

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Amber Mathwig

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: June 24, 2014

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is June 24 [2014]. My name is Therese Strohmer. I'm at [Walter Clinton] Jackson Library in Greensboro, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at The University of North Carolina of Greensboro, and I'm here with Amber Mathwig. Amber, could you state the name—your name, the way you'd like it to read on your collection.

AM: Amber Murray Mathwig.

TS: Okay. Okay, well, Amber could you start out by going ahead and tell me a little bit about where you were born, when you were born?

AM: I was born April 12, 1982, in Arlington, Minnesota. That is where my entire family is from; that is where I grew up and spent my life until I joined the military.

TS: Is it a small town?

AM: It's a really small town. Actually, the funny—the funny, not so funny, story about my birth is that my mother was actually one of the nurses at the hospital that I was born at, and my mom ended up hemorrhaging after my birth and, like, it became, like, this story about the day that Amber put the hospital through hell because everybody, of course, was also from this town and lived there and worked there and—

TS: Knew your mom.

AM: —and my mom being a co-worker, just put that much more anxiety on them, that they had to, like, rush her to another hospital, and my dad was actually the person that I spent the majority of my first forty-eight hours with.

TS: Because your mom was in such critical shape?

AM: Yeah, yeah, so my mom—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Did she pull through okay?

AM: She recovered.

TS: Okay.

AM: She recovered. She recovered. She's fine. She was fine within, like, twenty-four hours. They just had to get her to another hospital because we're so limited on services, but, yeah, that's my birth story, I guess.

TS: Do you have any siblings?

AM: I have two older brothers. They are seven and five years older than me.

TS: Okay.

AM: We were—I don't know, I don't think we were, like, ever really close in our life—

TS: Just because of the age difference?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

AM: —just because of the age difference, and they were doing different activities than I was. They took care of me a lot. My fa—My parents worked a lot. My dad owned a restaurant so it was, like, seven day a week job for him.

TS: What kind of restaurant did he have?

AM: A family style.

TS: Okay.

AM: Chicken and burgers and stuff like that. It was—It was really well known. My dad was a very sociable person so it was right up his alley of being able to, like, provide and be social, and he and my mom spent a lot of time doing, like, community work, stuff like that, so.

TS: It's a little—It's a small town.

AM: Yes.

TS: In the Midwest, and you are—What kind of things did you do for fun as a girl growing up?

AM: I was mostly a nerd, and by “nerd” I mean a book nerd.

TS: Okay.

AM: I spent a lot of time by myself reading books; winter, summer, it didn't matter.

TS: What kind of books did you like?

AM: Everything; I read everything. So I was reading, like, R.L. Stine, which was really popular when I was in elementary school, but at the same time reading V.C. Andrews. So it didn't matter, it was just a matter of would my mother take it out of my hand or not, if she thought the book was inappropriate.

TS: Did she do that sometimes?

AM: Occasionally.

TS: Yeah.

AM: Yeah.

TS: Did you get them at the library?

AM: No, I stumbled across a box of Harlequin Romance books in the closet. [laughs]

TS: Oh, really. Where were they from?

AM: I don't know if they were hers or if she—I think—I don't know where she got them from, but—

TS: Yeah.

AM: —she never read them, either, so I don't know why they were in the house, but—

TS: Interesting. So you read a lot. Did you do any outside activities?

AM: I hung out—Like, my neighbors and I would go biking and go on picnics and stuff during the summer, but I wasn't really, like, an athletic kid even though I did some sports in high school and junior high.

TS: Wasn't really, like, what you were all that interested in as much.

AM: Right. I wasn't—I wasn't—This is kind of, like, a reflection, it's definitely not how I felt at the time, but I was not introduced to anything, like, outside of what I was expected to do. So, like—

TS: What were you expected to do?

AM: Just go to school and be an athlete.

TS: Was it—But for the—for the athlete part, was that—had to do, too, because it's such a small town that when they had, like, sporting events they needed to get as many girls as possible to play?

AM: It wasn't so much that. It was that—My school that I grew up in—and this is also a reflection from many of us—is weird, in that academics and athletics and band and choir were all held on the same level with each other. There was no one better than the other. Everybody that did well in one was probably in another, if that makes any sense. Like, we didn't realize at the time that most other schools you tend to fall into, like, one category or another; you don't do all three.

TS: So they wanted to be—you to be more well-rounded, perhaps?

AM: Yeah, well-rounded but just also the hierarchy of being involved in sports and stuff like that, so there's good aspects to it, there's negative aspects to it.

TS: What do you think are the negative?

AM: That if you're not good at sports, or you're not good, then you're less. So just because—I mean—

TS: You're not valued as much?

AM: Yeah, you're not valued as much. I was—I enjoyed being on the teams and I was always, like, most spirited or most supportive but I was not good, by any means, so. That was, kind of, like, I guess my introduction to being part of that teamwork without having to be the star, so.

TS: How about—Did you do anything like 4-H or Girl Scouts or anything like that?

AM: I did Girl Scouts; I hated that.

TS: Hated it?

AM: I hated dance class. Actually, I hated almost all this, like, really super girly stuff that my mom made me do. And I don't—It's not even like she was like, "Oh, you have to be in dance." It was, "Well, dance is really the only option to be in."

TS: Why?

AM: I took karate for a little bit, and we still disagree about this, but karate and dance were moved to the same night and I wanted to do karate and my mom swears that I said I wanted to do dance because that's where the girls were. There wasn't other peers, really, in karate. It was, like, a small group of a variance of ranges[?], whereas dance class was a large group of my classmates, so. But, yeah, we disagree on—

TS: [chuckles]

[Speaking Simultaneously]

AM: But I actually chose—

TS: On memory of that.

AM: Yeah, what I actually chose and what I was pushed to do, so. I guess—Yeah, so I grew up, like, being told to do these girly things or being told to be involved in, like, these girly things or traditional gender role type of things and I don't really do any of that. [chuckles]

TS: Well, did you enjoy school itself?

AM: No.

TS: Not at all?

AM: No, I was always an outsider.

TS: Why?

AM: I don't know.

TS: How—Upon reflection, as you said earlier, what—what kind of things made you an outsider?

AM: Not wanting to be in—Not wanting to be like everybody else. Like I said, I wasn't really interested in dance. I really wasn't—I really didn't like Girl Scouts. I was awkward so I didn't start relationships very well with people; I didn't maintain relationships very well with people. I was often discluded [excluded] purposefully and non-purposefully so that as I got older it made that even worse; that I didn't want to, like, be in—talk to people. I had a group of friends. A couple of them were very reliable individuals; most of them were not. So out of the ninety-some people that I went to school with my entire life I still maintain one friendship. And that does not even include my cousin who—we're still friendly with each other but we're not friends by any means, even though we grew up together.

TS: What did you think as a girl, then? Do you remember as a young girl thinking about, like, what you really wanted to do, or—

AM: I just wanted to leave. I just always had these ideas—This is really weird. So I always had these ideas of, like, picking up and just leaving; like packing a car and going somewhere. But I also at the same time require stability and support, and that's something that I've learned more as an adult. I didn't realize that that's why it was so hard to do as a kid, or when I was, like, eighteen, nineteen years old. I wanted to leave but I couldn't.

TS: You mean you couldn't because of those other feelings?

AM: Yeah, and I didn't understand what was holding me back. So I guess joining the military provided me with that stability to be able to leave after all those years of wanting to leave that community.

TS: When did you start thinking about joining the military?

AM: September 11, 2001. So I—

TS: How old were you then?

AM: Nineteen.

TS: What were you doing at that time?

AM: I was working at an insurance company. And the insurance company was based in Minneapolis or outside of Minneapolis, and the headquarters was in Boston, and the other office was in California. So we had these relationships with these people who lived in Boston and we had these relationships with these people who lived in California, and my co-worker came up to me and was, like—she listened to the news every morning—and she's like, "A plane just hit the World Trade Center." Yeah. And I guess because I read so much, like, I already knew that it was a terrorist act before the second plane even hit and before people were like, "Oh, what is going on here?"
"It's terrorism."

And about an hour—two hours—sometime be—sometime, probably, like, early afternoon, we found out that the—one of the—he was kind of like a CEO—he was the medical director of our insurance company—his wife had been on one of the planes. And it's really awkward, my mom and I worked at the same company, and she had actually been on a teleconference with him at the time that he has the news on, on silent in his office back in Boston, and he basically, like, watched her plane go into the [Twin] Towers.

TS: But he didn't know at the time that it was her plane?

AM: No, he didn't know at the time that it was her plane, but, like—

TS: Later.

AM: He knew that he had dropped her off at the airport that morning and that she was on the—on a plane.

TS: Right.

AM: But not knowing anything else about it. But—So, yeah, that was kind of like a big effect, and I don't know if it—Around that time I was like, "I'm going to join the military." It was, like, just a automatic decision.

TS: Had you thought about it before then?

AM: Not really. My—I had really high ASVAB [Armed Forces Vocational Aptitude Battery test] scores so I got a lot of calls from recruiters and my dad would always, like, take their information, put it on a Post-it note [small piece of paper with a re-adherable strip of glue on its back], put the Post-it note up on the wall, and not say anything, because it wasn't—it wasn't anything that he was going to push for.

TS: When did you take the ASVAB?

AM: In junior year of high school; it's required in Minnesota.

TS: Oh, it is?

AM: Yeah. I don't know if it's a federal requirement but it's required in—

TS: Oh, okay; I hadn't realize that.

AM: Yeah—Minnesota, that you—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So—

AM: —everybody takes the ASVAB.

TS: So they had been recruiting you.

AM: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

AM: Yeah.

TS: Had you—Was anybody in your family in the military that you're aware—you were aware of?

AM: My cousin was in the navy in the early 90's. My dad's four brothers all served during the Vietnam era. My grandfather served as the—the army air force [United States Army Air Forces]—before the air force—as an ambulance driver. Nineteen—

TS: World War II?

AM: Yeah, so, 1942, 1943 timeframe. And of course, all of his brothers served, but it's not really, like, a family thing to be in the military. So my cousin and my cousin's husband have sin—joined a couple—the guard a couple years after I did and one is still de—He's on deployment right now, actually; he's volunteered; I don't know why. I have opinions that aren't very popular, but [chuckles]—The other—My cousin's husband was like, "No, I'm done." After, like, three deployments in five years he's like, "I'm done." It's kind of become a family thing, but not really.

TS: Well, so when 9/11 happened and you start—you're starting to think about joining—

AM: Yes.

TS: —how soon after did you sign up?

AM: I went on a military website that night and just filled out my information to be blanketly [in a manner that covers all of the things under consideration] given to recruiters. I want to say it was about six weeks before a recruiter called. And I didn't have any specific service that I wanted to join but the navy called first and that's who I ended up going with.

TS: Did you look at any of the other services?

AM: Yeah, I did. I didn't like my navy recruiter very much, so—

TS: So how did you settle on it?

AM: [laughs] I would say that they tried to—they made it seem like they rectified the issues that I had with them. I don't think that they really did but I kept going with the navy; I had already been to MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Station]. I had looked at the [United States] Marines for, like, a minute. I was not interested in the air force; I was not interested in the army, really.

TS: What was it that—What things about the [U.S.] Army and the [U.S.] Air Force and Marine Corps didn't—did you not—

AM: I don't recall at all.

TS: No?

AM: No.

TS: Just that—Do you recall what attracted you to the navy?

AM: It just—seriously was just that they called first.

TS: Really?

AM: Yeah, and then I started the process with them and then I stuck with them, so.

TS: So you felt, like, committed.

AM: Yeah, kind of committed. They used their little blanket threats of, "Oh, you've already started signing[?] the—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So they intimidated you.

AM: Yeah, they intimidated me a little bit.

TS: Okay.

AM: The problem that I had with them is actually that they encouraged me to lie about some stuff in my past in order to pass the MEP Station, and then—

TS: Do you want to talk about what that was?

AM: Not really.

TS: Okay.

AM: My—And then my recruiter, like, freaked out on me because I didn't get qualified the first time around because, being a male in the military, he assumed that I was on birth control to prevent getting pregnant, and not to manipulate my period, which was what I needed it for at the time that I was taking it. So that was a disqualification that I had to go and get a doctor's letter for. So he's like, "I—" He's, like, not really, like, yelling at me but like, "Why did we waste our time coming up to the MEPS Station. Why didn't you tell me this?"

"Well, you never told me."

TS: Why would you know to say anything about it?

AM: Yeah.

TS: Right.

AM: "Why would I know to say something about this if you never thought beyond—"

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Why you were on birth control.

AM: "—She was just—She's just a nineteen year old slut," so. Which was interesting because I wasn't sleeping with anybody at nineteen, but that's a whole other story.

TS: What did your friends and family think about you wanting to sign up?

AM: It was very post-9/11. "Yeah, that's wonderful; you're going protect our country." I didn't—Like I said, my dad had always taken the recruiting information, kind of—My dad knew me very well so I would say that he knew that I would eventually take that route because he knew that I wasn't happy doing what I was doing.

TS: And maybe it would give you opportunities that you were looking for?

AM: Right, right.

TS: Did your mom feel the same way?

AM: My mom's a mom, nervous about me and everything, but I think she was fine with it.

TS: And your brothers?

AM: Yeah, they didn't care. [chuckles]

TS: No.

AM: Either way, they didn't care; at least not that they ever expressed.

TS: Okay. And your friends?

AM: At that point—Between the time that I started the MEPS process and the time that I actually left I lost all my friends due to an argument that was actually instigated by them, and then they pretty much told me how they all felt when they scheduled a graduation party after I had already put out the information of my parents hosting a going away party on the same date. So that goes back to I only have the one true friend from the group that I hung out with, plus a few other people that I was in high school with that I'm still friendly with and everything.

TS: So you were ready to go?

AM: Yeah, I was ready to go.

TS: Did you—When you signed up, did you have—did you get to pick a vocation or skills or anything like that?

AM: I was such an easy recruit. I pretty much was like, "I want to do medical or law enforcement."
And they were like, "Oh, look, we have these ten thousand new jobs for law enforcement in the navy." So there was—There was no work on their path[?] to recruit me into a job.

TS: So you went into law enforcement?

AM: Yes.

TS: Were there anything—Like, why did you—were you interested in those two fields?

AM: I thought that's what I wanted to do, was law enforcement overall with medical as a backup. I was a volunteer EMT [emergency medical technician] at the time. I—Being raised in a—the household that I was in, which was very community-centered type of stuff, I had, kind of, a glorified version of what law enforcement might look like.
But, on the other hand, I had never successfully fired a gun in my life so this ended up being a problem later on in school, but my supervisor's husband, like, took me

to the gun range a couple of weeks before I left for boot camp and got me comfortable with guns.

TS: When you say you'd never successfully fired one, does that mean you attempted to fire one before basic training.

AM: Yeah, I had—Another one of those, like, required things that everybody does in my home town is once you hit the age of being able to get a fire—a gun permit for hunting, everybody goes to fire safety—or firearm safety school.

TS: How did that turn out for you?

AM: It was a joke that I had pointed a gun at my neighbor who happened to be our chief of police at the time. Which I actually did but it wasn't loaded, so. [chuckles] I think I fired a shotgun that day but I completely missed the target. But, yeah, they have you fire a shotgun a couple of times and walk around with—working on safety stuff as if you were out hunting with people. Which is weird, because I never would have gone hunting.

TS: Yeah, but they just wanted to familiarize you—

AM: Yeah.

TS: —with it.

AM: Yeah.

TS: As you said, it was one of the things that you did at—in that community.

AM: Yeah, just something that you did. Right.

TS: So you decided to join the military after 9/11.

AM: Yes.

TS: And what do—Do you know what your motivation was at the time? Was it just to get out? Was it a—Was it patriotism?

AM: I want to say it was mostly patriotism, based on the timing, but also, knowing the long-term benefits and know—having this idea of, "Oh, this time next year I can be living somewhere else." Stuff like that.

TS: It was a combination—

AM: Yeah.

TS: —of things. Well, tell me a little bit then about when you went to your basic training. You said you went to [Naval Station] Great Lakes [Illinois].

AM: Yes.

TS: So it wasn't far away.

AM: No. It was in the summer. So I left May 20 of 2002, and the first day was so bad because I never knew when we were going to have to provide a urine sample and I had never done one before MEPS so I was really nervous about having to, like, provide this urine sample, so I kept holding my urine even though I had to pee.

TS: What were you worried about?

AM: Just being able to provide the sample and not having to, like—

TS: Pee on demand, sort of thing.

AM: Yeah, being able to pee on demand, which, after ten years I can pee on demand being dehydrated, so. [both chuckle] So that was kind of like—boot camp ended up being, in my opinion, easy. There was a lot of issues that—just issues of being in a compartment; that's what our barracks were called. Their barracks were called ships and then the rooms with—inside the barracks are called compartments because that's what they'd be called on a ship.

So just being with all those different women and all these different attitudes and backgrounds and just very interesting. Like, that was probably more challenging than anything that they actually told us to do.

TS: Dealing with the other women.

AM: Yeah, dealing with the other women. There was—There were people who purposefully antagonized others. There were people who really just, like—we had a—Maybe she was crazy? We had a girl, like, a week in like, "This isn't for me. I see ghosts at night." Like, getting up and sleepwalking. I made a couple of friends through boot camp. I got some sort of infection that pretty much resulted in me getting my tonsils removed a year later, because I ended up with, I think, eight ear infections—or throat infections the first year in the military, so just, like, a reflection on the type of environment that we were living in and that we were passing all these germs; it was so gross.

Our [RDC, Recruit Division Commander] one was a E-7 female, so chief petty officer; one was an E-6 [petty officer first class] male, self-described redneck; and the other one was a E-5 [petty officer second class] male who—He wasn't around as much. I think that was—because they go through these rotations where they work together but, like, two of them take charge and the third one is kind of like a person who's allowed to have a little bit more family time.

TS: Okay.

AM: Because—So they go through these rotations, so I think he was on his rotation of “you're allowed to have more personal time this time around” so he wasn't around as much. And the female was, like, my first—her and the female that was in our sister division, they were kind of like my first introduction to all women with super—seniority in the military are bitches. Just the way that—Just the way that they carried themselves or were thought of to have carried themselves. The male, the E-6 male—wish I could remember his name—he was actually, like, the nicest out of all the males that we were—that were in and out of our barracks, even though he was extremely sexist, and he was, like, on his third marriage, he had two kids of the same age that were from different mothers [chuckles], and it was like—He was a self-described redneck, like, “This is why I am the way that I am.” But—So that was kind of, like, interesting, too, that we knew so much about him personally even though, like, he was this senior position to us and supposed to be in this, like, training environment.

They—Like I said, the most challenging part was dealing with the other females. Really, coming from my background of primarily a white community, being around black people for the first time, like—in a personal environment, not just passing on the street. Hispanics. We had a lot of Caribbean people. That's really popular in the navy, like, I don't know if it is so much in the other services but a lot of people from the Caribbean join the navy. So just all those different attitudes.

TS: It's the first time you'd been around all these different—

AM: Yeah.

TS: People who were from different background and cultures.

AM: Yeah.

TS: And socio-economic statuses—

AM: Yeah.

TS: —and things like that. Was that just, like—That was a challenge for you?

AM: It wasn't a challenge for me; it was a challenge for me to, like, watch how other people interacted with each other. Like, maybe it was challenging for me, I don't know.

TS: Were you making any friends?

AM: I made a couple of friends. They were kind of like me. I want to say one was from Wisconsin, had been raised as a Lutheran. I made friends with one of the Caribbean women; she braided everybody's hair so tight every other day or so that, like, you basically had a face lift.

TS: [chuckles]

AM: There were people that I was just friendly with. There was one—There were definitely women that I avoided talking to completely.

TS: Why?

AM: Because they—Some of them were bad people; just bad people in general.

TS: What did they do in basic that gave you that impression?

AM: They would antagonize other people. They would, like, find that little button that they could press and they would press it until they cried, so. Some of these women that I was with in boot camp, we all went to MA [Master at Arms] school together, so—to our training together, and then we became better friends on top of that, but.

TS: Now, were the academics difficult?

AM: I don't—I didn't think so.

TS: You just learned about the navy mostly, right?

AM: We learned about the navy, the re—the reorientation process of how you're supposed to act; the words that you're supposed to use. I don't ever recall anything being difficult for me.

TS: Even physically?

AM: Yeah, I was extremely fat and out of shape but, I mean, as far as the standards that they were enforcing upon us, it really wasn't that difficult. I did not—I did not get into better shape in boot camp.

TS: No?

AM: No. I didn't lose any weight, I didn't—anything like that. Everyone else is, like, losing weight and getting stronger and I'm just like, "La-de-da-de-da," but.

TS: What are you thinking while you're in there, while you're in basic training? Thinking was it still a good choice or were you—

AM: Yeah, it was still a good choice. I just kind of took it in stride like, "Okay, this isn't hard. This is something I can do. We just—It's only, I think, nine weeks long." So just ready to move on to the next thing.

TS: Well, when you talked about the female leaders in positions of authority as being bitches, was that—

AM: Right.

TS: —like, the perception of them or is that how you perceived them?

AM: That's how I perceived them.

TS: Okay. What were they doing to make you feel that way?

AM: That they had to scream to listen. [chuckles] This is so weird because this ended up happening twelve years later, too—ten years later—that—What I remember really clearly about the chief petty officer is that she would occasionally join us for PT [physical training] but she would not PT, she would just scream at us to PT, and it was kind of like, "Well, why are you even here? You're not going to lead—You're not going to lead by example." And that was something that I saw.

TS: Again, that intimidation factor to, kind of—

AM: It wasn't even intimidating, it was just she was not leading by example and that stuck out to me, that something as simple as PT. And I saw that several times over my life in the military and actually just recently too. And maybe it's sticking out because it is women and I don't think we're in a position to be able to only speak and not do when it comes to physical training. But, like, other women being either—choosing the easy route or choosing to not participate at all but telling everyone else that they have to.

TS: That just rankles you.

AM: Yeah, it does, because, I made—I had to change a lot about myself in order to be successful in the military, so. Learning to shoot firearms—Actually becoming really good with the basic weapons that we were issued with, and becoming—being able to PT and stuff like that. I have ran [in] boots against my better wishes because I knew that doing that would set up a—kind of like a hierarchy of this is somebody that can be respected, because I was teaching classes primarily of men, so—and a lot of them were either of my same rank or higher ranking than me so I had to, like, set myself up to be thought of as better than them.

TS: And that's one way that you did it?

AM: Yeah. Running them in boots for two to three miles, so. They were given the option of boots or tennis shoes and instructors wore boots.

TS: Now, had you been away from home before?

AM: Yeah, I had gone on a youth exchange trip when I was fifteen so I was gone for seven weeks at that time. I had gone with my aunt to Europe for three weeks after I graduated from high school.

TS: Where'd you go?

AM: Germany, Aus—Amsterdam, that was really about it. We bounced around Germany a lot. Oh, and Austria; stayed with some friends in Austria.

TS: Did that give you a taste of, like, being in a different culture and a sense of adventure or anything by doing that?

AM: Yeah, I guess so. We grew up with a lot of exchange students coming in and out of our house, so.

TS: Oh, you did?

AM: So, different cultures was—

TS: That you were familiar with.

AM: Yeah, I was very familiar with it. I was probably more familiar with other cultures outside the U.S. than other cultures within the U.S. And I've never really been homesick; like, I don't understand homesickness. I don't know what to explain about that. I just—It's like I'm someplace that I have to be. I guess the closest I've ever come to being homesick was actually after I moved here, that I no longer was moving with the navy. Like, moving with the navy was very easy. Like I said, I needed stability even if I didn't want to be in the same—around my family and everything. It was not necessarily about my family, but in the navy I was provided, like, the certain stability and this preset group of potential friends and all of that.

TS: So it gave you a sense of stability but also independence—

AM: Yes.

TS: —at the same time.

AM: Yes.

TS: And then when you moved here for that stability—

AM: It was gone.

TS: It was gone. But your independence was still there.

AM: No, I had to ask my mom for money. [laughs]

TS: Oh, so you're in this—kind of a flux period—

AM: Right.

TS: —after having been on your own for a while.

AM: Yes.

TS: Yeah. After you graduated from basic—Now, did anybody attend your graduation?

AM: My parents did.

TS: Did they?

AM: Yes.

TS: And then after you did that, where did you go?

AM: [Lackland Air Force Base] San Antonio, Texas, for Master-At-Arms "A" School.
[specialized law enforcement duty training]

TS: And how was that?

AM: It was interesting. We were there from June—July—We were there from July through October, which is five months, and we were only supposed to be there for three months because the navy was so backlogged on people needing orders because they had upped this force. They had gone—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: This is 2002, right?

AM: Yeah, this is 2002. So they had exponentially increased this force of Master-At-Arms and Master-At-Arms were now coming in as, like, E-1 [seaman recruit], whereas previously they had to be converted [?] after becoming an E-3 [seaman] or an E-4 [petty officer third class], so there was just this whole backlog of individuals to place and pay for to get places.

TS: You were in—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

AM: So it kind of—

TS: —class the whole time? You were, like, in a status—

AM: We were just—

TS: —of waiting?

AM: Yeah.

TS: And that's what they do, make work for you and things like that?

AM: Yeah, like, literal waiting. Like, "We don't care if we don't have any work for you all to do today. You are going to sit here and do nothing." There was a lot of—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Are you very good at doing that?

AM: No. There was a lot of—There was a lot of smoking and playing card games, which is kind of like part of the military lifestyle; smoking and drinking and playing card games late at night and just kind of, like, partying a little bit. The three months that we were in school—two months—I think it was two months of school and three months of waiting—oh, that's forever. [chuckles] Didn't seem like that long at the time. But the—While we were in school was okay. A lot of rules, just being tired. I mean, it was Texas in the summertime so being tired at the end of the day; a lot of shopping. Most of us, this was the most money that we had had regularly incoming and our meals were being provided for us and our boarding was being provided for us, so a lot of shopping and movies and dinners out after class.

TS: What were you—I'm sorry. Go ahead.

AM: It was like a mix of new recruits and, like, older people. Either people that had gotten converted [?] or people that had left the military and were now coming back in after 9/11, so those—It was kind of a weird environment, too, because everybody was technically on the same level as a student but also people being more mature and having actually been in the military.

One of my friends that I made there, she was in the K9 handler's school [specialized dog handler training] and she was the first one that I heard say, like, "It doesn't matter what you look like anymore, every woman in the military—every—," she didn't say beautiful because that wasn't the word that she used, that's another word that I

heard down the range in the same sentence, like "Every woman in the military is beautiful," but hers was more along the line of like, "Every woman in the military is considered a sex object." And she had been out in the fleet for, like, a year and a half, two years at that point and was now back at K9 school and she—like, she's the one that taught us about all of that, just from, like, a matter of fact, "This is what I've been experiencing in the last two years."

TS: Did she tell you anything about what to—what to expect?

AM: No.

TS: No?

AM: Just—Yeah, just like that whole, "You're now a sex—You're now a sex object." But kind of like making a joke out of all of it—

TS: Right.

AM: —at the same time.

TS: But not really get into it.

AM: Yeah. Yeah, not getting into, like, "This is what actually goes on," but.

TS: Well, how are your housing arrangements now?

AM: We lived in barracks, two people to a room; shared bathrooms.

TS: How was that?

AM: It was fine. I had a roommate that I stayed friends with for a while. Actually, I think I had two roommates. I had one girl that was almost done with school and then the other girl that came in, we were there for the same amount of time.

TS: Transitioning through?

AM: Yeah.

TS: So you felt like you did good in this training?

AM: I almost failed out because of the weapons training.

TS: Okay. Well, talk about that.

AM: So, I—

TS: You kind of talked a little bit about it earlier but didn't get into detail.

AM: [chuckles] I just—I wasn't afraid of the weapon, I just didn't know how to hold the weapon. Like, I couldn't even shoot enough of the paper to get, like, a minimum qualifying score. And it was very upsetting to me because I got held back a week, which actually was fine because I ended up liking my—It kind of expanded my group of friends, and it put me in class with this fleet returnee who had actually been an army vet. And we hated each other but, of course, we ended up becoming friends by the end of class. He just kind of, like, again, taught me some of that no-nonsense stuff about the military.

TS: Like what?

AM: I can't even remember now. Just—The way we became friends was really weird. I had to—I had lost my ID [identification] card—No, my ID card had cracked in half and I was told I had to go get a new one but the ID card station was too far away from the barracks to walk, so he just gave me his car keys. We don't even like each other and he just gives me his car keys. And I go and I can't find the place so the next day he drives me over there and he sits there with me and we just talk the whole time about, like, his experiences that he's already had having been in the army and stuff like that.

And I guess—I guess that's one of the things that he taught me, like, it doesn't matter what you think of each other, you're still supposed to help each other out. So, like, after that and after he knew that I was trustworthy and I would always put gas in his car, if he was—Whether he needed something or whether I needed something he would just be like, "Here's the keys, go get it," because he knew that I would come back and—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Wouldn't trash is car or—

AM: —there'd be gas in the car and I'd pick up his cigarettes and stuff like that. And that was, like, just a certain amount of freedom to have on the base. And that actually played out several times in my career where people would just be like, "I don't know you but I'm going to help you," and I tried to turn around and do that to other people as well; "I don't know you but I'm going to help you."

TS: It's like a mentoring?

AM: Not so much mentoring because I think mentoring is a long-term thing, but going with that—"This could be good or bad, depending on the situation." Going with that idea of we're all in the same situations; we're all going to help each other.

TS: You're part of a team.

AM: Yeah, part of a team.

TS: Who was it that helped you with your qualification for the weapons training?

AM: It would have had to have been the instructors. They were just really patient and they knew that I had purposefully picked the job and it wasn't just something, like, another random, "You don't know what you want to do so, here, go to this school." I had already shown that I was really smart and able to take tests well and speak well and process well and everything. I just couldn't get this, like, firearms thing, so they probably gundeked [to falsify reports, records] the scores to tell you the truth, but the second time around I did slightly better and I passed, and it wasn't until probably the next year, again, having shown some initiative in asking our firearms instructors at my first command were like, "Look, if you want to, you can come out to the range on every range date that we have." And they had a whole bunch of them scheduled several weeks in a row, so every other Tuesday when I wasn't at work I was at the range with them helping with cleanup and mustering everybody and stuff like that, but also getting that extra fire time in when there wasn't a lot of people there getting a lot of detailed one-on-one time.

So it took me about, I think, six, seven weeks of doing that to actually become better than okay, to actually be proficient. And that ended up carrying into later on when I became a firearms instructor that I felt like I had a better—I was—I was a calmer instructor, I didn't just hand a weapon to somebody, expect them to know how to use it. And I would tell the females, "Look, I don't care that you say you can't shoot. Like, I couldn't shoot the broad side of a barn either and now I'm an expert, so." I felt like that really just played into how I dealt with people in training over time, having had to push myself completely out of my comfort zone to be good at my job.

TS: Right. You didn't start out really good at it.

AM: Right.

TS: And then when you're teaching someone after having gone through this process you sometimes are a better teacher.

AM: Yeah. I think—I would say most of the time I was a better teacher.

TS: Yeah.

AM: As far as the teaching somebody to be accurate and comfortable with the weapon. Maybe not so much with, like, nomenclature, and I couldn't rattle off histories of guns, which, by the way, is really interesting. Guys in the military find out that you're a firearms instructor they do one of two things. They either call you out and say, "That's a bunch of bullshit," or they assume that you're a gun enthusiast who knows, like, the history of weapons from 1776 to now, so there was no midline, like—

TS: You didn't fit into either one of those categories.

AM: No, I didn't fit into either of those categories. Like, I could care less about any of the weapons that we're not using. Like, these four or five weapons that we were using for security purposes, I can teach you how to break them down and clean them and fire them accurately and tell you what to fix and make you comfortable with using that weapon and tell you when is the appropriate time to use it and make you comfortable with making that decision, but, no, I can't tell you the history about it. I don't care. [chuckles]

TS: That's the pragmatic part of the learning process.

AM: Right, right. It didn't really matter. So, like, are you going to say, "Well, we used to use the 1911 Colt," when somebody's charging you?

TS: Yeah, it's not that important.

AM: Right.

TS: Did you—So you made it through the Master-At-Arms training.

AM: Yes.

TS: And then did you sign up for your next duty station or did they just throw something out?

AM: They, kind of, just threw stuff at us.

TS: Okay.

AM: Again, going back to, like, the money and all that, the—Everybody got sent in groups. Anybody that was married or had ch—dependent children stayed in the U.S., everybody else got sent overseas in groups. So there was, like, fifty of us, I swear, over a three week graduation period that went to Sasebo, Japan [United States Fleet Activities Sasebo]. And at the same time, because there were so many people being processed, this whole other group from Virginia, same thing. About thirty to forty people from this school in Virginia that was being led by civilians and very little military leadership went to Sasebo, Japan.

TS: Wait. Other people were being trained by—in a different place?

AM: Yes.

TS: For the same job.

AM: Yes. And there was—

TS: Is that because of the whole number of people going through? They opened another school or something?

AM: Yeah, yeah. And there was—I bring up the difference because there was a huge amount of difference in the way that we had been socialized to be in this job and the way they had been socialized to be in this job and to be in the military.

TS: What was the difference?

AM: So, like, we had actually been in the military training environment. They had been under military regulations in a civilian training environment. So there was just—And those people could complete—Actually I don't think they did disagree; I think for the most part they did agree. They just acted differently. They knew—They didn't know as much as we knew as far as the school because we had the older people that had already been in the military; they did not have that. So they hadn't—They hadn't been given, like, that camaraderie with senior people like we had been. Just little things like that ended up being, kind of, a big difference.

TS: How did it affect the job?

AM: In the end it came down to individuals, as far as who was good at their job and who wasn't, but they had—I felt like we were ahead of the game. We were more ready to be introduced to this job than people who had been to this other school. And it wasn't like—And it was something as simple as like, "Okay we have a hundred people graduating boot camp on Friday, let's pick names out of a hat to see who's going where." It was as simple as that type of decision was made on who was going where to be trained. I think that was a—that was definitely a good thing of fate on my part to have gone to—

TS: To the other one?

AM: Yeah, to have gone to the original school, not the—

TS: Do you think they were missing, like, the cultural aspect of the navy and—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

AM: Part of the culture, yeah.

TS: And so, that, kind of, made it more difficult for them to transition—

AM: Yes.

TS: —when they actually got on the job?

AM: Yes.

TS: Okay. Well, so how was Japan? Tell me about that.

AM: Japan was interesting. So much waiting time; always so much waiting time. So because, again, we had to have—We had to have our uniforms, which were not the standard issue navy uniform; we were being given the green BDUs [battle dress uniforms]. So we had to wait for uniforms, we had to wait for gun belts, and we had to wait for all this other stuff that you should have before you go stand in post, and they didn't have any of that for us so we just kind of, like, sat around for a while waiting to at least get the uniform.

TS: Oh, you're in Japan?

AM: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

AM: They didn't have the money for it; spending in the military. But—

TS: This was, like, the end of 2002?

AM: Yeah, November of 2002. Actually got there, like, two days before Thanksgiving. I spent my first Thanksgiving in the military eating at a Japanese restaurant.

TS: How was that?

AM: It was fun. It's a good memory. I still say something about the people that I was with that day all these years later just because it was a good memory for all of us and it was—we'd all—Most of us had come from "A" school together and the people that had already been there a few weeks had made a couple of friends so it was like, "Okay, let's go do this."

The—Getting into the job, it, like, quickly became apparent that there was nothing exciting about it; like, "We're standing post. Yay. We're calling dispatch on everything and nothing at the same time." Those first few months, just trying to get all those people that had just graduated from "A" school into a job, and getting these sections that previously had been, like, five or ten people and now were, like, forty people, getting them to function and work. We had some really, really horrible individuals in our security department. We were being led by a guy who probably spent more time putting hairspray on his head than he did actually being a leader in our department. The first couple of security officers that I had were—I don't want to say horrible people, but just horrible security officers. The second one was a—practically a baby. He was a flight officer but he was Japanese-American and therefore his ability to be bilingual with the community was more important as far as the base was concerned, so I guess—

TS: You mean than his skills on the job?

AM: Yeah, than his skills on the job. Because he was able to go out to all these events and—

TS: He's a liaison, really, then.

AM: Yeah, he should have been a PAO [Public Affairs Officer], not a security officer. So it took us a while to start getting people in our department that were actually there to lead us than just people that were in these jobs.

Oh, this is kind of important, I guess, talking about that. So the security officer position prior to 2005, 2006, was kind of like a shore duty for SWOs [surface warfare officer] and flight officers who otherwise might not have the opportunity to be on shore duty. It was not until, like, this 2005, 2006, timeframe that they started realizing, "Maybe we should actually have security people doing the job of a security officer." So that, I think, started to make a difference overall in how commands were working. Not just like the commands that I experienced but how other commands were experiencing also. Actually, like, feeling the person that is in this position of power over you has been in your position.

TS: Well, talk about—When you're in Japan and you get—you have your uniform and you're working, what's a typical day like?

AM: [chuckles] Getting up. We worked fifteen days a month, so we worked two on, two off, three on, two off, plus training Tuesdays.

TS: How many hours when you were working?

AM: They were twelve hour shifts but we would have to do guard mount [pre-shift official formation] an hour beforehand, and it would take up to an hour, hour and a half, to do dismount at the end of the day, so they're about fifteen hour shifts, including the entire time that you're there. We were mostly on post for three hours and then patrolling for three hours, on post for three hours, patrolling for three hours type of thing.

TS: You rotated.

AM: Yeah, and it kind of just, like, swayed with how many posts were required.

TS: How big was the base?

AM: Not very big, but there was a lot of assets [?]. Like, the actual base itself was small but there's a lot of out-lying assets which just increase the amount of the time that we had to travel to get to these posts and everything, so it could be like a sixteen hour day sometimes. The—It took a couple of months but I started sitting dispatch, and then depending on who was our supervisor at the time, because our supervisors were constantly being changed, I would sit dispatch a lot because I basically tried to take care

of everybody, tried to keep the post hours even. If people needed to go to the bathroom, I would get somebody out there.

That was another thing I learned about leadership; like, which leaders were willing to give bathroom breaks when you were short-handed. You think it's like a little thing, like, "Oh, I have to go to the bathroom. I'm going to go to the bathroom." But when you're standing on a post, you don't have that option to just go to the bathroom, unless you want to pee in a cup. Which I occasionally had to tell people to do.

I learned that the better leaders were the ones that, knowing we were shorthanded, or knowing that we would really be busy, would go and put a gun belt on and put a gun on, and go out and do bathroom breaks for people. That was just part of their mentality of taking care of everyone, and that would show in how they took care of people overall.

But, yeah, so I spent a lot of time in dispatch just kind of, like, running the show at the—with the watch commander. And that had, like, its pros and cons to it. There was definitely some power issues on—I would say more from the guys. Like, I don't like that you're in dispatch, and it would either be—because it ended up—It ended up kind of becoming a pregnancy post. A girl's pregnant, she can't do anything besides dispatch and that generally means that you suck. [chuckles] If that's the only reason that you're doing it, is because you can't do anything else, or I don't like that I'm being bossed around by this girl. So it had its challenges and it had—

TS: How were you treated?

AM: I would say that most people just thought I was bossy.

TS: Were you?

AM: No, it was just me; I was just taking care of everybody. I always thought ahead; I always thought outside the box, I think. I don't know, I just always knew what needed to be done.

TS: Did you like this job better than you liked being on post?

AM: Not necessarily; I liked doing all of it. I like being in supervisory positions over being the one that has to—is being given—

TS: The orders?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

AM: —the orders to do and everything, but I—

TS: Why was it that you liked that?

AM: Just because I felt like I did take care of everybody better. It really always comes back to taking care of everybody. Because I felt like other people would just ignore certain people, and to me it really didn't matter if I liked you or not, it was going to come down to, "What do we need to happen right now? Who's the most capable? Who needs training?" Stuff like that.

TS: Some played favorites and things like that.

AM: Yeah, like, I didn't play favorites. I would just—I thought of what needed to be done.

TS: Was there anything—How was the breakdown gender wise? I mean, how many females were at the—

AM: There was—

TS: —in the—in this job?

AM: In my section photo—Maybe I can send you that photo. Somebody has it on Facebook. There's me, Jen—I think there's four or five females in our section photo and our section is about twenty-five to thirty people. So no—There were no female leadership at the time that this photo was taken. Towards the end of my time there we had some female leadership but the—my brother section or my sister section—whichever word you want to use—we had the same work days and the same off days, but they worked nights, we worked days, or vice versa. They, for the first several months, had no females; they refused to take them. They said, "No women will ever be in our section."

And I think that not putting a single female in there by themselves was probably a good idea on the part of the command, but at the same time just feeding into them saying, "We're bros and we're always going to be bros," because these guys were the biggest assholes and they harassed all the females. They harassed me. They came up with the most off-the-wall, non-existent regulations all the time. Just basically really feeding into that whole "women are useless and don't belong here" type of mentality, that when they finally did get females in their section, even though I think the leadership was different, the young people had already, like, absorbed that mentality.

TS: Of being anti-women?

AM: Yeah, of being anti-women in the section; that women are less for some reason. But I think we had been there for eight or nine months when we had our first carrier visit, and it's a big deal because we're just this small little base and the amount of people on a carrier is significantly more than the amount of people on the base. So it's important starboard watch sections [?], and we found that the guys were, like, purposefully antagonizing people.

TS: Which guys?

AM: The guys out on patrol.

TS: Who were they antagonizing?

AM: Like, the people off the carrier; people that had been out drinking, and maybe they're getting a little loud in the—

TS: So it was like a power play kind of thing?

AM: Yeah, it was like a power play and we were like—it was really easy to see that they were kind of, like, antagonizing—

TS: Like trying to provoke something.

AM: Right, so that they could respond to it. Whereas the women were kind of like, "Hey, why don't we calm down?" And that ended up becoming, like, a thing where if you wanted to break up a fight, like, send a woman in because 90% of the time these guys are fighting at two o'clock in the morning because they're frigging bored; they didn't find a woman to talk to. So, like, if you would send two girls out to break up a fight or to, like, find out why this fight was going on it would go so well, so many times. [laughs] If you, like, send out guys you never knew what was going to happen.

I'm not saying that's [unclear] all the guys were like that but a lot of them.

TS: The testosterone [unclear]?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

AM: Yeah, they were more—they were more ready to react physically.

TS: So they weren't de-escalating the problem.

AM: Right.

TS: They were escalating it.

AM: Right. But according to them they're awesome; they're God.

TS: Well, now, did you have that experience yourself personally when you—Did you have to go and break up any fights like that?

AM: Breaking up fights or just, like, knowing that—knowing that a party was going on and, like, going and walking through the party and—I had this one patrol partner—This was, like, my first introduction to Marines drinking. I had this one patrol partner who was very

just, kind of, quiet. Like, he was a really good guy but he was real quiet; he was a reservist; he was older. And we were out on patrol during a MEU [Marine Expeditionary Unit] visit—the 31st MEU from Okinawa—and there was not supposed to be any drinking in the park, and we just walked up and we're like—and I'm telling you, there was me and there was this guy, and everybody flocked over to me to show me that they were of age. Like, pulling out their ID cards before I even asked because that's what they thought we were going to ask about. But it was like, "Hey, guys, you can't be drinking here."

And they were all like, "Oh, we're so sorry, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

And my partner and I were like, "Look, like, we hate alcohol abuse so we're not going to tell you [that] you have to dump everything out but we are coming back in half an hour." And my partner was totally cool with this; like, it was kind of his idea that we just give them half an hour to wrap everything up and come back. So, like, we come back a half hour later and they're still sitting there drinking. [laughs] And as we walk up, they're like, "Oh, shit." And they just all—They grab every beer, they shotgun every beer that they have left, and they throw everything in the trash and they leave. And, like, I don't think that I could have done that with a lot of other patrol partners that were guys because they were so intent on, "Oh, we have to show ourselves off to the Marines. Show them that we're big and bad and strong and everything," so, yeah.

TS: It was just a way of handling yourself and—

AM: Right.

TS: —and this—the partner you had, too, was not, like, in your face.

AM: Yeah, he didn't want to start a fight; it would mess up his pretty face. [both chuckle]

TS: What did you take back from that time in Japan?

AM: Japan—as is still making the news—has this ridiculous liberty policy where, because people can't control themselves when they're drinking—and it's just a small portion of people—everybody has to suffer. So most of the time in Japan was spent dealing with this ridiculously—ridiculous liberty policy. And it was like a—For me, because I'm a rule follower, so therefore the people who didn't follow the rules were very antagonizing to me.

TS: What was the liberty policy?

AM: Most of the time it was on base at midnight. Sometimes it was on base at 10:00 [p.m.], sometimes it was muster in person at ten o'clock, but most of the time it was on base at midnight unless you had a white liberty card which meant that you could stay overnight—or stay out past midnight, and it was only for E-4 and below. Which was weird because all the times that we had to muster at ten o'clock at night to show that we were on base, was actually E-5 and above that had gotten into trouble.

I lost my white card once because I had been out drinking, and this is prob—this is kind of like an example of good leadership and bad leadership at the ba—same time. I had been out drinking and I came back and I decided to shower before going to bed and I passed out in the shower and I flooded the barracks room, and it caused about five thousand dollars' worth of damage in clean up to three different rooms because of the water damage. So the good leadership part is that because I was a good worker and because I was held in really high regard for the most part, by everybody, they swept it under the rug. I still had to pay for damages.

TS: You had to pay for damages?

AM: Yeah, I paid half of it, so it took me a while. [chuckles] I had to pay back half of the damages but I never got sent to mast [non-judicial punishment disciplinary hearing]. They were never like, "Maybe she has a drinking problem." It was just, "Hey, look, you screwed up, you're going to pay back this money; everything else is taken care of."

Kind of a funny story. My friend who died two years ago from stepping on an IED [improvised explosive device] in Afghanistan while being a canine officer, he is actually the one who quote, unquote "lost" all the evidence from this case that they were thinking about sending me to mast with. It's, like, yeah, Michael lost it; it ended up in the shredder. [laughs]

So there's just all these little things in play that, like, set me up for success, because my senior enlisted advisor at the time was like, "So here's what we're going to do, and by the way, criminal justice classes start next week. I'll be teaching them; I'll see you there." Like, "Do something with yourself." Because I'd been at the navy a year at that point and I hadn't done any of the college stuff that I said I was going to do. I was very much a party girl, work hard, play hard type of individual. Not playing as hard as some but not doing anything that I said I was going to do when I joined.

TS: Was that part of it, that you wanted to—

AM: Yeah, that I wanted—

TS: —be able to go to college?

AM: Yeah, I was taking community college classes when I signed up for the military so—with the intent of trying to figure out what I wanted to do.

TS: Okay.

AM: So that was that—Like, he got me back on that track. It took a while but I eventually finished my associate's degree in criminal justice.

TS: So you were sowing your roo—What is that?—sowing your roots first.

AM: Right.

TS: Oats.

AM: Oats; sowing my oats. [both chuckle]

TS: Oats, that's the word.

AM: That's the word.

TS: I knew that word wasn't right.

AM: But at the same time, that came back to bite me a year after that because I was very sick and Medical decided that I had a drinking problem. So when Medical says I have a drinking problem they go back a year and they're like, "Oh, maybe she does have a drinking problem and it caused all these issues." And if you want to talk about gender, like, they—My drinking problem was gendered, because when you fill out this paperwork, they're answering all their questions of, "Well, she's a female, so therefore she can only have two drinks a night. Therefore she can only do this; therefore she can only do that." I'm five foot, eight and a half inches and a hundred and eighty pounds, three beers doesn't affect me the same way that it affects a five foot tall female who's only a hundred pounds. So it was, like, these—Was I drinking too much? Yes. Was I drinking any more than anybody else? No. Was I drinking more than your average five foot, four [inches] female? Absolutely, because my body was metabolizing it different. So, like, because of these gendered alcohol rules and everything, I ended up being sent to alcohol rehab [rehabilitation]; like, I wasn't allowed to transfer, and—

TS: You weren't allowed to transfer from where?

AM: I wasn't allowed to transfer from my base to another base before—

TS: And this was while you were in Japan?

AM: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

AM: I was supposed to go from Japan to Italy; all my stuff had already been shipped. I ha—I was checking out of command and then they're like, "Oh, no. We need to get your problem taken care of by sending you to rehab."

So I go up to rehab, which is in Yokosuka [Commander Fleet Activities Yokosuka, Japan], Japan, and I have just the biggest asshole, power-tripping E-9 [master] chief petty officer in the navy as a counselor who was just insistent that because I wouldn't come out and say that I was an alcoholic that I was—therefore I was an alcoholic. He told me that I was lying about my family environment growing up; that there's no way that I was an alcoholic if my family was normal, like—and his—That

whole exercise was that we had been—draw your family as you were at dinnertime. So I drew a picture of my dad's restaurant with my mom and my brothers and I sitting at the table and my dad in the window where all the food came up. And everybody else is, like, drawing themselves sitting in their bedrooms. I'm like, "This is how my family was; like, we ate dinner together every night." So I ended up asking to leave rehab be—which is technically a failure, and failure means that you get kicked out of the navy.

So at this point in my life—Let me get—Let me back up. I get asked—I ask to leave—or I—So I had that issue and then I had another issue where my friend had sent me flowers as, like, an encouragement on my second week because she knew that I was having issues with this counselor, and the flowers showed up right before the day started. I checked my clock and I was like, "I have two minutes to call her." So I called her, I said, "Thank you, you're great," and then I hung up the phone. I was probably on the phone, like, thirty seconds, and all I see is one of the counselors walking out of the room and everybody was just looking at me, and I'm like, "What?"

And they're like, "He was trying to get your attention."

I was like, "Why didn't he say my name?"

They're like, "Well." And everybody was like, "Yeah, he was trying to get your attention but he wasn't actually, like, trying to get your attention. He was just staring—"

TS: Standing there?

AM: Yeah, standing there staring at you. And so, they called me disrespectful and it was kind of like a—I want to say it was boot camp style rehab, which is a horrible idea by the way. So that—Because of that they scheduled me for this meeting where it's, like, a conference table this big and it's, like, me over here and the psych—the psychologist, the lieutenant over there, and, like, all the other counselors, which was, like, twenty-something people, all of high rank, just this—

TS: That many people in the room?

AM: Yeah, and it was supposed to be a counseling session.

TS: Okay.

AM: They're basically telling me what a piece of shit I am and how I just need to come to terms and admit that I'm an alcoholic. And myself and this other guy that had been assigned to this counselor, we had talked the night before and we were, like, "We value ourselves too much to just go with this to keep our careers." So knowing that I would get processed for separation, I said, "I don't want to be here. I want a new counselor."

And they said, "We don't do that here."

And I said, "I don't want to be here then."

The whole time I had been in contact with my chain of command back in Sasebo. The DAPA [Drug and Alcohol Program]—I don't know how the army goes, but in the navy, the DAPA, the drug and alcohol person, is generally considered to have a problem

themselves. Kind of like we're finding out with all the sexual assaults representatives, a lot of them, turns out they have harassment and sexual assault in their background.

So my DAPA had been completely unreachable for this whole ten days that I was at rehab. Just getting his voicemail from both his cell phone and his work phone every day, but I had been in contact with my personal chain of command which ended up being, kind of, my saving grace; that I had called them every afternoon to tell them how stuff was going, because they were completely supportive of me. They're like, "We've trusted and believed in you the last two years so we trust and believe in you now; that you're telling us the truth and that you're going to make the right decision."

TS: So you have this big meeting?

AM: Yeah, so I have this big meeting and they say, "We don't do that here."

So I say, "Well, I want to leave then." And I go to sign my paperwork, like, I'm voluntarily dropping from rehab, and all the counselor does is print the one page from the instruction and highlights the part where it says I will be administratively separated, hands it to me, and I go home and—or I go back to the barracks room and I get packed and I wait for my flight arrangements, and I go back to Japan and I ask to have a Captain's—an open Captain's Mast [a non-judicial punishment disciplinary hearing]—which is not always a bad thing—to speak with the CO about doing a recommendation for me to stay in the military despite my failure.

And we had had this incident the prior summer where this underage girl kept getting in trouble and a whole bunch of us went to—We didn't go to mast because we stopped at the chief's board, but we basically got yelled at by all the chiefs and one of them had been like, "Well, why didn't you report her when she was drinking under-aged all the time?"

And I, being me, spoke up and was like, "Because nobody in the chain of command cared. Like, she had been reported for underage drinking all the time and nobody cared so we stopped caring." If they don't care, why would we not hang out with her, and drink with her, type of mentality. So, anyways.

TS: How did that go over?

AM: It did not go over very well. There was—I did not look at him when saying that but some other people were looking at him when I said that and he was furious; he was absolutely furious. And we all ended up with just extra military instruction, which was completely stupid, but the—Our command master chief for the base was gone the week that I had this meeting with the captain, so we had the captain who didn't know me from anybody, our new executive officer who was a 100% "we do everything by the books" lawyer, and then the fill-in CMC [Command Master Chief], which was this guy that I had pissed off a few months prior, and [chuckles]—

TS: Your cards came up good.

AM: Yeah, and I only had a couple of people that I had asked that had been my supervisors over the two years show up and they never even got called in to vouch for me or anything.

TS: They didn't show up?

AM: No, a couple of them showed up. I had asked about ten different people. And the DAPA was there—The DAPA was there, and my chief was there, and the DAPA was like, "She never called me or anything."

And it was, like—My chief was like, "She called us every day to let us know the issues. This was a personality issue, not her not trying to follow the rules, blah, blah, blah."

So, anyways, they recommended me for separation, and I would say—this is spring of 2005—I was pretty heartbroken because I had not hit three years in the military yet, so that was one thing. They were like, "Well, if you are going to be processed we're going to drag it out because we need you to hit your three year mark so that you can get your Montgomery GI Bill."

[There are two types of Montgomery GI Bills: Montgomery GI Bill Active Duty, where active duty members who enroll and pay \$100 per month for 12 months are entitled to receive a monthly education benefit once they have completed a minimum service obligation; and Montgomery GI Bill Selected Reserve, for Reservists with a six-year obligation in the Selected Reserve who are actively drilling]

So that was—That was, like, February-ish? So that would have meant dragging it out to May. I wasn't—I was working on staff, which was cool because my roommate was pregnant so she and I were working on staff together. We got to do a lot of stuff, like, during our off time, but at the same time, like, I enjoyed my job. I missed being in a patrol section. They put me back in a patrol section after a little while with a group of people, like, completely opposite from the group that I had been with and I was just, like, again, heartbroken over that. And I complained enough that they were, like "Yeah, okay, we screwed up. We should have put you back with your original section, after two and a half years of being with them."

And the—I actually signed separation paperwork; like, "You are being processed for administrative separation from the military due to alcohol failure."

And the—Finally the command master chief came back from wherever he was and, like, the day that he was back in his office I was standing outside his office and I was like, "Look, this is what happened." And he was very involved with security; he would stop and talk to us all the time. He liked to go out drinking. We would give him rides home at night because he wouldn't—his wife wouldn't come pick him up. He wouldn't take the car out there, obviously, so we would, like, pick him up and give him rides home from the bar when we were on nights, so he knew all of us, like, really well.

And he, like, went to the CO and was like, "You're making a bad decision"—or, "You made a bad decision." So two days later they were writing the paperwork requesting for this waiver. And, like, a month goes by, and I remember the—Like I said, my roommate was on staff with me, and part of our duties was to help with traffic control in the morning. So I was out checking IDs and it must—it must have been raining or something [chuckle] because I had my Gore-Tex [water-proof, breathable fabric] on over my regular uniform, and I go into the office after ID check is over and I'm starting to, like, take off my rain jacket and take off my rain pants and she's like, "Amber, you're never going to guess what arrived this morning."

And I was like, "Oh, my waiver?"

And she's like—She just gets this big smile on her face and I'm like jumping up and down with these Gore-Tex pants down around my ankles. So, yeah, my waiver got approved. Then it took a few months to get orders again but I finally got the orders again and it was, like—it was kind of like a, "You can report immediately," so I was like, "Okay, I'll be—I can report now," and—

TS: Where were your orders to?

AM: [Naval Base] San Diego, California.

TS: So the ones to Italy were—

AM: Ones to Italy had been long lost.

TS: And all your stuff, how'd you get all that back?

AM: [chuckles] Nine months later—

TS: Nine months later?

AM: —it all came back to Japan. In the mean—

TS: Were you still there?

AM: No, the—Yeah, I was still in Japan at the time, so I guess that's part of the story, actually, of what I was just about to say.

TS: Oh, I'm sorry.

AM: The—So my stuff was in California forever, and I got another set of orders to San Diego for a ship but then I lost those after I failed out of rehab; like, I was supposed to go to this ship right after I passed rehab. And then when I got the approval to stay in the military, I got orders to [Naval Support Activity Souda Bay] Greece but my medical screening got declined, and all it said on the medical screening for being declined was alcohol rehab failure. Like, "We're not sure this person can be at this small base," blah, blah, blah.

And so, at this point, they're like, "Well, we don't know when you're leaving because orders tend to go into a freeze at the end of the fiscal year and now it's summertime and the—"

So the nice—the very nice Japanese gentleman at the housing is like, "Okay, we'll get all your stuff back" So now, like, nine months later, finally, I get all my stuff back. I'd been living at, like, the bare minimum; two suitcases of clothing and some other stuff for last nine months. I had bought a few things but the—

He was so funny. I, like, go into their office the day that I got the second set of orders for San Diego. I said, "I got orders and I want to leave on Friday," and it's, like, Monday.

And the lady's like, "No, no, no, no, we can't do that."

And I'm like, "Will you get—" I can't remember his name. I was like, "Will you go get So-and-so san?" And she, like, goes to the back and he walks up and he looks at me and I go, "I got orders."

He's like, "When do you want—When do you want truck?" [chuckles] So they were—They packed my stuff out forty-eight hours later and then I left the next Monday, so I really did leave within, like, a week.

TS: Of getting those orders.

AM: Yeah, and I have, like, somebody telling me in my chain of command also—she was like, "No, you can't leave that quickly, you have to do this, this, this, and this."

And I was like, "No, I don't."

Like, she wa—She was interpreting the instructions just to make things harder. I was like, "I don't have to do any of that stuff."

And again, like, I went to my master chief the next morning, because I had been having this argument with her very late in the day, and he was like, "No, if you can have all your stuff packed up and you feel like you're ready to go next Monday, I will make sure that you're on a flight next Monday."

And coming—Again, coming back to that whole people helping you out, like, I arrived on a holiday and a girl who had left our command pregnant a few months ago picked me up at—She had given birth in that meantime so she had, like, this daughter to take care of and she took me to the barracks and got me checked into the barracks and she's like, "Are you good?"

I'm like, "Yeah, I'm great." And I'm like, "I just need to get some shampoo."

And she's like, "Oh, the [Post] Exchange is open around the corner."

I was like, "Okay, I'll walk over there." The exchange was closed.

So the guy that was on watch at the barracks was like, "Hey, come back down at 7:45, I'll take you out to Walmart. You can get the stuff that you need." Don't know him from anyone. [laughs] Fortunately his relief was somebody that I did know, so, like, his relief—

TS: Like you could trust him?

AM: I would have—Yeah, like "Yeah, go ahead. Go and get your stuff and I'll talk to you when you get back." Just like—I probably would have gone with the guy anyways, just that whole military trust system, but it was nice to know that somebody knew that I was leaving with this guy, because I had no cell phone, no mode of transportation or anything like that.

But sometime between April and October my medical records had been lost and a few months after I got to this command I got an email from one of my friends, like, "Hey, they found your records wedged behind a desk in Medical so they want to ship them to your command." And I gave them the address and I get the records a couple weeks later, and it gives, like, detailed notes of why the doctor decided that my screening to Greece had been denied. Because nobody joins the military—Actually, people might join the military to be in San Diego. I didn't join the military to be stationed in the United States; I joined the military to be stationed overseas. So it was, like, really a big deal to me to not be able to go to Italy and then not be able to go to Greece and then not be able to get on a ship and all these things.

And the doctor had wrote, like, some really mean stuff in my medical records; like, "She was a hardship to her command because of her alcohol and her drinking problems," and I'm like—It just said all this stuff that was not true. Like, she had not called anybody in the command and verified that I had been a problem. She, like, didn't know my work ethic, she didn't know that I had—I had never shown up drunk for work. My alcohol problem, per se, was completely restricted to my liberty time.

TS: How was it that you got recommended for the rehab?

AM: I had gone into Medical with intestinal issues and it turns out that probably was 90% dietary-based. Yeah, alcohol was part of my diet but I quit drinking and I was still sick, so it—

TS: It went from there to this—

AM: Yeah.

TS: —whole process that you went through, okay.

AM: Yeah, but—

TS: So your records had shown some untruthful things about—

AM: Right.

TS: Okay.

AM: And a few months ago I was talking to one of my other friends who had gone through rehab around the same amount of time that I did and he was a significant problem to the command, and he did show up drunk for work, and he did go to Captain's Mast for

alcohol-related incidents, and then he did go to alcohol rehab, and yet he got approved around the same time that I did to go to an overseas command. So we're, like, going back and forth on, "Well, who was the doctor," and trying to figure out—and I was, like—He agreed with it. I was like, "It's all because you were a guy. You got your approval because you're a guy and they needed you to go do this special job assignment that otherwise I would have been denied for." So that was, like, an interesting—

TS: Is that something you just found out about in recent months?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

AM: Yeah, I just—Yeah, because I didn't know where he had gone afterwards. I knew that he had significantly changed his life around. He met a woman that he was just instantly head over heels and she was like, "I like you but you're a fuck-up [laughs] and I'm not going to have fuck-ups in my life."

So he was like, "Okay," and he changed, and he is—he's an amazing person; he's still in the military. He sees the gender problems, which is a really big deal, I think, for a guy to see those issues, but—

Yeah, so that was like—That's how I ended up in San Diego, is all these, like, issues related around me drinking too much or me not drinking too much, and really coming down to, like, these decisions were made because I was a female and I was not the average and I was outside of my norm because I was outspoken. If I hadn't spoken up for myself at this psychiatric beat down I probably could have just suffered through rehab for two more weeks and been approved and all that stuff, so.

TS: Well, when you got those records that said these things, what—did you do anything about it? I mean, did you take it to anyone and say, "This is not true."

AM: It was too late.

TS: Yeah? It was all done?

AM: I still had to use the medical records because there was such an extensive stack of, like, follow-ups and everything from the rehab. I don't know why alcohol rehab was associated with Medical anyways, to tell you the truth. But I had to explain it every time that I had to go through a special evaluation, so I found that the best way to explain it was just to say that I didn't drink anymore. Which was true for a certain amount of time. Then it was, "Well, you know I drank once a month," or something like that, which was also true for a certain amount of time.

But, like, just the fact that when I got screened for the Baghdad IA, the Individual Augmentee [U.S. military member assigned to a unit as a temporary duty assignment] the—it, like, came up again; "Oh, she had a problem in the past and now we have a PTSD

[post-traumatic stress disorder] problem so she may come back being an alcoholic;" that sort of thing.

And it was like, "No, I'm not. This was a false diagnosis." And after a couple of years I stopped playing into it and I was like, "It's a false diagnosis."

TS: What are we thinking, though, about—So even though they put you through the ringer like that you still wanted to stay in?

AM: I still wanted to stay in.

TS: Why?

AM: I loved it. I just liked being—I liked the positions that I was in, and as far as being a supervisor, shooting the firearms, doing the patrol stuff, being overseas, even though the liberty policy affected certain parts of actually integrating yourself into the culture and all of that. I love—I absolutely loved the people that I was with. Even when I hated them I loved them. So the—Just the memories that we had. And that point was 2005 so I guess patriotism was still a part of it, even though that was probably being overdone by all the other stuff at that point, but I was trying to—[Naval Station] Guantanamo Bay [Cuba] had been taken over by the master at arms—the Navy Master at Arms, so I was trying to get on one of those and I couldn't because of the alcohol thing. I tried to go on an IA, which was an Individual Augmentee, in which sailors were being taken and sent on billets that the army would have otherwise been doing in Afghanistan and in Iraq.

So I—From 2005 to 2007 I kept asking to go. I'm like, "I want to go on an IA, I want to go on an IA, I want to go on an IA," because I really felt like that was—it was not only something I needed to do for my career, but it was something that I needed to do to be part of that battle that was going on, part of that fight.

So it was not until 2008 that I finally got to go on an IA, and the only reason I got to go is because it was no longer a—"You went TD—TAD [temporary additional duty], TDY [temporary duty] from your command," it was, "You can go in between commands as part of your orders that you received." So instead of going from one command to the other, this was considered a separate command in between and that was why I got to go; I picked it as orders to go.

TS: When you were at San Diego what did you do before you went to the—

AM: I—

TS: —Iraq.

AM: I worked in the training department. I was supposed to—At the time, San Diego was one big regional command and each base had, like, their separate patrol departments and I was supposed to go to one of those patrol departments, but I got stopped in training because—basically because of my outspokenness, and they needed somebody to come in

and do their administrative stuff because their person who had been there was about to give birth.

And so, that—Actually, that didn't help, that this position had been a position of disabled and pregnant for so long. And now here I was brand new to the command, everybody knew that I hadn't been at a patrol station, and yet here I was in the administrative department, not disabled, not pregnant [chuckles], not black, because most of the people that were in the training department were black. And that ended up—It ended up being a really good thing for me because they quickly realized that I had a lot of capabilities beyond administrative. I corrected a lot of the administrative stuff. I, again, enforced regulations, like, they were gundecking weapons quals [qualifications] left and right.

TS: Gunducking?

AM: Gundecking.

TS: What's that?

AM: Falsifying.

TS: Okay.

AM: They were gundecking weapons quals and they were gundecking other qualifications and I was, like—to my boss I'm like, "We can't be doing this." Like, looking at the instructions and they would be like, "Oh, but we were at the range from such and such time to such and such time."

And I'm like, "Yeah, and you did not put this many people through range qualifications in that amount of time." So a lot of that stuff—Not a hundred percent, but it got better. It got to the point where people were actually qualifying and not just, like, showing up and writing their name on a piece of paper and leaving. Just organizing stuff.

So after being there for several months is when they sent me to firearms instructor school so I could start participating in that. And then I got to start participating in other instruction, so I was teaching and being administrative at the same time. And, like I said, it was really good for me because those were all really positive things or things that I enjoyed doing. I loved teaching, but at the same time it always came back to, I was the administrative person and I was an administrative person because I was female, being more organized.

My boss only followed instruction when it suited him. He was a GS-13 [General Schedule United States civil service pay scale level 13 which is a managerial level] so he really just didn't give a fuck about anything. So if some—He was a GS-13 and he was a Mason [member of a fraternal organization known as Freemasonry] so if some other Mason came in that I had been, like, arguing with over instructions and stuff, my boss would, like, sit down with him like they were best friends. And the end of the conversation it was like, "Amber, I need you to do this." Kind of, like, acquiescing to what the person had wanted instead of following instructions, that sort of thing. But, like,

I was still given a certain amount of leeway to argue against him doing stuff this way, or I just wouldn't do what he said sometimes. [chuckles]

TS: But he was a civilian then?

AM: He was a civilian, yeah.

TS: Who was in your chain of command?

AM: I work—Because it was a training department it was mostly higher ranking people. I went to San Diego as an E-4 but I advanced to E-5 two weeks later, so I was the lowest-ranking person in the department. I had—There was a bunch of first class's—E-6s—that were instructors and then chiefs, and I reported directly to the chiefs, E-7s.

And then—So we had the two E-7s, and that was really about it. And then the two E-7s and the civilian. If I had to do, like, a whole military chain of command, the rest of my chain of command was part of the administrative department in another building on another base, so it was really awkward. [chuckles]

TS: Well, you got promoted pretty quickly after getting there, after all you'd been through with that rehab and what they'd—

AM: Well—

TS: —done with your records and all.

AM: Yeah, the navy at the time was primarily based on a testing system, so when I went up from E-3 to E-4 we were at 100% advancement so pretty much everybody that passed the test and wrote their name correctly got advanced. When I went up for E-4 to E-5 the first time it had dropped significantly; it was now overdone at the top. That took two testing cycles. So the first one I passed but didn't advance because of quotas; the second one, I was in, like, the ninety-eighth percentile or something. And there was a lower percentile; I think it was like 10% got advanced. And I had picked up E-6 the first time that I tested for it. The—Which I was really proud of because it was only, like, five percentile; the top five that advanced at that time.

TS: Yeah.

AM: And I had taken the test while I was in Iraq. We didn't have a lot to do, so our chief at the time was like, "We're going to have study sessions." I don't know if they really helped me or not because I don't remember the material that we studied versus the material that was on the test but—So it's like a final calculation of your test score plus your advancement point plus you got points for having a college degree, so I had just finished my associate's degree and I made sure that that was on the test.

So I—After Baghdad I went back to San Antonio, Texas, to go to brig [brigade?] school training before going to my ship command, and it was a—it was the end—it was the last week, so it must have been the second week or the third week of class. The third week of class is when I found out that I got advanced. I knew that the results were coming out so I sat in my barracks room, like, refreshing the computer screen—

TS: [chuckles]

AM: —until the very last minute and, like, the last time that I could check before I had to leave for class is when it came out and I'm, like—It's 7:30 in the morning and I'm screaming in the barracks by myself.

But I got to school and the senior chief [petty officer], the E-8 that was going to be at my command—my next command, was also in school at the time. Anyway, I just kind of like casually told him like, "Hey, I picked up first class."

And he's like, "Oh, cool." He's just really—turns out extremely emotional but at the same time I thought he was this unemotional person. And I was the only person out of all—like, a class was, like, thirty-five, forty people that had been eligible for advancement that had advanced, so they—he asked the schoolhouse to advance me. It's kind of like a—It's like a paperwork thing plus a—

TS: Ceremony?

AM: Ceremony. So they decided to do the ceremony so that I could show up at my ship as an E-6, not as an E-5 who then got E-6. Again, going back to there was pluses and there was minuses to that, because the plus was that everybody respected this E-6 position, not knowing how long I had been in it.

TS: Right.

AM: A week. [both chuckle] And at the same time, like, everybody thought that I had all this knowledge.

TS: Right.

AM: Assuming that I had been in the military a long time and had probably been on a ship at one point, and I was, like, "Never been on a ship before, I don't know anything," so.

TS: Interesting.

AM: Yeah.

TS: Well, let's go back to when you said you were applying for—what position was it that—the augmentation.

AM: The Individual Augmentee.

TS: Individual—

AM: Yeah.

TS: Yeah, so you got that.

AM: It wasn't—There weren't so much applications, they were who could the command afford to send and who did they want to send. And that—And it ended up becoming, like, a manning [staffing] issue, and that was one of the reasons that—a secondary reason why they kept saying, "No, we can't send you. We need you here."

Like, once when I was in Japan it was because, "We don't know what's going on with your alcohol stuff so we can't—"

TS: You had been applying there, too.

AM: I had been asking to go, yeah.

TS: Okay.

AM: And then when I was in San Diego, it ended up coming down to—"We can't afford to let you go because you're doing such a great job of running everything for us here." So it was kept—And then they finally changed it, not realizing that so many commands were suffering from all these personnel being TAD or TDY for six months to a year, and then—so they changed it to these actual in between orders. And, I mean, I got selected for it, it was just a matter of finishing the medical screening and everything.

TS: So what happened? How was that assignment?

AM: It sucked. The training was okay for it. The—

TS: When did you go?

AM: Two thousand [and] eight; I went to training in South Carolina in September of 2008 through October and then ended up in Iraq at the end of October. We got put into, like, these billets. This is very specific to MAs [master-at-arms]. MAs got put into, like, these billets where, "Oh, we need you, we need you, we need you. We need your skills. We need this." Not accounting for gender restrictions or ideas of gender restrictions, so we all showed up—and by "we all" I mean, like, twelve people—we showed up and we basically got interviewed to see where we would best fit into these positions that they needed in different bases in Iraq.

And we went through this, like, train—We went through this training thing and then it was a—It was a "train the trainers" thing and then, like, two or three people would be selected at the end of the week to be part of this training team that traveled around and did evidence collection training. And one of the guys that I had arrived there with already

knew the army guy from somewhere, and basically knew that he would get selected to be with his friend and told his friend—because there was two of us females, he said, "I don't want these girls on our team." So that's exactly the way it ended up being, is even though she and I were probably better qualified and just better instructors than the rest of them, it was, "We don't want them traveling with us. We don't want—We don't want women."

So even though they had a woman from the army on their team, it was, "We don't want any more of these women."

So that was that, and then the other interviews were actually done with the females that were—it was a—How would I describe it? It was—It was like a little office in which files and stuff were looked over for evidence. It wasn't—It wasn't part of the big legal team overall but it was kind of like a little, "Hey, let's find this missing evidence, make calls out[?]." And there was a female lieutenant commander and a female chief in charge there, and a couple of other people that worked in this little office, and a couple of interpreters. And the female chief interviewed all of us as if we were actually honestly being considered to go out to these positions at the different FOBs [forward operating base]. And in the end tells me and the other female that—Honestly, I think she had been assaulted while she was out at one of the bases, but in the end tells us that, "Well, females have special needs and therefore I can't in good conscience have you going out to these places where you can't shower."

And these guys got sent out to these places and they would fly back occasionally and they were very noticeably, like, antagonistic towards us, thinking that we were, like—and we were, we were in these coddled positions, and we had access to the best DFACs [dining facilities] in Iraq on a daily basis, and we had a vehicle that we could use for transportation, we were able to go to the gym and—but she and I were not the type of people that wanted that. Like, we went—We went on this IA to be able to do something and we were sitting there twiddling our thumbs and processing paperwork knowing that we were probably better than these guys.

TS: So they resented that you weren't going out in the field?

AM: Yeah, they resented that we weren't going out in the field, even though they knew exactly why we weren't out in the field. The training—It's still so weird to say after so many years—The training class that we went through, at one point we had to, like, do evidence analysis or something on a vehicle. So outside the classroom that they had set up, they had this old vehicle that was up on blocks and it was torn apart, there were holes in the seats, but you had to treat it like it was a new vehicle and that you were tearing it apart, right?

So I'm in the truck taking one of these guys that had been in this class with me, and another guy that—so that guy was higher-ranking than me by one position, so he was—I was an E-5, he was an E-6, and then there was an E-7 that had just arrived and he—they were flying out to this base together. And I'm in the truck taking them from our office to the airport, and he's telling—the E-6 is telling the E-7, like, "Yeah, we got to break down this brand new vehicle and it was so cool and we tore it apart and we had it up on blocks by the time we were done with that stuff."

And I was like, "Why are you lying?" Like, kept it in for a little bit but it's, like, a half-hour drive.

TS: Right.

AM: And I'm like, "Why are you lying?"

And he's like, "What are you talking about?"

And I'm like, "That vehicle was up on blocks, like, when we got there. I am not fucking delusional. Like, that was already the—The way you're describing that you took it down to is how it already was."

And we got to the airport—must have been right when I said something because we weren't in the vehicle for very long afterwards—but we got to the airport and, like, the chief took off because there was this whole disrespect thing that I had just done, and the E-6, like, dressed me down and was like, "You're so disrespectful. I can't believe you did that in front of an E-7."

And I was like, "You're just trying to show off to him." And he dressed me down so much that I actually started to question whether I was the one correct or not about the condition.

TS: Your memory?

AM: Yeah, my memory—about the condition that the vehicle had been in, and it had only been a few weeks. It hadn't been months, it hadn't been years, it was only a few weeks. And he even was like, "You know you're just in this position here on this base, and you're living this high life while we're all out there having to deal with bombs and stuff."

And it's like, "I don't have a choice. I was not given a choice—"

TS: Right.

AM: "—to go off to these bases and do that stuff." Like, again. But, yeah, it was just—it was so crazy that he was blatantly telling a lie that I knew was a lie but he dressed me down so much and I was so upset about the fact that he was correct about why I wasn't doing anything valuable that I thought that I was wrong in the end. It was really weird [unclear].

And that chief, like, he—because he came—I saw him again soon afterward and he was completely cool. Like, the E-7, he was, like—he—we talked a little bit and he was like, "I think you're—" basically like, "You're a really valuable person and you have a lot of intelligence and everything." The only reason that he took off was because he knew that the E-6 was upset and that whole—

TS: He didn't want to have to deal with the dynamics of all that.

AM: Yeah, that whole disrespecting of rank thing become so much more important than truthfulness and equality.

TS: Maybe usurps it, right?

AM: Yeah.

TS: Where were you stationed at in Iraq, then?

AM: It was called Task Force 134. It was a legal processing for detainees so—I was at Camp Victory [part of the Victory Base Complex near Baghdad International Airport], actually.

TS: Camp Victory.

AM: Yeah.

TS: Did you get to go off the base at all?

AM: Nope.

TS: Never?

AM: Not a single one time.

TS: What was your living conditions like there?

AM: I lived in a CHU. My friend that was at this office before I was, she—C-H-U. I'm sorry, Combat Housing Unit. It was basically a bunch of renovated trailers with walls, and then on each side was two beds, and they're set up in little camps, and the bathrooms, there's, like, a strip of trailer bathrooms in between every hundred or so. It's really awkward, actually.

TS: Were you with other women?

AM: Not really. So my friend, she had somebody staying with her and she knew that I was coming so when that person left the—they never went and told that this room was open, until, like, two days before she goes and says, "Hey, this room is open and this girl is coming in," and she basically reserved this room for me. I don't know how they manage to run it like a hotel in the middle of a war zone but they do.

And then when she left we didn't tell anybody that the room was open; there was more than enough rooms for everybody. So basically left it up to them during their inspections to see that the room was open, and I stayed by myself for four months there. Which may not have been the best thing.

TS: Because you're isolated?

AM: It's isolated. I was surrounded by a bunch of guardsmen from Indiana, maybe? Or Montana? I don't know. They were—I think they were good people to be by because they were—They were all MPs [Military Police]. I would occasionally talk to them. Oh, I did

get a roommate towards the end of it. She was with one of the psychological teams, and I remember, like, two weeks after I left is when that army officer shot a bunch of people in the psych eval clinic [psychiatric evaluation clinic].

TS: The one in Fort Hood [Killeen, Texas]?

AM: Not in Fort Hood.

TS: Oh, the one in Iraq?

AM: Yeah, it was in Camp—it was in Camp Victory but it was actually on Camp Liberty, which is, like, a small—like a suburb of Camp Victory. So I was, like, panicking for a few hours not knowing which clinic she had been working in that day. So she finally, like, emailed me and was like, "Oh, no, I was on Victory that day."

I was like, "Thank God." But just, like, to realize—I think it—I don't think it's as noticeable while you're there how much you're doing to, like, always protect yourself considering everybody has a loaded weapon.

TS: What do you mean?

AM: Just how you go about your day and where you choose to go and who you choose to go with.

TS: Who were you protecting yourself from?

AM: Just everybody.

TS: Even fellow navy and army?

AM: Yeah. The—Because I worked at night so, like, I walked around this base by myself a lot at night. We would not go to eat if we didn't have a vehicle to transport us just because it was such a long walk and we had to walk through, like, really dark areas. I would—My co-worker and I, we actually—we actually set it up so that I would come into work late—No, he would come into work late. So he would go to the gym first and he would come into work late and therefore there was still people from the day shift there with me, and then I would go to the gym early in the morning at a time when we didn't normally need the truck so that I could take the truck if I ne—if I wanted to. A lot of times I would walk to leave him the vehicle, just in case. But there's, like—It's just a weird environment, I think.

TS: So you didn't feel safe?

AM: It's not that I didn't feel safe, it's that I was just unconsciously doing stuff to protect myself. The—Like I said, to get to the bathroom [chuckles]—there was an outhouse near my CHU but it was usually pretty gross so I would use it, like, first thing in the morning

after they cleaned it, which was usually by the time that I woke up in the middle of sleep to go to the bathroom anyways because you're just constantly chugging water, right, with all the dust and variances of temperature. But—So I would use it right after they cleaned it but then I wouldn't use it anymore so I would have to walk through probably, like, two, three hundred yards to go to the bathroom otherwise. When I was in our office we had an outhouse right outside of our retaining walls, and then they installed a trailer because there was a bunch of offices there. They installed a trailer bathroom towards the end of the time that I was there that was well-lit and everything but—Yeah, it was just kind of like you never knew where you might encounter people, I guess.

The quickest way to get to the bathrooms would be to walk through all these other trailers, so you might walk—There was one guy that, like, would suntan during the day in his underwear outside of his trailer. Or you might be walking through walls at night and, like, run into somebody because they're also walking through the walls to get wherever without any lights on.

Trv—Taking people to the airport at night if you didn't know the road could be a little weird. It's all on—It was all within walls on base but one wrong turn and you're on some part of the base that you don't know where you are, so.

TS: Well, was it—

AM: And the—I don't know if it was so much because of, like, [unclear] people but the Ugandan guards that were contracted to, like, check IDs at all the gyms and the DFACs and everything, they would, like, very openly—I don't want to say harass, because they're not like, "Oh, get with me," and everything, but just very openly like, "Where is your name? When will I see you again?" And stuff like that, so.

TS: Did it make you, like, uncomfortable then?

AM: Yes.

TS: Yeah?

AM: I've changed my gym time once because of a guard that was always there at two o'clock in the morning.

TS: Do you need to take a break? Because we've been going for quite a while.

AM: Yeah, I'm actually probably going to have to leave soon.

TS: Okay. Okay. [both chuckle] Okay, we'll break this up then and just have you finish with Iraq.

AM: Okay.

TS: So what—So if you—when you had this desire to go to Iraq and be part of that—

AM: Yes.

TS: —when you—reflecting on it today, was it what you thought it would be, or even when you were there was it what you expected?

AM: No, it wasn't what I thought it would be and it wasn't what I expected, and I kind of have to go back a little bit to—must have been 2000—My little cousin would have graduated in 2003. It must have been 2005 when I was at home and my little cousin who's two or three years younger than me was preparing to, like, go on an actual deployment. He and his brother-in-law had already been on deployments to Italy. Jason had been in Italy; I can't remember where Chad went, but their father has always been an asshole to me, like, his—my entire life, and he point—Yeah, it was 2005. No, 2006. Yes, it was the Arlington sesquicentennial.

So I had been asked to be in the parade in my hometown and wear my white uniform and walk with some of the other veterans, and my uncle told me that it was inappropriate for me to be part of the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] because I had not been in a foreign war, even though I had been stationed overseas for three years, and because I had not been in a warzone.

So even though I had been trying actively to go to a warzone, and it kind of became, like, a sticking point for me that I will, "No, I'm going to prove him wrong," as part of this grander plan to better myself and do something worthy with my career—not as a primary, of course.

But—So there's this whole thing when people talk to women veterans about their status, and it's first of all the assumption that women aren't veterans. And then they find out that, "Oh, you are a veteran," and they're totally okay with that, I think. Like, it's totally okay for a woman to be a veteran but then it comes down to these questions of, "Well, have you been to war? Did you do anything grand in war?" They don't say them like that but that's what the assumption is of their questions; it's, "Have you done anything worthwhile? Have you killed somebody? Have you been threatened by combat?" And they know the answer is "no" for most of us, like—

TS: Even for most men.

AM: Yeah, even—No, actually, I don't think they know that. Like, I think that they assume all men have been exposed to combat. Like, even cooks who've been exposed to combat, which is actually kind of true, but depends on, again, what unit were they attached to.

TS: So there's, like, a veteran and then there's a worthier veteran.

AM: Yes.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: And it's sort of a status thing.

AM: And that's part of what I try to focus on in my own studies, is what is this—who is a veteran and who is a worthy veteran? And it's—No matter how women get set up for it, no matter how much they can say, "Thank you for your service to our country," which is really uncomfortable thing for me, and I, unfortunately, have to put up with it at work when—and I don't come out and say I'm a veteran but sometimes it comes up in conversation. But that, yeah, there's this whole hierarchy of who's a worthy veteran. When it comes to, like, people asking me where I was stationed and where I was deployed I don't say Baghdad unless they specifically ask, "Were you in Iraq or Afghanistan," because I don't like the questions that come with it. I don't like the assumptions that I did something worthy by being there.

I didn't do anything worthy by being there. I pushed papers, I called—I called combat units to ask them why they lost a piece of paperwork. That—In the Iraqi justice system it didn't matter that piece of paperwork existed or not. It only mattered in the American legal system whether it existed or not. And, like, to—I just remember—I don't ever know what happened to this guy, but he was upset—like, he was so upset that they had lost this bag of evidence, because he knew that under the American justice system that this person who they had actively caught building a bomb, and they had a bag of all of his bomb material building equipment and somehow it didn't end up in the vehicle and when they went back for it, it was no longer there. Like, he was so upset by that. And just listening to him on the phone like, "This is the best that I can do, is I can remind people that they're failing to do their job." And that's—And at the time—I think—I think I do that a lot [chuckles] but that wasn't what I wanted to be doing as part of my deployment.

TS: What did you want to be doing?

AM: I don't know. I just wanted to be doing something that I felt was worthy and I didn't think that that—

TS: Like those assignments to the FOBs [forward operating bases]?

AM: Yeah, like those assignments to the FOBs teaching people how to gather evidence, or being there to gather the evidence, not just "Why didn't you gather the evidence that you were never, ever taught in your job on how to gather properly?" And that's kind of—That's what the whole purpose of, like, that training program was, was to either teach or be there to gather the evidence, because these grunts had never been taught to do that. They—It—I don't know. It—

TS: They were just—they weren't necessarily trained as—

AM: Investigators.

TS: —investigators. What were they trained as?

AM: It really was, like, combat and grunt units and the guys—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So doing their grunt job.

AM: Yeah, the guys kicking in the doors and taking people down. I never thought that I would be doing that, but when people ask me questions about Iraq, like, I—maybe I'm hypersensitive, but that's what I think they're asking me, like, "Did you do something worthy?" As far as, like, kicking a terrorist's ass.

TS: And maybe, like, what's the most horrible thing that you saw—

AM: Right, right.

TS: —or experienced, and they just want to know the—

AM: Yeah, and I know males get that as much as females do; like, if you didn't see something horrible your deployment wasn't worthy. So—Like, my ship deployment, people also have these high expectations for, and it's like, "Well what did you do?"
"Well, we did gator squares off the coast of Libya."

TS: What's a gator square?

AM: It's—Your box on the radar that you're allowed to be in [chuckles]. So you, like, do the perimeter of the box—

TS: Okay, got it.

AM: —with the ship. The ship doesn't just stand still; it's constantly moving. So it's called a gator—a gator because the ship mast[?]
—the ship is like a gator when it opens up to let the LCACs [Landing Craft Air Cushion] come aboard, so they're referred to as gators. Alligators are the—

TS: Interesting.

AM: —the comical mascot of the ships.

TS: I see.

AM: So the—Yeah, people—I don't know what people expect but it's annoying for the most part.

TS: What do you wish they'd ask you?

AM: What do you feel you got out of your service? Like, I—Like, what do you think is the biggest issue with the military right now? I think a lot of times when I talk to people about the military that are not in my immediate group of caring about women's issues and caring about the military sexual trauma issue, like, I feel like they think it's a non-issue. Yeah, it's an issue, per se, but not as important as all this other stuff going on. Because they don't—They fail to realize, at the end of the day, it is really just a work environment. Like, when I was stationed on the ship, "Well, you're not on deployment so what do you do all day?

"Well, I go to work."

"Well, where do you go to work?" Not realizing that the ship is an office building. I live there, I work there, I sleep there; I do everything there. And so, they fail—they fail to take into mind that there's this actual, like, everyday mundane basic work environment that has to be survived in order for all these supposedly great things to happen.

I remember talking to somebody, and they were just so fascinated by how the electrical system worked on board the ship in the middle of the sea, because they had never thought about there not being electricity in the middle of the ocean. And I had never thought about how cool that sounds that we have electricity in the middle of the ocean. So telling them I was, like, this is kind of like what I wish people would ask me about. Like, these mundane every little—little things like, "Well, what's chow like? How do you get—how do you get chow?" Sometimes people will ask me about living in the barrack—or in the compartment with all those women.

TS: Right.

AM: Especially—And it's especially interesting for my command because we had women's berthing spaces but there was too many of us for—because they had been built for a certain number of women. So the command was like, "Well, we have this one big berthing space that all the girls can fit into and then we can separate the guys based on their departments to these smaller spaces. Much better idea for the most part. But now you've got two hundred women living in the same compartment together and they're—The thing about male barrack—or the male berthing spaces on the ship is that they tend to all be on the same schedule because they're—the flight deck people are with each other and the—Okay, so they're on the same schedule so it doesn't affect their sleeping as much, but now you have all these women from all the different departments that all have different schedules in this one berthing area together and it's just, like, those stories get kind of funny sometimes.

One morning I wake—I woke up, I think we were in port; yeah, we would have been in port. But I had come back a little bit drunk and I had gone to sleep, and I wake up and one of the other first class's that's nearby is like, "Oh my God, girl. I almost had to get you out of bed last night."

And I'm like, "Why?" Not having heard a thing.

And she's like, "These two girls were having a fistfight right over there," and I'm like—

TS: You were just out.

AM: [chuckles] I'm like, "Oops. Like, I don't think I would have been much good to you anyways."

And she's like, "It's okay, I broke it up." Like, nobody expects that to happen.

TS: Right.

AM: Like, they accept it but then they're like—they get that same, "Oh, people in the service are better than that." And it's, like, I love telling these little—stupid little stories about stuff that happened on a daily basis, like girls getting into a fistfight with each other in berthing.

TS: Right.

AM: And it probably wasn't even over a guy, which is what most people would assume. But it's like those types of challenges that—

TS: There's sometimes pettiness and—

AM: Yeah.

TS: —backstabbing and—

AM: Yeah.

TS: —undermining each other.

AM: Right.

TS: As well as the part that we were talking about with teamwork and wanting to help people out even though you're a stranger.

AM: Yeah.

TS: Even if you don't like each other; those kind of things.

AM: Yeah. I don't tell a lot of stories at work even though sometimes people ask me to, but I found myself telling a story one day about how we were doing training, and I was always—We were doing OC spray training and I was always, like, the person that they had to fight at the end of the OC spray.

TS: What's OC spray?

AM: Oleoresin capsicum; pepper spray.

TS: Okay.

AM: And so they go—they get pepper sprayed—which does hurt, by the way—and they go through this course of, like, fighting with their baton—a training baton, and then having to, like, take somebody down using Mechanical Advantage Control Holds, like arm bars and stuff. And then at the end they have to fight somebody in a protective suit and that was always me.

TS: You were in the protective suit?

AM: Yeah, I was the one in the protective suit. And it became, like, this—It was really a motivational training thing for a lot of people because a lot of people had to really fight to get me down on the ground and to get me to comply. So it was motivational for some of the guys. It was scary for some of the guys, and it was a lot more motivational to the women, because even though they knew that I was stronger than them, they knew that to a certain extent I wasn't going to mess them up like a guy might. I would still mess with them if they were refusing to train or just being real weak about it and everything, but—So it was towards the end of deployment—We'll have to talk about me getting fired another day.

TS: Right.

AM: Not from this; I was still doing this even though I wasn't working with my department. So not a lot of people would best me. Like, every once in a while a guy would best me either by accident or, yes, they really were good or, like, they had this determination in them, like, "I will not look like a fool. I will best her."

So towards the end of deployment the—My equal had to be recertified on his OC spray, and there was two of us in the suits that day; there was me and then there was one of the guys that worked for us. He was an E-4. And it was my turn to be on the mats but our E-8, our senior chief, was told that E-4—his nickname was Cookie—He says, "Cookie, put your mask back on."

I said, "Hey, it's my turn." I really wanted to fight my equal, my co-worker. And this is the story I ended up telling at work, and I forget why I got stuck on it, but it was, like, I knew it but I didn't really think about it too much; like, there was no way that a senior chief was about to let his two E-6s fight each other because only one of us would win.

TS: Right.

AM: And if it was me then Piper would be disrespected and if it was Piper then I would be disrespected.

TS: Right.

AM: And who would have it worse considering that—

TS: Right.

AM: —it was a male and a female fighting each other. And it was just, like—It became kind of a really big deal to me that he didn't let me do that. I was mad. It was, like, I really wanted to fight and it was my turn. [chuckles]

TS: Right.

AM: So.

TS: But did you understand later why he did it?

AM: Yeah, and I still don't agree with it. I mean, I think it just kind of perpetuates the stereotype, so.

TS: Yeah.

AM: That males should be better than a female even though—and I guess he knew better. I think Pi—I think Piper may have had the strength but I had the determination, which most of the time was how I won these fights, which was being determined to show them that, hey, if you're actually fighting for your life you have to try a little bit.

TS: Right.

AM: So.

TS: Right. Well, why don't we stop it there?

AM: Okay.

TS: And we can come back.

AM: I talked a lot.

TS: No, it's all right. I'll go ahead and stop it.

[Part One of Interview Ended]