

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Rachel Ann Brune

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: 3 April 2015

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is April 3, 2015. My name is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the home of Rachel Brune in Fayetteville, North Carolina to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Rachel, could you state your name the way you'd like it to read on your collection?

RB: Sure. Rachel A. Brune.

TS: Okay. Well Rachel, why don't you go ahead and start off by telling me a little bit about when and where you were born?

RB: Sure. I was born in Point Pleasant, New Jersey—[coughs] Excuse me—March 19, 1978. I was the first of what would eventually be six children for my parents, so I grew up pretty much always surrounded by people, with a larger than usual family. My parents moved up to northern New Jersey when I was really, really young, and so I pretty much grew up in Sussex County, which is not what people think of when they think of New Jersey. They think of the Shore, or Hoboken; right by the city. And where I lived it was the Appalachian Mountains, dairy farms, corn farms, the Sussex County Farm and Horse Show, Girl Scouts, camping, things like that. So growing up was a lot of my mom kicking us out of the house. [chuckles]

TS: [chuckles] "Get outside," right?

RB: Absolutely, which—I—made me sad because I just wanted to sit in my room and read all the time, but my mom was like, "No, you must go outside and play." We grew up without a television, which was heresy in some circles, but again, we had to go and entertain ourselves.

TS: Now, you said you were the oldest?

RB: Yes.

TS: How close were your siblings to you in age?

RB: We were all about two years apart.

TS: Okay.

RB: Myself, then there was my brother, and then four sisters after that.

TS: Okay.

RB: So. [chuckles]

TS: Your brother's a lone wolf then, huh?

RB: He—You know what? Everybody was like, "Oh poor—your poor brother," but he was the only one growing up who had his own room.

TS: Oh. [chuckles]

RB: [chuckles] I'm just go—I'm just going to say that. [laughs]

TS: Flat out say it, okay. Well, I can appreciate that kind of privacy. That's awesome. So, what did your folks, then, do for a living?

RB: My dad was—He always worked in, I guess you would call them nowadays, information sciences. When he—When I was first born he was finishing his master's degree in clarinet performance from, I believe, Rutgers [University]. And—

TS: What kind of performance?

RB: Clarinet.

TS: Oh, the clarinet? Oh, okay.

RB: Yes. And so, of course, when I came along though—no, no, let me back up. He was finishing his Master of Library Science.

TS: Okay.

RB: Somewhere in there—I'm a little hazy on the timeline but—

TS: That's okay. That's his story.

RB: He—Yes, those are the—So, he has those degrees, because he always wanted to be a musician. Then when we all started coming along he had to actually make some money.

TS: Right.

RB: So he—When I was growing up he was a—like, a researcher. He was Google [Internet search engine] before the World Wide Web came along, and he worked for a variety of firms. He also had his own firm at this—at one time. And then I also remember him doing a lot of working weekends at various college libraries. So—

TS: So he got his library science in there.

RB: Yes.

TS: Yeah. That's neat.

RB: I mean, it was neat. When you're—When you're a little book nerd, that's like the best job in the world. [chuckles]

TS: That's right.

RB: You're like, "Hey, I want to grow up to be just like my dad!" [chuckles]

TS: No kidding.

RB: My mom, she wa—She stayed home with us until, I think, I was maybe ten. She had a few jobs working at daycares, and then she also was a music teacher. And when I was—Like, the first job that I was really old enough to remember her having was she started a daycare in the house. And so, there was just all kids all the time, and a lot of the kids who came for daycare also came with their older siblings. So really, it was like the biggest play date ever for us.

TS: [chuckles]

RB: So that was a lot of fun, and sh—since then she's always had that sort of job, teaching music. Right now she—my dad is semi-retired, my mom is teaching music at el—at two elementary schools up in New York; they're Catholic schools. So—And also, they both have music students. So lots of music, lots of kids, all of the time. I don't really know what boredom is because I've—when I was a teenager I'd be like, "I'm so bored," but really what it meant was, "I'm so lazy and I don't want to do anything."

TS: Right. [chuckles]

RB: But I've always been able to entertain myself pretty easily.

TS: Now, did you play any musical instruments?

RB: I played piano, I studied voice, and I picked up the guitar when I was in college—Well, when I was in high school I was in chorus, and when I was in college I had a band with two of the women that I knew from high school, and I wrote the songs and we would play them and sing them. We had a small amount of local fame. Nobody knew who we were outside of Sussex County, but it was still a lot of fun.

TS: That's neat. That is cool. Okay, so you're outside playing with your brother and sisters and all the neighborhood apparently.

RB: Yes.

TS: What kinds of things did you do, then, when you got kicked outside?

RB: We would—

TS: You're an eighties girl, then, really growing—

RB: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

TS: Okay.

RB: We lived on this long hill and so we would all—this was when I was really little—we would all get on our bikes and Big Wheels—I'm a Big Wheel [unclear]—

TS: Yeah. Sure.

RB: —and skateboards and roller—roller skates, and whatever you had that had wheels, and we'd all start at the top and we would ride down to the bottom, and whoever got there first would win. And then we'd all go back to the top—after we'd finished arguing about it—then we'd all go back to the top. We would go—It's a little development, but surrounding it is the Appalachian Trail and some protected wetlands, so we would wander through the swamp, we would just do anything; use our imagination and play whatever game we wanted to play.

TS: Now, you said you did Girl Scouts, too, and 4H?

RB: I was a Girl Scout—never did 4H. I was a Girl Scout from Brownies up to—we made it, I think, through, like, the first year of Cadets and then the troop I was in just sort of—

TS: Then everybody's in high school, right, and—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RB: —faded away. Yeah. But my—All of my sisters were Girl Scouts and my mom was a Girl Scout leader, and one of the jobs she had was as a sports coordinator for—or programs coordinator—it's one of those things—for a couple of the local Girl Scout camps. So it was—So it—Again, there's Girl Scouts and camping and all that stuff. It was a lot of fun.

TS: Yeah! It sounds like it was fun. Did you enjoy your childhood, then?

RB: Oh yeah.

TS: Yeah.

RB: I mean, when I was a kid, I'm like, "God, this sucks." And it was very funny because when I was just up this other time, my sister Mary and my sister Taya[?] and I were all at the house at the same time, which is really, really weird because we're never all there at the same time.

TS: This was just a couple of weeks ago?

RB: Yes. And we were sitting there—[chuckles]—It was—It was, like, Friday, and my sister Mary is like, "We should go out."
We're like, "Yeah, we should go out," and we're looking at each other like, "There's still no place to go out!" [both laugh] Unless you want to go to a bar, and we're just like, "Uhhh, no," because it may be New Jersey, but there's a lot of redneck bars.

TS: Did you end up playing cards or something?

RB: Yeah, I think we watched—my parents still don't have a TV but my—they have the Roku [digital media player first introduced in 2008], the—

TS: Yes, sure. I know what that is.

RB: So I think we watched an episode of something, and then it was—yeah, then it was time for bed. Oh my gosh.

TS: [chuckles] That's pretty funny. So now, you talked a little bit about being a nerdy kind of book girl. You had that interest in reading, I guess? What did you have an interest in?

RB: Yes. I read anything I could read, and I liked school [chuckles] and—which—and I still do, which I'm still a nerd. I still like to read. I actually—When I was cleaning up I took—I have a stack of books; it started out as a very small stack and then it ended up as several bags that I keep there, because I'm like, "Oh, I'll get around to reading them all."

They're in the bedroom right now. [both chuckle] They haven't—They haven't grown any shorter, I should say.

TS: Yeah. But you did that as a young girl then—

RB: Oh yeah.

TS: —you were talking about how, like, when your dad was working in the library you liked to go—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RB: Oh yeah. I would go to work with him.

TS: Sure.

RB: And especially as I started getting older he would show me how to look stuff up in the library, and use the card catalog, use the microfiche machines, which I just thought were the most coolest thing ever. And when he was working—this was when I was in high school—during the summers or the weekends or whatever, if he was working on a project and he needed an unpaid research assistant, I would be [chuckles] that person.

TS: And you loved it, too, I'm sure.

RB: Oh yeah. Oh, it was great. When it came time to writing papers for school I had it down; I was like, "Alright, I got this." But yeah, I read a lot of science fiction and fantasy. I would go to the library as often as I could and—I just—it was a lot of fun. And then when I was in elementary sc—like middle school, my—this was—kids are so—they're such jerks. They're like, "Oh, Rachel, she reads a book a day!"

I'm like, "I do not. It's more like a book a week." [both chuckle]

And then, like, one thing that I remember from middle school—and I don't know why I remember this, but I just—it's always stuck in my brain—they had a—one of the English teachers in seventh grade—sixth or seventh grade—had this map on the wall and it was a "read your way around the world." So I—For every book you read you could advance, and every time you advanced you got, like, a ticket, so you could—at the end of the program there's a assembly or whatever and you get the tickets and the prizes and the stuff. And a coup—some people made it around once, or [unclear], and I was like, "I'm not interested." And then I was thinking, as a couple of weeks went by, I'm like, "You know what? I'd really like to get a prize." So I started reading and I ended up, I think, surpassing pretty much everybody because I was just reading, reading, reading, reading, reading. And my parents—your parents had to sign off on what you were reading, so I was reading the really easy books, like the science fiction, fantasy, whatever and tearing through them. And then my mom would be like, "Did you do your math homework?"

"No, I'm reading for this project at school!" [both chuckle] It's like, "Yes!"
So yeah, but—I was—I mean, even now it's—

TS: You just love to read.

RB: Yeah, I really do.

TS: What schools did you go to?

RB: You mean for, like, mi—elementary school, or high school or—

TS: Yeah. Like, who were your teachers, and how big were your schools, things like that?

RB: They were—They've changed so much, because as I was going through them they were even changing as the community was—as the community was growing. I went to a Ca—a very small Catholic school for kindergarten through second grade, and then I came over to the Vernon public schools, which were huge. And they were split up by K [kindergarten] through four, and then five through six, and then they were split up again so that there'd be two grades per school. And—But there was just hundreds and hundreds of kids. And when I went to high school I went back to a Catholic school, and I think my graduating class was a couple hundred. Not too many.

And then I went to—For college I started at a small liberal arts college out in Minnesota called St. Olaf [College]. I was there for a year and the weather was intense, and I was far away from home, and I didn't really want to go to college in Minnesota in the first place, so I applied to NYU [New York University] to the film program; I got in and I went there, and I graduated from there in May of 2000 and was immediately confronted by the reality that I had th—many thousands of dollars of student loans, and nobody wanted to hire you and pay you. Everybody in the film world wanted interns. So I tried to find a job that would even just pay me; just a little bit. I was like "You don't even have to pay me a living wage, just fifty bucks, so I don't have to lose money taking the train."

Yeah. So that—I got a job working in Park Avenue right around midtown, and that was where I was on 9/11. And my dad was actually working almost on the same cross-street, but on the ea— west side. So when 9/11 happened it was good because I could just—I was like, "That's it. I'm gone," and I went to his office and we basically rode it out. But that was one of the biggest factors in deciding to join the [United States Army] Reserves. Since then I've attended the [State] University [of New York] at Albany for my master's degree, and then Texas A&M [Agriculture and Mechanical], Central Texas College in Killeen for my Master of Criminal Justice.

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

TS: Okay. Cool. So you do like school?

RB: I do. [chuckles] And I—When I got off active duty—The plan was to get off active duty—or to apply to PhD programs, get off active duty, go get my PhD. Then I was like, "Wait a second. I've got nine months before I get off active duty. This would be the perfect time to have that kid we've always been talking about!"

TS: [chuckles]

RB: And "baby brain" just took over and I ended up not applying anywhere, and looking back, I'm glad that I didn't because I really—I'm enjoying this time, and having just taken command of the HHC [Headquarters and Headquarters Company] I'm thinking to myself, "You know what? I need that opportunity if I'm going to stay in, which at this point I think I'm going to, and there's no way that I could do all of these things at the same time. That's ju—"

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Right. You have a lot on your plate for sure.

RB: It just wouldn't work out. Yeah.

TS: Let me go back a little and talk about, then, when you're growing up and you're enjoying school, and playing in the—it's funny that you call it a swamp because I always think swamp is, like, alligators and stuff and I know there's no alligators up there.

RB: There are not. If there were I probably would still be in my room.

TS: Yeah?

RB: I would never have come out. [chuckles]

TS: So you had this great affinity for reading. What were you thinking about, like, for your future when you grew up? Like, what did you think were the possibilities in front of you?

RB: I don't think I've ever met a career field that I didn't at some point, even for however brief of a time, want to be in.

TS: Really? Okay.

RB: So growing up my two—my greatest ambition growing up was I wanted to fly the space shuttle. I wanted to be an astronaut, I wanted to go into outer space, I wanted to fly the space shuttle; I thought it would just be very awesome. And then it turned out that I didn't really have the affinity for studying as hard as I needed to in my science and math courses to make the sorts of grades that I would need to get into an engineering program, or something like that. Also, I had really bad vision so that whole—and also this was the late eighties or early nineties. I joined the Civil Air Patrol, thinking, "Oh, this will be great. Someday I'll be an astronaut," and I made it a few months, and then they have a little workbook that you go through, and I got to the chapter on space and I'm thinking, "This is great!" And I realized that not only was my eyesight too bad—this was, of course, before PRK [photorefractive keratectomy] and LASIK [laser-assisted in situ keratomileusis; laser eye surgery] and all that—it's like, my eyes are too bad to fly a fighter jet and, "Oh, I didn't know women weren't allowed to fly fighter jets. What's that all about?"

TS: Oh, right.

RB: So—

TS: Oh, because it was the eighties, before '94.

[Pentagon policy changed in July 1993 to allow women to train as fighter pilots]

RB: Yeah. So I thought to myself, "Well, maybe I'll be a science fiction writer, because I love to read it." So that dream kind of fell by the wayside. But I also always wanted to be a reporter, and when I was in the fourth grade I started a school paper. And then when I was in high school I took a journalism/creative writing class, and then when I was in college most of my film classes especially centered on writing, like, screenplays, things like that. So—

TS: So that's the way you wanted to go when you were—

RB: I never realized how much I enjoyed writing. I always thought that I enjoyed it in relation to other things. So I enjoyed writing a news article but I thought it was the "news" part of it that I enjoyed. And then I enjoyed writing a screenplay but I thought it was the "film" part of it that I enjoyed. And then a few—about s—when I went to AIT [Advanced Individual Training], as a journalist, I realized that what I really enjoy is the "writing" part of it. And I wrote my first novel, finished it in 2005. It wasn't very good. [both chuckle] It's somewhere in my things.

TS: Right.

RB: But then I started—When I was at Fort Hood [Texas] I joined a writing group in Aus—in Round Rock, which is right next to Austin.

TS: Right.

RB: [dog barking in background] I'm going to—

TS: Okay, I'll pause it for a second here.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Ready?

RB: Yes.

TS: Okay. We had to let the puppies go out to bark. All right. So you're—

RB: So I was in Round Rock and I joined a writing group while I was at Fort Hood. The group was in Round Rock and I was a member of them for several years. Even after I moved away I still Skyped in to participate. And through—By that time I was an MP [military police] so I was looking for an outlet for my creative work, and I started writing and eventually got better at it [chuckles], especially the fiction side of things. And since then I've had some stuff published.

[Skype is a computer application that allows voice and video calls to be made over the Internet]

TS: Neat.

RB: Short stories. I had a very small press, but another—it was a press, and they published one of my novels. So I'm—That's what I'm kind of doing right now, is some freelancing, and then I'm also working on some book proposals with the goal this year of getting one of those picked up and under contract so I could continue writing and getting paid for it, because again, for some reason people are like, "Oh, we'd love you to write this thing for us."

I'm like "Okay, well this is what I charge."

"Oh, well, it would be good exposure."

I'm like, "I don't need exposure! I'm not an amateur. This is what I do professionally." But—

TS: Well, that sounds really neat. That's neat.

RB: It's fun. [chuckles]

TS: Oh yeah. What year did you graduate from high school?

RB: Nineteen-ninety-six.

TS: Ninety-six. Okay, and then you went to Minnesota.

RB: Oh, geez, yes. [unclear] degree. St—

TS: St. Olaf, okay. It was too cold there.

RB: It was too—way too cold.

TS: So then you headed back to New York, and then—Now, when did you graduate from there?

RB: May of 2000.

TS: May of 2000. And then you're working, trying to find a job, and then you're working and two[?]-then 9/11 happens.

RB: Yes.

TS: You told me a little bit about that. Can you talk a little bit more about how you felt about it and what was going on?

RB: It was—It was—I'm still a little emotional, so that could come out. It was so weird, and I use that in the—like the literal sense of the term, because being in New York—when I was in high school there had been the attack on the garage of the World Trade Center, and so there was always a sense from that, and then from disaster films, that New York was a target for something.

[On 26 February 1993, a truck bomb was detonated below the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City]

But it's not something you think about when you're going to work every day. And especially not in September when it's so beautiful out and you're just like, "Doo dee doo, I'm going to work, and I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that." Like, it was just—

When my office manager called in—because I was—I was the receptionist; I was doing some other things but I was primarily the receptionist using my film degree to

answer telephones. But she called in and said, "Hey, I'm going to be late because it looked like some sort of plane had crashed into the World Trade Center."

I was like, "Wow, that's weird." And I was thinking maybe a little Cessna [small aircraft] had clipped the wing or something like that. And I went online, because you couldn't really see it. So I went online and I saw CNN [Cable News Network] had a live feed, but that was the Pentagon. I was like, "What is going on!" The—This live feed of just smoke and smoke and smoke billowing out of the Pentagon, and I'm like trying to look at all the local Internet news and nothing had popped up yet. And then it was just like somebody turned a switch and all of a sudden it starts getting plastered everywhere. We turned all the TVs on. The switchboard kept lighting up because every—of course everybody is trying to call to find out where everybody is because the cell phones stopped working immediately. So I was on the phones for a while. We finally—You could see the towers—like this much of the towers, maybe an inch or so—through the window above the skyline—

TS: Where you were at?

RB: Yeah. And of course, very quickly everything was obscured with just that thick, thick smoke, and I mean it was just—it was very, very eerie. Finally, my dad called and Crystal, the office manager, picked up the phone, because by then we were both working the phones and she's like, "Hey Rachel, your dad called and he said get your ass over to his building." [chuckles] I was like, "Okay, Crystal, if you're sure." And she actually lived down in—near Battery Park City, so she and her husband were not able to even get back. They spent the next couple of weeks in Connecticut with her family.

So I went over to my dad's and just, like, walking through the streets it really did look like a disaster movie. There was no traffic except for emergency vehicles. People—Even just clusters of strangers would—were gathered around people's radios because the taxis, or if you had a vehicle, it was pulled to the side and people were just listening to the radios. See, I told you.

TS: Right.

RB: And I made it to my dad's. He was working at Bates Worldwide, which is an advertising firm, and so they had one of their big TVs tuned to CNBC [a business news channel] and there was—there wasn't—they had this constant need for news, but, I mean, what else were they going to show other than the same thing over and over again? So they were just try—pulling in these random stories all over, so I was just sitting there watching it. And the biggest problem that we faced was all of the bridges and tunnels were closed down. So you couldn't drive, you couldn't take a train, you couldn't walk. You couldn't get anywhere. Finally, we decided, "Alright, well let's just see if we can go grab a train from Penn Station, get to—take the train from Penn Station to Hoboken, and then from Hobok—Hoboken we could up to, I think, Tuxedo, New York, and then my parents—or my mom could come pick us up."

And so, that's what we did, was we walked over to Penn Station, and they had—or Grand Central Station—one of them, it's very fuzzy. Or we got to Grand Central

and they said "No, you've got to go back to Penn Station," and then we caught the PATH train [Port Authority Trans-Hudson rapid transit system], and it was like—it was just a wave of people and they had opened up the gates—opened up the little thing where you swipe your card—

TS: Right.

RB: —and there's just cops just shoving—"Go through. Go through."

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So you didn't have to pay—

RB: No.

TS: Just letting people go.

RB: Yeah. And as soon as one train filled up it would just go to New Jersey and then come back to get the next. And there were—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: So they're just getting people out of the city.

RB: Yeah. There were people that we saw covered in ash from Ground Cen—from Ground Zero. There was one woman—I always remember—she was like—it was either a woman or a guy and they were saying that they had—they worked at the World Trade Center but they'd been late, so they were nowhere near it, but as they were coming—or coming out of the zone, someone was like, "Where do you work?" And without thinking they were like, "I work at the World Trade Center," and they hosed them down. [chuckles] And they're like, "Wait, I don't even—I wasn't even there!" So there was, like, elements of humor.

TS: Right.

RB: Then we got into Hoboken and they had set up this huge triage center, but there was nobody in it, because you were either in the towers or you weren't, so there just—there was very little triage.

TS: There weren't casualties like that.

RB: Yeah. So they—As we walked out they handed us a bottle of water, and one of the people was like, "Oh, where are you going?"
And we said, "Oh, we've got to go up to Tuxedo."
And they said, "Yeah, that train won't be here for about an hour or so."
And we were like, "Yeah, we know. We're going to go find some place to eat."
And the guy was like, "God bless you!" [chuckles] Because I guess—My dad and I were like, "Well, we're Italians so if there's something that—if there's a gigantic tragedy we're just going to have something to eat and that will make it better."

TS: [chuckles]

RB: And it did.

TS: Yeah.

RB: There's a lot of the—The restaurants in Hoboken were open and even our waiter told us, they were like, "Well, we don't know if we should open or not. But then we figured people will still need a place to eat."
And we said, "Well, we sure are glad you opened because otherwise we'd be sitting here eating peanuts out of the vending machine."

TS: Right.

RB: But we finally—the train came, we got on the train. I don't—I think that one was free too. I think if you were just coming out of New York they were just trying to get people out to where they needed to be.

TS: Right.

RB: And my brother and my mom came to pick us up, and then we finally made it back to New Jersey. But it was—it was a little bit of an ordeal, and I didn't lose anybody that I knew very well, but one of—one of my good friends, her boyfriend was in one of the floors above where the plane hit. And then there was just a bunch of other people. You can't help but know somebody who was involved, even if it's tangentially through a third party, because it's New York. Everybody knows everybody at least within two or three degrees of separation.

TS: Right, right.

RB: So it definitely made a huge impact. I tried—That was on a Tuesday. Wednesday I stayed home. I tried to come back in on Thursday. And then when I was back in on Thursday there was hardly anybody in the office. And there was a bomb scare at Grand Central, and I—it was like ten or eleven o'clock in the morning, and I threw in the towel. I'm like, "That's it. I'll be back next week."

So it was—it was—Like I said, it was definitely impactful and I can remember everything very vividly. And I also remember very vividly the—the media that came from it.

TS: Yes.

RB: The—What's the word I'm looking for? The after effects; like, what people did afterwards. And it was just very—it was—it was just weird, because again, how could you ever think that something like that would happen? You couldn't.

The—I think the biggest terrorist threat previous to that had been the Oklahoma City federal building, and that was that homegrown terrorism. So I think that back—sometimes I think we don't even—we can't even remember what our mindset was pre-9/11. And I think that's maybe not necessarily bad or good, but it should be acknowledged that it was a different mindset and that one event had the power to completely redirect the national mindset. So whenever—

[The Oklahoma City bombing was a domestic terrorist bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma on 19 April, 1995, carried out by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. One hundred and sixty-eight people were killed]

TS: That's a good way to put it.

RB: Yeah. [chuckles]

TS: It is, definitely. Well, did you feel like you had to do something?

RB: Yeah. I—If I see a sad picture on Facebook [social media website] I feel like I have to do something about it, so for that particular instance, yes, I—Especially because—Again, I was working as a receptionist and when I—on a good day I would get another project to help out one of the executives. But it was a great company with great people, but at the end of the day my job was to help rich people make more money, and I was like, "You know what? What if I die doing this? What if this is all I ever do?" And I was like, "I really need to get a job that is more than just making money." And every job, or lack of job, that I've had since that point has been about more than making money. Although money's nice. [both chuckle]

TS: Yeah.

RB: I like it, it makes life easy, but at the same time it can't be the only thing. And that's also how I knew when it was time to get off of active duty, was the only argument that people could make against my reasons for wanting to get out was, "Oh, but you're making so much money."

I was like, "I'm making so much money but I'm really bored and I want to do something different." So yeah. It definitely had an impact for the rest of my life, and probably will continue to do so for the rest of my life.

TS: Right. Definitely a very transformative moment for a lot of people.

RB: Absolutely.

TS: Well, when did you start thinking about the military?

RB: Probably two days after 9/11.

TS: Yeah?

RB: Two or three days. So. The—To back up a little bit. My dad was in the Air Force in Vietnam.

TS: Okay.

RN: And he was a flight mechanic or crew chief on an—on the O-2 spy planes.

TS: The [Lockheed] U2? [a ultra-high altitude reconnaissance plane flown by the US Air Force and the Central Intelligence Agency]

RB: O-2. It was—It's an old plane. And basically it was a plane that the psychological operations guys use to distribute their leaflets, so—at least that's what my dad said. So they—He was actually stationed with the army, with the 101st Airborne, and he told me, he was like, "Yeah." He went to college the first time but it didn't work out, so he left college—or he was invited to leave college, and joined the air force, thinking—[unclear]—thinking he would be in the air force and not have to worry, and he ended up going to Vietnam and getting stationed with the air—with the 101st Airborne. [chuckles]

TS: Right. Not quite what he had planned.

RB: So yeah. But growing up, we got a bit of a—of a—I'm not—I can't really think of what the word is. A self-contradictory second-hand experience, because my dad would tell us, "You're not going to join the military. You're all going to college, and you're going to have a career, and you're going to do great things, and you're going to major in creative things."

And I was like, "Alright. That sounds good."

But at the same time he would tell us these stories of when he was in Vietnam and I always just thought that sounded great. Stories like, he was friends with one of the K-9 [military police dog] guys, and Louie and Brucie[?], and we were never sure which was the handler and which was the dog—

TS: [chuckles] Okay.

RB: But my aunt Gloria had sent my dad a five pound block of provolone cheese, and my dad had to go on maneuvers, and when he came back he's like, "Hey! Where's my cheese?"

They're like, "Oh, Louie and Brucie ate it."

So apparently they had gone in the fridge, gotten the cheese, and just eaten it; "Here's one for you, one for me, one for you."

TS: Just ate the whole thing.

RB: Yes. [chuckles] So my—He would tell stories like that and I'd be like "Oh, okay."

And then he'd be like, "But you're not—Don't join the military. Don't join the military. It's a bad experience."

And I'd be like, "Oh, okay."

TS: You're getting conflicting messages.

RB: Yeah, but I always—like, I'd always wanted to join. And even when I was going to college the first time I had said, "Oh, I really—I'm really thinking about joining the reserves because I can get money for college," and blah, blah, blah.

And my dad was like, "No! Take out student loans."

Which in hindsight probably wasn't the best way I could have gone about things, but what did I know? I was a kid. "Okay, Dad."

Even when I told my dad that I was going to go see the recruiter—because I was at work after I got back and I had decided that, yes, I am going to join the military, so I might have been a child of the eighties but this was 2001 and I pulled up Google and I started looking up all the different branches of service. And I knew that the Marines were way too hard-core for me, I'm like, "Nope." So I looked at the air force because my dad had been in the air force, and it was either about fixing planes or fixing the other planes. I was like, "Well, I'm not a plane mechanic. I don't really want to do that." I didn't want to join the navy because then you'd have to be on a boat, and those things go up and down and side to side and sometimes they sink. And so, I was like, "Well, the army it is." And I always looked good in green, so I went there and I was looking through all of the different MOS's [military occupational specialty] that you could pick. And they had the visual communications, so they had the combat camera, combat journalist, both broadcast, print, et cetera.

So when I went to see the recruiter—Well, yeah, when I went to see the recruiter and he asked, "Well, what do you want to do?"

I said, "Well, I'd really like to do some of this stuff," and I showed him the guy with the camera. I was like, "I'd really like to try that out."

And I got the, "Well, okay," because I guess a lot of people go in and they say, "Well, I want to do this cool thing!" and then they score fifty on the ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery]. And he didn't know me from Adam.

TS: Right.

RB: So he was like, "Okay." And then I went, I took the—took the ASVAB—or took the practice ASVAB, and then he seemed a lot more amenable to it [chuckles], and he was like, "Okay." And he's like, "Oh, have you been to college?"

I said, "Yeah, I graduated NYU."

He's like, "Oh.," He's like, "I know a unit and they are looking for journalists, and you could be a 46 Quebec [MOS: Public Affairs Specialist 46Q]," and blah blah blah.

And looking back at it I was think—I thought, "Maybe I should ask about being an officer." But—

TS: But you didn't.

RB: I didn't. I thought, "Oh, I'll be a journalist and this will be fun." And also, it was going to be the Reserves, so I was like I cou—I was thinking I could get deployed, but if I deployed then I would be doing this fun thing, and I wouldn't really worry about what rank I was. I didn't really know much about the military, [chuckles] as you can see. But I did. I went and I took the ASVAB and scored really high, and made my recruiter very happy. And signed up to go to that unit out in Fort Totten [Queens, New York City].

TS: Right.

RB: And this was the 361st Press Camp. I graduated the distinguished honor graduate from my AIT, and—which was funny because they—they call you up, they're like, "Distinguished honor grad, Specialist Brune."

I was like, "Oh, that's me!" But I was like—I had this very straight face. I was like, "Okay, don't look—don't look too excited, because you're in the army and you've got to play it cool." [both chuckle]

TS: Right.

RB: I went up and shook the commandant's hand and I—I almost dropped the challenge coin that he was giving me because I had no idea what a challenge coin was. I was like, "Oh, thanks? I wonder tha—what that is?"

And then I saw one of my instructors, and she had been the—our primary small group instructor, and she was a staff sergeant. I can't remember her last name, but she was an air force staff sergeant, and she said, "Specialist Brune, you were so serious!" She was like, "If I had been—if I had graduated I would have been, like, dancing and jumping around!"

And I'm thinking to myself, "You're allowed to do that in the military?" [both laugh]

So yeah. But that was, yeah—

TS: Why was it that you didn't want to go active right away?

RB: Because I thought my dad might still be right about how terrible the military was.

TS: Okay.

RB: So I thought to myself, "Well, you know what? If it's really that terrible then it will only be for a weekend. And then after—I can do anything once a month and then—" whatever.

Because again, growing up, even my mom had said, "Rachel, don't—" This was—forget—I was in high school and I played music at the church on Sundays, and they had been looking around for somebody to do the eight o'clock Mass on Easter and they couldn't find anybody.

So I said, "Yeah, sure. I'll do it."

And when I told my mom that I had to be at the church at, like, 6:30 on Easter Sunday morning, she told me, "Rachel, never join the military because they're going to ask for somebody to go out on this mission in the middle of nowhere and you're going to raise your hand and be like, 'I'll do it!'" [chuckles] That's pretty much what happened.

TS: [chuckles]

RB: So.

TS: Well, how did your dad feel about you joining the Guard. Was it the reserves?

RB: Reserves, yeah. Well, he was not happy that I went to see the recruiter, but I think that maybe he thought, "Well, she's just wrapped up in the post-9/11, and it won't really come to fruition." But as I went to the recruiter, and then I went up to MEPS [military entrance processing station] for the processing physical, et cetera, et cetera, and you—he—he actually stopped talking to me for two whole weeks. Like, no talking whatsoever. And we were still commuting together to the city, so this was quite a feat. It was just, we walked out, we got in the car, we went to the bus, we got on the bus, we went into the city and we went our separate ways. And then we met back up on the bus, and we drove back home in silence. And that was the way it was for—for two straight weeks. Until—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Is this before you joined or after you—

RB: This was when I started the process for joining.

TS: Okay.

RB: And then he gradually came around, and I started talking about, "Well, I'm going to be a journalist." And I think that he didn't realize that there were that—that there were that sort of—hang on, let me back up. I lost control of my grammar there. I don't think he

realized that the army offered that sort of a job. He—Of course, he was in Vietnam in the seventies, and the air force in Vietnam was quite a different place than the all-volunteer army of 2001. So when he—I think when he realized that I would be able to do the sort of creative work that I enjoy doing, albeit in a military setting, he started to come around. When I told him that they had this student loan repayment program he started to come around some more. When I started talking about getting a bonus—it was the only time in any of my enlistments that I've ever actually gotten a bonus that had money attached to it—he started coming around even more. And when I started talking about, "I'd make this money, and would be doing this," he eventually—I don't know if he ever a hundred percent approved at that time, but he at least came around enough to be supportive of the fact that I wanted to do it.

And then, a couple of years later when my brother joined the air force, and my sister joined the navy, and my other sister joined the navy, he made a total one-eighty [degrees]. He was like, "Yes, great idea! This is perfect!" And so, they all got the benefits of my having gone through this, "Well, I can't believe you're doing this. Why? I can't believe—my own children going—" and he just went on a, like—

TS: So four out of the six ended up in the military?

RB: Yes. One—I was in the army. My brother did four years in the air force. He was a KC-10 crew chief. Those are the mid-air refuelers. My sister Mary was a Seabee, and she was stationed down in Gulfport. And my sister Taya—

TS: Is she not in anymore?

RB: No, they all did one and done. And then my sister Taya, she was a crypto technologist [cryptologic technician] or a cryptotechnician? I once asked her what she did, and she was like "Ha ha ha, it's classified!"

TS: Did she learn a language?

RB: She didn't. It was—It was some sort of technology that she worked with. And she applied to be a linguist, and got accepted, went out to Monterey [California] for a year to learn Arabic, and then got out of the navy. They were doing, like, a downsizing, and I think she had failed a PT [physical training] test, or something. And so, they were like, "Well, do you want to get out of the navy?"

And she said, "You know what? I think I will," and she got out. And then she was—she graduated from college, she was looking for jobs—she actually came down here and worked for about a year. And then, she's currently waiting—she got a job in UAE [United Arab Emirates], and so she's currently waiting for her work visa to finish being processed and for them to get her a plane ticket back so she can start. But, yeah, she went out there in—she went out there with a mutual family friend last year, and then got a job—or interviewed, interviewed, got the job offer. But there was going to be a long period of time where they apply for the background investigation, do the background, so

she came back home, waited, and then finally she got word that her clearance was going through. So, any day now [chuckles] we're—we're hoping.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: She's going to be heading over there.

RB: Yeah.

TS: Wow. Very interesting. Well, let's go back. Why don't you tell me about when you went to Fort Jackson [South Carolina] and now you're in the army, basic. Tell me about that experience.

RB: Well, this [chuckles] —Okay, so this is pretty much indicative of the way my entire army career has gone. We get to the MEPS station and they ask us, "Has anybody ever flown on a plane before?" And a couple of us raised our hands. And so, they go to this guy, they're like, "Here's a stack of papers," and it was all of our files from MEPS. Okay, great.

So we get on the plane, we fly to South Carolina, we get on this bus, and we fly—and we're driving along, and all of us are thinking that as soon as we get off the bus they're going to start shouting at us, they're going to be running around, doing all this stuff. So we're all like, "Okay, okay, okay," trying to mentally prepare ourselves.

We get off the bus and they're like, "Welcome to in-processing and reception. Go and sit in this room."

We're looking at each other like, "We're just supposed to sit here?"

TS: Right.

RB: Okay. So we sat in that room. They're like, "Don't fall asleep!" Okay. [makes snoring sounds] Fell asleep, of course. This was the middle of the night. And they started calling us all in, bit by bit, with—they'd have the folder, and they'd—so finally they said, "Is there anybody we haven't called?"

And there's five of us, and we're like, "Yeah, I haven't been called yet." So they got all our names and start looking through the paperwork again, and they start looking through it again. It was gone. All of our papers were gone. Our—So we're sitting there; it was myself, this one other female, I can't remember her name, but she—I do recall she was going to go be a PSYOP [psychological operations] specialist, and these three other guys. And for the next couple of days we couldn't get—

TS: So you were just in limbo.

RB: Yeah. We were issued uniforms, so we got to dress—we got to wear the uniform like everybody else and—but we didn't have a—we didn't have an assigned number like

everybody else got. We didn't have a ship date to go—to actually start like everybody else got. And we didn't even have—If you didn't have a number you didn't really have a bunk assigned to you, so we were like—in the middle of the night someone could come and kick us out of our bed and we'd have to find another one. I was like, "This is ridiculous! Is this—This is the army? Where am I now? Am I really in the army or is this like a big old Candid Camera [hidden camera/practical joke reality television show] thing that's gon—someone's going to jump out and be like, 'Surprise! Just kidding!'"

So we kept just going around and knocking on doors and saying, "Excuse me. Any word?"

And the drill sergeant's like, "No. Go away."

"Okay."

So we would probably still be there, but my buddy, the other female, apparently her dad knew a really famous congressperson or senator. And I don't think it was [South Carolina Senator James] Strom Thurmond but it was definitely one of those big Southern senators. And she was like, "You know what?" and it was so funny, she's like, "I hate to do this, but I'm going to call my dad." And she did. And literally the next day we—they had "found" our paperwork and we were off to the—they actually didn't find it, they were just like, "Here's a—Here's—No [speaking to dog]."

TS: It's all right. The puppy's just joining me. It's okay.

RB: Okay. [chuckles]

TS: It's all right, Rachel, go ahead. [speaking to dog] Sit. Sit.

RB: Captain! No!

TS: Captain wants to lay on me. [speaking to dog] Okay.

RB: Okay. [unclear]

TS: It's okay. It's alright.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RB: I told you they were very friendly.

TS: So you finally got to start your basic training.

RB: Finally got to start.

TS: All right.

RB: And it was—It both met my expectations and at the same time was not quite what I expected. The drill sergeants were definitely hard and mean and pushed you and everything.

TS: Now, was this co-ed [coeducational] or was it—

RB: It was co-ed, yes.

TS: Okay.

RB: It was men—or males and females—it was segreg—segregated by floor.

TS; But you trained together.

RB: But we trained together. We did everything together. My battle buddy was a woman; she was—Lydia Christie[?], PFC Lydia Christie. And I—You know how in basic training they're trying to pair you up with the person who's most unlike you? So I'm this tall—this six foot white chick who wears these thick glasses and is a little dirty, which always comes through no matter what clothes I'm wearing, whether it be an army uniform or something else. And she was maybe five [feet] four [inches] [chuckles], this black woman with this very thick Jamaican accent and they paired us together, I guess thinking, "Well, who could be more different?"

And I was like, "Oh, where are you from?"

She said, "Oh, I'm from Brooklyn."

I'm like, "Oh my gosh, I went to school at NYU!" So the two of us got along great.

TS: Oh, cool.

RB: [chuckles]

TS: [speaking to dog] Hang on, I'm just going to move you.

RB: And it was—Looking back, the lack of sleep and the fact that after 9/11 and I went and called the recruiter, I didn't really process any emotions because I was just moving forward. And as soon as I—As long as I was moving forward and busy with making arrangements and things like that, I didn't really have to think about anything. Well, basic training, you're doing a lot of activity, but you also have a lot of time to think. Because you will be doing something, maybe cleaning your weapon, or polishing your boots, or ruck marching, or something like that, and you'll be thinking. And late at night you'll be laying in bed—because we went to bed earlier and woke up earlier than I was used to, so it took me a while to go to sleep—and I'd be sitting there, and I would just be thinking, and I would—would be—replaying things, and not necessarily like straight up flashbacks, but I would still have these leftover images and feelings, and so they would

all come out, and it was just—it was kind of a horrible time because of that. And then also, because of all the pushups that we did. [chuckles]

TS: I was going to ask if anything was particularly hard physically.

RB: Yes, it was—it was—and it wasn't because I wasn't physically fit, it was just I didn't realize I could do the things that I could do. So I—I had no idea that I could do forty-something pushups, because I had never done that before. And then when I went to basic training I was like, "Oh my God, I have to do three pushups or I won't make it out of reception, and I was so nervous that I was like trembling, and I couldn't get up, and I'm thinking to myself, "Oh my God, how am I ever going to pass my PT test?" But when you see other people doing it, and you just have to do it, you do it. So I was—I was—Again, I was in chorus, and theater, and book nerd; I wasn't very much into sports. But it was—That was the most challenging part, I think.

TS: Was it?

RB: Yeah. It still is. It still is. I'm still working on getting back in shape after having a baby and I'm like, "Ahhh—"

TS: Well, I told you you'd get—you'd get a pass, as far as I'm concerned, for that. So that's [unclear]

RB: [chuckles]

TS: Well, so once you're out of basic though, then you had to go for your AIT for your MOS, right?

RB: Yes.

TS: And that was at Fort Meade [Maryland].

RB: That was at Fort Meade. That's actually where I met my husband.

TS: Oh, really? Okay.

RB: Yes, there's kind of a j—an in-joke about DINFOS [Defense Information School] romances. When I went there, there was a number of men and women who had just been in a very restrictive, highly physical, demanding environment, and all of a sudden now they are let loose on the world, and so there was some "pairing up" going on. And so, everybody was making a joke about DINFOS romance, DINFOS, romance. And there were a few couples that we knew who basically got married after knowing each other for a few months so that they could PCS together [permanent change of station]. And then there was a couple of couples that got together, like my husband and I, and actually my roommate started seeing this guy when they were there, and they are now also married,

and they also just recently had a son, who is actually, I think, two months older than Laura Jean. [chuckles] I was like, "There must have been something in the water at that time."

TS: That's right. I guess so.

RB: But yeah, it was—it was a pro—it was broken up into sections and you learned basic journalism writing, basic photojournalism, editing, layout—layout and design, public—basic media law, not enough to come out as a lawyer, just enough to be dangerous.

TS: Right, sure. Now, what was it, a class? Was it about equal for men and women, or was it skewed some?

RB: It was skewed. I would say there's probably a quarter to a third women, and it was all the branches, so we were there with—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh, it was?

RB: Yeah, we were there with—

TS: Okay, so this is why you said that the air force staff sergeant was—Okay.

RB: Yes. We had Marines, [U.S.] Air Force, Coast Guard, [U.S.] Navy, and then of course, [U.S.] Army. And we learned all those different aspects, as well as how to be a public affairs specialist, or NCO [noncommissioned officer], or officer, which meant prepping commanders for media interviews; giving them rundowns on—Let me back up.

Say we had somebody who wanted to interview the commander, or interview a subject matter expert. We would facilitate that request, which would usually come from the higher headquarters, and if it didn't, we'd have to run it by the higher headquarters, get permission for whoever it was to do the interview. We would prep that person for the interview by reviewing what—some other stuff that this journalist had done. So we could say, "Hey, this person's got a hit list out for the military and will probably be very combative, so try to shape what you're saying." And then were—or we'd be like, "Oh, they're very friendly to the media so you can expect that they'll give you some "softball" questions."

TS: Right.

RB: And then we would be there during the interview to facilitate; make sure that the general or the colonel, or whoever it was, didn't come off looking foolish. Or something like that. [chuckles]

TS: What if they did?

RB: Then you'd probably have a very angry colonel or general. We actually—Skipping ahead—When we were in OIF [Operation Iraqi Freedom] our general gave an interview, and I had gone home on leave, and the E-7 who was there—with whom I didn't really get along—he was facilitating the interview, and the questions started getting more and more specific. So they started out asking about the prisoners that we had, and basically got the general to swear up and down that we had total control of—we knew where all of the prisoners were, and we knew everything about it, and blah blah blah. And I'm thinking to myself, "Oh no. They're going to totally pull out the name of somebody that is having a har—their relatives are having a hard time getting in touch with." And that's exactly what they did.

So they're like, "Well, this person's family says that you don't know where they are. And have you ever heard of them?" And blah blah blah.

And I'm thinking to myself, "Go ahead and step in and say, 'We'll do some research.'" You can't—or—

TS: Right.

RB: You can't expect the general to just be like, "Oh, I know exactly who Mohammed is—" just as an example—because you've got five thousand—well, not five thousand—but fifty percent of the guys in there have some variation of those familiar names. It would be like, "Hey, where's John?"

"John? Yeah, I know that guy." And you've got fifty Johns on—on the list.

TS: Sure.

RB: So that was very—It embarrassed the general, it embarrassed the unit, it em—and it—it reflected badly, not just on the public affairs guy who was there, but on both of us, because you are your label. So there's one more senior officer who now has a bad taste in her mouth when it comes to public affairs.

TS: Gotcha. So that's why you try to do the diplomatic thing with the—Got it.

RB: Yes. Or just once the interview starts there's very little that you can do. It's the prep work that you want to do prior to it. So just sitting down, "Hey, they'll probably try to ask you about a specific EPW [enemy prisoner of war] and if they do that, then here's a good command message that—here are the—" just as an example—"here are the avenues that families can use to track down their loved ones." And publicize that, rather than sit there and try and look up a specific prisoner right then and there on the spot.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Right, kind of redirect the interview to what you want to say.

RB: Exactly. Exactly. Because that's—that's part of what your job as the public affairs is, to find that fine line of—give the reporter the information that he or she wants and needs, but at the same time provide them the information that we want them to share. And it's very interesting, in—last May—so I've been doing this for about a year now—I started working for—a freelance basis for Task & Purpose; it's a military interest website. And so, I've been on the other end of those sorts of interviews. Especially there was one—there's one series I did; it was a three part series on innovation in the military. And so, I interviewed a couple of higher level officers, and they—it was—it was along the same lines, they had clearly been prepared, so I would ask them my questions, which were legitimately "softball" questions, because it's a very military-friendly website; I'm not trying to do a hatchet job. But—So I would give them my questions, and some of them they were—most of them they were pre—prepared for, based on the topic that I had given, and some of them, they were a little less prepared for it. But they always had the PAO [public affairs officer] in the room with them, and I—if I was like, "Hey, can you send me a biography?"

They would say, "Oh, yes, we'll get that right to you."

I'm like, "Alright. Cool." So, it's—it's always, I think, a little bit easier working with the military as a journalist when you've worked in it as a public affairs.

TS: Oh, sure, of course. You know the inside story, right? What are you thinking about the army, then? I mean, you've gone through your basic, you've gone through your AIT, you were a distinguished graduate.

RB: I was ready—I was ready to join up active duty right away.

TS: Why didn't you?

RB: I contacted the recruiter, and it wasn't the same one, it was a different recruiter. And I said, "I want to go back on active duty," but by that time I had wised up and I said, "I think I want to be an officer." So I had—I was putting together my OCS [Officer Candidate School] packet and then one day [unclear]—

TS: This was in 2001?

RB: Two-thousand-two.

TS: Two-thousand-two. Okay.

RB: So there was a—Yeah, it was in 2002. I got back from AIT and most of my unit had gone to Cuba [Guantanamo Bay] as the press headquarters.

TS: They had gone to Cuba?

RB: Yes. And I was like, "Man, I really want to go."

And they said, "No, you have to stay here," because they were already there, and they didn't need any more people.

TS: Okay. Right.

RB: So the timing just worked out that at the same as I was putting in my OCS packet, the unit came back, and the camaraderie that I saw, and the stories that they were—"Oh remember that time?"

"Oh yeah!"

And they would—didn't even have to say what time it was—[sounds of dogs barking and scrambling out of room]

TS: [speaking to dog] Oh, gotta let you go. [more barking] Here, pause.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay, dog pause there. So you—

RB: So they came back from Cuba—

TS: Okay.

RB: —and they were—I could just see how they had come together as a unit, and I really, really, really wanted to deploy, and it didn't look like this unit was going to go anywhere, because they had just come back. So that second drill after they came back—there were some people that were coming around saying, "So does anybody want to go transfer to do a deployment?"

And I was like, "Sure, I'll do it. And I didn't even ask where, which—so my mom was right about that." [sounds of dogs entering room]

TS: Right. Here, I'll pause it again.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay, so we took a short pause there and we're going to continue. So you volunteered to deploy somewhere, you didn't even know where.

RB: Yes. I mean, I could guess, but they were—said somewhere in Southwest Asia, so I volunteered to do that. And then during this time, the news had shifted from reporting on Afghanistan, which is where I really wanted to go, to reporting on Iraq, and all of the—all of the debates and negotiations that were going on as far as going to Iraq. And I remember thinking that I will volunteer for this deployment but I might not even go on it because it's not even sure if we're going to deploy.

Well, I think it was like a week later I got my orders, [chuckles] to say, "Go here because you're going to deploy." And then that's when I realized that—I mean, I can't—I wasn't behind the scenes so I can't really tell, but at the moment that they were looking for people, and I volunteered, which was in November or December, right around that time—

TS: Two-thousand-two?

RB: Yes. I'm pretty sure that it was pretty positive that we were going to Iraq, and they didn't even need to bother to have the debates, because we were already going to be there and what else were they going to do? Ship us all home? I don't think so.

So I got my orders. I went to Uniondale [New York] —or I reported to Uniondale, and we actually deployed out of Fort Dix [New Jersey]. So we spent a few days packing everything up. I had never met anybody at this unit in my entire life, and very quickly got to know a lot of the people. We went to Fort Dix and we deployed out of there, and actually this is the funny—I think I have this picture in here, I'm not sure, but it's one of the funniest pictures.

TS: Can you describe the book you're looking at?

RB: Sure. This is the volume—I can almost call it a yearbook—but it's basically a collection within a book of all of the issues of *The MP Times*, which was the newsletter—or the newspaper that I put together when we were downrange.

TS: Really neat.

RB: And I don't know if you can see this but—

TS: Oh, there's a picture of you?

RB: Well, it's not me—

TS: Okay.

RB: This was a—the picture is of Sergeant Nicole Latta[?] bundled up in all of her heavy gear—

TS: Oh, this is at Fort Dix.

RB: At Fort Dix. It was a snowstorm of epic proportions, and we were at the firing range, so we were qualifying—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Yeah, it's quite a picture.

RB: Yeah, and like I said, it's mostly snow. All that stuff in the background, that's all snowflakes.

TS: Getting ready to go to the desert.

RB: Getting ready to go to the desert. [both chuckle]

TS: Okay. I get the irony there.

RB: But—I mean, it was—it was—it was a very interesting time because, again, we were going overseas and it was very uncertain, and we didn't even really know where we—where we would end up, because the 800th Military Police Brigade, which was—the HHC was where I was with, because that's—I was the brigade photojournalist, they didn't even know where they would go, because by doctrine, your enemy prisoners of war are supposed to be removed from the active battlefield and housed and located and taken care of past the—past the line of advance—or past the front line—of where the active battlefield is.

TS: Right. Behind there.

RB: Right. That was not going to happen, because Kuwait said we could not set up the EPW camp in Kuwait. None of the other surrounding countries would allow us to do that either. In fact, Turkey said you can't use—you can't use our country to—because they were going to go in from Kuwait, and then down from the top from Turkey. And Turkey was like, "No way. You're not going to do that." Okay. Later on they made a lot of money by allowing the supply convoys to come in from the top, but that's beyond—beside the point.

So we ended up at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. Some of our battalions, the ones that were going to move forward, were located at Camp Virginia and a couple of the other forward locations. And what eventually ended up happening was, on my birthday, when the war started, the forward elements moved past the Kuwait/Iraq border and they went to find someplace to build an EPW camp. The first place they found, if I'm recalling correctly—which I think I am because this story—Sergeant Dandola[?], John Dandola,

was telling us—when they moved forward and they found this area that they thought they would put the prison camp, he was walking to where the latrine area was, and the sand just kind of shifted, and he looked down and he was looking at a landmine. So they all basically picked up and left that location.

The Brits [British Army] had set up Holding Camp Freddy, and so eventually the battalion that our headquarter—part of headquarters detachment element went with, they ended up just settling on that camp, which was right over the Kuwaiti border. I mean, you could see Kuwait from the camp. And that eventually became Camp Bucca. And so, the way they got around the fact that the EPWs had to be moved to a relatively safe place was that they would collect them at these various points. And there was one in Baghdad—actually there were a number in Baghdad—then there was Trans-shipment Point Whitford, which was right by Tallil Air Base, and then they brought them down to Camp Bucca. So wherever you had EPWs captured on the battlefield they would take them to one of those places and then they would transport them to Camp Bucca, which eventually became the—the big prison camp.

TS: Well, let's talk a little bit. So you got there in March of 2003—no February of 2003 to start, you said; deployed.

RB: Yeah, I believe it was like late February.

TS: Late February.

RB: Yes.

TS: So now you're in that kind of condition. What were your living conditions like? What did you eat? What was that environment?

RB: Well, where we were it was pretty nice. Camp Arifjan, I think, at that point was already a permanent party post, but it was quite small. And all of us coming in staging, had just expanded it exponentially. So there was a—these are still there actually—a line of about a dozen of these long buildings. And there were two that were offices and cubicles and things like that, and—that are actually still there—and then you had a couple of warehouses that had—they had built like, plywood walls to make a makeshift building. And then in the last couple of them were just these long, long, long open warehouses filled with cots. So everybody coming in, especially if they were there staging to move onward, they would just cram into those—into those long warehouses and live there. And then work out of the two build—out of those buildings.

When we first got there we didn't really know if we would be—as the Headquarters at Headquarters Company, if we would be moving forward, again because we didn't know where the EPW camp would eventually end up. So we were living—and the warehouses, they were drafty. And what we didn't expect when we got there was that Kuwait in February, at night, is still pretty cold. So all of us were, like, running to the PX [Post-Exchange retail store] that they had there to get the big fleece blankets. And I didn't

buy one then, I used my sleeping bag, but I froze. It was so cold. I wasn't e—I was like, "Where am I? This is not the desert!"

TS: Right. [chuckles]

RB: And then, also, too, the—they had these drills for when the Scud missiles [a Soviet-built tactical ballistic missile used by Iraq] were going to be launched. And when you heard "lightning lightning lightning" and then there'd be like [makes sound of horn] "lightning lightning lightning" and you'd have to throw on your MOPP [Mission Oriented Protective Posture chemical warfare defense equipment] gear and your pro [protective] mask and go and get in the bunker. So we're like, "Okay," thinking, "this is weird." But—So every once in a while you'd have that sort of a—

TS: A drill.

RB: —drill, yeah.

TS: Why did you think it was weird?

RB: Because Kuwait was not—it didn't look like what I had imagined a combat zone would look like.

TS: What did it look like?

RB: It was just like a—like a normal army post. There was—Our living conditions were a little temporary, but at the same time we were driving around and there was a gym, and a DFAC [dining facility], and the PX, and there were people who were permanently stationed there. Like, this is where they went for their—to PCS there for a year. And they had barracks, and there was—the pool hadn't opened yet, but there was going to be a swimming pool. And they opened up this mall kind of area. So it had Sub—I think there was a Subway [restaurant], or—I might be misremembering it because when I went back—when I PCSed there in 2012—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Right. It had changed.

RB: It was all—No, it was all there.

TS: Oh, okay.

RB: All the—All the hardstand buildings that we had gone to because, oh this is great, they were there. So yeah, there was this feeling of everything is very temporary and at the

same time everything is very permanent. And we—As the headquarters company, we kept watching people come and go, come and go, because all of these troops were flying in with—and all their stuff was being shipped in, and so they would come and they would stay in the warehouse for a week, or maybe a couple of days. And then they would jump out to one of the forward camps that were much more austere. And we went to a couple of them because we had soldiers there, and they were basically a GP [general purpose] medium or a GP large tent in the sand and there was—

TS: What's a GP?

RB: Government—or—I don't know.

TS: Okay. Just a big tent.

RB: Yeah, it's a big tent that smelled very distinctively of canvas. But there was sand everywhere. Sand blowing all the time. There was just wind blowing, blowing, blowing all the time. But, I mean, you get used to it eventually. And then especially after the war started and everybody jumped north, and things kind of calmed down, there were 5Ks [five kilometer race] to run, and there's just all like—normal stuff, that I thought, "My gosh, I'm deployed to this war zone and everybody's worried about me but here I am at Camp Arifjan." And I was trying so hard to go on the element of headquarters, because we had—our battalion was primarily going forward first, but there was a small headquarters element that was going to go with them, and I was like, "I've got to go on that!"

And I think it was primarily the command sergeant major who said, "No, you're not going on that."

I was like, "But I'm the journalist! I'm supposed to go on this stuff!"

[mimics sergeant major's voice] "You're not going anywhere!"

I'm like, "What?"

TS: Why not? Why didn't he want you to go?

RB: The reason that I got was, "It's too dangerous and you don't need to go." And I said, "But—"

TS: Was it a gender issue or—

RB: I think it was. I think there was gender issue.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: But they didn't explicitly say?

RB: Yeah. I mean, again, I was still new at the army, and I had never, to my knowledge, had any issues with gender before. And then you go on a deployment and then all of a sudden it—you become very, very much aware of your gender, especially as a female. And I'm just like, "I—I'm—I need to do this!" I think also, to be fair though, they didn't really have a good understanding of what my job was, which is part of the reason why I left the field. Because a lot of people don't understand what your PAO is there for, and they think that you are there to shoot "grip and grin" photos of people getting [challenge] coins and awards. And I—I had to—I didn't really know anybody and I didn't really know how to talk pa—above my rank. So I was still very intimidated at times, and I just didn't know how to explain that this is the ent—if the entire brigade is moving forward, this is going to be newsworthy, and I need to be there to do it. And I can't just have someone relate it to me secondhand.

Very shortly after that, though, I did get a chance to go forward, but I still—I'm still a little mad about that. Especially since that command sergeant major, I don't know, he had some issues. He ended up getting sent back home to retire because he had a relationship with a specialist—not me, somebody else—and I learned years later that he divorced his wife and followed this woman to Florida and she broke up with him.

So yeah. Like I said, I don't if it—if it was primarily a gender issue, or if they saw me as just this specialist who is there to take pictures, and "Why do you need to go?" I think, knowing what I know now, I probably could have explained it better and said, "This is my job as public affairs, and I'm doing this for posterity," et cetera, et cetera, but—

TS: You did get to go forward you said. So you went—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RB: Yes.

TS: So February through July and then—

RB: Well—

TS: So from February through July you were at—

RB: I was primarily at Ari—Arifjan.

TS: Okay.

RB: But I was hitching rides on any convoy that went over the border, because there were convoys that went over the border.

TS: Yeah?

RB: And then once you got over the border they would go back and forth. So especially the chaplains would trav—or the chaplain would travel, the command team would travel, and I got to the point where anytime someone was going somewhere I would ask, "Can I go with you?" And they never really could figure out a reason to tell me no, so I just went. [chuckles]

TS: So what was that like when you did that? What were you experiencing?

RB: Oh, it was fun. Finally I was getting off of Camp Arifjan, which was eventually kind of boring, because it's *Groundhog Day*, over and over again.

[*Groundhog Day* is a 1993 American fantasy-comedy starring Bill Murray, about a weatherman who finds himself in a time loop on Groundhog Day]

And my job was to go in and do photojournalism, and do interviews, and take notes and write stories, and market those stories. And I had to put together this newspaper every couple of weeks or so. I set my own deadline so sometimes it came out earlier or later, mostly later.

TS: So you're basically like a one-person shop?

RB: Yes. I had a lieutenant colonel, Colonel Scheer[?] who had, I think, originally been a finance officer, and he came to the unit the same time that I did. But he took the lead when it came to the media management part of it, so people—when people called and they wanted to—they sent us media queries and things like that, he primarily took over that, and then I was—I was running around doing stories, and putting the newspaper together, and sending stories. I got a little more savvy. I wasn't really savvy at the beginning, but I got a little bit more savvy about how to market the stories that we were doing, which were mostly human interest feature-type stories.

TS: Who were you marketing to?

RB: Hometown newspapers, other army publications, some websites, and pretty much everybody that I could think of.

TS: Yeah, just to get it out.

RB: Yeah.

TS: Okay, so you're going out, you're hitching rides, you're getting stories, you're figuring out what's going on, you're putting together these newsletters, for your unit?

RB: For the unit, primarily.

TS: Okay.

RB: So we start the first issue, which is in here. It was literally a—I used Microsoft Word to lay it out, which—don't ever do that, it's terrible. And it was—I printed it out on both sides and stapled it, and I did that a couple hundred times, and that was our first newspaper. And then I wised up and I went to the—the Coalition Press Information Center, which is where all of the public affairs people for the—for CFLCC [Coalition Forces Land Component Command] were located, and I said, "Can I please have a copy of—" Oh gosh—

TS: Software or something?

RB: Yes, it was [Adobe] Photoshop, and the publishing software Quark[Xpress], maybe?

TS: Okay.

RB: I can't remember exactly which one it was.

TS: That's okay. You might remember and you can edit that.

RB: Yeah. But—So they gave me the software and I downloaded it to the computer that—actually, it was a computer that Colonel Scheer[?] had bought, because the unit didn't have a laptop for me.

TS: Oh, okay. So you used that.

RB: Yeah, and then also they had—when I'd arrived at the unit I had asked them, "Do you guys have a camera for me to use?" Because I didn't have my own camera at the time. [chuckles] They handed me this—I had been using—at DINFOS I had been using this beautiful, completely manual digital SLR [single lens reflex] camera. It was about this big, it weighed a ton, it was very expensive, it had interchangeable lenses. Oh my gosh, it was beautiful and perfect. I didn't really know how to use it. But it took—I was able to take some higher quality photos because it was a higher quality camera.

So they handed me this camera that looked like it had been the first digital camera ever made. It took a floppy disk [type of computer disk storage used from 1970s through 2000s]

TS: Oh, wow.

RB: And I looked at it, and I looked at them, and I was like, "What am I supposed to do with this? Take a half a picture?" So we used that for about a—maybe a month. We used that while we were at Fort Dix, and then Colonel Scheer went out right before we left and he bought a laptop and he bought a digital camera. And so, I was using those primarily until

they actually were able to issue us an actual laptop, and they had digital cameras from the supply of cameras that they used in the prison to process the prisoners, and we got one of those. And then I also—when I was in—once we got up to Baghdad, I actually bought a Canon digital SLR, and then was able to—to do even more with the—with photography and photojournalism. So that camera came with me also on my second deployment, and I—

TS: Was this your personal camera, then?

RB: It was my personal camera, and I enj—I learned how to use it, and I enjoyed it. Unfortunately, it stopped working about a year or so ago, and I went to get it repaired and they have stopped—they have stopped repairing those.

TS: Oh, no. [chuckles]

RB: I had to buy the [Canon EOS] 50D instead of getting my 10D repaired. So.

TS: While you're deployed, and you're out getting these stories—I know that probably a lot of that is in this book that you have—What are some of the stories that you didn't report, that you wished that you could have, that you might be able to talk about?

RB: Okay, so we went to—let me see—Okay, so, I'm going to skip ahead to when we finally—oh, actually, no, I won't—I won't skip too much ahead. All of the people that I have gone with to—or that I had gone to DINFOS with, I think that at some point I met them out in the desert. [chuckles]

TS: Oh, really? Okay.

RB: My—One of my best friends, Nicky Trent[?]
—now her last name is Goudelock[?]
—but she was a broadcaster and we had become very good friends at DINFOS. And she and I got called up at the same time. And she ended up going with the coalition press information center, so it was great because then I had an in at our higher public affairs headquarters, and was able to get a lot of stories placed just because she vouched for me. And then as they—after they got the stories they saw that I was providing them with high quality stuff.

And so, we made also a couple of attempts, and actually succeeded pretty much, at just going to see each other. And there was one time in particular—this was after we had gotten up to Baghdad—they were in the Green Zone [area in central Baghdad where Coalition Provisional Authority was located], we were out at Camp Victory. And I couldn't mail a lot of my stories because the pictures were too big and the Internet line was too small. So I said, "Alright, well, when's the next convoy to the Green Zone?" Hopped on a convoy and we went up there. And the general actually had to go to do an interview so it just worked out really well. Well, we were sitting there with the general, and I had asked, "Hey, is Specialist Goudelock[?]"—or Sergeant Trent, at this time—"is she here?"

And they told me, "Oh, she went to get the mail."

And I thought, "Oh, man. I missed her."

So she comes in and she sees me. She drops all of the mail and she comes over, she gives me this gigantic hug, and she's like, "Brune! I'm so happy to see you!" and she notices that there's a one star general sitting right behind me, and she's like, "Excuse me, ma'am. Welcome to the Press Information Center." [both chuckle]

So it was—But that was Sergeant Trent. She was very just open. And she ha—like I said, we're still friends. Whenever I travel down to Georgia, or I'm traveling through Georgia, I make it a point to stop and see her.

TS: That's cool.

RB: And she was actually—when I was coming back from mid-tour leave, that was when the [Hotel] al-Rashid got hit, and I was freaking out because that's where she was staying.

[Hotel al-Rashid, in Baghdad, Iraq was hit with eight rockets in October 2003. A U.S. colonel was killed, and 15 other people, including eleven Americans and one Briton, were wounded]

And she—she doesn't really talk about being there. But there was one time that she actually did write a little something on her blog—which I don't even think she maintains anymore—but she had been talking about feeling the building get hit, and then evacuating from the building, and seeing, like, people, and it's not something that we would talk about when we get together, but just knowing that I have a friend who's been through that sort of experience, I think, is—is a good thing.

TS: Yeah. Well, what did you think about being in a war zone?

RB: I'm—Sometimes I think that—again, this is going to sound weird—I enjoyed every minute of it. The only part that I didn't enjoy was my—after we got there, we'd been there for about four or five months, this new detachment came in that they had called up. And in that new detachment there was an E-7 who was a PAO NCOI[C] [Public Affairs Officer Noncommissioned Officer in Charge] and he became my boss; like, in between myself and Colonel Scheer. And this guy and I didn't get along. And it just—it was just—it made it difficult because he had a very difficult personality. So do I, but I mean, it was—it was trying at times, and unfortunately, nobody really liked him. So that made it even worse, because then people would say things about him to me, and I would—I would be like, "I so agree." And sometimes I would—I would not be a good person and I would say, "Yes, I know. He's terrible." And then sometimes I would just try to be a good person and say, "Well, he's—" I would try and play it off, make an excuse, or just try not to get involved in that. But there's this—Oh my gosh, there are so many stories about this guy. When I went on—There was one NCO in particular who did not like this guy.

TS: Did not?

RB: He did not.

TS: Okay.

RB: And he—This—Okay, so, Sergeant First Class Sutherland[?] was his name, and he had a very high opinion of himself, but he couldn't back up that opinion with actions. And he was with a group of reservists from New York and New Jersey who are very much, "what you see is what you get," and they don't really cut you a lot of slack. And they are going to—if you piss them off they're going to get on your case. So this guy, Sergeant Giuliani[?], I'll never forget, we were doing a formation run in Baghdad—which don't ask me why but we were doing it—and I'm running along, like a little sergeant—or specialist at the time—doo ti doo ti doo—and I look back and there's Staff Sergeant Louis Giuliani[?] at the back of the formation, running along, smoking a cigarette. [chuckles] I was like, my—it blew my mind. And I thought to myself, "Oh my God." But, I mean, this guy really was butting heads with the—with my boss.

So I leave to go on mid-tour leave, and I come back and I cannot find my thumb drive [computer data storage device] anywhere. I'm like, "What happened to my thumb drive?" because it had all these photos. It was 250 mill—or megabytes. Wooh! But it was what I used to basically bring my stories back and forth between here—between Camp Victory and the Green Zone, and I also used it when I was traveling in case I needed something. So come to find out, Sergeant Giuliani stole Sergeant Sutherland's thumb drive. So Sergeant Sutherland stole my thumb drive, and then pretended he didn't know—or, no, and then Sergeant Giuliani stole that one, so I'm like, "Where's my thumb drive?"

And Sergeant Bil—Sutherland's like, "I lost my thumb drive, too. Someone stole it."

And I'm thinking to myself, "Oh my gosh. Someone really hates the PAO section."

And Sergeant Giuliani gave me mine back and said, "Here you go. I'm sorry. I stole his and he stole yours. So I stole his."

I'm like, "Uh." Yeah, I mean, stuff like that doesn't make it into the big, epic movies, but it totally happens.

TS: Right. Happens—going on. Well, did you notice any other gender issues, like, when you would go out and you'd see women working with the guys, or was there anything like that?

RB: Not to my mind, no. I know that there was some harass—that there were some incidents, but—

TS: That happened to you personally?

RB: No. The—I think the closest that came was—they had built—I actually think Sergeant Giuliani built them—these wooden showers down by our TOC [tactical operations center]. And you could—

TS: By your TOC?

RB: Tactical operating center. So you—It was two stalls next to each other, and the water was from one of the giant bladders, but it was—it was better than waiting in line with a whole bunch of other people to take a five second shower and then smell really bad afterwards, because the water they used wasn't as good as ours.

But someone was like, "Oh, when you go to take a show—" or they were like, "When you take a shower, make sure it's with another female because some of the guys have been saying that they have been looking at some of the females."

And I was like, "What?"

And they said, "Oh yeah, So-and-so said he saw you in the shower," and blah blah blah. And it was actually Sergeant Giuliani who told me this story, which I took with a grain of salt because everybody knew that he would—he would basically sleep with anything if it had a pulse and was female.

So I was like, "What is—What reaction are you trying to get from me right now?" I was like, "Am I supposed to be outraged?" I just played it off. I'm like, "Yeah, whatever." And I was thinking to myself, "You know what? I'll just, from now on, not take a shower with anybody in the other stall."

So again, that was like the closest. But a friend of mine—At the time we had a number of different first sergeants, because the first first sergeant, First Sergeant Michalino[?], he was fine and then he had heart trouble and he had to go home. So they picked this other master sergeant to be the first sergeant. And he said some things to my friend that were really inappropriate. She was a specialist, just like me. Meanwhile, this guy, his wife keeps calling him home on emergency leave, so he kept going home on emergency leave, but then he would come back and he would make these ina—inappropriate comments. So I—I talk—I was talking to my friend and she's like, "Yeah, he was—wrote me this letter saying that he loved me and he thought I was sexy and this and that."

I was like, "Oh my God! What—" Me, always if I hear something I want to fix it. I was like, "Have you told the commander?" And—[extraneous comments about dog redacted]

So she said, yes, she had gone to see the comman—or she had talked to the commander, or someone had informed the commander, and the commander's reaction was, "Oh, well—" something along the lines of, "Specialist Erna[?] is always flirting," or "She's not completely innocent," or blah blah blah. [sound of dog barking] Exactly. [speaking to dog] That was exactly what I thought of that. [both chuckle] So that pissed me off. [sound of dog growling] Okay, Captain, thank you.

TS: Okay. So that's what she told you that he said?

RB: Yeah. And it just—it became—[sound of dog growling] If you don't mind I'm going to just pause—if we can—I'm going to put him outside because he—

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay, so.

RB: Okay, so that was a—that was my introduction to sometimes in the military even if something is blatantly wrong, like—she had the letter that he wrote her. It was my introduction to the fact that even if something is blatantly wrong, unless your leadership doesn't want to do something about it, nothing will get done. I was—Again, I didn't know what I didn't know, so nowadays I'd be like, "Well, it's time to make a complaint to IG [Inspector General] or EO [equal opportunity] or try one of those alternate venues, but yes—

TS: Well now, were you married yet or—not yet?

RB: No.

TS: Okay.

RB: I—Rob and I had talked over email. We were sort of dating, sort of just—I mean, we were long distance. I saw him right before I deployed, and then he—he was heading to Afghanistan while I was heading to Iraq.

TS: Was he also in the army?

RB: Yes, he was in the army reserve as well, and he did six months in Afghanistan; he was a broadcaster for a PSYOP unit. He came back for six months and then he went to Iraq just as I was leaving Iraq. And it was actually very cool. Colonel Scheer[?] was very supportive when I told him that my boyfriend was coming into BIAP [Baghdad International Airport] and he was going to be there for a little while, and, "Would it be possible if we went out to see him?"

And we hopped into a humvee, and I drove, and at that time when you went from Camp Victory to BIAP even though you never really left the security of the perimeter you still had to go through the full convoy brief. So you had to have two vehicles, and you had to have all this stuff. Colonel Scheer's like, "Oh, don't worry about it. Get in the car, Brune, we're going to go."

So we drove up, and they were like, "Uh, you're not really—"

Colonel Scheer's like, "I got it. It's okay. You can let us through."

"Oh, okay." And they let us through.

I was like, "This is amazing. It's good to be a lieutenant colonel."

And we went to BIAP, and we went to the little area where all of the arrivals wait to get picked up by their units. And there was Rob, and we sat for about two hours, and I don't even remember what we talked about, but we were like, "Oh, hi."

"Hi, hi."

And "Don't forget to email me."

"Okay, I won't. Don't forget to email me."

"Okay." And then his unit came and picked them all up, and then we drove back to Camp Victory, going the other way. So, it was a—That was a very—That was when I realized that if your leadership does care about you, then they'll take care of you. So it was sometimes a very schizophrenic [unpredictable] experience with certain things happening like that, and then other things happening, like what happened with my friend.

TS: Well, were you still thinking about going the officer route at this time?

RB: No, I was having too much fun.

TS: Okay.

RB: I was having too much fun. And I really loved my job. So I was getting—on that deployment I had more of the fun than the frustration. Even after we were leaving, and all of the stuff about Abu Ghraib started coming to light, and we started realizing that our legacy was not going to be the stories that are in this book, which is all of the actual stories that I wrote while I was there, but all we were going to be remembered for was what this squad did at Abu Ghraib.

[In 2003 and 2004, several soldiers from the 372nd Military Police Company, 800th Military Police Brigade, were accused and convicted of allowing and inflicting sexual, physical, and psychological abuse of Iraqi prisoners of war in Abu Ghraib Prison in Baghdad, during the United States' occupation of Iraq.]

TS: And that squad was part of your—

RB: Yes. They were part of the 372nd Military Police Company.

TS: So they were part of the brigade or—

RB: Yes. The company was one of our battalions that was under the brigade.

TS: Okay. Well, how'd you feel then, when you came back out of there? So you came back March of 2004.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RB: March of 2004, Yes.

TS: When you got back to Fort Totten [New York]?

RB: Well, we came back to Fort Dix and we went through reverse SRP [Soldier Readiness Processing] at Fort Dix. Then we went out to Uniondale [New York] and did our final out-processing, and then I went back to my unit at Fort Totten, which was a public affairs unit. And I didn't really know what to feel, except at that time they were very much demonizing [Brigadier] General [Janis] Karpinski, who was the [800th Military Police] brigade commander. And I felt—

TS: And you were under her at the time you were there?

RB: Yes.

TS: Okay.

RB: I felt that she had gotten the worst kind of rap for something that had—that was—that happened because of a systemic set of failures, both within the army and within our unit, but also within the world of politics.

[Extraneous comments about cat redacted]

TS: So you thought she was getting a raw deal.

RB: Absolutely. I absolutely do believe that.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Do you still feel that way?

RB: Absolutely. I absolutely do feel that. She—I actually wrote a book—Actually, let me go grab it real quick. This is the one thing that I know—Oh, here we go. This was my first attempt at self-publishing, and it's a very small book. The first section of it is poetry and photographs, and the second section of it is essays. And there's a lot of Iraq in here. In fact, I would say this is—this was probably my way of processing my first two tours in Iraq.

TS: Okay.

RB: I'll put that there. And one of the things that I make a note of in one of the essays was, General Karpinski came in to the unit about halfway through the tour. And so, she was—everything that would contribute to a situation like the one that happened, such as poor training, poor oversight, poor—poor quality of leadership; all of that was already in place when she got there. And she was doing her best to fix it. The woman traveled pretty much a hundred percent of the time. She had this very beautiful office on—in—on Camp Victory. It was this very beautiful little island in the middle of a lake, and she had, like I said, this marble floored office. It was very beautiful.

And I don't even know if I ever saw her spend more than a half an hour there when she was coming through, because she was always on the road visiting the camps. And by that time we had also assumed the mission for the prisons, and to train the corrections officers, and to set up the Iraqi—or set back up the Iraqi corrections system. Somebody—I think it was [Paul] Wolfowitz [U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, 2001–2005]—had made the decision at one point to fire all of the people who worked for the government of Iraq; like all the armed forces, et cetera.

So there was, really—and there were, like, stringent rules against who you could rehire. Now, the qualities that would preclude you from service under the Coalition [Multi-National Forces – Iraq (MNF-I)] were mutually exclusive with what qualified you to work for Saddam Hussein [leader of Iraq before the invasion in March 2003]. So if you were a bureaucrat, you had to be a member of the Ba'ath Party. If you wanted to work for the Americans doing the same job you had done before, you couldn't if you were a member of the Ba'ath Party.

So it prevented the United States from using the skills of all of these people who knew how the government worked, and it also created—as I think we've— as has been seen by newspaper analysis, et cetera—this huge cohort of unemployed, mostly men, who are like, "Well, what am I going to do to feed my family? Oh, you want to give me \$500 to plant this IED, improvised explosive device?" Or, "You want to give me \$500 to spy on the Americans while I'm doing my menial labor job in their camp? Okay." I mean, who wouldn't take that deal? So.

TS: When you were there, did you have any sense that any of this was going on at the time—

RB: No.

TS: Or was this like a reflection back?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RB: That—It was such a shock. It was such a shock. Like, you knew it wasn't perfect, but I don't—like, it was so well hidden that it was literally a shock—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Except for all the pictures that were taken.

RB: Well, after we found out about it, because when—when we were leaving was the first time that Colonel Scheer[?] was like, "Sergeant Brune, I've got to tell you about this." He said, "There's some pictures, and it looks like somebody—some people might have done some—abusing some prisoners."

And I said, "Oh my—oh my God! What?" Like, even just that little bit. "What's going on? This doesn't—How did that happen?" My mind was racing. I'm thinking, "Oh my God, as PAO, how are we going to deal with this?" And it was—it was literally taken out of our hands and lifted up, and all of the—all of the media was taken away and held up at CPIC [Coalition Press Information Center], which is as it should be, because that was all way beyond any of our pay grades.

TS: Right.

RB: And it was—But like I said, it was shocking, and all of us were like—

TS: But it came out after you came back, right?

RB: As we were leaving, and then when we—by the time we came back it was—it was all out.

TS: Full blown up.

RB: When we were in—when we had come back to Kuwait—we were in Kuwait for a while longer than we thought we were going to be because they were doing interviews with a lot of the different officers. And again, I was faced with the situation where I was outraged, but what am I going to do about it?

Sergeant Sutherland[?], my boss—and this was something that he did that there may still be threats on his life if he ever returns to New York City—he went to work for CPIC because he had deployed late, and they said you could stay for the full three [hundred] sixty-five days if you can find a job. So he went up to CPIC and he started working for them. And as I found out later from my friend Nicky[?], he was kind of loud. Hang on a second. [side conversation with RB's husband]

[Recording Paused]

TS: All right, I started it again.

RB: So—

TS: So he went and got the job and then your friend Nicky[?] said—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RB: Right, at the CPIC. "Oh, Sergeant—" she—she was so mad, she was like, "Sergeant Sutherland's been bad-mouthing you."

I was like, "Well, that's not—" I was like, "That's kind of usual, par for the course."

She said, "Yeah, but, I tell you what, he bad-mouthed you so much and once everybody got his number they were like 'Man, this Sergeant Brune must be really good if he hates her that much.'"

I said, "Listen, man, I've gotten used to it."

TS: Right.

RB: But what he did was, we both had pages up on SmugMug, which was a photography site—Well I had, I let it lapse. He posted this—this posting, and at the same time this newspaper article came out and said, "No Bronze Stars for EPW Brigade," and it basically talked about the fact that nobody was going to get a Bronze Star who had served with the 800th, as—because you get your deployment award. Nobody's going to get a Bronze Star. And then it quoted his—his SmugMug page, wherein he had said everything was messed up from the S2 [designation for Intelligence function on army staff] to whatever, and, like, he had basically said some things about the brigade that A: weren't true, and B: were very self-serving, and C: at the same time we were all under a—they had said nobody is to talk to the media about this, because they were—of course this was so horrific and terrible that they were—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Under control—

RB: —it was still under—Yes, it was still under investigation. Nobody really knew the whole story, and so they're like, "Don't talk to the media."

And we're like, "Okay, we won't talk to the media."

But this—and then here comes this guy just—and there was—in that article was quoted an anonymous source, but from the syntax I'm like, "That's him. That's him." So someone called up, he badmouthed the brigade anonymously, and then he sent them to his website so they could look at his stuff. I was so mad.

So I sat down and I emailed Nicky. I was like, "Listen, can you get me the email address for the CPIC OIC [Officer in Charge]," who I think was a lieutenant colonel, and I sat down and I let him have it. I was like, "Sir. I have a question. All of us are—" I was like, "I served with the 800th honor—They did honorable service. The vast majority of the brigade served with distinction, and they did—made the best of a bad time—" I just went on. I was like, "We've—" I said, "I really would love to tell the world all the good things that—that we did, but I haven't. I've been abiding by this media—by these rules for the media. So why is this guy getting to talk to the media and post stuff on his website," and blah blah blah. I was like, "He wasn't there the whole time. He's a terrible journalist." I just—I went off on him. And I sent it, and I cc'ed [sent a duplicate copy]—I cc'ed a number of people from my unit. Or actually I forwarded it to them when I was done.

And I got an email back from the colonel and he said, "Oh, thank you for bringing this to my attention, Sergeant Brune." And he cc'ed me on his email to Sergeant Sutherland's boss, saying, "Will you tell this guy to quit talking to the media? We've already had to talk to him about it once." And he got—I never heard back from him until a coup—maybe like a year or two later I got an email from him.

TS: Which "him" are you talking about?

RB: Sergeant Sutherland, my old boss. And I got an email from him saying, "Oh, I'm going to sue you," and blah blah blah. So I called JAG [Judge Advocate General], I was like, "Can he sue me?"

And they were like, "Yeah, don't worry about it."

And so, that was the last time that I had heard of—heard from him until I got commissioned, and then shortly after I got commissioned I got a note on my blog saying, "Oh, I heard you'd been commissioned. Congratulations." That was the end. [chuckles]

TS: Did he ever have to write a performance eval for you?

RB: He did, and it was okay. It was—It was pretty good. It was my NCOER [Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Report], but Colonel Scheer was the senior rater so he made sure that it looked excellent. I actually saw the eval that he wrote, and I was like, "Colonel Scheer, all the stuff that he put on his NCOER are the things that I actually did."

And he was like, "I got it. Don't worry."

So again, I was new to the army; I didn't realize that people put their subordinates' achievements on their own evaluations. But again, like I said, we—we just butted heads from day one, and he wasn't going to change, because he was an E-7, and he was eventually promoted to an E-8, master sergeant. And I wasn't going to magically become somebody that he thought was great. So. But Colonel Scheer was there as top cover, and I had already been with the unit for several months at that time, and when this guy started playing his little games I would have people stand up for me. Or just straight up steal his stuff [chuckles], like Sergeant Giuliani did.

TS: Right, there you go. Well, okay, so now you're back.

RB: Yes.

TS: Now, you went back to civilian life, too, right? Because you weren't—

RB: Yes. I started working for the local paper, which didn't really pay the bills.

TS: Okay.

RB: And my savings gradually shrank. And I—I really missed it. I missed being on deployment, I missed being in the army, and I just missed that camaraderie. So I went back to my original recruiter and said, "I want to go—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: The first one?

RB: Yes. I said, "I want to go on active duty." And I was thinking about asking to go officer, but I was thinking to myself, "Oh, I'll just stay. As long as I can keep my E-5, I'll just do it," which was—looking back, it was a mistake. At the time it seemed like a really good plan.

So I went on active duty in March of 2005, and they—they said, "Oh, good news. You can keep your sergeant rank."

I was like, "Yay!"

They're like, "Oh, also some good news: you're qualified for a bonus."

And I thought, "That's really great."

They're like, "Oh, but some bad news: you're—there's no money for bonuses so it's zero dollars."

I thought to myself, "Well, that's not a bonus; that's a tease."

TS: No kidding.

RB: Also it's kind of a jerk move to be like, "Here you go. Oh, no, sorry." And then I had wanted to—I said I would really like to go to 46 Romeo [public affairs broadcast specialist (46R)] school.

TS: What was that?

RB: That's the broadcaster stuff. And they're like, "Uh, we can't send you there," which, looking back, of course they could; it's called a reclass option. But then they're like, "Oh, and you have to go to Fort Campbell [Kentucky]."

And again, looking back, I didn't really know about the active duty army, so I'm thinking to myself, "Really? There's only one 46 Quebec [public affairs specialist (46Q)]

E-5 position in the entire army and it's at Fort Campbell? That's weird." It was not true, as I found out later. But that's where I ended up.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Right, you just went. And so, then, how was that?

RB: Well, I ended up at a sustainment brigade.

TS: At a what brigade?

RB: Sustainment.

TS: Okay. What does that mean?

RB: And they were logistics, so anything that can sustain the warfighter. Medical, signal, transportation, supply, personnel detachment. Anything that supported the warfighter, we convoyed, packaged, moved, supplied, et cetera. And so, it was very interesting, because when I got there it was the 101st Airborne and everybody was very "hooah" [implying military enthusiasm], and it was quite a different experience than being in the reserves.

And also, they kept making us go through this air assault PT because everything was about air assault. And air assault PT was fine. The air assault obstacle course included something that I have never been good at. One was a rope climb, which, let me tell you, the one time I made it to the top—I'm also very scared of heights—so I let go and fell. It was not a happy experience. And then they also had the Jacob's Ladder, which is this very tall device, and it's basically two upright poles, taller than telephone poles, and in between you have these round logs that are huge. And you have to climb to the top of it, and then you have to climb back down.

Well, they're so big that it requires some maneuvering to do. And they get wider and narrower, depending on where you are. The first time I tried to go up the Jacob's Ladder, I made it maybe four of those logs and I went back down again. I'm like, "I'm not doing this." So for five months between March and—or six months between March and when we deployed in August, I kept trying, kept trying. Finally the last session I made it to the top of the Jacob's Ladder, and I was like "I made it!" And then I froze and I couldn't move, and I'm like, "I can't get down."

And they're like, "Come on, Sergeant Brune, let's go."

I'm like, "I can't get down."

And they're like, "Come on, let's go."

I was like, "Help!" [chuckles]

So one of the sergeants had to climb to the top and, like, talk me very specifically down from the top of this darn ladder. And I made it to the bottom and I said, "I'm going to never do that again." And it was true; I never did. Because we stopped doing air assault

PT so we could start packing for the deployment. But it was definitely—I was like, "Man, I've got to stay away from high places." So.

TS: What did you think about deploying again? Because you'd only been back for a year[?].

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RB: Oh, I was excited. I wanted to go.

TS: [unclear] Okay.

RB: I was looking forward to it actually, because in the garrison it's okay, and there's stories to do and everything, but deployment is where it's at. Also you make more money, and it was going to be in an area in northern Iraq. So my first deployment I got to go all over, but primarily I was in southern Iraq. So now we were going to be in northern Iraq, and it was going to be—to get to see different things.

The only—The only note of apprehension that I had was, I had a sergeant first class coming in, and the unit still didn't really know what I did. They were—I showed up and they sent the civil affairs NCO to pick me up. And they were like, "Hey, you've got a new soldier."

And he said, "What?" I showed up and he's like, "Hey, I'm Sergeant First Class [unclear]"

I was like, "Oh, are you public affairs?"

He says, "No, I'm civil affairs. Ugh, they did it again. They don't know what they've got." Blah blah blah.

TS: [chuckles] So he knew the problems too.

RB: Oh yeah. I mean, spent, like, the first five months just working, showing people what I could do, doing stories, getting them in the post paper, doing a newsletter, getting all this stuff ready to go, and when my boss was getting there I saw that she was a Romeo, a broadcaster, so I set up all of the stuff that she needed so that I could do print and she could do video, and it would be really great. And I'm like, "Okay, this is going to be so cool." Well, she shows up and the first—the first apprehension that I had was, I had been trying to get in touch with her, trying to get in touch with her, and she wouldn't reply. And when she finally replied, it was to ask me about how she could find a house. I was like, "I'm an E-5 and I live in the barracks. I have no idea how you find a house." [chuckles]

And she showed up after—like, I had sent her an email specifically stating, "Hey, we are about to deploy. We're going to pack CONEXs [standardized shipping containers] in the next couple of weeks, so if you would like to put anything in them, like a personal box or something, now is the time to do so."

And she didn't really do that until after everything had been packed, and then she came in and was like, "Oh, I want to send a box. Is there room?"

I'm thinking to myself, "Wow." I was like—I didn't—I didn't realize it at the time, but I was about to have almost a déjà vu experience, because she and I also didn't get along, and—but this time there was no Colonel Scheer to provide top cover. Nobody at the unit really knew what I did, and I did not make the sort of friendships that I had made on my first deployment.

TS: Okay.

RB: So I was—I was really missing Sergeant Giuliani coming along and stealing all her stuff. [chuckles]

TS: Right.

RB: And then, like I said, on the first deployment the brigade command sergeant major was sent home for having a relationship with a junior soldier. Well, on this deployment the brigade command sergeant major also was relieved and moved to another FOB [Forward Operating Base] for, again, having inappropriate relationships.

TS: Not the same one, but the same position.

RB: No, a different one. Yes, same position. And one of them was my friend, who he basically pressured and who—and it became an assault. And they—she was working for me on the paper, because I had—my boss was literally incompetent. She didn't know the things that she needed to do her job. She had never been deployed before, and she was scared to go off the FOB, and she spent most of her time sitting in her office Skyping with her husband. And it was just very, very frustrating.

So I had this sergeant who was working with me on the paper, and he was—she was one of his victims. So the new bri—the battalion command sergeant major came up to be the brigade command sergeant major, and I didn't like her either, because she was—she was just very—I don't know how to describe her. The first time we ever met—or the first time we had a big thing, we were walking back and I hear, "PAO! PAO!"

And I looked around and I'm like, "Is there an emergency?" [chuckles] And usually people call you by your name—or your rank and your name—

TS: Not by your position, right?

RB: Yeah. And she's like, "PAO, listen. You need to come and take some photos, because we need—we need photos—command photos."

I was like, "Well, Sergeant Major, I'm—I'm willing to help out but that's not what I'm here to do." I was like, "I don't really know how to do that. I don't take portraits." Well, I tried to phrase that as tactfully as possible and just got my butt ripped. So I was like, "Okay. Sure, I'll—I'll come by eventually."

So finally they tracked me down and they were like, "Well, you've got to come and do them right now." So I picked up my camera and I went over there and I took head shots, but again, I'm not a portraitist. I'm a journalist, and I don't do glamour shots.

So she did not like the way that hers came out. And I was—I had gone off to do a story and somebody tracked me down. They were like, "Sergeant Brune! Sergeant Brune!"

I'm like, "Geez, what happened?" Thinking that so—all hell's breaking loose and there's going to be a big story.

"Come on! Sergeant Major [unclear] needs to see you right now." So I'm like running back, running back, running back. [chuckles]

She didn't like her photo, and she wanted me to retake it, and so had, like, sent these people out looking—tracking me down to go and retake her photo. And I took it, and it looked the same as the other one, because she looked the same as the first time, and she didn't like that one either. I was like—and finally I was just like, "Hey Sergeant Major, I—this is not what I'm trained in." I was like, "I don't—I don't know what to do. I don't know." And she—I guess she eventually gave up. It is entirely possible that I may not have used all the skills at my—

TS: Disposal?

RB: —disposal to make her look better than I did. But that's why you don't piss off the PAO. Yeah, she didn't like me. But anyway—to go back to prior—once this incident happened with the brigade command sergeant major, she came up and she sat in his chair. And she took my NCO and she moved her—

TS: This is the one that had been assaulted?

RB: —that had been assaulted—and her excuse was, "Well, that sergeant is a transportation sergeant and needs to be doing transportation things."

I was like, "Well, that's great but now I have nobody. And I'm still working on this." So that's probably why you don't piss off the sergeant major. [chuckles]

So one day, I had a chance to go on a convoy, and I tried to get out at least once a month, because I was publishing twice a month, and so the week that I was publishing I couldn't go anywhere. So I tried to get out every other week, depending on if the convoys were running right. And then I would do a loop. So I would take a convoy to one FOB, and then I would hitch another one to another one, and then I would hitch—and eventually I would make it back in time to put out the paper.

So I decided to go to—I think it was Diamondback, because it was near Mosul. And wherever it was, I stopped by the battalion headquarters to say hi, and I had "stringers," or unit public affairs representatives, that would—when I came down I'd say, "Hey, I'm coming down for this period of time. Let me know what's going on, whether it's an event or a human interest story, and we'll do all the stuff." And they—I said, "Hey, has anybody seen, Sergeant So-and-so?"

"Oh, she's over at the Movement Control Center," so I went down there. And so, we ended up just hanging out whenever I wasn't working. And the first night—

TS: This was the NCO that—

RB: This is the NCO that had been assaulted, yes.

TS: Gotcha.

RB: I said, "Hey, let's go to the DFAC and grab lunch."

And she said, "Oh, I don't—" She's like, "I don't go to the DFAC anymore."

I was like, "Well how are you eating?" Because that's where you go for the food.

And she says, "Oh, I have some microwaveable mac and cheese."

I just looked at her like, "What? Are you crazy? You sit here and eat macaroni and cheese when you can go to the DFAC and they make it for you and you don't even have to wash your dishes?" And she said—well, her—the CSM [command sergeant major], she—they moved her to the same base that they had moved the CSM when he was under investigation.

TS: The one who had assaulted her?

RB: Yes, and so she did not go to the DFAC because she was afraid that she would see him if she was there. And she wasn't up to seeing him. And I—I just—It blew my mind. It really blew my mind that that would be allowed to happen, especially by a female brigade—or by a female command sergeant major who should have known better. But that command sergeant major, I truly believe, was blinded by her own career and was getting very comfortable in that command sergeant major chair, and stopped thinking and caring about other people. So that's my own personal opinion.

TS: Did you try to do anything to help?

RB: I tried talking to a number of people, and nobody cared. Nobody wanted to do anything about it. Nobody cared. And I just—

TS: Was that other guy ever prosecuted? Hard to say?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RB: I'm not really sure what happened to the—it just—it was—I think he just came home and retired. But I never heard of anything that came out of it.

TS: Well, in these ways you're describing how it was different from the first one, where you didn't have, like, the leadership that was protecting you and supporting you, not just that, but really—What other things were different?

RB: It was more of a—2005 was very different from 2003, in that by now the conflict had gone on for several years—for two years at that point—and we were—instead of packing up all of our equipment and bringing it with us, and then packing it all up and taking it home, we came in and we fell in on equipment. We fell in on an established location and an established mission. And so, it was basically learn what they had been doing and then continue to do it ourselves. It was also different because the—it was easier to get around. And it was easier to make it to different places to do the stories that I needed to do. There was a little pushback at the beginning because, again, people were like "Why do you want—it's too dangerous, you can't go out just for a story."

And I was like, "Okay, well, then what am I going to do, because that's my job."

And so, after—after a while I just did it. I stopped asking permission and I just did it. Like, I went down to the different units and I said, "Hey, I'm the PAO and I'd love to do a story on your soldiers. When's the next convoy?" And they eventually got used to it.

In fact, some of the battalion commanders—there was one battalion commander—this guy loved for his soldiers and his battalion to be in the newspaper. So whenever they were doing something they would call me up prior to doing it, which was something that the other battalion commanders couldn't figure out. They were like, "We just did this really great thing. You want to come down and do a story?"

I was like, "You need to call me before the really great thing, especially if it's planned, so that I can come down and cover it rather than—" I was like, "Otherwise, just have somebody write me a story about it and send it to me."

TS: Right.

RB: So it finally clicked but it took them a while. But this guy, he was really great. He always had like—He always sent me really great stories so that—and he knew what would make a good story. So he never sent me a story—"Hey can you come down and cover this?"

And I'm thinking to myself, "How do I explain to this lieutenant colonel that's really boring and nobody's going to want to read it."

TS: Well, what would be a good story?

RB: Well, they—okay, so this is one of the stories I did. It was very, very cool. They had a HEAT [HMMWV Egress Assistance] trainer, which is a humvee egression assistance trainer, I think.

TS: It's just a vehicle?

RB: It's a vehicle body that's put on an axle.

TS: Okay.

RB: And you put the soldiers in it as if they were driving. And they turn the body of the vehicle and they simulate a rollover. So as they're simulating the rollover, you react to how a rollover would be. So you pull the gunner in and you hold on to something, and

then once the vehicle comes to a stop, you open the doors, you release your safety belt, and then you exit the vehicle. And the—There was one in country at the time, which I think was in Kuwait, and so when people came in they were going through the HEAT trainer. But since it was a logistics unit and there was constantly supply convoys, the battalion commander asked one of his warrant officers, "Can you replicate this HEAT trainer?"

And the warrant officer was like, "Yeah, sure. No problem."

So he put together a little task force of people drawn from all the different units, and they actually built their own, and it was so cool. I don't know where it is now, but it was so cool. And the fact that they made it from—completely from parts available through the army supply system, and put it together themselves, and provided the blueprints to anybody who wanted them, meant that the army could make this piece of equipment and utilize it for much cheaper than the contractors were doing it. Which is probably why after we wrote our story nobody ever heard of it again. [both chuckle]

TS: Right.

RB: Naively I thought, "Won't everybody in the army want to do this?" And no, because contractors are getting paid a lot of money to do that, so we'll just move right on—move right along. But that was very cool. And so, the christening, so to speak, where they unveil it and everybody gets to try it out, he invited me for that. So I went there a few days early, and I interviewed the people who were involved in it, and I got to see it in action. And then when they did the inaugural event, I think the first two people to go into the trainer were the battalion commander and the command sergeant major. So I have all these photos of the event. It was very, very cool. And that was just, like, one of the things.

Now, the battalion that was with us on Q-West [Qayyarah Airfield West], that was, I think, in Diamondback. The one on Q-West, that guy wanted to be in the newspaper, especially when he saw the other battalion commander getting all this press. But he didn't quite have the skill or the knowledge, so he's like, "Oh, we built this education center."

I was like, "Oh, that's great. Is it still ongoing?"

"Oh no, we finished building it."

I was like, "Okay, well when's the grand opening?"

"Oh, we already had it."

I'm like, "Dude, help me out here."

TS: [chuckles] Well, what was it like to go on a convoy?

[Technical error—loss of part of interview. RB re-interviewed 18 June 2016. See part 2]

TS: Well, this is the second tape for Rachel Brune, and it's still April 3rd, 2015. This is Therese Strohmer. We're just continuing the interview. We had to change tapes here. I guess they're not called tapes anymore, but something.

So anyhow, Rachel, go ahead. You were talking about how you were switching what you were doing and you were going into PSYOPS and then you decided maybe that wasn't for you.

RB: That's correct.

TS: And so, what happened then? Did you drop out of the program or—

RB: Yes, it was called voluntary withdrawal.

TS: Okay.

RB: And so, they have, like, a little—they have a little company of all the people who didn't make it through training, whether they voluntarily withdrew or they didn't make it for whatever reason. And it's PSYOPS, civil affairs, and Special Forces; people who just didn't make it through. So it's kind of depressing being in that group. And you want to get out as soon as possible, which is probably why when my rates[?] manager told me, "Well, you can come back and stay at Fort Bragg [North Carolina], but only if you do a year in Kuwait first," that I said, "Sure, I'll do it."

TS: To go back in the MPs?

RB: Yes. So I went out to Camp Arifjan, Kuwait; back to my old stomping grounds. And I was stationed there with the 595th Transportation Brigade, which is actually a strategic distribution brigade. They're under Surface Distribution and Deployment Command. And what they do is, they manage the deployment and redeployment of cargo from theater—from and to theater. So all of the units that were packing up their stuff and shipping it back, they were the strategic level brigade that oversaw the movement of that container from wherever they were back to the United States. Both military equipment, foreign military sales, sustainment, issue, and things like that.

TS: So this is now November 2012.

RB: Correct.

TS: Okay. What's your role as an MP?

RB: Well, interesting you should ask. I went over there, again, as the force protection officer, and when I got over there and I talked to the person I was replacing, who was also an MP, he said, "Well, you know what? They have a reservist working in that capacity so you'll be in the plans section in the operations section."

And I said, "Well, I'm an M—we're MPs. What do we know about planning strategic transportation?"

And he said, "Well, really what we do is RSOI [reception, staging, onward movement, and integration] for the incoming and outgoing reserve battalions."

The way that the brigade was set up was that you had—in your brigade headquarters and your downtrace [or subordinate] battalions, you had a certain number of personnel who were assigned active duty. But when the Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom began, they had to expand suddenly because they didn't have all of the personnel that they needed to run things.

So since, I guess, the early aughts—2001 or 2002—they've been filling, or augmenting, the headquarters—or the brigade and the battalions with reserve units. So they have what's called deployment and distribution battalions, and they are—they come in and they do a nine-month tour and they leave. So that was my job, was to basically make sure that they received the training that they needed to receive, that they came into country, that they were sent out to where they needed to be, and that the other units finished what they needed to do, came in to—came in, collapsed, and then left country. And I did that twice. The second time the—by the—I kept pounding on it and pounding on it, like, "I'm an MP. I should be in the S2 [Intelligence] doing the antiterrorism force protection. You have a reservist doing that, but I'm an active duty person. This is my career."

The first S3 [Operations] OIC who was there actually, like, said to my face, "Well, that—" because my friend Waltz[?], Captain Nansby[?] became the S—became the force protection officer after the first rotation.

And I kept hammering, I was like, "I should be there, I should be there."

And my boss was willing to go in and talk to her about it, and her response was, "Well, he's an MP. This is a career position for him, and he needs it for his career."

And I'm thinking to myself, "I'm active duty. This is what I do. I need that. How is that argument not being made for me?"

TS: Right. Why not?

RB: I'm pretty sure that she either didn't realize I was an MP, or didn't want to have me stop being in charge of the reservists coming in and going out. Because it was a—it was a big pain in the butt and nobody wanted to do it, not even the logistics people. And you would think that that would be something that a logistics person would do.

TS: Right. So you were filling a slot for the convenience really.

RB: I was filling a slot, yeah. It was—It was boring. I mean, it wasn't boring. It was interesting when I was actually doing it, but it went in spurts. We were either not enough hours in the day to get everything done, or I was sitting there going, "Is it time to go yet? Is it time to go yet?" And we worked six days a week—actually no—yeah, six days a week. We had Sundays off. And also we came into work on Fridays at 1300 [1:00 p.m.], so we had Friday mornings off. Because we fell under SDDC [Surface Deployment and Distribution Command] instead of under ARCENT [Army Central Command], which

was the insta—the command that was—pretty much everybody on Arifjan fell under, they did things like have four day holidays.

Well, our command was like, "We have people downrange, and they're deployed, and we're going to have this deployment mindset all the time. And so, we're never going to take a four day weekend."

I'm thinking to myself, "Uh, we're not deployed. We're in Kuwait, and there's not much for us to do. So if we have the office covered 24—or the TOC covered 24/7, why don't we just rotate around?"

There was a policy letter that everyone who was there, every six months you were supposed to get a four day pass, in addition to the two weeks of leave.

TS: Right.

RB: Well, we got a new company commander, he was one of the reservists, and he started going through all the policy letters, and one of the things that he did was very cool. He pointed out that there was a policy that you could go off post for MWR purposes, as long as you had a certain memo and something like that. So he started a program whereby if you had an officer and, I think a sergeant first class, or a staff sergeant and above, you could go do an MWR activity.

TS: That's morale, welfare, and recreation, right?

RB: Yes. Because I tended to be up for anything, I got a lot of, "Captain Brune, we want to go to the hookah bar, but we need an officer, so it could be an official morale activity".

"Okay guys, let's go." [chuckles]

So a lot of stuff like that made it a little bit more fun to be there. And then—I will never forget this—I just—I wanted a four-day weekend so badly, because I was like "I can sleep in for like three days in a row." I had all these books that I meant to get around to reading. I had—By this time I had a bunch of writing piled up, like—I had things that I—if I had just a couple of days straight off I could have accomplished them. And I wanted that four-day. And so they started instituting four-day passes. And I was like, "Yes."

So everybody chose their time, and I chose my time a little bit later so that other people in the shop could go first. Well, the day before I was going to go on my four day pass—like the day before—I'm getting like, "Tomorrow's going to be so great. I'm going to stay home from work. It's going to be so wonderful." Then an email comes out: "Nobody is going on any more four-day passes. This is a deployed environment, and you're not doing it." And blah blah blah.

I'm thinking to myself, "There was just one day. Just one day, and it could have been mine."

TS: So you never got to have it?

RB: No. Not at all. But that was—That particular deployment was really, really—it wasn't a deployment, it was a PCS move that was being treated as a deployment because

everybody else—all of the reservists there were on deployment, and we were supporting deployed troops. My point was, everybody in Kuwait is supporting deployed troops. There's no—There's no need to have this high of an ops [operations] tempo schedule. The people who are deploying there were there for nine months. The people who were there permanently were there for a year. So why were we on a deployment schedule when we were there for longer than the people who were deployed? And again, my job was not something where I had to be there all the time. After that second wave when I actually got to go over to do my job, doing the antiterrorism/force protection, and I was working in the S2 as opposed to the operations section, I actually started coming in at 8:00 [a.m.] and leaving at 5:00 [p.m.], and that was perfectly fine. Before it was like, 7:00 [a.m.] to 7:00 [p.m.], which was ridiculous. There was not enough work to fill the day.

TS: Well, wasn't everything kind of slowing down, too? I mean, the war was ratcheting back.

RB: Iraq, yeah. It was—It was all about the redeployment of cargo. But there were certain—when I was there—the first six months that I was there the S3 [battalion's operations and training officer] OIC was a very difficult person. She was pretty much the definition of toxic; when people in the army talk about toxic leadership. Always something to—everything was gar—like everything was kind of a—projects were yes'ed or no'ed based on how they would make her look. And it just—it became very tiresome very quickly; how toxic she was. I'm thinking to myself, "How did this happen again?"

TS: Right.

RB: I mean, my company commander—my first company commander, the one who got relieved—she and I did not get along. One of the things that she told me was, "Oh, Lieutenant Brune, this is your counseling. I don't feel that you have the potential right now to go on to any positions of higher responsibility."

And I was thinking to myself when she was saying that, "I can accept some good criticism, but I just came from a position that was a captain's slot, and everybody really wanted me to stay in it because I was doing a good job."

Because, again, my—the company commander that I was working for at that time, he was like, "Hey, I hate that I had to give you that project, but you're the person that I know that when I come to you, you'll get it done."

And I said, "Well, thank you, Sir, but stop—could you stop handing me those kinds of projects?" [chuckles]

TS: And where was that at?

RB: That was at Fort Hood [Texas]. So this woman was just—it was very, very difficult to work for her, and it just—that, combined with the fact that you never really got any time off, combined with the fact that when you're at work, if there's work to do and you're busy, time goes by. If there's nothing to do, like I—like I said, how long can you surf Facebook? And you eventually have to stop.

TS: So is it affecting how you feel about staying in on active duty?

RB: Yes. That was, I think, the deployment—when I was going through this pipeline I was seriously considering what—what I wanted to do with my life, but then the decision was to stay PSYOP or go back to the MP world. By the time I got to Kuwait, working for that woman, I realized that my decision was stay in or leave. And so, by the end of that deployment, even though she was replaced by an officer who was one of the best I've ever worked for, I told Rob when I was coming back, I was like, "Listen. I will give the army a year, because that's how much I owed, and if I am not offered a command by the end of that year, I'm getting out."

And so, I went to—I came back, came to Fort Bragg, came in—nobody knew I was coming so I had no sponsor. Nobody called me. Like, I had to call the unit and say, "Where are you? Because I'm here on Fort Bragg. I've just finished in-processing through reception and I'm ready to report. Where are you guys?"

And the answer I got was like, "Wait. Who are you?"

I was like, "Captain Brune. Look on your list."

And they didn't have—apparently the battalion knew I was coming but the brigade had no record of me. So I showed up and I went to the S3 pos—STS3[?] section, and it was a little cutthroat in terms of command, and I was thinking to myself, "I'm never going to get offered a command." So I told Rob, I was like, "I'm ready to get out." And I just—They made me the brigade training officer, which was a major's slot, supposedly, but it was—it was—I just—I didn't really want to do it anymore, and there was—the brigade XO [executive officer] was another toxic personality. And they saddled me with not just training but also USR, which was a constant battle because it's supposed to be done one way and he wanted it done another way.

TS: What does USR stand for?

RB: Unit status readiness. And it's basically—on active duty it's monthly, and in the reserves it's quarterly. It's a report that shows the readiness level of the units.

TS: Okay.

RB: So that became very difficult, and it just—it was a very—it was just a very stressful environment. I was like, "Listen. I just came back from Kuwait. I don't want another stressful environment." So we ended up—I ended up telling Rob, I was like, "I want to get out." And I couldn't get—I couldn't even get an office call with the brigade commander to ask what the order of merit list looked like and when I could expect command. So I just—I got fed up. I said, "I'm getting out of—I'm getting off active duty. I'm going to go get my PhD. I'm going to go do something else because I can't stand this anymore. I literally cannot stand it."

And so, I asked for an office call so that I could tell—so that I could present my REFRAD [release from active duty] packet. And the brigade commander was like, "What?"

I said, "Hi, Sir. Nice to meet you. I'm Captain Brune. I'd like to leave."

And he was like—Well, he was like, "This is very unique having an office call being a REFRAD packet submission."

I was like, "Well, Sir, I'm ready to get out of the military." And he didn't argue or anything. I mean, the army was trying to get rid of people, so even though I like to think that I make a positive contribution to every unit that I go to, they didn't know me and they weren't going to try and change my mind.

So I did brigade training officer things, I was the battle captain for one of the exercises, and I think by the time I left they were sad that I was leaving. And I almost—There was a time that I almost changed my mind and withdrew my packet, because I got a new S—we had a new S3—a new S3 sergeant major—a new crew came in, and for about a month I just loved going to work every day. I was like, "This is so wonderful. I could—Maybe I should take my packet back. Maybe I can stay in." And then we got a new deputy brigade commander and he—he basically—there was a project that I was working on as the training officer and I had put so much time and effort into it, and he basically called in all of the majors on the weekend and re—and told them to do all the work that I had just done. And it—I was like, "You know what? I'm done."

I had actually taken the step of asking the operations officer, my boss, like, "Hey, Sir. If I take my packet back, what does it look like for me getting command?"

And he's like, "Well, we can't really make you any promises—" or he talked to the brigade commander, who said, "Well, you need to make the decision before we can make you any promises."

And I was like, "Well that's the whole reason why I'm getting out of the army, so I'm just going to get out." So that combination of things.

And also by that time when I got out, and I was going to go into the reserves, and I was going to get my PhD, I had sat with my husband and said, "This is—There's going to be about nine months to a year before I start any program." I was like, "If I'm going to get out, this is going to be the time—if we ever have a child, this is going to be the time." Because throughout all my time on active duty, I never—like I would have been perfectly happy to live my entire life without children. I was having a great time, had a great career, and it's never been my focus to have kids. But I speci—I really specifically did not want to be a dual military couple with a child, because you get like, six to eight weeks and then you have to go back to work. And then it's—you drop your child off before the 6:30 [a.m.] formation, and then you pick them back up at night at seven—at 1700 [5:00 p.m.] or later, because you get off work at 1700, and if you're working on a staff, especially as an officer, you can't leave at 1700. Especially not here on Fort Bragg, where everybody competes to stay—who can stay the longest, even though there's nothing to do because everybody else went home.

So I was like, I don't want to be—I don't want to have a baby and then immediately just put her—him or her—in childcare. So—But since I was getting off active duty, I was like, "This would be the perfect opportunity." So by the time I was having my second thoughts, I was already pregnant, so that came into play as well.

TS: Your decision, yeah.

RB: And I was like, "You know what? I'm making the right decision." Because, that's—that's the army. You can have a great leader, and then that leader will go someplace and then you can have a completely crappy one. And I—By this time, being in, like—you've heard all of these different places that I've gone, I've either had really—lucked out and great leadership, or I've been in a situation where my life is crap. It's just terrible because I can't—when I come into work I have a leader that I have a dysfunctional relationship with. And I acknowledge that some of that is my own personality, and my own way of working with people that I've tried to—I've tried to self-develop so that I can work with a wide variety of people, but sometimes you just can't. And then—And typically if there's somebody that I cannot get along with, it's not only me; it's an entire shop is like, "Oh my God, why? Where does this leader come from?"

TS: Right.

RB: The army has identified these as toxic leaders, but there's still no real system—systematic way of identifying and correcting them once you have them, because most of them are, like, majors, lieutenants, colonel—colonels. They're these high-ranking people who—it's hard to remove somebody—

TS: You don't have a lot of leverage to do anything.

RB: Oh yeah.

TS: But you decided to stay in the reserve, right?

RB: Yes. I had another year of obligation as far as contract-wise. So I decided to stay in the reserves. I figured another year. No problem. I'll go up once a month, visit my family. So I went up. My very first drill was January, and I met my new unit, which was actually my old unit, only reflagged [when a unit is given a new designation]. And when I was there, everybody was—all of the captains were kind of walking around with their heads down, trying to avoid making eye contact, because the HHC commander was trying to leave and they couldn't find anybody to replace him. And at the 16th MP Brigade everybody is fighting for command. Here at HHC 333rd everybody is like, "Don't pick me, don't pick me, don't pick me."

So me being who I am—my mom, "Don't ever volunteer—don't ever join the military because you're going to volunteer for all of the worst possible things"—I said to myself, "Well, how bad could it possibly be?" And I volunteered for command. And I—I guess they had one other person who had submitted some paperwork for it. So I sent them my ORB [officer record brief], and my OERs [officer evaluation report], and my bio [biography], which, I mean, when you're on active duty it's not hard to compile an impressive résumé, as opposed to somebody in the reserves, whose opportunity for different assignments may be more limited, just because of the nature of the beast. So they called me up, they offered me the slot, I was like, "Great."

It's been kind of a wild ride for—the command inventories were a very interesting process. Every mentorship opportunity I have had, whether it be a formal institutional

experience, like the career course, or learning on the job experience like when I was the assistant S4, right after I came back from that third tour in Iraq, every mentorship experience has been, "You have to focus on supply. Supply is what's going to get you. Supply is what's going to make you or break you as a commander." So I came in thinking that there wouldn't be too many issues. And I ended up with five pages of discrepancies, because we actually did a one hundred percent inventory, looking at every single item. We found stuff missing; we found stuff that wasn't on the property book; we found stuff that we were like:

"Where did this come from?"

"I don't know."

"Is it on the property book?"

"No."

"Should it be?"

"Yeah."

"So are you going to put it on there?"

"Okay."

I mean, there were items that had been laterally transferred and never taken off our paperwork, so I'm like, "Well, I have no idea where all this stuff is."

"Oh, that was laterally transferred."

"When?"

"Oh, about a year ago."

"So you're going to take it off the property book? Because I'm not going to sign for it if I don't see it."

TS: Right.

RB: So they're working on that right now, and then hopefully they'll start the FLIPL [financial liability investigation of property loss] next week, and move forward with sending me the property book so I can sign it, as well as the assumption of command orders so I can actually be the official commander. But in what was indicative of the outgoing commander, pretty much as soon as I volunteered for the job, people started coming to me with their problems. "Oh Ma'am, you're going to be the commander? Okay, we have this problem and this problem and this problem."

I'm like, "Oh, okay." So I write it down.

And then someone else would come to me. "Ma'am, listen. We've got to sit down, we've got to talk about this, this, this, and this."

I'm like, "Oh crap. I've got two pages of notes of things that have to be fixed and I have only met two people."

TS: Right.

RB: So it's—I think it's so far been a very interesting introduction to the reserves, because I came in and, again, it's been a culture shock.

TS: Sure.

RB: But I still have this very active duty mentality of 24/7, I need to be in touch with you, you need to be in touch with me. So I'll send an email out and I'll wait, and I'll wait, and I'll wait, and I'll wait. So finally I'll call somebody and I'll be like, "Did you get my email?"

"Oh yeah. I meant to email you back about that."

I'm like, "Well, why didn't you? Why didn't you? Oh, that's right. You have that whole thing called a civilian job, and other things to do."

So it's—I'm trying to adjust my way of working with the unit's way of working. Some things need to be—some things they need to change completely—not change completely, but some of the things they need to do, because they're not doing it right, right now. Some things I need to adjust, because it's a different culture, and if I want to change anything, I have to change it within the culture. I'm not going to change *the* culture. But there's—An army regulation is an army regulation. A standard is a standard.

TS: Well, let me ask you a few, like, general questions. I mean, you've answered a lot already that are—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RB: I talk a lot.

TS: —that are on here. That's okay.

RB: This is like my dream. Somebody just wants me to talk about myself and go on and on and on.

TS: There you go. Awesome. In general you've done a very detailed description of how your relationships have been. Do you feel like you were treated fairly for promotions?

RB: Absolutely. Absolutely. When I was—I came in as a college specialist. My promotion to sergeant I thought was very fair. I submitted the paperwork and they—there was a bunch of us who got promoted at the same time, and I felt that the commander treated my packet as fairly as any other packet. Promotions on the officer side are more—they're just more—they're more standardized, and also a little more automatic. So the promotion from first to second lieutenant was just like an automatic thing that you knew was going to happen. And then the promotion to captain, they look at your board files, and all my paperwork was in order, and then I got promoted with a lot of my peers. So I feel like, as far as promotions go, I've been promoted with my—as I would have expected to be. Now, major is a different story because you start having the zones; the below zone [early promotion], the regular zone—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Well, you've got that down the road, right?

RB: Yeah, so—but again, since I've decided to stay in the reserves—like if I was going to get out of the army completely I wouldn't worry about it. Since I'm taking command, I'm actually thinking about, "Okay, well maybe I'll just stay in the reserves until I retire from the reserves." Because it's a different—it's a different experience, and I think it's one that I will enjoy more. So I'm like, "Well, okay. If I'm going to stay in the reserves, then I need to get promoted, so then I need to ch—make sure I get my KD [key development assignment, which officers must complete in order to be eligible for promotion] time, which was a factor in volunteering to take this command, because I do need it in order to get promoted. So I am not above doing a little career management. But also it was a challenge.

TS: So now you have a new plan, right?

RB: Now I have a new plan.

TS: It's interesting because of your time doing journalistic work in the big media, where back here, where you're hearing about issues of women in the military, a couple of things pop up, the women in combat, and sexual harassment, and sexual assault really; military sexual trauma. What are your thoughts on those two issues? What do you think about women in combat? Do you think there's anything women can't be doing, or shouldn't be doing?

RB: No. My thought on this is—I'm sorry, that cat is—[chuckles]

TS: It's okay. She likes me. You don't think there's anything—

RB: My thought on women in combat is this: It's—The only way that women are—women as a group, because of course there's the collective and then there's the individual, but as a collective I don't think that we are going to accomplish what we need to accomplish if we don't at least—aren't at least given the opportunity to do it. There's so many arguments about why women shouldn't be in combat, and many of them are invalidated by the fact that women have indeed been in combat for centuries. And when they aren't in combat, they're directly affected by combat. And also the—the definition of combat changes pretty much with every generation, let alone every combat situation, with every war.

So when we say women are "in combat," do we mean that they are deployed to a combat environment? Because of course women are doing that. Do we mean that they are deployed to a combat environment, but safe from all harm, so they don't have to worry about being able to fire their weapon, or being physically fit to maneuver on the battle space? Because right now, that's happening. Or are we going to just say we're going to open up every job to women as long as they can pass the standards, which everyone has to pass. And my question is—which is also my argument—if women can pass all of those

standards without making it a double standard—like "Here's the female standard, here's the male standard"—if we can make it all that one standard and a woman can do it, what's your argument against her not doing it?

And I feel that we're—this is kind of a very exciting time, with women going to the Marine Corps infantry school, and women getting their shot to go to Ranger school. And I think that we've definitely seen these opportunities pop up, and there are some women, like myself, who are—our role is going to simply be to cheer on other people, because there's no way you're going to find me doing that, because I have absolutely no interest in doing it. But I have a very good friend from the MP career course who is—I mean, she is extremely physically fit, extremely intelligent. She's an excellent leader, and this is—she's a triathlete and a marathoner—and she is going to go to the next iteration of the pre-Ranger course, where if you succeed, then you get your slot. And I just think that it's great that they're getting their chance to do that. I think that there's other arguments that people will make, but I think that—

TS: Sure. But for you, you think it's those [unclear]—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RB: Yeah, I think those arguments—

TS: —give them a chance, and if they meet the standards then—

RB: Right. And I think that wom—people have always argued against women doing things for whatever reason, but those arguments are invalidated by the women going out and doing them. So people argued that women couldn't run marathons, and that argument was invalidated the first time a woman ran the Boston Marathon. There's a very interesting dichotomy of viewing women as being frailer and having issues that we have to deal with, like menstruation, which is—what an issue. Or, "How can women do this? They're going to need to do this, this, and this." And I'm thinking to myself it's very interesting that we're very concerned about women doing all this when they're western women, who are like you and me. But if you look at women in other cultures, and other societies, and in other nations that don't have all the modern conveniences that we do, women are hardy creatures. I mean, they—if they have to walk several miles a day to get water, they walk several miles a day to get water, carrying their kid and their water device, or however they're going to carry it.

TS: Right.

RB: It's like, women aren't fragile little flowers. It's only now that they want to actually go and do some stuff that the guys don't want them to do, that all of a sudden, "Oh my gosh. They're going to ruin their bodies and they're going to put all this stress on it," and blah blah blah. You know what?

TS: Well, on the other hand, the issue of sexual assault in the military is really risen to the top, too, and that's connected in some ways to the issue of combat, right? Where—

RB: My thoughts on this are complicated, and it's—it's a very tricky line to walk. Because obviously I've had experience, not personally, but seeing it happen. And I'm working on an article right now on women in leadership, and I've had women tell me about some of their experiences being threatened, especially because they're in command and they're telling people to do something they don't want to do, so they get a threat. I'm—I'm, on the one hand, extremely glad that the issue is out in the open, and that people are talking about it, and that—that there's a focus that's coming from civilians, which we're supposed to have civilian oversight of the armed forces; that's the way it's set up in the constitution. And I'm glad that those civilian overseers are acknowledging that it's a problem and that they're pressing the military to address that problem. And I'm glad that it has gotten the attention that it has, because prior to, I think, the documentary, *The Invisible War*, there really wasn't an acknowledgment of it.

[The Invisible War is a 2012 film documentary about sexual assault in the U.S. military]

However, with that said, I also believe that people have a hard time holding multiple ideas in their head at once, and I think that the media especially has a hard time with multiple narratives, including multiple complex narratives. And so, there's a lot of media about, "Oh, those poor women in the military. Oh, you're a woman in the military." And I think people have this—this trope, or stereotype, of, "Okay, a woman in the military must be an MST [military sexual trauma] survivor, must have PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], must be a poor victim of all those men," blah blah blah.

And I'm like, "No! There's so much more to the experience of being a woman in the military than just fending off hordes of predatory guys." That's a part of some people's experience, but as a collective experience there's so much more.

There are women who are tough enough to go through Ranger school, to do martial arts. There was a woman, and I can't remember her name—I wish I did—but she went to the Best Warrior competition and won, [Sergeant Sherri Gallagher was the first female to win the competition in 2010] and part of that was a combatives [hand-to-hand combat] tournament, where she was competing against guys, and she won. And I'm thinking to myself, "These are some amazing women who could be shown to the civilian world as 'Look, yes, we do have this issue, but we also have so much more to the experience.'"

And that's actually one of the focus of the articles that I'm writing that I was doing the interviews for, and a book that I would like to write to show the positive side of things. [chuckles] Actually my—Come here, cat. I've got the cat. She—I think she wants to be on the microphone. Okay, here we go.

I just wrote a pretty scathing review of the new show on NBC, *American Odyssey*, And it was—Task & Purpose [news and culture website geared toward Iraq and

Afghanistan veterans] published it. It was not very complimentary. I basically—The biggest problem that I had with it was that it was a piece of poop as far as television shows go. But the way that they marketed it was, they marketed it by saying, "We are going to honor women warriors and women veterans by making this show about a woman warrior." And what they made was a show that's a piece of crap. I'm like, "If you're going to honor me with this show, please don't bother."

So I went and saw it and became quite incensed over the—over that particular part of the PR campaign. Also the fact that the show is not very good at all, and wrote—like I said, wrote a pretty scathing review, and it got published. But it made me think, how many people will watch the show and think, "Wow, that must be what women in the army do,"

And I'm thinking to myself, "No. That's not—We do so much cool stuff." You couldn't do five minutes of research, find a woman veteran, and I don't know, ask her about her experience, and then make this a little bit more true to life? The way it's set up is, she's just kind of shoehorned in there.

TS: Right. Okay, let me have that. Sorry, talking to the cat.

RB: Oh, that's okay. Yeah so, I was so—I was so mad.

TS: Well, when you first went in, the issue of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," that policy was in place, and during the time you were on active duty it was removed. So what do you think about that whole issue of homosexuals in the military?

RB: I was really happy when that—when that was removed. I actually had a really cool experience. They selected a bunch of people—basically they "voluntold" us [military slang term for being forced to "volunteer"]—to be part of the focus group and research that the army did prior to lifting the ban. And I felt that they went about it the right way. They had social scientists come and do—first they did a—we all came into this auditorium—there was hundreds of us from all ranks, genders, et cetera—and there was the panel that was overseeing the research; I think it was like a navy captain, who was an O-6, and a couple of others. And they said, "Listen, we're here to do research. You need to be honest, because this is going to influence army policy."

And so, they had—they opened up the floor to anybody who wanted to speak in front of the huge group of people, because that was their opportunity to speak directly to the panel of policymakers—or to researchers. And then after that, we all broke out into little focus groups that were based on rank. So mixed genders, but I was with the company grade officers [second lieutenants, first lieutenants, and captains]. The field grade officers [majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels] had a different one, et cetera. And the—there in the larger group, I would say that the number of comments that were pro removing the ban far outweighed the number of comments of people who didn't want to serve with homosexuals. I think there was maybe two people who actually stood up and said, "I don't want to do it." And they were honest. That was—That was why they were doing this research.

TS: Right.

RB: But again, far outweighed by the number of individuals of all ranks, all genders, all colors, shapes, and sizes, who said, "This is the army, and the focus that we should have should be on the mission, not on some other extraneous stuff."

I was like, "Wow. I didn't expect that."

TS: No, you didn't?

RB: I didn't. I thought there would be more people who would be emboldened to say that they didn't want homosexuals serving. But I was like, "Well, okay. That's a pleasant surprise." And then, when we went into the focus groups, I don't think there was anybody in the room—no, again, it was a focus group, so it wasn't a one-on-one, so somebody might have felt like they couldn't say something, but it was a hundred percent, "Could you please lift the ban, because we're losing people that we should be retaining because of this ban. We've got a mission, we've got a high op tempo, we need to be keeping people in the military, not removing them just because of this other issue."

They were like, "We are very well aware that there are currently people serving who are homosexual. So if they're here, and they're already serving—what's—this isn't going to be anything other than a way to get more people in the army who are qualified and have a larger talent pool." And I believe that the research eventually showed that there were—the objections to homosexuals serving were broken down—there's like an age line, where the younger soldiers, like the company grade soldiers and the specialists and young sergeants, they were like, "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's join the rest of the 21st century." And it was the older people—like the older field grades and the older E-8s [master sergeants and first sergeants], et cetera—they were—they had objections, but even within those groups it wasn't unified objections, it was mixed.

So I think that they—that the results of the research came in and based on—they didn't even finish. They were like, "You know what? There's overwhelming support, so we're just going to lift the ban." And I was glad that they did. They actually finished lifting it right after I deployed or right before—it was one of those times. But they lifted it and it allowed people to just be who they were. There was no more of this sneaking around. And part of the army's values, one of them is integrity, and living your life with honesty and not lying, et cetera. Well, when you have somebody and you say, "Well you can't—you can't have this part of your life if you're serving," you immediately force them to lie about who they are, even if it's a lie of omission. And heaven forbid that they want to have a career in the military, which why not if they can do the job? And I distinctly recall in the mid-2000s, where they started opening up the waivers to people with felony convictions because they were having trouble recruiting.

I'm like, "So I could be serving alongside somebody who likes the same gender, or I could be serving alongside a criminal. Let me think which one I would prefer." So for me—and growing up in New Jersey and New York, I had always been aware that people who were homosexual were out there, and I had friends who came out to me, and I was like, "Okay. It's not interfering with my life." So.

TS: Right. Well, do you think that your life's been different because of the time you've spent in the military?

RB: Definitely. [chuckles] Both my service and my family's service, I think. I've definitely spent more time below the Mason-Dixon line [in the south] than I ever thought I would. I've met so many people that I never would have met. I never would have met my husband. I would never be living in this house. I really—I like my life. I think it's a great life, and I wouldn't have it unless I had joined the military. You know what? The other life that I might have had could have been great, I'll never know, but I don't really spend much time thinking about it.

TS: Would you recommend military service to young people, especially, like, in particular, other women?

RB: Absolutely. I absolutely would. I would tell them to accept the challenge, because it is a challenge. It's going to be hard. It's going to be hard mentally and emotionally, and it's also going to be hard physically. Military service is often, I think, in direct contradiction to a society that puts the self first. Not in all places, and not in all jobs. I liken military service to other sorts of service like teachers. I consider teaching to be a service on par with the military. I think it's—Well, my mom's a teacher, many of my friends are teachers, and I feel that if we are going to raise children who are intelligent, and smart, and have a strong sense of civic purpose, then we should treat teaching as a service that's on par with military service. As well as other forms of service like firefighters, police, park service, even local politicians.

TS: Well, is there anything in particular you would want a civilian to know or understand about what it's like to be in the military that they may not understand, or appreciate, or maybe—yeah, that was the question.

RB: I would encourage civilians to—let me see, how do I phrase this? I would encourage them to refrain from making assumptions, just as I would encourage military service members and veterans to refrain from making assumptions about somebody else, which I think is just a good lesson for life. [chuckles] Because it really is—it's really easy to make an assumption about somebody based on either how they look, or the stickers they have on their car, or how they look. You never really know. So people—And especially sometimes the media—and I'm speaking of both news and entertainment media—doesn't serve as much as a communication tool as it does a tool to sell advertising. I really feel that there is a very significant civilian and military gap right now, which I think is tragic, because we have spent so many years at war that for the gap to be as wide as it is right now is terrible. That's one of the reasons why I wanted to get out and go into freelancing. It's one of the reasons why I enjoy writing for Task & Purpose; it's one of the reasons why I enjoy engaging people. I—I'm—I don't wear my service on my sleeve, although my husband bought me a shirt from Lady Brigade, so I might actually, every once in a while, wear it on my shirt.

TS: [chuckles]

RB: But I don't necessarily wear it on my shirt. But if somebody asks me a question I'll answer it, because I feel that if we don't engage people, they're never going to know. I mean, some veterans will be like, "Well, it goes both ways. Why should we always be engaging?"

I'm like, "Well, because we're the minority, and if we want the majority to understand who we are, and why it pisses us off when they appropriate parts of our culture, then we have to reach out and engage." Just like any other group, any other culture, if you want people to understand you and know who you are, then you have to do some engagement, and some education. And it's—I would rather talk with somebody who wants to know than blow them off and wonder why nobody cares about me.

TS: What does patriotism mean to you?

RB: I think that it is a love of your country with both eyes wide open. I think it is being in love with the ideal of your country, understanding that—that an ideal is just that, it is an ideal that we may fall short of it. We may fall short due to the fact that nobody has the same picture of that ideal, but we should never stop working towards it. And it's understanding that everybody has a contribution to the country, whether it be someone who has military service, or whether somebody serves in another capacity. And I also—it means—I think that it means identifying areas of dysfunction, and identifying areas of disease, and working actively to cure them and remove them. And by that I mean, things like overly partisan politics, on both sides of the spectrum. I believe that if you as a politician feel that you have nothing to learn and noth—and you're not going to talk to the other side because they're evil, then you need to go, because that's not politics, that's being a crazy person. I believe that if you have a generation of Americans who are graduating from high school never having taken a civics class, then you're in trouble with your representative democracy, because you're going to have a generation of people who don't know how to be involved in their—in their own governance, and things of that nature.

TS: Would you do it again?

RB: Yes. Absolutely.

TS: What would you do differently, if anything?

RB: You know what? It's hard to say, because everything that I've done has been a learning experience. Would I have—I think I might have—Instead of coming on active duty as an NCO, I probably would have gone to officer school. But, I mean, I say that, but then I wouldn't have been able to go to Albany, and I really enjoyed my program there. So I don't know. I probably would do everything—Every time I made a decision, I was making a decision based on the set of facts that I had at the time, and looking back, I think I made the best decision that I thought was going to be the best decision at the time,

based on the facts I had, which is one of my criticisms of the military is, they never tell you all the facts. So you're making a decision and then afterwards you find out, "Oh, really? I could have done that? Oh." So—But I mean, it's par for the course.

TS: Yeah. Well actually, I don't have any more formal questions. Is there anything that we haven't discussed that you want to bring up, or that you think you'd like to add?

RB: I'm trying to think. Not really. [chuckles]

TS: You could put it in your blog [*Infamous Scribbler*] [chuckles]

RB: Oh, well, I mean, I do. I do blog, and I am working on a proposal for a book that, again, highlights some of the positive contributions. One of the things that was very interesting was when Sheryl Sandberg's [Chief Operating Officer of Facebook] book *Lean In* came out, a lot of military women were reading it because it was a book on leadership, by women. And I was thinking—So I picked it up and I read it, and I really enjoyed it because it had—it was the perspective of a woman who was a leader, and what she had learned.

Now, there's some very viable and valid criticisms of that book; namely that, "Well, she's really rich, and so is her husband, and they have a nanny, and they have power and they have the ability to mold their lives how they want it," which I thought was a valid criticism. But at the same time, it's good to start a discussion about what women can accomplish. And the book that I would like to propose, and that I've started writing the arti—some articles for, is women in the military are expected to lead. No matter what level you're at, you have the expectation of being a leader. And so, I think that there are some insights from women in the military, I think, that would be of interest to the civilian world. And so, we could provide those insights, not just say, "Hey, look at these cool things that we've learned," but also to give this more rounded picture of what women are accomplishing in the military, because it is really amazing stuff.

TS: Well, that's a great book. I can't wait to read it.

RB: All right! [chuckles]

TS: Well, thanks Rachel. I'm really glad that I got to meet you and talk with you today.

RB: Oh good. Also—Oh sorry.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: I'll turn it off, then we can—you want to tell me about that on tape, or do you want to tell me—

RB: No, that's okay. I was just going to show it to you and then—

TS: Okay.

[End of First Interview]

[Begin Second Interview]

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Rachel A. Brune

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: 18 June 2016

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is June 18, 2016. My name is Therese Strohmer. I'm back at the home of Rachel Brune in Fayetteville, North Carolina, to conduct part of an interview that got lost [due to technical failure]—part of it did—for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina of Greensboro. Rachel, could you state your name the way you'd like it to read on your collection?

RB: Sure. Rachel Ann Brune.

TS: Okay. Well, Rachel, when we last left off we were in Iraq. That was 2005ish?

RB: Yes, 2005 to 2006.

TS: Two thousand five. And you had just started talking about how you went about trying to collect stories, and I had asked you what it was like to be on a convoy. Do you want to start there?

RB: Sure.

TS: Okay.

RB: There were a couple of different types of convoys that we went on, and some of them were—the majority of them were these logistics convoys. And they called them combat logistics patrols because they needed to call them something because they were writing a book about how to do them.

TS: Who's "they"?

RB: The battalion stationed at [Forward Operating Base] Diamondback. And so, they were—I mean, it wasn't like a book like you'd sit down and read. It was basically writing down lessons learned and how they went about doing these combat logistics patrols.

TS: Like a military history of that particular battalion?

RB: Yes. And they wanted to call them combat logistics patrols. And they were very specific that that's what it would need to be called, even though when we—when I was writing a news story that was typically meant for a general audience, nobody had any idea what they were called. [chuckles] Like, what was that? I don't know.

TS: Even with the name combat logistics patrol?

RB: Yeah, everybody was like, "What? What is that?"

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: "What does that mean?"

RB: It's jargon. It really is jargon. And in news writing you're supposed to stay away from the jargon, but in the army jargon will get you bullets on your evaluation, so everybody likes it. [chuckles]

TS: Okay.

RB: So it was basically kind of what I described before: platoons or squads escorting long trains of supplies from one place to another; all the different outposts and FOBs [forward operating base]. And then there were some other convoys that we went on which typically were not as frequent. So sometimes we would go with the local civil affairs unit and we'd go drop off supplies at schools, or we would go out and visit the market place, or we would—oh gosh, what did we do? Once or twice the field artillery unit that was down the street on our FOB where we were would be like, "Okay, we're going to go do this thing. Do you want to come with us?"

And I'd be like, "Yes. Yes, I do," because it was usually something fun. Like one time they were going out to—they had to qualify with their howitzers [a short gun for

firing shells on high trajectories at low velocities], which need a really large range of fire in order to qualify, so they had to go around to some farmers in the area who had agreed to let them basically use their fields to fire their weapons at. And paid them money, of course.

So we went out there with some of the forward observers who were directing fire. And that was kind of fun. We just parked out in this field all day and they were like, "All right, shoot. Go ahead, shoot." And then you'd see all the puffs of smoke coming up from where they were shooting in this guy's field. [chuckles]

TS: When you're riding along in the convoy, did you have your weapon? Where did you sit?

RB: Yes.

TS: What was that experience like at a—more of a personal level for you?

RB: In '05, '06, I was usually kind of a third or fourth wheel, so I'd be sitting in the quote unquote "passenger." So that was usually in the back left seat of the Humvee [High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV)], and I would have my personal weapon, but really, the—each vehicle had a driver and the assistant driver who would sit up front and navigate. They'd have a gunner in the turret, and then they might have somebody else—like, sometimes if there was a squad leader going out and it was their vehicle they'd be in the back on the right side. And so, I was just ri—I was just along for the ride. So I—I mean, I was—try and keep an eye out and stay alert and aware and everything, but I wasn't really that worried.

TS: You weren't that worried? Did you ever have any, like, dangerous things happen on any of the convoys?

RB: Not in '05, '06, [chuckles] which was funny because my friend with the CA unit [?]-which is how I got to know the unit and started going out with them—there was a couple of times they were like, "Listen, you've got to be extra careful because where we're going, every time we go someone takes a few pot shots or something happens out there."

"Oh, okay. Sounds good."

And I'd get all ready to go, stay alert, and nothing would happen at all. It would just be the most boring drive ever. And after—A couple of years after the deployment, my friend Brian, that I still talk to—he works, I think, right now for the Department of Labor—I was kind of joking about how they were always telling me all this stuff is going on, and it was like, "Yeah, but nothing ever happened." I was like, "I think you guys are just pulling my leg."

He was like, "No, no. We actually noticed that whenever you came out with us nothing would happen, so that's why we asked you to come out with us." [both chuckle]

TS: You're a good token, right?

RB: That's right.

TS: Token of good luck. So you're going out and you're collecting stories, and do you have any more of the stories that you found really compelling that you wanted to share?

RB: There were a few, and a lot of the stories were—a lot of them were—they were kind of the same story over and over again: "Look at this unit. It's doing cool stuff," and blah, blah, blah, which was good, because I mean, it may have been the same story to me, but if I was highlighting a hometown soldier—and I'd always try to find their local paper and see if they were interested, and sometimes they were. So, I mean, it was cool for them, but at the same time I'm like, "I can only write a story about a convoy so many times before—I'm running out of angles here. We left in the morning. We left in the evening." Okay. [chuckles]

TS: Well, did you ever have times when the hometown newspaper wasn't interested in that story?

RB: Yeah.

TS: Really?

RB: Yeah, I mean—

TS: That kind of surprises me, I guess.

RB: Well, at this point in—at this point in '05, '06, really a lot of the papers were—this was right when the surge was about to start.

[The surge refers to President George W. Bush's 2007 increase in the number of American troops providing security to Baghdad and Al Anbar Province in Iraq]

And so, it was kind of this weird in-between, where in '04 they were like, "All right. We're done. Mission accomplished." And then it turned into this insurgency in '05, '06. Everybody, I think, was starting to realize that we're not really sure what we were doing here. [chuckles] And then—I think that the papers themselves didn't really know how to process it.

So sometimes I would send a story. I might not get an answer back or I'd be like, "Oh, you know it's—" And then again, too, sometimes somebody would be like, "Oh, we'd like you to do this story."

I'd be like, "All right. When did it happen?"

"Oh, two weeks ago."

I'd be like, "Nobody's going to be interested, except for some military papers." And that was the truth.

TS: So you had to be, like, really timely.

RB: Yeah, which was hard, because whenever I would write a story it would have to go through, like, three or four different people, and then it would go to the brigade commander and it would just sit on his desk for weeks. So pretty much everything that I wrote turned into a human interest story because I couldn't get it published in time.

TS: In time, right.

RB: It was a little frustrating. But yeah, it was—there was a few stories, though, that I really kind of connected to, and one of them was—there was—up north of where we were, there was a place called Hatra and it was—no, not Hatra, although Hatra was cool too. It was an ancient temple, served as a bit of a crossroads of the ancient world, and we got a chance to go in and walk around and look at that.

And then there was another place that was very, very old, and it might have been the other area around Hatra, but basically it was abandoned by the archeologists who had been working there. And the Kurds [ethnic group in the Middle East] in that sector were trying to get it—they were trying to up the security so they could turn it back into a tourist area and get people working there again and everything, which probably would have been really great if it hadn't completely gone to—I don't think anything's secure enough yet for tourists in Iraq.

TS: Right. Right.

RB: But it was very cool, because, I mean, that's sort of ancient history. I mean, we're talking thousands of years old, and you're walking along looking at all of the different ancient structures and the cuneiform [one of the earliest systems of writing] impressed into the bricks, and it's been there since, like I said, thousands of years ago, and who—who's going to get to see it? I'm never going to get to see it again, probably, if things keep going. So it was just a very cool story and a very cool experience.

And there was a few more sites that we got to go out to in northern Iraq. And one of them, it was actually pretty—it was actually—[sound of baby in background; speaking to baby] Laura Jean, thank you. [chuckles] One of the sites, I was actually pretty sad. It was an ancient monastery, I think it was Dar al Salaam [possibly Dair Mar Elia, St. Elijah's Monastery] or something like that, and it was a monastery outside of Mosul, not too far from [FOB] Diamondback; like it was—literally you could just drive there very quickly. And it had been occupied by the 101st [Airborne Brigade], I think, when they were in Mosul during the first wave, but it was, again, thousands of years old, and evidence of the Christian monastic community that had been living in the Middle East. And then unfortunately, I think, not—it wasn't even a year ago, but you know how ISIS is obliterating all of the historical areas?

[ISIS, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, is a Salafi jihadist militant group. They are also known as ISIL, or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant]

Well, they went in and they obliterated—basically bombed it into nothing. So there's a site that was there for thousands of years and we got a chance to walk around it, but all that exists now are pictures and memories.

TS: When you were there had it been obliterated already?

RB: No, no, it was still there. I mean, they would take soldiers there and let them walk through and be like, "Look at this ancient site."

They'd be like, "Oh, yes. This is very ancient."

"Yes, it is." [chuckles] And we'd be walking around and it was very, very cool.

The chaplain actually took a group of us and was giving us, kind of, a tour and had, like, a little brochure that talked about the monastery.

TS: Yeah. You got to see a piece of history that nobody is going to see again unfortunately.

RB: Yeah.

TS: We talked a little bit, too, about, like, the difference between the tours that you had. Was there anything different as far as, like, where you lived or what the food was like? Just the basics of being in a deployment, was that any different? Had it changed; those kind of structural things?

RB: Yes. When we were there the first time in '03—when we were at Arifjan [Kuwait] in '03, there were—I mean, it was tent city and there were—I mean there was a pretty big DFAC [dining facility] and all of the amenities of the post, because it was a permanent station for some people. But for us, like I said, we were living in these big tents, like twelve people to a tent. It wasn't that bad, and it was Kuwait so we weren't in Iraq. Then when we moved to Iraq in July it was—we were kind of living in the Al Faw palace, which sounds really fancy, but there was no heat and electri—there was no A/C [air conditioning], no electricity. It was kind of—The toilets didn't work, so in the morning—we were sleeping on the second floor, so in the morning we'd have to run down the stairs and out the back and find ourselves one of the worst porta-potties I've ever seen in my entire life and take care of business, and then run back upstairs and get ready for the day. [chuckles]

TS: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

RB: [chuckles] So yeah, that was my morning sprint.

TS: Even though you're in a palace you don't have all of the amenities of modern living.

RB: It was basically just a big building that we were staying in. And then while they were doing that, we had some local contractors working on some buildings that were right near where our headquarters was, and so when those got finished we moved in there. And actually in 2010 when I was back in Iraq, I was at the same place up in Baghdad at Camp Victory. And the palace by this time, of course, had A/C and all—it was basically where a lot of the USFI—U.S. Forces Iraq—Task Force units had their headquarters. So now—It used to be we just, like, walked up and we were walking around; now you had to go through security and show five badges, and it was a little bit different. [chuckles]

TS: Okay.

RB: When we were in '05, '06, we showed up, we went to what they called CHUs, which were containerized housing units, and they—it was me and my roommate, and we had our bunk beds up against the back, and they were about twenty feet long I think. And so, we had the bunk beds at the back and then we each had wall lockers where we had our uniforms and things, and then we had a little table and a little fridge. It was actually kind of nice.

TS: Now, did they do anything like inspections, or formations, or PT [physical training]?

RB: We—Not really. We did PT on our own. My boss at the time, every once in a while she was like, "We're going to do PT!"

I was like, "Okay."

And then she would—we would do it once or twice and then she'd get bored, or I don't know, she just wouldn't show up, so we were like, "Well, if she doesn't show up I'll be in the gym. I'll see you."

I mean, we still had to take the PT tests, and we did ruck marches every once in a while, but it wasn't—there wasn't anything too organized. It was mostly—The shifts were from 7:00 [a.m.] to 7:00 [p.m.] so there really wasn't much else to do. On Sundays we got the mornings off, so that was nice.

TS: But then you went in in the afternoon?

RB: Yeah. And—Which is, I mean, 7:00 to 7:00, but—[addressing baby] Oh Lord, you're dropping water on the floor. Okay. So that's kind of why I tried to get out of the office as much as possible and go travel and do other things because then I didn't have to worry about, "Well, you've got to be in the office at 7:00."

"Okay."

TS: Well, was there anything else about this tour that you'd like to add, that you think was important to understanding your story? [sound of music playing; speaking to baby] Are you going to roll that around? [chuckles]

RB: I'll turn the music off. It's so much fun to play with this toy.

TS: It's okay.

RB: I'm not—It was definitely different being in an active duty unit than being in a unit that was a reserve unit that had been activated. There was a longer train-up. There were some different expectations. And I realized that it wasn't necessarily—I was like, well—There really wasn't a lot of career progression available, because I was like, "All right. Well, what are we going to do when we get back? Are we going to be doing the same thing?" And I had asked the division PAO [public affairs office] folks, "When we get back can I come work for you, because I don't really get along with my boss." [chuckles]

So they were like, "Well, no, you're going to be staying here and you're going to be—keep doing what you're doing."

And to me that was kind of—I was like, "Well, I've already done this, twice; this is my second time as a brigade PAO; my second time doing all of this work." I was like, "It's really fun, but it's not necessarily what I want to do for the rest of my career."

TS: What was your rank then?

RB: I was a sergeant, E-5.

TS: Okay.

RB: And I'd been in the army at this point only three years or so, and so I decided that I really wanted to do something different and I wasn't sure what, and I was looking at a few things, like maybe go to drill sergeant or recruiter; something like that. And then I got an email from the Mohawk Battalion of ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps] and they—it basically said, "Hey, we noticed that you went through MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Station] in Albany—" which was—when I went on active duty I had to go through all of the military entrance processing again, so I'd gone through that in Albany and I guess they had pulled a list of people who had gone through and had college. And so, I went and I emailed them back—or they said, "Are you interested in doing ROTC?" So I emailed them back—[addressing barking dog] Brandy! I'll let her outside.

TS: Okay, let's pause.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay, so they're asking you about ROTC. Now, to train or to what? What part of ROTC were they—

RB: Well, they wanted to know if I was interested in joining and doing Green to Gold [program to offer enlisted soldiers an opportunity to receive a commission as an army officer]. So I emailed them back and said, "Hey, listen, I already have my bachelor's degree. Can I do it as a master's degree?"

And they emailed back, said, "Absolutely. Here's a packet. Fill it out. We'll help you out."

So it was a little challenging putting it together because I was overseas, so I didn't have an official photo. I had to take one basically of me standing next to the building, and explained that I was deployed.

TS: Right.

RB: And I submitted it and I got selected for what they call Green to Gold Active Duty option, and that means I stayed on active duty, I went to college for two years, during which I participated in the ROTC program, and continued to get paid at my rank, E-5, and that was pretty much what I did for two years, and I went and got my master's degree in communication.

TS: And where were you at to do that training?

RB: The University at Albany, which is part of the State University of New York school system.

TS: Okay. So you did, like, a regular school, and then some ROTC training, but really you were not so connected with the military outside of the ROTC program?

RB: Right. Because I was still on active duty I had to belong to a student detachment. But that student detachment was at Fort Jackson [South Carolina], and so really the amount of contact that I had with them was very, very limited.

TS: Where was Fort Jackson at?

RB: South Carolina.

TS: Oh yeah. Okay, so you're completely removed from that.

RB: Yeah. Every once in a while I sent them some paperwork, or they got in touch with me and sent me some paperwork. Other than that it was—yeah, I don't think I ever—except I sent them a few leave—I sent them a leave request once really late, and their—got really—the first sergeant got mad. He was like, "Why are you sending me this leave request when it's the day before?"

I was like, "I'm sorry."

TS: [chuckles]

RB: But some friends of mine had decided to get married, and they'd been dating for a really long time, and I wasn't sure if my husband would be back from his—he had gone on some TDY [temporary duty] and I wasn't sure if he'd be back so I probably should have

just put it in anyway, but I waited because sometimes people do that. But yeah, he was—that first sergeant was mad. And of course he calls me and he's like "Rah, rah, rah." And I had already left. I was like, "I'm sorry, man." But that was fun.

TS: So you did that program, you got your master's.

RB: Yes.

TS: What did you get your master's in?

RB: In communication, with a concentration in political communication. And it was very interesting. The department was great. The—Because it was a graduate program, I was a little more comfortable I think. They were mostly older people who had been working—not older, but more my age, mid—like, late twenties, early thirties.

TS: Got you. Yeah, that's not older. [chuckles]

RB: No, it's not older, but older than undergraduates.

TS: Sure. Sure.

RB: Because, I have a lot of friends—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: More maturity and—

RB: Yeah. And I have friends who came back and they were like, "I'm going to use my GI Bill. I'm going to get my degree." And they're sitting in classrooms with like, sixteen-, seventeen-, eighteen-year-olds—I guess seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds—who this is the first time they've ever been away in their entire lives. And so, yeah—

TS: Life experiences are much smaller.

RB: Much different, yeah.

TS: Yeah.

RB: Whereas I was in classes with people—international students. My one friend had been a journalist in Germany, and I had some other friends who worked for the political—political offices in Albany. And so, it's a lot—people have done a lot of stuff, and so it wasn't quite—it wasn't quite a culture shock. And because they were all sociologists they saw having a veteran in the classroom as an educational experience, and

not "War's bad," which I very much appreciated, because even if they did, deep down, think that war is bad, they—

TS: That's not how they expressed it.

RB: Exactly. They were very—There was always a lot of very mature discussion.

TS: Now, did you know what kind of job or position you were going to have once you finished your master's?

RB: Well, since I was still on active duty I was going to get a commission for active duty, so I knew that I was just going to go back to "big army" and do my stuff there. And I really wanted to be an MP [military police], it was my first choice, and luckily, I wasn't—I wasn't the—on, like, the highest on the Order of Merit List [a Company or Battalion ranking those soldiers in order of priority to attend certain trainings], mostly because I'm like, "Listen guys, I'm thirty. If you think I'm going to run as fast as you, you are completely mistaken. You have fun." And then also, too, there was a lot of—the Order of Merit List for ROTC had a lot of stuff on it that—there were kids who were four years on the swim team doing things like Ranger Challenge [varsity sport of Army ROTC], which was—it looked fun, but I was like, "I'm not going to do that because I'm working on my thesis." [both chuckle]

TS: Yeah, right.

RB: So there was a lot of—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: You had other priorities besides doing these other things.

RB: I was like, "How come—" for me, I thought it was a little unfair that two combat tours to Iraq did not count for anything on that Order of Merit.

TS: Oh, you're kidding! Really?

RB: No. [chuckles]

TS: That does seem a little skewed.

RB: So I was like, "What?" But I graduated at least high enough, and the algorithm somehow worked out where I got my first choice, which was to commission as a military police officer. That worked out, so I was—I mean, I'm not unhappy about that. I was glad.

TS: So then what happened with that? Did you have to go to MP school or training?

RB: Yes. I got out of—I graduated, I got my degree, I got commissioned, and then I—my first duty station—Rob and I, in the meantime, had gotten married, which was very nice. And he decided to also go the officer route. So about six months before I was getting ready to graduate, he put in his packet to go to OCS [officer candidate school] and to go on active duty. So he did the—it's, like, about ninety days—did all of the OCS requirements. He ended up commissioning, like, two weeks before I did. [chuckling]

TS: Oh, really?

RB: Yeah. And he branched armor, so at about the time that I was graduating and commissioning in the MPs, he went to Fort Knox [Kentucky] for armor school, and then I went to Fort Leonard Wood [Missouri] for the MP Officer Basic Course. That was about two or three months. Oh, my gosh. I think it was about three months. And they—the two of us though, we had to go to Fort Benning [Georgia] first for a school that they used to call BOLC 2, Basic Officer Leadership Course 2.

TS: Okay.

RB: And this—They don't—When we commissioned they had just started this school, and a few years later they disbanded it, which is just our luck that we would have had to go to it. It was really kind of useless training. It was—Their idea was that all of the officers would get the same core training and then they'd move on to their specialties. But it wasn't well organized, and the people who were teaching it were not the best of the best. And they ended up—I think probably nobody could really agree on the importance of the course or what they were going to teach, because once we got to our actual officer courses nobody—they were like, "Yeah, ignore that stuff."

TS: So there was no really big value that you took from that?

RB: No, it was really terrible. And, I mean, I had a friend of mine, Cap—now Captain Blasingame[?]
—Marcy; my friend Marcy—she was a—she had commissioned as a chemical officer, and she was just kind of a sweet type of person, and she was not, like, "hooah, hooah," infantry. She just wasn't that person. And some of—like, one of the—I guess they call them OCs [Observer Controller] or TACs [Training, Advising, and Counseling Officer] or whatever, had been getting on her case, and getting on her case, and one day we were in, like, the final field exercise and I—she was getting really upset. I was like, "What's going on?"
She said, "Oh, Sergeant So-and-So, he's saying this to me; he's saying that."
And it had upset her to the point where she was just like—and for me being prior service, I'm like, "This guy's a sergeant, and he's saying this stuff to a lieutenant? Oh, no." So I found him and I said, "Hey, listen. Why are you giving Lt. Blasingame a hard time?"
"Oh, well—" this and that.
I'm like, "No, you need to—" I was like, "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, well, if she doesn't pass this course—" blah blah blah.

I was like, "That's BS [bull shit]. She does not need to—" I was like, "This course—We are not even getting an evaluation out of this course. If we don't pass it nothing will happen to us, first of all, so let me just get that straight. Second of all, that's a lieutenant. You need to treat her with respect."

And he was like, "Okay, ma'am. Got it. Got it." I found out later that after that day he never said anything to her after that. [chuckles]

TS: He never talked to her again?

RB: Nope.

TS: Well, good for you.

RB: Yeah, because, I mean, I was just like, what? But that was the thing. It was like, you had all of these—they were basically pulling them guys from, like, infantry, I think probably because Fort Benning has a lot of infantry training. That's where the infantry goes and trains. All of the maneuver elements go and they do their crew course there. I have a feeling they were just pulling people, or saying, "Hey, you unit over here, give me your people." And I have a feeling that people were doing the same thing that people in the army do everywhere, which is, "Oh. Here's the perfect chance to get rid of this guy. Okay, you're going to go over there now."

TS: Oh. Pulling their not so great people to fill in this role that—they didn't want to lose their good people.

RB: Exactly. I mean, officers are supposed to be trained by officers. Our platoon didn't even have an officer TAC. It was like an E-7 and a couple E-6s. That was it. I was like, "Well, how are you—What?" It was very silly. But they have since made that class go away and they've added more weeks to the actual officer basic courses. The military police officer basic course was like night and day. That course was great.

TS: Why was it so great?

RB: It was very well organized. The people who were teaching it were top notch, and I had a really good squad of just really motivated people who wanted to be there. They wanted to be MPs. They thought it was good training. And so, we just had a really good time. And that was in—like I said, that was about three months. I think so, because I left in October. Left in October, went to Fort Hood [Texas], and I was at Fort Hood from November of 2008, because it was right after the election to—

TS: Okay, it says here July 2011.

RB: Yes, with a six month tour to Iraq in late 2010.

TS: So now, at Fort Hood, you're operating as a military police officer, and so what was your role? Were you in charge of any particular—

RB: I had a few roles. When I first got there—When I first got there we were on the battalion staff, because they basically take lieutenants and they put them all in the battalion and they let them shake out a little it, give them a few projects, and then see where some platoon leader slots will open up, because lieutenants will get promoted, leave. So I ended up in the training section for about two months, and I didn't really have that much to do, so I was like, "I'm so bored." But then my boss, who was a first lieutenant, he was the training OIC [Officer in Charge] for the battalion, he went on TDY [Temporary Duty] for about three weeks and so I got left in charge. And then when he got back, they were like, "Well, he's going to go and do this over here," so he was going to get transferred.

And so, I'm thinking to myself, "Well, dang it. They're probably going to make me the training officer," because I was—it wasn't that hard. It was basically make sure that all the subordinate units turned in training schedules, and a lot of just organization and staying on top of things, and talking to the different members of the staff to make sure stuff was happening the way it was supposed to. And I ran a few ranges with some of the NCOs. I mean, it really wasn't that hard. It was kind of fun, too, because you got a chance to go and do all—like, observe all the training and it was kind of fun.

So yes, as I suspected, once this guy left—actually even before they left, they were like, "All right. You're going to be the training officer," and that's what I did. [speaking to baby] Are you—[Extraneous comments about baby redacted]

So after that there was a platoon leader slot that opened up at a—at one of the downtrace [subordinate] line companies. And I moved into that position for about a year, and it was—it was a company that had just come back from downrange [deployed], and so I was the platoon leader during the time that they were taking the police orientation course, which was a two week course that you have to take at—even if they had taken it before, since they had just come back from downrange, they had to take it again to recertify to work on Fort Hood.

TS: When you say they had come back from downrange, what does that mean?

RB: They were coming back from Afghanistan.

TS: Okay.

RB: So they came back from Afghanistan, started working the road, and I kept trying to go and do ride-alongs and things like that. Finally—And of course, the other units were gearing up to go, so as I was—as we were gearing up to work the road, the other units were gearing up to go downrange. It was a very, very high operational tempo.

So finally, the battalion commander said, "Listen, you guys keep saying you need people, you need people. All right, platoon sergeants and platoon leaders, you're going to work the road."

So we went and we got in the patrol car and we did our patrols. I made arrests, and did paperwork, and directed traffic, and did all of the things that my guys were doing,

and I loved it. It was awesome. It was probably the most fun I've had. I mean, some parts of it were not that fun, but just being able to work in the field with my troops was a very awesome leadership experience.

TS: What was it that was not the so cool part?

RB: Just the—Well, every once in a while you had somebody you just—like, I had this one guy, he—All right, so the first time I made an arrest, this guy had called—[Extraneous talking to baby redacted] So the call came, destruction of private property. So this guy was like, "Yeah, my girlfriend broke my laptop." Okay. So I went and I was like, "Yes, that laptop is broken." Great.

So in the information sheets that we have to fill out, one of them asks—or one of the questions asked is: Do you have any tattoos? So this guy is trying to describe this tattoo, and trying to describe it. I'm like—he's like, "Here, I'll just show it to you." And he, like, pulls his shirt down to show me his shoulder where the tattoo was and he's had this huge bite mark in the—in—[indicating location] right there. And I was thinking to myself, "Do I really want to know?" I was like, "Is that a bite mark?" Thinking I'm going to hear either, "Well—"

So it turns out that when his girlfriend would get mad at him she would, like, bite him. I was like, "Well, you know she can't do that, right? That's assault." So it turns out the two of them had this, like, really bad relationship, and this and that. So it was like—it was one of those cases where there is just—there is just no way to know who is telling you the truth. The only thing you could rely on is who had the marks on them. And, I mean, the bite mark was pretty obvious.

So that's how my first arrest ended up being this, like, eight and a half month pregnant lady, who was like, "Well, he pushed me."

I'm like, "There's no push marks on him, but there's bite—or on you, but there's bite marks on him." So that was less fun than some of the days where we got to do stuff like we're doing training patrols and things like that. Or when it was just very obvious that the person that was—that you were arresting had done exactly what they were being accused of doing.

TS: Right. No question.

RB: And you're like, "Why did you do that? Did you think you weren't going to get caught?" "Oh, well—" I mean, we're not allowed to ask people that, but I'm just—

TS: Right, on the inside. So you enjoyed the patrolling. Now, how long did you get to do that?

RB: Probably about three or four months? Previous to that we were doing a lot of training for various missions, so we were—and also we had units there who were sharing the road duties with our company, so that we could go and do training at ranges and things like that. But towards the end of my time with the platoon—excuse me [sneezes]—

TS: Bless you.

RB: —the other two units—or two of the companies deployed, so—and then one of them was deployed and hadn't come back yet, so we were the only company from the battalion there on Fort Hood, and so we just patrolled all the time. We just worked the road all the time. That's really all we had time to do.

TS: Okay. Was that how you ended your time at Fort Hood, or did you end up doing something different?

RB: I ended up going on a short WIAS [worldwide individual augmentation system] tasker, which is W-I-A-S, and I can't remember what the acronym stands for, but it's basically instead of deploying a whole unit, they'll need a person—like just one person to deploy as an individual. And I ended up doing that in July 2010. I went to—Fort Benning was running—they called it a CRC [CONUS Replacement Center]—something readiness center—and it was basically if you were deploying as an individual you went there, you had your gear, you went to the range, you did all the training tasks that you have to do before you deploy. And then they put you on a plane and sent you to [unclear] or Ali Al Salem [Air Base] in Kuwait. And then from there they sent you onward to where you needed to go.

So this WIAS tasker said they needed an antiterrorism force protection officer. I was like, "All right." So I went to the antiterrorism school. It was a week long at—actually here at Fort Bragg. It's not bad. And then I went over there and I didn't actually know what unit I was going to, because on the paper it said GRD [Gulf Region Division]; I had no idea what GRD was. I tried to call all of the numbers. There was no—There was, like—Nobody would pick up any of the numbers. I tried to email. Nobody would email. I was like, "I have no idea where I'm going when I get to Iraq." [chuckles]

TS: Right.

RB: Luckily, the place that I was going—the unit I was going to knew I was coming, and it turned out to be the Corps of Engineers.

TS: Oh, right. Okay.

RB: Yeah. So I was with the Corps of Engineers for about five and a half months in Camp Victory. There really was not that much to do because all of the force protection duties were being performed by contractors. So all of the things that I went there to do, I was not doing.

TS: What were you doing instead?

RB: I ended up, just, like, looking for stuff. I went to a bunch of classes, and then I went to—I started getting involved in some of the PSYOP [psychological operations] and PAO [public affairs officer] things.

TS: How did you get involved with that?

RB: I just started talking to people. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah.

RB: So—And my boss kind of let—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Now, this is at Camp Victory you said?

RB: Yeah. And my boss kind of just let me do it. And the PAO and I hit it off, because I had done PAO before, and he had been a previous PSYOP guy, but then he became a civilian—

TS: Oh. Interesting.

RB: —and did PAO. And what the contractors were doing—What USACE [U.S. Army Corps of Engineers] was trying to do, which was in line with what USFI—U.S. Forces Iraq—was trying to do, was basically show the Iraqis that we're there to help. So there was no covering—like, there was no pretending that we weren't there. It was, "We're here and we're helping." And we want to show them that we're building things for them, and because it's the Corps of Engineers, we want to show them we're helping you reconstruct your company. That was like the message that we were trying to send. And so, USACE was just dumping tons of money into these projects. And some of it was well spent, and some of it probably could have been spent better in other places, including here in the United States. That's my personal opinion. But that's what we were doing.

The contractors—the security contractors that were affiliated with USACE—or that had been hired by them—because they're the State Department they don't have troops. They have some billets for troops, but they don't have, like, security personnel.

TS: Right.

RB: So some of those guys, I think, had probably seen a good thing and were taking very much advantage of it, because the security contractor, their headquarters was on the same little FOB that we were on, and they just kind of made themselves at home. So finally, I realized that what the security contractors were trying to do was put together a PSYOP program that would pretend to be this non-existent group called—like, "Reconstruction

Engineers," and they would claim that, "Oh, we're here to help reconstruct the company—" or, "—the country." But they would never mention the Corps of Engineers or anything like that.

So one day I just had a little conversation with Marcus, the PAO. I was like, "Do you realize this is what they're doing?"

And he was like, "What?! What are they doing?"

I said, "Yeah. This is what they're trying to do. These are the contracts that they're trying to pull," because they were trying to get pens and things like that with this new logo. They were getting these stickers to put on their vehicles that said, "Reconstruction Engineers." And I was like—So USACE is nowhere near any of this stuff.

TS: So it was like a scam?

RB: Basically, yeah. And so, when Marcus found that out he was like, "We already squashed that and told them no."

I was like, "Well, that's what they're spending your money on." So I basically stirred everything up and then I left. [laughs]

TS: Do you know what ever happened with that?

RB: Well, I mean, this was 2010, and the USACE had gone from, like, three different districts to one district. So when I was there it was only one district, and they were—the State Department was drawing down even more. So I forget when they left Iraq and—or folded the Iraq territory into the larger Middle Eastern district, but I don't think that initiative went very far.

TS: So this was your third time?

RB: Yes.

TS: What were the different kind of attitudes; difference in the way that you saw maybe the war itself was operating at that time? Were you more cynical at that point?

RB: I was a little more cynical towards the contractors.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: That's what I mean, towards the contractors, right?

RB: Yeah.

TS: Did that surprise you that those contractors were there like that? Had they been like that in the other deployments?

RB: Well, not—yes and no.

TS: Okay.

RB: It was different for me working with the State Department because they are—they're definitely a different animal altogether. And they do—they typically do have these private security contractors because they don't have any—they don't have a lot of troops. All of the troops they have are engineers, and a little operations cell, and that's about it. There's a lot of civilians who work for the Corps of Engineers. Like, all of the project managers were civilians. There's very, very few actual uniformed military personnel. So it's—I understood why they needed the security contractors. But at the same time, I mean, contractors have been there since we were going in. And they've made a lot of money off of the United States taxpayer. So at this point I was a little less tolerant of it.

TS: I see. Okay. More willing to speak out about it.

RB: Yeah. And then also, too, is, coming from a PAO background, coming from a communication background, and going like—I would—I just went to meetings. I'd be like, "Oh, this is—Oh, they're having a PAO meeting. I'll go to that."

And everybody would be like, "Oh, where are you from?"

"Oh, I'm with the GRD, USACE, Corps of Engineers."

"Oh. What do you do there?"

"I'm in the operations cell, so I'm just going along liaising with everybody."

They're like, "Oh. Okay." Nobody ever questioned why I was there.

I'm just like, "Yeah. I'm here."

TS: Wow, interesting.

RB: And I was a first lieutenant at the time, so I was usually in rooms full of people who outranked me, and they'd be like, "What are you doing here?"

I'm just like, "Oh, I'm the representative from USACE."

"Okay," and they'd just keep on going.

But from going to all these different meetings and meeting all these different people, the biggest push at that time, like I said, was for the United States to basically show how they're—not necessarily all the military actions that were happening, but the reconstruction actions that were happening. And since USACE was behind the majority of these things, we were employing Iraqis and building things for Iraqis. Like, this was a huge opportunity for PAO and even, to a certain extent, PSYOP since it was in there operating in this foreign country. And because the contractors wanted to do this other thing, it was not just not what they were supposed to be doing, it was directly contradicting everything that the United States was trying to do. [chuckles]

TS: Right.

RB: And so, it was just—it was not just necessarily being willing to speak out. It was just being frustrated with people who just couldn't get the message, and wanted to get paid for doing something that wouldn't help us out. So it was—Yeah, I was like, "Next time, just detail, like, a company of MPs for your security concerns, because they won't—" I was like, "It will be a little bit easier. And cheaper too."

TS: Were you frustrated that you weren't being used in that role as an MP?

RB: Not necessarily, because when you're an officer, especially when you're on a staff like I was there, you kind of have to be a generalist. So when I got back I was at Fort Hood for another six months and they put me in the S-4 shop, which is the supply and logistics shop, and I ended up, like I said, spending about six months there. And I was the continuity between the outgoing S-4 OIC [officer in charge] and the incoming one. Actually they were going to keep me there for a little bit, but by that time I had applied to the PSYOP program.

TS: Okay.

RB: So I just—Like I said, when you're a staff officer you've got to do a bunch of different things, and kind of be a generalist. So I was more upset that there wasn't enough work for me to do, because there really wasn't. They didn't need as many people as they had, and I ended up—I got there—there was somebody who had been there, and they had forgotten to turn off the position, so they were like, "Well, we're glad you're here, but we don't really have anything for you to do."

TS: And this is when you were where?

RB: In Vic—at USACE.

TS: Okay.

RB: So while I was there, they still forgot to turn off the position and then another captain came in. So I'm like—There was literally nothing—There were times when there was nothing for me to do. But if there was nothing for me to do it wasn't like my boss would just let me go. Like, we had to be there from eight o'clock in the morning to eight o'clock—or six o'clock at night, or seven o'clock at night, something like that. I was just like, "I've got nothing to do, except sit here."

TS: So this is why you got your fingers in all these other things.

RB: Oh, yeah. I was like—I was so bored.

TS: What was it that interested you about the PSYOPs when you were over there?

RB: Well, my husband decided that he was going to put his packet in to apply to go through the assessment and selection. And I was like, "Well, if you're going to go to Fort Bragg and do this, let me just try it out." So I put together my packet and sent it in, because I thought it would be fun, just a change of pace, and I ended up getting selected after I got back.

So there was a period of time where I was back from Iraq, I was working in the S-4 section, and I wasn't quite sure what was going to happen next because I didn't know if I was going to get selected. And also, the battalion commander—they were getting slated to go downrange, and the battalion commander had asked if I wanted to go with them and act in the capacity of a CA—or, like, a civil affairs type of project leader.

TS: This is when you're still at Fort Hood?

RB: Yes. And I had told him—I was like, "I don't mind it, but I might get selected for PSYOP," which I did, and then I ended up moving forward with that. And so, I got back from Iraq in January of 2012—or actually, no, December of 2010. I was back with the battalion in 2011. So from January to about July of 2011—or June of 2011—I was working in the S-4 section. And then I left.

The PSYOP pipeline started with going to the Captains Career Course. So I went to the MPs Captains Career Course, because there's no, like, PSYOP or CA career course. You just go do—you can go to the maneuver one or you can go to the aviation or the MI [military intelligence] one. I decided to go to the MP one, because I still wasn't sure if I wanted to do PSYOP. So you do the career course, then I went through airborne school in early 2012, and I went through SERE [survival, evasion, resistance, and escape] school in early 2012.

TS: How were those?

RB: It was kind of fun. [chuckles] Airborne school was a little terrifying because I have a little bit of a fear of heights. But the—And it is kind of terrifying when you're in the airplane and you're like, "Shoot. This airplane took off and they're going to expect me to get off halfway through this trip!" [laughs]

TS: I think you mentioned something—maybe it was a different training—but where you were at the top of a Jacob's Ladder?

RB: Yeah, that was in 2005. I got stuck at the top.

TS: That was earlier.

RB: Yeah. But when I went through airborne school I was going through as a captain, and you can't really—

TS: Show your fear?

RB: Yeah. You can't really do that as a leader. You have to just be like, "Yeah. No, this is fun! I really don't want to do—I mean, I really want to do it. It will be cool. Yay!"

So every time there was something—we had to jump off of something or there was a tow—like, there's this apparatus where you walk up and you put a harness on and they strap ropes to your shoul—or actually to the harness, as if it was a parachute harness, and then you have to walk out this door and there's a drop, and then there's a pulley and you basically, kind of, coast along and you have to get yourself into the correct position. So basically it teaches you to properly exit the aircraft, and then properly get into position. Well, that's actually worse than jumping out of the airplane, because there's that drop.

TS: And then it catches you, right?

RB: Yeah, and then it catches you, but still, there's just that moment where you're just falling and it's very terrifying. When you jump out of the plane, you—because the air is moving at the same speed as the plane you don't fall. You just step out and it kind of takes you parallel to the plane, and then you start to go down a little bit. But the momentum just keeps you going so you're not—you don't feel like you're falling. You just feel like you're, "Tchoom!" Okay.

TS: Interesting. I've never heard it explained that way before. Interesting.

RB: Well, it was very—it was very comforting to me that I wasn't freefalling through the air.

TS: Even though you were. [both chuckle]

RB: I was.

TS: It didn't feel like you expected.

RB: Exactly. Exactly. So that was kind of fun. And then once you're—once you step out of the plane, the—oh my God—the static line—there's a static line, it attaches to your chute [parachute], and as you exit you hand the static line off to the jumpmaster and it deploys your chute. So you basically—you don't even have to worry about pulling your own chute. It deploys already. So all you have to do is look up, make sure it's not twisted or—that it actually did deploy and everything. And you're good to go. [Extraneous comments about baby redacted] So that—Yeah, that was actually kind of fun, [airborne[?] training..

TS: What about the SERE training?

RB: SERE school was—[chuckles]

TS: That's survival school, right?

RB: Yeah, the survival, evasion, resistance, escape. I mean, it was—it was three weeks with no phone contact, no nothing. You're just—

TS: Yeah. What was the most challenging part of that for you?

RB: There's—I mean, you can't really talk about the training too much, but there's a part in the training where they throw you into a situation before giving you the tools to handle the situation. And they do it so that you'll have a specific emotional connection to not knowing what to do, and understand that you—if you're not prepared you don't make the right decisions. But it's kind of—it's kind of crappy [chuckling] that they do that because—

TS: I would imagine. Yeah.

RB: It definitely had the desired effect. So—But then, of course, they take you back and they train you and then they put you in the situation again and then you have the actual tools to—

TS: Then you have the tools.

RB: Yeah. And we were—It was, like, the last day of training, we were out in the middle of nowhere, it was like midnight—I don't know what time it was—but, like, one of the OC—or one of the instructors was like, "Oh, you've really improved."

I'm like, "I don't know you. Go away." [laughs] I'm like, "Thanks, I think." So yeah. But that was—It was good training. It was good training.

TS: Okay. So you did that and then you went to the PSYOP?

RB: Yes, I went to—we got here to Fort Bragg, and Rob was still in his career course. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to go grab her [the baby] some snack.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay. We took a short little break for Laura Jean. How old is she?

RB: She just hit the nineteen month mark, so she'll be two in November.

TS: All right. So you go to the PSYOP training, and is that at Fort Bragg?

RB: Yes, it's here at Fort Bragg. Rob was still in his career course. I got here, and the first thing you do is go through six months of language school. So I started taking Russian and—

TS: Was that here at Fort Bragg you took it?

RB: Here at Fort Bragg, yes. And in the meantime we bought this house, and Rob finally arrived from his career course. So we were here—It started in May; started taking Russian in May. I made it almost to Oct—I made it to about September.

TS: Was that May of—

RB: Two thousand twelve.

TS: Two thousand twelve, okay.

RB: I made it to about September of 2012, and all during this time I just didn't really feel like I was in the right place. The people that I had been through the selection and through language with—and some of them I had met in the airborne and SERE school as well—they were all really great people, and with few exceptions they were just top notch. But the people that were already in the program, I was not very impressed with, especially not the people who were in charge of the training company that we were in.

TS: Okay.

RB: The commander wasn't very engaged and basically left it to his NCOs, who just didn't really impress me very much. Like, for instance, we were doing Operation Clean Sweep, which is this big one week—or one week in the spring and one week in the fall all the people on post, all the units on post, clean up the post. And they mow and they edge the sidewalks and they make sure everything looks spiffy. It's very nice. Well, we were out there doing this Clean Sweep and they were like, "All right. Well, we've got to do this and once we're done you guys can go."

But instead of letting people go when stuff was done, they just kept people there. And this was the morning and I was like, "Listen. I need to go get my household goods scheduled because I'm sleeping on an air mattress and I have no things in my house."

And they were like, "Well, you can't leave."

I said, "Well, okay, when can I go? Because this is the best time. We've finished what we need to do and I need to—I mean, all I need is fifteen minutes. It's right down the road. I can go. I can schedule. It will be perfect."

"No, you can't leave."

I was just like, "You are really not helping me out right now."

TS: Right.

RB: I was like, "When can I go?"

"Oh. Well, you have to figure it out."

"Ahhh! What do you mean I have to figure it out? I'm telling you right now, this is what I need to do." So I just—I mean, that's not like a big thing in itself.

TS: But that's like playing games with you too.

RB: Yeah. And then our—Like I said, I was not very impressed. I wasn't really impressed with a lot of what I was starting to hear from the people who were—like, as you start to make friends with people who were already in the program, I was realizing—[speaking about baby] She's okay—

TS: Oh, she's—

RB: —people who were just—instead of doing PSYOP they were being jerked around and this and that. And then, especially—like, there were not a lot of women in PSYOP, and so I looked around, I was like—like, there was no representation anywhere. They were like, "Yeah, there's one—there's one female commander."

I'm like, "One? Really? One?"

So I was more used to—like, in the MP corps, I was more used to a larger representation of, men, women; it's a pretty diverse mix. And people really have—I mean, there's gender issues everywhere, but for the most part if you just do your job and take care of your troops, it's not really a big deal. But here it's like—in PSYOP it seemed like it was a big deal. And I just—I was like, "This isn't the place for me. I don't like these people."

TS: It just didn't seem like a right fit at all?

RB: Yeah. So I called up my—and so this is—I think we're probably almost caught up. I called up my branch manager and I said, "Hey, listen. I don't want to do this anymore. Are there any slots at Fort Bragg I can move into?"

"Oh, yeah. No problem. Don't worry about it."

I was like, "Oh, okay."

So I—They were like, "Give us a call when you submit your voluntary withdrawal packet."

I said, "Okay. No problem," submitted the packet, got sent over to, like, the replacement unit, which is where you went if you voluntarily or involuntarily left special operations training.

So it was us; there was people from PSYOP; people from CA; people from Special Forces who had not made it through the training. And we were all just like waiting; just waiting, to figure out what was going to happen next. So I called up my branch manager, "All right. I'm done. I'm ready to go."

They're like, "Oh, yeah, there's nothing on Fort Bragg."

I was like, "What?"

"Yeah, I only have two slots and they're both in Kuwait."

I was like, "I hate you a little bit."

So I waited and I waited and I waited and I waited, and finally I was like, "I'm sick of waiting because this company is dumb." The commander of the company decided one day that she wanted the base basketball court repainted.

TS: Now, which company are you with?

RB: These are a replacement company.

TS: Oh okay.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

RB: So all the soldiers come in—

TS: So you're not in a set unit with the MPs yet?

RB: Right. So like I say, I'm in there with all the folks who, for one reason or another, didn't make it through the training. And some of them were very candid about it and some of them were really upset about it, because some of them left—like I said, some people left voluntarily like I did. There was one guy from the Civil Affairs training, he made it all the way up to the last—like, he was about to graduate. Like, he made it through everything and he was about to graduate, and he's like, "I don't think I want to do this anymore."

Apparently the conversation had gone, like, with somebody who is in—like, some high-ranking person, "Look guys, you're going to go downrange, and some people might be unfaithful and you've just got to deal with it. That's how it is."

And he's like, "Nope. I don't want to be part of this. If it's—If I'm going to be in a unit that's going to implicitly encourage people to do that stuff," he's like, "I don't want to be around this." And so—

TS: Interesting.

RB: Yeah. I'm sure that's not the only thing that happened, but that's what was sticking in his mind at the time. So he was like, "Yeah. I'll go back to doing what I was doing before."

And there was a guy, he was actually a friend of mine from ROTC, and he got kicked out for, he told me, an honor code violation. And he was upset about it, but he was like, "Other people got away with it," he's like, "but I know I shouldn't have done it."

I'm like—

TS: Right.

RB: So that's how I ended up going to Kuwait, because I just got sick and tired of waiting there. Like I said, one day the commander decided that she wanted the basketball court repainted, and when you're painting the ground on post, you actually have to go to DPW [director of public works] because they have, like, the environmentally safe paints, and they do all that. Like, that's their job, is they'll come and do that for you. But she, like, went and got these little cans of paint, and was like, "Here you go."

I was like, "I'm not doing it." I'm like, "You're—And you're not going to make me, because I'm a captain." And I've very rarely thought that in my career; like, "You can't make me because we're peers and I'm just not going to do it." Like, usually I try and help somebody in that situation.

TS: Right. But you were done.

RB: Yeah. I was like, "Nope."

TS: Yeah.

RB: And they'd be like, "Yeah, and you have to come back here and stay here all day." I would leave. I'd come back for formation then I'd leave again.

I was like, "What are you going to do?" [chuckles]

TS: That's when you decided that you would take the Kuwait assignment?

RB: Yeah, and then I ended up doing that. I left in November, came back in November. I think I was talking about the transportation brigade?

TS: Yeah. You talked about this.

RB: Yes, that's what I did.

TS: Thank you. There was a period that we missed in there.

RB: Yeah.

TS: Well, that you had to repeat, I guess.

RB: That's okay.

TS: Well, we did this original interview about a year ago, a little bit over. It was April 3, 2015. I was just looking, I was like, "Oh my gosh." It doesn't seem so long ago, but she's [the baby] so big now.

RB: Yeah.

TA: But have you reflected at all on the interview, or on your service, and is there anything that you feel like we didn't—we discussed a lot—but is there anything that you feel like you would like to add at this point?

RB: Well, I think when we talked I had just come into command, and I'm now trying desperately to leave command. Unfortunately, they can't find anybody to replace me, so. I

was supposed to leave in March and transfer to a unit in Cary [North Carolina]; much closer, much closer.

TS: Okay. Now, is it in the reserves that you're in right now?

RB: Yes.

TS: Okay. I think I've got that on here.

RB: The captain that was supposed to replace me decided that he just didn't want to show up for the drill before we were supposed to go—start going through the handover process. So the brigade commander was like, "Well, I don't know."

And I said, "You know what, Sir? I'll just stay another year. Not a problem." This time I had a soldier who—she was diabetic, but like, very, very severe diabetic and she passed unexpectedly.

TS: Oh my goodness.

RB: Yeah. So it was—I was kind of, like, in this place. I was like, "Well, I don't want to turn the company over to somebody who hadn't shown up for drill and comes up with lame excuses."

TS: Right.

RB: So I said I would stay, but I just—it's too far, it's too much, and I'm not really a fan of the unit, and I'm actually—like I said, I'm looking at a unit in Cary that is actually a public affairs detachment. When I was talking to them a couple of months ago they said they would be interested in having me come re-branch as a public affairs officer in [unclear].

TS: Oh, cool.

RB: So I was like, "You know what? Why not? I've only got a few more years and—"

TS: Before you can retire?

RB: Yeah. [unclear], "I'll try it."

TS: Why not go [chuckles] back into that?

RB: Right? It's been a very long year of just trying to get stuff done, and it's very difficult to get stuff done because you just—there's too much momentum that you lose between drills, especially if you are not there. Like, a unit in this area, even if my unit was in Cary or Raleigh or someplace like that, I could stop by once a week just to—"Hey, what's going on? What are you doing? Have we taken care of this issue?" Now I'll be like, "Hey, here's—" like I did after this past drill—"Here's the roster of people who are going to

annual training. I need you to take this and conform it to the annexes for the group order so we can all get there," blah blah blah.

Well, they waited a week and a half and then they called me up, "Well, why didn't you do this?"

I was like, "I did it and I gave it to you and you and you. And I emailed it to all of you and—"

"Oh, well—" blah blah blah.

I was like, "Listen man. We are all part of the same unit. If you don't want to do anything—" because I have a unit administrator. The previous unit administrator left; kind of a mix between resigning and getting fired. Nobody was very sad to see her go, and she did not help a lot of soldiers. I have soldiers who have significant medical issues, and bills from those medical issues that she just never did anything for. So like I said, nobody was sad to see her go. Right now they're going through the hiring process of trying to find somebody, and we have a sergeant who came on ninety day orders who's helping me out, but she also is working on her civilian job. She works for the unit as a civilian, doing these family FRG things, so—or family readiness group things.

So she's trying to do two jobs at once, and I'm like—the full time staff don't, I guess, communicate with her, because I'm like, "If you had asked her this question she could have told you, because I gave her all of the information so that she could be empowered to act for me when I'm not there. That's the way that it's supposed to happen. She's very, very competent." I'm like—I almost wish that she could be my UA [unit administrator] but it's very—it's just—it's—command is stressful and not—like I said, not being able to stop in to help keep that momentum going is even more stressful.

TS: Right. If you do go to the Cary unit, what would your role be there?

RB: Just a member of the unit.

TS: Not the command?

RB: Not the commander. No. No, no, no.

TS: So keep the responsibilities to your own basic level.

RB: Right. Yeah. I'm sure that they probably break it up into teams, so there's probably like a captain with a couple of—like a sergeant and some privates or something like that, but—I—that I can handle. The whole—I mean, I've got soldiers who—I mean, a lot of them are really great, but a lot of them have some significant issues: loss of jobs, or not making enough money, or going through really terrible divorces, or getting arrested, or—all of the things that happen in life and I'm just like, "Uh," trying to—

TS: It's a lot to handle.

RB: Yeah, which, like I said though, it's not—it's not a bad gig. I mean, there's good parts about being in command and getting to train and take care of soldiers and do fun stuff. Like, we were at—

TS: But now you have this little girl.

RB: Yeah. And during the time that I've been in command, Rob's been away more often than he's been here, and that's been an additional stressor.

TS: Okay. I forget, is he still in the service?

RB: Yes. He's still on active duty. He's in PSYOP.

TS: Okay. That's—I remember he was in PSYOP, but I couldn't remember if he got out or not. So he's—okay.

RB: Yes, he's still in.

TS: So you're juggling that part. Now you're a reservist and a dependent.

RB: And a dependent. And a mom.

TS: They don't call it "dependent" anymore, I know—

RB: They do; military dependent.

TS: Do they? I thought that was something—

RB: So that is what we do. And she is not getting any smaller or slower. She only gets larger and faster as we go along.

TS: Well, is there anything else you want to add to your interview that—

[Extraneous comments about dog redacted]

RB: Not really. It's—I—In March, when I was looking into getting out of command I was very, very close to getting out for good. And so, I realized that I don't necessarily want to get out of the army, I just want to get out of this unit.

TS: Right. And you've been in that place before.

RB: Yes. Oh gosh, yes I have. [chuckles] But the good thing about being in the reserves is that they'll find somebody and then I'll move, and I'll go someplace else and—

TS: You'll find a good fit.

RB: Exactly. And I'll just keep looking and then when I find it—So—But I am looking forward—like I said, I am looking forward to moving a little bit closer to home, and to not having as much—to not having as much full time responsibility. I mean, when you're an officer—even as a reservist—you still have stuff that you've got to do during—between drills, but I won't have to be on my computer, like, every day answering emails.

TS: Checking emails and stuff.

RB: Yeah. So that's what I'm looking forward to.

TS: Well, good. I wish you luck.

RB: And having a little fun. Thanks.

TS: Well, thank you again for letting me come back and we can get this filled in, but it's been nice to see you again, Rachel. Thank you.

RB: Same here.

[End of Interview]