

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
YVETTE PINO
Cook, U.S. Army, Operation Iraqi Freedom
2010

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Pino, Yvette., Oral History Interview, 2010.

Approximate length: 1 hour 34 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

Yvette Pino discusses joining the army, boot camp and advanced individual training [AIT], as well as her service with the 101st Airborne Headquarters and Headquarters Company [HHC] Division during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Pino remembers her reaction to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and how they affected her enlistment. She details her basic training at Fort Jackson [South Carolina] and AIT at Fort Lee [Virginia]. Pino comments on the dynamic between men and women during training as well as gives anecdotes regarding an ankle injury and her experience with the anthrax shots. She describes her role in the HHC Division as a cook and mentions her duty station at Fort Campbell [Kentucky]. Pino discusses her first deployment to Iraq and comments on night guard duty, the sand, and air raids. She gives an anecdote about painting a jersey barrier at Camp Doha [Kuwait] and talks about the battle buddies she has had throughout her service.

Biographical Sketch:

Yvette Pino enlisted in the Army in 2001 and served as a cook with the 101st Airborne HHC Division. She attended basic training at Fort Jackson [South Carolina] and then AIT at Fort Lee [Virginia]. Pino was stationed at Fort Campbell [Kentucky] before being deployed twice, in 2003 and in 2005, to Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Interviewed by Matthew Sorenson, 2010.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2015.

Reviewed by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Abstract written by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Interview Transcript:

[Tape 1]

Sorenson: This is an interview with Yvette Pino who served with the HHC Division, 101st Airborne during Operation Iraqi Freedom. She deployed twice, once in 2003 to 2004, and once again in 2005-2006. This interview is being conducted at the Wisconsin Veteran's Museum at 30 West Mifflin Street, Madison, Wisconsin 53703 on December 2, 2010. The interviewer is Matthew Sorenson.

Yvette, tell me a little bit about your background, your early family life, and the decision or the factors that influenced your decision to join the service.

Pino: Okay. I'm originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico. I studied theater at the University of New Mexico and I was a professional stage hand and props artisan. I moved to Connecticut to work in an off-Broadway theater in the late 90s and I worked as a props artisan for four or five years. That job didn't pay very much, so I was working two or three jobs. I became exhausted and I was looking for a better way to supplement my income. Originally, I went to the recruiter and, I'd always wanted to be in the military and this seemed like an appropriate time.

I went to the recruiter to seek out information on Army Reserve. We were in talks and I was getting my workout regimen settled, and I had to lose some weight to get in. So, while all that was happening, September 11th happened. After September 11th, literally right after I heard about it I thought, the recruiter's going to be calling me like any minute. I was staring at the phone. Sure enough, a few hours later the recruiter called to update my status and to see how I was coming along on my workout. Basically, he was calling to find out if I was still interested. I knew what the call was about. He knew I knew what the call was about and I said, "Unh-uh, no thanks, I'm good."

He was a real good guy and said, "What are you scared of? Why are you not interested all of a sudden?" I was like, "Have you not seen the news?" He basically tried to sweet talk me into joining and I said, "No thanks." I hung up the phone and then in the ensuing weeks I was watching the news, and watching everybody start getting ready to go on deployments, and just watching the politics behind everything. I felt really guilty for doing what I did, so I went back to the recruiter. My job was coming to a point where it was becoming—there was no more outlets for me to advance. I realized that, between the guilt and the idea that my job was at a dead end that maybe it would be a good idea to join fulltime.

I called the recruiter back and I changed my status to interested, and instead of Reserves, fulltime. I lost the weight that I needed to lose within about a month, and then got all the paperwork, and then I got shipped out.

Sorenson: Oh okay. What year was it? This was 2001?

Pino: It was 2001, yeah. It was right after September 11th and then I had a series of meetings, and I had to lose, it was like twenty pounds or something like that. I'd lost the weight and they got me into—January I was in MEPS. I started in February. February 26, 2002 is when the day I literally got on the plane to go to basic training.

Sorenson: Can you talk a little bit more about how you felt about September 11th?

Pino: Because I was working in Connecticut, and I was working with actors that lived in New York City, it was more of an emotional impact on our day-to-day lives. The realities that set in when the skies went quiet and there was no more planes in the sky. I wasn't really familiar with the World Trade Center, but my friend who was my coworker was very familiar with it, and my apprentice who worked under me was from New York City and was actually on the subway system when it happened. He was trapped underneath for a long time.

Several of our employees had uncles and aunts that were firefighters, and they lost a few family members. Some of the actors were missing. We were trying to track them down. When it happened on a Tuesday, for the theater Monday and Tuesday are our weekends, so all the actors were back in New York City when it happened.

That week was an impact of--our job was affected. We went what's called "dark." There were no shows. It was the first time that Broadway went dark in, I think, it was fifty years. Then at night the planes, there were no planes flying over, so it was a really strange feeling. When the theater did come back to work the actors were kind of in a state of shock. Everybody was walking around just kind of like zombies. They're doing these big cheesy musical theaters numbers and then coming offstage and weeping.

My feelings were of confusion. I was not the angry type, like I wanted to go get vengeance for whoever did it; I was just very concerned with our surroundings. It was so eerie that just one right after another and they kept happening. It seemed like, I got out of the shower, it happened. Then I'm almost ready for work and thirty minutes later, it happened. Then I get to work and another one crashes. It was just this really weird series of, what's going on? I think when we started watching the news; the news was on twenty-four hours a day.

When the news hit and it was on so long, and you watch everything that's going on, and all what people were assuming was happening, I really got disheartened by the idea. I was happy that America was joining together and was really, got that patriotic swing, but I always am fearful when you get an over-patriotic nation, because you get a lot of vigilantes, and you get a lot of people that want to change the world-- just kicked people in the ass and I don't know if their [inaudible]. There was a lot of racial profiling was going on, especially in Connecticut. You couldn't drive around in an unmarked van without getting pulled over. I'm from New Mexico, I have darker skin. There was always a raised eyebrow when I walked around in Connecticut.

After September 11th, that's going to be normal wherever you go, but I think there was just a weird feeling of uneasiness that I was really confused about. I felt like, by watching the news I didn't understand what was going on, the politics in the world. One of the things for me was, the only way I'm really going to understand is if I involve myself in it and I don't want to be in politics, so I thought, If I'm in the Army and we have to go to war then at least I can comprehend either the purpose of it, or the behind-the-scenes so that I actually have a voice that's educated as opposed to just watching media.

Sorenson: I see. When you deployed, I'm sorry, when you left to go to boot camp where did you go?

Pino: I went to Fort Jackson, South Carolina. They call it relax in Jackson.

Sorenson: Can you talk a little bit about your experiences in boot camp. How did you find it? Was anything particularly difficult or easy?

Pino: I was actually a little disappointed in how easy it was. I think the most challenging thing about boot camp was the mental game playing, and the mental adversity that you have to build up. I was really grateful for it in the end because throughout your whole military career it's always a mental game. For females, too, because you're not—we can't get away with just—well, I could because I had a lot of strength so I could just carry things and work my way in to the trust level that way. The grunt labor guys usually, we're the ones that people trusted the most because they were reliable. I fell into that category because of my strength.

You know there was--I decided when I went to basic training, it was a huge life change for me, it was a huge culture change for me, that I was just going to remain quiet; that I didn't go there to make friends, I didn't go there to do anything except learn to become a soldier. I had stripped myself of everything. I was not making any money, I needed to re-

discipline and refocus myself, so I was really concentrating on recreating myself in some ways.

When I went in I had two male drill sergeants and one female drill sergeant. Drill Sergeant Guthrey [sp??] is the female and she was an E-7, and this woman was phenomenal. She was really energetic and really thoughtful, but she was hard. She was really hard; very strict. Then I had a really gung-ho airborne, parachute, the whole nine yards. Didn't want females in the military, but was doing his thing. Then I had a really cool, laid-back guy. He had all the same awards and accolades that the other drill sergeant did, but he chose not to display them. That was his motto: that he didn't need to display his honors on his chest to know what he had accomplished. That was just a different mentality, so it turned out to be a really good balance.

The exercise was kind of pathetic. We did a lot of exercise. I was training for old-school Army. My father's in the military, my brother's in the military, so I was training to really have that growing, you're going to run until you throw up and I didn't really face any of that. It was winter, so it was really cold and we weren't allowed to wear any of our cold weather gear. We had it issued to us, but we weren't allowed to wear it. I remember how cold it was getting up in the mornings and waiting to hope and pray that they let us wear our jackets and our knit cap, and it never happened.

We'd go to PT. PT was fairly easy. Two weeks before basic I almost broke my ankle. I was running. I used to run at night in Connecticut and it was snowing, and I just totally thought I broke it. It was the size of a softball and I thought it was going to keep me from going to basic. I don't know how I got through at MEPS. At MEPS you're stripped down, you're in your underwear and your socks, and when I got my exam my foot was still swollen and green, a little bit of bruise. It was the size of a softball. They were like, "Can you walk on it?" I was like, "Oh, yeah," and I did that thing where you're just like, oh that hurts so much. They're like, you're good to go. I'm like, "Okay."

At Fort Jackson they put you in replacement for a week before they send you to your unit where you start to train. While I was in replacement we didn't do a lot of running because you were getting all your gear. It was all just in-processing. That week allowed it to really heal and it was good to go. Then I was about five/six weeks into basic. I was right before the final phase, because it's a nine-week basic. I was right before the final phase and we were on a run and I hit one of those little orange markers on the street, and turned it, and it was pretty much gone.

My first sergeant was on the run and he made me get up and run all the way back to the barracks. I went to the doctor and the doctor had a one-on-one with me and he was like, "It's pretty bad. Can you walk on it?" I'd try to walk as best I could, but I couldn't do an about-face. He said, "I could X-ray it, or I could not." He goes, "I'm going to tell you something right now. If I X-ray it and there's sign, any indication, a hairline fracture, anything that indicates it could be broken I have to recycle you. Now, you can go back and not do the X-ray because you have such a short amount of time and if you think you can make it through, make it through; but I'll X-ray it but I'm telling you, if there's any indication you'll recycle."

I had just watched a series of people get recycled and some of them got stuck in recycling for like two years. Still not a soldier, still walking around in their knee brace. They didn't get to go home, they didn't get to get an advance in pay. They were just in limbo going crazy. No, I'll suck it up. I didn't end up breaking my ankle as far as I know, but I went through the last phase with this leg, ridiculous painful injury. I did the road march and everything. By the time we got to the final road march I was good. That was probably the hardest part of basic was our twelve-mile road march or was it ten-mile? And I thought it was the hardest thing, but I ended up at Fort Campbell and you have to do a twelve-mile road march once a month because it's air assault qualification. You have to do a twelve-mile in three hours every month.

Sorenson: Oh my gosh.

Pino: What I remember when I was at Fort Campbell it was like, I have to do this every month now. Looking back at basic, ten miles. That was nothing. Ten miles you're just barely burning.

Sorenson: Did you have problems with your ankle throughout your service then afterward?

Pino: I did. I don't know what it is from playing sports and just repetition of injury that my ligaments have just become really weak. I have really tiny ankles. I have these really big thighs and these really tiny ankles and really tiny wrists, so my ankles and my wrists have been really susceptible to injuries. Basically, it was just turning it over and over and as soon as I have my full battle rattle on—when we talk about Iraq, I had a 249. I had this gigantic weapon, two sets of drums on my leg, my flat vest, my Kevlar, and we took everything and made it balance.

We were doing our first, our combat lifesaver training in Iraq. I don't know if he sees me. I'm down just kind of doing our advances, and I caught a rock and with all my gear it just cracked. I didn't get to X-ray it. My medic, he's a great guy. He's a pal, he's a good guy. He said, "You're

going to have to do these stretches and your ligaments are just weak from repetitive turning.” It happened all the time but there was never any evidence other than a big giant swelling and bruising that it was broken. I never.

Sorenson: Can you talk about; in boot camp did you train with the men recruits, as well?

Pino: Yeah. In basic training we all trained together and then once you go to your AIT, you still train co-ed unless you're infantry. Then the infantrymen get taken away. Actually, thinking about it now, infantry all train at Fort Benning and they do their basic and AIT as one full unit. My dad was infantry. He was a chemical specialist so he did his full training with the same guys for eighteen weeks, or half a year or whatever.

We were co-ed. We don't share the same barracks. You're in the same barracks, but we have different bays, so there was a female bay and a male bay, and the female bay had sixty some-odd bunks, or whatever. It was four platoons were separated into each bay. You might be with other females but they may not be in your platoon.

Sorenson: Oh, I see. What's your opinion on that, because I know that the Marine Corps still heavily segregates men from women, especially in boot camp?

Pino: I think that the separate bays in basic was very good. It's interesting. I came away out of basic training almost with the idea, maybe women shouldn't serve. I was so irritated by all the nitpicky crap that these women—I couldn't understand how some of these women ended up joining. There was no in between. There was either people like Ornelias [sp??] who are like, “Why can't women serve in the infantry? I can serve in the infantry. I have more strength than any of those guys combined.”

This girl that was over here who cut her hair high and tight for basic training, Drill Sergeant Guthrey, our female drill sergeant, first day off the bus—we hadn't even been split up into our platoons. They get you off the bus and they pull all your bags and you have to go find your bed. She hunted her down in the pack and she walked up to her and she said, “Are you a man or are you a woman? Take your hat off.” I can't remember her name, but she took her hat off. She goes, “I asked you, are you a man or are you a woman?” The girl was like, “I'm a woman, Drill Sergeant.” She's like, “You don't look like a woman. What possessed you to want to look like a man? This is the Army. You're a woman. We have regulations for women.” She goes, “I'll tell you what, soldier.”

Actually, we weren't allowed to be called soldier until the end. She was like, “I'll tell you what. By tomorrow afternoon I want you to have a full

head of hair. Do you understand me?" This girl's like, "What?" "Don't backtalk me!" You're a woman in the United States Army. You need to act like one. You're not a man. If we want men, we'll just recruit men." Drill Sergeant Guthrey had short hair, but it wasn't—high and tight. A woman doesn't belong wearing a high and tight. "How the hell am I supposed to know you're a woman?"

It was just really interesting. You had women like that, and then you had women that were—Ornelias was my bunk buddy to the left. Then you had, I think her name was Walker. She was on the right. She was the number one Mary Kay saleswoman of 1997. I mean, like pink Cadillac and everything. I remember laying in that bed one night going, "Did you get the pink Cadillac?" She was like, "Mm-hmm." She used to pluck the girls' eyebrows. She used to do like facials and pluck their eyebrows in the barracks. I remember looking, going, what? She's like, "We're going to the field tomorrow. I don't want to go to the field. I hate outside. I hate being outside." I was like, "Then why did you join the Army?" She's like, "What are you talking about?" The Army are the foot soldiers. The Army and the Marines are the ones that go out and like crawl in the dirt. She was like, "They didn't tell me all that." I was like, "Why did you join? Why?"

She said she joined because she was trying to toughen herself up, but I'm thinking—the reasons why women join the military are so different than the reasons why men do. I think there are still very equal reasons, like I needed money for school, I needed a change of life, I needed new direction. My father's in the Army, so I grew up knowing the Army. I don't think that it's always that dream of being a soldier. We join to be in the Army, and men join to be soldiers. That's just generalizing.

I was in the roomful of women that one minute they're total hard asses and then the next minute they're like, I just can't take it. They're always messing with my mind and just nagging and nag. I couldn't take it. I'd just lay there and go, God. Shut up. I don't know how I got a reputation for people not to touch me. I don't like to be touched, so these girls would touch me and I don't know if I gave a look or what, but I think there was this whisper mill not to touch me.

I never talked until it came to test time. When you get tested on all your books that you get, your get goes or no-goes. These girls, they haven't paid any attention. I shouldn't say girls. It was the guys, too, but I was in the girl's barracks so I never understood what the guys did when they studied. They never talked to me until they needed help doing the tests, so they would come and ask me for help. It was weird. It was like the bully girls from the hood. The girls that were like, You don't mess with them. They're like—"Psst. I need help with my test". I was like "Okay".

I'd help them study, so I had this weird reputation to where the tough girls had my back, but they didn't necessarily acknowledge me in public. The whiny girls had my back because they thought I was tough enough to protect them, I guess. I don't know, but I just never—I developed two or three really good friendships, [inaudible] was my battle buddy because you're forced to. Raeus [sp?] is a good, good, good woman. She still talks to me now. She's tough as nails. She's one of the ones that I respected. There was, I would say, probably sixty percent of those women in there where I couldn't figure out what they were doing.

A lot of those women went off. That's the difference now is, you finish basic, you automatically get deployed. If you don't learn something from your deployment you just shouldn't be in, in general. I know a lot of those women just from seeing them out in Iraq, or emails, or whatever, have now become deployment hardened and actually have become really valid NCOs in their own right. They were questionable in my book at the very beginning. It just was a matter of experience.

It was just so weird because you had a lot of females that were moms, so they had this mom mentality. That became more evident in AIT, because we trained with Marines in AIT. The cooks, I was a cook so when you go to your AIT you train with Marines, but the Marines were now, had already finished their year of training. That's when I realized the difference in training was that, they had already finished their year and now they were on to their job training. They were considered prior service, so they got to go out at night, live in the barracks, and they didn't have drill sergeants. They got to take food home from our cooking sessions. We didn't have any of that. They had a different set of rules. But they had been in longer, too. A lot longer than us.

The longer the mommy stuff came out in the AIT was constant. Are you okay? What can I do? Can I take care of you? I developed that a little bit later on, but I felt like it was more of a comrade attitude than a mom attitude. It was more of a watching over the flock sort of thing. There was never any, if you can't handle it I'll help you through it. I was more of the bartender.

Sorenson: Oh, I see. A minute ago you mentioned battle buddy. I've heard that expression used so many times by people in the Army. What is a battle buddy, and what's that all about?

Pino: A battle buddy is, from basic training is, as soon as you get to your designation section they link you up in twos. Wherever you go in the Army you should be in twos. Basically what it is, is accountability as well as, there should always be somebody there to help you up if you fall. It also is a way of forcing you to that companionship, avoiding getting

somebody isolated. Some people are isolated to their shell and go off and then that can be a detriment to themselves, it's also a detriment to the group as a whole. If you have a series of battle buddies you always know that somebody's watching out for somebody else.

In basic training it became your bunkmate. It was checks and balances, too. Like if I wasn't going to wake up, Raeus was going to be there, be like "You'd better get up", because you couldn't go down to formation until your battle buddy went down. You had to go everywhere together. If you had to go to the bathroom, they had to go to the bathroom. It was really irritating but at the same time it was a really strong sense of accountability and attention to detail. It was also training you to be future leaders. Everybody was a leader. Everybody was a soldier first. If Raeus's uniform was all jacked up, it was my job as her battle buddy to fix it, or to get her to fix it, and to encourage her, and peer pressure.

Then battle buddies became very relevant when we got deployed, because we were in a constant state of accountability, and especially when I became an NCO it was made the most evident because I was in charge of soldiers and I need to know where they were at, at all times. In deployment, not in necessarily in garrison. It wasn't calling people in garrison, where you at?

When I was a private the first time we deployed I hated it. We had to be everywhere with somebody, especially going to the bathroom. It was like, really? I don't want to have to be with somebody, but there are occasions where the port-a-potties did get hit by mortars. And there were occasions where certain areas got hit, so your battle buddy was there to either assist you or it was always a definite way of how to know where somebody was at, to find their battle buddy.

For females, we always had to travel in pairs because they were afraid of rape, but we fought the hard fight that the guys should have to follow the same protocol. Whatever, that was like one of those fights, choose your battles. It was a sense of protection and a sense of, when we had air raids and we had to get to the bunker Cato [sp??] and I became self-appointed battle buddies. I was on one end of the tent, she was on the other. I'd get geared-up and go through the tent and she'd grab my arm and then she'd guide with the light while I guided with my arm, because we had our mask and everything on. There was just a camaraderie. My friend Jamie, we still sign our emails, "Thanks battle."

Sorenson: Oh, okay. I see. Now, you said that you went to Fort Campbell for your AIT training?

Pino: No. I went to Fort Lee. Fort Campbell was my duty station.

Sorenson: Oh, right. Where's Fort Lee?

Pino: Fort Lee, Virginia.

Sorenson: Fort Lee, Virginia, okay. How was your AIT training?

Pino: AIT was good. It was a lot more laid-back. You still had drill sergeants but you were in more of a barracks situation. It was four-man rooms. The bathroom inside, you didn't have to share a mass shower or anything like that.

Even though you had drill sergeants it was more, you got assigned leadership positions like Junior First Sergeant, and Platoon Guide. That's an interesting psychological experiment that they do in putting your peers into leadership roles for a certain amount of time and put the responsibility on them. People will use people, people will backstab people, or people just showed their real, true colors as leaders. It was really interesting. Then your drill sergeants basically just marched you to and from class. We still had to march everywhere. Our drilling ceremony was always repeated.

Our first section, we worked in classrooms. It was culinary school. It was pretty cool because I became a chef afterward and it was my introduction to culinary school and it's a really amazing program that they have. They started from the basics all the way to advanced cooking the way you would be cooking in the garrison kitchens. Then your final phase is you actually work the garrison dining facility at Fort Lee.

Sorenson: Who eats at the garrison dining facility?

Pino: Well, in this case it was the soldiers that were in AIT. Because we were in AIT we were cooks, but the cooks aren't the only ones that do their AIT there. Supply and commo [sp??] do their AIT—no, commo's at Fort Benning. But supply does their AIT there. There's a few other. I think the truck drivers, transportation, do their AIT there. We had to feed all those soldiers, as well as the cooks.

It was kind of cool because now you were separated. My battle buddy was supply. Raeus was supply, so we got separated after basic. We rode on the bus all the way to Fort Lee, and then we got there and it was basic training all over again. They kick you off the bus, you have to find your bag, but this time you're in your Class A uniform. You're scrounging everywhere and you have to say good-bye to your buddies, because they're not in your same job. That was interesting because then I had to make a whole new set of friends that I had trained with, but they weren't in my platoon. It was really weird.

In garrison you get a meal card, so all the soldiers that are junior enlisted can eat at the dining facility. The NCOs and above --.

[break in recording] [00:31:29]

Pino: At the garrison you eat. It's a convenient place to eat. It's a cafeteria so you don't have to leave post. Getting on and off a post with over 20,000 soldiers can be difficult when you only have—I guess they have an hour to eat. I don't know. I never got to eat, because I was a cook. I never got to leave post.

Sorenson: The officers obviously ate somewhere else. Did you guys ever have to cook for the officers?

Pino: Yeah. Rarely did you see an officer in the dining facility. It wasn't that they couldn't eat there. I don't believe that officer clubs or NCO clubs exist any more. If they do it's mostly for, I think like, officer's ball. As far as I know, an actual club that's called the Officer's Club doesn't exist. Every once in a while you'd get a really cool officer that would come through the dining facility. They wouldn't necessarily eat, but they would grab a cup of coffee and go talk to the soldiers. General Helmeck [sp??] was really good about that. I served with General Petraeus and I was in his headquarters platoon. I got to see his interactions on a daily basis. He wasn't big on that. He did come to the kitchen every once in a while. We had a couple of good officers that would come through and talk to their soldiers.

Company commanders. I don't think it was intentional that they didn't go there. I learned that later on. It was because a lot of times company commanders would pretty much eat in their office during lunch. They're the brown baggers. If you had a good set of NCOs, you'd have good sergeant leaders coming through. Sergeant majors would come through and talk to the soldiers and get a little bit of idea of what the soldiers were feeling. Officers, not so much. The only reason I had as much interaction with officers as I did was because of the platoon I was in, and that was all the G-1, G-2, direct commander, the post sergeant major and the commanding general. That was in my chain of command. People were always confused when they asked me to cite my chain of command and it went from my company commander to the division sergeant major, and the commanding general. They were like, No, no, no. That's the division. I was like, "That's who I work for."

Sorenson: When you graduated from AIT—when did you graduate, and what was your rank when you got out?

Pino: I graduated, I think, July of 2003. It was a nine-week basic and a nine-week AIT, and I did a program that was called Home Recruiter, or something. When you graduate you go home and you work for the recruiter for two weeks, and you get an extra weeks of leave or whatever because you're working for the recruiter. That was in August, so it had to have been July.

Sorenson: This was in 2002?

Pino: Right.

Sorenson: Oh, okay.

Pino: I started basic February of 2002 and then it was eighteen weeks. Then it was a little bit more than two weeks because you had a week of replacement at basic. I graduated as a PFC, a private first class.

Sorenson: That's an E-2?

Pino: E-3.

Sorenson: E-3, okay.

Pino: I graduated as an E-3 because when I joined I had college credits. I didn't have a degree, but I had almost 100 college credits. If I would have had a degree I would have entered as an E-4. I'm actually grateful I didn't. You get into, especially as a cook, you get into the kitchen and E-4s are the ones that have already, they earned that right. Earning rank just for college credits became a really big, oh, red flag. They know if you're just out of basic training and you're an E-4, they're not going to give you the respect that an E-4, but yet you're still expected to do the responsibilities of an E-4 and you don't have the experience to know what to do as an E-4.

You haven't been in, so as a PFC that affected me, too, because my roommate in the barracks was a private, just a PV-2. She was always late for work. When I'd get to work my sergeant was like, "Where's your roommate?" I'm like, "I don't know. I'm not her keeper." He pulled the rank on my collar and said, "This rank makes you her keeper. You're a higher ranking soldier than that, young lady, and she needs your help as her roommate, and as a PFC so you need to go get her, and you make sure she's here every day." I learned real quickly the relevance of the rank and the importance. I knew you had to earn it, but I was just grateful I wasn't an E-4 because that really targeted you. It really, really targeted you if you came in as an E-4.

Sorenson: I see, I see. Where did you go after AIT?

Pino: I went on leave and then I went to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. I got my orders. While you're in AIT you get your orders of where your duty station's going to be. My ASVAB score allowed me to have anywhere in CONUS. I could have probably had the choice of where I wanted to go and I didn't understand what it meant, so they picked for me. I didn't pick Fort Campbell. It picked me.

Sorenson: Well, Kentucky. Yeah.

Pino: Yeah. I lived in Albuquerque in a city. I grew up in the city and then I moved to Connecticut, in a small town in Connecticut, but I lived near the city. I'd never seen farmland like what I saw. I love it now. I love Kentucky and Nashville. It's on the border of Tennessee and Kentucky. The first day we drove, they pick you up at the airport in Nashville and its forty-five minutes away, and there's a van drive. I remember just seeing corn field after corn field and I was sick. I was literally sick and the first few weeks I just had culture shock.

I got stuck in replacement at Fort Campbell. I didn't actually end up at my unit for a month and a half. Normally you get to Fort Campbell, you go to replacement for a week just like basic training, and then they set you in your unit. My unit didn't pick me up. They just left me there. For my first four weeks or so I just cleaned the barracks.

Sorenson: Oh, boy.

Pino: Yeah.

Sorenson: When you did get picked up by your unit, which unit was it and what was your experience like when you first got there?

Pino: My unit was HHC division, which nobody understood. It was on my paperwork and that was part of the problem. Nobody knew what HHC, which was the headquarters. HHC division basically encompasses the G-1, G-2, G-3 staff, the general staff. I thought, oh, I'm going to be the general's cook, but the general's cook is actually—which I couldn't understand how I qualified for that. My ASVAB score was great, but I didn't qualify to be the general's cook. His cook is actually an aide that's actually a specific job that, he knows his food and his uniform and he has an assistant that's an E-5 and above. Usually E-5, E-6. We were his support staff. There were ten cooks, ten supply, ten mechanics, ten-- There were two NBC specialists and three pack clerks.

Sorenson: These are all assistants to the general?

Pino: They were all his headquarters platoon. We still had the G staffs above us, which were all the officers that were doing the war room, and all their junior enlisted.

Sorenson: Like intel and all those guys?

Pino: Exactly. All the intel and all those guys. Like PAO, the public service, civil affairs. All those guys. They weren't necessarily on top of us rank-wise. You had the general and then you had—if he needed anything done; his vehicles, for example, in the motor pool were our headquarters. We were in charge of maintaining his vehicles. When we were deployed we didn't cook for him, but his aide would come and say, the general needs this, this, this, and this and we would have to provide for him.

The supply, our supply, would order all his, whatever supplies he needed, but we didn't necessarily work hand-in-hand. He never came to our kitchen. I didn't prepare his food, but I was his staff. It was a really complicated situation that I still struggle to understand until I left.

Sorenson: Was this General Petraeus that you were talking about that you worked for?

Pino: Yeah. He was the commanding general of 101st in 2003 when we went to Iraq. The historical timeline, basically, every unit that we crossed the border in March of 2003 we were a day behind each major advance. The Marines went one direction, rakkasans went one direction. Rakkasans are from Fort Campbell. They're our infantry and then fourth ID went another way. That's how it fanned out and we were behind each major battle.

The first cross of the border they cleared a path, we followed. Our convoy was 200 vehicles and we had the general's gear and all the division main, all the war room equipment. Our convoy was 200 vehicles; this was going in across the border, plus two Apache helicopters, plus infantry guys circling us. It was like, oh, don't bring attention to yourselves. We're led by Apache helicopters. (laughs) We may as well have just had big targets on us. The general wasn't with us. That was the ironic part. All that protection for his computers.

Sorenson: When you were at Fort Campbell did you interact with the general at all?

Pino: Actually, I did not meet General Petraeus until we were in Kuwait. I was so young, and so new, and so confused I had no idea what CG meant, which is commanding general. I was very confused about my chain of command, because everybody has to memorize their chain of command. Who's your platoon sergeant, who's your first sergeant, who's your commanding officer, who's your command sergeant major, who's your

division sergeant major. That all got broken up because of what I talked about earlier. I had no idea what was going on. I was just new to the Army. I was just homesick and homesick for a place that I hadn't lived in years, New Mexico. I had joined in Connecticut. I was just culture shocked, I was lost, I didn't have people I liked around me and I was just really in a weird space.

When I got to my unit, my sergeant who became our platoon sergeant, but he was my NCOIC. He was really strict on weight and I was never overweight. My stature, I'm short and I'm stocky. At five feet tall I'm supposed to weigh like 110 pounds. I honestly haven't weighed that much since I was probably in sixth grade. I always had to get weighed and taped for every PT test, but I was getting a 290 out of a 300 on my PT tests. My hips were too big in the tape test. He was always on my back. My first day the unit picked me up, we dropped our gear off in our barracks. They were condemned buildings. They were building new barracks, but we still lived in a condemned building. It was this really old, World War II shoebox room where I shared with another person and we barely had enough room for our two beds in there and wall lockers. We literally had to walk sideways in the room. Our gear didn't even fit in there. We had to stack our gear up on top of each other.

He told us to drop our gear off and then get in our PTs. He introduced us to Aletman [sp??] who was a PFC. He told Aletman to get in his PTs and we were going to do PT. The cooks, instead of getting up at 6:00 with everybody and doing PT in the morning with the whole section, we have to cook, so we have to be in the kitchen at 5:45. If you work the morning shift you work 5:45 to 1:00 in the afternoon, and then the second shift comes in at 10:00 and they work until 8:00 or 9:00 at night. If you work second shift you do PT with everybody else. If you work first shift, you have to do PT after your cooking shift in the afternoon. Aletman worked morning shift and Sergeant Hutchinson said, "Get in your PTs and meet me out front in 45 minutes." We literally downloaded our gear and we hadn't had a PT test that morning at replacement. It was really weird timing.

I'd already run two miles, done my pushups, done my sit ups. Big-time PT test. He's like, "I don't care." Williams went to work. They took her to the kitchen. I don't know why she didn't have to do this, looking back now. I was like, wait a second. Why? Aletman, he always had a weight problem, too. He got me and they took us out to what we called cow country. It's where the cavalry trained. There was this big hill and hiking area back in the woods. It was where the air assault--air assault schools at Fort Campbell. You do your air assault march. He made us run and he's like, "I want you take her out for a three-mile run and I'll come back and pick you guys up." Aletman's like, "Okay."

We run down the hill and Sergeant Hutchinson drives away. We run down the hill and Aletman says, "Screw this. I'm tired of this guy. I don't want to run." He's like, "Whatever, and he's not going to be back for like—he thinks we're doing three miles." He starts walking. I'm like, "Okay." I don't want to step on any toes. I'm brand new, I don't know anybody, and here's the PFC, he's like, "Don't worry about it. Whatever." I'm like, "Okay. I'm not going to be like, oh, no. I'm super athlete. I want to run." I should have. We turn the corner and Sergeant Hutchinson had taken the other route in the car and drove back around and caught us walking. I was screwed for the rest of my time under Sergeant Hutchinson. He always was like, "Oh, I bet you want to walk, huh? That's all you want to do is walk." I'm like, "I just ran eight miles". He's like, "Oh, but I bet you want to walk." I would get out of line and he'll just look at me be like, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

Sorenson: I'm assuming then that women in the Army, probably women in all services, you guys had a lot of pressure on you to maintain a certain fitness level.

Pino: I wouldn't say any more so than the guys. I think there was even more pressure on the guys, because I think they were expected to—I always am really careful about when I sing loud to women because I think that the guys don't necessarily always get the same benefit of knowing how hard it is. They're just expected to be able to lift 200 pounds. You know what I mean? For me, like I said, I was really strong. I had a hard time running long distances. I got way better at it. Aletman, he was really slow. He didn't run very well, but he was a big guy. He might have been overweight, but he was just a big, burly guy. Big guy, hair on his back, just big old head, but a sweetheart. Just, you see this big guy and you expect, oh, he can lift that desk over his head. He wasn't that physically strong. In fact, he was actually a little on the weaker side. He had a bad back. Oh, my back. He was kind of a puss, too. I'm not going to lie. He whined a lot. He was a great guy, but he whined a lot. Their expectations of him because of his size, and then you have expectations of less because we're female, and in reality they always paired the two of us together. I guess that's why I have so much opinion of him because they paired the two of us together a lot. I ended up doing a lot of his grunt work.

He was a smooth-talker so he ended up getting me out of a lot of stuff. I'm always the type, just do the work and get it done with instead of trying to talk your way out of it. You spend so much energy trying to get out of it instead of just doing it. He was always like, "Well, I don't know why we have to do this stuff. We've rearranged this thing four times." I'm like, "Shut up and help." I don't know. I don't know if they paired me up with him because I'd tell him like I saw it or if they thought I couldn't do it. I

don't know. I eventually earned the right that they knew I could pull my weight. It took a while, though.

It took a lot of convincing where, there was this kid, De Sousa, he was maybe 120 pounds soaking wet. He was an office clerk and we were doing combat lifesaver drills and they wanted him to carry Aletman in a fireman's carry. Aletman was about two, 220. He was like, "Oh, I can't even wear his glasses." Heritage-wise he's from the Kennedy clan, so he grew up very wealthy and joined the Army to prove himself. He's just like, "Oh, I can't do it. I can't do it. Oh God." It was funny, because I was like, "Yes you can. It's technique, it's not strength." He's like, "I can't do it."

I finally pushed him out of the way and I lifted Aletman up on my back and I walked ten steps. Then I set him down and I looked at De Sousa and I was like, "You can do it." He was like, "Well, I don't know." I sit down and I'm like, "I just threw my back out." (laughs) That hurt so bad. I proved my point, but my back hurt so bad. It's just little things like, it was just dependent on the person. There were some people that were very capable and they chose to be weaker. They chose to say, I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't. Then there were those that kept saying, I can, I can, I can to the point where they screwed themselves, and I was in that category. Maybe I should say no and I shouldn't hurt my back trying to prove a point.

Sorenson: Were you an E-3 the whole time at this unit before you deployed to Iraq?

Pino: Yeah. I stayed an E-3 all the way until—I want to say, we were in Iraq, I got promoted to E-4. I think I got promoted in July. I'd have to look that one up. I just remember we were already at the palace in Mosul. That was already after April, May, and I didn't get promoted for another month or two.

Sorenson: When did you find out that you were going to be deployed to Iraq?

Pino: After everybody else in the United States. We had been running—let's see. We went in January, February of 2003. Yeah. We'd been running drills nonstop. Afghanistan was already going. The first set of people from Afghanistan had just come back when I got to Fort Campbell. They were in the first series of Afghanistan people. I actually rode in a van from the airport with Special Forces guys that had just landed back from Afghanistan and they didn't want to wait for the Fort Campbell van so they rented a car. They were like, "We just got back from Afghanistan. We're not waiting around for this."

The first wave had just come back when I got to Fort Campbell, so we were not on the Afghanistan wave. I was actually trained to be on the culinary arts team, which is a traveling competitive culinary arts team. It's actually internationally known and I had made the team. One of the girls that was on the team in another unit had just come back from Afghanistan, so she was telling us all these stories about Afghanistan. I was kind of like, wow. I'm glad I missed that bullet.

Next thing I know we're hearing about Iraq. I was like, what does Iraq have to do with anything? I was even more confused. The last year I hadn't really seen any TV or had any news. I'd been in training. Then I went to Fort Campbell and I had nothing. I wasn't in a unit, and I didn't have a TV in my barracks. I was living off of Miller Lite and DVDs. Actually, I had a VCR. I had video tapes that you could get at the PX that were way cheap. I literally just watched Zoolander over and over. I hadn't seen any news, I hadn't seen anything.

All of a sudden I'm hearing about this Iraq thing. Before I knew it we were getting our anthrax shots. I was like, "Why are we getting anthrax shots? What's going on?" We had to go get the series of six anthrax shots. That happened once a month, and then we were doing NBC training. A lot of NBC training. Then a lot of masking and unmasking. The all-clear's given, and just because the all-clear's given you don't take your mask off until the lowest ranking person takes their mask off. If they die, you have to stay masked. If they live then you're clear. We were doing a lot of fields. We were in the field a lot. I just remember we kept doing this training and we kept asking our sergeants, and they were like, "It's just training missions. People, there's rumor mills. This place is rumor-infested. You're doing training missions. You're on a training mission. You're doing training missions." I got sick of hearing, "This is a training mission."

My best friend calls me, she lived in Maine, and she called me and she said, "I just got the news." I was like, "What news?" She was like, "Are you doing okay? Do you need anything? Is everything okay?" I went, "What's wrong?" She's like, "CNN just said that the 101st is going to be going to Iraq within the next like four weeks." I was like, "Really? No, no. We're on a training mission." She's like, "No." Okay. Then I guess that broke the news and I went to work the next day and sure enough. Bring your gear in we're inspecting your gear, sending out packing lists.

I had a great set of NCOs for my first deployment. They really prepared us well. We had packing lists, we had agendas, we had tags to identify our bags. Next thing you know we're spray painting the bottom of our duffle bags. We're getting new equipment; we're packing up everything in our storage shed that we ever owned. It was freezing now. Now it's December

and there was ice everywhere. They had sandbags delivered in piles and we were loading the, what do you call them, mill vans. Wherever there was a nook and cranny we had to shove a pack of unused sandbags, so that we would have sandbags when we got there. Millions and millions of sandbags and they were on pallets, and they were all a huge, frozen brick. We had to take out chisels and chisel the sandbags out and then wedge them.

Biffle [sp??] and I—Biffle was a female, the other E-4. She was an E-3 at the time, too, a cook with us. She's an example of a battle buddy that you hate and then you do become best friends. She was my battle buddy that, we literally had an agreement that we had to be cordial at work because we worked together, but other than that we didn't have to care one bit about one another. That was a really great agreement. Then we became really, really good friends when we got deployed. We were small so we would climb up into the middle vans and they would hand us stuff, and we would wedge it. Things were fifteen feet tall, so we would climb up on the side and they would hand us canvases, they would hand us light sets, cooking gear, you name it. We got to the top and there was a little crevice we'd stick a sandbag in there and then we'd start stacking the front part all the way from forty foot, a forty-foot trailer. It was so cold. We were getting our vehicles ready.

I would probably say within three weeks of that phone call we were getting on a plane. It was still a training mission until we landed in Iraq. We packed everything and then we got on--we had to load the trucks on the railheads and it was freezing. Our heater and our TV didn't work. We had to chisel the ice off of the trains, too, when we loaded the vehicles up because you had to put them on the ramp and get them on the trains. We didn't have to do that the second time. They already had vehicles set up.

Sorenson: Can you describe that anthrax shots that you got. What did it feel like to get them? Were there any complications from getting them?

Pino: The anthrax shots were and are rough. I say are because there's still current reactions to them. You get them in your arm and they're so potent that you have to get them in opposite arm the next month. It's a series of six shots and the first four are every month, and then the last two I think they stretch them out a little bit. At first you get it and it really is one of those shots that burns and you have to pump your fist while you're getting it. When you get it, you pump your fist and you get a knot in the arm. Then your arm is really—it's probably, it's a little bit worse than a tetanus shot, but it stiffens your arm really badly. Then you get it in the opposite arm the next time.

I actually got five, and on my sixth one I started doing my homework and realized that the anthrax shot was causing some major medical issues. I had, right before we deployed literally within three weeks before we deployed, I found out I had polycystic ovarian disease and I had cysts on my ovaries. I was going through a series of tests and treatments to locate the cysts and to have them surgically removed, and I got taken off the deployment list. Then they decided it wasn't life or death so they put me back on the deployment list. I was told "every swinging dick was going." (laughs) whether you have one or not, you're going on this training mission. (laughs)

I had to start doing some homework on the cysts. I was told I had three or four the size of peas. Because of that, the way they diagnosed them was, I was having skin conditions. I looked like I had spider bites on my legs; on my legs, on my back, on my butt. I was getting these things that looked like brown recluse bites and they were really bad. My commanding officer, my CO, actually was the one that sent me to the doctor. Because what happened was, I couldn't shave my legs anymore because these things were really bad and they hurt. It was just really sensitive. She pulled me into her office, she'd confront me about personal hygiene issues because I wasn't shaving my legs, and the perception I was setting, that people were talking behind my back. She brought another female NCO in to have this discussion with me who was the supply sergeant, because my NCOs were male. She's like, "We're concerned with your personal hygiene and people have been talking," because I didn't shave my legs. I said, "Well, I'm not shaving them because of these things on my legs," and I showed them to her and she was like, "Oh, my God. You need to go to the doctor."

I went to the doctor and we ended up having to completely GI my room, GI party my room because we thought it had brown recluses. Brown recluse spiders are big in Kentucky. It wasn't farfetched that I had gotten bit and that maybe there was an infestation in the barracks mattress or something. We cleaned the room, they checked the whole supply room. It was a really big deal that I really didn't want. When I went to the doctor he did some investigating and he said—the doctor was kind of a jerk, but he was like, "You didn't actually see the spider bite you?" No. Nobody usually does, but, "Oh, I'm going to watch this spider bite me." When they kept popping up and they were getting worse-- .

[Tape 2]

Sorenson: Okay. Go ahead.

Pino: He brought in the real physician and he said polycystic ovarian just from those symptoms, and so he did a series of tests and they found out, sure

enough. Then as I was reading about the anthrax shot it had been shown that males were getting cysts on their testicles from the anthrax shot. They were getting brain tumors and a lot of stuff was just like, they didn't have any research on the females. It's kind of like now. They still do a lot more research on the males because there's still a higher percentage of males than females, so they don't really have a lot of key studies for females. I was a little skeptical what was going on.

I knew our medic, so I told him I didn't want the shot. He was like, "You have to get the shot." I said, "No. This is a voluntary shot according to the paperwork I just signed. I don't want this shot." He's like, "You've already had five, you need to get this shot. You really need to get this shot." I said, "I've been doing my homework and I don't mean to get you in trouble. I really, really don't want to get you in trouble and I don't want to cause a problem, but this is what's going on with me, and I don't want this shot. I don't want the shot."

I said, Landrove [sp??], I've never turned down anything. You guys prick me full of needles for this and I was like, "I really, really don't want this shot." He was like, "All right, well, I'm going to write you down as having the shot, but if this ever," it's kind of like the broken ankle thing. If anybody finds out about this it's not on me. I was like, "You're good, you're good. I don't even remember this conversation." It was good. He passed me through and I didn't get the sixth shot. I ended up getting deployed and when I came back the cysts were—they had grown from the size of peas to the size of softballs and grapefruits. I almost lost my ovaries because they were covered in giant dermoid cysts. I don't know. They grew substantially. Cysts usually grow really fast, but usually not bigger than a quarter and these were.

Sorenson: I'd imagine that would be very painful.

Pino: It was painful. Yeah, it was painful and it was one of those where, when we cooked in Iraq we'd boil the food in the T-rat which are in a square can. I would take them out of the boiling water. Biffle got my back. The same girl I was talking about. There was the tent where we held all the boilers and everything. She said, "You stay in here, you lay down, do what you need to do," and I got covered. I would take one of the T-rats out and put it on my abdomen and the heat would help it. Then she would watch the door to make sure nobody came in.

Sorenson: Did you have any access to pain medication while you were out there?

Pino: I kind of tolerated it for as long as I could. They give you birth control, and birth control is supposed to help it. My six-month supply got lost in my bag somewhere on the way. I honestly don't know what happened to

it. We didn't have a lot of access to anything for the first eight months, nine months. When we finally got up Mosul and got established and everything was going better, they got really bad, the pain got really bad and I finally—it got so bad one time I basically took Motrin, Advil, Aleve, Tylenol, and what's the PMS stuff? Midol. I took them all at once. I literally just took a handful of pills and I was just zoned-out. My friends finally were like, "you go see the medic".

I went to the medic who was a National Guard doctor and he thought I was trying to go home. I told him, "I really don't want to go home." They did an ultrasound when we were there to see what's going on. He goes, "Well, I kind of feel something in your abdomen. We don't have one anywhere. We could send you to the air field to get an ultrasound but we don't have anything to compare it to." Which doesn't make any sense because if I had gigantic cysts they would have seen it on ultrasound. He says, "There's nothing I can do for you. I'll give you a prescription of Motrin." The favorite prescribed drug. I got Motrin which I already had, and I did an "I told you so" to all my friends. I told you. I knew that, that wasn't going to be a possibility. I just dealt with it. It was only painful, sad to say, once a month when I was ovulating.

That's one of those you can't say anything about. You don't go to your first sergeant and say, "I have cramps." I wouldn't. I hate when people did that, although I know that there are moments where you're bent into—you don't. That's something you don't. I sure as hell don't want somebody to be like, "Oh, my belly hurts. I can't come to work today," and have to cover for them. I don't know. I've always been that way, though. I don't have an opinion whether it's right or wrong. I've always been that way. I don't think that's a valid excuse to get out of work.

Sorenson: You said that you took a plane, an airplane, to Iraq?

Pino: Uh-huh.

Sorenson: Where did you land when you got there?

Pino: Well, we went to Kuwait first. Then we didn't fly into Iraq. I did the second tour, but the first time we flew to Kuwait and we ended up at Camp Wolf, which is now the camp where you exit out. Originally it was just that, we went to Camp Wolf and then you get off the plane, and they have eight or nine of these little miniature Isuzu vans lined up. We got off the plane and literally, I was on bag crew so I unloaded all the bags into one van. Then they load you into these little tiny van buses, and you're in all your gear. I was next to the chaplain who was 6'4" and his knees were literally in his chin from where we were sitting in this thing. They cram

you in and then all the curtains are closed so that they can't see what these vans are transporting.

You don't know where you're going. You're in this pitch-black van and then they just drove. We were driving, and we were driving, and ever once in a while you'd peak out the curtain and you could see they just drove us through desert in Kuwait. We were in the middle of nowhere. You have no idea of direction, where you're headed, where you've been. We were driving through Kuwait City and then out into the middle of the desert to the camps that we built up. There was Camp Pennsylvania, Camp New Jersey which was where I was at, Camp Virginia. Basically camp of states.

I was at New Jersey which was just adjacent to Pennsylvania and Virginia. We set up camp there. Before the work started and that's where we got all our gear ready to cross the border, and did all our training drills, for NBC training drills for the nuclear and biological attacks, and built our bunkers. We filled a lot of sandbags. I actually got out of sandbag detail in Kuwait because that's where I met General Petraeus. We were in our tent and Major Fitzpatrick who was the—oh, I can't remember his position name. He's now a colonel. He was the third in charge under General Petraeus.

He came in and asked if anybody knew how to draw, like draw pictures. Nobody knew me. I was still really knew. I was training for culinary arts so I wasn't with my normal people, because I was on a team. I was an outsider this whole time. Barely anybody knew me. I didn't say anything and everybody asked this girl Grace. They said, "You know how to draw". You draw all the time. She was like, "No, I don't want to do it." He was like [inaudible]. "No, I don't want to have anything to do with it."

I was sitting there. He goes, "Does anybody else know how to draw? Draw or paint?" I walked forward and I was like, "Did you just ask if somebody can draw and paint?" He said, "Come here." I said, "Yes?" He goes, "You can draw really well?" I said, "Yeah, I'm pretty good." He goes, "And paint?" I said, "Yeah, I'm pretty good." He goes, "Oh, I don't mean any of that graffiti shit. I mean, can you paint?" I'm not sure what that means, but okay. Yes. (laughs) He's like, "Pack your bags. You're coming with me." I said, "For how long, sir?" He goes, "No longer than two days. Come on. Pack your bags. For two days you're coming with me." So, I packed my bags and Heron [sp??] who was in the cot next to mine says, "You'd better pack for two weeks, because two days in the Army means two weeks."

I packed my bags, they stuck me in an SUV, drove me in daylight hours through the desert so I got to see where we were actually at. We went through Kuwait to Camp Doha which is no longer part of our, part of the U.S., but it was the building docks, the shipping docks and it's an Air

Force base. We went to Camp Doha and when we pull in the path that goes all the way in to Camp Doha was just lined with the [inaudible] Jersey barriers and they all had a painting on them from all the way back to the Gulf War. It was every unit that had come through since the Gulf War painted a Jersey barrier. I'm just looking. I'm like, "That's interesting." We go, and we go to the war room, which I didn't know was the war room. I didn't know anything. I just was like, okay. He goes, "You're going to meet the CG in ten minutes I want you to come up." No, no, it was the day before. He got me in a big, giant aircraft where they store the airplanes.

Sorenson: The hangar?

Pino: The hangar. Big giant hangar and there was 1,000 cots and just packed with people. It was a giant, just hangar after hangar with thousands of cots. You couldn't see. The person across the hangar looked an inch big. It was that huge. You walked through and he found me a cot and he's like, "That's your cot." He goes, "There's a library over here." It was kind of like an active duty post. He was like, "There's a library over here and there's a dining facility over here. You need to go to the library and you need to come up with four drawings for the General, or for the CG and you'll present them tomorrow." For the Jersey barriers.

Sorenson: Nice.

Pino: I was so confused. I don't know what I'm doing. I went to the library, I tried to come up with drawings. I only had four colored pencils and a Sharpie and my sketchbook, so I was really hurting for ideas. I came up with a couple sketches. The next day he takes me and I still don't know who the CG is, or what the hell CG means. He goes, "Come on. You're going to meet the CG." You go up to the front desk and they need your clearance badge, and I don't have one, and I have my pencil and the sketchbook. Major Fitzpatrick was like, "She's got clearance. She's going to be doing the mural." And they're like "whatever". Actually until I got out of the Army that was my clearance badge.

Sorenson: Oh, really?

Pino: Yeah. I could pretty much get in anywhere with my paintbrush. It was kind of cool. I'd come with a can of paint and they're like "it's okay Pino, come on in". And I'm like, "thanks!" (laughs) I walked in and it literally was like the TV. There were big screens and computers, and everybody's in their gear sitting at a computer. Maps with like strings and arrows. I was like—Major Fitzpatrick was like, "Face forward! Face forward!" I'm like, "I wanna look." We hadn't crossed the border yet. I look back and there's

these *Time Magazine* pictures of General Petraeus in the war room and it's like, that room.

Sorenson: You were at that room.

Pino: I was just like, "Oh, crap." I walked in and he goes, "Go show the CG your pictures." I was like, "Who's the CG?" He's like, "What do you mean who's the CG?" Thank God he was wearing a brassard that said CG on it. I went up and I was like, "Excuse me." And he turns around and I look and I see the stars. It would have been on the collar, because it was the desert uniform. I look and I see the stars and I go, "Sir. Excuse me, sir." (laughs) I was crapping my pants with my little piece of shit sketchbook. "Excuse me, sir. They want me to show you the drawings." He's like, "What?" The drawings for the painting. I don't know. Who are you? I think I had three. He goes, "I like that one." It's like, "Okay. Thank you." Major Fitzpatrick grabs me and walks me out.

He was like, "I'll have paint here tomorrow. You come prepared to paint. You have two days." Okay. These things are concrete. They have holes pitted in them. It's sandstorm central so they're covered in sand. I show up the next day and he's got five gallons of paint and no paintbrushes. I was like, "Do you have paintbrushes?" He's like, "You're going to have to make do. Make it work." I took paper towels, Q-tips, and I took a twelve pack of, we call them [inaudible] water bottles. I shouldn't call them that. We got the water bottles and I cut them in half, I flipped them upside down and I cut a printer box got the lid on that, flipped it over, cut holes in it, turned the bottles upside down and stuck the mouthpiece in the hole. It had its lid on and mixed paint. I had some stir sticks. He got me one paintbrush that was an inch, a one-inch paintbrush and this thing was fifteen feet by seven feet. It was like, right on.

I painted this mural with Q-tips, paper towels, one paintbrush, and paint in a water bottle. People kept coming up, what are you doing? I'm in NBC gear because we still had to wear all NBC gear, so I had the mask on. Not on my face, but on my leg. All the G staff were like, "What are you doing? You're painting. That's so cool". Everybody was closing in and taking pictures with me. I was like this superstar for a day. Nobody knows me over there. I'm painting a picture. I was proud of it because of the surprise I had and what I had to do to paint it, because it was so hot that before the paint got to the concrete it dried on the paint brush. I was more proud of the fact that I actually got it done.

When we went back in 2004, actually at the end of the tour we went through—we had to pick something up at Camp Doha and I was on that convoy. We drove through and after I left, the staff that stayed in the rear, that stayed in Kuwait while we went to Iraq painted over it.

Sorenson: Oh, geeze.

Pino: They had a chief, a warrant officer that was a graphic designer so he painted this really nice silhouette. It was a great painting, but I'm like, yeah. He had paintbrushes and he had everything. This is my legacy. All those piece of crap paintings from 1991 are there, and you painted over mine. You could have got a blank Jersey barrier and just brought it. It was one of those where I sat in front of it for a day when we were at Doha just staring at it. My buddy was like, "You've got to get over it. I mean, you've got to get over it." I'm like, "How do you get over it, man? There's thousands of historical Jersey barriers for the war that every unit that came through here, and I got to paint one of those and a damn officer didn't have the courtesy to think about that." I painted my signature and I put '92 Gulf, which was my MOS with a spoon next to it. I was like, you know. I'm just a cook. I'm not shit. I don't get anything. I don't get chances like this. This guy lives the life of luxury for a year at Camp Doha with a movie theater and the ocean right next to him. He can go into Kuwait City and have a beer. I was like, "Come on. You can't tell me to get over it." He's like, "I know, but you just need to get over it." I'm like, "Well, I'll get over it when I have my revenge." (laughs)

Sorenson: What did you think of Kuwait?

Pino: It was dry. Actually, a lot of people hated Kuwait and I loved it because I'm from New Mexico, so I'm from wide open, vast desert land with the most amazing sunrises and sunsets you'll ever see. For me, I had been away from New Mexico for almost ten years, so I had already been missing it before I joined the Army. Cause Connecticut's all trees. I felt suffocated.

We were out there in the mornings just that beautiful sky. It reminded me of home. The sandstorms were really rough. When I went back the second tour I hadn't experienced the sandstorms like I did in Kuwait. I have pictures of us. We didn't have showers, so I think that's what made the sandstorms even more rough was that you were just getting caked with sand on a daily basis and you had no way to clean yourself. There's pictures of us and we're just sunburned, and you see the line from your T-shirt and it's part sunburn, part sweat mixed with sand. You just have sand in your teeth. It's just chafing everywhere. I remember it chafing under my collar and my legs, because it's so hot, so you're sweating, and you've got this crap.

Trying to keep your weapon clean was pretty scary. I remember it was funny because you talk about separating the guys from the girls, we all lived in the same tent once we got deployed. There was no segregation.

We all lived together. I'm over there and I'm like, whatever. It's just dirt. We took our baby wipe baths on a daily basis. Basically what you would do is get your poncho liner and put some 550 cord up and make a little tent like you do when you're a kid. It was the best for me. Me and my brother lived our whole childhood in tents like this, so I was like, "Yeah!" I'm in there, I'm in my gear, and you put your little tent up and you do your little baby wipe bath. You could hear people rustling around on the cot trying to get clean.

I remember I'd finished mine and opened up my little curtain, and I sat on the end of my cot and looked over at Taveras [sp??] who was a female. She was our NBC junior enlisted. She's sitting there with an oil can. You know the oil cans that go under the vehicles when they're parked in the motor pool, the black oil pan. She's sitting there with an oil pan full of soap and water. I have a picture of it. She's scrubbing her legs with this oil pan. She's like, "I'm going to bathe, one way or another. I don't care." She's just sitting there enjoying her little bitch bath.

Aletman Aguilar is the other male cook and he's hardcore, a Hispanic guy from Chicago, right? Shaved head, little mustache. Another big guy, a big burly guy. He's over in the corner almost crying. "I can't deal with this sand anymore. It's all over my cot." He's just mentally having a breakdown. He just keeps putting his hand over the cot sweeping it away, sweeping it away. He's like, "I sweep it away and it comes back now. I can't. There's so much dirt." He's crying about the dirt. I was like, "Are you crying about the dirt?" And he's like "Just because you all live like a pigsty over there. I can't take it. I can't shave my head, there's nowhere to take a shower. I want to take a shower."

Everybody was having these mental breakdowns. We'd only been there a couple days. I'm just like, "Embrace the dirt. Embrace it." It was this total skit. You have me with my little curtain with baby wipes, Taveras with this oil pan with water, Aguilar crying and next thing I know you hear this loud fart. Then Atelman just takes his shirt off and is like, "I've got to get clean." He's the big, burly hairy guy I was telling you about. He takes his shirt off and lets out a fart, and Taveras and I were like, "Oh, oh, put it back on. Ah, that's worse than the sand, please put your shirt back on". He's like, "Whatever. You're welcome to take yours off, too." (laughs) Taveras is like, "At least if I take mine off it won't look like that. God. Put your shirt back on. If you've got to go to the bathroom, go to the port-a-pottie."

That was our daily family. It was really great because it was rare an occasion that people felt inhibited. The females every once in a while were like, "We need another tent." I think they did end up providing one at the end. I have a couple pictures from that. There are—you see clotheslines

of, they wanted to wash their clothes. We washed our clothes. It was fine. We hung them out on tent ropes as clothesline. With the sandstorms you wash your clothes and hang it on the tent ropes, and then the sandstorm would come. What was the point? It was just pointless. Your clothes could walk; they were so stiff from the sweat. Trying to wash them, the sand, it was just like stiff—you may as well not wash them. But I did.

Sorenson: What was the feeling at night in the desert in Kuwait? Was it different than nights out in New Mexico?

Pino: Well, it was different because we weren't sleeping. We were on guard duty constantly. We had rotating guards 24/7, so we were every two hours, I think. A two-hour shift or a four-hour shift. It was between a two and a four-hour shift where you would go and watch the perimeter. At night it was different in Kuwait because for the first couple weeks we were doing drills where the air raid sirens would go off. Then the day the war started our platoon sergeant came and said, "The war has begun. This is no longer a drill. When that siren goes off its legit. There's real Scuds coming our way.

Night for us was mostly about getting through the night. We would take bets on when the air raid siren would go off, because it was just—I'd always say 3:43 because I got off guard duty at 3:00. By the time I got back to the tent, got my gear off, laid down, you'd hear whooooo. I'm like, "ah I'm gonna kill somebody". It was still. There's something about the desert that's just really still. We were far enough away from Kuwait City; we were literally in the middle of the desert, so there were some lizards walking around. There's just like the idea of what's out there.

I was on guard duty one time up in the tower and there was a sandstorm and I had my night vision goggles on, and I had scanning. There was tumbleweeds. I was like, "Oh, tumbleweeds." Then I looked past, "What the hell's that?" We had our supply shack meal van that they held all their stuff in and next to it they had got these giant rolls of bubble wrap to ship stuff, so there was these gigantic rolls of bubble wrap that were stacked up against the meal van and we used to—well, not me, because I don't like to do it. The bags used to get on top of the meal van and jump onto the bubble wrap. Just be, whoooo! I think somebody broke their arm or something doing that. I don't know. You would get up on top and then you'd jump on the bubble wrap. It was fun, whatever.

I'm on guard duty and I just see these things going across the desert. I was like, what? I looked and it's the bubble wrap. The bubble wrap's just rolling like tumbleweeds across the desert. I was like, oh my God. Sergeant Young's going to be so pissed tomorrow. She's going to be so mad.

You would go on guard duty and you would take turns. One person might be able to sleep while the other person went on guard duty. It was creepy. Guard duty at night is creepy. You're tired as it is. I'm already a natural paranoia to me anyway, so I'm always like, oh, what's going to happen. I don't know if it's bad paranoia or if it's the story, the theater person in me that's like, something's going to happen. You would see farmers, shepherders, in the distance. It was just creepy. Just creepy seeing the infantry patrol out in the far just distance, sounds.

It just was really—that idea of being so tired that you don't—you're hungry, but you're not hungry. At snacking I got an MRE and your stomach is just—you've got the shakes and you're stomachs got that knot in it and you know that you need to—you're chewing to stay awake. We're chewing; we're smoking like a chimney. You've got to smoke the cigarette while you cup the cherry so it doesn't get seen. You smell. Every part of you smells like tobacco.

Your throat is so red and tight, and you're thirsty, but you don't want to drink water because that means you have to go to the bathroom and you have all that gear on. In the port-a-potties you get really good at—I was able to figure out how to unbutton my pants with the flat vest on. I had to hold my weapon with one hand and unbutton my pants with another, but it was like, ah. You guys could stand up, you know. I was just like, hey, because there was nowhere to move. Umm. Ugh, I don't know what I'm gonna do. I just tried to avoid the bathroom in general.

You go to guard duty and you just have this weird—especially if there was a sandstorm, because there was just this wale, you know, this wailing wind. It would get cold and you'd be there and you couldn't sleep. I was on guard duty one night and I came back and the tents were gone. (laughs) The sandstorm took them. I came back and the tents were on the ground, like demolished. I was like, where's all our stuff? Wilford [sp??] came and picked me up and they had moved all our stuff in the middle of the night. Another reason why you need to keep track of your gear, because you never know when people are going to be moving your stuff. I did. I came back from guard duty and I was like, "My house is gone." That was the night of the tumbleweed bubble wrap.

I think that air raids in Kuwait made it weird. It was quiet, but when they started being for real it was pretty intense.

Sorenson: Yeah. Talk about how that feels to have those air raid sirens go off.

Pino: Well, there's actually a lot of stories for that. When you lay down you set your gear out like a fireman. I would sleep with my weapon and I'd sleep

with my mask, not only in its case on my leg, but I would have it open to where all I had to do was grab the mask and put it on. I would kind of sleep in that position. My boots were untied and ready to the right of me, and I slept in my uniform. Like I said, we had guard duty every two hours. There really was never—the whole idea of getting into PTs or getting comfortable was pointless. I learned to sleep on top of my sleeping bag on my cot with my gear all ready to go.

You'd be in a half sleep, half daze and you would hear in the distance. They would echo. Camp Pennsylvania would go out first, then Virginia, then Jersey. I was on the very far end by the door on one side of the tent, the door furthest away from our bunker. Our bunker was just another one of those shipping containers with a few rows of sandbags behind it. That was for all E-4 and below, and we lived with the 101st band, so we were traveling with the entire band. They were our gate guards.

We're talking about, basically that forty-foot shipping container was our bunker and we were packed in it like sardines from front to back and it was pretty intense. You had no room to move. You'd lay there and I could hear Pennsylvania's siren go off first, and it would be one of those when you hear something so often you think you're hearing it, but you're not really hearing it. I'd sit and I'd be like, I don't know if I'm hearing it. I don't know. I don't know. Then I'd hear Virginia and I'd look around. My gauge was to see if anybody else was reacting.

[audio ends abruptly][end of interview]