

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
KELLY McMEANS
Personnel Support, Army, Operation Iraqi Freedom
2015

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McMeans, Kelly, (b. 1982). Oral History Interview, 2015.

Approximate length: 47 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Kelly McMeans, a Baraboo, Wisconsin native discusses her service in the 13th Med and 232nd Personnel Support Battalion of the Wisconsin Army National Guard during Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2003 until 2004. While she was a junior in high school, McMeans completed her basic training at Fort Leonard Wood. After graduating from high school, McMeans completed Advanced Individual Training at Fort Jackson, in South Carolina. She was attending college when September 11th 2001 happened. McMeans discusses the change in atmosphere, when she and her fellow servicemen and women realized they were going to be deployed. She was stationed in Kuwait at Camp Victory. McMeans discusses her experiences having a delayed deployment after breaking her ankle, and how that impacted her time in the service. After discharging in 2008, McMeans went on to become a nurse.

Biographical Sketch:

McMeans (b.1982) served with the 13th Med and 232nd Personnel Support Battalion during Operation Iraqi Freedom. She was involved in Kuwait before being discharged in 2008.

Archivist's Note:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript, if possible.

Interviewed by Andrew Thompson, 2015.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2016.

Reviewed by Robert Brito, 2017.

Abstract written by Robert Brito, 2017.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of McMeans.OH1954]

Thompson: Today is January 28, 2015, and this is an interview with Kelly McMeans, who served with the 13th Med and 232nd Personnel Support Battalion, of the Wisconsin Army National Guard during Operation Iraqi Freedom. This interview is being conducted at the central branch of the Madison Public Library, and my name is Andrew Thompson. Kelly, why don't we start by telling me where and when you were born.

McMeans: I was born on January 8, 1982, in St. Clare Hospital in Baraboo, Wisconsin.

Thompson: And fill us in on your life before you joined the service, what was early childhood like, what was high school like, that sort of thing.

McMeans: Early life was chaotic, there were four of us girls and my dad joined the military when I was, I think I was three, so at the time my mom babysat kids to supplement the income while he was away. It was before any sort of regulations, so we've got pictures where there's twenty kids and, you know, that was just my childhood, that's what I knew. And he was gone for quite a while, because he went to basic and then did AIT [Advanced Individual Training] right away, and he was a medic, so it was, what, five months or something like that, for just his AIT. But yeah, that was the little, the beginning parts, I guess. Growing up it was just my sisters and I, we didn't always get along, you know, there's always a lot of competition, my dad had high standards, I don't know if it was his military training, or if it was--I think my grandpa had similar expectations, so that was kind of how my path led to the military also, was just knowing that I was going to be expected to pay for my own college, and pave my own way. He always liked to point out that he did it himself, nobody did it for him, he had to go back to school when there were four girls at home, and that was, I mean, it was always a great example of what you do for your family if you need to, and so.

Thompson: Were you involved with any sports or extra-curriculars during school?

McMeans: Yeah. I did, I did play volleyball. I was on the dance team for a little while, I was the editor of our yearbook our senior year. Volleyball I didn't do, senior year, because I ended up doing basic training between junior and senior year of high school, so by the time I got back, they'd already had started in the summer, and was just one of those things that, you know, by the time I got back, schools are [inaudible] starting, and I just didn't, didn't jump back into it, so.

Thompson: How did you just, decide to join the service?

McMeans: You know, it was one of those things where we all said we would never be like our dad. Like hands-down, we were adamant that we were not going to follow in

his footsteps, and each one of us did. And I'd guess it got to the point where it was, like, starting to think about college, and what was my plan going to be, and yes I could have taken out student loans, and I did take some out. But I don't-- just, something just really pushed me, that this was what I wanted to do. And I didn't really look into any other units or anything like that, really didn't even look into any MOSs [military occupational specialty]. My dad's actually always been kind of the one that takes the reins and pushes us, and so he--being in the military--he was in the 13th Med, he was one of the medical officers, and so he talked to the admin guy and said, "Do we have any slots?" And it worked out that they did, and they kind of just streamlined me into their unit. So--

Thompson: That's great that you were able to serve with your dad, then.

McMeans: Yeah, yes and no.

Thompson: Good and bad.

McMeans: Good and bad for sure. [laughs]

Thompson: So you mentioned that you did your basic training before, between your junior and senior year of high school. What was that like, as a high school kid, going to basic training? And where did you do your basic training?

McMeans: I did basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Being in the summer, it was that summer surge, so there actually were a lot of people around my age. You know, if not juniors, then maybe a year or two older. I think that that was the positive of doing it in the summer, was that there was a lot of people my age. It was kind of exciting, I mean, to come back, and be in high school, and say, "Yeah, I went through basic training alrea--" you know, and some people that would never even picture themselves doing it, much less do it, and here was this girl, seventeen-year-old girl, doing it, so. There's definitely proud moments.

Thompson: When was this? When was basic training?

McMeans: Nineteen ninety-nine, that would have been the summer of 1999.

Thompson: So describe to us the process of going from home to basic training. You know, how did you get there, and then talk to us about basic training at Fort Leonard Wood. What was that like, what kinds of activities did you do, what sort of training?

[00:04:52]

McMeans: Let's see. At Fort Leonard Wood, I ended up getting there a week ear--it was actually kind of weird, because a girl from the next town over, we enlisted about the same time, and it was just a matter of where we fell in the line. She ended up

getting on a bus that, you know, they started right away. I got on a bus that we had to wait until the company filled up, so I ended up sitting there, basically, a week in holding. Which was stressful, because you didn't know what to expect, and, you know, you're just waiting for--to get screamed at, or you're just waiting for everything to start. And we were just kind of stuck there, and then I remember the cattle car coming, and that was probably the most intense day ever. You know, we get loaded up on the cattle car, and we pulled up to our company, and they start banging on the side of the cattle car, and you just know that, "Oh my god. What did I do?" And here it starts, and we all, you know, fell off, and then the smoking started, and it kind of just went from there. We--because it was a summer surge, we ended up actually being, not in dorms like the rest of the companies were, the rest of the basic training companies, we were in, they're actually the, like, tin buildings that they used for classrooms? They slapped on some drywall, and then they put an air conditioner in them, and they called them our homes, so we were the Echo Company, we were the ghetto company because we were off on the paved roa--or not on the paved roads, we were on the gravel roads. [laughs] So we'd get smoked in the gravel, and yeah. It was really fun, though. I mean, looking back, it was fun.

Thompson: You mentioned getting smoked. What is that?

McMeans: Oh, just intense exercise, you know, just up, down, burpees, push-ups, flutter kicks. I was just--

Thompson: And so basic training, you started with, what sort of training did you do, I guess?

McMeans: I think our first things were just your basic classrooms, I don't remember that, I think we didn't, I don't think we did, like, the range until closer to the end of the twelve weeks. It might have ended up being twelve, I think, so technically it was nine, but with the holdover times and stuff I was there closer to twelve. We did the field exercises towards the end, also, just a lot of the navigation, the map-reading-

Thompson: Basic soldiering skills and so forth?

McMeans: Um-hm.

Thompson: Okay. How did you choose your specialty?

McMeans: That actually--like I said--just kind of, it just worked out, just being that there was an opening in that unit. But once I got into the unit--and it being a medical unit, knowing I wanted to be a nurse--my goal and my plan was always to just take my direct commission within the unit, and just stay there. But then life changed, and things happened, and.

Thompson: Back to basic training a little bit, do you remember any of your instructors, or

your friends from there--

McMeans: Oh, yes.

Thompson: --do you have any stories you could tell us?

McMeans: There was a, one of our drill sergeants was a heavier-set African American woman. Not heavy-set in the sense of, you know, a normal Wisconsin obese population, but she was very broad on the top with very skinny, skinny legs, and she always had her hair pulled back in a super-tight bun, and she carried this stick with her. And everywhere she went, she was pounding this big stick. It was like a--what do you call them--the, um, like a staff, you know, she always had that, and then she told us her story, about one time somebody had tried to challenge her, or attack her, or something, so from then on she had this. But she would call me her horseman because, believe it or not, I actually was thin and could run, once upon a time, so I was the fastest female in our company. So she called me her horseman.

There was one time where I leaned into the PX [Post Exchange] to let some of our guys know we needed to go, when this female--those female drill sergeants are just crazy--she came up out of nowhere, she wasn't even part of our company at all, I didn't know who she was, she got right in my face, and she was yelling at me. "Are you flirting with him?" And I'm like, whoa, what's going on, and she smoked me in front of her whole company, in front of my company, it was the most humil--I mean, there was just no humility, when you're there you just deal with it, and. Um.

I remember the gas chamber. Very, very fondly. The whole lining up, and being five groups out but you can start to feel it tingling on your skin, and just starting to sense that, and then when they get in there and they make you talk, you have, you know, you can't just sit there and hold your breath, they hold you in there long enough to make sure that you get a nice mouthful, and. Yeah. Oh, there were a lot of--I keep in touch with some of them, there's one girl, the one that was a battle, she and I are still Facebook buddies, now with the technology.

Thompson: Are there any memorable stories of your buddies, your battles there?

[00:09:56]

McMeans: I just, I was, I guess it's all just kind of clumped together. A lot of fears were overcome for me while I was there, some of the, like, rappelling, things like that, I always had a fear of heights, and just getting yelled at that, you know, you don't get to just choose, this isn't your time to choose if you're going to do this or not, you're going to do it. And so there was a lot of fears that were overcome, and I think I grew a lot as a person while I was there.

Thompson: How were the facilities at Fort Leonard Wood while you were there?

McMeans: Like I said, we were in the ghetto, so ours was, we did not have the nice dormitories. And actually my dad went to basic training at Fort Leonard Wood also, so you know, he's kind of shared where he was when they came to pick me up for graduation, and, um. But mine, like I said, it was--and actually, in the end, it actually probably worked out better because, as far as cleaning-wise, you can only clean a tin concrete floor so well. So as far as inspections for cleaning goes, we probably got off a little easier than others, but it was basically just a big open tin room, you know, our bunks were just lined up, and we didn't have a bathroom that was connected to the building. It was two bays, and then the bathroom, and then two more bays. And then right across the little gravel road were all the same tins, just without the drywall, and that's where the classrooms all were. So we'd have a lot of other companies come through there, too, so it was a lot of traffic.

Thompson: How was the food?

McMeans: We didn't get to really eat much of, you know, anything. We kind of got a little trick where you could steal a little bit of the sugar packets, and you'd put it on a piece of buttered bread and pretend it was a donut. [laughs] Because no sweets allowed for basic training, at all. The food was bland. I remember that, you know, especially when you're out in the field, they'd always feed us some sort of flavorless chili mac, or something with a lot of color. Especially on the gas chamber day, I remember we got fed a lot of colorful foods. We didn't get to, I mean, we didn't partake in any sweets, anything to drink other than water. We got to have a Gatorade our last week we were there, because we had to hand our canteens in, and then we had to use our Gatorade bottles for our canteen, so that was exciting, getting to taste Gatorade after twelve weeks. It's the little things, you know, you miss and don't think about. So that was, I don't know what it's like now, you know, if they, if it's still as strict as it was, but.

Thompson: So then you graduated basic training did your family come down for that?

McMeans: Yeah. My parents, and my boyfriend at the time. My dad was not thrilled about riding in a car for eight hours with him, but, yes, they did. They came down.

Thompson: That must have been exciting, to see them after--

McMeans: It was.

Thompson: --after so many weeks.

McMeans: Yeah. We've got some nice pictures of me, with a nice crying face and all those, but yeah, my dad wore his uniform, yes, I've got some nice pictures of me saluting him, and yeah.

Thompson: Did you ride back with him to Wisconsin, then, after?

McMeans: Yeah.

Thompson: Okay. So then you're back in Wisconsin, you have a year of high school left. Talk to me about that year, what happened then, did you do any training during that year?

McMeans: Oh, yeah. I drilled with my unit every, you know, with the one weekend a month, and the two weeks in the summer, just as though I was already graduated and everything, and just kind of got some hands-on, on-the-job training, as far as what my job would be once I did graduate from AIT. It was just a normal year. Yeah, just planning for college, and homecomings, but I mean, everything was just the same otherwise. It was just that one weekend a month, I put the uniform on, so.

Thompson: Did you dread going back to training at all?

McMeans: Um--I didn't dread it, I had that same boyfriend, so it was one of those, you know, whole, you know, saying-goodbye-again kind of things. In the end it was the right thing to do, I mean, it was, I'm glad I never let anybody hold me back, you know, because obviously he would have not wanted me to join the military in the first place, so. It was kind of hard, knowing that I was going to have a whole other summer, that I wasn't going to be with my friends, and things like that, especially right before college. And I know I missed out on things, I'd get letters and find out what was going on back home, and of course it always was a little bit of a bummer, that you're not there, but I don't think I regretted it, and you know. I met some really great people, when I was at AIT, too, so.

Thompson: Where did you go for Advanced Individual Training?

McMeans: That was at South Carolina.

Thompson: South Carolina. Do you remember the post?

McMeans: Fort Jackson.

Thompson: How was AIT for you?

McMeans: It was good. It was--oh, we were there probably, I think it was about twelve weeks, too, so it was one of those things where you kind of met people, and then some of these other AITs that were a lot shorter, you'd see them come and go, and you'd see them graduating, and it's like, "Oh, man," you know, and it's like, "Oh, it'd be nice to be going home, but," you know, it starts out similar to basic training, where they're very much in your face, and in, letting you know who's in charge and things like that. But, as the weeks went on, like, our last three weeks that we were there, on the weekends we'd get a little pass. So one weekend, we

got to go off, and then you had to come back, and then the next weekend we had a one-overnight, so you could go out, we left Friday night, and we got to come back. And then on the second, or the last weekend we were there, we got a double-overnight. So that was fun.

[00:15:17]

Thompson: How long were you at Fort Jackson?

McMeans: I think it was about twelve weeks.

Thompson: Twelve weeks? And you're obviously preparing for your job. Talk to us about the training for that.

McMeans: A lot of typing. [laughs] A lot of, just regulations, knowing the different regs and how to properly type up, and memorandums, things like that. Being admin, it was just a lot of things like that, like paperwork, and.

Thompson: Did you do any training outside of the admin paperwork stuff?

McMeans: Yeah. We did a, uh, what do you want to call it, like an FTX, where we went out in the field, and we did our, dug our fox holes, you know, and all that, and treated it as though it was a wartime situation, and then I had to do our admin duties out there. We did a, uh, did we do navigation again while we were there? I don't think so. I think it was just the FTX was all, kind of the, encompassing everything we had learned, and that was towards the end.

Thompson: Did you have any memorable instructors from AIT?

McMeans: Um, yeah, there was a few. There was one guy who was probably five-foot-one, I mean, I just think those guys are the funniest, the ones that are really little, and ah. There was one, oh, he was a--gosh maybe he was maybe from, like, Brooklyn, that's what he kind of reminded me of, this big, beefy kind of, just bald head, and had an accent, and there was one time where I got--I don't know why I did it, but--I was kind of leaning on my, the outsides of my feet, and in the chow line, and so I just kind of, you don't think anybody's paying attention to you, and out of nowhere this little short guy's in your face, and made me do the dying cockroach in front of everybody, so that was, it was a lot of those.

Thompson: What is the dying cockroach?

McMeans: Oh, you lay flat on your back with your arms and legs straight up in the air, and just lay there. [laughs] So that was, that was fun. Um, yeah, yeah. They were, they were decent. I mean, there was the, towards the end, you know, they got more real with you, and obviously the, it was still strict, and it was not meant to be enjoyable, but there were, you know, they kind of relaxed a little bit more,

especially on the weekends. Some of our instructors would come and do the duty, call duty and stuff, on the weekends, and so it was just kind of nice, getting to see them as real people, and kind of see what life was going to be like after AIT.

Thompson: What did you do during your downtime at AIT?

McMeans: We didn't get a whole lot of downtime. They had a day room where we could come down and--I think they'd throw some weird movie, you know, they had their small selection of movies that we could do, but mostly just talked, you know, that was, people still wrote letters, and there was a phone, but you hardly ever got to get--you know, there was, the line was always so long to use the phone, so.

Thompson: And how were the facilities and food at Fort Jackson?

McMeans: Similar. We did get to have desserts, now, when we were there, so I mean, I just don't think military food is great in general, you know, you got your basics. Your chili macs, your scrambled eggs that must have come from powdered milk, you know, things like that. And we'd do chow duty, that was fun, because then you got, you know, left alone. You were just in the cafeteria all day with the workers, and you know, drill sergeants left you alone, and you got to sneak a little ice cream, or things like that, so that was always fun.

Thompson: Any memorable buddies from Fort Jackson? Anyone you still keep in touch with?

McMeans: Yeah, there's two. One guy, we were good friends, more, like at the beginning of college, I went up to Boston a couple times and, you know, hung out with him, and then one girl, we just, you know, like I said, just Facebook buddies, not, we haven't seen each other since AIT, but it's just nice to see how she's changed and grown, and you know, what her career ended up with, and things like that.

Thompson: Did you have a graduation for AIT?

McMeans: I did. They didn't come for that one--

Thompson: No?

McMeans: No. They did not come for that one. So that was kind of just did it, got on a plane and they picked me up in Milwaukee. So that was nice.

Thompson: So then you're back home, and you went to college?

McMeans: Um-hm.

Thompson: Where at?

McMeans: UW-Madison for the first two years, so that was another, kind of just jumped right

into it. I had missed out on my freshman orientation, I'd missed out on, you know, the class selection. So by the time I actually got back, back home and was, you know, going to meet with an advisor and things, classes were kind of picked-over, so I think I took classes I didn't necessarily need, and it was kind of a hard first semester, you know, being, starting college in general, and being away, and then jumping into it, like not being fully-prepared, and um. It was hard.

Thompson: And this was 2000, or 2001?

McMeans: Two thousand.

Thompson: Two thousand. So then you're drilling. What was that like?

[00:20:04]

McMeans: It was a weird unit. It was a, so it was a medical and dental detachment was what, it used to be, um, it was a big unit, back in Desert Storm, you know, they had mobilized and went over, and then when they came back they downsized the hospital and just made it this little detachment, so the majority of the unit, the weekends were spent doing physicals, so, you know, people that needed, we were the ones that they came to. Anybody in the National Guard that needed their physical would come through us. So I pretty much did, like, all the in-processing, and things like that. So it was--I mean, it was fun, you got to see a lot of people coming through. It was a good unit, you know, a lot of, a very laid-back unit. That was the one thing. Coming back from, like, the active duty of basic and AIT, and then coming to a National Guard unit, where things are just n--a little bit more relaxed, and so--

Thompson: Where was the 13th Med located?

McMeans: It's on Wright Street.

Thompson: In Madison?

McMeans: Right in Madison, yeah, over by Gardner's Bakery, and there's--just down the road from headquarters. But like I s--I believe they're still there, I just think the name is, has changed to reflect more of the headquarters.

Thompson: Sure, sure. So then you're back, you're drilling, you're going to school, you know, life is moving. And then September 11th happens. Talk to me about that, especially being a member of the army when that happened.

McMeans: I came back from class, it [inaudible] was, like, a social studies class or something, and I walked in, and my boyfriend and roommate were both watching the TV, and it was just, it was crazy. I mean, it was just like, "Wow. What's going to happen now?" You know, it was just everybody was on alert, we kept getting--

not warnings, but it was kind of coming down from headquarters that, "Hey, this is what's going to be happening, people are going to get mobilized." And it became more real. Like, it really did, like, the weekends, you know, when we were doing the physicals and things like that, it was just kind of like, "Okay, you need your physical." And then all of a sudden we were mobilizing these people. Like, our whole mission changed. We weren't doing the physicals, we switched and drilled up at Camp Douglas the majority of the time, and they did all their MOB's, that's what they were doing, and so it was like, to see people coming through, knowing that you're, they're shipping off, a part of me felt guilty, like "Here I sit," you know, "doing your paperwork, and you guys are getting ready to go." I remember one time, a married couple came through, and they were getting ready to go. And I said something along the lines of, "Well, at least you guys get to go together," and she said, "Yeah, we have a six-month-old baby," or something like that, it was, like, really heartbreaking because it was like, "Wow, you're leaving them." So, yeah.

Thompson: So you mentioned that you deployed with the 232nd Personnel Support Battalion. How did you come to that point? That's--

McMeans: I actually volunteered.

Thompson: You did?

McMeans: Yeah. I had no idea where we were going, what we were doing, who these people were. I just, the 13th Med wasn't a unit that was going to mobilize, it just wasn't. I mean, after Desert Storm the mission had changed, you know, people could get picked piecemeal and added to units, and things like that, but as a unit, we were not going to go anywhere. And I was at a point in my life where it was just, you know, I was going to start nursing school, I had been accepted into the program, but then I had declined, dropped a class because I was having to go off-campus for it, and I said, "Well, if I got accepted once, I'll get accepted the next time." Well, the next semester came around, and I was not accepted, I was put on the waitlist.

So it was just kind of, like, you know, what am I supposed to be doing, and this opportunity came, one of the commanders for headquarters called me up and said, "Would you like, would you be interested? We've got a unit going," and I said, yeah. Something told me that I was supposed to say yes. So I volunteered, and got the call, and it was February of 2003 that we went to Fort McCoy, I met this unit--thankfully they were just wonderful people, I fell in with a couple of the younger girls right away, made really good friends. Yeah, but we mobilized in 2003, I ended up--well, actually, the whole thing is just fate. It is what it is, you know, I, that's where I met my husband, so. I ended up breaking my ankle while we were mobilizing. Just the whole Fort McCoy, in the middle of winter, to get ready to go to a desert just still blows my mind. I mean, it just doesn't make any sense, but it was after a training exercise, one of the guys was falling, and we kind of fell

together, and he ended up landing right on my ankle and it broke, two places. So I ended up getting left behind, I had the option of, did I want to just not go, I could do a medical leave, and I said no. I felt like this is what I want, this is what I'm supposed to do, and I know that this is what I'm supposed to do, so I ended up getting to go home.

[00:25:04]

I think I was home for thirty days. Yeah, I think it was thirty days back at my mom and dad's house while my cast was on, and things like that, and then I had to go back to Fort McCoy, and I was just stuck in alpha company, just in the holdover, which was just horrible. Because, you know, you don't know anybody, these are just all these holdover people that were here for whatever reason, that they weren't with their units, and my ankle hurt, it was swollen, I used to, I still had the cast on, and. But during that time, my husband, now-husband, he and three other people from that unit also had gotten left behind for a short time, they had gone, and had to do a re-train for his MOS. And so they were stuck there at the same time as us, and you know, we just became better friends, we started, it just was a really good friendship at first, it started out just getting to know each other, they left and then I was still there by myself. And that was horrible, it was absolutely horrible because I had to have, to travel to Kuwait by myself, I took a commercial flight. So here I am, a female, you know, I'm in civilian clothes, I had a weapon in the underbelly of the plane so I had to have that all checked. My ankle hurt like a son of a gun, you know, I had just had the cast off, and so here I was, on it for hours at end. By the time I got to Kuwait and I saw the couple people that came to pick me up, I just start bawling. It was so nice to see a familiar face, and so that was how I got to Kuwait. So yeah, that was a long, long plane ride by myself.

Thompson: Did you meet up with your unit in Kuwait, or were they in-country yet?

McMeans: We actually were stationed in Kuwait, so they came, we weren't near where they picked me up, though, so three of them had done, they did a little--I don't know what to call it.

Thompson: Convoy?

McMeans: Convoy, thank you. And came and picked me up at the airport, so that was in--well, they had switched. It was Camp Wolverine, I think, was where I had flown, where I, I flew into, the commercial flight, and then we went over there, got in-processed. I didn't have a blanket that first night, I was freezing, I remember that. You know, you don't, I just guess I assumed desert was going to be warm, they didn't have anything for us, and I did not have a blanket, and I just remember freezing all night long. But, yeah. Then we went to, we were at Camp Victory. Camp Victory, Kuwait. There were no facilities, we used porta-potties for the whole year, they had trailers for the showers, our faci--our DVAC was just

basically a couple trailers all kind of pieced together. We lived in big tents. When I first got there, the surge had just kind of ended so that it was really, really, really crowded. And they had males and females, we were all in one tent. And they had just kind of a--like, a barrier over it? You know? But we were all just super-crammed in there. And then after a while, since we were permanent on that camp, and things, once things slowed down a little bit, we moved and had a little more space, and made areas for our home for the year.

Thompson: So you arrived in, when did you arrive in Kuwait?

McMeans: Everybody else got there in January, and I got there mid- to late-February.

Thompson: Okay, so you were there before the war started?

McMeans: No. Well, we were, it was 2003, 2004.

Thompson: Two thousand--sorry. I understand. So then, talk to us about your day-to-day job, what did you do while you were there?

McMeans: We were responsible for MOBing, and in-processing, and out-processing. Anybody coming in or out of theater, both the army and marines. So we ended up working with a small group of marines that helped us with that, but we basically gave their briefing, welcomed them into country or out of country, swiped their IDs, which is basically what started their pay, or, you know, things like that. So we did all the briefings for them.

Thompson: How much did you work, I guess?

McMeans: You know, it was kind of off and on. We had different teams, we had the red team and the blue team, and we kind of rotated. Because these convoys, these guys came in at all hours of the night, and we might have a briefing at three o'clock a.m. It wasn't like it was a nine-to-five kind of thing. So we just kind of rotated that, we also did tower duty after the camp while we were there, so we'd have to man one of towers twenty-four-seven. Actually it wasn't twenty-four-seven, it was just at the evening. Because then, during the day, they had their, one of the units provided the security during the day, so we did that.

Thompson: What did you do during your downtime, if you had any?

[00:29:55]

McMeans: We had a little MWR tent that we could go down to, they had some board games, we had two computers that did have internet, so people kind of fought for those. We had volleyball, like a, just a little volleyball court and a little gym, so we did do that. They had, sometimes they would have buses that would go to Camp Doha, and Camp Doha was one of the original facilities, and there was British

troops, you know, they had all sorts of foreign allies and stuff there, so we could go there, and that's where they had a bigger PX, and you know, we'd kind of spend a day, and yeah. Feel like you weren't stuck on camp.

Thompson: Did you feel like you were at war?

McMeans: No. I really didn't. And I hear people's stories, and it makes me feel guilty, almost. Like how drastically different, one person's experience versus another, and. There were times where I was almost embarrassed to say, "Yes, I'm a veteran," because to me the veterans were the ones that were in the heat of it, that were, you know, seeing the firefights, or the nurses that were seeing the people. It was things like that, like, to me, those people earned it more than, you know, I don't--it was, it's still kind of hard for me to say, "Yes, I'm a veteran," because it's like, "Oh, where were you in Iraq?" It's, you know, everybody assumes, if you're a veteran, you were in either Iraq or Afghanistan. It's like, "I was in Kuwait." You know, just--to me there's a cer--small amount of embarrassment, that I didn't do more. You know? I don't know if that makes sense, but.

Thompson: What kept you going, through all of this? Through the deployment, through the working, all of that?

McMeans: I think it was just having friends, and people that were going through the same thing. I mean, there were definitely times where it was really trying, you know? Just being away from everything, and just being stuck in the sand, you know, you just get to the point where it's just like, there is nothing around but sand, and if I have to use the porta-potty one more time I'm going to explode. You know, it was just like, just things like that just dragged on, but like I said, my husband ended up, you know, he was there, we really built a great friendship, and that obviously grew once we got back. I have friends, still, that I talk to from that unit, and I was just, I just did it. I was supposed to be doing, you know?

Thompson: Any injuries while you were there? You mentioned the broken ankle, but was there anything else that--

McMeans: No, the ankle caused a lot of problems for me. I ended up having surgery again when I came back, because just the wear and tear of being over there, you know, obviously, not having a stable ground to be walking on, I had pins and screws, and they were all just right on the outside, so it was constantly rubbing. So I had a lot of pain. A lot of pain. I had to go and see a PT a couple times, you know, things like that, and I don't know. That was it, though.

Thompson: Did you earn any medals or citations while you were there?

McMeans: I got an ARCOM.

Thompson: And what's that?

McMeans: The--ah--

Thompson: The Army Commendation Medal?

McMeans: Yes, thank you.

Thompson: What did you earn that for?

McMeans: I just was put in for it because of the amount of hours, and time, and kind of took a leadership role while I was there, doing the briefings, and things like that.

Thompson: What was your rank at the time?

McMeans: I was an E4.

Thompson: E4, Specialist?

McMeans: Um-hm.

Thompson: Okay. Did you have any habits or rituals for good luck, or--just to get you through things?

McMeans: No, not really.

Thompson: Did you pull any pranks, or have any memorable stories of buddies pulling pranks, or anything like that?

McMeans: I don't know if so much, pranks, but I mean, there was, it was a goofy group of guys. I mean, some of these guys, they'd known each other since they were seventeen, also, so they'd been in this unit together, and so they just, they were--I don't know, they were just silly. It was fun. We'd sit in that, in the day room, our office was a big tent just in itself, so we kind of had a little more space than a lot of these units had. So we had our PSB, and then we'd all kind of congregate, and hang out, and I don't know, people were just, you know, people really tried to just get through it by not being mopey, and we had a lot of fun when we could.

There was a softball team, some of them played softball, so we'd go watch them play softball. Oh, there was an injury, actually. There, oh gosh, he, it was bad. There was, I think he was from Louisiana or something. They were in anmonie so they'd kind of come and hang out with us every once in a while, and he played softball, too. They were one of the other units that were permanent on the camp. And he was screwing around one night, he and another guy--I don't know if they were wrestling or not--he ended up getting stabbed with an antenna of a radio, and they said it was, they ended up having to ship him out, and then when we finally talked to him, Richard was his name, it was very close to his heart, and it could

have been really serious, and yeah. It was, that was exciting.

[00:35:03]

Thompson: How did that happen?

McMeans: I have no idea. It was just, it was one of those things where it was out, and they'd just, the way he landed, and it was a freak thing, and somebody was smart enough not to pull it out, they said, "Just leave it," and they ended up shipping him out, and. That was probably the most exciting.

Thompson: How long were you in Kuwait?

McMeans: I was a little shy of a year. They were a little over a year, just by the time I'd joined them, with my ankle. We ended up getting back, February of 2005, so we left January 2004, February 2005. Yeah.

Thompson: Describe the homecoming, how was that?

McMeans: Disappointing.

Thompson: Really?

McMeans: Kind of.

Thompson: How so?

McMeans: Well, my mom and sister came, I was hoping my dad would come, he was busy with work. You know, I thought it was going to be one of those things where they were telling me he wasn't coming but he was? I have a really bad habit of making it up in my mind, that somebody tells me it's not happening, and I'm like, "Oh, sure it is, of course it is. Yeah, they're just joking," you know, it, so. I didn't see my dad when I came home for my two weeks of leave, he had to go away for something. Whether it was with military, or for work, he, I think I saw him for, like, just a day or a half day, and then he was gone for the rest of the time. So then I thought, "I'm coming home, of course he's going to be there, you know?" And so I showed up and it was just my mom and sister, and I was like, "Bummer." You know?

Thompson: Did you have to go through a demobilization after that, or were you free to leave?

McMeans: No, I was demob--and I actually got stuck there longer, again because of my ankle. Because I had to have the surgery, again, to have all the hardware removed, and so everybody was at Fort McCoy for maybe a week or so, just doing the demob, and then I stayed a little bit longer, to have my surgery, did the recovery, and then got to be done. It wasn't until April that I was actually officially released,

so I was on orders a little longer than everybody else.

Thompson: Yeah. Did you go right back to school, or what happened after the deployment, I guess?

McMeans: Let's see. We lived in Sun Prairie, and I had tried to get into nursing school--I had already been accepted into nursing school at Milwaukee, and they told me they were going to hold my spot--that's where I ended up. I did my first two years at Madison, and then transferred to Milwaukee--they were going to hold my spot for me. I was hoping to maybe get into Madison, I just wanted to kind of stay where we were, but that didn't work out, so let's see, we started, I would have started in the fall, then. So we had a few months of, where we stayed in Sun Prairie and just kind of got back to life, and had my ankle, and yeah. Then I did nursing school, so that was two more years. My husband got his Associate's in IT, and then we moved back to Madison, I got my job at the VA, and then we bought our house in the Dells.

Thompson: How much longer were you in the military after you came back? Did you go back to drilling status?

McMeans: Um-hm. I did. I got out, let's see. Our first daughter was born in July of 2007, and my husband was still in, and I was in, and I did not want to be those people, that got called up and said, "We've got a six-month-old at home," I just was not going to be them. I thought that, I, there was no way. So I got out on--I don't know if it was technically on a hardship or not, but--it was related to not having somebody to watch our children if something would happen, so. I think it was about April 2008, is when it officially was, I was out of it.

Thompson: Were you still in E4 at that time, or had--

McMeans: No, E5.

Thompson: --had you been promoted? Okay. And did your husband stay in after that?

McMeans: He did stay in for a little bit longer, he did active duty at Fort McCoy for, he got just put on active orders for a little over a year, and then he ended up getting out just recently, within the last year.

Thompson: Did you start dating your husband while you were in Kuwait?

McMeans: Well, I don't know if you can call it dating, since you're, there's no, really no dating, but was there--

Thompson: Was it, was it more--

McMeans: --definitely--

Thompson: --than a friendship?

McMeans: Was there more than a friendship? I mean, there was definitely sparks there. You know, obviously it was very frowned upon, it wasn't something that could be public in any means, so it was a little bit of a stress, knowing that you cared for somebody, but you couldn't show them you cared for them, it had to be very much private, and secret, and. But yeah. We ended up getting an apartment, and things, when we got back, and our relationship progressed from there. There was another couple that also did. They ended up getting married, and have a baby, and another on the way.

Thompson: Very good.

McMeans: Yup.

[00:39:58]

Thompson: Describe for us your thoughts and feelings when you left the service, as you look back and reflect on your service, what did it mean to you at that time?

McMeans: Um, it was kind of a mixed emotion, because part of me was happy to be, put that chapter, you know, close that chapter and move on, and another part of me wishes that I got to do what I had intended to do. My whole goal was to become a nurse, it was to advance in the ranks, I watched my dad do two tours as a nurse, and just hearing his experiences, you know, part of me was like, "I should have done that, that should have been me doing that." So I think I would have felt more fulfilled, as far as my military career goes, if I had done something more like that, and experienced that aspect of it. So it was definitely with mixed emotions. I mean, I don't miss the one weekend a month, because it felt like it always happened when something else was going on, you know, that's kind of how it goes, but it was hard to balance and fit my military role in with being a new mom, and a new wife, and you know, a new nurse, you know, I just had so many roles and so many hats to be wearing that it just, it kind of just, you know, I dropped it off, and I didn't really look back.

Thompson: Did you join any veterans' organizations after your service?

McMeans: My dad had us all join the VFW, but I wasn't an active member, he just really wanted to be able to say we were all part of that with him.

Thompson: And you mentioned working with the VA. Can you talk to us a little bit about that, what you did there and who you worked with?

McMeans: I worked in the ICU, I was an ICU nurse. I was able to get an internship at the Milwaukee VA when I was still a student, and from there, I just was--again, my

dad's influence has always been part of, you know, in the background, it's always there whether we want to admit it or not, but--he was very good friends with the manager of the ICU in Madison, and so kind of put a bug in her ear, and she hired me, and I was pregnant at the time with my daughter, so I had to take leave right away, which was just great, to come in and say, "Hey, thanks for hiring me, and by the way, I'm going to take some leave now," but it was a great experience. The Madison VA is great. I mean, it's a beautiful facility, you know, they--state-of-the-art there--they really care about patients, and it was a great experience.

Thompson: Did you interact with any veterans coming home from current wars, during your service at the VA?

McMeans: Not many. I think it was kind of, unfortunately, one of those things where a lot of the younger veterans were kind of shying away from VAs, I don't know if it's just the bad rap that the VA had gotten in the past, or, you know, if people just, with the health insurances, had other, you know--I'm not sure what the situation was--we saw mostly more the Vietnam era, some World War II guys, still. Occasionally you'd see some of the younger guys, but just not as often as you would think. And that was one thing that I know they were trying to push, was to get, at the time, was to get more of these young soldiers in, and let them realize that they had all these things available to them if they needed them.

Thompson: With your ankle, and especially with the surgery, did you use the VA facilities after you were, had been working there, and do you still use the VA facilities?

McMeans: No. I did at first, when we first came back, I hadn't started nursing school, I had those couple months where I was without--and then actually, during nursery school I didn't have health insurance, so it was always the VA until I got a job, and then had private insurance. And would be expected to use that first. But no, the VA was great, I got all, everything documented for my ankle, they helped me do my comp and pen, I had to have fertility treatments, and they helped me with those. So as far as the women's studies, I know they're really trying to enhance their women's groups at the VA, and that was pretty apparent, so they were, that was always great. If they couldn't directly help me, they resourced it out to whoever could, so.

Thompson: Thinking about your service, what surprised you? What didn't you anticipate, if anything?

[00:44:44]

McMeans: I guess, like I said, I just didn't expect it to end the way it did, I expected myself to go further. I could tell the disappointment, you know, that my, in my dad, that we all kind of stopped at our, the point that we did, and that nobody really, you know, retired in it like he did. But, looking back, I, there's just not one thing in my life that I have that is not in some way linked, or related to, my time in the

military. I mean, so it's, I'm just super-grateful for the time, and the experiences, and I know how vital it is to who I am, and what I am, and.

Thompson: Is there anything else that you want the listener to know? About service, about you, anything?

McMeans: Um, I don't think it's, I don't know. There's just so many programs that the military has, I--when I went to graduate school, because of my service connection with my ankle, I was able to get into the Volk rehab program, which was invaluable while I was at school, because it provided me resources, and financial support, while I'm going to school, and not being able to work, so I just, I mean, I just, the number of programs that are out there for veterans is just amazing, I just think that that's, I hope that never changes.

Thompson: Okay. Well, thank you very much for sharing your story with us--

McMeans: --thank you.--

Thompson: --today, and be well.

McMeans: All right, thank you.

[End of McMeans.OH1954][End of interview]