

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

**JULIE (MURRAY) POWERS**

Armament Specialist, Air Force  
Operation Enduring Freedom & Operation Iraqi Freedom

2014

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**Powers, Julie (Murray).**, Oral History Interview, 2014

Approximate length: 1 hour and 21 minutes

*Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.*

**Abstract:**

Julie (Murray) Powers discusses her decision to join the Air Force, her deployments with the 115 Fighter Wing in Operation Enduring Freedom to Qatar and Operation Iraqi Freedom to Iraq, readjusting to civilian life, and her work with veteran's organizations. She outlines her basic training at Lackland Air Force Base (San Antonio) and her technical training as an armament specialist. Powers compares her first deployment to Qatar in 2003 to her second deployment to Balad Air Force Base in Iraq in 2005. She describes her situation as a female armament specialist, including how she related to other soldiers and the people of Qatar. She also details her role as a member of the National Guard and mentions her use of the Federal and Wisconsin G.I. Bills to continue her schooling. Lastly Powers speaks about her involvement with the Madison VA Hospital, the Women's Veterans Committee, the Vet Center, and the Circle of Change Program.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Julie (Murray) Powers enlisted in the National Guard in 2003 and served with the 115 Fighter Wing as an armament specialist. She was deployed in November of 2003 to Qatar as a part of Operation Enduring Freedom and then again in 2005 to Balad Air Force Base in Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom. She left the National Guard in 2009 when her contract expired.

Interviewed by Andrew Thompson, 2014.

Transcribed by Connie Kottwitz, 2015.

Reviewed by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Abstract written by Claire Steffen, 2015.

## Interview Transcript:

Thompson: Today is the 10th of November, 2014. This is an interview with Julie Powers, who served with the 115 Fighter Wing, based out of Madison, Wisconsin, during Operation Enduring Freedom, from November, 2003 until April of 2004, and during Operation Iraqi Freedom from June 2005 until November 2005. This interview is being conducted at the Madison Public Library Central Branch. The interviewer is Andrew Thompson.

Jamie, lets, I'm sorry, Julie, let's start with telling me where you were born.

Powers: In Madison, Wisconsin.

Thompson: Okay, and ah, tell us a little bit about your background and your life before entering the service. So, talk about high school and all of that good stuff.

Powers: Okay. Um, I grew up in a family of six, so I have three sisters. Um, I always knew my dad in the military. That's all I've ever known him as. I didn't even realize that he had a real job until I was older. Um, and so, I knew that military was a culture in our family, um, whether my dad would admit it or not. Military was the, the vibe in our household when it came to chores and doing things, he was um, very strict, so military was natural for me. Um, but I went to school at the Wisconsin Dells High School. Um, I was very involved in athletics. Involved in a lot of school programs, one of the programs I was involved in was Students Offering Support, so that's where I kind of, I guess learned that I wanted to be in the helping profession. That was an opportunity for me to do kind of my first social working, as a freshman through senior year I was on that council involved in like Student Council, as well. Um, but a bulk of my high school was really focused around sports. And I figured that my career path would go from high school into college playing sports. Um, that's not the direction my life went, but that was okay. It wasn't at the time, it was a little bit nerve wracking to try and decipher how I was going to proceed, but, I really enjoyed high school. I had a lot of friends; it was a small town, so everybody kind of knew each other. Um, my dad had it in his mind that we would all kind of follow in his foot steps to go in the military. In hind sight, we all did, but at the time none of us thought we ever would. Um, as I progressed through high school, my older sisters actually enrolled in the military when they were juniors, so they did the ROTC program. Um, so I knew that they were treading down the same path that my dad had taken, and I was at, I knew that I would never join the military, and I was able to do it on my own. Um, life took me in a different direction. So after college, I actually went on and played volleyball at Baraboo University, it's a tech school there. Um, was in there for about a year, um got into a little bit of trouble, um and didn't focus on academics more on

my personal life. Um, started to kind of falter, I guess, in the academic realm. Got into some trouble with the law unfortunately, um and my dad, kind of being the hard-ass that he was, said, "You know, you can go and figure out what you are going to do with your life on your own, or you can maybe look into the military to see if this is an option for you." Knowing that I needed some direction in my life. Um, I did at the time, feel like I didn't have a lot of options. Um, and so I chose the military. Best decision that I could have ever made! I didn't feel that at all in the first, probably in the first year that I was in the military. I wasn't on board to be there, you know, it wasn't something that I felt was my goal in life. Um, but going through basic training, I think, shaped me dramatically into what the military actually was, to what it stood for, how much we could kind of offer to our country, and I think that I got more of that like patriotism, um, ingrained in me more so as my own person, versus kind of seeing it through my dad's eyes. Um, so after I actually joined the military, had to go through kind of process to actually get into the military due to my background, um but thankfully, they took me on a waiver, and said that if I continue to do well through basic training, that I could continue my career in the military. Um, so in September of 2003, I went to the 115th Fighter Wing here in Madison. Um, my dad swore me in, which was pretty cool. It made it a very personal experience. Um, my mom was there as well. Um, so it's a, a day I'll always remember. Um, him in uniform, um which meant so much more to me then once I realized what the military was about. My dad's an officer. Um, so that put a whole new perspective on our relationship; him being an officer. Um, so he swore me in and one week later I was heading down for MEPS and right from MEPS they sent me off to basic training, where I went down um to San Antonio for Air Force.

Thompson: And for those listening, what is MEPS?

Powers: So MEPS is a place where you go to get your initial screening for the military. Also, I should say that ASFAB, which is the test that deciphers what career path you are going to be eligible for. Um, interestingly enough for me, I didn't know anything from a screwdriver to a wrench, but I managed to qualify for an armament position, which is working with ammunition on a F16 aircraft. And I choose that career field initially, because they offered a bonus, um so the money was little bit enticing, but I am very grateful that I had that job. In hind sight, I, I know more about tools than I would have ever imagined that I did, and can actually do things now. Um, so I went down to MEPS, they did all like the medical piece of it. Um, they talked to you about military culture, you know, they review you from head to toe. Um spent the night over there, you know they do all their testing, I guess, for medical, physical, mental kind of stance. So I was there for, I think I was there for about a day and a half, um and then they qualified that I could move on to basic training.

Thompson: Okay. And what is, what does MEPS stand for?

Powers: That's a good question. I honestly don't know. Um

Thompson: Um and where was MEPS?

Powers: In Milwaukee. And they set us up in a hotel, um that, 'cause we get up early the next morning and we had a roommate and there was hundreds of us. Um, I really wish, I'm sorry I don't know what the acronym is for it. Um, something about entry I would imagine, but um, yeah, that was the initial starting phase for going to basic.

Thompson: And when you got, were you sure that you would go basic training when you got to MEPS, or was there a little uncertainty after that?

Powers: Yeah, a little bit of uncertainty because it all really depended on if you passed the medical evaluation and I remember getting screenings for mental health concerns. Um, and then they obviously had all my background information prior to going to MEPS. Um, but there was, you know, if there was anything that was wrong, if you had any um injuries before joining the forces you weren't likely to go to basic training. So, I was really waiting for that green light after MEPS to say, "Okay, she's cleared, and now she can go."

Thompson: And did you leave straight from MEPS to basic training, or was there some time in between?

Powers: Oh, there was about a week and a half in between. Um, where I went home and kind of got all of my things in order, um, for the plan for duration of going to basic and then on to AIT after that, annual training and the learning my job. So, I, there was about a week and a half.

Thompson: Okay. Um, so then you, you left for basic training and that was in San Antonio.

Powers: Correct.

Thompson: And which base was that at?

Powers: Um, it was the Air Force base there. Um, why I can't think of these names [chuckling]

Thompson: Lackland.

Powers: It is Lackland, thank you. Yes, ah, Lackland Air Force Base, yes. And I remember, it was so funny because we were on a bus heading to Lackland, and I remember my dad specifically telling me, "When you get there, do not volunteer for anything. Do not volunteer for anything." And I could never wrap my head around that, I didn't understand what that meant. Um, and of course, when we get there, I know when you're getting off the bus and you're just getting screamed at. You can't even get your brain wrapped around what's happening and I was nervous and scared and anxious and all this, and um the first thing that they asked is if any of us played an instrument, and of course, I volunteered! And right after I volunteered, I was like, "Oh, wait, I wasn't supposed to do that!" But, um, it actually ended up being in my favor. Um because I was entered into a Band Flight, um so I played the trumpet for the band in basic training. So we would go to all the graduation ceremonies of all of the people ahead of me. And I would sadly wait for my day eventually, but we got to play for all the graduations. We actually got to go off base a couple of times to go in parades and that was a huge deal in basic training. We actually had an opportunity to eat like whatever food we wanted. We stopped at a gas station and everybody just consumed hundreds of calories in about five minutes. Um, so it ended up working to my favor, um, to join the Band Flight. So.

Thompson: Okay.

Powers: That was, ended up being a good thing.

Thompson: So you get to San Antonio and they're screaming in your face and sort of disoriented a little bit.

Powers: Very much so.

Thompson: Um, take us through what happened then.

Powers: So, once I said that I could play an instrument, they sent me over to one section and everybody else went the other way. And we sat for what felt like hours. I know it was like at least a few hours we sat there waiting for them to do whatever it is that they were doing. I'm sure that was a tactic that was they are used to - just hurry up and wait kind of military mentality. Um, so we sat on the pad for a couple of hours and then we had to go into a room to get basically processed into basic training. Um, so you got your folder which was all of your medical records that would stay with you through the course of basic training. Um, and during this process, you're just being herded with hundreds of other people. You couldn't talk to anybody; you just needed to stay in your military bearings, which nobody even knew what that was. So anytime you stepped out of that, you're getting screamed out because you're not doing what you're

supposed to be doing, but you have no direction of what you're supposed to be doing. Um, so it was a long, long day of just going through lines and just getting processed and checked in. Um, and then after we had done that we were sent over to go to our barracks. Um, and I was in a Band Flight, so we had a brother flight that was always next to us, and we would always be uh together, no matter what we did. But obviously, the barracks were all female. Um, that first day of getting to basic training, I'll never forget laying in bed and ah remembering, what did I do! [Laughing] Is this really something that I should have tackled on, because the day was so long and exhausting. Um, and hadn't met anybody, so I just didn't feel comfortable. I was completely out of my element, and really just so many second guesses of was, is this the right decision to make.

Thompson: Hmmm. Ah, you mentioned a flight. Can you give the listener a little background of what that is?

Powers: Yeah, so for the Air Force, you know like Army sometimes does squadrons, or units, the Air Force calls them "Flights". So, it's roughly between like seventy-five to a hundred people. So we had about a hundred females in our flight, and then we had a brother flight with about the same amount of people. Um, so that's what we're called as our unit, it's called a flight.

Thompson: So entry in basic training, what kind of training did you do, what were you trained for?

Powers: Um, so we did a a lot of drills. Drill pad, you know, learning how to march, learning how to keep your hands together. Obviously a lot of military regulations, which is quite exhausting. I never realized how much time and effort is put into somebody putting on a uniform. You think it would be pretty simple, but there is so many regulations that you have to follow, and you're just kind of like, "Who cares if my hair is down below my collar?" But that's a huge, you know, insult to the military. You need to be very concise with how you dress. We learned a little bit of hand to hand combat, not a lot, and I think that was because we were a band flight, so a lot of our um stuff was focused on playing in the band. So instead of going to like the drill pad to do all these marching orders, we would go and practice band instruments and, and music that we would be playing. So that was kind of a neat thing, especially in San Antonio with the hot weather, it's not too much of a disadvantage to be inside when everybody was outside. Um, we did have what we call in the Air Force, was a warrior week. So that's where you actually go and play war for a week. You go into the field, um with all of your items you would need if you were truly at war and learn how to interact with one another. Learn how to do your job in a high stress situation, um and actually kind of enacting a war, where there would be, you know, pretend bombs going off, and firing

happening. You know, learning how to get around when you are being attacked. Um, and that was, that was pretty eye opening, especially because we were right in the heat of kind of 9-11 happening. It was a reality to all of us that this is something that we needed to take seriously. That it could potentially be our future down the road. Um, but yeah, a lot of it was basically just learning the military culture, um learning the ranks of the air force, learning who the important people were in the Air Force that we needed to recognize and know off hand. Lots of testing was done. Um, it's just never fun, but I managed to make it through and pass everything, so I never, in the Air Force you get what they call recycled, so if you fail any piece of any of that, then you, you get recycled back. Um, normally everybody gets recycled back a week, but since we were a band flight, we would have been recycled back two weeks if we failed anything. So that's ah pretty intense motivation to not want to screw up, not want to fail anything because you're then here for an additional two weeks. Um, and being in the guard, we were pretty strict on that we couldn't get recycled, you know it would have screwed up everything, 'cause everything is in place ah, when you go to basic, that you'll do basic for this, these amount of weeks, then you'll go to your class for four weeks, and then you'll come back for on the job training.

So, there's a lot of pressure to continue to do well and, I mean obviously you're under pressure no matter what, just having T.I.'s, the training instructors is what they're called in the Air Force. Um, you know, you don't want to make them mad. [Laughing] You want to stay on their good side. So, yeah

Thompson: Um, speaking of T.I.'s, did you have any memorable instructors or buddies that stand out in your mind?

Powers: Um, definitely! My T. I., thankfully because I was pretty athletic when I came in, um he, his ah flight had won the fitness flag, ah five years standing when we came in. Um and fortunately, we had some women in our flights that were not up to standards for the military, um, regulations. So, they got a lot of harp and I beat a lot of my brother flights, so he was "kind" to me, if you want to say, use that word. I'll use that very loosely. Um, but it was funny, because he, at times, would try to maintain his professionalism as a T. I., but you could tell that he was, I guess, happy that he had a female representing him on the fitness side, I guess, if you want to say. Um, and I'll never forget him coming in, 'cause you know, him being a male, you know he could never just, which was a good thing for us, he could never just pop in like other T.I.s if they were female, could come in whenever, no matter what you were doing. So we always had it announced that he was there. Um, and him showing up in civvies was pretty interesting. I think I'd put him down a peg so the next day was pretty rough, that he was ah, that he wanted to make us know that he was



the T.I., and just 'cause he came in civilian clothes didn't mean that he was our friend. Um, but I'll never forget him, Sergeant Milke was his name. Ah, and he was awesome, I mean he motivated me. He kept me very active, and I was actually nominated to be the female representative for our flight for any fitness stuff. So during Warrior Week, we had to run a 5K, and I was the female that ran it for our squadron. So that was pretty, um nice, to be honored for that. And I got second, so he was happy with that and made my weeks relatively easy for the remaining time there.

Thompson: Um, any memorable friends that stick out from basic training?

Powers: Actually, yes, and thank God for Facebook, because that provides an opportunity to actually stay in touch with people. Um, I have probably I would say, my gosh, eight girlfriends that are all over the country. Some are even over seas right now that I still keep in touch with. I don't know if it would be that way if Facebook wasn't around, because it's pretty easy to lose sight of people when you don't have the means to, to keep in touch. So thank God for media to allow us to do that. Um, and it's very interesting to hear about the active duty side, 'cause they are all active duty and I went Guard, so very different life style in terms of the military. Um, and it was interesting because I deployed before any of them. So that was kind of like "Huh!" okay that's interesting, so, got to kind of fill them in as to when they actually deployed after me. Um, but very grateful for those relationships, 'cause it's something that only they know what we went through and to have that commonality was pretty rewarding to continue that ten years later.

Thompson: Um, can you describe for us a little bit of the, the training facilities and the camp? Talk a little bit about the food, what's that like?

Powers: At basic?

Thompson: Yeah.

Powers: Yeah, okay, so um, you know we didn't get to go a lot of places other than where our T.I. was taking us. Um, it's, Lackland, it's actually very beautiful ah Air Force base. I have the honor of going back after my twin sister graduated, 'cause she went in after me. So I went back to Lackland um, for her graduation. Different perspective when you're looking at it from there. Um, but it's um very clean, organized. Um, you stay off the Commander's grass, the grass is green. Um, the food was okay, I don't really remember tasting it honestly, because you had to eat so fast, and truthfully, it was never really like focusing on my meal.

It was just like, hurry up and eat so I can get out of here and not have a bunch of people staring at me, waiting to yell at me. Um, what I

remember, it was pretty decent. Um, the chow lines were always interesting. You know, you had to be six inches away from any male, you know, so that was a huge thing that people got yelled at for, was if you were too close to each other in the chow line. I always thought that was pretty interesting. Always made you take three glasses of liquid, whether it was water or Gatorade, but you had to have three glasses. And I know now it was for hydration purposes, but it was always interesting that you had to have that. Um, just very fast paced. Everything was so quick. Um, from chow lines to anything we had to do. Time seemed to go very fast when I was in basic training, even though at times it felt long, it went by really, really quickly.

Thompson: When did, uh, when did basic end for you?

Powers: Um, so we were, I was there for six weeks, so got there in September and left a little bit after October. And went straight to my Tech School from basic training.

Thompson: Did you have a graduation from basic at all?

Powers: I did. Yup. So, where I used to play for everybody, they had people below me that were, um graduation, was ah incredible. Very, very emotional. Um, especially when they started playing songs. Um, yeah, had to hold back tears many times during graduation. I think just for the fact that I was shocked that I made it, um, I was very privileged to be there. I was excited to see my family, um to show them that I did succeed. Um, but, yeah, graduation, it was, it was a blur, I guess, to say the least. I'm trying to recall specific things. I unfortunately, as you can see, I wear glasses, and so I had the horrible BCG, which is "Birth Control Glasses", is what they call them. Um, so I didn't really want to see too many people in that attire. But, that was probably the one thing I hated about basic training, was having to wear those glasses. Um, but my grandma ended up coming, too, for graduation, so that was pretty neat to have her there. Um, she remembers coming to my dad's, you know, like twenty-some years ago. So for her to come back and see that was, um very cool to have her there. But, yeah.

Thompson: Okay, um so, after basic training you went off to Advanced Training?

Powers: Mm hmm, yes.

Thompson: And tell us about that.

Powers: So I was in um, on the border of Oklahoma and um, Texas. And, um, I'm gonna, I'm spacing on the Air Force base's name. Um, it'll come to me. Um, but my training was eighteen weeks long. Um so, we got there and it

still felt very much like basic, for the first, I would say for the first four weeks, because when you go to Tech School, they do stages for how you kind of progress for getting more into the civilian life again, if you want to say. Um, so like first four weeks you have to be in uniform at all times, unless you're obviously in your room. Um, then you progress to phase two, and that's where you can wear civilian clothes when you're not in training. Um, and then phase three, you can go off base on the weekends, you know, so you progress through these four phases. Um, so the first phase was very much like basic training, you know, a lot of ordering around, you know, having to be certain places at certain times. Um, the classes were um, a bit challenging for me because I was not a mechanic. I didn't have the background of all of this. So I was really learning things from square one. Um, and the career field that I chose, does not have a lot of females. So, it was myself and one other female in the class, with I think like fifteen other men. So that was an interesting dynamic. Um, and it was a cool dynamic to have there, because I knew that was what I was going to have when I got back to my base. And I didn't know anybody at my base either. So, it was a good transitional period to know that this was going to be a male dominated career field and to be aware of that and to just be cognizant, I guess, of um that environment. Um, but, still friends with a lot of people even from training. Um, keep in touch with them via Facebook. Um, it seemed to go a bit slower in training, but I think that's just because you have more free time, where in basic you were just you know, if you weren't doing something, you were sleeping. So, um it was neat to have a little bit more freedom. But at the same point, just anxious to kind of just to get done with school and get back home. Um, knowing that I was in the guard, I was ready to just kind of like get back and start doing what I needed to do to ah continue moving forward. So, um, did have a very small ceremony when we graduated from training. Um, the one and only time I actually had to wear my blues, my dress blues, 'cause in my career field, you don't wear your blues because you're under an aircraft all the time, so you're always in your BDU's. Um, but that ceremony was pretty awesome, you know you got to culmination of everything we had all just went through from basic on to training was really exciting. Um, nobody came for that, which I didn't expect, in terms of like family and everything. Because I knew once I, my graduation was done, I was flying back home to Wisconsin to see people. So, um, it was nice, I mean they always had like the P, we call it the PX, not the BX. I know Army and other ones call it PX, but basic exchange is PX. Um, or Post Exchange. Um, so we didn't go there often. They did have a movie theater on site. I do remember going to movies. They had a bowling alley. So we would do that on um, time off, 'cause I wasn't of age to drink, so you know, you had to find another things to do. Um, and really got to know a lot of people when you got to go off base for the weekend, which was a lot of fun. There was a lot of hotels around, so people would just rent out hotel rooms and go kind of, scour around. Um, so met a lot of

really good people, and learned more about the military culture and, it's interesting because you know your guard, so everybody tells you it's going to be different than what you're used to, so you're just prepared for the guard setting. But, um, it was neat to see how active duty rolled, I guess, 'cause I was never aware of what that was like.

Thompson: Um, what kind of, what kind of training did you do at, at tech school? Tell us about what your job was and what you were trained to do.

Powers: Sure! So the job is called, it's an armament specialist. So, um we're ah, we're not ammo, just put that out there. Everybody confuses us with ammo. Um, but what we do is, so we load bombs on the F-16 aircraft. Um, but we also need to know how the adapters work. So a lot of it was learning about all of the, ah, um bombs that we would be loading onto them knowing that, you know, how they work, what they actual mechanics were, um, where you need to place them on the terms of the wing. Um, and then they have, what they call like pylons, which is basically an adapter that is between the, the wing and the bomb. And so we would have to learn to completely tear that apart and put it back together. Learn how to do testing on it to make sure it was running and functioning correctly. Um, and then we would be out on the flight line, um, learning how to actually load the bombs. Um, got to drive some pretty cool machinery, it's called a Jammer, so it's kind like a forklift in a way, but it's basically that you use that to elevate the bombs onto the pylons, since they obviously weigh a lot. Um, so it was kind of cool to learn how to do those things. I learned how to drive stick over there. That was cool. Um, but most of it was a lot of mechanical stuff. So really learning how to take everything apart, put it back together. Um, and then learning about the bombs that you were going to be loading.

Thompson: Okay. Ah, are there any memorable instructors, or experiences that happened during the tech school?

Powers: Um, not really. Honestly, it was pretty mundane, you know, same thing every day. Um, the instructors were all great. You know, I think some of them had a little bit of stigma against, I think, females being in that career field. Um, so that was a bit challenging and especially if I didn't score as high as the men did on the, the testing and stuff. You know, they're poking fun, more so, than trying to be, I think, degrading. But in the same sense, as a female, it's still frustrating to kind of have that reaction from somebody. So, I think that made me want to strive even harder, um to do well and do better. Um, but I mean everybody was very, was very nice. Um, I don't, nobody really sticks out in my mind, though of somebody that I remember.

Thompson: Um so then, after tech training, you get to go home. And when was that?

Powers: Um, so we came back, so it would have been sixteen weeks later. So that's like five months, six months later. Um, so came back and I had to do OJT, so on the job training. So I came home and went straight to my base then next like, I think I came home on a Saturday, and had Sunday to kind of re-coup and then Monday I had to report to my base. Um, and they did on the job training for um six months for the actual um job itself. So, I went there and just basically started meeting people and processing at the base. So it was like a day and a half of doing that. So before I even started on the job training I had to go and meet with like the medics. Um, payroll and you know, all of these um, administrative departments to kind of get myself set up as the 115 Fighter Wing um Airman. And that, and um, I shadowed for six months in different departments in my shop, so they have what's called Back Shop, which is where you would do all the mechanical stuff of like tearing down and putting back together and making sure that everything is running efficiently. And then you have, what they call Load Toad's, is what they called us. That's where you're actually on the flight line and you are loading the ammunition and you're getting the jets off. Um, so we would go all around during that time in each job and learn how to do that so that if you needed to be pulled somewhere, you knew how to do everything. Um, so yeah, I was on the job not too long, I think, only a few months before we got orders that we were going to go overseas. Um, and I think my mouth hit the table when that was announced because I had in my mind, "Oh, I was Guard, I wouldn't, I wouldn't deploy any time soon, and if I did it would be years from now." And here I hadn't even been in the military a year and they were telling me that I was going to go overseas and um, it was scary! Very, very scary! And they wouldn't tell us where we went, um, thankfully the first deployment was to Qatar, Qatar, however you say it. So relatively safe, you know, it was kind of an R and R base for a lot of Marines um and Army guys. And that was my first experience as a deployed soldier. Um, it's hot as hell over there. The humidity, humidity was unbearable. Um, but the base was really nice. They had a lot of stuff on the base. Um, and that deployment was only um, just a few months. We came in to relieve active duty and waited for the next active staff to come in. Um, and on that deployment I was on actually in the back shop, so I wasn't on the flight line there. Um, and so I worked in the back shop just working with them. Met some really awesome active duty people. Um, still friends with a couple of them from that first deployment. So that's pretty neat to have those connections still. Um, a lot of them are out now, as am I, um so to still have, to keep in touch with them is pretty neat. Um, but it, it, I think it um, my anxiety was completely ceased when I got to Qatar, because when I realized that this wasn't like a conflict area, that I was preparing for. Um, so I kind of like let my guard down and just kind of like took it all in. Um, it's, active duty is very different than the Guard. So it was kind of an adjustment getting used to working with active duty, I

mean just everybody does things differently. To each their own, but um, that was an, an adjustment, working with them. Um, but it really provided an opportunity, I think, for me to really get to know the people at my home unit because I was actually deploying with them and you have so many hours now to spend with them, versus, you know, the drill weekend, where you see them, you're there with them seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. You know, working twelve to fourteen hours um, shifts, you know, while we were there, so lots of time together. Um, so it really provided a unique opportunity for me to become more cohesive with my unit as a whole on that first deployment.

Thompson: Okay. How did your family feel about you going over seas?

Powers: Um, my mom was terrified. Um, my dad had never been deployed. So I didn't, couldn't even go to him to get like guidance or insight about like what can I expect. Um, so that, I mean I think that's why I kind of over prepared, um in terms of that. My older sister had deployed at that time, but unfortunately, our relationship wasn't where it was today. So I didn't get a lot of information from her. Um, my twin sister, I think, was still in shock that I'd even joined the military, but was kind of just like, "Well, okay, see ya when you get back." You know, I don't think the reality had set it that we were still at war for a lot of people, even though 9-11 had not happened that, not that long ago. Um, so every, I mean, tons of support the entire time! Um, but it, obviously my mom feeling pretty nervous about me going so far away and not really knowing what I do and kind of where I was at.

Thompson: Okay.

Powers: But, thankfully, she had my dad to kind of calm her down. [laughter]

Thompson: Um, how did you get to, to Qatar?

Powers: So, we actually took an international airline. They contracted out, I couldn't tell you what airline it is now, but it was one of those, you know, huge international planes, um that we took over and landed right in Qatar, from, I mean, we made a few stops. I want to say it was um, I think it was, it was either Ireland or Turkey, for that one. I, sometimes I confuse my first and second deployments, so I apologize. But, um, but just a couple of layovers, but then it was straight over to Qatar.

Thompson: And you left from Madison?

Powers: Um hmm. Yeah.

Thompson: Did you do any training before hand, or

Powers: Well, I was on the job training before we went, so that's, but once we were, got orders that we were deploying, um they upped the ante and you know then it was like, now we're in deployment status and let's prepare for this. Essentially the same kind of training, just at a higher level, I think, like being prepared to do that.

Thompson: Um, upon landing in Qatar, what were your initial feelings? What, what went through your mind?

Powers: Um, I felt, and I don't know if it was because I was in an international plane, I felt safe. Um, I guess because I don't know if it was the airplane that it was just like well, we're flying over and it can't be that bad. You know, if they're sending international flights over here, so, I don't, I wasn't too nervous, I don't think. Um, to land there, and, I mean it was definitely a different world, being over there. Um, especially the culture and they have a, they call them um, um, what are they, TCN - Third Country Nationals, that work on the base. So, they are people from the country that are there. And that was interesting, in and of itself, because of their perception of women in their culture. So coming over as a woman was interesting, um just because of the way that they responded to me if I ever had to tell them, or ask them, to do something. Interesting responses. Um, but all in all, and I'm sure I can say this now because of my, my second deployment was not as friendly. Um, so I think looking back now I'm like "Oh, yeah, that first one was fine and everything went great only because I have the comparison of my second deployment." So, I feel as though the first one was an easy transition into military and deploying.

Thompson: Um, you mentioned some interesting responses from the third country nationals. What types of responses did you get to [inaudible]

Powers: Um, yeah. So getting ignored a lot. Really. I mean like looking at me while I spoke and then turning around and walking away. Um, so then having to go to a male counterpart and saying, "Could you please ask them to do this because I'm not gonna fight with them or, you know, demand that they do what I'm asking." Um, or if I would walk into a room and it was um, say a few of them, they would leave and I don't know if it was just the uncomfortability of me being a soldier, or if it was because I was a female soldier, or if it was just 'cause I was female. You know, I didn't ever approach any of them to ask, but you just get that, that vibe from them. And then obviously the blatant, blatant, ignoring and walking away.

Thompson: And did that, did that frustrate you and how did you feel about that?

Powers: Ah yeah! I was pretty frustrated. I, I have a major in Women's Studies, so I am, I consider myself, a feminist, and you know, I strive in my life to try

and make a point of being equal with others . And so, it was a hard lesson to learn right off the bat. Especially knowing that my career field was male oriented. It was like, oh now I have this level to add on to it. Um, I never had any problems with any of my cohorts, that deployment in terms of me being a female or anything like that. Um, but it's just, it's a very different perspective, perception over there. And I actually did have the opportunity to go off base when I went to Qatar. And I was not allowed to go on my own; I always had to have at least three men with me at all times. Um, and I had to wear um layered clothing. I didn't have to do like a head garb or anything like that. But me being blonde, I mean that was like, "Oh my God!" You know, people staring. Uncomfortable stares. Like why is this female here? Um, had to no tight fitting clothing, you know you had to wear very baggy stuff. Um, and I didn't have any negative interactions when I was off base, but very uncomfortable looks. Um, while I was out and about. So, it was, I felt safe that I had the gentlemen around me to kind of I guess protect me, if you want to say.

Thompson: Um, take us through a typical work day for you.

Powers: Okay. Um, so get up very early. I always had the morning shift, so we had to be there about Oh-Six Hundred, um for our shift, and we would work anywhere from twelve to fourteen hours, depending on how many flights were going to be leaving. Um, so you would get in in the morning, um, you get your morning brief from the commanding officer or our chief, if he was there. Um, kind of establishing what the day's plan was. Um, and then, since I was back shop, we always had equipment that we had to work on. Um, because they're constantly rotating through. They would have our planes, which we had, I think, eight, over there at a time. And then they would have the active duty planes, so that's a lot of machinery and equipment that we always had to cycle through. You know, the, the equipment always had like thirty, sixty, ninety day checks that you had to do. So you always had stuff rotating in. Um, so that was a majority of the day in Qatar. That was working on pieces of equipment and getting them sent back out to the flight line to get used for, for missions.

Thompson: How long did your work days last?

Powers: It varied from twelve to fourteen hours usually is what we would work. And then you'd go off and have the rest of the time to yourself. Um, if there were more sorties going out, so sorties are like your missions, um, then we might have to work longer. Um, you'd, they did provide us with one day off um, during the week, work week. Um, so that was nice, where you kind of just got to like let loose and not really have to focus on the job. Um, but most of it, I mean there were, was never, there wasn't a lot of down time in the back shop. There really wasn't. You always had something that you needed to be doing. So.



Thompson: What kind of things did you do when you weren't at work?

Powers: Um, so they had a movie theater there. So watched movies. I played cards, ate a lot with my fellow cohorts when we were over there. Um, they would bring some of their own gaming systems, so they would do kind of that. Um, Qatar did have a pool, but I never even thought to bring a swim suit on a deployment, so I didn't, I didn't have one so I didn't utilize the pool. Um, but that have that available, which was kind of nice. Um, I spent a lot of time like running outside, because I, it was nice to run around the base and um, I had a girlfriend of mine from our unit that we would go and do that a lot. Um, otherwise you'd go to the BX to kill time. Um, yeah, there wasn't a lot to do. You'd go to the chow halls and spend a good, a good chunk of time there for a like lunch or dinner. Um, or they had one room that had like ten computers and like two phones. So, if I wanted to try and get through, the connections were obviously not good at all over there, so I would make attempts to send emails or call home, if I had the chance. But, always very long lines to get in there. You had a time limit of how long you could be on the computer or the phone. Um, so if you knew you were going to go in there, you had to have everything in line of who you wanted to call and what you wanted to say and get it all out there in the short amount of time you had.

Thompson: But you were able to call home frequently?

Powers: Yeah, yup as often as you were able to kind of go in there and sit around, yeah.

Thompson: Um, did, are there any memorable stories or experiences that happened that stick out in your mind, or memorable people that stick out in your mind from that first deployment?

Powers: Yeah. I mean for sure the active duty people that I met that I'm still friends with; Martina is one of the females that I met over there. And I'm still friends with her. I actually went ah to New Orleans and was in her wedding a couple of years ago. So it's just cool to have those relationships. Not a lot, I think happened during that deployment other than just kind of doing my job, um, and passing the time just waiting to, to get home, 'cause I had been, was ready to get into school, and so it was just patiently waiting to kind of finish up the deployment. Did have an opportunity to um do a rear detachment with the next unit that came in, which means that I would have basically stayed there. Um, I ended up doing that on my second deployment, but not on my first one. I was, I was ready to get home. On my second deployment, um so, I mean I worked a lot with the people from my, my unit. Um, which we, you know, worked

with after we came home, too. So, not a lot of memorable moments I don't think from being over there, not, not during the first one.

Thompson: Were you ever, was your post or base ever attacked?

Powers: Not in Qatar. No, no.

Thompson: Okay, so then you, you came home

Powers: Um, hmm.

Thompson: And how did you get home?

Powers: Um, so we took the same kind of flight back, the international flight. Um, and coming home was as, very emotional time and um, we I think we came to North Carolina was where one of our lay over's was. And getting off the plane, and there were all of these veterans from previous wars that were there to like welcome us home. And that was one of the most remarkable experiences I've ever had. I mean you, you don't even think about it, it's just like "that's my job, and now I'm coming home to my family", and to kind of just move on with my life and to have the appreciation of veterans and their loved ones and community members that were there as well was pretty rewarding. It was like okay well what we did over there was important and there was a reason we were there and um, so coming home was pretty neat. And then when we actually flew into Madison, my whole family was um, at the base waiting for me, so that was an amazing reunion. Even though it had only been a few months, it felt like forever. Um, so it was very cool to get off. There were some people that didn't have family that were there and you could truly see the difference of being at home by somebody that you love and care for and not having somebody be able to be there. So I was very grateful for that, that I did have my family there. Um, and it, it was a little bit of an adjustment, I think, coming home, but not, not a huge one because I, again, I guess the deployment was, it wasn't like, not to minimize what we did there. There wasn't as much action, I guess, um and I felt like I was just there doing my job, you know it was the job I was going to do in Madison, versus Qatar. So, it wasn't anything big, I guess. But, military people always tend to minimize what they're doing is what I've gathered from working with fellow veterans as well as like, "I'm just doing my job". So.

Thompson: So once you got back to Madison, um, what happened then? What did you do next?

Powers: So, I, yeah, I applied to a bunch of schools to get in for college. Um, I ended up getting accepted to UW-Whitewater. So I started my under grad

degree shortly after I got back. Um and I was able to, and that was interesting, I think just because I was older going into high school, or excuse, going into college. Um, so that added a kind of a different piece to joining the, joining college. Um, I didn't do dorm life, I, I just couldn't. I was like, after living in a dorm overseas for that long and being in dorms in the military and being my age, I was like, I'm going to live off site.

So I ended up living with a bunch of people I didn't know and I was used to that. So, I was like whatever, no big deal. So I sublet somebody's apartment or a room and met a bunch of people from Whitewater. Um, and it worked out well, thankfully. Um, that we all got along really well and I ended up being friends with them through all my years at Whitewater and still am. Um, but it, it was an adjustment coming back to civilian life because I think I just had a different outlook on life in general. Um, and what was kind of important to me and, you know what I wanted to do with myself and kind of who I was as a person after being over there. Um, and that was interesting because my friends were just at a very different place than I was. Um, so that was interesting, I think, to kind of observe all of that and see how they were looking at things and how I now looked at things. Um, but school was good, I was, I actually excelled in school because I wanted to be there now, versus when I, you know, started school right from high school. Um, so I was doing well in school and I think I was in for about two years, I was in school and then we got orders to go back over for deployment. Um, so that was interesting trying to, oh my gosh, trying to organize all of that of, you know, withdrawing from my classes, you know without, you know getting um incompletes and things like that and trying to get all my affairs in order again. It felt a lot like déjà vu and um, yeah, just got prepped to go again for deployment and we found out that we were going to Iraq this time. Um, and I was, we went to Balad in, in Iraq, is where Balad Air Force base. Um, and that was a hundred and eighty degree different deployment. And I think it was to my disadvantage that I expected the same situation that I had in Qatar. Um, so we actually took a military plane um to Balad, so we took commercial to a couple different places and then we ended up getting a military plane to get over to Balad. Um, when we were arriving in Balad we were actually being fired on. Um, and so we had to land very quickly. Um, and it was just sheer panic because I don't think anybody anticipated that. Like they know we were going to a more hostile environment, but not the welcoming, I guess that we expected. Um, and so you know, you could hear panic kind of in the pilot's voice, that you know, that we're being fired on. And nobody knew what that meant, you know, was it a, an IED, you know, where it may not hit us, but it might. You know, you just, there was all these questions and, you know everybody was in their full fledge gear. You know, we all had our helmets on and our, and our flack vests on and you had your big ass duffle bag, you know, and it's just like well what the hell's going to happen here! And so we ended up having to

land um very, very quickly and we ended up getting hot brakes, which means that the tires actually started on fire. Um, so then at that time, you know their, their pulling the back um bridge of the plane down before it's even landing and telling us to get the F\_\_\_ off the plane! Um, and mind you, it's pitch dark out, you're on a flight line, so all that you see are these little lights and everybody's is like, "Well, where do we, you know, where do we go? What do we do?"

And it was sheer chaos. I mean, I, that's the only way that I can describe it and, I mean, it makes me sweat even now thinking about it. But, um, I just remember a guy and I remember seeing his reflector belt, so I knew that he was, you know, was there and he was a soldier that was already there. And I remember him grabbing me and basically dragging me over to a T Wall, and for the listeners, that's like a huge cement wall for barrier and protection. They have them all over the base. Um, and you know, the alarm is going off, this screeching alarm. Red is happening and um, I was terrified. I was absolutely terrified and did not know what was going on and the guy was trying to calm me down, saying "Its okay, this will pass. You know you just need to wait, um, wait it out." And I, I held back tears! Even though that I knew that they were coming and um, and I, it was, it was ah, ah a situation that I'll never forget. Um, and so after they cleared it, you know, they were bombing the flight line, but thankfully, you know, nobody was hurt. You know, the plane was fine. Um, so after all that chaos, they took us over to a basketball court, um, to kind of arrange where we were going to go. Um, so mind you, my unit it was me and one other female. She didn't deploy that time, so that I was the only female from our unit that was over there. They didn't know that I was coming, so they had no accommodations set up for me. So there was no room, there was nothing, so I sat on that basketball court with all of my other cohorts, but you know, they're all moving along as they get their living arrangements and orders and stuff. And I sat there for six hours, um waiting for a room and where to go. And I was emotionally exhausted, I was physically exhausted. I remember sleeping on my um, my bag to try and get a little bit of rest. It was so hot! And you couldn't take your uniform off because you're outside, you know, you have to be in full fledge uniform. So, um after about six hours, they finally had somebody come over and say that while we can't get you into the female quarters because there is no room for you, so they put me in a pod, which are normally reserved for like high-ranking um, enlisted and officers. So that actually worked out to my advantage because I was by myself. So I wasn't in, in dorm setting again, with like hundreds of females. I had my own pod, so that was kind of nice. Um, but, Balad was just a different, different environment. Um, you know, we had alarm reds multiple times during the day. Um, and they would go off and sometimes, you know, we were told that it was like the, you know, them fighting each other. So like outside of our, our barriers and stuff, they were trying to fire at one

another, and so sometimes it would come into ours, because they don't have any specific, you know, they're, they're make shift bombs and stuff are not what ours are. And so, they would talk about that, um, but it was scary, you always had your helmet and your flack vest right next to you because you never knew if you were going to get an Alarm Red or not and what that actually meant. Um, we actually, unfortunately did have a bombing happen where um, it was right by the chow hall and it blew up the bus. Um, I don't believe there was any casualties in terms of death, but there was definitely injuries. Um, I saw from a distance, I thankfully was, you know, it was, it was scary to think how life happens, but you know, it was only about five minutes upon our arrival that all of this happened.

Um, so, that was pretty intense when that happened because clearly everybody was in mass chaos when you see this blown up bus and it's interesting 'cause when you are over there you kind of become complacent in a way because that's just the life that you're used to. But then something like that happens and it immediately puts you back into where you are and that you can't be off guard, you need to be in check at all times. Um, but thankfully, there were no fatalities during that incident. Um, I was on the flight line during this deployment and so that was a totally different feel than being in the back shop because you are constantly, I don't want to say a target, but you just need to be on high alert at all times. That you don't know what's going to happen on the flight line and clearly that's what they're aiming for is our planes to try and, you know, minimize our opportunity to go out and do our missions. Um, so it was a very different feel being on the flight line and very scary knowing that you're closest um T-Wall is thousands of feet away when you're on the flight line. Um, so just always being alert was very important I think at that point.

Um, met a lot of real, a lot of real good people. I actually did a rear detachment during that um, during that deployment, so I stayed on for a few extra months um to help out. Um, they were short staffed for the active duty coming in, so they asked if anybody wanted to stay over. I was already pulled out of school anyway, so it was like, you know, I'll stay and work. I've been here this long, I'm already oriented. Um, that deployment was much more challenging, I think, on me, and especially, I wanted to call home and talk to somebody about it and I couldn't. Because if I said anything to my, I think I made one comment about um, Alarm Red and it just freaked her out and my dad was like, "Don't tell your mom that kind of stuff. You know, she doesn't know how to deal with it, she doesn't know what it means." And I was like, I just needed to process it and I didn't have anybody to do that with. Um, so that was really hard and there wasn't any other female so I didn't, you know, I didn't want to look like a "Sally" in front of the guys, you know, about being emotional about it. Um, so that was tough, to not be able to process all that and I had a lot

more challenges when I came home from that deployment. It was not an easy transition back to the civilian life. Um, and unfortunately, I had an interaction with a gentleman from the active duty that did not want females in that job. And so, um, he made it very clear and very evident that he didn't want me there. Um, I was treated very differently. I was called a "Bitch" multiple times. I was told that I didn't know what I was doing, um, when I was very competent. I was, you know, we have levels of our education in our career field and I had surpassed them all. Um, so I felt confident in what I was doing. But, unfortunately, you know, those are just some barriers that I had to come across and deal with. Um, it did, unfortunately, have to be taken up to the chief, which was unfortunate because then it had to be documented. I didn't, you know, it just that shit I don't want in my, I, I didn't know if I was going to be career military or not. And, you know, I had many, many conversations with people about you need to be very careful with, you know, with what you want documented, what you don't want documented, um about your health. You know, I got sick a couple of times over there and I refused to go to the, to the clinic because I didn't want that documented. I didn't want that to make me non-deployable. When I came home, um, because that's what everybody said, you have concerns they are going to make you non-deployable.

So, and that ended up, you know, unfortunately, it is now causing concern for me now. Um, in terms of service connection, which I'll, I can talk about later, but. So, that, so a lot more challenges during um that deployment, that caused um things to just really, really, it changed me as a person. Um, and it made me view things extremely differently. Um, and when I came home from the deployment, unfortunately, I didn't use the most appropriate coping methods, and I was drinking a lot. Um, because I was so tired of dealing with, in my view, petty shit at home. Um, and I was tired of the question, "Did you kill people over there?" I was tired of the questions of like, oh, there was just very, and I understand it was just ignorance from the civilian sector. That people just didn't understand what we were doing over there and they think if you're a soldier, you're over there killing people. Or, that you're um, doing something that you're not and it just got very frustrating to try and explain that over and over again. Instead of dealing with it, I just drank and that was not the most appropriate ah coping method. So, you know, I had to go through a little bit of a tough time when I came back. Um, I actually didn't return to school right away. I ended up taking the remainder of the semester off. I did go back the next year and finished up and you know, I got my own help that I needed, um to kind of process all the stuff that I had gone through and stuff that I still work on today. But, you know, it's an ongoing thing you deal with everyday. So, um, yeah, it's interesting to have such varying drastic deployments. It's very different and shaped me how I was, so

Thompson: Just to um, help the listener out a little bit, maybe you can define some terms for us? You said that you lived in a pod, what is, what is a pod?

Powers: So, a pod is like um, it's a, it's a one room trailer, basically. And it, it has nothing but a bed and a closet in there for you to keep your items. Um, technically, supposed to have four people in a pod, but because they didn't have a place for me, I was the only one in there. I actually ended up getting a roommate my last five days that I was there. Um, but it's, instead of having huge dorms if you want to say, of these long dorms, it's just very um, individualized little trailer.

Thompson: Um, and then, what exactly is an Alarm Red?

Powers: So, an Alarm Red is when we are being fired upon, whether that be with a bomb, or with guns, or with any, any cause for concern where people need to take cover and that the police, or you know, the surrounding people watching our borders are aware that something's happening. Um, and it's a very, very loud, screaming thing. Um, and it, you know, it's interesting and now I, I actually forgot about this but I remember coming home from that deployment and I was sleeping on my parent's couch and I remember a fire truck going by and a fire alarm going off. And I immediately like rolled off the couch and I got into my hovering position and my mom was there and you know, of course she start's crying 'cause she doesn't understand what's happening. And, you know, it took me just a second and I was like, okay, wait, I'm, I'm in Wisconsin. I'm in my parent's house and I'm fine. But, you know, just how quickly that stuff comes back to you that you hear that noise. It's like, "Oh! Shit! Something's happening and I need to take cover." Um, so that was a part of that transition period of like, remembering that I'm safe and I'm not in that situation anymore and I don't need to be concerned. Um, but things from then even, I still do it today, you know, I can't have my back to the door. Or I can't, um, you know, be in a huge crowded amount of people, you know, it's just certain things that stick with me, even though I can consciously understand like cognitively, like you're fine, you don't need to worry about that, it's just engrained in me from these deployments that's just who I am and what my habits are now, I guess. Yeah.

Thompson: Um, what type of personal equipment did you carry while you were there?

Powers: Yup, so we had um, our helmet, our flack vest and then I always had my bag, which had like my um, um, um gas mask was always on and then we had our, our rifles that we carried with us, that we always checked when we went in for like, you know, um chow or anything like that. But that all had to be carried with us at, wherever we went, no matter where we were.

So whether you were in PT gear, physical training gear, or you were in your uniform, you had to have all that with you.

Thompson: Okay. Um, and when you were loading the bombs on the aircraft, what types of, of equipment were you loading on the aircraft?

Powers: Um, so like the kind of bombs?

Thompson: Yeah.

Powers: So, they, like the J Dam Bombs, um a lot of them we had were like radar. Um, or um, or geez what are they? Um, missiles, geez, sorry. We'd load a lot of missiles on there, um, there was probably, like four bombs that we mostly used. The J Dam's are the biggest ones, and then the missiles were huge, because obviously for tracking wise, we used those. And those were always on the ends of the wing. Um, you know I'm blanking on some of the bomb names -- gosh, it's crazy when you're out for so long how that all just goes away. I have everything at home, I could tell you everything that's there, but um, I'm trying to think of B-52's, no, that's not . . . but there was a variation. But

Thompson: Were they mostly like anti-personnel weapons, or anti-tank? What types of?

Powers: Oh! Sure! Yeah, um, anti-tanks a lot because we were always the air support for anybody on the ground, convoys. Um, so from my understanding, that is what a majority of them were. Yeah. I don't know that it was a lot of anti-personnel ones.

Thompson: Um, did you have any interactions with third country nationals while you were at Balad?

Powers: It was the same kind of thing that it was in Qatar. Um, not so much of like having to ask them to do things. A lot of them, you know, they did a lot of the latrine stuff, a lot of the cleaning. Um, so I didn't have as much interaction being on the flight line with them. Um, no opportunity to go off base, um in Balad. That was not even a question. Um, but it, and I guess because we were getting attacked so often, I hate to say that I had resistance to be around them, but I guess there was a part of me that was like, how do we know we can trust these people. You know, and um, even though that they were there to try and help us and to try and help their people, and try to, you know, make their lives better, there is still a little piece of me that I was just like I don't know that I can trust you. I don't know who you are and where you are from and when you are surrounded by military people, that's a very comforting feeling. Um, so it was, it was



definitely a different feel, being around them, but I didn't have as much interaction with them as my first deployment.

Thompson: Okay. Um, one thing I did want to try and straighten out was a time line. So, you were in school in 2004? Was that?

Powers: Yes, yes.

Thompson: Okay. How old were you when you were in school?

Powers: I think I was twenty-one, when I joined, when I finally got back to school. 'Cause I was older, and I hate to think how old I am now, but I must have, twenty-one or twenty-two when I got into school. Yeah, I must have been twenty-one.

Thompson: Okay.

Powers: Yeah.

Thompson: And then you deployed in June of 2005 to Iraq?

Powers: Um hmm.

Thompson: And then you came back in, I think you said, November?

Powers: Yeah, and I'll have to double check and I'll get you my 214, just so my dates are. 'Cause I hate, I, I should know these, I ask the veterans all the time at work, like when were your periods of service. And I'm just, I'm just really bad with dates. But, um, I think, that's right. I'm pretty sure that's right, 'cause it was '03 and then '05. So I--

Thompson: Okay.

Powers: I feel pretty confident with that.

Thompson: Um, so then you came back, and you took the rest of that semester off. And then you went back to um, regular guard status?

Powers: Yes! Yup.

Thompson: Okay, and so what does that involve?

Powers: Um, so you do your one weekend a month and it's normally on the first weekend of the month. And basically, you just go for Saturday and Sunday. We never had to stay over, you know, unless you lived further, or far away. And then they would put you up in accommodations. But, um,

I was in Whitewater at the time, finishing school, so um, go there on Saturday. You basically are doing the job that you are doing overseas. Um, as well as taking care of any administrative things that needed to be done. So if you had medical check-ups, or you had anything that you needed to take care, you would do that during drill status. Um, but mostly, you know it was a long day on Saturday and then you got done early on Sunday. Um, and then there would be like ceremonies, if somebody was getting um, promoted, or if there was, you know, an award for somebody, we would do that during drill status. But, mostly, it was just doing the job that we had done, deployments or back at home.

Thompson: Okay. Um, and so just to back up a little bit, when you first joined, how long was your contract for?

Powers: Six years.

Thompson: Six years, is that six years of active drilling, or

Powers: Guard status. Yup, and then if um, a deployment came, then you would do that. And the guard also has where you have to do two weeks a year. Um, so that's usually some, what we call, our annual training, where you come in and you work, basically for two weeks at the base. Um, to accrue your time and your points for being in the guard.

Thompson: Okay, and you did that a few times once you came home?

Powers: Yes. Oh, yeah. Yup. Every year I did two weeks a year, um sometimes it would be at the base um, like I was saying we have levels for training. So you're a three level, a five level, a seven level. So during the years that I was going to get my more training, I would go to a different ah air force base and get training.

Thompson: And so if you were a two you'd go to a different base and train for the next level?

Powers: Yup, that's correct. And that's how you get your two weeks qualification. Yup.

Thompson: Okay. Um, how long were you in, in drilling status in the guard then? When did you finish up your service?

Powers: Um, I ended service September of '09. That was my last drill status. Yeah.

Thompson: And what led you to get out?

Powers: So, um, my second deployment was pretty rough. Um, and I think that really kind of re-evaluated what I wanted to do with my life. I knew I wanted to still remain within the veteran population. I just didn't think that the military was for me. I knew that I wanted to finish school. Um, and I knew that we would continue deploying and so, that was a big piece for me, that I wanted to continue on with my, my life's plan, I guess, if you want to say. And, you know, it was a very hard decision. My dad retired from the military, and so he, you know, always thought that being career military would be an amazing benefit, especially knowing that I wanted to work for the VA, just really meshes well. Um, but I just, I wasn't, I don't think mentally I was prepared to go on another deployment and so that was really my true, I think, voice speaking, saying I, I'm not ready for this. Um, and I've actually gone back three times to talk about potentially re-joining. Um, and unfortunately, I was in my Master's Program, and I was in the part-time program, so I went to school on Saturdays. Well, and Saturday is a big drill day, so they were like, we just really can't accommodate that. Um, you know, but think about us when you're done. 'Cause they were, they have a very low ranking enlisted right now, and with me having my skill level, they were like yes, we would love for you to come back. But, um, and I think it was a blessing in disguise, you know, because obviously then my life continued and, you know, now I'm, I want to have a family and I don't know that I want to be in a position to have children, that I might have to leave. Um, I remember what that felt like as a kid, having my dad leave, and it's not an easy thing for children. It's not an easy thing for the spouses and um, so I just, you know, my way of continuing to be in the VA in the Vet Center, excuse me, the Veteran arena, is to work for the VA versus being really in the military.

Thompson: Okay. Um, let's back up just a little bit and um, when you first started, or returned to school rather, um, what were you still in your Bachelor Program, or were you in the Master Program?

Powers: When I returned from deployment, I was in my Bach - , um in my Bachelors. I was going for um Psychology and Women's Studies. Um, and unfortunately had a pretty unfortunate situation when I was at school, too. I normally didn't ever wear anything that would alert people that I was a veteran, and one day I just happened to be wearing my air force sweatshirt. Didn't even think about it. Um, I, I got verbally attacked by somebody from school about um, being in the military and we're going over there killing people and we have no business being over there. You know, and that was a, a pretty rude awakening. I had never experienced anything like that being, you know, from a military family, and then being in the military, you don't have that response to what you're doing. And, I guess, more so, I had received so many positive responses from people that would see me in uniform and thank me for my service and things like that. Um, that it was a real slap in the face. It was just kind of you know,

I was stunned, and I didn't really have words for the gentleman and I just said, "I'm over there doing my job and you know, I leave all the politics to the higher ups, and you're welcome to write our Congress, and let them know what your thoughts and feelings are." You know, I was pretty, kind of, I was pretty rude, I think, to him, because I was not expecting that response. And you know, unfortunately, there was a lot of people around, so it would have attracted a crowd, and it was really an awkward situation, but that was my only, only bad experience that I've ever had in all of my years of being enmeshed in the military. Um, but that was, that was very interesting to go back to school and again my whole perspective on the world changed. And it was like, you know, to have somebody attack me for something that I felt so proud about, um, it was very heart-breaking. And, truthfully, now, when I look back at it, it's like, I, it was a very, very little taste what the Vietnam veterans got, I think when they came back was the people just didn't support them and um, to be bombarded by that is a, it's a horrible feeling. And it makes you question, you know, what you did, and um, so it's a, it was an interesting experience to go through.

Thompson: Sure, sure. Um, so you finished up your Bachelor's degree. Um, was that a full time program?

Powers: Yes, yes it was.

Thompson: Okay. And then did you go right into your, your Master's Program?

Powers: I did, I actually started my Master's Program at the, at Whitewater. Um, and I was going for, it's called LPC, it's a Licensing Practicing Counselor. Um, and I was also working full time at the VA as a Mental Health Technician. Um, and thank God, I thank her everyday, a pharmacist told me that um the VA doesn't hire LPCs, they hire Social Workers. Um, so I was a year and a half into my Master's Program and I ended up withdrawing from there and applying at UW Madison to get my Social Work, my Master's in Social Work, which would make me much more marketable within the VA system.

Um, so I did, did technically go right into it, but I all that happened. I really like education apparently, so I just bounced around from program to program. But, um, yeah, and I actually just finished my Master's, this last May. Um, so.

Thompson: Um, so obviously you're very involved in the veteran's community. Um, do you work at the, the VA still?

Powers: Yes, yes.

Thompson: What type of work do you do there?

Powers: Yeah, so I um, I started at the VA as a Mental Health Technician. And then I went over to the Vet Center, which is still a part of the VA, but it's a very different mission. Um, it's a very remarkable mission. I love what the Vet Center does. Um, and I was an Office Manager there for five years while I was doing my Master's Program. And then I graduated in May, and I actually got a social work job, it's acute care, so working with the veteran's that are in-patient at the hospital. And organizing kind of their stay at the hospital and then what they need for support and resources when they discharge from the hospital.

Thompson: Okay. Are you involved in any other veteran's organizations?

Powers: I am. I'm actually the chapter coordinator for Guitars For Vets. Um, so that's a nationwide non-profit organization. Um, started, gosh, I think, my chapter's been up and running for almost five years now. Um, and it's where veterans get paired with a volunteer instructor and they teach them how to play guitar. And then at the end, the veteran gets a free guitar package. So it's a whole bunch of goodies. Um, and it's an opportunity, it's um placing healing in the hands of music. It was a Marine Corps veteran and a civilian that started this many moons ago. The veteran came back with pretty severe PTSD and um, learning how to play guitar was his way of coping. Um, and so once I heard about that program, I wanted to bring it to Madison and so got it up and running um, five years ago and we've had tremendous success. We have a huge wait list because everybody wants to get in 'cause it's an amazing program. Um, so I'm involved in that, um, I was involved with the women's um, Women's Veterans Committee for five years. They no longer have it, sadly, um, it was disband last year. Um, but I was on there representing women's veterans for the State of Wisconsin for quite a few years. Um, I was involved in the Circle of Change Program, which is the program where veterans have an opportunity to work with dogs that have, um emotional and behavioral issues as well. It's kind of like a mirror situation where they see that a dog has hyper vigilance, isolation, aggression, a lot of the same PTSD and anxiety symptoms that veterans have and kind of watch them, um grow and overcome them, gives them kind of the hope to have the same thing happen. Um, so I got the program running here in Madison, stepped down recently just 'cause of graduating and marriage and things like that. Um, but still heavily involved in getting referrals over there, so we partner with the Dog Den in Madison to provide an opportunity for veterans. There's no cost to veterans, they bring in the dogs and it's, it's just a very, a beautiful thing to see and it's, you get these Vietnam veterans that have been isolated for years and they come and they meet these other Vietnam veterans and the camaraderie that sparks between them again and conversation and the healing starts and um, you

know, lots of statistics out there about animal assisted therapy and how beneficial that can be. Um, so it was very cool to be a part of that.

Thompson: Very good. Um, thinking generally about your life in the military, what kept you going? It seems like you had quite a few challenges, so what, what kept you motivated and driven to succeed?

Powers: Yeah! Um, that's an interesting question. Um, I mean, truthfully, I think it, it's the way that I was grown, it's the way that I grew up. My Dad never allowed us to quit anything, you know, even if we hated it. Till the end. It didn't matter if we started something, we finished it. You know, and that was just something that he instilled in us from a very young age. Um, and I think that's truly what kept me going and just knowing that if something wasn't good, right now, it's going to get better. Um, and that you always have a chance to make changes in your life. And I think, for me the biggest piece, especially like between when I was still in school and I was learning more about psychology and things like that and um, it gave me a little more power back in my life, to know that even though horrible things happen to good people, that you can change that. And even though you'll never forget it, it's something you can heal from. Um and that truly played a factor into it, especially after my second deployment, it was um, it made me realize that I am a strong person. Even though I didn't realize that before and I was resilient and that you know that all the shit that had been dealt to me that I still overcame it, and um, having the love and support from my family. There's no words to put on that, um coming from a military family, you just had that natural support and just the love that, obviously, any family has for one another. Um, but knowing that I always had those shoulders to lean on, if I had problems or just needed to kind of cry it out or whatever I needed at that moment, to deal with it, um family is, is everything to me. So, I think that's where, yeah . . .

Thompson: Um, did you receive any medals or citations during your career?

Powers: Um, we did as a unit. Um, I didn't get any specific ones, just like my ribbons for being overseas. Um, no ah, I mean we got accommodations um for being, yeah, they were all unit ones for being kind of a stellar unit and providing good quality um services to the, the jets and stuff while we were over seas. But other than that, um, no, just the basic medals and ribbons that went along that everybody got.

Thompson: For, for each campaign?

Powers: Yup, each campaign in, yup.

Thompson: Um, did you use any benefits that are available to veterans?

Powers: I did, yeah. Um, I used a Federal GI Bill for my undergrad and then I used the Wisconsin GI Bill for my Master's Program. Um, which has been just amazing to have that opportunity to continue with my education and not have to stress about the financial piece of it. Um, I'm still working on unfortunately, a service connection. Um, due to my own self, I um, my post deployment screens, like I was saying previously, I, I said nothing was wrong because, I at that time thought I would be career military. Um, and that's kind of coming back to bite me in the ass. Um, I'm putting forth for um, tinnitus, ah, 'cause I have ringing in both my ears, horribly from working on the jets. Um, and that's been a battle with the VBA, unfortunately. Um, I'm also putting in for um, a chest condition because, my pod, when I was in Balad, was right next to the smoke pit. Um, or the smoke pile, I should say, in Balad. I don't know if you've ever heard this before, but they had this smoke pit, where they literally just burned everything. Um, so it's just non-stop smoke that would come out and be, you know, and then there's dust storms over in Iraq and things like that. Um, so things I'm still pursuing, um, a little bit more of a challenge than I expected, but I also know that I just need to stick with it and, and I do feel that I deserve, not having my hearing anymore and having to, you know, what!, all the times, so um, I'm working with um, a representative in Milwaukee who's kind of taking my case on and going to help me to kind of continue with that. But--

Thompson: Do you feel good about your chances?

Powers: I'm a little bit leery 'cause I've been denied twice um, for them because of this one screening. Um, so I'm, I'm a little bit hesitant to have any hope for it. Um, but I've heard great things about him and he's a veteran himself, so a very big advocate on getting vets what he feels they deserve. And I've laid it all out there for him, so he feels, he feels confident in pursuing it and so I'll go with that and see how it rides out. But, yeah.

Thompson: How has your experience with the VA other than that and outside of your work, as well, as a veteran?

Powers: Yeah, um, so I mean I did receive care there um, and when I go for like my comp and pen for the service connection claim, um, I had to go to Milwaukee 'cause I work for the Madison VA, so just in terms of conflict of interest they send you to a different VA. Um, I have received tremendous experience. I've received great care, um, happy to see that women's clinic is getting um, developed over the VAs. Um, took a long time and they still have a lot of work to do, um, but right now I receive my medical care through, you know, my own insurance because the VA doesn't provide what I need in terms. And a lot of it is just um feed out, which means that they'll just pay an outside provider to give you the

services. So, it's like, I'm not going to mess with all that. Um, so I just use my own private. But I hope that the VA will continue to move in this movement towards more women's health, because it's lacking in the VA. But what the VA does, I think is remarkable. And I think they, Madison especially is a hospital that provides excellent care. There's so many incredible employees there. They're getting more veterans, um jobs there, which I think is extremely important to have that camaraderie and to be able to serve your veterans and after your service. Um, so I have nothing but high regard for the Madison VA. Um, Milwaukee VA I had excellent care, so I have nothing but high regard for them. I haven't been to a lot of other VA's. I know there's a lot of slack in the news about the VAs and it's unfortunate, because that's what gets the attention and not the positive stuff. But, yeah.

Thompson: Um where there any surprises along the way in your military career? Was there anything that you thought might go one way and just completely didn't and took you off guard maybe?

Powers: Um, I mean, I, I guess I would say my whole second deployment really didn't. Honestly, it was nothing that I ever expected. I thought I was prepared to go back and it was going to be nothing. And it was nothing that I ever expected. Um, I knew I was going to get a little bit of slack for being a female in the, in the um military and they obviously, you know, that they harp on you about sexual harassment, and the military sexual trauma, you know, so that's being bombarded on you the whole time. So, I guess in my naive sense, I thought that that wouldn't be an issue. Well, people are people, and whether you're in the military or you're in the civilian sector, you are going to have some of that stuff that you have to deal with. Um, but that, it was a surprise to me. I didn't expect that, but I had to come to the realization that I was in a very male dominated career field and that it was going to happen. When you are around ninety guys, you're bound to have one or two that are inappropriate, push the boundaries, say things they shouldn't, you know. So, that was a bit surprising, but you know, I kind of got that just pretty quickly, into, into military, that all right, this is how it's going to be, and I just need to be prepared for it.

Thompson: Okay. Um, what would you tell somebody who doesn't know anything about war? How would you describe it to them?

Powers: Oh. Um, I would say unpredictable, for sure. Um, that's a, that's a tough question. Um, honor the friendships that you have, because that's what is going to get you through the tough times, is having your battle buddy or whoever it is that's going to help you get through it. Um, it's loud, it's hot. [Laughter] Um, it's an experience you'll never forget. Um, you're going to have negative and positives like with any life event. Um, but to keep in



mind that it's a challenge. It's, it's something that you're, or you, I don't think you can ever fully prepare for until you're there and you've gone through it you know what it's like. But, um, I'm sure some job fields are like the movies, but what my experience was nothing like the movies. Um, so to just be cognizant that, that what you see in the movies is not always real life. Um, so to come at somebody from the veteran perspective and just be conscious of what you say and what you ask and tread lightly. 'Cause you don't know what somebody's experience is and prime example is my sister and I. She had very different experiences in the military than I did. And we were both Air Force and we both deployed, so you just never, you never know what to expect.

Thompson: Anything else you'd like to, you'd like to say?

Powers: No, I mean this is an amazing opportunity, I mean it's an honor to be able to share our stories and that people are interested in doing it and I, you know, I'm grateful for every civilian and every veteran that supports veterans and um, I appreciate you guys for doing this and taking the time. So.

Thompson: Thank you very much for taking the time to come in and talk with us.

Powers: Yeah, absolutely, my pleasure.

[End of Interview]