just so funny. And from there on out we would always kid around about the tools to be successful. One of my favorite jokes with him is, like, just don’t think about it, and don’t be smart. Or he’d try to make, like, a joke and it, kind of—you know, one of those jokes that required intelligence, both to tell and comprehend, and be like, “Don’t be smart.”

And he’d say, “Yes, sergeant, I will not be smart.” [laughs] I just—it reminds me of that; that funny incident that we had with him.

So, we did a couple of days of, you know, we’re going to be deploying, and just meeting each other, and going over some paperwork stuff, and training. It was also in May 2009 when we had that. It was a few weeks after a soldier had killed five people in a combat stress control clinic in Afghanistan, and that was the 55th combat stress control detachment. So, it was a little like, wow. We didn’t really know all the details of what had happened, and it was a little scary for us, too.

And that topic had come up about, you know, making sure that we are protected, and safety procedures that we will take with—you know, if somebody comes in, you take their weapon before you start counseling them, and what you do with identifying people who are high risk for, maybe, harm to themselves or others, and different procedures to protect ourselves from that, because this is an incident that, you know—very publicized.

TS: Right.

NB: So, I had that three, four day weekend of training then, and came back home. Then everybody was, kind of, doing their own little thing to gear up for deploying, and the unit’s mission got pulled because they didn’t have enough time from when they went to Iraq in 2006 to 2007, for this mission; they didn’t have enough down time, the department of the army felt.

Then the mission was—everybody was transferred back to their units, and then the mission went to the 1908th combat stress control unit out of Kansas. So, they had the

mission. Then, I was—you know, I've already got my mind set on deploying, so now I'm like trying to talk—you know, get my unit to talk to their unit, to transfer me over there. So, get transferred over there, and now we have training in August. And I had taken, like, a class—like, a class that was three or four weeks long, or something, over the summer, and was, kind of, doing other little things.

Also, I was working—by the time I had deployed, I had worked for a year, year and a half, as a caregiver for a man who had ALS [amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease], and had in-home care. That was good for the bond, and for the mental health, and how strong he was, and also for nutrition. We prepared all of his meals from whole foods and blended them and tube fed him. So, anyways, that, kind of, is helping me now with nutrition, but—

Then we had training in August to go to with the 1908th, but we were still doing the same training in California, and going to Camp Parks [Parks Reserve Forces Training Area] to do this training. A week before we were supposed to leave from the training, I got a call from our family. My parents had divorced while I was in Wisconsin, and my mom was living in Illinois with her family, and they had told me my mom was in hospice and was very ill, and that she had a do not resuscitate order, and wasn't eating or anything, so they were just trying to do whatever they could to make her comfortable now. So, for me, that was really difficult. It hit me, not because of the sadness or her death, because I had seen her on my own terms to say goodbye in case something happened and I couldn't see her, and make my own peace with her, also, when she was little more mentally cognizant. But it hit me, because for twenty-three years I had been prepared and had been living with somebody who was ill and dying. So, it was kind of a big relief, and a big closure, but it was still very, very hard to think about.

TS: Right.

NB: So, I decided again, am I going to go to training? Am I not? Am I going to go visit her? Am I not? I thought it would probably be a little more detrimental to me to see her in that state, and, you know, she was surrounded by a lot of family and everything, and that she'd probably would want me to do my training and stuff like that.

So, I was in training for a week when she had passed away, and was notified, and so that was hard. I had good friends there to help me through it. One of my friends was Sergeant Krueger, and I had known Sergeant Krueger since May when we first went to California, and a couple other people. We had really—our units, even though we went from the 113th to the 1908th, and later the 467th, we had really all trained together since May, and become close. Then this training we did, combat operational stress control training, and that was a week course just about how to give traumatic event debriefings, different indicators of combat stress, and just, kind of, basically what we would be doing

in theater and what we would need to be doing, and resources, and stuff like that. So, that was a great class.

Then we did other training, and mostly a lot of, just, briefings. You have to do antiterrorism briefings, and prevention of sexual harassment, assault briefing. You have to do briefings about suicide awareness and prevention. You have to do briefings about the Law of War [concerns acceptable justifications to engage in war], about Geneva Conventions [standards for the humanitarian treatment of the victims of war], about the Rules of Engagement that—for what we were going to be going into; what we could and could not do. So, just tons of briefings: chaplain briefing, IED, recognition defeat briefing; just lots of different stuff to get us ready.

Then, went home, and at that time I was able to, kind of, spend some time grieving for the loss of my mom. And even me, the mental health specialist, saw a counselor and said, “All right, I have three weeks until I have to deploy, so what can I do to grieve and get past this?”

And my counselor was like, “Whoa whoa whoa. Doesn’t really happen like that.” But I did learn—

TS: You wanted to grieve in this three week period and that was it?

NB: Yes.

TS: Schedule your grieving.

NB: Yes.

TS: Okay.

NB: How many liters do I need to cry, how many sad movies, how many journal entries, how many this, how many that? Let’s do it. Like, I’m ready. I’ve got three weeks and then I’ve got to get my mind right to go.

So, she’s like, “Whoa whoa. It doesn’t really work like that,” you know. She was fantastic and helped me with what I could and process what I could, and I guess I had done a lot, but it just was waiting for the actual death, and, kind of, closure in order to grieve—grieve that.

TS: Right.

NB: And it wasn't as traumatic as the future experiences because it was more of an expected illness, even though it was still hard, it was, kind of, more like grieving for twenty-three years.

TS: Right.

NB: And lost—and the relationship that was lost between my mom and I, not necessarily just her. Then, it was also trying to look at how I can remember my mom positively, and move forward in life with that. So, we had a memorial and everything, and then, kind of true to fashion, or true to a comedy, I'm thinking about the movie *Due Date*, she wanted me to spread her ashes on the Oregon coast. Nobody had said a word about this to me until she was in hospice. So, here comes a USPS box [laughing] with my mom's ashes in it. I was just like, "Oh my gosh." And I didn't have time to go and do that, and I wasn't really ready to go and do that either, but you know, they were there, so that just had to go on hold for when I deploy, you know.

TS: Right.

NB: I don't know how other people would think about it, like, "Oh, it's important. We need to do this in a timely fashion," or whatever, but that's one of the things when you're a soldier, you have to say, "I don't have time for this, I have to do this." And you're trained to look at the mission and focus on the mission and what you need to do. I could have made time for it, but I emotionally, mentally did not have time, and wasn't ready to do that.

TS: Right.

NB: So, then we went to—we went to, after that, San Jose [California] to do the rest of our training. We had that month off in September, and October was when we were leaving home. Another note about Sergeant Krueger was that her and another girl, Sergeant—or Specialist Akins[?], they were in the mental health specialist class below me. So, they remembered seeing me, and you know, I don't know, whatever impression, I guess, was good about me, too. It was just so funny because you totally look at the people who are above you in the class, and kind of, idolize them. There's that, and I also came to find out that the unit she was in in Wisconsin, a combat support hospital again, the master sergeant in that unit, Master Sergeant Beretto[?], was there and her master sergeant. Then he came and he was an active guard and reserve member, so it's like a reserve person but they are active duty but they support their reserve unit, if that makes sense.

TS: Okay. Sure.

NB: He'd come out and take in—over being the first sergeant in our combat support hospital. He said, “You know, you and Sergeant Krueger are just so much alike.” He's like, “She was so awesome.”

And at first I was like, “Oh, I don't really know.”

He's like, “I gave her more stuff and she just did more and was great.” And he's like, “When I met you, I thought you are so much like her, and I just gave you things and you could just do it.” So, that was, kind of, an interesting little point. Then in October, we left home, prepared to leave. I left my dog. I left my car. Put everything in a box I wanted sent to me. Kind of makes you feel good knowing that these things will be on their way; some comforts of home.

[speaking simultaneously]

TS: Comforts of home?

NB: Yes. And, you know, said goodbye to my family, and we flew—you know, flew to San Jose, and then we went to—I can't remember the base. It'll come to me, though. So, we went to the base there, and had done training with weapons; a lot of weapon stuff, like, grenade launchers, M240s, 249s, and that's totally against Geneva Conventions, even, for us to touch at all. They were fun—

TS: Just to train with it?

NB: Not to train with, but to fire in combat.

TS: If you were in combat?

NB: Yes, because they are offensive weapons. And .50 cal[iber]; it was really fun, you know, but not what we were technically supposed to be doing, but there's just a certain checklist of stuff that you'll do. More briefings and classes, and also we did things like training in our vehicles, like, driving. So, they had area where we would drive, you know, and then they had baby powder IEDs that would go off, and how you would react, or how you would react if you hit a barrier. We'd do those different missions, and then qualifying with our weapons on the range. Lots of, just, other pre-deployment training stuff there.

When we had gotten there, and we're making out our bunks, Sergeant Krueger had this army combat uniform camouflage blanket rolled out, and we're like, "Oh, that's pretty cool," you know, and she had said that her family had seen these people in Wisconsin who were making it for their soldiers, and they had requested one for her as, kind of, a gift. So, she had this and she said, "Yes, I sent in an order and I asked them if they could make enough for our unit. You know, like, fifty, sixty people, and I don't know if we'll get them before we leave or not, but—" she said she had done that, and so, she just mentioned that. Okay. Then we went to—you know, we had our barracks, so on the off time we would have there—kind of watching movies, or there was a pool we could go swimming at. In our PTs, Sergeant Krueger couldn't go swimming because she had this big tattoo she had just gotten on her back, of an American flag and a military cross, which is the downturned rifle with the boots and the dog tags and then the helmet. On the top she had "All gave some but some gave all" and then "Sacrifice" on the bottom in big words; just a huge, big, beautiful tattoo. So, she couldn't swim because of that, and she was so proud of it, and was telling us how her friend was like, "No, you should wait until after you get home to get it," because she just got it two weeks before.

And she was like, "No, I want it in case anything happens, you know. I want it before I go to remind me of why I'm going." So, there was that, and then there's two other girls who [unclear] friends with, and our, you know, group of girls, and just kind of did whatever; watched movies or went to chow together and just had a good time.

Lots of fun memories of that training, like, one briefing they gave us about cultural customs and traditions was like, you should have your junior enlisted serve the meals because it shows their, kind of, position and authority to [chuckles] the Afghans or Iraqis. You know, like, they have different positions, and they said, "Even though," you know, "we know everybody's," like, "a soldier," or whatever, "it's just one of those things."

So, one of the girls was a PFC and we had told her, "Okay, you're going to be serving us. Here's what we would like today." We keep making fun of her about that, and by that time I was a staff sergeant, and Sergeant Krueger was a sergeant, and Sergeant Courtencamp[?] was a sergeant, and then there was PFC Thompson; that was kind of our group of girls. So, we'd tell her that, and then—so, we had that different training and got more of our clothing and items issued—gear issued for deployment, and then from there we went—we flew to Kansas, and they usually have four days of home station training. Since the mission, kind of, came down to go to Afghanistan a month before we were supposed to leave, there wasn't a lot of time to prepare different training and prepare to go to different locations or anything like that.

TS: Because originally you were supposed to go to Iraq?

NB: Yes. And originally the 1908th had that mission, so the 467th, kind of—you know, whatever the 1908th did, we did. We just went together everywhere, so that's how our two units were really close. We went to Kansas for four days, where it's supposed to be pretty light training and then you get to see your families, you know, before you leave, stuff like that, but none of our families were really there except for the some of the people from Kansas, so—but we'd go out to dinner, and whatever; have downtime and go shopping or, you know, whatever.

Then from there, we left on November fourth. We left to go to Fort Hood, Texas, and we took a bus for eight hours to come to Texas.

TS: No air conditioning; or was there?

NB: There was air conditioning, small seats, whatever. [chuckles] And, you know, got to Fort Hood, got off our bus, put our bags away, chose our bunks, went to eat, talked about how much better the food was there.

TS: There where you were at? At Fort Hood?

NB: Yes, at Fort Hood. I mean, you have good food, and you're good, wherever you are. So, I remember the name of the base. It's Hunter Liggett; Fort Hunter Liggett is the one in—outside San Jose.

So, then we—just normal stuff. Called home, “Got here,” went to sleep, got up the next morning. Some people had gone to chow, and I decided that I wanted to actually put on my makeup instead, or diddle daddle around getting ready; I didn't want breakfast or anything. I remember it was, like, raining in the morning, I believe, and we had gotten on buses, or we were waiting to get on the buses and stuff. Got on buses, we're driving to go to—because Fort Hood is a huge base, lots of training land, but in that there's also private property where cattle roam and stuff, and—I know. I know. [seemingly responding to some expression or non-verbal reaction by Therese]

So, there's a part over here where the pre-mob[ilization] people are and then it's about forty minutes away to the main base where the SRP [soldier readiness processing] processing and a bunch of other stuff is, but from the site where the pre-mob is, it's easier access to training ranges and stuff like that.

TS: Do you all go together?

NB: Yes.

TS: To do all these—

NB: Yes. We all move as a unit. So, we went, and I remember I was sitting next to Amy [Sergeant Krueger] on the bus and the music, and she was singing along to the Zac Brown Band “Chicken Fried” song, and she loved karaoke; just a normal day. Went in, did all of our different little stations we went to. The females have to go to a medical annex first, so at their site they have a larger building with personnel and legal and, like, audiology, optometry; just all your, kind of, different little stations there. And then, they had another building for more medical stuff. So, all the females had to go. You have to get a blood test for pregnancy, to make sure you’re not pregnant. Then you go to all your stations in your big building, and then when you’re done, you come back. Check, you’re not pregnant, and you get immunizations, and then you wait in line for your final medical checkout from a doctor. Since you have a couple of different medical stations to go to, the doctor looks it over, looks over your records, makes sure you have everything, and you’re good to go. And that’s a process because it’s a little more extensive.

So, we were just going to our different stations, and stuff, throughout the day. I had completed them all, and was ready to go do my final medical checkout. Had completed my will, had completed my legal—if something happens to me, here’s where I want my money to go; all that different stuff. Then went into the medical annex; wasn’t pregnant, no surprise there. [chuckles] And then—

TS: Can you not deploy if you’re pregnant?

NB: No, you cannot deploy.

TS: Okay.

NB: Then got my immunizations, and I had got in line for the final medical checkout; kind of, seated row of chairs in a line. Kidding around with some other soldiers. They had this patch with a seahorse on it, so we were like, “What the heck, is this a—What are you—a SpongeBob SquarePants patch?” [chuckles]

They’re like, “No, we’re engineers.”

We’re like, “So, what do you do. You build aquariums? What?”

They’re like, “No,” and we started playing around and everything. Turns out, that made it into all the legal records, so now [laughs]—now, we get reminded of that every time we re—go through the details of the situation, and everything, again. So, we were doing that, and I was reading a book; I was reading *On Killing*[?] by Marc Grossman, and just, kind of, that talks about the psychological and physical aspects of killing. Like, how can you justify killing in war, but not murder, murder is illegal. So, different ways of thinking about that.

That's when the Fort Hood incident [The Fort Hood shooting was a mass murder and terrorist attack by Nidal Malik Hasan, a 39-year-old U.S. Army major serving as a psychiatrist] took place. So, I cannot talk about what I saw or what happened from that point, because the—we still have the trial, and I don't want to jeopardize anything for that. But I can pick up again from the point of what we did that evening.

TS: Okay.

NB: Some people already knew what casualties we had, but we didn't know all. We didn't know all wounded. I had gone to the hospital with wounded soldiers, and provided aid to them. Then they had—didn't really know what to do, because this was, you know, out of the norm event, and they didn't know if we were patients or not, or where to put us, so we just waited in this room. I was quiet—I had, you know, called my dad right away and said, “Dad, look, this is happened, and I'm okay. So, if you see the news, I'm okay.”

And I had told one of my friends in a text message before my phone died, like, “We just got shot up.”

And he's like, “Oh, yeah, I know, I hate immunizations.”

I was like, “No.” And then my phone died, and that was it. So, yeah.

TS: Oh no.

NB: So, I feel bad, but they could—luckily my dad knew and everything. He's was like, “Okay, sounds like you did the right thing and you did a good thing, and blah blah blah.” And nothing was on the news. It took about twenty minutes from when the incident had happened for it to be on the news. Then my dad started really, you know, really—

TS: Worrying?

NB: —worrying, yes, and like, wow, saw how serious this was. We waited. I told him I'd call him later.

So, we waited in the clinic, in this room, and some of our other people in our unit came, you know, because we were like, “Okay, here's where our unit is. There's other people.” We, kind of, made that as our point where everybody was. It was me and another soldier there for the first few hours, and gave statements; all that. My uniforms had blood all over them, and I needed to change out of them. But I remember for some point, I just—I didn't want to change out of them. It's kind of like the uniform really adopted meaning then. I don't know. It was—I can't really describe why, but. When they went to take me out of my uniform, the nurses, I just started bawling crying. Like, they really physically had to take off my shirt and my pants and everything. But I looked

down and I saw that I had worn not only clean, but matching underwear and bra. And I just said, “Oh, thank God!” [chuckles]

TS: Some relief?

NB: Yes, because—And just—and then I just started laughing at that thought, like—

TS: This is what I’m worried about, right?

NB: Yes. Like, it is true what mom tells you in case of an emergency, and you know, you just, kind of, refocus. When you see—since this event has happened, coming back, I see trauma and stuff on TV and movies, and it’s like you can’t imagine going through it, or you see it, it’s so serious for so long. But I think about it and it’s not necessarily like you’re just in this deep pit of emotions, but you are in a rollercoaster of highs and lows, because you realize what’s happened but you’re trying to make the best out of any situation, and be positive. Then you realize what’s happened, or you see this one thing that reminds you of a good memory of this person, and then you see one thing that reminds you that they’re gone.

So, even in the span of minutes, it’s not so depressing, but I believe the human spirit tries to deal with it, and tries to cope in that situation. All I can say, it’s, just a wave and rollercoaster of highs and lows. You get excited somebody’s come back, but then again, you find out who else was wounded. So, it’s kind of hard and the hospital did not tell us anything about who they knew was wounded; who they knew was killed in action; who they knew was, you know, anything. They just said that they’re accounted for. That enraged me, too.

Then we had—one of our generals was there the day before to just, kind of—or the night before to just, kind of, talk to our unit about deploying. He came in and, you know, had asked us what happened and we had told him, and it was amazing to see the disbelief in his face. And the—it’s just disbelief. It’s shock. It’s wondering, “How could this have happened?” It’s understanding what this means. It’s all of those in just his one expression. You could read it all. And I think for a general to realize this, you obviously care about your troops, and the impact it’s going to have on them. I know I definitely saw that on his face.

So, by this point there’s about eight of us together, and I don’t want to go back to our barracks, because I don’t know if this is something targeting our unit, if this is something, you know, what happens. I felt like “somebody’s out there to finish us off, and I don’t want to go back”. My peers felt the same way, too, and so, you know, I didn’t care if I stayed in the hospital that night. We didn’t know where our commander was, or

our first sergeant, or anything. So, we just had, kind of, the one sergeant who was the highest ranking and doing everything he could to find people and stuff.

Then they ended up—they gave us medicine to help us sleep, and they took us to a warrior transition barracks, where it's like three small rooms in a little moveable building thing. It had a little kitchen and stuff, and bathroom, because that's where they—you know, for soldiers who are coming back but still have medical care, but aren't needing to be hospitalized; it's a kind of transition thing. So, we went there and we had one—we had two of our wounded soldiers. One of them was shot in the thigh, and then one of them was shot in the head and the back, and so, they were with us. The bullet was—two bullets removed from the person who was shot in the head and the back, and then that skinned[skimmed?]-and then they left the bullet in for the guy who shot in the thigh.

So, we went there and just, kind of—they had gotten us clothes and soap and, you know, whatever, to take a shower and change, and bedding, and all this stuff. They were going to separate the girls from the guys, and we said, "Oh no. We are all staying together," so we all slept together. One of the soldiers who was with the general—part of the general's—

TS: Entourage?

NB: Yes, entourage was at the door. And he stayed awake, at the door, the entire night and guarded it, and they got us some pizza to eat. Obviously, we hadn't really eaten anything. Our commander and first sergeant had come by, and we asked them, you know, "What about so and so? What about so and so?"

And we got the same thing, "They're accounted for," and they were going to go and visit the different soldiers who were wounded and in the hospital, from our unit. So, the—I stayed in the room. I slept on the bed on the floor, with the soldier who was shot in the thigh, and he had slept on the actual bed. We had gone to sleep and he said that I was screaming my friend, Sergeant Krueger's, name all night, and just didn't know, and—which I don't really remember, but that's what he said and I believe it. He also was pretty comical; was like, "Oh, war hero now." And he started—"Brossard, sponge bath, huh, huh?" [chuckles] Just like, well, this is probably the only circumstance you would get that under—no. And so, you know, it's just another example of, you try to—

TS: Cope in a certain way.

NB: —cope. So, we got up the next morning, and I helped the soldier who had been shot in the head and the back, kind of, bathe, and then we went back to our unit. Went in there, and I had seen one of the other girls, Sergeant Cortencamp[?], and she came and saw me,

“Sergeant Brossard.” You know, I’m in, like, purple sweats and combat boots. I don’t have a uniform that [unclear].

I gave her a big hug and I said, “Where’s Amy?” And she just looked at me and shook her head and said that she didn’t make it. She didn’t make it. It just—shock, it what I felt and kind of crying.

Then they were like, “Okay,” you know, “everybody, we need to sit around in this room” and going to be addressed by our command. So, they just went over the roll call, and so, I didn’t have enough time to survey who was there or not, or whatever, and kind of really understand the extent of what happened. They read off, and they went through—went through people, and the first one I remember they went through was Major Caraveo, killed in action. And I just looked at his best friend who was there, and just screamed, [emotionally] “No! No!” and just looked at him, and his eyes were just red and crying, and looked down, and it was just unbelievable. Like, no, how could he not be here?

Then they went through and they read off, you know, “Sergeant Krueger, killed in action.” It still is hard, but at least it wasn’t the first time I heard it. And then, “Captain Seager, killed in action.” Some of the other soldiers had been aware of that. Then they, you know—when we got to our wounded in action, they had said their name and their wounds and prognosis, and just, kind of, like I said, “We have to leave in thirty minutes for a briefing, and formation will be in thirty minutes.” Went back, and I just went in and laid on Sergeant Krueger’s bunk and, like—you know, everything was there; her clothing drying, her box of crackers. She loved Pringles; she had a can of Pringles in her gear. And it’s just—to look at it, it just—can’t comprehend it.

Put my uniform back on again. Well, a clean one, and my boots. And I remember I haven’t ever felt so proud to wear the uniform, and it’s weird because of what happened, but it takes on meaning then. You know, you could just tell in our unit. You could see the blank stares. You could see the anger. You could see the watery eyes; everything that happened. And for me it was just, like, confusion and, kind of, panicky. Like, what’s going on, and what’s everybody doing. You know, just still, kind of, shock.

And we marched down to go to hear some generals speak, and some higher command speak to us about what had happened. Then they said, “Okay, now the units that were there come in here,” so we went in this building and I think they didn’t even know how to react either, you know. And they were just like, “Well, you know, this is what’s happened,” and they want to try to rally the troops. I think that’s one thing I’ve learned about most men, on how they deal with trauma and coping with stuff like this, is just like, this has happened, but it drives them even more to try to keep pressing forward.

I remember one of the guys there, on the night we stayed at the WTU[warrior transition unit] barracks, had said, “Sergeant Brossard, you cannot cry. You need to keep a stiff upper lip.” He’s like, “Your soldiers need you. You cannot cry and break down in

front of them.” And it was just, like, I think that he was maybe saying that more for himself than he was for me, because, you know, I’m emotional but I’m not as—crying hysterically all the time. I did cry, but my emotion comes out more in the loss of control, and kind of, more like in trespassed[?] and more anger and aggression. That’s, kind of, how my emotions were after this event.

So, they said, “Okay, now we have some people at the main base who want to speak to you, blah blah blah, after this briefing.”

TS: Were you getting a little tired of all this—the processing?

NB: Not yet.

TS: Okay.

NB: Because you’re still just—I’m looking for somebody, like, what’s going—you know, what are we—you’re just—you’re still in shock.

TS: I see.

NB: One to three days you’re still in shock

TS: Okay.

NB: So then, we get on these buses. We go to the main base. We get off the buses. We get in formation. Now, we’re on the tarmac for the plane, and—

TS: Where are you headed?

NB: We weren’t headed anywhere.

TS: Okay. Oh, you’re just on the tarmac.

NB: We’re on the tarmac, and there’s a plane with the cargo down, and you know, they had talked to us for a few minutes and then we lined up in formation. They had brought out some other units, so I don’t know, really, if they were part of the shootings or not. I’m guessing that they kind of weren’t because their solemnity was not there.

TS: Their what wasn’t there?

NB: Their emotion. Their, like, seriousness of the emotion wasn't there, and they were joking around and talking and we were just so angry. Like, how dare you. How dare you act like this now. So, they had—what we were there for was for what we call in the military, a ramp ceremony, where you carry your fallen onto the ramp and into the aircraft that's going to carry them, you know, on to Dover Air Force Base, on to the next destination on the way to Dover, and ultimately to be returned back to their families. And we were not allowed to carry our own fallen, because what we were told was, we did not have the Class A uniform. That really bothered a lot of us. Bothers me, because the last thing you want to be able to do is to have a part in the process of making sure that your comrades are going to make it home and safe. And it's a part of saying goodbye to them.

So, they had their people that had practiced, and whatever, and then we're watching the vans pull up with empty caskets, and they're practicing bringing on the empty caskets on the plane. It just was more of a train wreck, I guess I can only describe, for all the shock that it was. Then we're just, kind of, wondering what's going on, and we're standing there waiting, and we're in the heat. We haven't eaten. We don't have water. We're—People didn't sleep, and everything, and then they bring—you know, they back up the vans and one by one they bring out the fallen in the flag draped caskets, carried them up, and you could see the tag fluttering in the wind with their names. So, we tried to figure out who was who, and where they were. You know, gave our final salute, and, kind of, cried or whatever, and that was that.

We did not get to go on the plane and say goodbye to them. Yet the dignitaries who were there, General [George William, Jr.] Casey, the Secretary of the Army, generals at Fort Hood, they went on to, you know, render salute and pay final respect. I understand there is a certain amount of ceremony to go on into that, I however, feel in that time, my emotions were that, you know, how—why do they get to go on? They don't even know them. They do not even know them, and we don't get to really say goodbye to at all. And so, that, whatever—the ramp ceremony happened, and then they called our unit around General Casey, and the Secretary of the Army, and they had—you know, said, "If you need anything, anything at all, here is my assistant's phone number and you call them, and we're here and we're going to get through this and we're going to do that," you know, blah blah blah. I mean, I think they're just as in shock, too.

So, then we get on these buses and go back to our unit, and that's, kind of, where we are, and try to eat. And then try to go and visit our wounded. For me, I really wanted to see how the people were doing that were wounded and that I had helped take care of. So, it was a process, kind of, tracking them down. I had gotten—we were at this little shoppette, like, a day after, I was trying to get some of my uniform items back. And they had these shirts and hats that said "I survived Fort Hood," and I think it's supposed to be, like, Fort Hood's just a sucky training place, or whatever, and you know, that. So, I grabbed a bunch of them and I went a brought one of those to each of the people who

were wounded, and I have it. I've still haven't—I've never wore it, never nothing. But I have it, and I just look at it and the irony of it, and, like, yeah. [chuckles]

TS: Right.

NB: Yeah. So, you know, [unclear] to go and see our wounded, and see how they were doing, and blah blah blah. And then, we had the Texas Rangers—came, with their spurs and smelling like Old Spice. But I felt comforted. It was like, “Whoa, we got the Rangers on this now! We're not playing anymore.” And the FBI and the—you know, lots of people there, taking statements, trying to do everything they can; CID, which is the Criminal Investigative Division.

I can't remember everything from that point. I know we had more generals come talk to us. I know we had, you know, days to go see the wounded, and different stuff like that. We asked about going to their funerals, and they said probably not, because we had training and stuff to do and they had—you know, they had to figure out if they were going to deploy our units or not, and make that decision, while still packing up the gear of our fallen, and making sure their personal effects get home to their family. Then we had the National Memorial.

And also within that time, my cell phone and my bag and my medical records, everything, was in the building where the incident took place, because I ran out. I didn't have a cell phone to call home at all, so when I did get it back and heard—no, I had my cell phone, but the battery was dead when I was at the hospital. So, my phone charger I got back, and my other stuff. When I finally got it charged up, I listened to all the voicemails, and you know, all my friends and family had called. You know, “Are you okay? We're just trying to figure it out,” and blah blah blah. And on that four days we had in Kansas, Amy's friend had come down, so we had gotten to know her because you could have family come visit if they wanted to. She—I'm not sure if it was her. She had called me, but also Specialist Akins[?], who was friends with Amy, but she didn't deploy with us. She, you know, had just done some of that training in August, and supported us. She called, and I listened to about five messages, as it went through, with, “Hey Nicolle. I know you guys are there. Just wanted to make sure you're okay.” “Nicolle, what's going on? Call me back. I don't know what's going on.” And then to emotionally tearing and crying and pleading, to calling and saying, “I know that she's dead. I know that she's gone now.” So, that's rough, too—

TS: Wow. Listen to the—wow.

NB: —all at once, yes. And then, you know, it was also stressful for me, dealing with all my family and friends. I love them, but I could not give them emotional attention, and

everybody cares so much. And I have found this to be, still, something I wrestle with today, not just with the Fort Hood incident, but with everything is, I feel like I can't give them the emotional attention and the time that they a) number one, deserve, and that b) I want to give them.

So, I had, you know, said, "Listen, I'm sorry, but I need this time to, you know, try to memorialize and grieve, so please don't be offended if I don't contact you, but this is what's going on." And sent emails out.

TS: Don't take it personally.

NB: Yes. So, I had told them that, and my dad I called every day, and anything else, people could talk to him about, and stuff. I think at one point I was wounded, too [possibly meaning reported as wounded]. They had called, so it really helped that I called my dad right away and told him I was okay, because they had processed us in as patients because they didn't know what to do with us when we got there, but we really weren't. They were just trying to keep—

TS: Track of everyone.

NB: Yes, track of everybody. So, now we have—they allowed me to be an escort to Amy's uncle when they came for the memorial that we were going to have. Now, we had no idea about, really, the memorial. I had never been to a military memorial, at all. Had the opportunity to go to several throughout deployment, unfortunately, but I really did not know how it was going to go. We were just, like, so off-put by what happened with loading our wounded [sic, fallen] onto the plane for the ramp ceremony, that we were just, you know—it was further traumatizing in a way. Our first sergeant had said, "You know, listen. We had to do this. We had to do that for America. We had to do that for the country." He's like, "It was what it was. They didn't do it right, but that's what we had to do at the time." I think that that is, kind of, a moment of true leadership, when you're able to give the difficult news and point, or deal with a difficult situation, and just say, "This is what it is and we must move past it," and that is leadership.

And so—okay, that stuck with me, and so we had this memorial and they said they were going to do it right and treat us right. Because we were reserve units, it's kind of like we were farther out of the level of awareness, and stuff, as the rest of the, maybe, active duty units who were affected and on Fort Hood and everything, but we had suffered five casualties and thirteen wounded.

So, they had asked me to escort Amy's uncle, and so I had gone—late at night, we had gone to pick him up from the airport; it was a few hour drive. I have a warrant officer driving me around; [chuckles] my chaperone. That doesn't happen very often in the

army. So, we had got him and taken him to his hotel, whatever, and then picked him up the next day for the memorial. We had, also, sergeant major chaperoning around her other cousins and uncle. That doesn't happen for certain—for certain. So, we had got there and went into the back of this building, and I didn't know Fort Hood at all. We went to these rooms. We got these stickers, you know, and there's Captain [John P.] Gaffaney's wife and son. Right or wrong, it's all hindsight, but I told her what I had heard that he did that day. So, there's that, and there was the families of the other fallen; for everybody who was killed at Fort Hood. Then, we all, kind of, had our little circle areas, I guess, you know, and had military escorts and stuff.

Amy's mom wasn't there because she was working on the funeral arrangements and everything, and getting ready to receive Amy's remains. So, her two uncles and cousins had come. And, you know, I saw Captain [Russell Gilbert] Seager's wife, and she had kind of told me a few stories about him and his training that he had shared, and his son. Then, in came dignitaries, General Shinseki, who's now retired; Mr. Shinseki, and General Casey, who was the chief of staff for the army, and we had seen him a few days before. And then, in came President and Mrs. Obama. And I remember just looking and seeing them at the doorway, and it's like, "Whoa." So, wasn't really expecting that. Again, knew this was big—

TS: But you didn't understand the magnitude, necessarily, or hadn't processed it yet?

NB: Correct; hadn't processed it. Didn't have access to television, really. Didn't really want to know.

TS: Right.

NB: Because at this point, there's the picture of the alleged shooter all over media sites, and that's the last thing you really want to see. I also remember now, between our ramp ceremony and the national memorial, we had done a critical incident debriefing, too, and had met with chaplains and psychologists. So, that's, kind of, where I can tell you more about that when I talk about deployment, what we did, but, you know, where everybody came together and said what happened; tried to put pieces of the puzzle together and give resources and stuff.

Then, also, before I talk about the memorial, we had, kind of, started doing a little bit of training again, and so, we were checking out our vehicles that we were going to be using for our different little convoy stuff. I had checked out a vehicle and was driving it, and I didn't have anybody else in the Humvee with me; it was just me. We were in line to go get gas with our cars—or with our Humvees, and the gas pedal got stuck down on the vehicle, and it wouldn't—it wouldn't—[bumping noise, as if stomping a brake pedal]

TS: Wouldn't release?

NB: —wouldn't release. And I was just freaking out, and I had my foot on the brake, but the gas was still, you know, just throttling. I was honking my horn, and like, yelling for people to come. So, you know—and I just couldn't think, because I went right back to panic situation and mode, and, "Oh, my gosh. I'm going to crash into something and die." You know, catastrophizing. So, luckily I thought to put it in park and turn off the engine. And then, I went and I yelled at all these people, like, "Didn't you hear me yelling for you? Didn't you hear me honking the horn? Why didn't you come and help me?" and you know, all just that, like I said, I became angry and tried to control everything that was out of my control, and everybody that was out of my control. And I will admit, I wasn't strong in my leadership. Certainly, not how I am now. So, maybe if I had been stronger in leadership, or had gone through some other situations, I wouldn't have been like that. And everybody certainly had the way they react, but that's how I reacted.

Now, going back to the memorial, there—President came, and Mrs. Obama, and had just, kind of, said they have no way to understand what we are experiencing, but they want us to know that we care, and that they support us, and that they are—you know, appreciate the sacrifice that they have made. Then they went around to each family and had, you know, shook their hands, talked to them. And since I was escorting Amy's uncle, I had met the President and told him about Amy's tattoo. I just really wanted him to know that she had this, it had meant so much to her, and I told him she will always be under the flag of the nation that she loved and that she served. And, you know, about how—what it said, and sacrifice, and he's like, "You know, she was about sacrifice, and I know that you are too, and you have sacrificed a lot, and know that your Commander in Chief is proud of you and supports you." And so, you know, that was very touching, and he put his hand on my shoulder and everything.

Then, Mrs. Obama had come and just gave me a hug, and very warm and was just like, you know, "We are going to fix this. We are going to make this right," and I think they're in the same position as the whole rest of America. What do you do? What do you say? How do you make this okay? There's nothing you can do. There's nothing you can say to make it okay. It just is what it was, and you can only say, "I will be there for you moving forward." And so, to me it meant a lot that they came. So, met them, and they spoke to the rest of—the rest of the family members. Then they went and they spoke to the wounded, and then we had gone out to—I think all the family members went to, like, a room on their own and then we—the escorts and everything had gone out to take our place—seating for the memorial.

So, we were going down these stairs, and you know, see the doors and I can kind of—the flag; there was this giant flag waving so I couldn't see very much until I had

made it out from under the flag, and I look and there's just thousands of people everywhere, and like, thirty cameras on this platform, and thirteen military crosses with all the pictures of the fallen, and a podium, and units everywhere, and it's just massive. No idea—no idea whatsoever that it was going to be like that. I remember, like, what my first sergeant said; "You know, this is something we have to do for America."

So the point is, is that my job description in the military is to be a soldier. It is to provide mental health services to other soldiers, and there's many other things I do, but in reality there really is no limit to what a soldier is asked to do for their nation; no limit. To me, to have the memorial and invite America to be a part of it, was very—[an] open gift that we gave to our nation to understand how the military mourns, because the way that that memorial was and that military memorials usually are that we do in deployment, isn't something that we really do in the civilian side, or that the civilian funeral would be a part of; custom and culture. Does that make sense?

TS: Sure.

NB: So, then they had the memorial and—oh, I forgot another part of the—after the President had left, General Casey was still there. Now, a few days before he had said, "If you need anything, anything at all, let us know."

Well, one of my soldiers is, like, "You know, is there anything you want me to tell anybody I should meet, or anything you want me to pass on?"

He said, "Well, tell him that we could really use some beer," [chuckles] because we were under general order number one, which is you cannot drink alcohol while training on duty.

So, I said, "Um, Sir, I would just—you know, as most of the people have moved out, I would just like—remember to ask you—remember when you said if we need anything, anything at all, well, I'm just saying we could really use some beer or a hard drink, you know; a stiff drink. Like, well, sometimes you give beers to soldiers in Afghanistan for Fourth of July or the Super Bowl, and I mean, we would just appreciate a case or two. [laughs]

He said, "Why? You think because I'm the general in charge of general order number one, I can lift that?"

I was like, "Well, —"

And he said, "We'll see about it," you know. And not like it was the perfect moment or anything, but tried to bring some lightness to it.

Then his wife came and just kind of like a typical general's wife, I think, she's like, "You can't have alcohol?"

And I was like, "No, ma'am."

She's says, "Well you know who's in charge of that. That was him right there," [laughing] and she just totally pointed out her husband, and she said—talked about one of his other deployment experiences where people were drinking a lot and he didn't think that was right, which it isn't. My God, I don't want people drunk, you know, and protecting our base or anything.

But—and I said to General Casey, "You know, extenuating circumstances, sir." Then I had to later explain that to my first sergeant. I was like, "Just in case you hear something about this," and I ripped off my rank and said, "you can just go ahead and carry—hold this now," and I got up in the push-up position—as I was doing push-ups and explaining to him what happened, "I'm just going to go ahead and pay the price now." He was just, you know, thought I was crazy and whatever. But—so, again, trying to fit in those moments where you can.

And so, then we had the memorial and the roll call again for not just our unit, it was just different people. Like, they had nine people who were there and they read their names, and they also read the names of the fallen. When you read their name you read their—their, you know, Private so-and-so, and then Private, first name, last name; Private, first name, middle name, last name; you read it three times. Then did that for the list, and then twenty-one gun salute, and I remember my body was—would physically jolt because of the noise. Then we went up and gave a final salute to the pictures and the military crosses, and a final salute to Sergeant Krueger's picture. Then we had gone with the family members back to their hotel. They had, like, an interview, and then we were there with them.

And that's when I had talked to my dad, and never ever seen or heard him cry, and he cried for the first time because he had seen me on TV, and, just, told me he was proud of me for what I was doing. Then I had done a short interview with Bob Woodruff who—he himself was injured in Iraq from an IED; had a traumatic brain injury. Then we went, after that, back on our base, and I had missed this because of it, but whenever the rest of our unit came back they just had people lining the streets with flags and, like, the Patriot Guard [Riders, motorcycle club whose members attend the funerals of United States armed forces members], and stuff like that.

The chapel that we had, some of the—some of the people in Texas had paid to have a barbecue for us and a DJ [disc jockey] brought in, and so, it was a time, you know, to eat and share those good memories. Some of our other friends from the units we had trained with, but didn't deploy, came as like a quick reaction to support our combat stress. You know, it affected so many people on the base. They had all the pictures of our five fallen there, and some of the wounded were discharged from the hospital by this point and were there. Then the families also came, and they said it really meant a lot to them to see how—well, I know for Amy's uncle, he said it meant a lot to him to see how she spent her last month, you know, and the people she was around. And I think for him,

also, we were able to provide him with more details—not myself but some of the other people who were there, with what all happened and how everything happened and everything they did to try to save her, and I think that meant a lot for them to hear that. [brief emotional pause] That’s probably one thing I feel kind of awkward or guilty about with deployment; is that I know such intimate details of how so many people have died, and I know them before their family does, and I don’t know if their family will ever know or not, but I can imagine if I lost somebody close to me I would want to know everything. It would be hard, but I would still want to know.

So, that’s one thing that they had—so, they went over some of that. I think that helped provide some idea of closure. And, you know, he shared that with her mom and everything. Of course, they get autopsy reports back, but they don’t get, you know, reports about the incidents of that day or anything like that. From then on it was kind of like, “What are we going to do with leaving—”

TS: Did you ever get the beer?

NB: No. [both chuckle]

TS: General Casey never—

NB: He still—General Casey still owes me a beer. [laughs]

TS: I think so.

NB: Yes. And I saw him later when I came back from deployment and reminded him, and he also called my hot pink camera gaudy, but I was like, “Well, sir, would you steal it?”

“No.”

I said, “Neither would any other man on deployment.”

He goes, “Good point. Good point.” I really admire and respect General Casey. He has been supportive of many mental health and psychological resiliency initiatives within the military, and support for that, and so I really support him for that. And—so—

TS: So, they’re trying to figure out what they are going to do with your unit.

NB: Right. Trying to—

TS: Whether you’re going to deploy or not?

NB: Yes.

TS: How did you guys feel about it at that time? Do you remember? Did you have any—

NB: I think that at first I was like, “There’s no way I can go. We can’t go. No.” And then it was kind of like, “What are we going to do when we get back home?” Then that day I thought, “There’s no way I trust myself behind a weapon because I’m just going to mow down any person that looks remotely like they are an enemy. I don’t trust myself to fully be able to enact the rules of engagement.” So, yes, and that’s a little scary when you really push your own limits yourself, you know?

TS: Right. Sure.

NB: That’s how I felt. Some people were like, “No way we can go.” Some people were like, “We have to go,” and ultimately they’re—you know, the unit in Iraq needed to be replaced. There’s [sic] no combat stress control services in Afghanistan. There was, like, some psychologists at the hospitals at a few bases, or some brigade level mental health assets, but they have to travel around to so many different bases they really aren’t a constant presence there, and they aren’t at the forward op—you know, kind of, more the front line level, if you will.

So, you know, our unit said that we will go and we will carry on with our mission, and I whole heartedly believe that was the right call because I think—

TS: You do or you do not?

NB: I do.

TS: Okay.

NB: I think it would have been—psychologically, it would have impaired us a lot to, kind of—it would have signaled that we accepted defeat if we did not go. And also, there’s still people dying over there that still need help, and so they decided, you know, we’re going to still go. We didn’t have to do some training; like, we didn’t have to do first aid training. We all kind of checked that block. People did amazing things providing chest needle decompressions; providing IV bags; just amazing things people did that day. We did not have to do react to contact [training]; we kind of got that down. So, there was some other training that we just didn’t do. Then in the last week before we went, was kind of our final validation. We went back out to the range, and I didn’t know how I was going to feel about that; hearing gun fire again, but it felt empowering to be behind a weapon again and to fire. One of the most important things you can do is return to

normalcy as soon as possible, because the more you don't do something the bigger of an issue it's going to be.

So, the last week before we got our pass we had done a training. Like, we had—we're going and we pretend setup combat stress control units, clinics, and you know, pretending that, oh okay you're here in Kandahar and you're here in Kabul. Then we had pretend cases came through. So, we did, like, you know, scenarios and training for what we would be doing during deployment those few days. That was good to reinforce what we were doing and, kind of, come together again for our mission.

Then we had a four day pass, and we knew we were going to have that for a while and what days they would be. It was over Thanksgiving, again, and my dad's sixtieth birthday was before that, so we were planning on going to Disneyworld; or Disneyland, for a while before. So, I got to go and see my dad again in Disneyland, and it just, like, you know, brought tears to my eyes to see him again; for him too, and my family, and to have that kind of break and go somewhere happy. I also talked to some more of my family and friends more; was able to, but in some ways—you know, like fireworks; that didn't go over too well with me. I can't really think of any other triggers then, other than that.

Another [unclear], it was just good to be with my family. You have a whole new appreciation for them. I made sure to remind them, too, that Christmas is around the corner [chuckles] and they could really express their appreciation to me in such a fashion; talking diamonds. But—and then, you know, we just—we didn't talk a lot about the Fort Hood stuff. My dad's very good about not really pressuring me with it, but he didn't really know what to do or what to talk about, or whatever. He was just—you know, he was there, and asked some questions and stuff. Then when the four days were up and we went back to Texas, and I had gotten really sick. My immune system had just, kind of, had it.

TS: Probably by now, for sure.

NB: Yes. Huge temperature; I got, like, four different prescriptions for, you know, cold and flu stuff, and was confined to the barracks for a few days. Well, we had done all of our training and all of our classes and certificates for sign off, we were just waiting to go, and then—

TS: How does your dad feel about you going; deploying now?

NB: He knows it's more serious but he still supported us going. I think that he, you know, realized I may not come back but he never said anything to that effect. So, he just—I

think he saw the importance of our mission and what we were doing, and then tried to give some good, you know, “remember to duck” advice.

“Thank you.” [chuckles] So—and like I said, I have to realize the impact it’s had on my dad and try to mitigate that the most for him. And I’ve told him once in detail what happened, and if you should have the opportunity to go to the trial I’m not going to invite him because I don’t want him to have to go through that again either. So, you kind of have a responsibility to protect your family, and some people say, “Well, you should share everything with them,” but you know, you just—you don’t. And the other part is, when you open up to somebody about this stuff I think you have a certain expectation about how they’re going to react, and in some ways I can’t blame people if they can’t react the right way that I want them to because they just don’t know.

So, I kind of get a little upset about—they say, “Oh, you should talk about your experiences in deployment.” Or I get upset at what the general public says; “Oh yes, —” or they mention family members that they know and, “He never ever talked about that,” or “They don’t talk much about what they saw over there or what they experienced during war,” you know. In some ways, again, I think we have to educate the public about some of the things that happens and goes on, so they can understand how it has affected our nation’s military. But then I also believe, what right does anybody have to know my personal story and experiences, and to feel like they’re entitled to know about that? Who goes up to anybody else in the civilian sector and says, “Tell me about your absolute worst day of your life, and tell me it without crying, and tell me it—how you feel. And then you know what I’m going to do? I’m going to say, ‘Oh,’ or I’m going to say, ‘Interesting,’ or ‘Thank you,’ or ‘Wow, that had to be rough,’ and then I’m going to go about my normal life while I just open up a wound of somebody else.”

TS: Because you have that vulnerability now?

NB: Yes.

TS: That you’re not necessarily reliving it, but having that—those emotions come back again?

NB: Right.

TS: And then you’re letting somebody in and they just, kind of, walk away, right.

NB: Yes, so I have to realize that is not their fault. They do not know better. They do not know how to react, or they do not know how—more so, how to relate. So, I’m very choosey about who I talk to, and I have, like—you know, have, like, a deck of prepared

statements, so I have certain things that I have said enough, that—about like, “Oh, were you at Fort Hood?”

“Yes, I was at Fort Hood. We lost so-and-so, but we went on with our mission.”
So, you kind of—

TS: Stoicism?

NB: Yes, and you start out with Fort Hood but then you get them switching the topic onto our mission in Afghanistan and I say, “Yes, it was really cool because I flew around in a lot of helicopters,” blah blah blah. They just don’t even realize what I’ve done, but you know, now we’re talking about helicopters and flying around. So, you have a certain amount of those to be like, you know—

TS: You have a certain narrative that you’re going to tell depending on who you’re talking to and the circumstances?

NB: Yes, and that’s not emotionally charged.

TS: But don’t you—you kind of need that, too, to be able to protect yourself.

NB: Exactly, yes. So, there’s no shame in it I think.

TS: No, I don’t think there’s any shame in it at all. And I guess, maybe, for some people they would open up more because they—they’re able to.

NB: Yes.

TS: I don’t know, that’s—

NB: And so, got off quarters[?] for being ill, and we were, kind of, packing up our stuff, getting ready, just waiting for the time that we’re going to move. So, this is kind of funny. We said, “All right, are we leaving today?”

“No, we’re not leaving. We’re not going anywhere.”

“Okay.”

So, they’re like, “Pack up all your stuff; take your linen out the door; [laughs] empty your wall lockers; move them outside; do this; do that, but we’re not going anywhere.”

“Yes, okay. Great. I’ll just infer what I want here.”

So, —but then, you know—so, we all knew we were leaving, like, a few hours before anybody told us, but then—so then they told us, “Okay, here’s our route. Here’s our movement times,” blah blah blah. Obviously, what we went through and then what we were to do was kind of groundbreaking, and there hasn’t really been any unit that has faced this circumstance that we went. So, there is a lot of media attention. Before we left though—a few days before we left they had, like, another barbecue for us, and the—

TS: Who’s “they”?

NB: Some people that had a ranch right around the area we were, and they had—it was really nice, and they—we went to their barn, and you know, had music and food, and that’s one thing I learned; all of the hospitality and the things other people did for us during that time, and the public around there, is that, you know, if you haven’t suffered a great circumstance like this you cannot appreciate as much the love that is poured down on you. I just really appreciated everything that people did for us and how they supported us afterwards.

TS: Well, when—I’m going to ask you something about when people say, “Let me know if there’s anything I can do for you—”

NB: Right.

TS: How do you take that now?

NB: It depends on if I know them or not.

TS: What if you know them?

NB: If I know them?

TS: Yes.

NB: Like, if it’s a friend, then I tell them, you know, just, kind of, “Okay. I will. Thank you.” But the people who have either been through this or they know me, they don’t ask; they just do. So, yes, that’s what I found.

TS: You think sometimes that’s just, like, a—words people use because they don’t know what else to say?

NB: Yes, of course. Yes, definitely.

TS: But it has empty meaning, too, sometimes [unclear] that, I would think that that would be difficult to take because I'm sure you've heard that—

NB: Yes.

TS: —many times.

NB: I guess it's just trying to understand that they just don't know or don't understand, or that they want to, or they want to try but they just can't, you know. So, I just say, "Thank you. Okay. Thank you." And some people during deployment, I was like, "Yes, well, I would really love some Rice Krispies Treats," you know, and they sent stuff. But I know who's going to send stuff and who's not, and know who's going to be there and who's not, you know.

TS: Who's going to come through?

NB: Yes. So, —and I think that's one thing, too, that I think a lot of America in general struggles with is they want to help our troops; they care. They love us, they support us. They buy me drinks when I'm flying. They buy my meals, and I don't even know who they are. They send care packages. They—we had some ladies who sent cameras and mp3 players to our clinic because they just really believed in what we were doing and they want to support us. But I think that it's, again, hard because what are they—what can they do, you know? Especially in the beginning of the wars it's hard, but now there's so much more with wounded warriors [probably a reference to the Wounded Warrior Project which provides programs and services to severely injured service members], or a lot of different veterans organizations.

TS: So, you think there's more support systems in place now to be able to help?

NB: Yes. Yes. And I think people want the answer of how do we stop suicide and how do we stop PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], but—they want to say how do we stop it, but it's hard to accept the fact that it is what it is, and it is a product of war. You cannot go to war and not have death. You cannot go to war and not have higher suicide rates and not have PTSD.

TS: Do you think that any of the—like, the sexual assaults are associated with that, too? Because there seems to be, like, a higher rate of that in some deployed areas; not all.

NB: Right. I'm not sure. I don't really know enough about that at all. I know that we just have a larger military, and we have a larger amount of people deployed, so it could just be a third[?]

TS: Numbers?

NB: —variable in numbers. Yes, but I don't know at all. Thankfully, we didn't experience any sexual assaults, or anything like that, while we were providing services on our base; at least that we were aware of.

TS: Right.

NB: So, now we are leaving, but we're not really leaving, but we are leaving. [both chuckle] Three a.m. and news stations come out and they want to see us off, and they do. We get on our plane, and good riddance Fort Hood; never so happy to leave a place. We traveled to Fort Bragg and then another base in Virginia, and kind of picked up soldiers along the way. Then layover on Germany, and then we went to Manas, Kyrgyzstan, and that's where—it was an air force base and we were just, kind of, there for—you know, to catch a flight to theater [warfare] because they don't take civilian air craft, obviously, into theater, you take military air craft that's able to mitigate threats like rockets, gunfire; stuff like that.

So, just there, and then got on our plane to go into Afghanistan. It's kind of a little scary because you hit a certain point and they say, "All right, you need to put on your body armor now."

It's like, "All right. [chuckles] I thought we were flying. I thought we were in a plane."

He says, you know, but, "No. You put on your body armor when you're flying in that airspace," and coming back out they tell you a certain point you can take off your body armor. So, I guess it makes sense if you have to make an emergency landing; you're going to, kind of, want that on, or for whatever types of risks could happen.

And flew in and landed. We went to Bagram Airbase [Airfield], and then we stayed there a night, and then we went to Kandahar.

TS: So, this is like, you said, December?

NB: Yes, in the beginning of December.

TS: It's not even a month, really, after the incident at Fort Hood?

NB: No, we flew on the fourth and we flew all throughout the fifth, and so most people didn't even really think about it, which was nice. Kind of a little happy to be away from the spotlight, too.

TS: Right. Yeah, what did you think of all the media? Did you—did you think of it at the time, or it is like reflection?

NB: I did do an interview with my hometown news station, and my dad went down to the station too, and just thought that was great and stuff. But because I wanted—even though this event happened in Texas, I wanted, you know, Oregon and Washington to know that they still have soldiers who were there and affected, because we had quite a few soldiers from Oregon and Washington there.

Besides that I—the only thing I did is I allowed myself to look at one news story and that was it. That's the same thing I do now with any type of major event that's in the media with the military now. I just look at one news story and try to read the information, and then that's it. Then, we weren't really in the spotlight so much—media because we were on the military base and kind of protected and everything. Even though several people did interviews and stuff like that. Then it was kind of nice—not to be offensive at all, but it was kind of nice to have the generals away. Because they care and they want to show their care, I get that, but you have to get back to normal and training and stuff like that, so, you know, it was a nice reprieve.

So, then we went—we landed in Kandahar, and you're just kind of there, and it's like, "All right, here we are."

And I just remember, kind of, driving around and as soon as you get there they tell you, "Here is the rocket alarm. If you hear this, here is what you need to do. If you hear this alarm, here's what you need to do. Here's a map. Here's this. Here's that." Then we went to our barracks, and we stayed in this huge, huge building with these huge rooms that are, like, size of, excuse me, of gymnasiums, and just bunk beds everywhere, and you just have a bunk bed; that's it, half of a bunk bed.

TS: Half of a bunk bed?

NB: Half of—like, top half, bottom half; half of a bunk bed.

TS: Okay.

NB: You know, we were just there, kind of, waiting to go out and get our missions. We went through an IED defeat [unclear] again to get more education about that, and filled

out—you fill out certain paperwork for being in country, and you get a laundry bag and some other things like that, but most of the time— we had some down time and went to—they have a big bazaar there, and so we went to a bazaar, and watched movies.

TS: What was it like—I mean, what did it feel like; the smells, the sounds. Was it—

NB: It was dusty and it was kind of warm for December, and the smell—well, they have a poop pond, but poop pond doesn't do it justice. It's more like a shit lake. [Therese chuckles]

TS: Okay.

NB: And it is this water reservoir where the feces and urine goes, and it's—whatever is done to it and processed, and then they have it—like, sprinklers in there or something, I don't know, shifting it around; whatever it's doing. And depending on which way the wind blows it is so disgusting, and it just makes you gag.

TS: And where—this was in Kandahar?

NB: In Kandahar. Some people have said when they are flying in they can smell it from miles out, and it is just horrible, and everything will smell like it, too, depending on how close you are. And you go to the showers and they don't really have pee traps, so you could go in and come out smelling worse than when you went in. [chuckles] Just—it's just gross. And, you know, no privacy really. Very dirty, very dusty. I always covered my mouth with a scarf.

The sounds is—it's very, very busy; lots of cars, lots of traffic, lots of third country nationals; the rocket alarms going off. I remember the first one, because you aren't used to it yet. You don't know, and so it's very scary, the first one, and you think the rocket's heading right for you, you know?

TS: Sure.

NB: Interesting thing is I don't think the enemy really knows where the rocket's going. We don't really know where the rocket's going because they're using such old, like, Chinese rockets or old Russian rockets; whatever. They just set them off, and it's more, kind of, harassment type thing. And they are targeting the air field, but sometimes they land and they hurt people, and most of the time, thank God, they don't.

So, in a rocket attack you'll hear the alarm and you're supposed to get down for, like, two minutes, because it's supposed to be—like, the alarm's supposed to go off

before the rocket comes in, or it can sense it, kind of, crossing the space, and then if the rocket detonates the shrapnel's going to fly up. So, if you're laying down on the ground it's going to be least likely that, you know, you're going to get hit by it. Then after that you go to bunker until you hear, "All clear." So—and so, those are a little panicky, especially for people who have already been—had their lives threatened. So, those are, kind of, the sights and smells and sounds.

It was a big base. They have this boardwalk area where it's got little restaurants and some little shops, and volleyball courts, and a hockey rink because it's a NATO base, so I think Canada owned the base, so they would have hockey, and they have a coffee shop.

TS: They have ice hockey?

NB: Not ice hockey.

TS: Just hockey.

NB: Yes.

TS: Okay, like, on a wood floor or something?

NB: Yes.

TS: That's interesting.

NB: You know, the people; the ingenuity they have there is just amazing.

TS: Like what?

NB: Like making a hockey rink. [both chuckle]

TS: Okay, but no ice, I mean, come on. No, I'm just kidding.

NB: Yes. I know, no ice. I mean, that would be impressive, but yes, and things people—things you can make out of plywood, I tell you what.

TS: What kind of things were made out of plywood?

NB: Well, we made our clinic. We didn't make it but they had a clinic made completely out of plywood and two-by-fours and some tin roof. And you can make nice desks; people have made armoires; they have made weapons racks; they have made couches; just—

TS: Just whatever is laying around that they can—

NB: Yes. Extra plywood, scrap plywood, whatever; it's just amazing. So, we were at Kandahar for a little bit, kind of waiting to get pushed out to our bases, and we did some more "here's what types of things we're seeing mental health-wise here. Here's what to do with this, here's our procedures for evacuating people." Kind of, where our command was going to be based; their building and stuff like that. And then—

TS: Were you all going together still, or were you being broke up at all?

NB: We were all together and then we were being broken up at this point.

TS: At this point, okay. This is where you go to the little separate—your unit.

NB: Yes.

TS: Okay.

NB: And now, we didn't have—nobody had been where we were going. No—like, we didn't have combat stressors. We weren't falling in on a clinic. We weren't falling in on an office. We didn't, you know, have all that stuff, so we were going out to a base—they said they would have our spaces procured for us but when everybody got out there, not really, you know.

TS: But you have your paper and your pencil, right?

NB: That's about it. [laughing] I did have my tools to be successful, yes; a pad of paper and pen. Thank goodness for those, yes, and so—so, we went out and we had, like—they told us from my group, you know, we were going out, and there were six of us. So, we went out to FOB [forward operating base] Frontenac, and it was a— it was French-Canadian, and then they had taken it—the army—the U.S. Army had taken it over; had taken control of it from, like, maybe six months earlier, and we didn't know anything about it other than they had sustained a lot of casualties.

So, we go out there, fly in a Chinook [helicopter]. We land; kind of desolate, but it was clean. It was so much better than Kandahar; it was clean, nice. All right, so we get

our room and one of the officers I was with was a female, so her and I share a room. They show us their aid station. They don't have computers that work to hook up. I mean, they have computers. They log stuff in computers but they don't have internet because they have the aid station right by the flight line, so that—you know, they can get casualties in and out quickly. Two-bed aid station; that was it. Then they—

TS: What—I get the two-bed; what's the eight station mean?

NB: Like, first aid station. Like, medical.

TS: So, eight stations for—

NB: Oh, aid; A-I-D.

TS: Oh, aid—two-bed aid station. Gothcha, okay.

NB: Yes, and then we went—they had a good DFAC [dining facility]; far better than the food in Kandahar, and we found that to be true; that all the bases—you know, forward operating bases had a lot better chow, and it's like they would, kind of, send more of the better stuff out, I guess, or maybe it was easier to send smaller shipments of certain things out to us.

And we had—the buildings we lived in, we called them CHUs [containerized housing unit]. They're compartmentalized housing units, and they were nice. They're like a—If you imagine, like, a railroad car; kind of the size of that. They have a little door and a little window, and a little air conditioner and heater in there, and two beds, and plywood, again, shelves; somebody had built it. And then there was a shower CHU and a toilet CHU at the end, and they were pretty clean and new; very nice housing accommodations. And there was only about six females there, and so—

TS: How many altogether are there? Like, for the men?

NB: For the men?

TS: Yes.

NB: Maybe three [hundred] to five hundred.

TS: Okay.

NB: Maybe a little bit more.

TS: I'm just getting a sense of—

NB: Yes.

TS: —ratio.

NB: They had—so this unit was out of Fort Lewis. They were five two—five two, I think, one seventeen, or one fourteen. So, they were a striker brigade and they had sustained, I think, twenty-three casualties by this point. They had lost a lot to IEDs.

TS: How long had they been there?

NB: They had been there since July; July 2009, and there was a very public incident that happened at the end of October 2009 where eight people had died in a striker vehicle at one time, and that was their unit. So, they're—I think that's why they sent so many of us out there at first, and then they were going to break up half of us to send to another—another base when it was prepared for us to go there. They had their chaplain; he was just awesome but, I mean, he was drained, too, I think.

And they had—one thing they did to memorialize their fallen was they were, like, the buffaloes. That was, kind of, their mascot. So, they had a teepee. Somehow they had gotten the cloth and the sticks and they had made a teepee. And then inside there they had pictures of all of the fallen, and candles, and they had the bible open, and they had, like, the little fire circle in the middle, you know, and every night they would light the candles, and people could go in there and they could leave candy, notes, cigarettes, whatever, for them.

TS: So, like a little shrine?

NB: Yes, a little memorial. And we got there, I think, on December twenty-second, so right before Christmas. Yes. So, we kind of just told the commander of the base, or you know, the commander of the unit, we were there and if there was anything we could do. We're just trying to have a presence and get our feet under ourselves there, too, and then we had Christmas, and it will be hard to top Christmas ever again. That is probably the best Christmas I've ever had because you're there, and—first off, people send you a lot of stuff in care packages and you're not obligated to send a lot back [chuckles] because you're deployed and you just got there. I sound so selfish, but I'm just saying it is a little

bonus. Like, my aunt had sent me a sweater even though I can't wear it. She's like, "I hear it gets cold in the mountains." I can't wear that there, whatever.

So—and then—but what made it so great was the fact that you don't have presents. You don't have a lot of the commercialism. And you really don't have your family, but you have these people and they become your family, and all you have is, kind of, each other, and you celebrate Christmas together. The chaplain had—somebody had sent him cookies and frosting, so we decorated the cookies and we had hot cocoa and sang Christmas carols and it was just really, more truly, the spirit of Thanksgiving—or no, of Christmas that was there.

TS: Right. Much more intimate—

NB: Yes.

TS: —in how you're relating to it without all the hoopla?

NB: Yes, definitely. Yes, so it was really beautiful. Then, also, they had—for Christmas they really went out—out of their way for the meals. So, we had crab legs; we had ice sculptures; we had cakes; we had chocolate cake balls; we had shrimp; we had steak and turkey, and you know, just everything. It was nice to see that and experience that meal together and stuff.

TS: Do you think that food is one of those things in the military that—you know, you either—you're loving it or you're, like, griping about it, but it kind of shapes your—your connection to a particular space, you know? Like, "Oh yes, I remember when I was stationed there, the food there was horrible," or whatever, you know.

NB: Yes.

TS: You think that's, like, a connector with people, and then when you're in the military you can talk to other people and say, "Oh yes, when I was at such and such a place the food there really sucked"?

NB: Definitely, yes, it is.

TS: "It still sucks." No. [chuckles]

NB: Yes. “Well, what about Taco Tuesday, and this and this Friday, you know.” It’s just—I guess it’s one of those things that changes so you have something to look forward to, hopefully.

TS: Oh, when you change stations, sure.

NB: Yes, or you know, throughout the day, or whatever. And mealtime is kind of a break, and yes, like, definitely food makes or breaks a deployment.

TS: So, you’re living high.

NB: Yes, we’re living great. This is—I love deployment. This is fabulous, you know? And then, for—so, we were there. We did some mental health things; like, the psychiatrist we were with had done some interviews for—for people—like, if you’re going to go to drill sergeant school or recruiter school or whatever, you have to have a mental health eval[uation] done. So, he did some of those. We saw some people with sleep problems, and I think maybe one or two combat stress type issues. Not really a lot of stuff we saw there or dealt with was—we had a lot of down time. We were on a small base, and by this time their mission, kind of, had reshifted; their area that they were patrolling and in charge of. I think because they had sustained so many casualties and stuff. So, they had not as of demanding missions to do.

Also, there was an EOD, which is explosive ordnance [disposal]. I kind of became friends with people from there because it was just a few people and it’s—when you’re deployed, like, in mental health, everybody’s your client, so if you don’t want to talk about how somebody, you know, you’re working with, or some of your interpersonal problems with that, who do you really turn to? Luckily, there was a small group of people who had played poker and watched movies and, kind of, some people I could bond with there.

And then—so, from that point—now we’ve been there a few weeks getting the groove of everything. We have ability to call home and ability to be on the computer for, like, thirty minutes at a time, and I volunteered to work at the computer and phone center; the MWR [morale, welfare, recreation] tent, they called it, just cause I wanted to volunteer and I thought, “Oh, I can meet more people, and learn so and so from combat stress, mental health, and if you need anything,” blah blah blah. So, I did that for a few nights a week.

Then there was supposed to be—like I said, three people were supposed to go to a different base, FOB Leatherneck, which is an all marine base in the south more, but there was army parts of the base, too. So—or Camp Leatherneck it was called. So, I was supposed to go and I had—you know, was packing up my stuff and everything, and

another one of the soldiers there who was my same rank was supposed to stay. He had gone back to our command and had told them incorrectly, falsely, that we had talked and I decided to stay. I wasn't really too bothered by it because I liked that base, but I just felt betrayed and, you know. And so—

TS: Why did this person say that?

NB: They were going through some personal stuff, and one of the officers they'd be going with they, kind of, really related to and that was a social support for them, which wouldn't have been a problem if they had told me, you know?

TS: Right.

NB: But they didn't. So, anyways, they said, "Well," you know, "you're going to stay here and then so-and-so is going to go with two other people." The two people I was left with, the officer, was constantly making sexually inappropriate jokes.

I had told him, "If you continue this," along with the soldier who was there, "I will file an EO complaint," which is an equal opportunity complaint. So, I told them that and, you know, I think it's fair to give them the verbal warning and the opportunity to correct their behavior. From there, it didn't really stop and it turned into a hostile work environment, and so much so that he was yelling at me in the DFAC in front of many other people and saying he's going to take my rank, which, it takes a battalion level action for a staff sergeant to be demoted, and we're just at a detachment. So, there was a detachment and then company and then battalion, and he doesn't have that authority at all, and I knew it wasn't a viable threat. Then he said he ordered me to stay in my room and that I can't leave to go to the chow hall or get my laundry or anything else like that, which, again, that takes a battalion or brigade level memorandum to confine me to my room, and that's more because of illness. So—or that's the purpose of that.

Then he ordered me to give him a key to the clinic, which I had signed for a key from the base command, so I wasn't going it to him because I was accountable for it; it's my signature. So I said, "I will turn in the key and you can go and have it reissued then from them."

"I'm ordering you right now. So, are you saying you're not going to listen to my order and you are disobeying a direct order."

And I told him, "Well, it's actually illegal because I am hand receipted for this, so your order is giving me an illegal order." I think that just infuriated him more and he had pretty poor emotional control, and there was witnesses to this and statements, and he had made everything such a hostile work environment and so uncomfortable that—he was supposed to be leaving in two weeks because psychiatrists only stay for ninety days, so

he was supposed to be leaving in a few weeks, but it was so horrible and all of the rest of the people—not all the rest of them, but the sergeant major on the base knew.

He's like, "What is going on?" you know, and I told him and I just had started crying and he was like, "We can't have you here." He called my commander and was like, "Listen, we only have a" —you know, "somebody who's a rank below this person here, so we technically cannot order him off or—" you know, whatever. They kind of could but it was a difficult situation with the rank. Then he said, "I think that we should have Sergeant Brossard go back to Kandahar for a few weeks. I want her on the FOB; I like her here; my guys like her here; I like to know I have a female NCO here; I like to know I have a female to search other females that can come in the gate, too," and he's like, "We want her back, but," he's like, "this is such a small base and he's making life miserable for her and he can continue to do so." And so then I, you know, packed my bag for my two weeks and went back to Kandahar.

TS: Did you resent that you had to leave and not the—not him?

NB: I did. I was upset. I thought it was wrong because I didn't do anything wrong, but then it was kind of like, "Well, you know, it's better I leave than stay here, and at least if I go back to command I can have my command's ear to tell them what's going on," and I told my command, "When I get back I will be filing an equal opportunity complaint."

So, because we had such a limited communications, I was able to do that. And I went back. My command was very good about if other people in the unit don't need to know, they don't share it. They're very good about keeping things, you know, at the command level if they need to be and stuff. So, I went back; I had filed my EO complaint; planned on staying there for a few weeks and going back to FOB Frontenac when he left—or when he was on his way to leave.

And so, I filed my EO complaint and all he—you know, they contacted him; the equal opportunity officer for our battalion, and said, you know, "This is what I understand is going on. Just do not have any contact with her, and you can leave; just leave. You have two more weeks; just don't do this."

Well, he said that he didn't agree with that and that he felt like I wasn't telling the truth, and that's his right, and so they did a—what's called a [Army Regulation] 15-6, which is a commander's inquiry investigation; so, my command requested this. They have another officer who came who's not part of our unit, and interviewed me, and they interviewed our chaplain and chaplain assistant because they were there to witness some of this. I presented her with the sworn statements that other people had written about what was going on; sequence of events. They interviewed her—or him, and then they interviewed the other soldier there, and then that person puts together, you know, what their findings are; if it's substantiated that what I'm claiming is to be true. And it was

substantiated that what I had said was true and what happened was true, and he ended up getting, from my understanding, a general officer memorandum of record, which is a, kind of, punitive letter that he's not to be supervising troops on his own; some other things. I don't really know all the details, but basically he—it's kind of a career ender for him.

I take no pride in that, but I do take pride in the fact that I stood up for myself and that I knew I faced an ethically—an ethical dilemma, and that I did the right thing, and that he's not going to be able to harass people any more like that. But it was still difficult because, you know, command has to be unbiased, and stuff like that, and I didn't feel like I had a lot of people on my side.

And also, he had ordered the—somebody on the base to go in my room and pack up everything and send it to Kandahar. So, somebody had gone in my room—and it does bother me knowing that somebody touched all my underwear, and somebody touched my letters from my mom who is now deceased, and my pictures. It does bother me that I didn't get all my stuff back, and that I was just violated again.

So, here I am, violated at Fort Hood; threatened; physically backed into a corner. Now, deployment; emotionally backed into a corner and violated again. It just wasn't, really, a good spot. It was very difficult to deal with.

TS: Where does the mental health specialist go to get support?

NB: Mental health specialist went to her first sergeant who provided good support and mentorship and guidance and direction. Other than that, mental health specialists went—there was another—we had to do, like, questionnaires every ninety days after Fort Hood about our mental health.

TS: Oh, you did?

NB: Yes, and so—well, we did one when we got there, and then they were kind of like, “You know what? Just let them do their job,” and then we did them more when we got back.

TS: I see.

NB: So, on that my scores were pretty bad and had been experiencing a lot of things, even though they weren't directly tied to Fort Hood, but then they had it—some type of behavioral health provider in theater, not related to us, do follow up interviews. So, I had talked to her about all that and she helped give me some coping mechanisms and stuff. You know, at this point I still feel like life is very chaotic; it's out of control; very much like I'm just flapping in the wind, because I haven't been able to really settle down

anywhere, and going through all this stuff, and kind of feeling betrayed by the other soldier.

TS: Why did you say, too, that you didn't feel like you had command support?

NB: Because I think they had to be unbiased and I respect that. I would have liked them to say, "Oh yes, what a—" you know, "this and a that," and blah blah blah, and you know, but—

TS: I see.

NB: —they had to maintain that composure.

TS: They were detached in a—okay.

NB: And the same person who had—who I filed the EO complaint against had filed this huge complaint against our first sergeant that was found completely unsubstantiated, and so from—and that started the first day he got there. So, we didn't train with this person at all. We just met him when we were in Afghanistan and he flew in from Kuwait. He didn't really start off—he started off making a lot of waves.

TS: Okay.

NB: And then later there was another officer who had saved all these emails and communication with all these other people, and one of them was with him, and this person had saved them on his computer and did not delete them and had to turn in their computer; hundreds of pages. There were emails back and forth from this other person and him saying, "Don't let her get away with anything. Don't do this. I think she has a personality disorder." Come to find out that this—this person was telling my command that I had a personality disorder and, you know, that they've spent a few weeks with me and they know this and that I need to be chaptered out of the military and I need this and this and that. I'm like, "Wow. Talk about betrayal."

TS: No kidding.

NB: Also, talk about somebody who is pointing a lot of fingers and hasn't been a lot of places our unit has already been, because what I was experiencing was a combat stress reaction from the incidents of Fort Hood, and the anxiety over the new change and everything, but you know—

TS: This was a psychiatrist?

NB: Yes. Yes. So, that was, kind of, another act of betrayal. And I definitely do not have a personality disorder. [both chuckle] So, I was upset. All my stuff was moved; everything like that.

Again, going back to the high standard that's set for civilian men now is, one of the guys I had, kind of, become friends with and there's some—a little bit of romantic interest; not action, but interest in each other, you know, and had become close with, had—moved up their convoy a week early so he could spend time with me in Kandahar. So, who drives three hours across the desert to spend time with me so I didn't have to be by myself, going through all this stuff there? It's going to be tough to beat, men.

TS: But you also—you said that part about the comparison to—or what the expectations for civilian men. You said that off tape, so before—

NB: Yes.

TS: So, that reference was in reference to how you were describing the treatment that you received from a lot of really supportive men in the military.

NB: Yes. I think I had talked about it when I was saying about the—kind of, the men and women training together and in combat and stuff.

TS: Oh, right, initially, too.

NB: Yes.

TS: Oh, yes, and then we had that little break and you talked about it, too, so.

NB: So, yes. High bar is set; very chivalrous.

TS: So, you're—where did you go then?

NB: I went to Kandahar.

TS: Okay, Kandahar.

NB: And so, I was there for a month, and I did some—I did some mental health work and stuff there. Then from there, nothing too serious [unclear] really, and again, poop pond; dust; hot; rocket attacks; busy; very, very busy. Kandahar is like the big city, and the FOBs are like out in the country.

From there I went to FOB Lagman, and that was a new base that they were going to be pushing a lot of people out to, they said. That was in Zabul Province. So, I went out there in the middle of March; I think, like, March fifteenth of 2010. When I got there I met a lieutenant and she had come in to support us for one of—to replace one of the wounded. She came into country in January, so I had never met her until this point. And—

TS: What was her role?

NB: She was a social worker.

TS: Okay.

NB: And so, with mental health you have a mental health specialist, and they usually work under a clinician; social worker, nurse practitioner, occupational therapist, psychiatrist, or psychologist. So, we're kind of a force multiplier because we can do intake interviews, we can do some counseling treatment, interventions, and stuff like that, so we work with them.

TS: Okay.

NB: So, met her at this new FOB and get a little room all to myself; cleaned it ceiling to floor. It's just—I think it was like nine feet by six feet, and you know—but it was mine. [chuckles] It was probably the best decorated room in Afghanistan.

TS: First time you'd had room by yourself in a while?

NB: Yeah, exactly.

TS: Wow.

NB: It's always hard going to a new place, though, because you don't really know people and everything, but—you don't know the threats to that specific area, and you don't know who you can trust or not or whatever, like, as far as the third country nationals. And obviously for me, as far as same service members, too.

TS: Sure.

NB: Then we went to—we were there, cleaned our rooms. And this lieutenant, she was really great; pretty laid back. I do fear that she—other people had kind of talked to her about me before, and so I didn't feel like I got a fresh start from it all, you know.

TS: What do you mean?

NB: Like, about what had happened with the—at the other base and stuff.

TS: Okay.

NB: So, yes.

TS: With your EO report that you did?

NB: Yes.

TS: Okay.

NB: But we kind of got there and we had this little combat stress shanty, I call it; plywood, pretty small building. I will definitely provide pictures.

TS: Okay, good.

NB: Just, you know, not level. [chuckles]

TS: We should have the video for your arm here.

NB: Yes, my arm is tilting down.

TS: I'd say sixty degrees.

NB: [laughing] Yes. And we're just like, "All right," you know, "we're going to make the best of this."

So, we had two little rooms in there and a little front area; very, very simple. We had some desks in there, so then we started off with, you know, cleaning it and putting it

together. We glued down laminate floor that one of the sergeant majors had ordered for us—

TS: Nice.

NB: —and cut it, and you know, made it nice, because we didn't have air conditioning, and so we had to have the cr—things in our floor. The air conditioning units were up there, so we could look at them and say, "Oh, wouldn't it be nice if you worked?" But they weren't plugged in because we didn't have electrical wiring to be able to sustain the power they needed, and we had the—they wouldn't electrically wire it until we had the cracks in the floor all cleaned up—or sealed and everything.

So, you know, we did that and we just kind of got our bearings around the FOB. On FOB Lagman we had a FST, which is a forward surgical team, and then we had the 82nd Airborne; part of their fourth brigade. We didn't have a lot of their people on our base. Their base was, kind of, more of a headquarters. We had a base that was, like, maybe ten minutes away where they just had more living quarters and that's where most of their people were, along with—along with the ANP, and so the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army, so they could train with them more. So, we could see that base from where we were.

We had a lot of Romanians on our base, and the Romanians worked with a unit from Germany and they trained together, preparing to deploy. Then they Romanians go to Germany and train, and then the—you know, our soldiers go to Romania and train, and then they come and deploy together. So, it was eye opening, especially in Kandahar because you have Canadian, French, Lithuanian, Romanian, Mongolian; you just have all these different nations there, and it's like, wow, you don't realize how many people are really there supporting. You know, British; a lot of British in Kandahar, and stuff, so.

Yes, so, in FOB Lagman we had a lot of Romanians, and we had, like I said, the 82nd and then we had the American unit from Germany that trained with the Romanians.

TS: Did—with all this multinational force, were—was most of the multinational force men? Did you ever see any women?

NB: Yes.

TS: Did you?

NB: Yes, we saw the French women and they could wear their hair in a ponytail and wear earrings; a lot more, kind of, feminist [sic, feminine?] looking. Same thing with the Romanian women; they could, you know—

TS: They were in the military?

NB: Yes. They could wear their hair in more of a ponytail or down; down loose even, and they—

TS: What kind of roles were they in?

NB: Some were medical. Some were more of administrative.

TS: Okay.

NB: Not any combative, though, and—

TS: Did—Were any of the FOBs that you were at, were the women only in the medical, or were they in any other roles?

NB: For the international ones?

TS: Either United States or—

NB: United States? United States, they were truck drivers and they were commanding convoys, and they were medical; they were military police; they were—what else did some of the women do? Administrative; civil affairs; intelligence analysts; so, a lot of different roles.

TS: But still a very small percentage?

NB: Very small percentage, yes.

TS: That's interesting.

NB: Yes.

TS: I was just wondering about that as you were talking about the stryker unit before, because I was thinking that there weren't, probably, any women in that unit, maybe.

NB: No, just—it's considered more of an infantry unit, so they just had two mechanics and a medic.

TS: That were women?

NB: That were women.

TS: But, so, they did have a couple then?

NB: Yes, three.

TS: That's not zero, though.

NB: Yes. Their population doubled when myself and the other lieutenant went on the base, yeah.

TS: I see.

NB: And they were—they were all specialists, too, I think, so E-4s. They didn't really have any non-commissioned officer leadership.

TS: I see, okay.

NB: Yes.

TS: Interesting.

NB: Yes, and then—so, at FOB Lagman they had the forward surgical team; they have, like, the Romanian headquarters; they had, kind of, our headquarters building for the American unit. We had civilian contractors, and—who were there, you know, just doing stuff to build it up, or fixing the vehicles that went out; working on weapons. We also had a route clearance unit, and they were combat engineers but they were doing route clearance, which is not their role. Then we also had Special Forces from different branches there, and that's all I can really say about that.

TS: Yeah. So, big mix, though.

NB: Right, big mix, yes.

TS: Both multinational and just different types of—

NB: Yes.

TS: —roles that people are playing.

NB: Yes, definitely. But it's—you know, like I said, it's kind of like the country, before when we got there you didn't really have to wear a hat at all. You know, it was just a little bit more laid back, but I have found that—I have found that some of the people that have the most stressful jobs also—you know, they don't try to bother them a lot when they come back and stress them out. You try to make things as nice as possible. So, one thing about deployment is you say, "Okay, what if you could go to this area? It's a small area you stay within, and guard it, and it's warm, and there's sand, and people do your laundry and they cook for you and they clean for you and you don't have traffic, and you don't really have to think about what to wear. Doesn't that sound great?"

“Yes. Sign me up.”

“Okay.” Well, that's like deployment.

TS: Except for the shooting at you.

NB: Except for the shooting and the death, yes.

TS: And the death.

NB: So that kind of mitigates it, but—so, kind of a day in the life is I wake up, go for a run. We have a perimeter; it's about—

TS: You still got to do your PT?

NB: Yes. [both chuckle]

TS: What?

NB: We still have to stay in shape, and I always made it a point to set the standard. I don't preach what I don't do. So, even later on during deployment we had two more soldiers come and join us—mental health specialists, and every Saturday we would run as a team together. You know, we showed a lot of unity and we still did physical training, and we really just tried to be where the soldiers are and just, kind of, show as much of ourselves as we could.

So, we would wake up, there's a 1.8 mile perimeter, and the only thing between me and the outside world is a chain link fence. And we have some guards on the towers,

but luckily this base had never been rocketed and wasn't really targeted to be rocketed or mortared or anything. [brief pause] Excuse me. So, go running. It was beautiful; big beautiful mountains; a little scary. You run a little faster with the adrenaline going, knowing that it's just you and the world.

TS: Yes.

NB: Come back. Go to the dining facility. We usually would have, like—we had pretty good food as long as trucks came in. If trucks didn't come in we wouldn't have fresh food or vegetables at all, but you know, we had whatever; pancakes, eggs, bacon, sausage, oatmeal, cereal.

TS: Standard fare.

NB: Yes. Then I always thought it was great, we had lots of fruit, like watermelon and honeydew and cantaloupe, strawberries sometimes, and kiwi, pineapple. So, that was always really nice to have.

And then go to, you know, shower and change. At first we had to walk about a block away to a shower trailer for the women, and then halfway through the deployment they put one, kind of, down by where we were living. So, you carry your stuff up; pitter-patter up there in your flip-flops; take your shower; put on your clean clothes; come back, and then go to work for our clinic. You'd have it open. We'd do a lot of, like, walkabouts where you'd go to the different units, introduce ourselves. Just constantly going in; seeing how things are going; just trying to get a pulse on it; familiarization.

Also, we didn't have any PX on the base, so not really—we didn't have a store where people could buy anything. If you needed anything you, kind of, maybe had a center in your unit where you got care package—extra care package stuff, or you had people mail it to you, or you could shop online. So, we would—I saw that and I am not above bribery to get people in my clinic, so we went on [soldiersangels.com](http://www.soldiersangels.com) [<http://www.soldiersangels.org>], and it's a website they set up. We put a little—couple pictures up and our story about us and said, “Oh, maybe we'll get some care packages and we can give stuff to people.” We got inundated. We always had a constant flow of care packages coming in, and I would save all the addresses and, like, once of twice—once a month, or every other month, send out a letter, kind of, “Here's what we're doing. Thank you,” and just write a little hand written note, “Thank you for this or that,” to them and back. It just blew me away; all of the stuff, and we—shampoo, conditioner, toothpaste, toothbrushes, soap; all that types of stuff, along with card games, magazines, because, you know, you—we have one or two TVs on the whole base. Snacks; drink mixes; baby wipes; all types of stuff people would send to us. It was

amazing. Pictures, cards; “We support you”. Budweiser had sent us a stack of postcards of people who would write letters to us, “We’re having one for you,” and I’m like, “Don’t send me this, Budweiser.” [both laugh] Yeah.

You know, just everything and it was just amazing, and so we would advertise that and promote it. If interpreters wanted to come, if the local nationals needed things, we would give them to them. We found that women out in the local communities, especially the midwives, after they would have their babies they would use the feminine hygiene products for post-children. And, you know, that’s something that I guess a lot of women didn’t use during deployment so it wasn’t taken as much, but it was something we could still use.

TS: Right.

NB: And it—you know, people who send us that, I’m sure they didn’t imagine it like that, but it is kind of a goodwill gift towards them of a medical aide item. So, it’s just—people don’t even know the effect that they had on us, so. Then—so, we would promote that, and sometimes people would come in the clinic and we’d be like, “Oh, hey, how—”

And they’re just like, “Just come in here for a bar of soap.”

“All right, cool. Have a nice day.” And sometimes they’d come in, look around, stay a few minutes, like, “Hey how are you doing?”

“Good, how’s—” you know, you could ask them a few questions and then they’re like, “Well, do you have a minute?”

“Yeah, I sure do.”

And then some people, they would tell me later on, that they would send in their strongest people; their most mentally strong people to come in, field the questions from us at combat stress, and then they’d send in some other people to go in and get snacks, and then those people would leave, and then you’d have the other mentally strong people who have been prepared, like, “Okay, they’re probably going to ask you about this, and they’re going to ask you about that, so think about this,” then, you know, they cut ties and leave too.

TS: They’re prepping—

NB: Yes. [chuckling]

TS: Wow. That’s neat, actually that’s very—

NB: Thoughtful. Like, tactical.

TS: Yes, tactical is a good word, yes.

NB: So, we did that if they had people, you know, come in. We also—we just tried to make ourselves as most available and friendly as possible there.

So, it was pretty slow for a while when we got there. We set up our clinic. We put our floor in. We organized stuff; had people help us. We built shelves. We had one unit come and we had a, kind of, patio out there and they built us this patio. When my other two soldiers came they painted white on a piece of plywood and got a projector and would have movie nights and *Rock Band* [video game], and it was just a place for people to come and, kind of, hang out and where we could be. It just really helped us keep a, you know, presence and build relationships with people.

TS: And be, like, more casual and—

NB: Yes.

TS: Not clinical, so much?

NB: Right.

TS: And scare people away.

NB: Right.

TS: Right. Okay.

NB: Every record that we kept, too, was a paper record unless it was somebody who had to be evacuated for, like, suicidal ideations or a severe mental health issue. Then it had to go in the computer system. That was probably, I would say, about five to ten of the people that we ever saw. So, everything else was in a paper record that we maintained the entire time. The medical clinic can't come and say, "We want to see these." The command can't come and say, "We want to see this." It would just be us that would have it, and then we took those records with us back to the United States and they are still under my unit's control, and in five or six more years will be burnt. So, —

TS: Why is it that that's the policy for that?

NB: To maintain confidentiality, because we try to—you know, the military's so close-knit and it's such a stigma for mental health, so we try to do everything else that we can. And

that isn't just something we decided. It's something that, you know, our command directed us—

TS: Oh, no, sure.

NB: Yes, in the theater and stuff. So, I think it's awesome that we have that and that they realize that, and it's just—

TS: So, will—the soldiers knowing that policy will be more willing to open up then, you think?

NB: I think so, yes. We do tell them if they say anything that violates UCMJ, the Uniform Code of Military Justice, that we may have to report it, along with if they're having thoughts about harming themselves or somebody else or they're, like, hallucinating.

So, usually if they're having thoughts about harm—you know, they want to be there anyways, they want help, and they know what's going to happen. Then, with UCMJ we never really ran into a case where that happened; you know, we had to report anything that violated UCMJ. One of the things we heard like, okay, maybe infidelity or something, yes, but it's kind of a judgment call. And sometimes it's something that happens years ago and it isn't really relevant to the situation at all anymore and it isn't putting anybody else in danger, so—

TS: Right.

NB: —it wasn't—yes. Now, we luckily never dealt with anything with, like, detainee abuse or abuse of enemy combatants or corpses or anything like that, so you know, those things just never came up for us.

So, we have our clinic open six days a week, and then whenever a—part of what we would do is do classes on resiliency or combat stress or stuff like that, so I firmly believe if we can establish relationships with units and we can provide them with information and, you know, built that relationship, when something does happen we will be there; they will already know us and we will be there to help support them. Luckily, nothing really happened in the first little bit while we were there, and we were able to build those relationships and stuff.

Then as the spring came—in late spring they have war fighting season, so what I have been told is that it correlates with the heroin—or the poppy harvest and the heroin trafficking around the country, because that's where our enemy gets most of their income from. And so, a lot—they are putting more IEDs out on the roads trying to disrupt stuff

more. Or, I don't know these—too cold to fight during the winter. I don't know what it is, but all the trends are that casualties—

TS: Springtime.

NB: —increase in spring and summer, yes. And so, we did have some helicopter crashes. One helicopter crashed, nobody was hurt—or there were some injuries but nobody was killed. We had another helicopter crash and there were two people killed, and that's where the female was killed.

TS: That you talked about earlier?

NB: Yes, I talked about earlier, and another soldier. That was Special Forces soldiers, so we really didn't do a lot with debriefing and stuff. They are a very resilient, close-knit community, so they really, you know, had their own memorial that they did, but we were there and we made connections and offered services and maintained connections throughout our time there. It did affect a lot of the other people there in the unit, and it did affect other of their friends, too.

So, one thing we would do [was] tobacco cessation class. Some of the guys from Special Forces came up and, you know, like I said, our stuff we give it to whoever needs it. They come up and they're like, "Do you have any cigarettes or dip?"

I'm like, "No, we don't have that." I'm like, "I have a tobacco cessation class though."

And they're like, "No," and they talked about their friend. They're like, "He smoked every day and look at how he died. Why should I quit now?" Tough to argue with, you know?

So, like, "Okay." It's kind of funny because a few months ago at my new unit I ran into somebody that had a memorial bracelet with that person's name on it, and I was like, "Yes, I know him, [chuckling] and I didn't get to teach one tobacco cessation class for two months because of him."

He's like, "Yes, he always smelled like cigarettes," and you know—so it's kind of a good laugh you can have, and it's just, no matter where you are you never know who you're going to come in contact with later, yes.

Then things started to—started to have more—sustain more casualties. The first ones were at the beginning of June. We had Staff Sergeant Fike and Sergeant First Class Hoover leave. They were killed by a, I believe, thirteen year old boy dressed in a burka, and they were part of a provincial reconstruction team in Zabul Province; our province. So, what they do is they are—this team is designed to go out and teach about agriculture; provide medicine; provide education; provide—you know, just, they're kind of like the

welfare of them. They're kind of like winning the hearts and minds, working with the government and all this stuff.

So, these people were an infantry squad that were providing protection for the engineer and the medical assets. The medic was in—buying prescription medication off the local economy to give to the locals, because we don't want to give them our prescriptions because they're not going to have the same formulary and everything, you know what I mean? But they do have equivalents there and it is things that they can obtain later. So, using U.S. dollars to go and buy this and dispense to the locals.

Here's the thing that's hard about these situations and the amplification effect like I talked about: We had intelligence that they're, you know—a threat of a suicide bomber, but our—and we had intelligence threat of a man—a young man, but we didn't have intelligence threat of a woman or a boy dressed in a burka or anything, you know, this young man, his hands looked feminine and the burka covers everything else. So, you know, he detonated himself and wounded one in their squad. Kind of, obviously, a few others felt the pressure wave and everything, but actually one was hit with shrapnel, and then killed two others.

So, then we were like, “Okay, are we going to go out to them? Are they going to come up to us?” —whatever. And—

NB: —I think at this point my officer was gone and I had another—there's another person who was, kind of, filling in for her; another psychiatrist who had come out who was very nice.

So—but I—they had ended up coming back down to their main base that was near us and we did a debriefing with them. The traumatic event debriefing is where we take the people who were involved in the incident, usually it's a squad or platoon, and we bring them together. Anybody who was not involved in the incident is not supposed to be there and need to leave because for them, usually they're close to the platoon and they know the people, but sometimes when you hear these stories your imagination is far worse than the reality of what happened. It's horrible what happened but each person has their piece. So, here we're bringing the pieces together into a puzzle, and sometimes looking at the whole puzzle can be very, very difficult.

What we do is we take these people together and we have them first go around and introduce themselves; their names and what their job is; simple. Then we have them go around and introduce what they were doing that day, or their role that day. “I was providing security at this gate.”

Then we have them go around and say, “What did you see?” and they each say their different position. Some of them start processing the emotions then, but the whole, kind of, point of what we're doing is to take them into facts, to emotions, right? Then we say—have them go around, “What was your reaction?” Because reaction isn't feelings, so

you can say reaction, even though you use feeling words to describe reactions, it's not the word feelings; it's reactions. So—

TS: Oh, okay.

NB: —they go around—

TS: Interesting.

NB: Yes, and they say, “Well, I felt like this,” or, “I saw this and I was like this.” So, they say that and that's usually the most time consuming part of it.

It also has everybody, kind of, processing, so you can see, “Okay, this person isn't talking very much. We're going to follow up individually with him,” or, “This person's really talking a lot about this and they had a big piece of this puzzle. We are going to follow up with them.” And I think it helps the junior enlisted see their NCOs are processing it too, and it just, kind of, helps build that support. It's kind of a preventative to PTSD if you can get them talking, you know. So, this is something that's done twenty-four hours to seventy-two hours after the event.

TS: It is, like—does the internalization, kind of, fester some of the PTSD, too? I mean, not that you're going to totally eliminate it just by having them talk about it, but—

NB: Right.

TS: But is that part of it that you try to draw out?

NB: I think so. I think so. And I think it's part of not getting stuck on sticking points about what happened or what they might have missed.

TS: Have[?] process all the way through?

NB: Yes. Then we have go through: what did they do good? How did they react effectively?

“Well, even though we lost this person we treated them in a dignified manner. We gave them the best care that we could. We, you know, protected them. We did this. We did that.”

Or, kind of, go through that and we say, “Memorialization is a very important part of this, so what are you going to take with this person, or that you learned from them, or what memory are you going to take throughout your life about them?” Well, sometimes it's very, very sad, very heavy, and sometimes I can't believe how these people are

throwing their dead friend under the bus. [laughing] All the drinking stories—“Well, he said he was going to take it to his grave, but we might as well let it out now.” And sometimes we were sitting there and my officer and I are looking back at each other in, like, disbelief of this.

“And then he was peeing in the trash can,” and it’s just, like, wow. But it’s kind of a way to wrap it up and leave it on more of a positive note.

Then we do some education about signs and symptoms of combat stress. What’s normal; a lot of normalization and how to know when you need help. What we do; what to expect: not sleeping. Make sure you exercise because you’re going to have this adrenaline surging through your body and you need to, kind of, exercise that out and stuff like that. And you know, what to expect in the next few days. We usually—if they are at a base that’s far away, we usually go back out there a few weeks afterwards to do follow up care with them.

So, that’s the debriefing model and that’s what we do with this event after the suicide bomber. From there, you know, you kind of have to realize that they need to heal within themselves, too, and with their own leadership, and together. As an outsider you’re not part of that. You can be and you can earn their respect and trust and rapport and everything, but the fact of the matter is there’s not really a lot you can do for them other than be there and supportive. But they do need to go through that grieving process and the memorial.

TS: Do they—do they know what you had been through?

NB: Sometimes they do, sometimes they don’t. Teaching some combat stress control classes before a lot of these events happened, I would get through to the end of the class and say, “If you use these principles; if you work on being resilient now; if you are aware of this, you can make it through the worst that Afghanistan will put you through, and I know because I went through Fort Hood and I—” you know, “our unit lost this and this is what we went through and this is how we coped and how we dealt with it, and so I’m not just selling this to you but this is what I’ve done myself.”

That really helps them and they say, you know, “It’s not like you just read something out of a book. You really know and you can really relate to us, too.” So, I think they appreciate it, and it is definitely a connector. I try not to throw it out because in the time that we’re there, their crisis is their crisis and their trauma.

TS: Right.

NB: But sometimes if there are certain things I try to pull out or relate to them on, I can pull it out and say, “I went through this, but here’s this main point that I want you all to take

away from it.” The hard thing was, for me—and see, Lieutenant Garrett[?] didn’t go through Fort Hood so sometimes it was kind of hard to relate to it, but sometimes it was really good because she didn’t go through it so she, I think, was able to remain pretty strong through a lot of these other things, you know, whereas maybe it would affect me more because every time the trauma would happen it would take me back to day one of our trauma and the day after we experienced that loss. Just looking at him like, “You guys have a long road, I know, to go down, and it’s so painful,” and I tell them, “I wish I could take your pain away, and I wish I could carry it all for you. We don’t sugar coat anything. It’s going to be hard; it’s going to be really hard,” you know, so. That’s all we can do.

TS: And you have more casualties that summer?

NB: We had a lot more. We had—we had the suicide bomber and then—we had, you know, the helicopter crash and the suicide bomber. A few weeks later we had a soldier who was dismounted and on an IED that was triggered, and killed. That was hard because he was helping somebody else; he was a mechanic who was trying to help somebody else who was stuck in this vehicle; he was trying to clear IEDs because we have radar, so he was trying to check it, but he got stuck under this culvert, or tunnel. So, the mechanic had come to pull him and that’s when it detonated.

In an instance like that the remains are difficult to deal with; multiple body bags; a lot of guilt for the person who had, kind of, gotten stuck. That person never looked the same and I highly doubt they will ever be the same; their first casualty, which is always very hard. The first casualty is the hardest because you’re learning. And also, the friends of this person, one of them punched a wall; broke his hand; just the anger of it all. So, those were the hard things to deal with, with them. Then, the reminders of the visuals of what happened.

And the thing was, for a route clearance company to go six months without a casualty is just, kind of, unheard of. So, you know, the higher you are the harder it is, and they were a good company. They had awesome leadership. They had overcome many obstacles being there, and different challenges, so it was hard.

A week after that—a week or two after that there was—yes, it was about a week after that there was an incident out at FOB Lane where a mortar had exploded in the tube, or that—it was outgoing, so we were returning fire, had exploded in the tube and caused a catastrophic brain injury to a soldier and caused damage to another soldier’s leg. So, we went out there for that. That was kind of difficult because I think there was some other investigation stuff going on with it. So, that person was, like I said, catastrophic brain injury and in cases like this, and it happened a few times, they just stabilize them physically, if at all possible, until they can get to Germany; have their family go to

Germany, where they will pull[?] a resuscitation, you know, if it is catastrophic. I believe that person ended up donating organs to five other people. So, it's a horrible situation but in some ways, you know, I think the—I have to respect the army because they do everything they can to try to put you with your family on the last possible moments. I don't think that's something they've done in a lot of wars before, if ever.

TS: I remember one nurse told me that the quadriplegics in Vietnam really were not able to be transported because of the technology at that time. So, if they were quadriplegics they probably were going to die in country. She always felt really bad that they didn't at least get to spend time, you know, with their family—

NB: Yes.

TS: —before they died. That's pretty much what you're speaking to, is that the army gets you to your family even if they know that you're not going to make it.

NB: Right.

TS: That is the one thing I remember that really traumatized her the most.

NB: Yes. I think it's hard, too, and I kind of wonder does the army say, like, "On this day we're going to do this," or, you know, I don't know how all that works. It makes me wonder—I mean, I wonder about it all though, but—

TS: Well, you know, there's always a plan and then there's always what happens.

NB: [both chuckling] What happens, yes. I do know that. I am aware of that.

So, we had that. A week later we had two soldiers; was it two or three—three soldiers. It was Mendez, Pridam[?], and Lee; they were killed in an IED. They were driving, and they blow up their bridges a lot over there. I don't know; the Taliban, enemy, whatever, they like to target bridges. They're easy targets because they're easy to get under and place the IEDs and all this stuff, but it's like, "Don't you see what you're doing to the locals?" And sometimes they have their own little—win the "hearts and minds" campaign of the locals, too, and they'll make sure those ones are triggered so that they aren't, you know, harming the locals. So, we, kind of, okay, you send one local, one military, one local, one military.

But the bridge was damaged, and so we had to—or they had to go around the bridge into—in the sand around the bridge, so it's easier to cover up an IED then, right; moved sand. So, excuse me, they were there, IED went off; very big IED, apparently, and

three casualties sustained. This is from the unit—I think it was Delta one-four who was, you know, working with the Romanians, and stuff, before, even though they'd go out on separate missions most of the time together—or most of the time not really together all the time.

But—So, they had that incident happen and they were now up at—they were at our base, Lagman, but they had been moved up to FOB Bullard, and so we went up there. You know, they—the casualties always come in the forward surgical team, like I said, and that's kind of where they're pronounced dead, and we have a little morgue there, and then the helicopter comes in and that's where, you know, we take their remains to, to be flown home. And so, usually it is a litter with a body bag and an American flag over it that goes, so it's not a whole lot of fanfare to it all. Sometimes their uniforms and body armor goes too if we have access to it, just for post-blast analysis.

But the helicopter comes in, the crew get out; the pilots, obviously, stay; and we all salute as they carry the remains to the helicopter; load it on the helicopter. Then as the helicopter flies away we continue to salute. So, pretty much if anything happened within our province, we knew about it there. The medical people were very good about coming and letting us know whatever happened.

So, we had lost those guys and—but they had returned back to their base, and so we flew out there and did the debriefing. Now, one guy, I'm not sure if he was at the incident or not, but he was there in the room for the debriefing and he was so angry, and they were angry, and rightfully so. And he had his weapon and just stormed out, and he was so angry at the locals, and we had a few locals working out there. I was like, "Oh my gosh. He's just going to kill them." So, I'm chasing a guy, you know, like one and half times my size, with a weapon, and trying to defuse the situation because the—my lieutenant is running the debriefing now and, you know, I'm kind of—

TS: With everybody else, right?

NB: Yes, and I'm kind of the chaser, you know, so yeah, like, "Whew, interesting, scary." And you can't tell them they're not justified to be angry. They're justified to feel everything they're feeling. So, luckily got the weapon and calmed him down and said—

TS: You got his weapon?

NB: Yes. Yes. "Just let me hold onto this," you know, "take good care of it; haven't held this before." You just get them changing subjects. [snaps fingers] And then, I think one of—somebody else from their unit came out and was with him, and I went back into the debriefing.

Also, I remember there was another person—

TS: What kind of an adrenaline rush did you have after that?

NB: It, like—"Thank God he didn't kill these people," you know.

TS: Or you.

NB: Yes, or me. I wasn't so worried about me too much then, you know?

TS: Wow.

NB: And we had another a little bit earlier in June, because this is now the first week in July, and the incident happened with the mortar exploding, you know, over the July fourth weekend. But earlier in June there was an explosive ordinance team that went out. One of the tactics they used is they will have—they, the enemy. They will either place a real IED or a fake IED and make it, kind of, evident, and then they will place another IED, like a pressure plate IED, —

TS: Near the—

NB: —where if you step on it, you know, within so many meters outside of it, so that—because they watch us. They watch what we do; our tactical procedures. They know what perimeter we put up around that, and so they say, "Okay—" you know, they see that and—

TS: So, they adjust based on the tactics that we're using?

NB: Yes. So, this person was walking up to the IED in the bomb suit to detonate it and, you know, kind of clear it; all this stuff, and died because of the pressure plate IED. So, —and in that case, speaking about women, it was a woman team leader who had sent them out, and she didn't go out on that mission, but very obviously emotionally and physically affected by it. And they had—their command had pulled that army element and we just kept our navy EOD that we had there after that casualty. I'm not really sure if it's because they couldn't sustain the mission without that one person or because of what happened, or wanted to rotate or got different mission, and stuff like that, but I remember shortly after they had left—and so—and then we had also suffered a Romanian casualty; dismounted IED again. So, for the Romanians, they have—the priest goes out with the Romanians and fly them home, and stuff, too.

Okay, so we had those three [unclear]; Mendez, Pridam[?], and Lee, and we were out at [FOB] Bullard to do their debriefing and to be with them. Also was the unit that had suffered the loss of two from the suicide bomber, you know, about a month ago. So, checked in on them; how are they doing, you know, whatever, and they were doing pretty good; they were pretty—doing pretty well. Their biggest issue was really just, kind of, housing issues and operational issues there. Again, at that base, you know, one toilet—latrine, one shower, and they just cleared out and guarded and, like, you know, “Here you go;” very hospitable.

The weird thing though is, is that we couldn’t get a flight back out because flights don’t come around that often, and so this unit was going—these guys who had suffered the loss from the suicide bomber was going back down to the city and by our base, and so we’re like, “Well, you know, can we convoy with you?” and got approval from our command. So, we were leaving at 2:30 in the morning to convoy, then we can drive on blackout conditions. So, driving, you have a camera on the front of your vehicle and it’s like playing Nintendo. You have no headlights or anything because then they can see you coming from far away and detonate an IED. So it’s all thermal energy and you’re just driving based off a computer screen, pretty much, that folds down like a visor.

TS: Were you driving or were you a passenger?

NB: Oh no, they wouldn’t let me drive, no. I was a passenger. [chuckles]

TS: Well, you had all that practice, so.

NB: I know, yes, I wish. But they know those roads and that’s their jobs and stuff. So, we came to this point where, you know, a bridge was blown so we had to go around, so we were pulling rear security. We’re sitting there pulling rear security while two trucks go across and then they’re pulling security while we go across and around.

TS: I see.

NB: We’re there kind of waiting; we’re listening. We have headsets so we can all talk to each other and we can talk to the different trucks; we’re listening to what’s going on. Look out my window to the right and a red light is moving, and it’s moving towards us, and I can’t really see very much—you know, very far because I’m behind, like, six inch thick glass. But the guys who had night vision and stuff saw this guy moving towards us with a red light at 2:30, 3:00 in the morning. It’s not like the clubs just let out.

TS: Yes. Doesn’t seem like a good thing.

NB: No. And he just, kind of, sits thirty feet off from our truck and just sits and watches us. The first two going through went down a wrong little—wrong little turn or something and kind of got a little stuck, so yes, it took a while. It's like, okay, is he calling some friends to come, or what's going to happen. And if it were me, I would have just eliminated the threat but that's not our rules of engagement. So, the gunner just kept his eye on him and they just played a little staring contest and then off we went, but it's just, like, wow, wow, wow. Then we went through that and then we kept driving.

Then we had another area to go around because another bridge was blown. And the thing, again, that's weird about being in mental health is I drove past the same area where I just listened to fifteen people tell me about how their three comrades died. So, I'm under the same threat as everybody else there, and you know, experienced that too. Just very realistic and surreal to be there and do that.

Made it back safe. Thankfully no problems, and so, that was good. Then a few days later we had four soldiers die from an IED in the route clearance company again. And here's the other thing about intelligence. They had an idea of a threat that was allegedly a thousand meters up. They were going to go three to five hundred more meters, get out, and start walking. Right there they were hit, and they are large; large, large IEDs. We have more armored vehicles, they make larger bombs. Also, what kind of happened in this scenario, when we have wind storms we can't fly our helicopters because of the dust and stuff; they can't see. So, if you can't fly you're helicopters you're not going to send out your route clearance, because if something happens you're not going to be able to medevac them out, right? There could be three days that nobody's out on the roads, and they have spotters right outside our gates so they know that's three days they have to implant an IED, and a big one.

So, the IED went off. There's five people in the vehicle; three were immediately killed. There was another one who was going into cardiac arrest, and he was apparently telling the medic, "Just let me go. Just let me go."

And I just thought, "Wow, that's so eerie." The fourth one was in the turret and I think survived because of the over pressure [pressure caused by a shock wave that is over or above normal atmospheric pressure]. Like, it's mostly the over—the pressure from the explosion that harms people the most.

So, medevac'd them out. Kind of sitting, waiting, you know. You have three, you have four, you have three, you have four casualties. What, okay. So, you know, you have four and then the one person living. It's just tense waiting every moment for the updates, and you try not to put your wounded with your killed, but there's no option here. The person who was wounded was best friends with the—one of the guys who was killed since they were thirteen. They even worked to be in the same platoon together. And the

person, his other best friend, was expecting a second child a month later, after this incident.

So, this person was fine medically; we were getting pulses and everything. Then went back, and I don't know all the circumstances of it, but he's now a triple amputee; two above the knee and one at the elbow; amputation. And it's been two years and he finally just came home.

TS: From where?

NB: From Walter Reed [National Military Medical Center].

TS: I see.

NB: The other soldier whose, you know—his friend who died, his mom came and said, “You are my inspiration.” It kept her going to see somebody else going. She could have easily been angry and said, you know, “Why wasn't it my son who lived?” but she wasn't. And a few months later, after that one guy's baby was born, they had sent pictures and stuff. Well, the unit showed me them, and they had a little bear with the dad's picture on the bear that was in the crib next to the baby; just sad.

TS: Yes.

NB: Yes. So, we did debriefing for them of course, and then after that, a week later, they had a platoon, that was up from another unit, in their battalion to come and support them so they could have enough—you know, a few days off and do their memorial and just some support for the area. They got hit with an IED and lost four people.

TS: The one that was coming to relieve them?

NB: Yes, and those people were very angry. They said that the locals were making fun and celebrating; a lot of wreckage with the vehicle. They actually had detained the person who was the triggerman. And here they come to an ethical decision, “Well, he killed our people. Can we kill him?”

“Well, he doesn't have a gun in his hand, so you can't kill him.” And, you know, a lot of people wanted to, but that's the type of ethical situations our people face and they have to—even in the face of looking at the people who just killed four of their comrades, have to keep this person alive, protect them from other people who might want to kill them in the platoon, you know, and bring them home for justice to be served; whatever that is there. It's really emotionally hard for them. And again, sometimes with these

situations, you cannot collect all of the remains at once. Some remains have to be welded out of the vehicle. So, it's just—it's war.

It was pretty much at that point that we were like, "How much more can we handle?" because every week, and it's pretty much at that point where we run out of tricks [chuckling] in mental health.

TS: Right.

NB: Because, you know, what are you going to tell them? All we can tell them is, "We did not come here to die. We support each other. We are here to support you. We have these missions and they have to be ran," and you know, how brave are those people to go back out and pass the same areas where these things have happened to them and they continue to do their mission. And, you know, this—the one unit—not those four but the unit before, the other four, or same kind of unit, they had a female medic, too, and so there's a female involved in their unit. I think she was on leave when that had happened. And that's hard, too, when people are on leave and they come back and they weren't there and, you know, "Could have been me," and this and that; you play all that game.

So, luckily the casualties had kind of gone—stopped being at such a high rate. Then we had an incident where one of the units that we had kind of worked with, or kind of a little bit—we really didn't know them too much but they had moved to another unit and they were attacked at the—it was mostly people from on our base that supported them, but they were at a little Afghan National Police COP, we call it; combat outpost. They have a vehicle drive in, detonate, and then people come in and open fire on them, and had casualties from that.

Then—so, that was, kind of, very difficult due to the nature of the circumstance how everything happened. And then we had—so, things were—kind of, died down for a bit from what I can remember. Then we were just providing continued combat support services; following up with all these different units, assisting these different casualties.

TS: How are you doing?

NB: How am I doing? I'm running out of stuff to—to help with. After—after the bomber in the burka; suicide bomber dressed in the burka, I just—I couldn't even cry if I wanted to. I was like, "How am I going to do this? How am I going to do this?" I went back to my room and I opened up a care package that somebody had sent for, like, a female soldier, you know, and so one of the other units had brought it for me. There was a picture a girl had drawn, from a family in Wisconsin, and she had drawn a stick figure girl with a combat—combat camouflage dress on and she said, "Army Girls Rock." I looked at that and I was like, "Okay, if she believes in me—" and it just is like, "I can do this." You

know? But I had to start, really, closing down emotionally, and when everybody else—the trauma is when we were on. So, it was when we did our job and it kicked in it was very emotionally draining and straining, especially after everything else we went through. It was difficult, also, to not be able to just fix something.

TS: Yes.

NB: Yes. We also had a guy, civilian contractor, who was out that had hit an IED. Two people were killed and he was there. He was a triple amputee at this point but he still had a heartbeat. So, they brought him in; they raced him in. No aircraft came to get him, they just drove and raced in, his buddies. Brought him in to the forward surgical team, and lots of blood lost; they just did amazing medical procedures there, and did everything they could, but couldn't save that—couldn't save him. And you have to think, if you have enough pressure to blow off three limbs, what's the rest of your body and your brain like, right? So, even if you have the absolute Johns Hopkins University Hospital right where something happened you still can't save everybody, and that's a reality that we would have to, you know, help people realize, too.

And so the forward surgical team, they took a lot of hard—hard hits, too, mentally and as providers. One thing they said is, you know, “No matter how valiant the knight, some days the dragon still wins,” and that's kind of how they worked through this. So, we did provider resiliency training for them, too; specifically for them. Also, another incident happened where three Afghan children were hurt by—maybe playing with an IED that exploded or something. Came in; they treated them. They sent them off to Kandahar; to a hospital in Kandahar to maintain treatment. Came back; enemy killed them for getting medical care from the Americans.

TS: The children?

NB: The children. And that really shook the forward surgical team hard because they were children and they worked so hard to save them. So, it's risky. It's, I don't know, trauma. Like I said, I closed down. I knew by the end of the deployment I really only had about eighty percent to give to people, and I pretty much held a lot of stuff together. I did have—well, I want to finish going through the different traumas and then go back through my other personal experiences there, because I kind of want to get them out all at once, if that's okay.

So, we had a Romanian vehicle hit by an IED; two Romanian casualties. We had another Romanian vehicle hit by an IED; started it on fire. And so, two people were trapped in there. We had—that route clearance came out again and had helped put out the fire and react to that. One of the other—when the Romanians came to—the other ones

came to rescue them, and the helicopter came to take their remains, one of the guys who came on the helicopter, with the vehicle convoy, I'm not sure what it was, was one of those soldiers' brothers; was one of the Romanian soldiers' brothers. Yes, so right there.

And we also dealt with a suicide. It was on Election Day, and we expected to deal with a lot of stuff on Election Day, and they did. FST was packed with just a lot of different stuff. And during Ramadan, lots of locals got in a lot of fights. [chuckles] I don't know if it's the low blood sugar throughout the day or what it is, but they, you know, treated a lot of the locals, too, and the ANP [Afghan National Police] and ANA [Afghan National Army]—I won't even go into their casualties because they have a lot. They always treated them very well; very dignified, and would prepare their bodies according to Muslim tradition for the—for their families to take them at that point, and I just really respected that.

But the suicide was something they were not predicting was to happen, and they—it was an officer who, I guess, was coming under some type of investigation or something and he just went in and committed suicide. I don't understand that, because for me, I think you fight every day to live. You fight every day to live and it's hard. I understand how people are suicidal; I clearly get that, but it doesn't mean it's hard not [not hard] to deal with. And it affects, kind of, everybody then because there's so much more wonderment on what happened and how that person can feel that way, and really that's truly a situation where you can, kind of, evaluate more and I think you would have more claim for “was there a way we could prevent this?”.

TS: What, the suicide?

NB: Yes. My—the soldier—we had two soldiers come and join us Specialist Gildersleave[?] and Specialist Zurflu[?]; Specialist Zurflu, female, Specialist Gildersleave, male. And he went and he had taken all these suicide awareness classes and done all this suicide awareness training and prevention and was, kind of, the guru. He went and did the, you know, reaction team for them, and provided a support and all that stuff, and was really great and he just so cared, and passionate. Nine months after we were home he ended up committing suicide himself. So, just, kind of hard to think about that.

Then—so, in August I had gone on leave. When I had gotten back is when the suicide had occurred, and there was also a helicopter crash that killed nine people, and—

TS: When you were there or when you had—

NB: When I was there.

TS: Okay.

NB: Yes, after I had returned from leave. That was Special Forces again that had sustained that. One guy, he was supposed to leave the very next day to go home, and so I think there was about—there was probably another incident where there was an injury—wounded, and then after that we had left. Two more incidents of wounded from the same route clearance company. One of them was we had this guy, and he had been in a Husky. It's, like, the most survivable vehicle in Afghanistan. It's just a one person vehicle meant to go and clear roads, and radar and all that stuff for route clearance. And he had been hit two times before, I think. The first time he was just like, "Oh, whew, whatever." The second time he's kind of like, "Wow, a little more serious." Then we had him in for a two day resiliency stand down where we just taught about combat stress, gave him some rest, and he was held back from missions for a while. Not because of anything he did, but just, you know, "You've gotten blown up twice and let's share the wealth here."

TS: Right.

NB: So then, he went back out. A few months later he had gone out and he got hit again. Fine, totally fine physically; no damage from the explosion, but he had cardiac damage. I think, like, a minor cardiac infarction—heart attack from it. [chuckles] It's just—it's not anything to laugh at, but the stress of being blown up again, the physical stress, you can't tell me that it's not—doesn't manifest.

TS: Related?

NB: Yes. So, they said, "Yes. Bye. Go home."

TS: So he got to go home?

NB: He went home because of—because of the cardiac problem that he had, so—and I think everybody was kind of happy for him.

TS: Three times?

NB: Yes.

TS: Wow.

NB: They had a couple of other, you know, wounded in action and close scares, but everybody since has been fine. So, that's pretty much it for the traumas.

As for me, it's hard. I had a couple guys who were very, very close friends. For me, they were like my big brothers and they protected me. They would go out on missions with me. They would help me get whatever I needed in my clinic. Excuse me. I had a sergeant major whose brother was actually killed in Afghanistan; he was a Green Beret [United States Army Special Forces]. So, he is probably the person I related to the most, and every Sunday at sixteen-hundred we would sit on our porch and smoke cigars and just talk.

He was able to really understand a lot of this stuff. Like, there's over-memorialization where, you know, everybody wants to keep bringing up Fort Hood and this memory and that memory and this t-shirt and we're going to do this memorial and that memorial. But it kind of comes to a point where you need a break from it all, and you know, you feel like you're keeping them alive by keeping their memory alive, and that is true. You do carry pieces with them, but it can be so much, it can impair you from going on [in] your normal life.

TS: Paralyzed?

NB: Yes.

TS: In some sense.

NB: And so, he really helped me understand that. Another thing is, I didn't understand at what point—during the incident I went through, we thought it was training but it wasn't, and I didn't know at what point it wasn't. And that made me very angry that I didn't know when—the definitive point of when I could say this was reality, because I felt ill prepared to be able to do that in the future.

But he's like, "That's what training does. You're supposed to just train your body and not think about it and just do it.

TS: React.

NB: React. So, there's other things that he just, kind of, helped me deal with, like, my own stuff of dealing with Fort Hood and everything. And I think just being part of a community that understand you, what you went through, grieving together, and just trying to do the best that we could with the job that we had. Watched a lot of movies; read books. I had taken a class but I had to drop it because I would go out for four days at a time on mission, and you know, not have computer access. Wherever I went I found

whatever pets they have; goats, pigeons, dogs, cats, whatever, [chuckles] and befriended them. I exercised. They have the four hundred club; either you weigh four hundred pounds or you can bench four hundred pounds by the time you leave.

And we had—some of the guys were awesome. They put speakers in my office; they, like, wired speakers. Somebody on the base had bought a TV and a DVD player and fan and dropped it off at the mailroom for me, and I never knew who it was, they just did that.

TS: Just a gift?

NB: A gift for combat stress. So, we would have movies people could watch or come in or whatever. We had books and magazines. Obviously talking to people back home helped; friends and care packages and all that. Birthdays there; awesome, since you mentioned mine's coming up.

TS: That's right.

NB: Because it's like every day's the same so it's like you don't really have a birthday. Sometimes I have to remember, "How old am I? Oh, yes, I skipped this year." [both chuckle]

TS: That's right.

NB: Me, personally, for what I went through? I was very afraid of somebody opening fire in the dining facility there. So, I would always get to-go plates or I would, for the majority of the time, sit in a back room that was smaller and had a few doors to get out.

TS: Like you always had an escape?

NB: Yes. I was scared of suicide bombers—a little bit. That wasn't number one, for sure. I was a little bit scared about being, kind of, kidnapped off the base. But, you know, the few people we had on there, the locals, they did really good about monitoring them and they didn't go anywhere unsupervised, and stuff, so you know, that wasn't too big of a reality for me, or fear.

Rockets weren't too bad of fear either because we didn't really have those. Although, when I did come back from leave I was in Kandahar, because that's our main base we fly in and out of, and the first day I was back I was—we had an attack at, like, three in the afternoon, and then we had an attack at around midnight. And I was asleep and the alarm didn't go off, I just felt the—

TS: The shock.

NB: —the shock of the explosion. And I just immediately swung my left elbow in, rolled off the bed on the ground, sleeping bag and everything, laid down for a minute; people are panicking. In these transit buildings we're at we have people that's just coming in to theater. We have civilian females who are, like—they're Americans but they're, you know, working there and they don't have weapons with them, and you know, people just like, "What do we do? What do we do?"

I'm like, "Grab your weapon, get down on the ground, go out to the bunker." And, you know, you did. You wait, and you wait for the all clear. And then, come to find out it was about two hundred meters away from where we were staying. It came in and I have picture of what it did to this tent that I can provide. Luckily, that—

TS: Nobody was hurt?

NB: Nobody was hurt. Those people were out on patrol.

TS: Wow.

NB: So, —but it does scare me, especially with, like, the thunderstorms we have here.

TS: Pretty severe ones sometimes.

NB: Yes, that sound like they're just outside your window. Even I was on military training the past two weeks and there was—in South Carolina, and there's thunder there, and so they were, kind of, using this jumping to conclusions scenario. Like, "Okay, you heard thunder, so what did you immediately think?"

Said, "Rain."

They said, "How many people thought rain?"

Everybody raised their hand but me, and somebody looked at me and, you know, I know this person hasn't deployed, which doesn't mean they're less of a soldier, but it does mean their experiences are different. They said, "You know, you're the only one who didn't think that, that it was rain."

And I just didn't say anything. I just bit my tongue because I realized, you know, their situation and, like, well, I just thought to myself, "If you had a mortar go off close to you, you wouldn't think it was rain either. You would think, 'I'm on a military base,' which in my experience isn't safe all the time. They are threatened targets and you hear this loud explosion, so what are you going to immediately do or think?" So, like I said,

for me I kind of had to emotionally, just, shelter myself, and I couldn't cry if I want to, so I had to really turn off a lot of those emotions.

I saw death every which way. I lost my own mom. Life was threatened, my own. You know, bombings, IEDs, suicide, murder; everything. Accidents; you name it, I saw it. I did have those—you know, good support and everything around me.

When we came back home was a week before the one year anniversary of the shootings. So, we came back home, and even—you know, there's just a certain tint that the Fort Hood experience puts on every happy moment of your life. You're happy you come back home, but then you say, "Well, there's five people who aren't coming home from this mission that started with our unit and aren't here." And so, it's just, you know, difficult. It's kind of everywhere.

We had—some of our wounded soldiers greeted us when we got off the plane, and that meant so much for us to see them. And it was hard for them to not deploy, too, you know.

TS: Right.

NB: They were wounded and they sat at home the whole time and we went out with the mission. Not like they didn't do anything, but they didn't go; they didn't deploy. Then we had the one year anniversary of Fort Hood, and if we wanted to we could go down there and we did.

TS: You went?

NB: I went. They had a memorial stone for them and they had, you know, some discussion—like, a presentation from General Casey, and that's when he called my camera gaudy and I reminded him he owed me a beer; still working on it, okay. Then we had another, kind of, speaker and they did an award ceremony, and what I remember from that is, General Casey had spoken. He said, "You know, so many deaths. It's been the year of firsts. The first birthday without this person; the first Christmas; the first anniversary, and today is the last first; the first anniversary of this shooting. So, now it's a year of nexts." So, that was poignant, I remember that.

TS: It's a point to move on?

NB: Yes.

TS: Because those firsts are gone?

NB: Yes.

TS: That's true with death in a lot of different—

NB: Ways.

TS: Yes.

NB: Yes.

TS: Well, —go ahead.

NB: So, came back, gave them—gave a presentation about combat stress to my first college I went to; Pacific University, and didn't know how I was going to be perceived, any of that stuff. Had nightmares pretty much every night that I was supposed to go back to Afghanistan, which is pretty common. My nightmares really didn't stop until, probably, October 2011; October, November, December.

TS: So, like six months ago?

NB: Yes. I had them for a good year, year and a half, afterwards. Now I know if there's a, kind of, incident or activating event—like tonight, I'll probably just go home and sleep.

TS: Because we've talked about all this?

NB: Yes. I'll either go to bed at, like, six or seven tonight so that if I do have nightmares I have enough time to sleep. Or I'll only sleep six hours until the weekend when I can sleep in really late, because I know I won't have nightmares if I only sleep six hours, but if I sleep seven or eight hours it's like, I have nightmares.

So again, I was coming home to all that death; coming home to all that death through deployment, coming home to my mom's death, and coming home to all these people who haven't seen me in a year and all they want to do is spend time with me, and you know, see me and be happy I'm home. Well, guess what? There's not—there's other people who aren't coming home. And I haven't had any emotional processing of this and I held it together; kind of processed a little bit. I started going to counseling and everything. And I spread my mom's ashes, which was pretty therapeutic for me.

TS: What part of the Oregon coast did you go? More than one or just one?

NB: Just one.

TS: Okay.

NB: She wanted—do you remember Terrible Tilly [Tillamook Rock Light], the lighthouse?

TS: Oh, yes!

NB: Yes, she wanted her ashes in there, but that company doesn't do that.

TS: Won't let you do it?

NB: Yes. They don't do it anymore, and so—but I went to the lighthouse, you know, kind of by—the lighthouse, but in the little cove where you can see it and I spread them there.

TS: Sure. How neat.

NB: Yes, and I kind of feel like—you know, like I said, I have a spiritual belief. I believe, “Okay, God had twenty-three years to take my mom. Why then? Why not later?” And I believe, you know, she was kind of my angel during deployment, and I feel like in the end I needed to have her where I could control that and where I knew where she was. I wasn't ready to let go until I came back. I didn't spread her ashes on my leave, none of that, because I needed her, kind of, there.

TS: Right.

NB: And then, you know, funny thing is I had it in one—in one wall unit and said, “This is what I want for leave. Don't move any of this.” I'm gone out for a few weeks and they've moved it all and now I don't know where they are.

TS: Oh no.

NB: We find them, okay, everything's good. But, yes.

TS: Well, how was it coming back—coming here. We talked a little about—well, because I'm thinking as you're talking, when you walk—you know, we walk out here and pass people. You don't know whatever they're carrying with them; —

NB: Right.

TS: —their life experience. And when you walk through and nobody knows—looking at you doesn't know what you've gone through.

NB: Yes.

TS: So, when you accost someone, say just—not accost but—say you're in a situation, like, a customer service situation, and that person is just—you can tell they're not having a good day and they're maybe not treating you really well—

NB: Yes.

TS: —does it—do you think to yourself, you know, “This is so trivial?” Or do you think, “Come on,” you know?

NB: Yes.

TS: Do you have thoughts like that ever about—

NB: Yes, and it's weird because it's such small things and they seem so small because you're like, “Well, nobody died here,” but it's those really small things that agitate the hell out of you. And you know during deployment, I've heard a statistic, you make about fifteen hundred choices. Like at the end of the movie [*The*] *Hurt Locker*; he goes to the grocery store and he can't choose a cereal box because there are so many choices. During deployment, you know, you have the same choices for breakfast, for lunch, for dinner. You have the same little area; not a lot changes really. You don't have to make a lot of decisions, but you come back. For me, everything was very over-stimulating. So, it was hard to mentally keep track of all the noises, all the sites, all the sounds, all the lights, all this, all that, all the people. It was so exhausting; so exhausting; could not go to a mall because it was so exhausting. And I loved shopping. Here I have all this deployment money and I have the opportunity to wear clothes, and I don't want anything to do with it.

So, that stuff was hard. It was hard because some of my friends, you know, we would say, “Oh, when you get back we'll do this and we'll do that,” but when I came back they weren't there. That bothered me because I clung so tightly to that, what we were going to do, during deployment.

So, yes, I moved to North Carolina because I was burnt out on psychology and counseling, and wasn't—didn't think I had it in me to pursue my PhD. And so I came back and I really wanted to study nutrition, and so I decided, “Let me, kind of—” and

adolescent obesity, so I said “Let me take this other route with nutrition.” And Wellspring Academy [Wellspring Academies], I really wanted to work there. They’re in North Carolina, in Brevard, so I said, “Well, let me see what colleges have a nutrition degree,” and some of my friends were from the 82nd, which is at Fort Bragg, and one of my best friends was at Fort Bragg; Danielle, who I said is now my first sergeant. It’s also away from all the rain of the great northwest. [chuckles]

TS: That’s right.

NB: Sunshine, and so that’s kind of how I ended up here. I already had my apartment picked out; applied to college. I had everything done before I even left Afghanistan. That was a coping mechanism, too; to be future oriented.

I came here for a few days and Josh Green and Dedrick Curtis were awesome and just embraced me. I told them what I had been through and they were just like, “Okay,” you know. And sometimes I will throw—like, those statements. Throw out one that’s maybe a little tip of the iceberg and see, “How do you handle this?”

And if they’re like, “Yes, no problem,”

I’m like, “All right, I’ll share more then,” because you’re not going to, like, be dramatic or anything with it, you know, or—you understand. So, they were just awesome. I felt like this is where I was supposed to be and I moved here and started classes. I also think, looking back now, who I was before deployment with who I am now, or who I was after deployment, is very, very hard to merge because I had changed so much.

That’s one of the hardest things about reintegration, is you’re gone for a year but all your memories are from before you left. Well, life doesn’t stop, and you know, you try to come back and you’re trying to be that person and live the life that you had a year ago, but you can’t. I think that’s a hanging up—a hang up point for people with reintegration. So, you know, you have to merge that—those two people and figure out, “Oh yes, I was like this, and I don’t need to be so hyper-vigilant all the time now, so—

TS: Is that what one of the hardest things was?

NB: Yes, definitely, because I was just still in survival mode, coming back. And so, now I don’t have a weapon. I, you know—whether whatever—whoever wants to make whatever judgment about it, it was nice to be on my own away from a lot of other stuff at home. I feel like I needed that space to, kind of, breathe.

My family was really supportive. My dad’s always like, you know, “Pursue your dreams,” and everything, so—and I had already made a couple good friends with my apartment agency, and I know people weren’t far away if I need them. But, you know, I come back; for me, I felt safer in Afghanistan, and my dad said the same thing too. He

said he felt like I was pretty safe because I had a weapon and I could defend myself. Then when I actually came back he said he was sleeping so much better at night now that I was back. I stayed with my family and he'd come wake me up at 6:30 every morning just to give me a hug and feel me. That got old real quick, like, "Dad, I will be here when you get home from work." [chuckles]

TS: He was a little clingy?

NB: Yes, clingy, you know, so—but it was sweet. So—And then—also, I want to make a point. While I was gone, they have [the] Yellow Ribbon [Reintegration] Program in the reserves and National Guard where they have a few four day weekends, and they fly family members to places, or usually they do it if the unit's all together in that city, but ours was so spread out. But they did it in, like, Dallas and San Antonio, so they flew my parents there and then they had different presentations about post-traumatic stress disorder, about combat stress, and they would tell them the different things our units were doing while we were deployed. They would prepare our families and give them the language and the education to realize when there are problems and how and what to do to address those problems.

So, the way that my dad had acted after Fort Hood compared to the way that he reacted when I came home and was able to talk to him more, or through different stuff throughout deployment after this, was pretty different. He wasn't as afraid to ask me questions, and I didn't have to explain to him the terminology of this or that; he—He just knew and he would just ask. So, that was—even though it may not seem like it at the time, it's beneficial to me; that was extremely beneficial, that that military did that for my dad, my family, and educated on that.

So, yes. So, I came to school. Now, the States is like my battlefield, because I come back to a small room with limited entry and exit points; people I don't know. No weapon to defend myself, and dealing with a lot of, kind of, firsts. Like, the first time I hear sirens again, because I didn't hear sirens since that day at Fort Hood. And I found that I was so hyper-vigilant, and I'm listening to everything going on around me. So, every little whisper, every little wrapper, everything; I hear it all.

TS: Everything's magnified?

NB: Yes, and so I can't shut out this other stuff and tune into the teacher and listen to what they say. So, I always have to go home and read the book and read my notes. I'd write down stuff, but I wouldn't remember writing it down though; it wouldn't, like really stick in my memory.

So, you know, the hyper-vigilance; the preparing escape routes; preparing what to do if somebody comes in. You know, different stuff like that, along with trying to process, also, everything that happened during deployment. Then you go from this feeling no emotion to—I would see, you know, a PetSmart commercial of a dog running to a little girl and just bawl. I have a dog, too, and so, you know, I really missed him when I was gone.

TS: What kind of a dog?

NB: A golden retriever, and he's been my therapy, too, but—

TS: What's his name?

NB: Diego.

TS: Diego, okay.

NB: I'll send pictures.

TS: Thank you.

NB: He went through his own little separation anxiety, and now whenever we're separated he's very anxious and he's in every room with me now.

TS: Follows you around?

NB: Yes. But he's so, kind of, emotionally sensitive. I think he really kind of takes a lot.

TS: He can sense what you're feeling and knows when you're upset.

NB: Yes. And so—But I would be so exhausted at school, and sometimes sitting in class thinking about, like, “Wow, a year ago I was flying in a helicopter to here, or I was doing this.” I really struggled with a loss of purpose because now it's just me going to school.

TS: Sure.

NB: But really I was doing all these great things for our soldiers, and now I'm just going to school. I would be so exhausted every day from class. I would go home and have to sleep about two to three hours just to function to do homework, and then go back to bed; about

three times a week have nightmares. Most of the nightmares were always about some type of scenario where we were taking fire, or we were being attacked or ambushed, but this time I had a gun and we would fight back. So, I think it's just in the situation I was in at Fort Hood you didn't have a gun. You did not fight back. You could not defend yourself. I think your mind, in dreams, prepares you and tries to prepare you for your activities throughout the day.

TS: Were you seeing a counselor?

NB: I was. I saw a counselor when I got home; a civilian in Oregon. Then we would Skype, too, when I moved here. Then I kind of felt like I needed a little bit more—she helped me and took me a very long way. I felt like I needed a little bit more trauma specific and military specific counseling, and then I went to the vet[eran] center.

TS: I see.

NB: That really helped get me over the rest of everything going on.

So, right now I feel like I can't really get closure. I feel like the door's still cracked, because of the trial, and that's hard because I don't get to move past it and I don't—I feel bad. Like, I can't—I have to remember everything because I may have to testify. So, I can't really let it all go. Once the trial is over, I will write out every detail of everything that happened to me throughout the entire deployment and put it in a book and tuck it away so that way I don't have to rely on memorizing it. If I need it, it's there.

TS: Right.

NB: When I came to UNCG, there's Josh and Dedrick. Also, the chancellor had started a task force for military veterans, military members, and then family members of military. So, I was on the task force, and that was awesome because I felt like I was doing something. I was also learning a lot about the school, and I felt like I came in to be a part of something. I didn't really make friends the first term because every—to me, everybody was like—or I looked at everybody like, "What do you want from me? I can't really trust you." Like, "Why are you talking to me," you know. And, so—very—I just very much wanted to go to class and go home, and that's so not like me, but.

There wasn't too much trivial stuff I dealt with then. I think most of it was just, you know, reintegration. Then—but when things did happen they would be magnified. Like, if I had a bad day or I got bad news about something, where I could normally handle it, it really got magnified for me. And I really didn't believe that I was safe from

violence or school shootings because there was school shootings. There was the shooting in Oslo [Norway].

TS: Oh, yes.

NB: Yes.

TS: Terrible.

NB: There was a private from Fort Knox who wanted to repeat the same type of attack that happened at Fort Hood, where he was—his plan was to bomb a restaurant off base. Then as people ran out he wanted to shoot them. So, it's like, you know, —I tell my counselor, "You can't tell me that—" you know, "It's not like there's no IEDs here in America. You can't tell me that this isn't a reality for me." If you could talk to her she would tell you every day after she would come in I'd be like, "See? I am justified to still be feeling this way and to be feeling this because this happened."

And she's like, "Okay. How many other people made it through the day without this?"

Or there was the shooting with Gabby Giffords in Arizona in January after I had moved here. I was like, "See, I'm not safe anywhere." But, you know, it took a lot of work of me saying every time I went to class and I was safe, "I'm safe. Nothing happened," and just really reinforcing that.

TS: Build up every day as another positive experience?

NB: Yes, and knowing what my triggers and stuff are, too. So—And then—let's see. The summer was hard. I remember a couple incidents that happened; the shootings in Oslo. There's finding out about another person who had come home and abused drugs and died, from a unit we had worked with. Again, that blows my mind. How do you fight an entire year for your life and you come home and—gone, you know? Then my soldier who had committed suicide, and that was extremely hard to deal with. You wonder—the thoughts going through my head were like, "Why couldn't they feel like they could turn to me," you know?

TS: Yes.

NB: Even though we weren't that close I reached out to him several times and tried to contact him. And still, whatever information I got I made sure him and the other specialists got and stuff, so.

TS: Do you feel like you failed him? I mean, is that what you feel?

NB: I don't feel like I failed him. I feel like if the sadness—that if somebody who knows so much about suicide, and awareness and prevention; if this could happen to him; if he could be so low, it can happen to anybody.

TS: Is this the one who had his—the pencil and paper?

NB: Yes.

TS: That's the one? Okay.

NB: This is the one who was getting the tools to be successful.

TS: I see.

NB: And, you know, he was in his forties and trained and all this, and it could be that you just get so depressed and spiraling you just—you can't even lift a hand to reach for help and—or who knows? I don't know all the circumstances of it all. And—but it's just, like, one more casualty. When do I get to be done dealing with death? When?

TS: I don't—I don't know if there's an answer to that one.

NB: Yes, when I die. [chuckles] That's when I get to be done.

TS: That might be the day.

NB: Yes. I will say, too, a, kind of—I consider it a gift that I got from the experience at Fort Hood, which you—I find people who go through trauma, you have to make sense of it. You have to make your own little sense; you have to make your own little meanings and stuff. When everything was happening I had thought to myself, “Well, I sure am glad I got my will done and I know where my money's going to.” [laughing] That was comforting. And you know, I was thinking through, of course, what to do in the situation, but I will say I have never felt more at peace my entire life because I have no control. I have no control over what was to happen, and you just are, kind of, just there and you're just waiting.

So, I really don't fear death. I fear living through another traumatic experience, and you know, it's—I know I'll get through it but I know it will be hard whatever it is.

But to me it's a gift to not have to fear death in the future. I think the only thing I could ask for is to die doing what I love, and if that's serving my country—like, before I even left—you know, before Fort Hood or anything, I told some of friends, "If anything happens to me don't be sad. I'm doing what I love; what I believe in." Who can say that? Who, driving home on the highway in a car accident, can say that? Who, you know—like, my mom, after being medically sustained for so long, can say she really went out doing what she loved? And like, Steve Irwin with his sting ray.

TS: Right.

NB: Terrible what happened, but I look at it and say, "He was doing what he loved."

TS: Right.

NB: That's all I could ask for. So, again, kind of—I know I'm moving around all over the place. Coming back and stuff, we had to stay with our unit for a year after we came back home because they wanted to monitor—kind of, make sure we transitioned okay. We were available for any type of trial proceedings. We did mental health evaluations. We went to a couple different conferences for reintegration and—with our families. So, the army flew myself, my two brothers, and my parents to Orlando, Florida for four days. Then, also, my parents and I went to Denver, Colorado a few months later. So, you know, in that sense they do care, and they do care about the families and stuff.

We had to do behavioral health screenings, and it's just so—and even for me, a mental health specialist, sometimes they're so frustrating because you're supposed to go and talk to somebody that you don't know, who already knows about your worst day of your life, and then they want to open it up and talk to you about it and see how you're processing it. And it's just, like—it's like rattling a wild animal's cage, kind of. Because, you know, it just, there's—

TS: Are you sure you want to do this? [chuckles]

NB: Yes! And there's nothing to be that's very clinically sound about it. I understand they have to do it, but I think there's ways around it rather than asking us where we were and what happened. Sometimes I feel that those people that we had to do those with only were wanting for their own knowledge what happened, or their own curiosity about what happened; they wanted to know. I don't feel like it was therapeutic to me.

TS: Well, still so very raw.

NB: Yes.

TS: And then the trauma of being deployed and all the death that you faced there, just, I'm sure—

NB: Yes.

TS: —opened it up again.

NB: And we had just barely started forming a scab, —

TS: Right.

NB: —and just ripped it off. A lot of people felt that way. It would have been better to do either a few weeks after we got back or a few months more after. Not, like, a month and a half or two months.

TS: Do you keep in touch with the people from your unit?

NB: Some people I do. I still talk to my first sergeant and my commander. A couple people I'm friends with on Facebook, so.

TS: But is it hard?

NB: Not really.

TS: No?

NB: It's just more like we've, kind of, all integrated and gone our separate ways in life.

TS: Yeah.

NB: Yes. So, yes—like, at home I have a gun, and so I have that for protection, which is comforting. Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night sleep walking and I wouldn't wake up until my hand felt the cold metal of the lock on my door to make sure it was locked. Different scenarios kind of like that went through. But a lot of that has really been alleviated and worked through, through counseling; through time; through good support here. One of my best friends here is a first sergeant, retired from the army, in the nutrition program, and from Oregon, so I don't know how much—[chuckles]

TS: Perfect.

NB: Yes. So, it helps me to have her, and we're going through classes together, and the Student Veterans Association and other veterans. UNCG has really highlighted me and supported me, and really, kind of, shown me off. You know, they selected me to be in a magazine and any articles. I love being able to share this experience, and being able to hopefully inspire others and open up a window for a peek into what the military life is like, or what a soldier, kind of, goes through, because I feel a little more prepared to talk about it.

TS: You've done a great job in this discussion of that, I think.

NB: Thank you.

TS: I wanted to ask you how you felt—and this is going to sound kind of silly in some ways,—

NB: It's okay.

TS: —but, you know, I talk to a lot of women who did a lot of firsts, right? They trail-blazed a way in the military; in the WAC [Women's Army Corps, or may refer to the WAAC, Women's Army Auxiliary Corps]. Remember you talked about—

NB: Yes.

TS: —wanting to have been in the forty—grown up in the forties and been in the WAC?

NB: So wish I could have been a WAC, yes. [chuckles]

TS: But you're—but you're not. This is your era.

NB: Yes.

TS: And in some ways you have blazed a trail.

NB: Yes. I believe that I have blazed a trail with mental health in—a female in the mental health. I feel that going into deployment, or being mental health, there's such a stigma still. People worried about it harming careers and being a weakness, or perception of

weakness and stuff like that. And you are taught to drive on throughout the mission. But to have been so accepted in to the units that we worked with; to have been allowed to go into the Special Forces area, you know, to eat dinner with them; to be invited to go out on missions, which stopped when the one female was killed because they just couldn't handle if they lost another female or anything happened to me.

TS: That was on the helicopter crash?

NB: Yes, after that they just didn't—they didn't want to take—take us out; that stopped that, so. And to, you know, just be so embraced and accepted, again, is like—amazes me. When I left the combat engineer unit some of their guys had made me a plaque, and it was—and a certificate. It was for being the happiest person on the FOB, and they said, you know, "Your positivity and happiness helped us get through some really tough days, and knowing you're always there for us," and you know, "You bring great credit upon yourself, your unit, and the United States Army." I was just, like, could not believe—so flattered. It was the thing I am the most proud of. It is the only award I hang on my wall, because it's one thing to earn—earn a good job or a kudos from your superiors. It's one thing for your peers to acknowledge, you know, what you're doing, but to have your subordinates and the people you serve say you're doing a good job and really admire that, it's just—it's so priceless to me. It's so, like—like I can't believe it. I cannot believe it.

So, it just means so, so much to me to do that. And I think, yes, we went places where—blazing a trail where—you know, there weren't females on the FOB, where you share the latrine and the showers; where, you know, you—the night of the incident, you sleep next to the man who's wounded. Everything you do together, it is, I guess, more so than feeling like I'm a woman who has done all these firsts. I feel like maybe the circle had kind of come around, where I'm a woman who is integrated and has more of an equality and partnership in what we're doing.

TS: What do you say—

NB: If that makes sense.

TS: Sure, it makes sense. What do you say to those people who say woman shouldn't be in those areas, in whatever role, but especially not combat?

NB: In combat?

TS: Yes. "Well, we shouldn't have women over in Afghanistan."

NB: Well, guess what. We're already there.

TS: But that's—but what do you say to them? That women shouldn't—the ones that say they shouldn't, you know, be—doing any offensive—you know how you say you can't in your medical field, but women aren't supposed to take—direct offensive action—

NB: Yes.

TS: —in combat; in certain combat roles, right?

NB: Yes. I just say, you know, “We're already there. Again, whether you put it on paper or not, or whether your opinion is or not, we're still there. We are still dying for our country. We still bleed the same blood. We still love our country and the freedoms that we have and we'll stand to protect them.” So, that's what I say to that, and that if they—if it's a man telling me that then I say, “Great. I would be happy to stay at home while you go over and take my place in Afghanistan.” [chuckles]

TS: There you go.

NB: And I will—I have had some incidences, I feel, of like be told, “Oh, you're in the Barbie squad,” or, “Look at her in the Barbie squad.” You know, because I wear makeup and I—everything within regulation, but I still try to be feminine and try to maintain who I am even though I wear the uniform, because for everybody they're still a person and a human being under it, you know. I have been asked how many blow jobs does it take to become a staff sergeant these days, and to which I reply, “Sixty, and I'm quite tired.” [chuckles]

TS: That's your pat response?

NB: Yes, and it's just, you know, some people, if it's just kind of off the cuff like that, I just have that quick witted response. If it's somebody I know more and I work with more, and I will take them outside and have them stand at the position of attention and parade rest, and I will educate them on what exactly it does take to become a staff sergeant in my level, and the education that I have received, the training I have gone to, the leadership I have performed, the awards I have received for my performance, and the faith that my peers, subordinates, and leadership has in me.

TS: So you school them?

NB: I school them. And furthermore, I understand that they—you know, their position is one of jealousy. I will help them advance but it does not come with undercutting your peers. I have been told—one guy was just smoking this other guy. So, what that means is he's just having him do push-ups and flutter kicks and all this other stuff. It's a hundred and twenty degrees in Afghanistan now, he's in the sun just having him do this, and he's doing it in front of everybody else in front of the DFAC. So, everybody else can walk by this and see it, and I told him, "Look, you need to move him in the shade and give him water. I'm not here to say how you punish or what you do, but I am here to say that this is, kind of, an illegal—"

TS: Abusive?

NB: Yes, "way to do this. If you smoke them and you give them an opportunity to drink water and you're in the shade and you're mitigating all the risks you can and you give them a break every fifteen minutes, great, have at it." You know what I mean? But it's wrong, I think, to really do that and make somebody—put somebody to shame in front of all the rest of their peers, too. It's just really wrong. Everybody else is going to end up hating you, and so I told him professionally, I said, you know, "You need to just move him and give him water."

He said, "Look, stay out of infantryman's business, woman."

I said, "Oh no, this isn't infantry. This is army."

And he says, "Well, how many times did you leave the FOB?"

I said, "I've left plenty of times, but I've noticed you haven't left on a single mission, and that all you do is collect garbage around the FOB. So, don't—we're not going to play this game. Move the soldier." And he just, you know, wants to keep going back and I said, "All right, I'll just go get your first sergeant then."

And so, "No, no, no. We'll stop. We'll stop."

"Okay, great." So, you stop, you move him, end of discussion. And I went and I notified the—his first sergeant and told him, "Here is what your soldier was doing. He was very disrespectful. Furthermore, you need to just tell him if he is going to smoke somebody, that it's, you know, blah blah blah conditions."

So, he had this soldier come up and apologize to me and he said—so, he was standing at ease apologizing to me. He's like, "Sorry. I'm really sorry I disrespected you and everything."

And I'm like, "All right." I'm like, "Look, just don't have it happen again."

He said, "You know, it's really hard to talk to you because your eyes are so blue and really pretty."

And I said, "Move out." So, it's just like, ooh, that just [unclear] me. It just, you know—even when you're supposed to be apologizing you're trying to fit in this little—

and it—I get that, you know, you could say, “Oh, he’s just trying to compliment you.” No. So, it’s—it’s just one bad apple in a very good bunch, I felt that happens too.

And the incident I described, you know, with the officer at FOB Frontenac. That was a difficult situation for me to go to as a female, and go through. So—And I want to be careful that I’m never asking for a special consideration or special exception because of that. In fact, I know that I may not be as tactically knowledgeable; I may not be able to say how you should run a squad through so many different, you know, offensive maneuvers, or I may not be able to recite for you exactly all the different, I don’t know, components in a certain weapon, but I do know, because I’m not that tactically, maybe, savvy, I work two, three times as hard to learn the same information, and pay as much attention to obtain it so that I can perform at that same level.

TS: Well, I have a question—a couple of questions for you here.

NB: Okay.

TS: You were seventeen when you signed up for the army reserve. Has it lived up to your expectations?

NB: [chuckles]

TS: First of all.

NB: It’s such a better life than I could have ever imagined for myself.

TS: How do you think your life would have been different? How is it different with it, do you think?

NB: Oh yes, I think it’s different. I have—you know, growing up I went from a life where not as much, maybe, order and stuff, and my life has far more order. I have learned to push myself. Like my drill sergeant said, he pushed me. So, I learned how to push myself and until after about nine months in Afghanistan when I did hit that wall where I could only give eighty percent, I had no limits whatsoever. There was no limit to what I could do. You know, sixteen credit hours of class, working twenty hours a week, going to drill, getting, you know, 3.75 GPA; no problem at all. It, you know—give it to me; I’m ready. So, that built a lot of confidence in me. I think it developed me more as a woman; as a strong woman. It developed a lot of character. It certainly helped me with my education and being able to go to school. It developed in me a love of learning. I have great friends. I have a retirement; halfway there.

TS: Yes, you're getting there.

NB: Yes. The one thing that's been the hardest for me, I think, is in terms of relationships.

TS: Why?

NB: Well, you—it's just, you know, if you meet somebody before you deploy it's hard to sustain a long distance relationship. Sometimes civilians that I date I think they think it's—you know, it's neat I'm in the military and they think that's kind of cool, but then it kind of just stops there, and they don't really—it's not so much that they don't understand, and I can't blame them for not understanding because I haven't worked their job or walked in their feet, but it's that they don't try to understand and they don't ask questions and investigate, or you know, seem really open to hearing about everything I went through.

Then sometimes dating military there are so many different changes and absences and time you have away from each other. It's just, kind of, six of one, half dozen of the other, and it is challenging, I think, in that sense. And I have high standards, so that's hard too.

TS: Yes.

NB: Yes.

TS: When you—when you're talking about—for relationships with civilians, but what—what do you think, just in general, some of the misconceptions that civilians might have about people who are in the army or the military in general?

NB: I think some misconceptions I've been worried about, is I've been worried about being perceived as kind of like a crazy veteran, or as kind of damaged goods because of everything I went through, and you know, coming back, reintegrating.

I think sometimes they think that we are uneducated, and really a bachelor's degree does not translate to the skillset that is developed in the military. You can just look at how hard we're trying training the Iraqi army and the Afghan army in very, very basic things. And you're having eighteen year olds go over there and do all these different, you know—training, and they deal with a lot of emotions and they deal with a lot of difficult circumstances, a lot of ethical situations, and that doesn't necessarily translate to course credit. So, I think that they think that we are—we're all kind of gun toting, [chuckles]—like, can't wait to go to war. Again, not really. Some people—a lot of

people I know in the reserves don't even touch a gun outside of the reserves; don't even own one.

I think that they think that some people join the military because it was their only option, and—

TS: That's what some people think, you mean?

NB: Yes. I would like to remind them that our force is a one hundred percent volunteer force. Everybody volunteer—who's in it has volunteered to be here, to go. So, yes, those are, kind of, some of the misconceptions, I think.

TS: What does patriotism mean to you?

NB: Well, God, going back to the WAC, and I have this on my—on my fridge at home; "Are you a girl with a star-spangled heart?" [laughing] I have a star-spangled heart and it's—it's weird because I love our country and there is really no greater place on earth, and I think that what I try to think about the most is how many freedoms people have here. Like, again, when you talk about the trivial things or problems people have I say, "You're a—" I just say to myself, "You are so lucky that that is your biggest issue." And again the eternal optimist, I try to say, "You know what? I'm really glad for you." I say that to myself. "I'm glad for you that that is your largest issue." I don't try to make them understand mine because they won't. That is futile; cannot change that.

When I see kids playing back here at home—because, you know, you see some children when you're out but not a lot. Or even if you see, like, brown skinned children playing, or like Middle Eastern children, I just look at them and I just think, like, "I'm so glad that we have a country you can come to, and you can go and play in the street where you don't have to worry about being blown up, and you know, you don't have to worry about all the different things that the families endure in Afghanistan.

So, I guess it's just a lot of the freedoms that I think is most patriotic, and the fact that you have—I think somebody told me the statistic you have one person in the military that has signed up for service so that some, you know, one thousand, ten thousand people, whatever, can rest in peace tonight. I mean, that's just amazing. That's patriotism for me. That's sacrificing yourself for the betterment of everybody else, and that's just, kind of, humanity.

I love our country, I love the government, all that stuff, but number one I think I just look at all the freedoms and opportunities we have here and that's what I care about defending the most.

TS: Yes, that's great. Well, we've covered a lot and I actually think we should talk again in, like, five years; [both laughing] I think.

NB: Okay!

TS: But is there anything—

NB: I'll have another ten hours for you I'm sure.

TS: That's fine. That's fine with me. We could do it in two years from now. But is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd want to mention?

NB: Let me think really quick. [long pause] I think just, kind of, my concerns for the future.

TS: Okay. What are they?

NB: I'm worried about when the wars finally do end, we have so many troops coming home who have been operating at a high optempo [operational tempo] for so long; some people are on their sixth deployment now, and they go and they get—you know, they have a certain level of things they have to deal with, or difficulties. You just have to be at a certain level for deployment; you know, a certain mindset. And then you come back; you don't ever fully get to decompress.

At this training I was at, for master resiliency training, they said it takes about thirty-six months to fully decompress from a deployment; so, sometimes they get nine months to a year. Some people get a year or two, and then you go again, and then you come back again; and then you go again, come back again. It's kind of like, maybe, with Fort Hood and deployment, you don't really ever get to process everything. Then when the wars do end is when you come back down from it all, and so I'm really worried for our military then. I know there's a lot of support services and stuff, but I think it's just going to be scary. I'm worried about the TBI, which is kind of new to our war; the traumatic brain injury and mild traumatic brain injury, because the effects of it aren't necessarily seen right away but as people age they degrade faster. So, that's something that's very concerning to me looking thirty, forty, fifty years down the road.

TS: That's true.

NB: Yes, and it also just, kind of, makes me wonder, you know, what is the real outcome that we're looking for in this war? I consider myself blessed and lucky because I don't go to fight the war, I go to support the soldiers. And I really get to do that right at the front line,

and I just—I just love it. I love my job. Just, I love what I do. I love being in the army and military and all of the amazing people I work with. So—But it is hard to figure out, you know, with so many difficult ethical things it's not like there's a clear victory, and I think that's something kind of on a larger level to worry about, you know.

I will say—you asked about trivial things. Sometimes it's taxing to go to school. I try to just share what knowledge and experiences I have. Sometimes it's taxing, though, to go and, yes, deal with—

TS: The mundane?

NB: The mundane, or the more immature; and/or you have to be put in the same situation—you know, you only have one teacher for a class and they teach to the level of the most—more mature, and you've got to deal with that and it's just like, "Really?" Sometimes I think, like "If you were my soldier your arms would be so sore right now." [from doing push-ups, presumably] And I don't like the fact of how disrespectful people are to each other or to their professors. That's very frustrating. Sometimes I—

TS: Did you ever speak out?

NB: Yes, [chuckles] I have. In one chemistry class this girl just kept going on to the professor about, you know, "Are you going to put your slides on Blackboard because I wasn't here some days."

And she said, "No, I have never done that. We're three-quarters of the way into the term. You need to get the notes from somebody else."

"Well, what about this? What about that," and she kept going.

And from across the room I just yelled at her, "Listen. She's not going to do that. Just pay attention, come to class, take notes. If you need copies of notes come see me after class. I will give them to you. Otherwise, we're done. Keep going." And the teacher can't do that, but I can.

TS: I'll tell you which classes I'd like you to sign up for. [both laugh]

NB: And, you know, it's just so funny because some people were in that class and they were like, "Oh yes, I remember you from that."

TS: I think that's an unforgettable moment, yes.

NB: Yes, and it's just, you know—and I hate it. I hate that; that I have that kind of breaking point, but I just cannot tolerate it, and—

TS: I think that's just forthright and—

NB: Yes. One of my classes in the morning the garbage truck would come and pick up the dumpster and it would drop it, and every time it drops it, it sounds like the mortar going off, so I'd jump out of my seat. One of my friends was like, "Yeah, I kind of laughed at you jumping, then I remembered, oh yeah."

It also is very—the hardest part of being in class for me is—you talk about trivial stuff, is in classes where people, I call them class hijackers, and they go off on all these anecdotal tangents. Like, we're learning about nutrition for pregnant women. Then everybody wants to talk about what they did when they were pregnant, and how it was like after they had their baby, and what their uterus did or did not do. I don't care. It is not a teaching point. It is not something that contributes to what the teacher is teaching. It is a discussion that is totally off target and anecdotal; is not relevant. They're stealing my time from learning and from my being able to get knowledge from the teacher. It's just—it just annoys me so bad; so bad. I kind of think it's, you know, a classroom management situation, and I did talk to the professor and from what I understand the classes afterwards have been completely different and that's been very good for people, but—

TS: Good.

NB: —for this one specific class, but for a lot of other courses, just, people, you know, hijacking the class to take it where they want to go, or stupid stuff that should be talked about after class.

TS: Do you sometimes think about how—well, the focus of people's concerns are at such a low level compared to things that you've experienced in your life? You know, like, whatever's not working; the TV isn't working, the, you know.

NB: Yes.

TS: Does that get to you?

NB: Not really.

TS: No?

NB: No.

TS: It doesn't bother you?

NB: Their problems are their problems, not mine.

TS: Yes?

NB: Yes.

TS: That's a good way to look at it.

NB: So, yes, I'm grateful for so much that I have. I really try to feed a positive attitude and a grateful attitude that I can just deflect those things, you know.

TS: Yes.

NB: Like, one of my most favorite things to do is cleaning toilets. I love it. It makes me so happy. Whenever I have a bad day I come home and I clean my toilets because I—when I am, like, scrubbing that cold porcelain it centers me because I think about the poop pond, and I think about sharing a toilet with thirty other women, and I think about overflowed trailer toilets in Manas, and I think about, you know, hot port-a-potties, and pee tubes, and I think about all this stuff, and I just think about how much I love coming back and to a toilet that's mine, and it's porcelain, and clean, and it just makes me happy. [both chuckle]

TS: Well, that might be a good place to end. [both laugh] What do you think?

NB: Let's go out on a high note.

TS: I really appreciate you coming and talking with me today. It's really great.

NB: Thank you. Thank you for all of your time and your interest and your compassion and understanding and caring and being so easily available to open up to too.

TS: Well, I think that your story's really valuable, and I'm really glad that it's part of the collection.

NB: Thank you.

TS: Thanks, Nicole.

[End of Interview]