

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Rosie Grosshans Noel

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: April 12, 2011

[Begin Interview]

TS: This is Therese Strohmer, it is April 12th, 2011. I am on Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. This is an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Project at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I'm here with Rosie—is it Noel?

RN: Noel.

TS: Noel. And Rosie how would you like your name to read on your collection?

RN: Rosie.

TS: And your last name—you want a middle initial?

RN: Oh—Rosie Grosshans Noel.

TS: Okay, very good. Okay, Rosie, well, thanks so much for joining me today for this interview, I really appreciate it. Why don't you start off by just telling me a little bit about, like, when and where you were born?

RN: I was born in 1967 in Warren, Michigan. My parents were Eugene Grosshans, and my mother was Madeline Grosshans, and I was raised primarily in Michigan.

TS: Were you? Do you have any siblings?

RN: I have an older sister, Laura.

TS: Older sister Laura. So it was just the two, growing up in that area?

RN: Yes.

TS: Well, so, Warren, is that like—is it a suburb, is it a city, what—

RN: It's a small suburb outside of Detroit.

TS: What was it like growing up in Detroit?

RN: For the most part, it was typical, you know, childhood, growing up. It wasn't the Detroit that you hear about, with, you know, cars burning and, you know, people tagging their little signals all over the sides of buildings with spray paint, it wasn't like that.

TS: Yeah. What'd your folks do for a living?

RN: My dad, when I was younger, worked for a trucking company, and they laid asphalt. So a good portion of I-90—or, no, I-75, my dad had something to do with. [chuckles]

TS: Wonder if he went all the way up to West Branch [TS's hometown], because it went right by there. [chuckles]

RN: Yup, probably.

TS: Yeah. Well, now, so what kind of things did you do as a kid, like, for fun?

RN: Well, I was the second of two girls, so I was pretty much raised as a tomboy, and so it was nothing for me to be out there, you know, climbing up trees that didn't have any branches to get back down. Was not into, you know, playing with dolls or any of that. Definitely into sports.

TS: What kind of sports did you play?

RN: When I was younger, I would hang out with the guys and, you know, play, you know football in the streets, and kickball, things like that. And then when I got, you know, to school age, where I could actually play a team sport or whatever, I was into basketball, got into soccer, and then I started doing, you know, volleyball and basketball in high school.

TS: And did you, did you like school?

RN: I rather enjoyed school. It was one of those—I guess I took to it as far as, it was like an extension of my family, and you know, made friends real well, and I went to a very small high school, and so it was kind of like just an extension of family at the school, and so I really enjoyed that, and I actually got good grades, so my children have a lot to live up to. [laughing]

TS: Oh, is that right? And now, in elementary school, do you remember anything about growing up and going to elementary school?

RN: Not as much. I do remember the, you know, playing—again, very active, outdoors type stuff. Of course, back then, the generation wasn't sitting behind a TV or playing video games or any of that, so I can remember doing a lot of outdoors-type activities. I can remember, even back then, you know, again, climbing trees and I even, you know, enjoyed doing like, hiking and that kind of stuff.

TS: Where'd you go hiking at?

RN: Some of the stuff that I, you know, as far as hiking was—we had trails when I was growing up, up north, and Wolf Lake area, I don't know, I don't remember the exact city, but we would do a lot of like trail hiking, and I can remember going—you know, picking berries and things like that. Things that, nowadays, your kids would look at you like "Yeah, whatever."

TS: [chuckles] They wouldn't want to go pick berries?

RN: No.

TS: No?

RN: Yeah, down at the local Food Lion.

TS: Oh, okay. [laughing] So, you—did you do, like, Girl Scouts or 4-H or anything like that?

RN: I did do Girl Scouts. And the funny—and I never even thought about that, but yeah, I did Girl Scouts, and I can remember, even back then, when—in the middle of the night, if any of the girls, you know, in our tent or cabin had to, you know, go out and use the little port-a-johns or whatever, they'd always wake me to go, because they were afraid to go by themselves, and I was the one that would usually, you know, be the one to go with them.

TS: Yeah. Were you the one that started the fires, too, you know, for camp?

RN: Not so much. But you know, I definitely was the one that wasn't afraid to, you know, catch a fish, kill a fish, clean it or whatever. And I can even remember in high school, in biology class, being the one that, you know—

TS: Dissected?

RN: Yeah, wasn't afraid to dissect a frog, and I can remember, you know, being the one that got the furthest into dissecting, so.

TS: Yeah, that's cool. Did you—did you have, like, a favorite teacher in school?

RN: I would have to say, you know, no one that really sticks out. Again, I went to a really small high school, so all of the teachers were, you know, kind of significant in that regard.

TS: What school did you go to?

RN: I went to Harper Woods High School, secondary.

TS: So they were all—about how big was it, then?

RN: Oh, there was less than a hundred people in my graduating class. So it was a pretty small school.

TS: Yeah. What did you like best about school?

RN: Sports.

TS: Sports, yeah. So did you play, like, on the varsity and travel and do things like that?

RN: Yes.

TS: For your teams. What was your favorite sport?

RN: I think volleyball—

TS: Yeah?

RN: —Was probably—because, and I think, you know, part of that is because I, you know, still can get out there and do that. And what's kind of funny is, playing basketball with my Marines, they were expecting me to get out there and, you know, gunny just go, because it was, you know, PT. And then they realized that I actually, you know, wasn't afraid to get in there and take an elbow, give an elbow, so. So it was kind of nice.

TS: [chuckles] And did you—now, as a young girl growing up in this area, did you have, like, expectations about—or hopes or dreams about, like, what you were going to do when you grew up, I guess is what I mean.

RN: Well, I definitely didn't think I was going to, you know, make a career out of being a Marine. Initially, I wanted to be an architect, and then I saw myself sitting behind a desk and just—but I was very active, so I just, you know, envisioned myself sitting behind a desk and I just didn't think that was something that I was going to enjoy doing. So my major in college was phys ed for the mentally and physically impaired, and go figure, I ended up being a Marine. And again, you know, when I first joined the Marine Corps, I actually envisioned that I could make a career of it, and then I was disillusioned a little bit, and not every Marine is that poster, you know, of what you envision being a Marine.

But, you know, given the opportunity to actually experience a little bit more of the Marine Corps, I got to realize that there are, you know, no matter what job you're doing, there are good Marines, bad Marines, just like there are good people at any job. And so I stayed and did twenty and—

TS: Well, our interview's done, then, I guess. [both chuckle] Now, when you finish high school, then, did you have an expectation of going to college, was that like a—for sure, you were going to go to college?

RN: At first, I didn't think I was going to go to college, just because financially, my parents weren't going to pay for me to go, and one of my high school counselors didn't—you know, didn't settle for that. And he helped me get, you know, some scholarship money and some financial aid, and because I actually didn't live with my parents my senior year, I actually moved out when I was sixteen, and so I qualified as an independent student, so I qualified for extra aid, and—but, you know, once you get to a certain point in college, that aid doesn't pay your whole way, and you know, so I was working two jobs and it was just, you know, getting more and more difficult. But initially, I didn't even think I was going to go to college.

TS: Where'd you go?

RN: I went to Northern Michigan University, and it was—I don't want to say it was a culture shock, because I grew up in Michigan, so, you know, being around snow was not that big of a deal.

TS: Well, for people who aren't familiar with Michigan, describe where Northern Michigan University is.

RN: It is right up on Lake Superior, which is about as far north in Michigan—almost as far north in the United States as you can get.

TS: And it's the Upper Peninsula [northern part of Michigan between Lake Superior to the north and Lakes Michigan and Huron to the south].

RN: Yes. And it's so cold in Lake Superior even in August that you can't swim in it. So it was kind of a culture shock for me.

TS: From going—from a city.

RN: Right.

TS: To a rural college, really, up north.

RN: Yeah.

TS: Yeah. A Yooper [slang term for residents of the Michigan Upper Peninsula], right?

RN: A Yooper, yup!

TS: Well, what year did you graduate from high school?

RN: I graduated from high school in 1985.

TS: Nineteen eighty-five. And in that—let's see, I'm trying—so Ronald Reagan was president then. Well, you—did you have any awareness of like, world events or things like that, like, happening?

RN: Well, actually, I can remember back as early as the—the early '80s, when Reagan was running for president, and Barbara Bush was doing like a speaking tour, I guess, and she came to my high school. And you know, I didn't—never did I think that I was going to, you know, get to this point, but I can remember her coming to our school and, at, you know, doing a Q and A. And I can remember asking some pretty pointed questions, at that point—I was only in like the eighth grade, and was already asking some pretty politically pointed questions.

TS: Well, what kind of questions were you asking?

RN: Well, I was wanting to know, because that was during the Iran hostage crisis.

TS: Yes.

RN: And so I was kind of, basically wanting to know what he was going to do about the hostage situation. So, like I said—and this was back when I was, you know, an eighth grader.

TS: So what'd she say, do you remember her answer?

RN: They didn't answer it! [laughs]

TS: No? They let that redirect, sort of?

RN: Basically, it was—she couldn't answer anything that was a political—in that regard.

TS: I see.

RN: And I went away rather disappointed.

TS: Did you?

RN: In that, as a matter—and I can say this now, because I think Ronald Reagan was an amazing man, but back then, I was just pretty disillusioned. I was like “Really?” So, but I think even back then, I was all about, you know, what our country was doing and where we were involved, politically, and I even served on the high school government, and I was actually president of the residence hall that I lived in when I was in college.

TS: Is that right? I’m going to pause it just for one second. [recording paused] Okay, all right. That’s kind of neat that you got to meet Barbara Bush at, you know, as a young girl, and get that, you know, perspective, at that time. Well, you had said earlier that you had—you’d moved out when you were sixteen? Do you want to tell me about that at all?

RN: Both my parents—I don’t want to say I was young when they got divorced, but I was definitely pre-teen when they’d gotten divorced. And when they both remarried, they—seemed to live independent of having children, and my sister, I want to say, she definitely was needy, and—

TS: She was older than you?

RN: She’s my older sister.

TS: Okay.

RN: And so I don’t want to say that she was oblivious to, you know, the circumstances of the divorce, but she was getting all of whatever her emotional needs and everything met from, you know, getting poor grades and whatever attention she could get. And I excelled at school and sports and seemed to function well, and got to a point that, I don’t want to say that I didn’t need my parents, but I definitely was at a point where I served myself better by being independent, and I think it made me a stronger person, and I removed myself from—not a bad situation, but I removed myself from a situation where I had a stepfather that, you know, could have bordered on abusive. As a matter of fact, he felt that I would never amount to anything, so my mother—she’s not married to him anymore, and so we kind of chuckle about that now, to see where I’m at today and for him to think that I would never amount to anything. And my stepmother definitely had a very—I used to refer to her as my stepmonster. And she had some of her own little issues. And so I—you know, I couldn’t live with my stepparents, basically, and—

TS: In either one of the households.

RN: In either of the households.

TS: I see.

RN: And I—again, excelled well on my own, and I was a live-in babysitter, and the people that I was a live-in babysitter for were amazing, and they had two small girls, and I did a paper route, you know, before school, and then would watch the girls and go to school,

and if I was needed during the week or whatever, and just—it worked out well for me. So.

TS: So you were able to continue to go to the school that you went to.

RN: Yes.

TS: That's interesting. And so, you are already showing a sense of independence, at that age of sixteen. Probably before. [laughs]

RN: Before, before. And again, it—you know, having an older sister that was needy, she took up a lot of the attention, and I was one of those, you know, give me a clod of dirt and I was happy. So, again, I think that every experience that I've had from, you know, early on, has made me a stronger person, so—the independence definitely was there at an early age.

TS: Now, how did you end up at Northern Michigan? I mean, why did you pick that college?

RN: Well, they had a program for special needs. And it was, to me, again, I can remember even back then, it was a—not so much a political thing, but I knew that children that are born with disabilities are kind of—their life expectancy is shorter, and part of that is because they're not—they're not looked upon—this was back then—they weren't looked upon as viable, and so, their physical health wasn't an issue, it wasn't important to people. And I felt that if someone took it upon themselves to ensure that they are also, you know, physically fit, we have all learned that your heart—you could be fat on the inside, too. And so I thought that that was important, and so I went to school for phys ed for the mentally and physically impaired.

TS: How'd you get interested in that?

RN: Well, one, I have a cousin that's mentally retarded, and I was involved a lot with the Special Olympics and things like that. I was involved in a club called Interact in high school, and so every year, you know, we'd help out with the Special Olympics. And I can remember hearing stories, because my cousin's name is Dorell[?], and we call her Dory, and she's older than me, and I can remember hearing stories of—that my aunt was told, that she would never be able to be potty trained, she would never be able to ride a bike, she would never be able to do this, whatever. And she's highly functional, and she's—I want to say that she's held down a job at one place for over twenty years. And so, you know, for her to be, you know, mentally handicapped and be able to do that, I know people that there's not a single thing wrong with them and can't do that, so. Very proud of her.

TS: That's true.

RN: And again, it was because somebody—a family took her in, and raised her, and my aunt did not, you know, put her in an institution. She couldn't handle her herself, but she did not put her in an institution and she was raised by a loving family that raised her as if there was—and I hate to use the term “wrong”, because I also have a child that is autistic. My eighteen year old son is autistic. So I hate to use the term that there's something “wrong” with them, they're just different.

TS: And so when you went up to Northern Michigan, how did that go? How was that experience?

RN: It was—for me, it was an amazing experience, not just, you know, the going to college, but because I was an outdoorsy-type person, I thrived. It was great. I even took—before the military was even a thought, I even took a class that I was able to do rappelling down the sides of, you know, rock faces, and cross a rope bridge, you know. So when I got to do it in boot camp, it was kind of like, yeah, been there, done that. But, so in that regard, I really enjoyed it. We had Sugar Loaf Mountain, so I could go hiking. Just—I mean, there's thousands of acres of, you know, unexplored—

TS: Lot of wilderness up there.

RN: It was beautiful.

TS: Yeah. And so, how—you were saying you were working—you were working a couple jobs, right?

RN: Yes.

TS: And going to school and so how did it go as you progressed?

RN: Well, it got to a point that it was just difficult to, you know, manage going to both the jobs and to school. And part of it too, was—I don't want to say I was killing myself, because I wasn't killing myself, but I was just, you know, struggling financially to end up where I just wasn't sure, you know, if that's where I wanted to be. And I often joked that I hung around with people that their idea of roughing it was black and white TV. And so, that's, I think, really what led me to the decision to join the military.

TS: Had you talked to anybody, did you know anybody that had been in the military before you decided to join?

RN: Well, my father had even been in the Reserves—actually, National Guard, and I didn't have—I didn't have any family members that, you know, I really was in contact with that were in the military. I had a cousin that had gone in the [U.S.] Air Force, and I did have a cousin that I really didn't talk with about the Marine Corps until I was like getting ready to ship, that had been in the Marine Corps for four years.

TS: Well, how did you pick the Marine Corps, then?

RN: It was the toughest.

TS: Yeah.

RN: So I basically—

TS: You wanted to do the toughest?

RN: I wanted something that was—

TS: That wasn't the air force? [chuckles] [TS's former branch]

RN: [laughs] No. I wanted something that was a challenge. But—and being that the one cousin I talked with—it was kind of scary, you know, because some of the stuff that he told me, like just before I was shipping, was like “Maybe I should have talked to him before.”

TS: Before.

RN: Before.

TS: “Before I signed the paper and raised my hand.”

RN: Yeah.

TS: Yeah. And so what year was this that you decided?

RN: Nineteen eighty-eight.

TS: Nineteen eighty-eight. So, okay, so—I still don't get the—why you picked—why you wanted to go in the military. I mean, there's other options out there for you, right?

RN: Right. I was a really good waitress. [laughs]

TS: Okay.

RN: No, I think that it got to a point where, again, I'm hanging out—and don't get me wrong, they were great friends, but they were spoiled. And I don't think anyone that I was hanging out with really appreciated what they had. And I don't think—you know, you can go all the way back to when I was in the eighth grade. I don't think anybody appreciates the freedoms and liberties that we have, and I've always been like that, I've always, you know, been grateful that I was an American. And so, I joke a lot with people that I came in because we have indoor plumbing. We're—we take for granted that you

walk into a room, you flick a switch, your lights come on. And if they don't, you get really annoyed.

TS: True.

RN: Indoor plumbing—it was that basic, and you know, then I find myself, fast forward seventeen years and I'm, you know, in a country where I don't have indoor plumbing.

TS: [chuckles] Yeah.

RN: But again, I think that's what it boiled down to, is that we as Americans take for granted the basic liberties that we have, and I truly believe that our military, whether it's the Marine Corps, the [U.S.] Army, the [U.S.] Navy, the [U.S.] Air Force, Coast Guard—we have those liberties because of the freedom that they provide. And so, at that point, it's—

TS: So is this, like, eighteen, nineteen year old Rosie talking, or is this—

RN: When I came in, I was twenty. I was almost twenty-one.

TS: Okay.

RN: I was in college at seventeen. But again, it's—I'm also the type of person—don't complain unless you're willing to be part of the solution to the problem. And so that's when I thought, well, you know, if I'm going to be part of the solution, I'm really going to be part of the solution. And I went—was actually paying my rent, and my landlord owned the building that the recruiting office was in. And I paid my rent and went back downstairs and didn't even bother walking into any of the other offices, walked right into the Marines—

TS: Yeah. And so, did you say—did you have an idea of what you wanted to do? I mean, like, in the Marines? Besides the challenges that you're talking about, that, you know—

RN: Right. Well, I'm really glad that the one thing—and the only thing I can think my recruiter did that was good for me, is he told me I didn't want to be a cook. [laughs] But, you know, I wanted to do—because I knew they had some culinary—that's how they sell it.

But he's like “You don't want to be a cook.”

Well, I took the—they give you like a little pseudo-ASVAB[Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery], if you will, and it's an Armed Forces Quotient, where they basically, you know, determine how intelligent you are. And I could basically do whatever job I wanted to do—that women were allowed to do.

TS: Right.

RN: And they came back, they offered me a bonus and everything to come in, guaranteed me an automatic promotion and everything.

TS: To do what?

RN: Aviation.

TS: And was that interesting to you, did that, like—did you know anything about aviation? Or was that something like you'd say "Yeah, I want to go in aviation!"

RN: "Oh look, airplanes!" Yeah, that was my extent of knowing—

TS: So, it had to do with airplanes.

RN: Yeah, it was airplanes. That—I mean, I didn't know anything about fixed wing, rotary wing, I didn't know the—I mean, by terminology, I didn't know the difference. And—

TS: But did you feel like, at that time, well, yeah, I can do—I'll try whatever, you maybe didn't worry about what laid ahead for you?

RN: Nope, didn't worry at all. I knew I could do whatever it was that was put in front of me, so.

TS: So you signed up with a bonus, does that mean—how many years did you sign up for, initially, then?

RN: Four.

TS: Four? And then, so you—how did you, what did you—after you graduated from basic, what was your rank?

RN: I actually got paid as a PFC [private first class] from day one.

TS: Oh, you did?

RN: But I wasn't a PFC, I was a recruit.

TS: Right, right.

RN: [chuckling] I wasn't a private, I wasn't a PFC, I was a recruit. But I—upon graduation, I wore, you know PFC chevrons, and you know, as long as I did what I was, you know, supposed to do and successfully completed my, what we call A-School, my first school, then I was given, basically, a check—less taxes—for two thousand dollars.

TS: That was for your bonus?

RN: Yes.

TS: Now did—now, okay, so you go, you sign up, and you said you went out of Milwaukee, is that where you were shipped out of?

RN: Yes.

TS: How—tell me about that. Do you remember your first days?

RN: Well, I—one, I can remember driving all the way to Milwaukee, which took forever. But I can remember—while we were waiting to ship, which was—again, I’m twenty, and I’m—already been living on my own. And we got into trouble—we weren’t doing anything wrong, we weren’t drinking, we weren’t fooling around with anybody, but me and the female that I was rooming with, we were across the way, hanging out—door was open, hanging out with some of the guys that were waiting to ship, and she was waiting to ship, I want to say for the army. And we were hanging out, and of course the cutest—you know, not to brag or anything, but the cuter guys that were waiting to ship were going into the Marine Corps. And we basically got—I don’t want to say got in trouble, but they came and, you know—made us go back to our own rooms.

TS: [chuckles]

RN: And I thought it was stupid, I just, you know, I thought, this is just silly, I’m a grown adult. But you know, it wasn’t until later on when I was a drill instructor, and you’re like—you’ve got these recruits that, you know, two months into recruit training, find out they’re pregnant, because they’re stupid, but—but, so that was like before I was even at Parris Island, you know, I was already getting into trouble. [chuckles]

TS: Well, what—before you go forward, what did your family think about you joining?

RN: Well, my mom—I think her exact words were “Why not the air force?” [chuckles]

TS: Just teasing.

RN: Yeah. Well, I mean, just—typically, you know, the [U.S.] Air Force treats—and they do, they have more creature comforts than the Marine Corps does. And I’m not going to say that they don’t—the difference in how the individuals are treated, I think every branch, you know, has their own sense of camaraderie and everything. But yeah, she was—I think she was really kind of scared for me.

TS: So yeah, she was worried, because—

RN: Yes.

TS: Yeah, she probably didn't know much about what the Marine Corps was for women.

RN: No. As a matter of fact, I, you know, think now, especially like now that I do speaking engagements and things like that, my mom's pretty tough, and if ever there was somebody that—as far as a female influence in my life, if her generation was now, I think she'd have been a very successful Woman Marine. So.

TS: Did you tell her that?

RN: Yeah.

TS: That's cool. So, what about your dad?

RN: No. He wasn't—I can tell you that I—just from hearing the stories, he wasn't very disciplined in the National Guard. You know, he was kind of—I don't want to say a troublemaker, but he wasn't—he did not behave himself very well. Not to take that away from him, at least he, you know, raised his hand and served his country without being told he had to.

TS: So—but he wasn't too crazy about you going in the Marines, or?

RN: Actually, at the time that I came in the Marine Corps, I really wasn't on speaking terms with him, because of my stepmother. So.

TS: So you didn't really have a conversation about it.

RN: No.

TS: How about your sister?

RN: Well, she always thought I was crazy. [both laugh] So.

TS: Well, what about these friends that you were talking about, that you—

RN: A lot of them—well, the guys were like “You know, people are going to think you're gay.”

Because again, the Marine Corps is definitely the toughest, and of course, you know, some of my girlfriends, they're like “That's a pretty good selection of guys you've got going there.”

So I mean, it was—I think it was a mixed bag in that regard. But I think all of them were kind of not so sure that that was the best decision for me. And again, like I said, my stepdad totally thought I was never going to amount to anything. So.

TS: So, but it was your choice and you decided to go, right? And so you get to—where did you go for your basic training?

RN: Parris Island, that's where all the women go.

TS: And so how—tell me about that experience. After your trouble-making—[chuckles]

RN: Yeah, after my trouble-making in Milwaukee.

TS: That's right, Milwaukee.

RN: Well, we all fly in, and I'm pretty sure we flew into Savannah, eventually, that's where we all ended up, and it's like they have us in this room, and I don't want to call it a holding cell, but that's pretty much what it amounted to. And over, you know, a period of hours, you know, people would come in and you would slowly, you know, accumulate a roomful of, you know, both men and women. And I don't know how they arrange it, but you know, even as a drill instructor, it seemed like it rained every time recruits showed up. And it was cold and wet, and it was May, and I can remember the bus ride from the airport, and having, you know, come from where it was cold, I had a jacket that was—it was one of those lightweight thermals. So, I was fine. But I can remember all of the girls that were on the bus were, you know, cold, and so I was letting them—even back then, I was Mom—and so I was letting them take turns, you know, keeping warm with my jacket, because—I mean, it was tropical to me.

TS: I was like, you just came from northern Michigan. [chuckles]

RN: Yeah. So it was tropical to me. So I was letting them take turns warming up using my jacket. We get to what they call processing, we get there and they immediately go through all of your stuff and take away things. And I can say it's kind of akin to, now, going through security at the airport, because they took away my emery boards, so I couldn't file my nails.

And, again, I'm thinking "These people are stupid!" And—I mean, that was my first impression of, you know, the whole process. I'm like, they're taking away my emery boards? And I can remember, that night, they sent us—you know, we got processed, and we're supposed to take showers, get cleaned up. And I'm in the bathroom, the head, and one of the drill instructors comes in there and starts yelling at someone for doing something they weren't supposed to be doing. So, me, I immediately popped to the position of attention, and the towel hooks that stick out from the wall? I hit the back of my head. I still have a scar from the towel hook.

And so, my head starts bleeding, so I go up to the quarterdeck to the drill instructor to tell her that my head's bleeding, and I say—you know, tell her—I said "My head's bleeding."

And she goes "My, my, my. Gotta be an individual." I mean, she's chewing me out for, you know, saying "my".

And I'm thinking—you know, again "These people are stupid." So I show her my hand, you know, because I've got blood on my hand from the back of my head, so I show her, and I say "Well, could you at least look at it?"

“You, you, you, I’m a female sheep?”

Which, so, I’m thinking, whatever. And so I go back to the rack and, you know, get in the rack, and having taken first aid in college, all’s I know is I need to put pressure on it, it’ll stop bleeding eventually. I don’t think, maybe, I don’t know, about an hour goes by, whatever. And I have this drill instructor, mind you, who’s supposed to be mean, she comes up and she’s checking on me to make sure that I’m okay. And at that point, I already realized—I mean, I hadn’t even been on Parris Island twenty-four hours, and you know, she’s all checking on me to make sure I’m okay. And I’m thinking “This is a joke.” And pretty much, that’s recruit training from that point on. I know that they can’t kill me. And believe me, there was times that I was just, you know, don’t get me wrong, it was no cakewalk. But I knew they couldn’t kill me. And I knew that they were, you know, as stupid as things were, they did it for a reason, or whatever. And ironically, that particular drill instructor, I actually worked with, because she was an air winger, years later.

TS: Is that right?

RN: So.

TS: So you—did—when you were going through the training, and you realize that, you know, there’s this game, sort of, that’s being played. But what was it that challenged you about basic training?

RN: There—honestly? I don’t want to say it wasn’t a challenge, but having been a phys ed major, and you know, I was kind of into bodybuilding and that kind of thing, and it almost seemed like it was a game, with the drill instructors—when they had someone on the quarterdeck, because I was a phys ed major, even though we were told that they didn’t know anything about us, I definitely know that’s not to be true. So every time they had someone on the quarterdeck, I was on the quarterdeck.

TS: Why?

RN: Because I was physically—I was physically fit and I was, you know.

TS: So what does that mean, to be on the quarterdeck?

RN: It’s incentive training. They have you up there doing push-ups and jumping jacks, and—you see it in the movies all the time, where they say “Drop and give me, you know, a hundred.” It doesn’t work that way, but that’s the gist of it.

TS: So you had to go, too?

RN: Yeah.

TS: No matter who was up there?

RN: Right.

TS: Every time?

RN: If I was in—

TS: Sigh? [laughs]

RN: I was up there.

TS: Yeah. What'd you think about that?

RN: Well, at first I thought it was—again, stupid.

TS: Yeah.

RN: And—but after a while, it didn't bother me. It got to a point that it was like, okay, we've got this many days of training left, they can only—they can only IT me this many times.

TS: What's IT mean?

RN: Incentive training.

TS: Okay. So, you're—physically, it's not that challenging for you. Mentally, you're getting—you seem to not have really had issues with it. Except for, like you said, about the silly things they were doing. How about the fact, you know, how are you feeling about wearing your uniform and those kind of things?

RN: Again, I—having been already on my own and I was one of those individuals, even in college and high school, I would iron my jeans. So, to iron anything was kind of not new to me. And even the drill instructors thought that I was one of the older recruits, just because of the way I carried myself. And I wasn't, by far, the oldest recruit, but again, because of the way I carried myself, and the way I nurtured the others.

TS: Yeah, I was just going to say, now, how were the other women reacting, with, you know, in your platoon and—

RN: Well, I think you had some of them that were, you know, out for themselves. You know, that were individuals, and you had some—I could have cared less if I was the honor grad. Which I wasn't, but I could have cared less. That just—that wasn't my goal. My goal was to become a United States Marine. And you had some that wanted to be the honor grad, and you know, they kissed butt and all that other stuff. And I've never been like that; I've never been a butt-kisser. And as a matter of fact, you know, when I did get higher up in rank, I let my people know, you know, you're not going to get anywhere—

TS: Don't even go there.

RN: Yeah, don't even bother.

TS: Yeah.

RN: So I think in that regard, having, again, having been already independent and on my own definitely played a big factor in how I adjusted to being in recruit training. I can remember, I got sick about halfway through training, and again, it was probably just going from Michigan down to Beaufort, South Carolina, the humidity, and I ended up with bronchial pneumonia. And they put me in—I was in the—they called—I don't know what they call it now, but they called it MRP, which was medical rehab platoon. And I was very upset that they'd put me there, because, you know, I didn't think that I should be there. And again, you know, I'm a tough cookie, so I was very upset about it. But I was more concerned that they were going to send me home. And I can remember sitting in the passageway waiting to see the doctor, after they did all the tests or whatever, and there was a girl in his office at the time. She's boohooing and boohooing that she wants to go home. The first thing I said to him when I got in there was "I don't want to go home." And so, when I got sent to MRP, I thought for sure that that was just like one step to getting sent home. And ironically, I had a follow-up at medical after, like, the weekend had gone past or whatever, I had follow-up at medical, and I got to join my original platoon.

TS: Oh, you did? So you got to graduate.

RN: I graduated with my original platoon.

TS: So, what do you take away, then, from your basic training?

RN: I think that just the whole premise of, you know, give it your one hundred percent. And again, people aren't—whether it's, again, recruit training or life in general. People are only going to do to you what you allow them to. And be the person that you know that you should be, and I knew that I was capable of doing that, and I didn't allow anybody to take that away from me.

TS: Now, what did—where did you go next?

RN: I went to Millington, Tennessee.

TS: And this was your training.

RN: Right, that's the—it's currently, now, in Pensacola, Florida. But at the time it was in Millington, Tennessee, it was NAS [Naval Air Station] Memphis. And that was my A-School. And I want to say that I got there—wow, August of '88. And I left there in

maybe February of '89. And I went from there to Lemoore, California. And that was like a—they called it a C-School, it's like a more specialized aviation school. And I did that school, and I was there until May. And I did—I actually did some other extra schools, because they—there weren't that many females. I was—matter of fact, I was the only—at one point, they finally just convened a class and it was just me and a chief. Because there was no one else classing up. And I had to stay in the chief's barracks, because they didn't have facilities, at that time, for women.

TS: And where was this at?

RN: In Lemoore, California.

TS: Lemoore, California. So how was the training for you?

RN: Cake.

TS: Really.

RN: Yeah.

TS: No problem with it academically or anything like that?

RN: Yeah, it was pretty easy. Especially in Lemoore. It—you know, kind of easy to get, you know, a good grade when you're the only student in the class. [chuckling]

TS: Well, not necessarily! You could fail really quickly, too, right?

RN: Right.

TS: So. And, so, did you have more freedom, in your training? I mean, obviously had more freedom than in basic. But did you have restrictions on you, or did you have free time on the weekends or at night, or?

RN: In Memphis, there was definitely a lot of restrictions, and rightly so. You had a lot of people that, this was their first time away from home where they had liberty, if you will, and so they did not know how to behave themselves, conduct themselves. And again, you know, I was—at that point, I'm twenty-one. I'm old enough to drink; ninety-five percent of the people that are living in the barracks with me aren't old enough to even drink. And of course, I wasn't a drinker, so. But it definitely was, for a majority of them, it was kind of culture shock, because they—this was their first time being independent. I'd already been independent for almost—

TS: Five years?

RN: Five years. And so, for them, they didn't know how to handle it, and so they got into a lot of trouble. A lot of the girls got pregnant.

TS: Did they get out or did they stay in, or?

RN: Back then, you could actually get out, if you were pregnant, you could actually opt to get out of the Marine Corps. Which, I didn't—again, I—being, you know, a mature adult, I didn't think that was right.

TS: That they could get out?

RN: Right. They—I didn't think it was right that they get pregnant their first enlistment. Of course, you know, to this day, there's still a lot of people that agree with my philosophy, but go ahead, try to get away with that in the Marine Corps, or any branch of the service, for that matter, and infringe on somebody's rights.

TS: Yeah. So then—so where was your first actual duty station at?

RN: Beaufort, South Carolina.

TS: Oh, you came back to Beaufort.

RN: Oh, yeah. And that was the other thing, it's like the whole "I don't want to go over to Parris Island."

TS: You didn't want to come back?

RN: No.

TS: Did you have, like—could you select places that you were hoping to go to, or?

RN: Actually, there—and of course, this was another one of those, just, you know, I don't know—irritate people. I could think of another word, but it probably wouldn't be good to be on the oral history. But myself and another female, we both got orders, and you got to pick where you wanted to go. You had three choices. You could put East Coast, West Coast, overseas. That was your choice. And you know, whatever order you wanted. And this other girl got Yuma, Arizona. And—or, I got Yuma, Arizona, and she got Beaufort, South Carolina. Well, I'm from the East Coast, I wanted to be, you know, at least close to home. And she wanted overseas, West Coast, East Coast. Something—well, that's just, again, stupid. You got two people, and we both got almost a hundred and eighty degrees from what we had asked for. So we basically went and asked someone up in admin, you know, is it possible to switch our orders? And back then, they thought—and I know this is terrible, because I know today they wouldn't get away with it. But they basically thought, oh, WM for a WM. No one's going to care, you know, a woman's a woman. And—really, that's just—they just switched our orders.

TS: Just like that?

RN: Yup. Typed up two different sets of orders.

TS: And that wouldn't happen today, you don't think?

RN: No. No. And I really hope that the mindset wouldn't be like that. But back then, you know, when a woman checked in, it was like "Here's another one." They didn't think that we were going to be worth anything. We definitely weren't treated like we were going to be worth anything.

TS: How were you treated in your training? During your training?

RN: Again, it depended on who you had as an instructor. We still have what I call dinosaurs in the Marine Corps today that still have that caveman mentality. But back then, again, we weren't embraced. So they weren't thrilled.

TS: Well, okay, so, in what ways were you not embraced? Can you give an example?

RN: Well, to a big extent, a perfect example was my first work center, in Beaufort. We were going to be ruining their fun.

TS: In what—how were you going to be ruining their fun?

RN: They—the desk, I can remember it like it was yesterday. The desk that they had in the main workspace, we call it the INU, which is like the first room that you walk into, they had a huge desk that had a drawer full of porno magazines.

TS: Yeah.

RN: They would not get away with that today. But, again, we were ruining their fun. The clock on the wall, the typical government—

TS: White background.

RN: White—yeah, white background—

TS: Black frame, black letters, sure. I can see it.

RN: Yup.

TS: We can probably look around here. There's no clock in here!

RN: There's not one in here, but yeah. The typical government clock. And they had removed the face, and the background of the clock—now, this is in a Marine Corps work center—was a centerfold boob shot of Fawn Hall, who—I believe it was Fawn Hall, she's the one that got in trouble with Gary Hart, who was a presidential hopeful.

TS: I remember, yes.

RN: That was the face of the clock in the INU. And that would never fly today. But you know, twenty years ago, that was the norm. The government desk that was in there was one of those big grey desks, and the little penholder in the—they used that as an ashtray. Now again, can't smoke in government buildings now, but back then—and they used the desk drawer, the tray that was supposed to be for pens and pencils, as an ashtray. And again, the filing cabinet drawer—filing cabinet drawer, not little drawer, filing cabinet drawer, was full, to the top, with dirty magazines. So we've come a long way.

TS: [laughs] Well, how did you—how did you cope with this kind of stuff, then?

RN: Well, I was very—again, independent, mature, confident. Overly so, I think, you know, now that I look back. Well, even now I'm kind of—I'm not going to, you know, apologize for it, but I was definitely, back then, not hard on the eyes. I was a cute, you know, by then, twenty-two year old, and I didn't let that flap me. Even if it did bother me, to let them know would have just fuelled the circumstance or whatever, so I just, you know, pretty much ignored it. But they used to, you know, take—when I would walk in or whatever, they'd pull one of the magazines out. They were probably doing something else that was entirely different, but they would deliberately, you know, get out magazines when the girls would walk in, whether it was me or any of the other girls, just to mess with us.

TS: Trying to get a rise out of you or something?

RN: Right.

TS: So you just ignored it, mostly?

RN: Pretty much.

TS: Yeah. Did they ever—I mean, did you ever have anything said to you about your capability for work?

RN: Nobody ever really questioned—and you know, it's funny that you say it. No one ever questioned my abilities, because I never gave them an opportunity. I've always, always, been one to work twice as hard as anybody else and get half the recognition, and that was fine. That—it benefited me in the long term, you know, when I got higher up in rank. It benefited me to—and I think, you ask any successful woman in the military, they're going to tell you the same thing, that they'd had to work harder, and it was—that was a

parameter I think we put on ourselves, I don't think anyone else put that on us. We just had to prove ourselves and move on.

TS: And did you—since we're on this subject, this is something I usually ask later, but I'll ask it now, in that when you saw another woman that you were working with that maybe was not doing a hundred percent or something like that, how would you react to that?

RN: Depending on the rank, and depending on at what point in my career I was—when I was younger and more junior, probably didn't say or do as much. But I know that as I got higher up in rank, I would eat them alive. It was not beneath me as a sergeant, matter of fact, a lot of the males would come get me, because this was post-Tailhook [refers to a series of sexual assaults and harassments at the Tailhook Association symposium in September of 1991, and ensuing investigations.]—that they would be concerned about even counseling a female without another female being present. And so I would be the voice of reason, that kind of thing. And I had no qualms about taking a female aside and doing the proverbial jerk a knot in them [colloquial phrase, to jerk a knot in one's tail or head, meaning to punish or straighten out]. I can even remember, at one point, we had a female that we had an issue with when I was an instructor in A-School, and she was no longer even a student within the area I was in, and I just happened to be over at the headquarters building she was in, in office hours and she was in trouble and she was, you know, going before the colonel. And the—she was pregnant, which had nothing to do with her office hours, but they asked her to step out, and they had had me come into the office hours to speak with the colonel, and the gist of it was, you know, he was hesitant to punish her as harshly as he normally would have because he felt that, you know, she was pregnant, she, you know, was going to have to worry about her finances and her family and so on. And because I was in there and because he knew the type of person I was—I'd give any Marine a chance to prove themselves. Make a mistake. If you make a mistake, it's only a mistake and an honest mistake, if you don't learn from it—or, as you were. It's only a mistake, an honest mistake, if you learn from it. If you don't learn from it, then it's definitely—fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me.

And I stood right there and I told the colonel “Absolutely not, sir. She knew what she was doing; she should be punished just as if she's just any other lance corporal.” And he, because I, again, because I was there, it was dealt with a little bit differently. But it was because we as Marines need to, you know, hold everyone to the same standard, and it shouldn't matter what the gender of that individual is or what their circumstances are.

TS: Was there ever a tension, though, because, I mean, as a female, and knowing that, you know, you have to prove yourself? That when another female wasn't pulling their weight, that—compared to maybe a male Marine not pulling their weight, that that woman would reflect on all women, whereas for the man, that wasn't necessarily the case, reflecting on all men. You know what I'm saying?

RN: Yes. It happens all the time, and part of that is, again, we only make up six percent of the Marine Corps. So when you think of how few females that there are, and when I check in, say I check into a duty station, I check in, and five guys check in. By the end of the day,

everybody knows who the female is. Everybody. Nobody's going to be able to tell you—maybe one of the guy's names. But everybody knows—and again, if the female is cute, or whatever her attributes are. Those are the things that you know about. Nobody says “She is the greatest aviation electrician that God has ever graced the earth with.” It's not what they're known for. They're known for whatever their attributes are, or—positive or negative.

TS: Physical, you mean? Yeah.

RN: Yeah. And again, we don't do that with the guys. And I guarantee you that happens to this day. And again, we only make up six percent.

TS: So you're in Beaufort—thank you for that. You're in Beaufort, and it's your first duty assignment, and—tell me about that experience. Just, you know, for you—the work experience for you, how was that?

RN: It was good.

TS: I mean, you've told me about the environment, right?

RN: Right. Actually, you know, I started out as an aviation electrician, and the basic job, pretty—I don't want to say boring, but we were wire-chasers, basically, and you know, you have something that doesn't work, and it's only because power isn't getting there, so you have to find out—it's the equivalent of a, and I'm going to get basic enough that I tell you how I used to teach my students in electronics. If you have a pipe and water runs through it, if you open up the pipe, the water can't get to the other side. Well, it's the same thing with current that flows through a wire. So basically, that's all we were doing, was chasing down wires to see where the opening in the wire was. Pretty boring. Pretty basic stuff. After I'd been there for—well, about a year, they had an opening at one of the schools that was—it's no longer there, but they had a school aboard the base that was micro-miniature repair. And one of the students that was supposed to fill one of the seats rocked out, basically failed his A-School, so he wasn't—

TS: The slot was open, then, for somebody else.

RN: So they made the slot available for someone, and what they would do is pull from the Marines that were aboard the base. Again—

TS: It was easy to get there.

RN: Right! We're already there. And again, you don't know until—it's like, what we call short-fused orders.

TS: Okay.

RN: And so they came down and basically asked if anybody wanted the seat, and we had a female in the class—or, in our shop, that was what I'd consider a kiss-butt, and I'll be nice, but she volunteered for the seat. And whether I wanted the seat or not, I just wasn't going to, you know, rush out there and, you know, be "Oh, me, me, me, look at me, look at me!" And—but she was pregnant. And micro-miniature repair involves soldering with lead. And again, it's a hazard, so they basically shot her down. And again, oh, well, a female volunteered, so a female for a female!

TS: Oh, so they replaced her with you.

RN: So they just—so I got sent. And luck would have it, I enjoyed it, I did very well.

TS: How was it different?

RN: You were given—if you've ever seen the inside of a computer or anything electronic, for that matter, and it's got little chips? We would de-solder those chips, put new chips in, and re-solder them. We would run new lines, if there was like a modification to a component. We would run wires that are just a little bit bigger than a human hair to re-route—I mean, so it was kind of tinkering at that point, that was pretty cool stuff. And some of the work that we did, we had to use microscopes, and—but I excelled at it. I excelled at it so well that the—the OIC [officer in charge] of the school was a master gunnery sergeant, and he spoke with the master gunnery sergeant that was in charge of my division, and basically told my master guns that he felt that I should be in the next micro school. Which, typically, you have to be a corporal or above to even go, plus they want you to do mini-comp[?] for a year or two to prove yourself before you can have a micro seat. So I excelled that well, and I think part of it was maturity, part of it, you know, I had the dexterity to do it, and so basically, back then, it was he contacted Headquarters Marine Corps and they did what they called an MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] conversion and I went from being an aviation electrician to a micro-miniature repair technician and I did that for the remainder of my—

TS: Remainder of your time. And so you went to that school, and where was that at, the?

RN: Micro school was also—

TS: Same place. So how long were you at Beaufort?

RN: I was there for-ev-er. [laughs] I was there from '89 to '96, the first time.

TS: Really? That is a long time in one place, isn't it? That seems unusual.

RN: No, not everybody's begging to get to Beaufort. [laughs] So it's a matter of, you know, supply and demand. So, if you don't have people leaving Beaufort, you don't have people coming to Beaufort, so. And you had a lot of people, I want to call them homesteaders, that would stay there. And of course, I, at that point, was married, and so—

TS: How'd you get married?

RN: How did I get married? Momentary lapse of intelligence. No, I shouldn't say that. I got married to someone that I actually had worked with.

TS: So, another Marine?

RN: Another Marine. And we were married for fourteen and a half years.

TS: So, was he stationed there too?

RN: Yes.

TS: So you were able to jointly be stationed at the same place.

RN: Right.

TS: So that was probably convenient, too.

RN: Right. And then I went to Pensacola, Florida in '96 to be an instructor.

TS: What kind of instructor?

RN: Aviation. Just aviation electronics, basic school.

TS: Yeah. How was that, did you like that?

RN: I loved it. I loved it. And as I said earlier, someone had convinced me that, don't judge the whole entire Marine Corps on a few—basically give others, you know, an opportunity to make an impression on you.

TS: So how were you judging it, up to this point?

RN: The drawer of porno magazines. [both laugh]

TS: Really? So—that's—so you were in the same place, the same people, the same—

RN: The same environment.

TS: For—

RN: A long time.

TS: Yeah.

RN: So—and, I mean—I don't want this to be about sexual harassment and sexual discrimination.

TS: No, no. Right.

RN: But it existed. And it still exists. But it exists in the civilian sector as well. Again, it's how you conduct yourself. And—

TS: But so, you're six years in one place. That's a long time, for the military, to be in one place. Okay. So you go to Pensacola, and so you get a new fresh view of the Marine Corps.

RN: Yes. And you know, I'd already been an NCO for a while, and here I'm a sergeant, and I'm treated, for the first time, like I should be treated as an NCO. Which, again, different environment, different people.

TS: Well, for someone who is, you know, reading this transcript or listening to this transcript, can you explain the difference in treatment? I mean, treated how you should be, what does that mean?

RN: An NCO is a non-commissioned officer. Which means you're not a boot, it means that you're—that you're entitled to, they call it RHIP, rank has its privileges. And you should be treated with a certain amount of respect and esteem. Not put on a pedestal, but you should still be treated with a little bit of dignity and respect, above your juniors. And I was never even held to the same standard as my peers. I was treated differently than my peer group.

TS: In what way?

RN: Like I was less than they were. Like I was still a lance corporal.

TS: You mean in the way that they talked to you, or the way that, like assignments you got?

RN: The way I was ranked, the way I was treated, the whole—anything in regards to how the day-to-day was conducted. Even though I did my job just as well as they did, if not better.

TS: So you're getting promoted, at the—

RN: I got promoted, every time I was eligible for promotion, I got promoted, because I did my job—

TS: So it's not that, it's not—

RN: Well, they had no control over that, that part.

TS: Well, who does your ratings, has some control, right, over how the rating—

RN: To a certain extent, but at that point, not so much, because I wasn't getting promoted based on my fitness reports. Luckily for me, I got out before that happened. Because it's not until you get into the staff NCO ranks that your fitness reports really affect your standings in your career.

TS: Okay, so you go to Pensacola and they start treating you with that respect that you weren't necessarily getting before.

RN: Right.

TS: Okay.

RN: And I mean, it was just a different environment. And I just, I remember working, you know, with staff NCOs that respected my opinion, and I wasn't treated—again, like a lance corporal, I was treated like part of my peer group. And so it was kind of nice. And I think that was the other thing, I—because I didn't fall into that whole, you know, looking at the porno magazines and, you know, the smoking and putting my ashes in the drawer, I was kind of ostracized, and I wasn't ostracized for being what I call a cookie-cutter Marine, I was, you know, believed in pressing my uniform and shining my boots and being respectful and respecting others, and so it was a different environment.

TS: And then, you really liked the training, apparently. Because I feel not only like I could go in and fix any wire just from what you've told me—so—

RN: It did, well, again, my major in college was phys ed for the mentally and physically impaired. So, to be a teacher, to be an instructor, I really enjoyed that, I really excelled at it, and I was able to take and break something down, so that—and I know we joke a lot about Marines, you know, muscles are required, intelligence is not expected. But I was able to teach Marines and sailors basic electronics. I taught aviation fundamentals. I taught algebra to Marines and sailors. So. So I enjoyed that.

TS: And what—what did you get out of that? For yourself?

RN: I think it was a sense of accomplishment that I was training the next generation of Marines and sailors. You know, to have touched that to a certain extent, which was what led me to go to Parris Island. When I left instructor duty in Pensacola, I went to drill instructor duty in Parris Island.

TS: Did you volunteer for that?

RN: Yes.

TS: Why did—why did you volunteer for that?

RN: Again, that female that I talked about earlier? She—I did not want the product that was leaving Parris Island to be that. And—

TS: And which person is this that we're talking about?

RN: The female that was at office hours and was pregnant.

TS: Okay.

RN: And the—I did not want the product that was leaving Parris Island to be that. And so I thought—well, again, I can't complain about something, kind of like coming in the Marine Corps, can't complain about something unless you're going to be part of the solution, to fix it. So, I went to Parris Island, you know, thinking that I could be part of the solution.

TS: What year did you go there?

RN: I was there from '99 to 2001. And—it's, you know, I actually have some of my former recruits that I keep in touch with on Facebook now.

TS: Yeah.

RN: So that's kind of neat.

TS: Well, tell me about being a drill instructor there.

RN: I enjoyed training recruits. Other drill instructors, not so much. [chuckles] It's what they call cutthroat. I mean, it's very competitive, I even had—

TS: Within the drill instructors?

RN: Right.

TS: Really?

RN: Yeah. Very competitive.

TS: Like, is it like, for your platoon, you have to—you're trying to compete against each other, or? How does it—

RN: Well, that—even individually. I mean, they—to—because, it's one of those—to—you want to be the cream of the crop. And that's what a lot of people look at drill instructors, as being the cream of the crop. But I had some people even question that I wasn't mean

enough to be a drill instructor, and it got to the point that—one of the drill instructors that had questioned me, by the time the conversation was over, I had her crying. But don't mistake kindness as weakness. And I had her question, you know, why I was even a Marine. And I thought, you know, who are you to question me being a Marine? Especially—I love being a Marine. And like I said, I had her crying by the time the conversation was over. But, matter of fact, she's one of a handful of Marines—and I'm not proud to say that I've made Marines cry, but she's only one of a handful that I've made cry, and I made her cry twice. [chuckles] But, as a matter of fact, my nickname on the drill field from the other drill instructors, not from the recruits, but from the other drill instructors, was Mary Poppins. So.

TS: Not in a positive way.

RN: Oh, no, it was in a positive way. They—I was one of those, you know, I would stock our fridge with Gatorade and—I was a mom by then, so—

TS: So, nurturing type of—

RN: Right.

TS: Of drill instructor.

RN: Now, again, not to the recruits, but you know, like my team or, you know, whatever drill instructors I worked with, when we had the Crucible, the people that ran the command post, the CP, they loved it when our series was out there, because I always brought in homemade banana bread and brownies and—because that's just, that's me. When we're on the rifle range, same thing. [audio file 1 ends, audio file 2 begins]

TS: What's the Crucible, can you describe that?

RN: The Crucible is what the Marine Corps has as the culminating event for recruits that have gone through recruit training. And it's a fifty-four hour evolution of sleep deprivation, hiking, and the first day, I want to say, they put about twelve miles on their boots by the time the day is over on their first day. And it ends with a, I want to say a nine mile hike back from Page Field, which is Parris Island. I can't speak for how they do it at San Diego.

TS: Right.

RN: But—and then it was, you know, it ended with the Eagle, Globe and Anchor ceremony, so. That, you know, at least for the generation of drill instructor that I went through, that was a very emotional and prideful experience, knowing that when I handed that Eagle, Globe and Anchor to that recruit, that they'd earned it. And I would tell them, when we were on the Crucible, because each drill instructor would be like a team leader and the recruits would have to go through and they would have to use teamwork and do these

different events, and the obstacles—some of them were almost impossible to complete, but it wasn't about the—completing the task as much as it was getting them to work together to try to finish it. And I would tell them “It's a cold piece of metal if you don't earn it.” And that whole—we joked “bird, ball, and hook”. It's not an Eagle, Globe, and Anchor unless you've earned it. And it's—it's—you know, put out there a lot. It's something that is not given, it is not inherited, you cannot buy it. It is earned. And they had to earn it.

TS: Do you have—do you remember any recruits in particular that you were especially—I don't know, that were memorable?

RN: Not really, I mean—I did five platoons, and like I said, I had some of them that I'm friends with, you know, now on Facebook.

And it's kind of funny, you know, because some of them, they see you and they'll be like “You don't remember me, do you?”

And I'll be like “No.”

And they'll be like “Well, I was in platoon whatever-whatever”, you know. In my own defense, I did suffer a brain injury, so, you know, some of them might—you know, I don't remember.

TS: But they—it's much easier to remember one person for them than for you to remember—

RN: Oh, absolutely.

TS: The faces in the crowd, sort of.

RN: Well, one of the things that I learned a long time ago is, I remember all the names of my drill instructors. And had it not been that I went to a very small high school—I can tell you the names of a lot of my teachers that I went to high school with. But your drill instructors, as Marines, your drill instructors, especially if you make a career out of it, are almost as important as Mom and Dad. And so that's a big deal. And matter of fact, Semper Toons[?] even has a cartoon out there that says—shows a picture of a drill instructor standing there, looking over the shoulder of this young kid that's writing home, and says “I've got good news and bad news. The good news is, I've arrived safely. The bad news is, I've got a new mom.” So—and it holds true. So, we remember the names of our drill instructors. You know, if they've done their jobs, and so that's—I think that's a testament to what we do. And again, even if you have a drill instructor that's just evil and ugly and wasn't the best drill instructor, you probably still remember them. So, good, bad, or indifferent, you remember your drill instructors. So.

TS: Now, were you at—were you a drill instructor when 9/11 happened?

RN: No, I had just left the drill field.

TS: When did you leave?

RN: I left—officially, I think the date officially is April of '01.

TS: So where did you go to next?

RN: Because I was married at the time, my husband was stationed over at Beaufort Air Station [chuckling], so I was back at Beaufort Air Station.

TS: So you went back to Beaufort after that? And so that's where you were when 9/11 happened? So, what can you tell me about that?

RN: I was actually—at the time, a friend of mine, the actual day, a friend of mine that was still on the drill field—we were roommates in DI [drill instructor] school. I had her two kids with me when it happened. And I can remember it being—again, because, you know, I still had friends that were on the drill field, I can remember it being a really big issue for them. And they—you know, they let the recruits know. Especially—you had a bunch of them that had family and friends that were—that were there. So I'm sure that was, you know, a big event. It's kind of like, you know, people say “Where were you when Kennedy was shot?” I was, you know—it was one of those time-stood-still type moments. And I can remember it being all over the news, and—I can remember—you know, I was still in the Marine Corps, so it definitely was going to affect myself, and I was married at the time, so I knew that there was going to be another evolution that I was going to have to think about. Having been in during Desert Shield, Desert Storm, so. I don't want to say it was old hat, but you know, at that point it was, okay, just waited for what was going to come next.

TS: What happened during Desert Shield, Desert Storm?

RN: I was already slated to go to Japan, so that was the rotation that I did. We ended up staying because of the way the rotations get set up, we got, I don't want to say thrown off rotation, but we ended up staying almost ten months instead of the traditional six or seven, to Japan, so. It was awful, I hated being in Japan for that long. [chuckling] I'm kidding, it was wonderful.

TS: Oh, really?

RN: Yeah.

TS: Well, tell me about that, then. We skipped that somewhere. Because we're going back in time now.

RN: It was a—what we call a unit deployment, so.

TS: Oh, okay, so you deployed out of Beaufort.

RN: I wasn't stationed in Japan—right, right. I was in Beaufort and got stationed there from Beaufort. It was just fun, I mean, especially—I didn't have any kids at the time, and I was already married and my husband and I were both on the same rotation.

TS: So you were both there.

RN: So we were both there. And we joke—I conceived my son over there. So he's made in Japan.

TS: [laughs] That's cute. And so what kind of things did you do that were so fun?

RN: We went and saw the Peace Dome, which is where the—one of the bombs was dropped, in Hiroshima. And—and that was definitely an eye-opening experience. We went to the—there was a museum there, and we did that. We rode—you know, took trains and buses and, so that was kind of an interesting cultural experience. There was a little island there called Miyajima Island that we would go to, and they had—like, deer that would walk right up to you and eat right out of your hand. Again, a lot of sight-seeing. There were some caverns that you could go into and do tours, so we did a lot of that kind of stuff. Ride around bikes.

TS: Touristy.

RN: Yes.

TS: What about—did you get involved in the culture at all? I mean, did you—I mean, other than the tourist route, I mean, did you—

RN: We did a little bit. We did some trips, like we'd go to orphanages and play baseball—which is a really big deal over there. And we would do cook-outs, and the kids there, I mean, it's different. They—it's almost like—you could have like a handful of candy and they would just flock, like birds to seed. But I can remember—this was, you know, before I had my kids. They had—they asked for volunteers to umpire the Little League aboard the base. And you know, Japanese kids would play with the American kids. And I think I was one of the only ones that volunteered to umpire. And they ended up coming back, to get people to do it, they paid us. And I just enjoyed it, I mean, it was just a really good experience to umpire, and the little—the Japanese kids were so serious. I mean, they really take their baseball serious. And that, I think, was probably one of my more memorable—

TS: Yeah. Did you play any sports while you were in the Marines?

RN: Not for the Marines. I played softball for my church, and I coached soccer for the base, for the kids.

TS: For the kids, like youth soccer.

RN: Yes.

TS: Stuff like that. But you didn't—did you have an opportunity to do that, or is that something—because you had played a lot, in school, I remember, so.

RN: You know, it—again, my first duty station, they didn't really encourage any of that. They weren't—I don't want to say that they weren't the best role models, but pretty much—they weren't the best role models.

TS: [chuckles] Okay.

RN: So. So it wasn't encouraged, to do that, and—you know, by the time it was ever something I even thought about, I had kids and it just wouldn't have been a responsible thing to do, even though I would have probably enjoyed it.

TS: Yeah. So then, back to—forward to 2001. You talked a little bit about your—you knew—you had said you knew there were going to be some changes. What changed?

RN: Well, I just knew that one, being where I worked, I worked where there's a secure flight line. So I knew that there was going to be heightened security, a lot of those kind of issues. I just—it was one of those—kind of like the bombing of Pearl Harbor. You knew it was something that was going to change the world forever, and it did. It really did. I was very proud, though, that I already owned a flag that I could hang, outside my house. But that was—you know, that was definitely a big deal.

TS: And—I mean, because soon after that, you know, we went to war against Afghanistan.

RN: Afghanistan.

TS: And did your—where you were at, did any of them deploy, over?

RN: We had—at that point, because I'm F18, at that point, we were F18s in Beaufort [F18s are naval fighter jets which were in use for Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, as well as Operation Iraqi Freedom.]. So we, you know, offered some support, but it wasn't like a whole unit deployment type situation. So we didn't—we had our—I don't want to call them onesies, twosies, but we didn't really offer a huge amount of support. And it wasn't—and I was already slated, again, it was one of those—you're slated out so far for certain things. And—being married to a Marine, that was the other issue, is we couldn't both be deployed at the same time, especially with a child that has special needs. So those were a lot of things that we had to start, you know, working on.

And we have—the Marine Corps has—and I'm sure all the other branches do too—we have what's called a Family Care Plan. And there was a big rush to make sure everyone had their Family Care Plans. If you were dual military or a single parent, that you had the paperwork in place in the event that you were deployed, so that whatever

family member was supposed to take care of your children in the event that you did deploy—that all that paperwork is current, up to date. Again, a big push to make sure everyone's wills were done, make sure that their—your SGLI, which is your life insurance policy, make sure all that stuff was up to date, and make sure that all the Ts are crossed and Is are dotted. And that was a big deal.

TS: So there was like an intensity level that kind of raised up with all that. And you said you were slotted to go—where were you slotted to go?

RN: Well, we had—back in '01, I mean, we already had projections for, you know, the next couple of years. I was going to—I went, I did go to the advanced course on '03. And that was back when we first went into Iraq, and I was in the advanced course at the time that that took place. And—and I left in February, I believe, of '03, and I was in the advanced course. And a friend of mine, that we were in DI school together, was killed in March of '03 over there. So it became—I mean, not that it wasn't already real, but it really became real when that happened.

TS: When that happened, yeah.

RN: Because you don't—at least for me, it—when you do a job that you know is dangerous and you expect it or whatever. But when someone that you know is affected by it, then it's—the reality really kind of sinks in. And he had a small son, and you know, I had two small children. So it was kind of—you know, in that regard, you think back and it's like “Wow, he was at my son's birthday party two years ago,” or whatever. And you—it's that kind of thing that you just can't put your finger on until it happens.

TS: Right.

RN: So.

TS: And did you have any expectation that you would ever go over?

RN: I think at that point, I wanted to go over.

TS: Yeah?

RN: You know? Not that I wanted retribution for him, but you know, at that point, it—you start to think—in '03, you know, I've already been in the Marine Corps for a long time, and I rifle qual[ify] and pistol qual[ify] every year. And yet, I don't deploy, you know, to the hot zones, if you will. And it—it was one of those—I actually was what they call a “hot fill”. I went to Japan—let me back up. I got done with my advanced course in '03, was a distinguished grad, ninety-five or better GPA, and I went to—when I got back from there, I made sure that I was slated to do a unit deployment, I was what they call the det[?] NCOIC, non-commissioned officer in charge of a unit deployment to Japan. I did

that. And when I came back from that, I requested orders to a unit that was going to be the ace.

TS: And what is ace?

RN: They're the unit that is basically the number one in charge of that area—we call a van pad. So we were the forward unit, basically.

TS: That's going to deploy. And at this point, let's see, we're—how long have you been in now?

RN: Sixteen years when I went to Japan in '04.

TS: Sixteen years. And at what point—so you had said, you know, for a while there you weren't really sure about making it a—you know, sticking with it, I guess, because of the culture, and then you went to Pensacola and you had a different—so, in between those two, you actually reenlisted.

RN: Oh, yeah. I reenlisted—the first time I reenlisted, I didn't even intend on reenlisting. That was after Desert Shield/Desert Storm. But I—again, didn't think women should have babies their first enlistment. So I planned my pregnancy around, you know, getting out. Well [pause] my ex-husband, at the time—we were married—he could not reenlist because of the draw-downs after Desert Shield/Desert Storm. So, I could. So he got out—he has broken time. He got out, and I reenlisted. And I was going to get out at the end of that enlistment, and that's when I got—I don't want to say talked into, but talked into taking the orders to Pensacola, Florida. And I loved it, Pensacola. And you know, again, once you get twelve years in, now you're already—I don't want to say past the point of no return, but you're halfway there.

TS: Really, more seriously thinking about—

RN: Right.

TS: Did—and did you think about what you would do if you had gotten out of the Marines at that point?

RN: Oh, I was—matter of fact, before I went to Pensacola, Florida, I already had a job as an access controller, making ten forty-two an hour, back in '94. So I was making pretty good money.

TS: So you had stuff lined up and you were ready to get out, for sure, then. And then you went to Pensacola and you changed your mind.

RN: Right.

TS: Okay. So now—so now, you’re on a career, kind of—

RN: Right.

TS: —track—did you think about what you needed to do? Because people talk about what the, what is that, checking off their boxes and—

RN: Checklist?

TS: Yeah, checklist of like, what you need to do to be able to get promoted to stay—you know if you’re going be career. Did you have anybody that, like, helped you figure out what—where you should go, what you should do, those kinds of things? Like—like that mentoring we talked about, but like, for career-wise?

RN: Yes.

TS: Okay.

RN: And I had all of the checks and everything, and put in a letter to the board saying “Do not promote me.”

TS: Who put in the letter?

RN: I did.

TS: Why?

RN: Because I had already put in seventeen and a half years in, and I had—I found myself as a single parent, and I have a child that’s high-functioning autistic, and reality really sets in when you get wounded.

TS: So this is after that experience, okay.

RN: Yes. So, that whole—there’s countless people that are ready to step up and be a first sergeant or a master sergeant. There’s—I’m it. I’m their only mom. And it was a bittersweet decision. And then, of course, I find out that I would have gotten first sergeant. From the person that had my packet to brief. But, again, I mean, just like the decision to stay over in Iraq when I got wounded, I wouldn’t change it. It’s just—it’s one of those decisions that had to be made.

TS: Well, let’s talk about going to Iraq, then. How did that come about? You’d said you want—you put in that you wanted to be in that ace, is that the—

RN: Yes.

TS: Okay. So talk about that, how—

RN: I came back from Japan, and at this point, I already knew I was getting divorced. And had been married fourteen and a half years. And I come back, and I talk with my monitor, who had—I was actually on the drill field with him, he was also in my field, avionics, and we'd been stationed together, friends. And you know, I talk with him and basically, I was what they call a mover, you know, I'd already been in one spot for long enough, so I was entitled to moving, and—but his one question was, because he couldn't move my then husband there, so he was kind of like—all right, he already kind of knew, you know, at that point. And so I was told I would have to sign paperwork stating that I understood that I could not be co-located, which is what they call when your spouse goes with you wherever you're going. And I assured him that my divorce would be final [chuckles] before I executed the orders. And my divorce was final in October of '04, and I PCSd [permanent change of station] in December of '04. I checked into my unit—

TS: Where did you go?

RN: I went to MAWs [Marine Aircraft Wing] 26.

TS: Where's that?

RN: It's New River Air Station, Jacksonville, North Carolina. And I checked in just before New Year's Eve, I think it was probably the 30th of December, I checked in. And we were in Iraq in February of '05.

TS: Of '05? What was that like?

RN: It was tough, because I knew two people in the whole entire unit.

TS: Oh, so it was a really—and after so much time in one place, this was really a new—

RN: It was tough—I mean, I literally knew two people in the whole entire squadron. And one of them was that female that I made cry when I was on the drill field. [laughs] So it wasn't going to be a fun time. But, um.

TS: So what did you think about going over there at the time, before you went? I mean, you said you wanted to go?

RN: I thought about it just like I did, you know, going to work every day. It was part of my responsibilities, my job. And I felt it was important to do my turn. I mean, I'm sure part of it was career motivated, because, you know, I obviously can't be competitive with the guys if I'm not doing what the guys are doing. Especially if I'm wanting to be a first sergeant, which is definitely, you know, more attuned to, you know, the combat side of things. But it was—it—I just felt like it was something I was supposed to do.

TS: So what was it like, like when you got off the plane and you land, and—

RN: It wasn't what I anticipated at all. I was anticipating sand and camels and—

TS: Okay.

RN: You know, I was anticipating desert. No, this place was pulverized sand and rock. It was awful. I mean, you know, it was—people choose to live there and it amazes me. But just the evolution of getting over there was just cumbersome at best.

TS: In what way?

RN: Well, you have to go through customs in and customs out. And it's one of those really, like, again, one of those stupid evolutions, and of course, I seemed to have brought more than most anybody else had brought, and I had, you know, the extra little flight pillows and things like that, and the whole—again, Mom. I had, you know, decks of cards and, you know, little hand-held electronic games, and snacks, and all this other stuff. And everybody was fussing that I had all this stuff that I was bringing along—

TS: They wanted it. [laughs]

RN: They sure wanted it when we got—and matter of fact I had my laptop and, you know, we were able to watch movies and, you know, when we were sitting there waiting for the next evolution of—

TS: I'd like to travel with you. [laughs]

RN: And that was the thing, you know, I was ready for the trip. So. But we did, we sat there and we watched movies while we were waiting for the next evolution of travel, and—I was, by virtue of the two people that I knew, one of them was an officer when I was in Japan, and he knew I was, you know, what we call a mover and a shaker. I'd, you know, make things happen. And so he made me a stick leader, which, I was in charge of, like, a group of people. And so from the onset, I was in charge of people that I didn't even know who they were. [chuckles]

TS: Right, right.

RN: But I mean, you know, I obviously got to know them real quick. You know, before we left, but. That's, you know, the nature of the beast, I guess. You have to be responsible for people that you don't know or whatever. And—

TS: And what's your rank at this time?

RN: I was a gunny. I was already a gunny. I was the senior female enlisted going on this deployment. Which was another reason why that other female didn't like me, because she was, at the time, was the senior female enlisted.

TS: Until you showed up.

RN: Until I showed up. So. And she even made a comment about, you know, being professional. She—she had me—amazed me. She was a junior, junior gunny, and I was like a senior gunny. And she had me report to her office. And I reported to her office, and she had me shut the door, and she, you know, wanted to make sure that we were going to remain professionals, you know, because of the history that we had of not getting along or whatever. And I looked right at her and I said "I'm still Mary Poppins." So. And we did have issues when we were in Japan—I mean Iraq, but. Hence the second time making her cry.

TS: Oh. [laughs] Okay, we'll get to that. We'll see. So, then tell me about, you know, how—what kind of work did you have to do in Iraq?

RN: When we first got over there, I was part of what we called the night crew. We had—we were obviously in a combat environment, so we were twenty-four/seven. There was no, you know, eight hour shifts or whatever. We were twelve on, twelve off. And my—I was the second in command, if you will, of the enlisted, nights, for avionics. And our—to me, our biggest responsibility was, in that environment, if we had an indirect fired rocket, accountability of everybody. But I—after the first, I'd say, three months, then I became the head of the division, because the head of the division on nights went to day crew to be the head of the division on days. And so I was the head of the division on nights.

TS: So [unclear] you were working the twelve hours, but the nights.

RN: Yes. I usually ended up working sixteen hours, because there's nothing else to do.

TS: No really off time.

RN: Yeah, it's not like you can run to the mall or Wal-Mart.

TS: Yeah, no touring around.

RN: No, no. I mean, a lot of the time, you know, go to the gym or—I had a bike, so you know, ride bikes and—

TS: Where'd you ride your bike?

RN: Just around the base.

TS: Yeah. How'd you bring a bike?

RN: Oh, someone else had one there.

TS: Oh. Handed off?

RN: So when they left—

TS: Yeah. Oh, I see, okay. And so what were the living conditions like there?

RN: Well, when we first got there, we lived in tents, because the people we were replacing were living in the quarters we were going to be occupying. And that was horrible. But it wasn't as horrible as the living conditions with the men. They were living in the exact same tents that we were living in—you know, not in the exact same tents, but the same type tents. But myself and that other female, we ran a tight ship. You know, it didn't matter that it was dirt floors or whatever, we made sure everything was kept clean and organized, and kind of kept up, you know, with the females. You know, made sure that they were, you know, checking in and checking out.

TS: About how many were there in your unit?

RN: I don't think we had twenty. There really wasn't that many of us.

TS: But of how many, total?

RN: Oh, our unit? Probably seven hundred. But you know, accountability was very important. I think at the time, there was four—five female staff NCOs, and then, you know, the rest were enlisted. You know, junior Marines. But we had no—at the time, no female officers, that were attached to us at that point that were in charge of anything. But there were some female officers from other units, because they put all of the females in one tent. There wasn't that many of us. But the men, their tents—from day one, were disgusting. Were absolutely disgusting. And they'd come over, you know, and they would be like—

TS: “It's nice over here!”

RN: Yeah! So, and you know, like when the higher-ups would be doing their little tours or whatever, and they—same thing, it's like “Why can't you guys be like that?” Or whatever. But after we were in the tents for, you know, two-three weeks, then we moved up to the billeting of the—they were like barracks, but they were small buildings that had been converted for us to live in. And we had no indoor plumbing.

TS: Did you have air conditioning?

RN: We had—eventually had window units.

TS: But not in the tents.

RN: No, in the tents they had air conditioning as well.

TS: They did? Okay.

RN: But again, an air conditioned tent—[chuckles]. But the plumbing that we did have in the barracks, we had like, you know, sinks that ran, but they encouraged us to use bottled water when we brushed our teeth and everything else, because we didn't know what kind of bacteria was in the water or if the insurgents were going to, you know, contaminate the water and all that other stuff. And then as far as plumbing and all that went, we didn't really have any of that, and we had—some of the guys had built containers that would collect water, you know, from a hose or a system, and they were big metal containers and they would heat up, from the sun, and that's what we would take showers with, in the buildings. And then they had port-a-johns outside, and that's what we used for—and sharing port-a-johns with a bunch of men is not fun. And same thing on the van pad where we worked, there were port-a-johns. And they'd come by twice a day to clean them.

TS: And how long was your deployment supposed to be?

RN: It was a year.

TS: It was a year? Okay. So, now, what were the conditions like as far as the war was going at this time, when you were over there? As far—you know, because I know—not that there's not a war at any time, but it had escalated and come back and, you know.

RN: Well, you know, we're—at this point, we're halfway there. You know, we've got a lot of what we call FOBs, forward bases. But the frequency of the indirect fire was definitely, by midpoint, had diminished drastically. Indirect fired rockets were more of a nuisance than anything. And you know, we'd see an increase in activity during rotation, because that's when you had the most people aboard the base. But the base we were on, the army guys and the Marine grunts, they referred to it as Camp Cupcake or Disneyland, because it really wasn't—I mean, out of all the bases that were over there, it really wasn't that bad.

TS: So it was pretty secure?

RN: Yeah. And we had a Pizza Hut and a Burger King and a Green Bean café, and a Subway. So we were—

TS: Yeah, that sounds pretty cupcake-y.

RN: Yeah.

TS: [chuckle] And did—so were you sharing it—besides the seven hundred in the unit, was there more people on this base besides—

RN: Oh, absolutely.

TS: What was the name of the place that you were at?

RN: Al Asad.

TS: Al Asad, oh, okay, that's right. And so, like, what was a—did you go outside that perimeter ever?

RN: No. Well, I shouldn't say that. I did, to go to Qatar my boss insisted that I take a ninety-six just like everyone else had, and it was a program that the army had set up where we would go to Qatar, and they would—you know, a whole bunch of us would get on a C130 and go to Qatar for some R&R, and they had a pool and a Chili's and—that, I mean, it was really terrible [sarcastically].

TS: [chuckles] It was?

RN: But I didn't want to go. One, the way that it was slated, I was going to be the only female, going, from the Marines, and so one, I knew I was going to be housed by myself. And the other part to that was, I just, you know, I felt—I didn't feel the need to have a ninety-six, I felt that, you know, let's just let one of the other, you know, sergeants go or whatever.

TS: Is ninety-six like how many hours you had?

RN: Right.

TS: Okay.

RN: And it usually ends up being a little bit longer than that. But the funny thing is, is that's where that whole me getting wounded comes into play, because my boss insisted that I go on this ninety-six. Well, I had to turn in my weapon. Everyone that goes has to turn in their weapon. And so I turned in my weapon to the armory. And I got wounded retrieving my weapon when I came back from my ninety-six.

TS: So tell me about that.

RN: Do you want me to tell you the Reader's Digest version? [chuckles]

TS: No. I can read it in different places, I just want to hear—

RN: Yeah. Well, as the story goes, there I was, riding my bike. I was—

TS: Riding a bike? And—say where—you're back at the—

RN: I'm back in Al Asad.

TS: Al Asad. And you've come back from your ninety-six hours of not wanting to go.

RN: Right. And I bought a really cool bracelet in the gold district.

TS: Okay.

RN: Matter of fact, I bought these earrings, too.

TS: The ones you're wearing?

RN: Yeah.

TS: Oh, excellent.

RN: And I come back, and my captain has asked me to go stop at the barracks, too, because he needs—this is a long story, but I'll just give you that part. He needs me to get the basketball for one of the guys. And so I stop at the barracks to get the basketball. And even though it's my basketball, I sign it out so that everybody knows where the basketball went, and I, you know, got my bike with my little basket, the basketball's in the basket, and I'm on my way to the armory, and an indirect fired rocket impacts approximately a hundred meters to my right. And it's—everything at that point is like slow motion. And I can see the shrapnel in front of me. And I got hit, but I thought I got hit by a piece of debris, because it didn't—you know, I didn't feel like I got cut. It felt like the equivalent of getting hit in the jaw with a softball. And apparently, I was knocked unconscious. But I—the next thing I remember, I'm riding my bike to the armory. And I continued on to the armory, and I get to the armory, and I bang on the hatch, and I identify myself to the armorer, and I explain to him, you know, who I am, the unit I'm with, and that I've been wounded. So he opens the hatch, and he—you know, I'm telling him, I say "get your pressure bandage." Well, he's taking too long, and me being a gunny, I'm like "Just get me anything." So he gets me a green t-shirt, and then he tries to raise transportation for me. But during attacks, we have radio silence. The only people that are supposed to be on the radio, obviously, are people that need assistance or whatever. So I start walking to medical, because I'm not going to stand there and wait. And so, he eventually raises transportation for me, and I'm already, you know, at this point, walked a good distance. And a corporal picks me up and drives me over to medical. In the meantime, he's stopping at stop signs, and I'm like "Really?" So I'm holding—at this point I'm holding the green t-shirt with my left hand against my right cheek, and I'm waving my right arm out the window, you know, waving off traffic. And we get to medical, and the hatch is locked. And I mean, it's just like, really? I mean, it's just one of those days. So I send the corporal around one way and I go around the other, and I get in the building, and there's nobody around. And I'm thinking to myself, great,

I'm going to pass out right here and nobody's going to know where I'm at. And so I'm walking down the passageway, and I'm all nonchalant, and I'm like "Hello, I'm bleeding here, can I get some help?" So the medical staff has apparently taken cover in a basement, so they come up, and they're expecting a boo-boo. So I pull the t-shirt down and show them, and I guess by the sheer look on their face, I should have known it wasn't just a boo-boo.

TS: And you didn't really know the extent you'd been injured?

RN: No. I didn't even know I was hit with shrapnel. I still didn't—at this point, still did not know that I was hit with shrapnel. So they take me over to triage, and I didn't realize at the time until later, but they take me over to triage, and one of the corpsmen, he starts, you know, proceeding to take off my boots for me. I'm conscious, and he's not unlacing them far enough, so he's just jerking my foot. So I'm just waving him off. So I undo my own boots. You know, I basically help them, you know, take my blouse off, then they come over and they replace the green t-shirt with a handful of those gauze—gauze four-by-four pads. So I'm holding those on my face, they come over, and they're going to get an x-ray. Well, they asked me to, you know, I have to remove my hand from my face for them to get the x-ray. Well, when I do that, it felt like someone had taken a cupful of warm water and just poured it down my face. So I'm like—put my hands back, I said "Someone's going to have to figure out another way to get the x-ray, because I'm not moving my hand." And so they—I don't know exactly how they managed to do it, and at this point, I'm probably even going into shock, but then—

TS: About how long has it been, since you got hit?

RN: Half hour, forty-five minutes, I don't—I mean, at that point, it's time—time at that point kind of stands still.

TS: Hard to say. Yeah. Okay.

RN: But then they come over and they start briefing me about what's going to happen, that I'm going to get airlifted, I'm going to go to Balad and then Landstuhl, and probably Bethesda, blah blah blah. And I'm like "No, I'm not, I'm not leaving my Marines." And I started to get argumentative. I was apparently trying to get off of the triage table. So at that point, Commander Williams, who's the anesthesiologist, she gives the order to sedate me, to shut me up. It wasn't until later that I found out the reason was because the piece of shrapnel that was in my jaw was right next to the maxial artery [sic, maxillary artery]. So if I kept on, you know, running my mouth, I could have nicked that artery. So, the next thing I know, I'm waking up in Balad, and they're shoving a sat phone in my hand, and—

TS: That's a satellite phone.

RN: A satellite phone, and I—the first thought that comes to my mind, at that point is “Who the [pause] called my mother?” Because I specifically said not to call my mom. So my mom’s on the other end, and I explain to her that I’m fine, reassure her that I’m going to be okay. Then she says, at least it hit you in the strongest part of your body. So. And I, you know, swore her to secrecy, because both my ex-husband and I are forward deployed, and she’s got my two boys. So I didn’t want them to know about it. And so I get done talking with her on the phone, and I speak with the surgeon that’s there. Because apparently they’d removed the shrapnel in Al Asad, and then I was airlifted to Balad and they’d fixed all the nerve damage in my face. And so the surgeon briefs me on my next evolution, of going to Landstuhl, because they needed to wire my—my jaw was broken, they needed to wire my mouth shut and any other further medical care, treatment, probably an MRI, you know, for any head trauma. And I remember asking him, you know, when can I get back to my Marines, when can I get back to Al Asad?

And he said “Well, I’ll talk to you when I do my rounds this afternoon.” So that afternoon, he talked with me, and he said that if he let me go back to Al Asad, I’d have to promise that I would only eat soft food. So I told him cheesecake is soft and Oreos get soft in milk. And ironically, that was about all I could eat. There was not—the mess hall does not have a variety of cuisine to eat.

TS: [chuckles] They don’t have the soft food prepared for you.

RN: No. So—and it was, matter of fact, it was even difficult the first day, because I couldn’t—wasn’t supposed to leave the barracks, and one of the staff NCOs tried to get like a to-go meal for me, and they wouldn’t give it to him. He had to throw a fit just to get a to-go thing for me. But so, I get—I do get allowed to go back to Al Asad, and basically, it’s like at a moment’s notice. You’re told that there’s a helicopter out there that’s going to be heading back to Al Asad, get your stuff. And I, no kidding, had my boots just slipped on, and they weren’t even Marine Corps issue boots, they were [U.S.] Army tan boots, and matter of fact, the camis—nothing I was wearing was my original Marine Corps issue anything, because they wouldn’t give me that stuff back, because it had biologic—it was a biological hazard, because it had my blood on it. So I get back to the flight, and they brief us, and they tell us to not even look at your Indiglo watch, nothing, you know, take the terrain and you know, silence, and all this other stuff. So we get the brief, and they explain that we’re going to go from here to, you know, get refueled somewhere else, we’re only going to be on the ground for X number of minutes, and then, you know, how long the flight’s going to be. So we get back to Al Asad, and I basically get ahold of my command and someone comes over and brings me back to the barracks. At that point, the next day, I go and I see the corporal that helped me at the armory, and—well, first, I walk over to the van pad, and see my captain, and he takes me over to see the corporal that helped me at the armory, and see the corporal that helped me in the Humvee. And then, I—the captain that was in charge of the corporal that drove me in the Humvee was the OIC of one of my first sergeant buddies, that I had gone to advanced course with. Small Marine Corps.

And he says “I know it’s morbid, but we took pictures.” And so they had pictures of the pools of blood on the ground. So I’ve actually got copies of pictures of the pools of blood.

TS: Where you had been laying when you initially were hit?

RN: No, from where I was standing outside the armory and blood was pooling underneath me—

TS: Oh.

RN: And inside the armory, while I was waiting.

TS: Right.

RN: So I’ve got pictures of the actual little pools of blood. And yeah, it’s a sick Marine thing, I’m like, yeah, I want pictures.

TS: I want to see it. Let me see those.

RN: Yeah, so I got pictures of that, and then, you know, I basically, from there on out, you know, I get a lot of that I should go home because I’m a mom and I’ve got kids. And it kind of bothered me, because I thought it was more important for those Marines that are there, you know, to prove that we go home on our terms and not the insurgents. And so, that’s where, you know, Rosie would have loved to have gone home, but Rosie wasn’t in Iraq, Gunny Noel was. And I stayed, and I finished out my tour.

TS: And did you—do you have a sense, though, of—when—did you have a moment of like, shock, awareness, of like, you know, how close that came to killing you, really?

RN: You know, honest and truly, from the moment that it happened, I was—I know this sounds really sad, but I was pissed off, because I thought I was going to get stuck in the armory until the all clear was given. I did not—I don’t want to say the Marine kicked in, but you know, you don’t think about—at least I didn’t. And I would think that—I would hope that any Marine would think this way. You don’t think about yourself. And for the longest time, you know, I didn’t know whether I was embellishing on my story, or—your brain fills in a lot of gaps, things like that, until a couple summers ago, I actually met the surgeon that removed the shrapnel in Al Asad, and my anesthesiologist from Al Asad, and her assistant that actually administered the anesthesia.

And the surgeon, Doctor Lissen[?], he told me, he said “At no time did you ever think of yourself. You were concerned about your boys, you were concerned about your Marines,” and that meant a lot to me, to know that I did my job, and—but that was when I really found out how close I came. He took his finger, and he, with tears in his eyes, and went just like this down the scar, and said “That’s where your maxial [sic, maxillary] artery is.”

TS: I can see. I mean, you can see where the scar is.

RN: Right, right. So you know, I don't—

TS: You didn't really realize that at the time?

RN: No. I realized, just like a lot of people, they think, a few inches higher or a few inches lower, I could have hit myself in my neck, or you know, my temple. You don't think about your maxial—you don't think about your maxial artery. And so it wasn't until a couple summers ago that I really realized that it wasn't—and he told me, straight up. He says “You didn't—it wasn't inches, it was millimeters.” And he told me, he said “If you'd have nicked your maxial artery and had a corpsman with you, you'd have bled out before you got help. That's how close.”

TS: So all that jawing you were doing, too. [laughs]

RN: Yeah. Well, that was the other thing, when I met—when I met Commander Williams, she at one point, I don't know if she still is, but she was the head of anesthesiology for both Bethesda and Walter Reed. And she—when she found out that I'd gone back—because they didn't know I'd gone back.

TS: To Al Asad.

RN: To Al Asad. Because I had actually went over there after I was cleared to leave the barracks, they had already rotated out, because like I said, that's when we get those big influxes. So they were getting ready to rotate out when I'd got wounded. And they didn't—so she asked me, she says “Did they know you went back?” Because she thought I'd snuck on a flight to go back. Because that's how wounded—that's how severely wounded I really was, that there was no way I should have gone back. At least in their mind, as a surgeon and anesthesiologist.

TS: Right.

RN: So.

TS: So, besides just saying you wanted to be with your Marines, when you think about going back to your boys and going back to Marines, how do you reconcile that?

RN: There's someone there to take care of my kids. They're going to be fine. Those young Marines? The last thing they heard was half my face was blown off and I was on my way to Bethesda. For them to see me, a couple days later, with a bandage on the side of my face, walking around, motivating the hell out of them was worth it.

TS: Okay, but still, someone could have stepped into your slot, couldn't they have?

- RN: But psychologically, they couldn't have done that. Psychologically, those Marines—again, we're talking air wingers. We're not talking, you know, 0311 grunt. We're talking, you know, namby-pamby, chase wires, you know. Worst that's going to happen is we're going to get shocked from electricity.
- TS: [laughs] So psychologically, what—how do you think that you assisted them, when you came back?
- RN: Well, one, when you're on a year-long deployment, halfway through, you're like "Ugh, halfway through." [chuckles] And so, you're already feeling, like, dread. And when someone is—especially, you know, someone—and I don't want to say that I'm esteemed, but—I don't want to say I was—I was liked.
- TS: Right.
- RN: So, when someone that's—that you might look up to or that you just got done talking to gets wounded and is airlifted, that has a traumatic effect on an individual, and again, to be told that whole, you know, half my face was blown off—I don't know how far from the truth that is, but that image that they have in their mind and then to get to see me, it proves to them that as a Marine, we need to get back in the fight. And so I think psychologically, it boosts [sic, boosts plus bolsters?] their morale, and it also reinforces the leadership by example that we talk about so much in the military, especially in the Marine Corps.
- TS: And what did it do for you, to get back?
- RN: Well, I felt like I won, the insurgents didn't. And I think moreover, especially when I do speaking engagements, I immediately made myself empowered. Instead of being victimized, I empowered myself. And I think, you know, psychologically, even though I, you know, I do have PTSD and I do struggle with certain issues, I didn't—I didn't allow the insurgents to win. So that's how I get through with every day.
- TS: Is the PTSD from the incident, or is it larger than that?
- RN: It's larger than that. Part of it's what we call hypervigilance, that anyone, whether they're wounded or not, you're in an environment where you have a heightened sense of awareness, and sometimes you just can't back down. You have what's been explained to me, you have two parts of your psyche, your emotional and your intellectual. And in a combat environment, you almost have to completely squash out the emotional, and you rely highly on your intellectual. And at some point, when you come back, you're supposed to let them get back together, and sometimes it's not that simple.
- TS: There's a tension between them, perhaps?

RN: Yeah. Well, I joke a lot of times that, you know, even I don't get along with myself.

TS: [chuckles]

RN: But, again, it's—that's a big part of the psyche. And the other part was, I wasn't very well treated or received when I did stay.

TS: By who?

RN: My favorite female gunny! She actually woke me up, I got back midnight of the twenty-eighth and that afternoon, she woke—

TS: This is in August?

RN: Yes.

TS: Okay.

RN: She actually woke me up to start an argument.

TS: What did she wish to argue with you about?

RN: Over her disposable razor handle.

TS: I see.

RN: So, put it this way. When I got wounded, all of my stuff—when I got back—I was wounded on the twenty-seventh, was back by midnight of the twenty-eighth. All of my stuff was already packed. She had already packed all of my stuff. She was glad I was getting sent home. Boy, did I piss her off. [chuckling] 'Cause I didn't go home, I stayed. And so—

TS: Would that have elevated her role, then?

RN: Yes, well, she would have been the senior female enlisted. But it was more than that. I was going to be getting a Purple Heart—I could have cared less. But to someone like her, she was actually jealous of that status, if you will. Not that she could pull off a scar on the side of her face like I can, because she's too vain for that. You can tell there's no love lost there. But, again, she—you know, had to share the—her living quarters with one more person. I mean, she really was that difficult. And the command wouldn't do anything about her.

TS: And how much longer did you have to go?

RN: Five months. Don't worry, I didn't live with her for that five months. [laughs]

TS: Why not?

RN: I went over—when she did that, I got dressed, and definitely shouldn't have been walking around at that point. But I went over and I talked with my captain, and I told him, I said "I cannot—I cannot live like this." And I wanted something done about her, and the sergeant major basically told me that he had a reason to send me home. So if I complained about that issue any further, that I was the one that was basically going to be punished. So. So I didn't say anything more. That's okay, she wanted nothing more than to be a sergeant major in the Marine Corps, and she's a master gunny. So.

TS: Did you see—was there that kind of competition between some of the women for—because of that? Not because—and I don't mean your tension with her, you know, between you two. But I mean, just in general—women in the civilian world, you know, compete against—

RN: Women can be catty. Yeah. Oh, absolutely. But again, I'm one of those—you know, judge me for me, what I do, you know what, I think it's great if someone is better than me. I truly believe that what we all bring to the table is what we bring to the table. And I've always been one of those that—I raise the bar. And if you don't like it, that's just too bad. You know, step up.

TS: Well, there's this question that I've been wanting to ask. Is—you talk about—okay, so, when we talk about the Purple Heart that you had as a gunny sergeant. You believe that you're the first female gunny sergeant that received a Purple Heart. And is there a little bit of tension between being the first female to do—to have—not—obviously, it's not like you "won" this, you know—

RN: Yeah, you don't want one.

TS: Yeah, right, you don't want one. [chuckling] But that, you know, that you received a Purple Heart—but, attention of being the first woman X, whatever that X might be, and being a Marine. You know, whereas—you're not the first Marine gunny sergeant to get it. So, what I'm saying is, is there—there's this tension between, you know, showing that women can do whatever it is, either—whether it's get injured, survive an injury, be in combat, whatever the first might be. Flying in Ospreys, and just wanting to be a Marine. Do you understand what I'm—

RN: Oh, absolutely.

TS: So how is that, I guess, for you—because I've never been a first of anything, so I wonder, you know, for you, how do you balance that out, I guess?

RN: The way I conducted myself, when I stayed, and I chose to stay. Because I didn't—at no time did I think "Ooh, I'm the first female Purple Heart recipient gunny, blah blah blah."

You—those thoughts don't go through your head. But the thought of being a wounded female, and knowing I've already been—you know, anybody that knows me knows that, you know, I've already been over there seven months, whatever, I've done my part. I didn't give anyone the fodder to say I went home because I was a woman. And that—that in and of itself, setting the example, saying "Guess what, if I was a guy, no one would have thought that I should go home because I have children, that I'm a father." So, again, I guess, stepping up, like I said, raising that bar was what I did. And setting the example, and not just, you know—I think I was proving something to myself, too, you know, that I was empowered, I wasn't going to go home on anyone else's terms. And the other part to that was, all those young Marines that were in Al Asad, not just the Marines that worked with me, but the ones that heard the little scuttlebutt, you know, rumors.

TS: Sure.

RN: Because, you know, that happens. And you know, Al Asad, we weren't the only ones there. You know, we had other [U.S.] Army and Marine units there. And so, you know, my impact wasn't centrally localized to just us, and now, not knowing—because believe me, I did not foresee this, but now, being involved with the book *Band of Sisters and The Girls Come Marching Home*, and doing speaking engagements, and helping others feel this sense of empowerment over victimization and so on. You know, talking with civilians that have no clue as to what we're doing over there. And the sense of, you know, you hear all the time, women aren't in combat roles. We're not. However, the front lines aren't what they used to be. And so, that, I think, is a role that I took on—I don't want to say I was naïve, but that wasn't the role I intended on taking on, but boy, I was—that's definitely the role I've taken. And now being the junior vice commander for the local chapter of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, and the state sergeant at arms for the Purple Heart—you know, those things, so it kind of puts a face on what women are doing, and I think that was what was important.

TS: Are those for men and women, or just women, those organizations?

RN: Those are—those are anyone with a Purple Heart.

TS: Anyone with a Purple Heart. And do you see—when you go out and talk to groups about your experience, what kind of questions do you get?

RN: Well, some of them—again, it's that—depending on what group I'm talking to. If it's civilians, a lot of them are still really naïve as to what women are really contributing. You know, we have a lot more to offer than typing or putting a Band-Aid on somebody, so I think in that regard, they ask questions that are more in tune with just the military in general. I still get—from Marines and civilians alike—I have a Purple Heart license plate, on my car. People want to know what happened to my husband.

TS: Is that what they ask?

RN: Hm? Right.

TS: When they, like, see you step out of the car?

RN: Well, if they just—if I'm in a parking lot, or you know, like a new neighbor.

TS: Right, oh, okay. "Oh, I saw that on your car,"

RN: Yeah. And they'll ask me—or, now, you know, Facebook. And someone that I used to know that friended me on Facebook saw I have a Purple Heart pin on my lapel, and they wanted to know, you know, something about that. You know. And it's like "No, it's mine. I'm the one that got the Purple Heart." And so, in that regard—and again, it's that whole sense of—you know, and again, some of these people are Marines, that are asking these questions.

TS: "How could a woman get a Purple Heart?"

RN: Right.

TS: "They're not in combat."

RN: Right, or, I was wearing my Charlie uniform, which is the short sleeved khaki shirt with ribbons, and someone that I used to, you know, work with years ago saw me at a conference, and you know, he pointed at the—kind of with that questioning look on his face and pointed at the little Purple Heart ribbon, you know, that I had, because it wasn't the whole medal thing, it was just the little ribbon or whatever, and he's pointing at it, and he's kind of giving me this—I said "Oh, I just like the color purple." You know, I mean—it's, again, and so you get that. But the over—over-resounding, I guess, effect that I get for the most part when I talk with military groups, especially from the men, is they're—they have a different outlook and a renewed sense of the pride and that means a lot, you know, that it's—you know, I'm, again, I'm a Marine, I'm not a female, I'm a Marine. And some of these guys, you know, I don't—at first, I didn't even think—you know, I didn't do anything heroic or anything like that.

But it wasn't until some people said "You know, you were putting your life on the line just like everybody else," and so, you know, but I think what, again, makes me feel proud of what I've done is that I stayed. You know, had I gone home, I probably wouldn't have the same feeling about my Purple Heart, if I'd gone home, because I don't think I would have rated it to the—I just don't think I would have looked at it the same.

TS: Because you went back on the job.

RN: Because I didn't do my job.

TS: If you had gone home.

RN: If I'd have gone home, yeah, I really think I—hadn't completed it.

TS: I see. That's interesting. Going to pause this for a minute. [recording paused] [laughs] I'll figure something out. Okay, we took a short break there for a little bit. So you're in Iraq, and you've come back to your unit. You—how are you feeling, physically?

RN: Physically, I actually [clears throat] suffered from migraines. And I'd never had a migraine before. And I'm also allergic to painkillers. So, anything short of Tylenol, I can't take, and I didn't want to say anything, because I didn't want to get sent home. So I didn't say anything to anybody. So, so it was pretty tough.

TS: Yeah. [audio file 2 ends, audio file 3 begins] Well, and we talked a little bit about, you know, like, I guess—how, sometimes in military, whenever something has happened, they want to get it in the paper, right? And yet, for you, it's like just a routine—you know, you're just doing your job sort of thing. And how do you feel about, you know, seeing your name in the paper, I guess is what I'm saying. Because you know, when I Googled you, you came up quite a bit there, Rosie. [chuckles]

RN: I think, you know, to a certain extent—like, some people that I'll meet, you know, for whatever, and they'll be like “You look really familiar. Were you stationed here,” or whatever.
 And it's one of those “Well, I was in the Navy-Marine Corps Times, or on the [unclear]”, whatever, you know. And they'll be like—and sometimes I'll have to say, you know, I'm the first female gunnery sergeant Purple Heart recipient.
 And then it'll be like “Oh, yeah!” And that's where they'll remember.

TS: That's where I saw your name, or face, or something.

RN: Right. And so, for the most part, it's one of those that they just—I have that—they've seen me, they just don't remember where they've seen me, and that's usually where they've seen me, is, you know, in a write-up or again, by virtue of the—I'm definitely civically involved, because I think it's important, especially now that I'm retired from the military, I want to stay connected, and so I'm on the retiree council. And so I help both, you know, retired and active duty veterans in that regard, plus being in, you know, the Military Order of the Purple Heart, both in a personal aspect and a professional aspect of wellness, I think.

TS: And you have a story to tell, too, you know. You do.

RN: And again, when I share it, I hope that someone walks away feeling empowered, and you know, that they actually walk away with something from it.

TS: Well, it's interesting how you say, you know, you feel like you won because you went back, and you didn't let the insurgents, you know, beat you. And send you back home. Right.

RN: Right.

TS: That's a great way to look at it.

RN: Well, that's what they're looking for.

TS: Yes. Send you back, so. We talked a little bit about—how about the food in Iraq, how was that? This was before your, you know, you can only have—[laughs] soft food.

RN: Again, depending on your perspective—I didn't have to cook for a year, I didn't have to do dishes for a year, so in that regard, it was amazing. The food—it was like Groundhog's Day. Every Monday, it was this, every Tuesday, it was this, it just—and next week, you knew that on Monday you were having this, on Tuesday you were having this, and so it got pretty mundane.

TS: Did it.

RN: It was bad.

TS: It was [laughs] okay, bad, that's—clarify that. So you didn't have to do the dishes, but—necessarily. Now, did you have any—I know that some celebrities and things have gone over to Iraq to visit the troops. Did anybody come to see you guys while you were there?

RN: We had some—Matt Lauer came over, we had some comedians come over, Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders. You know, big deal. You know, we'd been—I have a friend that wrote a couple books, and she's been trying to get over there, to, you know, basically do something for the women. Again, that whole sense of empowerment.

TS: They don't want to see the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders?

RN: No, no, and they won't let us have the Chippendales.

TS: [laughs]

RN: So—but again, it—they—when you only make up a certain percentage, obviously you're not going to get catered to, and I don't think we should be catered to in that regard. But at the same time, you know, I really don't care for the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders; it just doesn't do anything for me.

TS: [chuckles] Right.

RN: So.

- TS: But you know, that USO [United Service Organizations] tradition to have them, you know—entertainers go in.
- RN: Right. But again, USO is indigenous basically of the World War II era, and so that whole—the GI—
- TS: So there's a gendered kind of—
- RN: It's still gendered, yes.
- TS: For the men, okay. Well, in—in general, how were your relationships with your supervisors and superiors, throughout your time that you served?
- RN: I would have to say during the early part of my career, strained would be a nice way of putting it. One, because I'm not an idiot, and regardless of someone's rank, I think respect is mutual, and so I would never allow anyone to disrespect me. So, I was pretty opinionated, but I can say that I might have teetered on the disrespect on occasion, but I—you know, twenty-plus years in the Marine Corps, and I've never had a charge sheet. So, in that regard. But I can say that I truly believe, and this is I think what probably got me through a career, was, you take something positive away from everybody, and that's how I've always looked at it. Even someone that's a pain in the butt to work for, you choose to not be that person. So I think I've styled my leadership around that, that I've become the leader that I am today based on who I didn't want to be like, and who I did want to be like. And so for me, to have, you know, Marines that have worked for me in the past to still contact me and let me know what's going on in their career is pretty moving. I have right now a female that, she used to come to me for advice as a lance corporal. And she is now meritorious gunny on the second of this month, and she just started DI [drill instructor] school. And so, I mean, to be included in that is kind of, you know, important and touching for me.
- TS: So what do you think those subordinates to you—and you were kind of talking about it a little bit, but what do you think they would say about you if they were asked about you. What do you think about, you know.
- RN: Well, I'm certain some of them might not have great things to say, but I can—I actually spoke with a good friend of mine the other day, and I was the squadron gunny for a while, and this was at a high point in my career, and he was the acting sergeant major, and he can remember, he was telling me that he can remember the lieutenant colonel would say “Could you just make sure that she doesn't start yelling until after zero eight?” So—not that yelling and screaming at people was my high point, but you know, having worked with people that were just amazing, I worked with some really amazing Marines for a better part of three years, when I was at MAWS 31. So much to the extent that, you know, I'm still in touch with some of them.
- TS: Yeah. And would you—we talked a little bit about mentoring, I think we did.

RN: Yes.

TS: And you were telling me about some of the people that you—oh, and you said, there's some people you followed and some people you—the role models that you wanted to follow most that you didn't, right. And did you—it's funny, I have this question on here. "What is your most memorable decoration or award?"

RN: Well, I would have to say my Purple Heart.

TS: [chuckles]

RN: But again, I think that, for me, what makes it the most memorable was, you know, getting it in front of the Marines that I returned to. That would probably make it the most memorable.

TS: And why did you want to do that?

RN: Well, one, staying, like I said, was important. To show to them, you know, the leadership by example. And two, if I stayed because of them, then obviously I should receive the award that I got in front of them.

TS: Yeah. And did you—how much longer were you in Iraq? About five months later, right?

RN: Yeah, five months.

TS: And was there any other injuries or—how did your unit do? Did everybody come back?

RN: Well, again, we're in the air wing, so we don't really—I mean, outside of the indirect fire, we really don't take on anything. We very rarely went outside the wire, and counting—we had a lot of people that rotate at the halfway point, and then we had some people that augmented us from the MEW, and some of the other units, and counting the corpsmen and so on. Maybe fifteen hundred passed through, during the time that we were the ace, and I was the only one wounded. [chuckles]

TS: Oh, you were? Is that right.

RN: Yup. The only one wounded.

TS: You're just lucky that way.

RN: Yup.

TS: Well, how was it to leave? When it came time to leave, how did you feel about that, having to go home?

RN: Well, I had two children, so I was very excited to finally get home to them. And again, I was going home, you know, at the end of my tour, so it wasn't like I was abandoning my job.

TS: Right, right. And how did your children—when you explained to them what happened to you, how were they? How old were they, then?

RN: My one son was about thirteen and the other one was eleven. And my youngest, he was like “Chicks dig scars.”

TS: Oh, I see. Is that right? But were they scared?

RN: No, not really. Again, you know, they've spent their lives from the time they were born, they've always known the Marine Corps, so it was definitely, you know, something that they knew could happen.

TS: So where'd you go next?

RN: Well, I retired back in '09.

TS: And when did you leave Iraq?

RN: I left Iraq in '06.

TS: Oh-six. So you've still got a few years.

RN: Well, I was with the unit that was—I was the ace with, so we came back here as a unit.

TS: So you stayed there.

RN: Yeah.

TS: And you had said much earlier about how you were put in for a promotion and you had all the check things marked off and you decided—

RN: I put in a letter to the board three years in a row, saying to please do not select me. And you—there's a line in there, you know, that's kind of like a disclaimer, I understand I may get promoted, you know, for the needs of the Corps, blah blah blah. But the first board that I had submitted the letter, I met the master gunnery sergeant that was briefing my packet, and she told me that they were going to select me, and they—she actually made the comment that she was going to call me and cuss me out. But there was enough people that knew me and knew of my circumstances that understood my decision to, you know, retire, and be a parent.

TS: So if you had taken the promotion, you would have had to stay in for a longer period, or?

RN: Well, no, because I still had—you only have to serve two years, with that promotion.

TS: I see.

RN: And I would have still had just over two years left to serve. But you know, with that promotion requires moving, and at that point, with having a child that's autistic, it's just—it's stressful, and at that point, it just wasn't worth it. It was very bittersweet, and again, that—you know, I work for the Second Marine Division Association now, so I still work with Marines. I work, you know, in a building where there's Marines all around me. So you know, I'm still basically eating and breathing Marine Corps every day, so it's not like I really gave up that part of the Marine Corps.

TS: What do you miss?

RN: I miss the camaraderie, but I don't miss it to the extent that it's something that I regret. I made the—you know, the right decision.

TS: What is it that you don't miss?

RN: The catty—the cattiness.

TS: Yeah?

RN: I don't—I don't—and now it's kind of nice that if someone says something or does something that I don't like, and it doesn't matter what their rank is, it doesn't matter who they are, I can tell them exactly how I feel, and it—now it really doesn't faze me to do that.

TS: So, in a hierarchal system, you do have to pay attention to that, right?

RN: Yeah.

TS: Yeah.

RN: We call it tact.

TS: Okay. Tact.

RN: And, you know, the joke is, it's that thing that holds the calendar up on the wall.

TS: [chuckles] Okay. Now, you were in for—how many years, twenty?

RN: Just over twenty.

TS: Just over twenty?

RN: Almost twenty-one.

TS: And it was '88 to 2009, right?

RN: Yes.

TS: Were there any changes for women during that period of time that jumped out at you?

RN: I think the biggest change that I experienced was, we changed, you know, what our PFT [physical fitness test] requirements were. Becoming more standard and in line with the male PFT. The MCT, which is Marine Combat Training, we didn't participate in MCT up until, I want to say '97, is when women started participating in MCT. Which I think is very important, it's an integral part of being a Marine, and that's just one step closer to us being—

TS: Is that the pogo stick stuff?

RN: Well, we did the pugil sticks—

TS: Pugil sticks.

RN: And we did that in—we actually did that in recruit training. We didn't, but later, when I was a drill instructor.

TS: I see.

RN: But MCT is—you know, I mean they actually, females actually throw grenades.

TS: Okay.

RN: Which is a scary thought, sometimes. I can remember going through with recruit training, when I was a recruit, we only got to throw practice grenades. And there was only a handful of us that could actually throw the practice grenade out of fragmentation radius. So that is kind of a scary thought, that some of these—these, you know, young—young individuals are—but you've got men that are probably not any more attuned to doing it. So I do not envy MCT instructors, it's now considered a B billet, which is—you have, they're like extra schools, extra billets that Marines do, that's career enhancing. DI duty, recruiting duty, embassy duty, and Marine Corps Combat instructor.

TS: That's one of those checks.

RN: Checks.

TS: I see. Do you feel that you were treated—how do you feel the military treated you regarding your pay, promotions, and assignments?

RN: I think in the very beginning, I don't think I was treated fairly or equally. But again, I don't think it was the Marine Corps that was doing, it's just like anything, you know, whether it's civilian sector or military. It's the people. And I mean, I got a glowing fitness report as a young sergeant from the—the aviation maintenance officer, and you know, someone questioned how I got such a glowing fitness report, what I did for it, that kind of thing.

TS: Like, insinuating?

RN: Insinuating that I did something inappropriate—

TS: To receive it?

RN: Right.

TS: How did you respond to that?

RN: I just knew that he was ignorant, and to ignore it.

TS: Yeah. Interesting. What about sexual harassment?

RN: Again, I think it's not the actual military. You have sexual harassment both in the military and the civilian sector. I dealt with it, I've had my issues even all the way up into being a gunnery sergeant and dealing with it. It's, you know, ignorant people, and I dealt with it accordingly, and I would, to this day, if I had the issue, I would address it, and I would encourage anybody that ever has that as an issue, silence is condoning it, so if it ever arises, someone should do something about it.

TS: Did you have anybody in particular that you would consider like a hero or heroine?

RN: I don't—

TS: I don't necessarily mean in the Marines, just you know, in general.

RN: Well, the one person that comes to mind is Oliver North. I mean, Colonel North—he got a raw deal with the Iran-Contra, but he stood his ground and he was a Marine, true and true. And I think that—to me, I mean, for my generation, I think that that would—someone that's, you know, alive, that I think influenced in that regard. But I would think, again, Marine-wise, you have John Basilone, who was a Medal of Honor recipient. You know, Marines that—it doesn't have to be name-specific, just Marines that did their jobs and were proud to do their jobs and set the example.

TS: So you're naming all Marines. [chuckles] Okay. Of course you are! That's great. And what about the—you started, earlier, you had talked a little about your interest in politics and, you know, talking to Barbara Bush. So, you went through Reagan, George H.W., you went all the way through—

RN: Clinton.

TS: Clinton, and then George W. Bush. Do you have any thoughts on those that you'd like to share?

RN: I really like Ronald Reagan. [both laugh] Matter of fact, one of his quotes, I actually have on Facebook.

TS: Yeah. Which one is it?

RN: "Some people go a lifetime wondering if they've made a difference. Marines don't have that problem."

TS: That was from Ronald Reagan?

RN: Ronald Reagan. So.

TS: So what was it that you liked about him so much?

RN: He was—he was human, I mean, he was your everyman's man, and he didn't—he just didn't seem to act above—he didn't have airs about the way he was. He didn't make excuses for himself, he owned up, and I think that's important, to, you know, live up to who you are and don't—if you make a mistake, own up to it. And I, you know, as far as any of the other—I mean, obviously, I'm a Republican. [chuckles] But I don't—I don't, as far as, you know, political affiliation with any of the current administration—I don't want to really embellish on that.

TS: Oh, that's okay, I don't even mean necessarily, you know, political feelings, I just mean—because you had these different commanders in chief. You know. And even, like, the Defense Secretaries, you know, you had quite a few of those.

RN: Well, I can say I was completely appalled at the whole Monica Lewinsky thing.

TS: I don't think you're the first person that has ever felt that way.

RN: Yeah. But I just—you know, one, to deny it, and then two, we're held to a different standard, in the military, and I don't think that's right.

TS: Because he's the commander in chief? And not to make it political, but the idea of—the current wars have been going on for a while, in Afghanistan and Iraq. And when you pick up the paper, not—outside the military press, there's some—I guess you'd say—hmm. [pause] Boredom, with the wars. That the public isn't—like, is getting tired of them. I guess. And somehow—does that make sense, the way I'm presenting that?

RN: Yes.

TS: So when you would pick up the paper, and you know, the men and women are dying over there, fighting and protecting us. And then, you know, some celebrity is in jail, or something like that. Do you have any thoughts on that?

RN: It's one of those that really frustrates me, because the press that gives coverage—matter of fact, that's something else I posted on my Facebook. The press covers all the stuff that's going on with Charlie Sheen, and he's an idiot, plain and simple. Just listen to him talk, you know, he basically thinks we're idiots. And he insults, you know, the populace, and he feels that he's above everybody else, and so on. And you know, you've got Britney Spears, and these are all people that, you know, I—again, don't want my children to hold them as role models. And yet, we've had young men and women that are eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old, that have laid down their life so that they have the right to be public idiots. It bothers me, that the press will show all of that, and sad that we, you know, had the tsunami in Japan. I mean, that's just terrible and horrific. The only positive thing that I could say came out of the earthquake and the tsunami in Japan was, for a brief moment, that we didn't have to listen to Charlie Sheen.

TS: [chuckles] Okay. And then what do you say to people who say women shouldn't be in combat?

RN: Well, we are. We may not be, you know, taking up combat arms in the same sense that, you know, people think of the actual front lines of combat, but in today's arena of combat, there are no front lines. And there's potential for any soldier or Marine to be in that environment. And I just hope that we're all getting the same training, and that way we've got the same abilities to protect ourselves and defend our unit.

TS: The other, I guess most recent controversy has been about the Don't Ask, Don't Tell repeal. It's since been repealed, but not implemented fully yet.

RN: Right.

TS: Do you have any thoughts on that whole thing?

RN: The best I can say on that is, I actually have friends that have retired from the military that have a significant other. I do have friends that are currently on active duty that I will not mention names. And they love their country, and they're serving their country, and me personally, it's not my lifestyle, but again, when twenty-five percent of society served

during World War II, and less than ten percent serves voluntarily now, if they're—if they love their country and they want to volunteer, then they should be allowed to. I just don't think that we're really receptive or ready for it.

TS: And—what is his name, General Amos?

RN: Yes.

TS: He said that—he kind of was against it, but then he said, you know, the Marines will implement it the best. And he says—is that because of the discipline of the Marine—the values and things that go into it?

RN: Well, I think part of it is that whole mindset of “We’re going to do what we’re told to do, and we’re going to do it to the best of our ability.”

TS: And so even though he might have disagreed with repealing it—

RN: Right.

TS: —He’s going to make sure that it’s implemented properly.

RN: And I think that, you know, when it’s coming from the head cheese, then that’s exactly how it should come about.

TS: How do you think your life has been different because you’ve been in the military? When you, you know, joined up when you were twenty, right?

RN: Yeah. I really appreciate indoor plumbing. [both chuckle] You know, it’s twofold. One, I do appreciate things on a totally different plane, I think, than someone who hasn’t served. To really appreciate, you know, they just assume that that freedom and that liberty is there. And on the second end of that, having been wounded and missing my maxial[sic] artery by millimeters, it gives you a totally different outlook. I walk away from it knowing that, you know, only by the grace of God, and so I definitely, you know, I cherish every day, and I look at it as, I’ll clean it up for the tape, but if you bugger up today, you’ve always got tomorrow.

TS: What—if a young man or a young woman came to you today and said, you know, I’d like to join the Marines. What would you say?

RN: I have a friend that’s a recruiter.

TS: [laughs]

RN: I would encourage them, I would—you know, again, that's one of those, I've got two boys of my own. And my one son, again, he's autistic, so that's a no-brainer, and I just don't think my youngest is disciplined enough.

TS: Is that right. So they probably won't go in.

RN: My youngest wants to, but again, I don't think he—I mean, there's still hope for him, I mean, he's only sixteen.

TS: There you go.

RN: He could still mature.

TS: Right.

RN: But again, I would definitely—I wouldn't sugarcoat it, though, I would lay it out for whoever, you know, talks to me about it. Let them know, it's not all that simple. And the other thing is, you know, I've got friends that—that are retired Marines, and we go back and forth, and some of them say "I don't remember boot camp being that easy!" And all this other stuff. And what we forget to realize is, they're already in culture shock before they even get there. They've given up their cell phone, their iPod, the internet, the laptop, they've given up so much that didn't exist when we put our feet on the yellow footprints.

TS: That's really interesting, I hadn't really thought about that before. Yeah, that's true, isn't it.

RN: It's—I mean, most people, today, and the statistic is less than fifty percent, but it's more than forty percent of people actually check their email, their Facebook, or whatever, every day. Every day.

TS: Well, what did we do on our break? [laughs]

RN: Yeah, checked our cell phones for our messages!

TS: That's right.

RN: So, that—I mean, they really are, I mean, they're giving up a whole lot more than, you know, cigarettes and bubble gum and soda pop—

TS: TV.

RN: —when they—yeah.

- TS: Interesting. Well, that's true. Well, is there anything that you would want a civilian, I guess, to know or understand about the military, or even about the Marines that maybe they may not appreciate?
- RN: Well, it's—the only way someone could totally understand what it is to be a Marine is to actually do it. I mean, it's—we are totally different from any other branch of service. I really truly believe—if you talk to a lot of people, even from other branches of service, we're just—we're looked to—even Eleanor Roosevelt thought we were just about the crudest animal there ever was, but she loved us. And so I think in that regard, we might be, you know, the brassy, you know, speak our mind individuals, but when you strip that all away, we definitely love one another and really embrace that whole *esprit de corps* that we talk about and the whole *semper fidelis* of being always faithful.
- TS: Was there anything really difficult about transitioning from the Marines to the civilian world? I mean, I know you said before, you're surrounded by Marines. And you are. [both laugh] I walked in here.
- RN: Well, I don't have anyone to yell at in the Marine Corps anymore, but I have two teenage boys, so. So in that regard. I think the hardest transition for me is, again, not having that daily, someone needing me. You know, in the Marine Corps sense. But again, I know that I left the active ranks to, you know, ready, capable individuals. And like I said, someone that was a lance corporal that, you know, came to me for advice way back when is now a gunny at Parris Island going through, you know, DI School. So it—everything comes full circle.
- TS: Kind of passing the torch.
- RN: It is. It is. And so I feel good about that, I feel—you know, I feel that—not that there's a bunch of mini-me's running around, but there are. It's kind of scary. But as long as, you know, they're doing good things and I really, again, look to that, you know, when they're contacting me and, you know, getting guidance, or just letting me know where they're at in the world.
- TS: So do you feel like you still can be a mentor to these—
- RN: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Not—and again, I don't limit myself to Marines. I definitely think that I can help a male, female, civilian, military, feel, you know, a sense of empowerment.
- TS: And that's what you're doing as you go out and do your talks.
- RN: Yeah, because a lot of my speaking engagements aren't just, you know, curtailed toward military bases, they're, you know, I've done speaking engagements at churches and, you know, book clubs, whether it's on base or off base. So I've—I've definitely done my share. And again, I think the more I do it, it helps me as well. It's kind of a transition for

me from, you know, both being combat wounded, and it's also a nice transition, you know, from the military to the civilian sector.

TS: What does patriotism mean to you?

RN: Patriotism? Well, I'll try not to do the whole Military Order of the Purple Heart one. But basically, patriotism is loyalty to my country, to my family, to my God, to my brethren. I think that patriotism is a loyalty towards something that you can't—it's not tangible. You know, a lot of people, you think of the American flag, and you think of that as being patriotism. That's our symbol. But I think it's that nontangible sense of pride, that you stand for something.

TS: Well, you had a long career, and we only had a few hours to talk about it. But is there anything that we haven't—that I haven't asked you, or that you wanted to talk about? That we haven't brought up?

RN: Oh, I think we've done pretty much quite a bit.

TS: Yeah.

RN: But I really appreciate the opportunity to share my stories, and I hope that someone does, you know, get something from it and walks away feeling, you know, that sense of empowerment and that sense of pride that they, you know, can go, whether they do serve in the military or not, they've got a sense of belonging.

TS: Yeah. Thank you so very much for talking with me, I really appreciate it. It's been really great.

RN: I enjoyed it. Thank you.

[End of Interview]