

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

**MICHELLE RASMUSSEN**

Civil Affairs, Army Reserves, Operation Iraqi Freedom

2015

OH  
2003

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**2003**

**Rasmusson, Michelle.** (b.1980). Oral History Interview, 2015.

Approximate length: 1 hour 57 minutes

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

**Abstract:**

In this oral history interview, Michelle Rasmusson, a Fox Cities, Wisconsin, native discusses her service with the 432<sup>nd</sup> Civil Affairs Battalion in Kosovo, and as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom, her return to civilian life, and involvement with the VFW. Rasmusson enlisted in the Army Reserves in 1999 and talks about basic training at Fort Jackson (South Carolina), and advanced infantry training at Fort Bragg (North Carolina). She describes her deployment to Kosovo, experiences working alongside the local population, and returning to the United States. Rasmusson relates the lead up to her deployment as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. She describes her duties in Iraq, the living conditions on different bases, and the deteriorating security situation during her deployment. Rasmusson discusses being one of the only women on her base and successfully completed missions to rebuild schools. She comments on her return home, including physical and mental health challenges that she continues to face. She talks about holding a leadership position in the Veterans of Foreign Wars and coping mechanisms she uses to manage post-traumatic stress disorder.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Michelle Rasmusson (b.1980) served with the 432<sup>nd</sup> Civil Affairs Battalion, Army Reserves during Operation Iraqi Freedom. She also deployed to Kosovo as part of Kosovo Force and was discharged in 2007.

**Archivists' 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.

Interviewed by Ellen Brooks, 2015.

Transcribed by Charles Bellinger, 2016.

Reviewed by Helen Gibb, 2016.

Abstract by Helen Gibb, 2016.

## Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of Rasmusson.OH2003\_file1]

Brooks: Today is Thursday, August 6, 2015. This is an interview with Michelle Rasmusson, who served in the Army Reserve with the 432<sup>nd</sup> Civil Affairs Battalion from 1999 to 2007. She was involved in the Kosovo Force, K4, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. The interview is being conducted at the Door County Visitor Center in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. The interviewer is Ellen Brooks, and this interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans' Museum Oral History Program. We'll just start at the beginning.

Rasmusson: All right.

Brooks: Tell me where and when you were born, and a little bit about how you grew up.

Rasmusson: Sure. I was born and raised, the early parts of my life, in Dodgeville Wisconsin—a little farm town just southwest of Madison. And grew up basically surrounded by farmers and family, and apple orchards, and livestock. Our Christmas vacations were basically helping the family feed and change cows' hay, and things like that. And then the other part was, I grew up in the Fox Cities area, and—shoot, it goes all the way back to a very eclectic family that kinda comes together. My dad is a full-time career firefighter, in the Fox Cities, and then my mom is an artist, so I got a little bit of both worlds that kinda have molded me into where I've gone and what I've done. That's about it in a nutshell.

Brooks: What about siblings?

Rasmusson: Siblings, I have two sisters—God rest my mother's soul. I have two younger—I'm the oldest of three. We're all about three years apart. Myself, I live up here, the rest of them reside around family in the Fox cities area. Everything from culinary chef to my other sister who did not sign up for the military but she's working through Oshkosh Truck [Oshkosh Corporation] and Pierce building some of the trucks we would have used overseas, so kind of came full circle there.

Brooks: Tell me a little bit about high school and education, and all that.

Rasmusson: Oh boy. Let's see. Started in Dodgeville, did some time in Appleton—we moved back to Dodgeville. Ended up leaving halfway through my senior year to move to the Fox cities and graduated early. Through there, was big in sports: volleyball, basketball, cheerleading, track—the whole gamut just to stay busy. [chuckles] And then when I moved to the Fox cities, I graduated from Neenah after about two months of class there, and started classes at UW-Oshkosh [University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh]. Was the rooms division manager at the Paper Valley Hotel since I was seventeen, and then decided about three, four years into that—I guess it wouldn't even have been that—a couple years into that, decided, "Where's the next move? Is it GM and I'm gonna be, you know, my twenties, or maybe there's something else I can do with my life." And walked into the recruiting station, said, "Okay, I want to sign up. When can I leave?" and he said,

“Well, it's six months,” and I said, “I thought it was, like, now. Can't I leave tomorrow?” Walked in and said what's the highest, the highest kind of, you know, most elite position a female can be in in the military, and they said, “Well, there's a few. You can do civil affairs, psychological operations—all of them that fall into the Special Operations command, and we just happen to have a Green Bay unit just north of us, that's the 432<sup>nd</sup>, which was civil affairs, and they told me straight out they deploy about every two years.” and I said, “Fantastic. I'll do it.” [laughs] “You can stop with your spiel. When do I sign up? When do I go and start that whole process?” The day out of Basic Training, or out of my AIT training [Advanced Individual Training] they deployed me to Kosovo. I literally hit the ground running, and I was a reservist, and just started to go from there, so I was gone, just over about two years once I signed up.

Brooks: To go back a little—tell me a little bit more about that decision to walk into the recruiters' station.

Rasmusson: I think part of it was that I was—maybe not that college was boring, but you're doing that same process of—you know, you've got a decent job, you're going to school for something. You don't really know if that's what you wanna do, and I don't wanna say the—I won't swear on your thing, at least. [laughs]

Brooks: I don't mind. They won't mind.

Rasmusson: You know, that badass job that kinda gives you some recognition, and you know that you've given it your 100 percent, and everything you do during the day kinda goes toward something and is worth something. That kinda summed it up. It was like, Okay, it's not just this everyday routine—there's people that are dependent on you, there's new things to learn every day. There's this camaraderie and bond between people in the military, and everything about it just kind of excited me. That just kinda drove me even more to say, “Okay, I wanna do airborne, I wanna do air assault. What else can I do? Just chalk them all up on my application, and then we'll go from there.”

Brooks: Wow. And did you know all that from knowing other people who were in the service?

Rasmusson: That's the funny thing. I did not know family. I had distant family that was—more the elders that was in [the] military, no uncles. I have two cousins that were in the National Guard, but none that I had actually corresponded with one-on-one. I grew up—when I mentioned the apple orchard, my great-uncle was in World War II as a fighter pilot, and I think he kind of took me under his wing and maybe in the back of my head his voice was there telling me all the stories. I remember going to kindergarten and saying. “No, at any time something could fly over.” and I remember the teacher just being so upset that I had shared this story with a bunch of other five-year-olds, and I don't know if it was the fascination or just those stories there, but if anything—if any family tie to it, it would probably be my uncle, Uncle Gerald Fieldhouse, in Dodgeville, yeah.

Brooks: And how old were you when you went into the recruiters' station?

Rasmusson: I was nineteen. I had just finished about two and a half semesters at UW-Oshkosh, and was just ready for something else—ready for a new challenge.

Brooks: And what year was that?

Rasmusson: 1999.

Brooks: Okay. All right.

Rasmusson: Signed my life away for eight years, which seemed forever, and now with kids it goes by like there's no tomorrow, but, yeah.

Brooks: Okay. So tell me—you went, you signed your life away, and what was the next step?

Rasmusson: Waiting. I truly thought that you walked into a recruiters' station and they would ship you out the next day because I really didn't have any footholds in the Fox cities. I had my job, school semester was pretty much done, but nothing was really like holding me down. So they said, "Oh, it'll be about three months, and you'll go down, and in that process you'll go to MEPS, where they do all your physical fitness checks, and then they'll ship you off to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for your basic training," and then AIT was at Fort Bragg.

Brooks: Tell me about basic training.

Rasmusson: Oh boy. [laughter] I think through years and years, and you kind of hear that it's all mental when you get to basic training, and it's—they're gonna try to push you, and going in knowing that they're trying to break you, trying to bring out the strongest parts of you, and see your weaknesses. I actually kind of enjoyed it—you kind of fold back a little bit in the beginning, and just kind of watch to see how things fall into place, and by the end of basic training, I was on a soldier-leader of the cycle board, and ended up getting it for my, for my battalion. I remember when I walked into the recruiters' station, the recruiter said, "Well, I'll buy you a lobster dinner when you get back if you get soldier-leader of the cycle," and I'm thinking, No way, there's like six hundred people in my battalion here in Basic Training. Sure enough, you just kind of take every situation, and I had a blast, you know.

In AIT, we got to do it down at the Fort Bragg Training Center, where the Special Forces are, and I remember Nasty Nick, and there's—it's this obstacle course that's, like, twelve, fifteen miles long. And the Special Forces run it, and I just remember it was like one big jungle gym. And it was so much fun just to, kind of, run through it and—I'd say it probably was not easier for me, but I—it definitely pulled on a lot of my strengths that I was able to probably have fun and stay at the top. You don't want to be the top female in the group, against the top male in the group, to set the pace, because the top males were a heck of a lot—[laughs] at least the top male in that group was a heck of a lot faster than I was when it came to running, but it was—it was good, yeah.

Brooks: And Nasty Nick? Is that the name of the obstacle course?

Rasmusson: It is, yep. Which I think might be part of my passion for the Tough Mudder that they got going around the world, but, yeah.

Brooks: Okay. So, tell me more about AIT.

Rasmusson: AIT was a little bit more lenient—which is not really lenient at all—from Basic Training. They split us into two groups, with civil affairs and then psychological operations—they're kind of sister units that work together. And, really, you go through the JFK Special Warfare Unit, and they train you; everything from, you know, you're past that Basic Training or that basic knowledge of just combat, and you start getting into the realities and the functionality of war, and postwar, and pre-war, on what your specific job will be as civil affairs, and what your role will be when you go overseas and you're called on.

Brooks: Going through all this training, tell me a little bit about what was going through your head. Was it what you expected, or completely different—

Rasmusson: I think so. There was a different mindset between different people that had signed up. Some people signed up for the college money. Ultimately, we all volunteered, because there wasn't the draft when we signed up. But mine was really to get the most out of training—it wasn't just to get through training, it was literally to learn as much as I could so that I knew I could be effective and protect myself and protect others while being overseas. So it was something else—it was one of those things on my bucket list that once you did it, you're like, I am so glad I did it. And the deployments, you're like, Yep, I'm glad I did it. I don't ever want to do it again. [laughs] I used up the nine lives, but, yeah, it was good. It was everything that you see in the movies, and you see, it's very enlightening. [laughs]

Brooks: And what about the people. Were there any memorable instructors, or did you make any close friends while you were there?

Rasmusson: Sure. I still stay in touch with a couple people that I went through Basic Training with. You know, you have your battle buddy that goes through thick and thin with you every day, and she was the one that needed help doing a pushup at the beginning of Basic Training, and now she's running marathons out in [Washington] D.C., and I'm on the flip side where that is my past life. But we stay in touch, and, you know, as far as drill instructors, of course, they're the scariest people you'll ever meet when you're in Basic Training, and you forget they're real people at times, but they're there to push you, and there to break you, and there to just make you better all the way around. But the experience, it's almost an autopilot thing from lack of sleep, and you're learning but you're sleeping and you're walking and you're [laughs] learning. But it's one of those things you'd find—you find your max, and you find where—where you want to push yourself to be next, and you know your challenges and you know when you have to lean on people and think that's where that—kind of that bond comes, because you're going to find your weaknesses through this whole thing, and wish that there's somebody else that could kind of pick you up and other people you could pick up at the same time.

Brooks: Tell me more about the battle buddies because I know—I've heard of them before, but I don't really understand how that works.

Rasmusson: Sure. When you get to Basic Training and they shove you off the bus, and they start yelling at you, they pair you up and you have one person, and you're never to leave that person's side. And I don't know if that's more accountability, or what. It's kind of like, "Everybody's got a buddy—make sure you don't lose them." in kindergarten, and that's your person—that's who you train with. That's who is there when you wake up, the ones pushing you at the end of the day. They're the ones running with you in the morning and you really just kind of grow together. And they see the worst of you and a lot of the best, but there's definitely a lot of bad that they see, and just trying to help each other.

Brooks: You think it's a good system?

Rasmusson: I think so. Yeah, yeah. I don't know if as many people would make it through if they didn't have that, that battle buddy there next to them, to kinda say, "Yeah, I know, it sucks okay, but we can do this, okay? See them? They're not going to make it, but we can make it." [laughs]

Brooks: So did you end up getting your lobster dinner from your recruiter?

Rasmusson: He made bad choices, and when I came back I think he may have been in jail. So, I did not get the lobster dinner, but I knew I deserved it, but—yeah, no. It was a good challenge, I guess anytime anybody tells you, "Okay, this is one of the—this is the bar, and go and get it," and that's just the standard.

Brooks: And what was that name? You got the leader cycle?

Rasmusson: Soldier Leader of the Cycle. So you go through all your training, they look at all your PT tests, and your stats, and class, and tests, and everything, and then they take the top and then they literally kind of run them through this interview process, and test all your knowledge, and whoever comes out at the end, that's your person. It was good.

Brooks: And then was there some kind of ceremony for that, or just—

Rasmusson: You know, I don't remember. I remember, I think they put it on a plaque; I don't know. [laughs] It's just I finished it. That was, I think, accomplishment enough.

Brooks: So, when you went through all of your training, you were learning about, you know, what your assignments are going to be. Tell me more about what the Civil Affairs Battalion's responsibilities are.

Rasmusson: Sure. It's always been around, you know, if you see some of the movies that depict like *Monuments Men*—where they're the ones that—I don't know if that's the best one to pick, 'cause I think they end up—anyway, [laughs] They're the ones that are gonna go in, and they're that liaison between the military and the civilians. A lot of the Civil Affairs battalions, when I was in, were mostly reservists, with I think one or two active duty components just because they wanted that civilian background to those people. You had a little bit more—not that the military's not personable, but [laughs] there was a more personal touch that you could say," Okay, I'm a teacher back home; let me show you what we do with our kids," or, "I'm a firefighter back there—let me teach you some of

the things we do. Let me help you set up in, and basically be able to survive on your own and be able to create this community that doesn't feel like what you were in before." Especially with Saddam and that whole régime.

When we went through training it was a lot of. You know you have to be—first and foremost you're that combat person, so you have to always be vigilant of everything around you but at the same time you have to be somewhat human and not look like that military force that's coming on; you want to come in and say, "Okay, I'm going to help you rebuild your schools, I'm going to help your doctors, I'm going to help your hospitals." And it really is—It's kind of two-part. I'm gonna back up because I think I got ahead of myself. [Brooks laughs]

One of the first things they teach you is: when you go into a war zone, there's going to be dislocated civilians, there's going to be basic chaos. The people might be without house and home—the communities might be bombed out. So what are you going to do with all these people that are around? So that's where the refugee centers come in, civil affairs will help set those up and just the functionality of that. And then trying to get people to route to the places you want them to route so that they have tools and water and food and—you know, it's kind of our—we're more coordinators, it's kind of like our puppet-master things. "Okay, we need a pallet of water here, let's get it here, we have two hundred civilians." We're kind of that reporter kinda person where we go out, we say, "Okay, this house is demolished, this next house is demolished. Okay, this entire community is basically flattened, and we need this many tents, and let's get these guys to at least be able to sustain until we can get rebuilding things." The big part is all infrastructure repair; it's kinda that big hug that says, "It's okay. I know this is a horrible situation, and I know that things happened and things got bombed, but we're going to get you guys back on your feet, and bring you back, just a little better than prewar standard. We're not going to build you a mansion—I'm sorry—you weren't in one before," [laughter]

And there's that definite—that goodwill feeling, you know. Our unit was bringing order to chaos, and I think that's pretty equivalent to what we do, and so the training is really—which is interesting, because when I came back and did emergency management training, a lot of that Civil Affairs training we learned and did overseas is not necessarily what we use back in the States. It's weird to see us so advanced overseas and then come back and they're saying—a lot of it's there, but it doesn't seem like it crosses over completely. We're doing it for other countries, but then when things like [Hurricane] Katrina hit, well, where are all these Civil Affairs people that can come in and organize some of this chaos and kind of come in from above. Derailing, I'm sorry.

Brooks: That's okay. That's very interesting. I feel like a lot of people know that that's something that the Army does, but not exactly how they do that, or that there's a whole battalion assigned to that.

Rasmusson: That's a good point. We were one of the first units deployed to Iraq and when we got back, you know, you have all that negative media that said, "Oh, what are we even doing over there?" and we're so busy, and when we're in places that—as a Civil Affairs team they usually embed you with four-person teams in those active duty military bases. And,



a lot of times there just isn't media to cover what we're doing, and when we got back and they summarized what a hundred and twenty of us did in Iraq, out of one unit—it was dispersed all over the country in two- to four-person teams, and it was like—It was just unbelievable the number of troops. We had fixed almost, I think, like sixty to a hundred thousand schools, forty thousand hospitals, and the numbers were just unbelievable. We're like, How come we never hear about this stuff? And it's going on, but I—Maybe it's we don't stop enough to toot our own horn, or maybe the media doesn't want to cover the good stuff. But there's definitely a silver lining to all of it, , and it's nice to be part of that side of it, I think, was part of the appeal, too, when I was signing up.

Brooks: How many months total of training?

Rasmusson: Did nine months of training.

Brooks: Okay.

Rasmusson: I believe—I think that was about right. [laughs]

Brooks: Okay. And then next, deployed straight to Kosovo, or—

Rasmusson: Straight to Kosovo. I was about two weeks behind. They pulled me from my AIT graduation, and shipped me out right away, and joined up with my unit in Kosovo, spent a little time in Macedonia. And I remember my Mom asking me where I was when I first called home, and I said that, “I don't even know. Malaysia, maybe.” I had no idea where Macedonia was. [laughs] I had a little idea of what Kosovo was, and when I was in Basic Training, our unit does in-depth field training on where you're going, what you're doing. Well, since I was still in that Basic Training mode, they were still doing that combat training, so I was literally the greenest you could be going over, and I remember the drill sergeant saying, “You gotta be ready when you deploy.” and I'm thinking, “My unit's deploying right now. More than likely I'm gonna be deploying.” I don't know if they maybe spent extra care making sure that I knew everything that I needed to know, but, yeah, straight to Kosovo, and they put me on a team and we just started our missions.

The difference between Kosovo and my Iraq tour—Kosovo I really enjoyed. We were in the Serbians' section, which is that weird dynamic of how the Serbs kind of controlled that area, and then the Albanians. They ran the Albanians out, and then vice versa—came back where only about ten percent of the country was Serbian and we were actually protecting them from the rest of their country, just making sure that they were safe in their little pocket and helping them rebuild, and get reestablished. It was more like you were in Greece then. It was, you know, the beautiful landscape, and the thankful people. It was just a great experience all the way around. You're rebuilding schools, rebuilding ski resorts. Just trying to get that economy back up and going so they can sustain on their own. And there was, you know, that kind of combat side of it too, but it was mostly peacekeeping mission. You had your riots, and you had your—it could still get ugly, but it wasn't anything like the second deployment.

Brooks: So, let me back you up, just so I'm clear: So you were part of the 432<sup>nd</sup>.

Rasmusson: Mm-hm.

Brooks: When you were training, were you training with other people from the 432<sup>nd</sup>?

Rasmusson: I think there was two other girls that started—or two or three other people that started Basic Training that were from the 430—they were gonna be part of the 432<sup>nd</sup>. They didn't make it through Basic Training or AIT—they dropped out. Basic Training was everything from National Guard, to Army Reserves, to active duty Army. So when they say, well, “You've trained like a Reservist,” well no, we all train together [laughs] It's just how you go back, and it's always—there was always that tension between the Reserves and the National Guard, and the active duty, and I remember being overseas the first six months of Iraq, and they're saying, “Oh, the Reservists—you guys are part-timers,” and half of us—especially with the 432<sup>nd</sup>—we'd deployed more than most of our active duty counterparts, because they sign up for a two-year active duty stint, and we signed up for eight years. We're deploying every two years—if not more—and so a lot of us had more combat time than a lot of these active duty troops, and we got to go home at the end of it—

Brooks: So then you get to AIT and you're training with other individuals who are going into different Civil Affairs battalions?

Rasmusson: Yes.

Brooks: Okay. So then that's why they pulled you out, because your unit was more in need of you.

Rasmusson: Right, right. Yes.

Brooks: Can you tell me just a little bit about—you were saying about—there wasn't a lot of combat but there was some riots and things like that. Tell me about, kind of like day to day life when you were over there.

Rasmusson: Kosovo wasn't too bad. They, uh—I was at Camp Bondsteel, which was pretty much established. I was the third tour over there and it was basically this giant, kind of like—it was a military base, but we all had almost barracks-like setup where you'd have eight or ten people in a room and they put—I was obviously the greenest, and they had officers in a room, and the male NCO's would be in a room, and there was multiple sections of this kind of big, long barracks type. I actually got to go and live in the room that I had was actually the six translators and the two of us were just the lowest-ranking in our unit, and I don't know if it was—not that it was punishment, but it was actually amazing to be able to just see and live every day with people from Macedonia, and Bulgaria, and Albania, and just hear their stories. And it was almost like you were immersed in their culture and even more, just being able to eat the food—they could go off base and bring you back food, and it was amazing.[laughter] So, it was a great base, you know, you do your thing all day long, and come back, and you clean your gun—your weapon—and, you know, might had time to play some cards and watch some movies, and hang out, and call home, and do things like that, and just kind of plan out the rest of the day, the

tour. If you needed food, you go to the chow hall at, you know, midnight, if you wanted something to eat. But it was definitely almost more garrison than any type of wartime situation, so—

Brooks: Tell me about calling home, because this is 1999, 2000—

Rasmusson: Right, yes.

Brooks: —so how, how does calling home work?

Rasmusson: I'm trying to think back. What did we have? We didn't have satellite phones. I'm thinking that we had stationary phones in our main office that we were able to call home through. But it was few and far between. I don't know if it was—I wanna say it was through calling cards that—we could call through the one ground line or the one DSN line, and I remember—oh, god, I remember the echo now, because there was a ten-second delay, and it's the most frustrating thing in the world [laughs] So now it would have had to have been a DSN line. And you'd say something, and there's literally a ten-second delay, and at the end of the day it's like, "I'm just glad I heard your—" "Wait, what?" "What? I'm just glad I heard your—" "Okay, we'll talk later. I'll e-mail you. I'll e-mail you." And you send pictures back. One of the things I got to start up in Kosovo was, I—I'm not sure why, maybe because I went to school—I was in charge of rebuilding schools—I don't know. [laughs] I wrote back home and said, "Okay, you know they're lacking supplies."

So we started this adopt-a-school program in Kosovo, and Land's End—where my home town is—Dodgeville, they pulled together backpacks, and we couldn't even keep up with all of the supplies that were coming over and distribute them to all these kids, and just the look on their face was amazing. Which now pops into my head when—my first story, my first mission on the ground. Civil Affairs gets to go out every single day, basically, because they go out in the community, and they find out what they need, and you talk, and you do that goodwill thing. I remember the first place we stopped, my major—we stopped at a school and we started talking to the headmaster, and they're doing this little thing over here where they're chitchatting and the translator's translating, and they're laughing, and finally the major said, "And why are you laughing?" and he goes, "Well, we're trying to figure out how many goats and sheep you want for your soldier." And they were trying to trade me. [laughs] And he finally had to say, "No, not for sale," And they kept throwing in more sheep, and more goats, and more cows, and that was the big joke for the rest of the tour, was that, you know, Private Greek was trying to get—or the major was going to trade her for cows and sheep.

Brooks: Do you know how many livestock you ended up being worth?

Rasmusson: You know, I don't know. But I know that the ante kept going up every time we stopped at the school [laughs] Yeah. Being a redhead and a female, I think, in a military unit is unique enough when you get over to some of those Slavic countries, and—uh-huh. It was quite interesting. But it was a good relationship, especially through all the headmasters and rebuilding schools and the kids will get to know you. I think that was probably the hardest part of leaving Kosovo was the kids that you impacted every single

day, you know. They couldn't say "Michelle," so they said "Miška", so my nickname is Miška, and you could hear them yelling and running through the streets of some of these small towns just to get to my Humvee and say "Hi.", and hugs, and to show me tricks, it was just great all around. Teaching them how to hula-hoop. You know, here I am, nineteen years old, just like, "Okay, show them what I know how to do." [laughs]

Brooks: So, and, this is a technically a UN [United Nations] peacekeeping mission.

Rasmusson: Right.

Brooks: So did you have any interactions with other troops from different countries, or—

Rasmusson: You know, I actually did. One of the benefits of Civil Affairs is that you have to coordinate with other groups, so you have the UN, you have the Red Cross, you have all these people that are—that have all these supplies that want to help and fix things but they don't necessarily know who needs them. So that's kind of where we came in. We said, "Okay, we have all these communities. This is what they need, this is—" you got to kind of dispatch them out to where they needed to go. I got to work side by side with the Polish and the Ukraine where we were in Štrpci, which was the Serbian area—pocket that we had. A lot of our other counterparts had Albanian sections of the country—and I lost my thought.

Brooks: You were working with the Polish and the Ukrainian—

Rasmusson: Yeah, Polish and Ukrainian, which interesting because some of the riots that would happen, you'd have to partner with them and nobody speaks the same language. The Polish actually dropped CS gas—riot control gas—and you had all these different troops from different countries there, and none of us—they basically gassed the UN counterparts—us and the Ukrainians. And it all worked out fine, but there was definitely that learning barrier but at the same time it was—just to see the different equipment and be able to work side by side and see how they operate. The Polish and Ukrainian were great, and we ended up working with them again in Iraq a few years later, which—it's different, you know. Even the food all the way down to they eat big in the morning and light at night, so here we eat heavy at night and you got your baguettes and a little bit of sliced ham and that's their dinner, and so when you eat at their bases it gets a little interesting. No, it was definitely a lot of fun though, getting to know everything.

Brooks: And how long were you in Kosovo?

Rasmusson: I was there for nine months.

Brooks: Okay.

Rasmusson: And I tend to have to go from my birthdays to remember where I was and what I was doing, because I think Basic Training was my nineteenth birthday, and then I was in Kosovo for my twentieth birthday, and twenty-first I was just getting back. Which was kind of interesting in itself, because I got back and I was the only one under twenty-one that had just done nine months overseas with our unit, and everybody went out for that

celebratory drink, and it's like, Nope, sorry, not for a few more months. [laughs] It's like, That's kind of crap, you know? Just go and serve your country for a couple years, and can't even have a beer when you get back.

Brooks: So while you were there—you were talking about rebuilding schools and being there for the children—Did you get the feeling that you were making a difference? Did you feel like, you know, your missions were successful?

Rasmusson: Mm-hm. Yeah, absolutely. You know, they were very welcoming with open arms, both the Serbian and Albanian side, you know. Their fight was between the two of them, not with us. I think we were viewed more as that helping hand to try to get them back on their feet—to train them, their fire departments, to train their hospitals, to get the doors back open. None of them in our area, they had taken all the weapons away, so basically it was this town that was just trying to survive.

Brooks: And were you in that same town for the whole nine months?

Rasmusson: I was. Yeah, Štrpci, Brezovica area, which is the top of the mountain in Kosovo, and it was just unbelievably gorgeous. Every day, you'd try to get that 1980's Humvee up to the top of this mountain to for meetings. And every day was full of meetings, you know. You meet with the town leaders, you meet with the ag[?] guy, you meet with the water guy, and you just try to see, you know, what's holding them up from being able to accomplish what they're trying to do. And, my Lord, did they try to push that rakia on you. Rakia is that backyard moonshine [laughs] and they tried to give it to you every chance they got—with your tea. So lots and lots of tea, and lots of food that they tried to give you, and it's—they were very, very open, , and like I said it was a fight between the two of them, and never once did I really feel like I was the one being attacked, by any means.

Brooks: Any close calls?

Rasmusson: You know, Kosovo, not really. If anything, it'd be getting between—getting in between riots. There was one riot where the Albanian side of one of the town lines and the Serbian side were clashing at one of the checkpoints. And there was a guy with an ax that was chopping away at one of the cars trying to get to the guy, and you grab the ax and you throw it away, and kinda go on your way. They gave me a silly award for that. [laughs]

Brooks: That's what you did? Grabbed the ax?

Rasmusson: I grabbed the ax—apparently that was good. [laughs]

Brooks: What kind of award did you get?

Rasmusson: Just an Army achievement medal. But, like I said, nineteen—what do you do? You're in this situation where it's about to explode, and the ax is above our fireplace now.

Brooks: Oh, so you kept it.

Rasmusson: It's a good story [inaudible]. Yes.

Brooks: Wow. And they let you come back here with it?

Rasmusson: It was a farmhand tool, so it's not a weapon, or necessarily a war trophy per se—it was a farm tool, so. Yeah.

Brooks: That's great. So anything else about Kosovo, before we bring you back?

Rasmusson: You know, just all the way around great. We had a couple of people in our unit went back, married people from Kosovo. I still stay in touch with our translators. Almost all of our translators are stateside now. It was interesting having translators work with you, side-by-side, every single day, and then not be able to come to the States, and then you see some people that come to the States, it's like, Oh, you guys literally risked your lives every single day, and you can't come back with us. And a lot of them ended up marrying other soldiers and came back. And still stay in touch with them to this day—they have kids here and it's just great. You figure you grew up almost with them during that nine months, and to see these seventeen-year-old kids that were translators come back and have their own families. But no, just all the way around, it was just a great, great experience being over in Kosovo. And you see a lot of them they'll go back—friends will go back—and we've even toyed around with the idea of going back with them; I said, I can't even imagine what some of these kids would look like now, and if they'd remember you, and remember what you did. And see the schools that got rebuilt, and see the structures that came together. It's definitely still in the bucket list to go back and see how the things are striving now.

Brooks: What about kind of the reception in the media and just generally, back home—people's thoughts on being involved in Kosovo?

Rasmusson: You know, I don't remember a lot of—not lash back, but anything that my mom saved from overseas was always headlines in the local paper about us, doing the backpacks for kids. The local news channels out of Green Bay covered our unit quite a bit, and it was always positive stories, I think. I think since it was deemed more of a peacekeeping mission and we really didn't really go in in force, at least not by our third mission—I was still in Basic Training during the first two. [laughs] But yeah I think everything, from hindsight, at least, what I remember it was pretty positive.

Brooks: So, you got back home, and you couldn't have a beer—[Rasmusson laughs] which does sound unfortunate—what else do you remember about that homecoming? What are some things that kind of jumped out from your first few weeks back?

Rasmusson: I remember sitting, waiting for our flight to come home, and thinking, "Okay, we're sitting here at Fort Bragg—can't we just drive home?" A couple of us drove north and didn't do the homecoming reception which—hindsight twenty-twenty, probably should have partaken in that, but I've always been one that would rather be overseas and doing things than in garrison and marching at home—like to stay behind the scenes. That's probably why I'm in marketing now, and leave the PR up to the PR department. And

came home and you get some weeks off, and you can travel and do some things, and I'm getting my homecomings mixed up, but I remember traveling around, and, you know, you go back to go back to your job, which they guarantee a position back at the job you left when you signed up. Well, at this time, it had been almost two years, one of my good friends stepped in while I was gone to take over my position, and it got to the point where we were like, "You know, just keep it. I'll find something else to do—don't worry about it." Got into the paper-converting industry in the Fox Cities, and that's how I started in that marketing realm, in that sales realm, and kind of built up from there and was there for a couple years. Right after we got back, 9/11 happened within a few months of me getting back from Kosovo, or within that year. I'm thinking, Okay, I've been back just about a year and now I'm going to deploy again, okay, I just got a job, great. And we were put on call, right after 9/11, and I remember our unit, people volunteering for our unit to go over—"What can we do?" But being the military side, everything pretty much stayed as is.

I was actually in New York a couple days before 9/11. One of the girls that I worked with said, "Hey, my dad works for the airport. We can take a couple first class tickets—we can fly over there for the weekend, go over there for four days, and we'll come back," and she had her sights set on seeing the towers. And I was like, "What are we doing?" We walked, like, it must have been twenty, thirty, blocks it seemed like to see these towers, and it's like, "You walked me all the way here to see these Twin Towers, and you walk downstairs, and you go upstairs." And, you're like, "Okay," and you snap some pictures. And then, you know, back to work that next week, just like, you're not going to believe this, you know. Eight o'clock in the morning, we're sitting next to each other, typing up, you know, complaints of ripped paper that people had gotten, and watching the Towers go down, and walking into Walgreen's the next day to get those pictures developed, and almost shaking, saying, "Okay, this is—" You can see the people around them, you can see the big yellow-bronze ball in front, and just to see it destroyed, and, I think that's when it kind of clicked that the other part of my training was probably going to get called on sooner rather than later.

And it ended up to be two years later—it was quite a while—but looking back at some of the photos, you can see "Taliban" on some of the ticker-tapes, and you're like, I had never even heard that word before 9/11. And just be in that part of it, and to feel that protectiveness of your country, and say, "Okay, we need to go—we need to go. Tell me where I need to go. Just, tell me where my bags are and we'll go." And to sit for a couple years while all this kinda revved up, working at the company I was at, and, and then to finally get the call that, "Okay they're probably going to go to war. We're probably going to go to war in Iraq. We're going to put you on notice," And I remember doing shifts at our unit after 9/11—at our military unit—twenty-four hour shifts that someone in our unit had to stay because of the security level we were at. And so they finally called us up, and we sat for a couple weeks, and then they ran out of money to keep us sitting on call. They said, "Well, you're 99 percent going to be called up within the next few weeks," And you read everything—that's all the training on the country and where you're gonna go, and what the people are like, and what the dos and don'ts are.

At that time, when you find out you're going to deploy, so here's a month that all the credit cards are paid off, your phone's canceled, you move out of your apartment—you

just basically cease life and you're ready to roll. You don't have any ties back at home. I didn't have kids; I chose not to have kids until I was away from this, because little kids with flags waving just kill me. [laughs] And so they sent us home, said, "Okay, we're just gonna wait for your orders. We don't have enough money to keep you on for the next month, or whenever they decide that we're going to go to war with Iraq." One of the other girls in our unit said, "Okay, we got two weeks; we have no place to live, so why don't we just go to San Francisco?" We went to San Francisco for a week, toured Alcatraz. By the time we got back, they had orders for us—called us up, sent us down to Fort Bragg, and we sat in Fort Bragg for, shoot, must have been a month, two months. Let's see, we got called up in February—January, February—the first time, and then war started on my birthday. Like I said, everything ties back to my birthday, March twentieth. War starts on your birthday, and—

Brooks: That's 2003?

Rasmusson: 2003, yep. I was twenty-three at the time and already a war vet twice, and you're about to go overseas. We had our orders, and we were loaded up and flown into Kuwait, and we were at war. We adjusted a little bit in Kuwait, and sat there for a while, until they figured out exactly what towns and where we were going to go, and—not that things settled down at all, but just to where we were going to dispatch and all these people where they weren't—we weren't fighting. We were trying to at least get back to a sense of norm in the country. And they deployed us with our two hundred ten rounds, our team. My original team was the Dislocated Civilian Team, which was supposed to be all these people that were flooding out of the country and out of their towns—there weren't any dislocated civilians. [laughs] So they rerouted us, at least our team. We had a combination team from our unit and from a couple other units out in Pennsylvania—Civil Affairs units. And we probably had one of the biggest teams of—I think it was ten or twelve—and they dropped us at the pistol plant in Babil, right in the heart of Iraq, and said, "Okay, now we're gonna hold missions, and we're gonna hold out, and we're gonna tour the town" and, you know, you're still technically at war. You split out into couple-person teams and I remember the drive in.

So we're in Kuwait, we get our marching orders that we're going to dispatch out the next day, and we're in a group of Humvees that we're gonna go north—another set was going a different way with the combat units, and we're rolling in with the Marines. And we were actually being assigned to the Marines that were going to be at this pistol factory with us, too which is interesting because you always think if you're with the Army you're going to stick with the Army, but Civil Affairs, they kind of embed you. And I remember being in Kuwait, driving these Humvees past this beautiful water—Lamborghini's, beautiful buildings, and you're thinking, "Okay, this isn't going to be too shabby." And then as soon as you cross this fence line, you leave this—it's almost this crazy world where nobody works, and they're living this wonderful life where our dollar means nothing in this country because it's not nearly worth what their dollar is.

And as soon as you cross that line, there's this hut with this little dirty kid with no shoes on, and you're going, "Okay, okay," and we got about not even a mile down and then the IED's started, and we had never even—at that point, we were the first units rolling in—didn't know what an IED was, and you're all of a sudden—you're seeing this stuff



explode next to you and you're going, "Okay, I—this isn't Kosovo anymore. [laughs] This is a whole new realms for me." And as we crossed through the different towns, you could see the difference in the people that accepted you and the people that—or the people—we learned to find out that it was the people that were under Saddam's régime, the Shi'ites, and the Sunnis or the Shi'ites were the ones that were deprived, and they were the ones that were so thankful, and they're reaching into your Humvee and they're touching your hands while you're running through, and "Thank you, thank you." And it was the elders and you get that good feeling, and you drive through the next town, and there's rocks getting thrown at you and explosives going off around you.

And so we finally made it to the pistol factory. And literally what it sounds like—it's an old bombed-out pistol factory, and you're with these 1/4 Marines—they're trained to be as rugged as they can, and I think they do it just because of the stories. It's like, "You know, you can move under the shade, right?" [laughs] And so we were at this base—I think there's about four hundred of us—and sleeping on top of the Humvees, and eating MRE's every single day. We had mefloquine Mondays, which was when you took this anti-malaria drug. They gave you crazy dreams, and made quite a few people a bit nuts. I remember one morning our sergeant walked out and looked at me and goes, "I can't even look at you today." I said, "What do you mean you can't even look at me today?" He goes, "My dream was that you were in a bikini, running around with a lizard tongue, trying to get me," and I said, "I think you might need to go off the mefloquine." [laughs] So we took that for fourteen months—mefloquine Monday. And we started our missions, and I was with a colonel, and another sergeant, and eventually our team shifted a little bit. But we were no more than a two-to-four-person team that would go out. We had no armor for our vests, when we got there. We had two pairs of boots, two uniforms. We had no doors on our Humvees—it was the skeleton of whatever they could send us out with and we didn't even have our radio hooked up to the main—I can't even imagine, looking back, how many bad things should have happened to us in those first six months.

And I separate it into six months 'cause the first six months I was with the 1/4 Marines and the second six months they re-dispatched our unit out to different spots, and I ended up with 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division. So the first six months, I don't know if they just didn't realize our vulnerabilities but we would roll out, and I would sit in my—sit in my Humvee while the Colonel went in for his meeting, and I—I drove everywhere, and we'd every once in a while run into the IED's and things like that, but for the most part it was hot and gross, which I think is a sick joke to send a Wisconsin unit as one of the first units in in February, but, you know, [laughs] Especially a redhead from Wisconsin in February. But it was almost surreal. It was more of you're going around, and you're realizing what is bombed, and what needs to be fixed, and in the—not that they all kind of minded their own business, but they were more—not subdued, and I don't know what happened after the six months, that—it was crazy. We ended up moving after I left Babil—which was interesting because we didn't have showers for I can't even tell you how many months—and then people would hear, "Oh, you're at Babil. You're staying at the palace." and I was like, "No, those are those people staying at the palace—we are sleeping on top of our Humvees with bullets flying over every night." And you could sit there and watch the tracer rounds, and I just remember—you just lay back, and they couldn't get—it was such a small compound that they couldn't get—I think—the bullets

to drop, so you'd just see them fly over. We'd have mortar rounds that were on top of our, on top of the building—pistol factory building—but when the dust storms kicked up, it just turned into this big dust bowl inside, so a couple of us opted to just sleep outside of this building they were trying to hit.

But every single day, you know, we had our missions. About four months in, my team switched up a bit—we ended up with the colonel and then a Special Forces Army doctor, and it was the three of us that went out. We were working on schools and hospitals, and I think he taught me just as much—I definitely got to use my medical skills the first few months. I remember the first—of course, if you're in a military uniform from the US they assume you know everything. We were in the town hall building, and they said, [imitates person talking]—they'd been shot. So, we go in there. I'm like, “Okay.” And I remember looking at, like, this bullet hole in this guy's gut—and it wasn't bleeding at all—and thinking, I could stick my finger in there. [laughs] And it was just—you have no concept of bullet wounds. Here's this Midwestern girl, you know—never even shot guns before I got to Basic Training—and you're kind of like, “Okay, well, we'll just kind of patch it up then.” [laughs] And you run into other things that, with the medic we were over there with—that was with us—you see the car accidents, and you're first on scene. You do a lot of that kind of stuff—sticking people with IV's. Shoot, I mean, it's hot—we did a lot of that quite a bit, even team members, just from dehydration and trying to keep up with the water.

And then about four months in, our captain on our team committed suicide—yeah, it kind of hit the team pretty hard because he was in charge of—he had this—it was like his third deployment, he had two little kids at home. You know, he was the one in charge of rebuilding the agriculture and water side. He had quite a few projects that were up and going. I remember the night before, you know, you wake up at three o'clock in the morning, you're sweating 'cause it's ninety degrees and it was a hundred and fifty degrees during the day, and him just saying “Something doesn't feel right.” “Yeah. Nothing feels right—this is just a horrible, horrible situation we're all in. We've been here four or five months.” And you're starting to see that deterioration with the town and how they're—they're not so subdued anymore and they're starting to come out of the woodwork and they're starting to attack the bases. You're seeing soldiers and Marines die because of dehydration, and you're seeing, just, everyone just deteriorate. We didn't have mail for the first two months. Those niceties that you just don't get—you didn't have the connection back at home. I remember our, our first sergeant coming over, and no one ever came to visit us. It's this pistol factory—it's like they knew that we were in the worst—out of all the teams that were out there, we were literally living the worst. I remember we went up to the palace for one of the first and probably a handful of showers that we actually got and talking to my first sergeant and saying, “Something's not right. Like, he doesn't—something's not right with him.” And they brought him up to the palace to do the psych thing, and the only way they found—the reason why they found him was the guy went to the bathroom in the same port-a-potty every day, kept pulling on it and pulling on it and pulling on it, and he had killed himself within twenty-four hours earlier of that.

And, I think that was—there were Marines that were lost in the beginning through crossfire, and just when we first rolled in. But it was watching your team and somebody

that was your leader just fall apart and, and decide that, and it wasn't shortly after that—probably within a month—and you could just see it throughout the whole group. I think my biggest four months in, I remember going out on a mission—and I was always the driver—and I finally told the doc, I was like, “You gotta drive. I'm not feeling good,” and the next thing I know I'm throwing up out the back of a Humvee as they're driving down the street. The kids are waving, and [laughs] throwing up. I got back, and blacked out. And since that moment, it hasn't stopped from today—you still get those—I don't know if it's anxiety attack, or if it's the dizziness and the—your brain just kind of gets overworked, and every once in a while when you get home and you go to the doctor's, which was—[laughs] I'm sure we'll get to that. They had no idea—we were one of the first to come back, and they start seeing some of the stuff in people, and they don't know. And you can't get into the doctor, and they just keep prescribing things, and then they switch to, “Maybe it's a traumatic brain injury, and you got hit.” And now the latest thing is, “Maybe it's the mefloquine you were taking.” And just the fight to try to prove what it was when none of us really knew what it was. But it was definitely that point where you could start to see everything just kind of falling apart, and it was before we even moved north. We did our missions there, and [laughs] they re-dispatched us—we thought we were going home—and we ended up going north still in the same province we were in, just a little bit farther north and we were assigned to the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division, and I was the only female out of six hundred guys. [laughs]

Brooks: Wow.

Rasmusson: And they had absolutely no idea what to do with me. I had just gone through six months of hell—these guys were just getting here. And I remember them walking up and saying, “Oh my god, you're a female.” I was like, “Thank you, yes, yes. Thank you, I appreciate that.” And, you know, just, they had no idea either. They were green boots on the ground too. We had already been there six, seven months before they did, and, you know, we're kind of looked at—especially from the female side, we're this team of four. And we got placed with them, and like I said they didn't know what to do with me, so the guys kind of got shuttled into their tents, and then they said, “Well, how about we put you in the TOC [tactical operations center]?” and the TOC is the command center, basically, where lights are on twenty-four hours, the radio, all the pages, all the calls. And that was where I was for the first, probably week or two. And the thing about the TOC is you hear everything. It was every firefight that guys were in, it was every rescue mission that was coming in. You'd go out the next day, and then finally I said to the captain that was in there—not even [inaudible]—I said, “I can't do this—I need to, like, be able to pull a sheet over,” and there's this closet in the building that we were in that was stacked with paper. I'm like, “If I clean out the front part of this closet, can this be my spot?” [laughs] “I just need a spot.” And they said, “Well, we can maybe build you a shower, you know, with a top on it, and down to the ground,” It was one of those things where I need to shower, and I need to go to the bathroom, and, you know, we're still in—in the first six months we had to burn all of our feces. That's a whole new realm I had no idea you had to do in the military—you throw the gasoline in, and you have to stir it until it's gone, and you put it back in the little box, and that's what you do.

It was almost like I didn't exist. They called me the yeti sometimes, because it was like, “I saw her; she was up here, and then she was over here,” And then I was always out on

missions, and I remember the first time—in the first month, they told all the guys that they couldn't have any, you know, girlie magazines, they couldn't have any—they couldn't walk around with shirts off, and, you know, in their underwear, and finally I told the captain, I said, “Look. I don't want to be that person that takes all this away from everybody, and I don't necessarily mind it. We're going [inaudible] So the next day, this big hefty captain walks out in his whitey-tighties, and says, “Good morning sergeant.” [laughs] and I said, “Well, I guess I wasn't clear.” [laughs] It was low barriers that kind of kept getting broken down, and the more and more we fought next to these guys—because we still had these civil affairs jobs, but, you know, it was a daily thing there'd be three or four IED's that would either be found or they would explode on a mission. And it seemed, almost daily that there was one more person that was gone. Being attached to the military unit, we are—they had the FiSTers [Fire Support Specialists] that were our security. They also had the Air Defense Artillery, because they were kind of repositioned to be our security to take us out. The firefights you'd get into, and things like that—you stopped, I think, being looked at as a woman, and just part of the team. I was doing a lot of the same jobs I did. Rebuilding the schools was probably one of my biggest ones, and then, the gas stations, trying to get those back on track. And I had a thought and it's gone. Nope, it's gone. [laughs]

Brooks: In your first station, when you're in Babil, how many other women were around then?

Rasmusson: Well, we had—it was just with our team, we had I believe four or five that were from either our unit or another civil affairs unit. But none of the Marines had females in their unit. But they just pretended we weren't there, I think. It was, “You're a soldier, you're a—“ I think they were more upset that we were Army on a Marine base than females, , but, it was like we blended in, so such a shock to get to the Army site, and that they were just over the top like, “Oh, what do you mean?” Oh, that's where I was going. Rebuilding schools and gas stations—the Christian Science Monitor wanted to write a story, and come up, and learn about this woman at this base that was doing all these things for the schools, and rebuilding, and being able to get behind the scenes. She showed up in her khakis and white shirt, and jumped out of her little car. And she says, “Okay, so when are we going to go to a school?” I said, “As soon as those guys are ready over there.” I had a twenty-five person security team that was going to go out with me to take them to the school that was right around the corner from the base.

And she goes, “What do you mean? What are you putting on?” and I carried a grenade launcher in addition to my—[laughs] on the bottom of my M16, and she's like, “You have grenades on you?” and it was just—I don't know what her perception was. And it kind of made me think, “What do people at home think that these females in the military are doing?” 'Cause we're right alongside all of the guys, doing the exact same thing, the exact same missions, and in this case even leading some of these missions. And she goes, “So what do you do when all the guys do their workouts? Do you have coffee? Watch—read a paper?” I'm like, “Oh my lord.” Just unbelievable when we finally got all packed up, and we drove around the corner, and we got her out, and were showing her some of the different stuff, but the shock on her face to realize that, Okay, you guys are literally walking the roads in the morning to clear these bombs with your 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain combat counterparts, and then you're going to your meeting. Or you're getting into a firefight and you're going to a meeting with the mayor. Or your next meeting just got

canceled because they blew it up with a roadside bomb, or a car bomb, and now it's more body part recovery, to see which leader is still around. But I think that's probably one of the things when—in the last couple of years all this progress that we're making, and how women are now allowed in combat—it's like, what did you think was happening? [laughs] Where did you think they were hiding all these women when they were over there? Because the combat medics that were there—females. There's female pilots, there's the civil affairs, the psychological operations. We were just as embedded as the rest. I think it'll take a little bit of time but I think that's where there needs to be a little more media coverage—they're there too.

Brooks: And what about your fellow soldiers? How did you feel you were treated by them, being a female?

Rasmusson: I would say, within our unit we trained with all those guys. So you go through Basic Training and you see one of them break down and cry. You see all of their weaknesses, you see everything, and they are your worst enemy and your best friend. And the person if somebody sneezes wrong at you're gonna defend, and [laughs] you just kinda go through it all together. You just gotta make the best of it, and you're not going to fight and argue with your fellow comrades when you're in the middle of battle; they're kind of your support system structure. So no, I'd say if anything, we formed some really good bonds that, you know—really, through just social media nowadays you can reach out and get in touch with some of those guys that were over with you, and I say guys in the most non-male term, just [laughs]—

Brooks: Non-gender guys.

Rasmusson: Non-gender, yes, yes. I could keep derailing down every different avenue, I think, to get just different stories. It's all about the stories, and I think, coming back and I just became part of the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] unit up here, and there's always a story. It's something the guys always have. You hear that people don't like to tell their story, and it's like, I'll tell you whatever you want—just ask me the right question. There's a lot up there. [laughs]

Brooks: So, what were some of your most memorable, or most—well, let's start with this—some of your most successful missions when you were there? Depending how you measure success.

Rasmusson: Yeah, I got to be probably one of the—I think it's two-part. One is this female thing, because when civil affairs goes in, rank is there but it's not really there because you're doing a job that really doesn't fall into the active duty military ranks. So you might be reporting to the head colonel, and only be a specialist or a private. The first time we went in to do our presentation, the colonel—my colonel, that was on my team—walks in to the other colonel, and they put up on the board how many officers they have, how many NCO's they have, and how many N1F. And he goes, “What is 1F?” and he goes, “One female, 'cause she's an NCO, sir.” [laughs] “And she needs to be looped in with the rest of them.” It's just this weird perception that you don't think would happen. I think one was twofold—just trying to get some of these active duty units that some female counterparts can actually hang with you too. And the other was the rebuilding of

the schools. I think going out and serving these schools—not only being female, but being able to get behind the scenes with some—I mean they take off the headdresses when you're around. The kids open up to you—they don't do that with the male counterparts. And the schools that we got to rebuild, and I think—I used to have this—It was sixty, sixty schools from the ground up, and I think we were able to resupply fifty or sixty thousand kids with school supplies, which was probably one of my biggest successes, because that I coordinated. I wrote grants—I got a grant for 1.4 million dollars, which was more than any other community, in any other province, in the entire country, and it was just because I wrote it best.

I think it was probably the most rewarding and the most devastating at the same time, because you see the news after you get back—and that was your pride and joy, that was what you accomplished and it was your warm and fuzzy—and then, to see the units that go there after you doing the exact same thing because the locals had no respect for what was there, what was rebuilt. And they would blow it up, and the next team would come in and build it up, and then they would level it. I mean, we would build—finish a community, and some of the locals would come in and say—would take the rebar out of the road, and ruin the things that were around, so, “You have no respect for your country.” And, you know, I mentioned before how it kind of felt like things shifted after about six months. And I don't necessarily think it was the location, but when you start talking to some of the different locals, like, “Why are you blowing things up?” And they're like, “It's not us, it's the Syrians that are coming across and it's—” And you start to see some of the news that's popping up just with the ISIS stuff and how they've kind of filtered themselves in, and sat and wait. And now you're starting to kind of look back and go, “Oh my god, the locals were the ones that were telling you.” And as civil affairs we gathered about half of the counter-intelligence, the intelligence that we feedback, so that we know what's going on. Because those teachers are going to be the first ones to say, “Okay, there's some guy lurking around here. There's new faces that aren't always here,” and it all kind of clicks, and you're going back and you're going, “Okay, I'm starting to see why there was a shift. Maybe they did want our help in the beginning, and we were being kind of counterbalanced by some of those other threats that were coming in at the same time.” So yeah, biggest achievement and biggest devastation all at the same time, because you build it up and you watch it crumble.

Brooks: Tell me more about the grant that you wrote.

Rasmusson: Well, it's all about money and where you're gonna get it. You basically want to do as much as you can, and rebuild as much as you can, and there's that money out there—people that want to help and fix things, and the school things is right up there. You'd write, and you say, “Okay, we have this many kids without this,” and I think it was a Chinese donor that ended up fronting most of the money to rebuild these schools, but I remember just the other—the stats coming in of the cost and the grants and the funding, and we were definitely at the top, because of some of the grants that we got. Yeah, I remember that was the first time I'd ever seen \$1,400,000 in bills in front of me. [laughs]

Brooks: Was it in American dollars?

Rasmusson: American dollars, yup.

Brooks: Wow, that must have been something.

Rasmusson: Yeah. I remember the day that they that we presented it to the different schools, and distributed it to the contractors. And we're walking up to the tent, and the one guy says—the one local says—“In our country, the women walk behind the men,” and I said, “Well, you're on a US military base, and that's not the way, you know, that's not the way we do things.” “Okay,” and from there on out it was, “After you, madam.” [laughs] And it was learning all the way around. Yeah, I think technology, too was one of the interesting things that—they thought our uniforms—a lot of the kids and even the adults, they thought our uniforms were bulletproof, and that our glasses had maps in them, and it was very *Terminator*-ish, and they would ask to put on your glasses, and, you know, they'd feel your uniform, and, you know, maybe that was why they kind of figured us out after a while, but yeah, just interesting all the way around.

Brooks: How long were you at that second station?

Rasmusson: Six months. Total deployment was just over fourteen months—two birthdays, yeah, twenty-third, twenty-fourth, sat in Iraq—sat in Kuwait not very long. Once we started our transition back we handed over—ironically—to the Marines that we rolled in with. It was an interesting dynamic because they had—the reservists—our deployment was coming up on over a year, and a lot of the active duty components were seven month stints, and they would say, “Well, you're just a reservist. You're just a reservist.” Just, well, “Here you are, at least you got to go home for a while.” and ours were twelve to fourteen-month deployments, and the people that we rolled in with were the people that replaced us at the tail end, too. We handed off al-Hillah and the pistol factory to the Polish, which was interesting because they walked around in their speedos and drank their vodka at the end of the day [laughs]. I had my loyal translator Zed—hopefully he's still around. A lot of those translators, like I said, with Kosovo, they risked their lives to work with us, and a lot of them didn't make it. There was beheadings and everything else just circulated around everything that we did, and anyone who worked with us. It's definitely a different world—it wasn't Kosovo, it was a whole different ballgame. And you hope they can figure it out, and you hope they can get back on their feet, and the warm and fuzzy when you first go over there, that you're helping things get fixed, and then to just watch it decay over ten years and not move anywhere, and if anything move backwards, and everything that you've done—it's definitely humbling.

After I got back from Iraq, I went back to my job for a little while, at the paper converter, and I remember getting calls—and the transition time back to work was only a couple weeks, and then you're right back in it. Two weeks ago you just lost another comrade, and now you're sitting here in an office chair, and there's this woman yelling at you because she has a crushed roll of red paper. And I think that was the breaking point—I just said, “Okay, the VA's got me on nine different drugs: one to bring me up, one to put me down, one to take away the pain, one to do this, and—“ Finally just said, “You know what? I'm going to pack up a U-Haul,” and I moved to Door County. And bartended, and kayaked, and, dove, and said, “Okay, we're just gonna—we're gonna keep this simple life and just kind of get back to reality a bit, maybe start a family.” Ended up finding a local, and I guess like they say, the rest is—rest is history. [laughs]

We got two little girls now, five and three. My other half has no military experience whatsoever, which is rewarding enough just because he gets to be my foothold. I can't imagine going through just the ups and downs of PTSD and just dealing with [laughs] like I said, the roller coaster ride of another half that's been through a lot of that.

And got sucked into the local VFW unit, and I think I went to about two meetings and then they elected me the commander. [laughs] I had no idea what I'm doing [laughs] and you'll figure that out. The next youngest is probably sixty years my elder, so we're trying to get some new blood in there, just to get that—not even to join a club, but to kind of pull those guys back together. And the stories, they're so interesting. Just to listen all the way back to World War II, and as you can imagine, it was probably—it's a different world. They talked different. It's interesting to be in a meeting, and hear all the stories, and then see them around their wives, and they kind of hush up. I had made mention that we should do our meetings when we do our dinners and breakfasts, and one guy without even blinking says, “We have to separate the women from the men before our meetings,” and I just kind of looked at him, and said, “I think you might want to look at your bylaws.” It's like they didn't even look at you like a female. It was like, “Okay, we're getting there, but—“ [laughs] We need to scrub some of the old rules. But living the life up here, and right back at that stressful job again, but some days you say it might be better to be in Iraq, but [laughs] you usually come back full circle on that one.

Brooks: Just to take you back a little bit, did you have any down time while you were over there? And if so, how did you guys fill that?

Rasmusson: No. [laughs] I got leave, about—I got two weeks right—two weeks of leave about two months before we were coming home. They started giving us leave, that we could at least kind of replenish and re-center, and we must have gone back to—did we fly out of Baghdad or Ramadi—one of the big hot zones. It was Baghdad. And we loaded up on this big C-130 and we're taking off, and the next thing we know we're taking incoming RPG fire, and here you're going home. It's like, “If I'm going home I don't want to come back and try to get out of here again.” [laughs] And it was this weird blip that you're home, and you're back in the civilian life, and you're eating pizza and you're—it was just—not that it would have been better to not get it, but I think I rather would have just gone nonstop and gone home and just been done because the two months before of just seeing reality again before you get back and you're right back into that slump of, “I'm in a country that's trying to kill me.” [laughs] You're trying to help, and you're just watching the world fall apart around you. So yeah, the down time was that two weeks, but even during that two weeks you're kinds of processing what you're going to have to do the next week when you get back. And at least for, like, the civil affairs, you know, you're almost kind of doing double duty because you're doing what the combat counterparts are doing, and then you're doing your job, and then you get back and you have to analyze everything and see what resources are out there, and plan your mission for the next day. And I think I carried that two hours of sleep—or nap when you can—home with me, because I do the same thing now—you just keep going, going, going. Not that there's any crisis in destination marketing, but you have an entire community and all the businesses that kind of depend on people coming to Door County, so it's similar in a few ways [laughs] but it's definitely—it stuck with me.



Brooks: So, without, you know, much downtime, and obviously a lot going on, did you develop any coping mechanisms for while you're over there, and just try to keep yourself stable?

Rasmusson: I don't think I felt it until I came home. I think I was completely on, shields up, the entire time I was there. And your skin just keeps getting thicker. It's average conversation when you get off a mission and you hear, "Diborn [sp??] didn't make it back today," And he was just on your mission this morning or you saw him this morning at breakfast and it really was, "Okay, who didn't make it? Who's going tomorrow?" It was a day by day, and kinda just throw the crap in a pile, and then once you get back it just kinda—you start to process everything you've been through and you start to realize just what exactly you went through. But no, I'd say the coping at least, being over there, I probably feel more of it now than I ever did over there.

Brooks: You know, you said you've stories upon stories—people just have to ask the right questions. [Rasmusson laughs] What are some of the right questions that maybe I wouldn't think of to ask, for some of the stories that—

Rasmusson: You know, maybe it's that, that homecoming, you finally—you go through all this stuff, and you get home, and you're like, "Okay, I just used my nine lives up, and what's next?" And you try to grab onto those iconic back-home American values kind of thing where—"Okay, I have to get married, I have to have a house, I have to get that based to feel normal again." And unfortunately, I think that happens to a lot of people. Got back, one of the other guys that were overseas with us had given me a call up and said, you know, "Hey, I just got back. You want to hang out?" He flew into Green Bay, and just to have that other person who had been through it with you and is now trying to live a civilian life at the same time. Within a month and a half we were married [laughs] and within six months he was deployed again. And we were married just about two years, and by the time that he had gotten back and I had gotten my foothold here and he had even more stories now than—we were just two completely different people, and I think that probably happens more than a little when people come home and you're a totally different person. I had to pick up and I had to move. I moved up here because people don't know what I was like in the other life—they know this Michelle, and that's probably one of the most underlying stories that not a lot of people know. You do, you come back and you want to have that, that stability—you want to have that story tale, your house and your kid and all that stuff. It doesn't work like that. [laughs] It may for some, but you're a different person, and you almost need to start life all over again, figure out who you are, and how you tick, and, and what you want to be around, and who you want to be. And the last ten years it kind of separates that—that life before Kosovo—life before Iraq—and—I say it all the time since I've gotten back or when I was there, and it really is two different life stories. And I feel like I've lived two different lives, and it's different. It's not something you can really explain to a lot of people other than other veterans.

Brooks: So you got back late 2004?

Rasmusson: Uh-huh, 2004. We were back in May.

Brooks: What happens then? You're not done—you're not discharged, right? You're not done with

your eight years yet.

Rasmusson: Uh-huh. I got back, had quite a few different medical things that—dealing with the dizziness, the nausea, the blackouts, the migraines, the anxiety attacks, pain in my foot, pain in my neck, and just not adjusting right when I first came home. And I remember being there, and flashing back almost to the—my captain, that was like, “Something's not right, something's not right.” And I remember sitting there going, “Something's not right.” and calling up the VA, and them saying they could get me in in five months. And they said if it's an emergency to call 911. [laughs] Nobody's going to admit that it's that bad of an emergency to call 911. And finally got in to the VA, into psych, and had my psychologist, and my psychiatrist, and the doctor for a foot, and the doctor for mental, and it turned into an almost every two day missing work at your job trying to deal with recovering as a soldier and being a civilian. And people don't know what you went through. Your boss doesn't know what your limitations are or what you're going through, how he can help—any of that. It was—it was probably a good six months of that that you go through when you get back and just say you can't do it anymore. And I lost the question. Sorry. [laughs]

Brooks: Besides the adjusting, I'm wondering, like—and you said you're trying to kind of transition into civilian life—

Rasmusson: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Brooks: —but you're still technically part of the Army Reserve, right, so do you still have to go in for training occasionally?

Rasmusson: Yes. Yes. So in addition to that, I still have my contract I need to fulfill. I signed a six years Reserve—two years in Active Reserve where they can call you up if they need you. And dealing with all this and almost starting that medical process to be medically discharged because you're not in the right mindset to deploy again, as much as you'd love to support, there's too much—you can't be. You know your limitations and started that process. It was a two years process of poking and prodding and drilling on the weekends, and it turned into, “Well if you can't drill and do some of these exercises, you're going to be on funeral duty.” And it's like, “Okay, you realize what the issues are, that I've come home too. And now you're going to put me on funeral duty to just see more of what's still impacting me that I haven't gotten over.” And got down to that two-year mark, and they—I had to sign back up—re-up for two more years—for them to be able to discharge me.

Otherwise, my contract would have run out, so I had to sign up for two more years—it's so backwards—to finish this process, and at one point the unit was deploying again, and my medical files went missing. They were going to deploy me again, after eight years of service and it got to the point where you're going, “I've served my time. I'm past my eight-year contract, I'm still just trying to live life every day, like, I'm still adjusting. I can't deploy—I will deploy if I have to and I'll make the most of it.” But I ended up just kind of falling through the cracks and I got honorable discharge—no medical tie, really. They didn't to give anybody a PTSD tag, so, “It's the anxiety, and we'll tie that to you.” But it's service-connected as far as health and things. It was just quite the transition, for

the last few years—living up here, trying to move on and then finally got out. When they ask eight and a half years of service, because it was an extra six months before I could actually get my discharge papers, and that was in 2007.

And that was about the same time that the ex was overseas, and came home, and you're trying to get things settled here, and you feel very misplaced that you can't make the same impact, , and right after I had moved up here Katrina happened, and a lot of volunteers volunteered to go down. And that was kind of that deciding factor, too, of why I wouldn't stay in—it was because you did all this stuff for all these people overseas, and you knew exactly how to make it right, and people wanted help, and they weren't doing that in New Orleans and Mississippi. And so I volunteered to go down with Gulf Coast—Door County Gulf Coast relief fund, and started rebuilding houses, and we went down in two-week stints. Went down a couple tours, and my current husband was actually on one of those tours with us down there—I had no idea at the time [laughs] that he was going to be a future husband—and it just kind of all worked out in the wash, and it's kind of been a growing situation ever since then, and I couldn't be happier. But you still—it's the double life.

Brooks: So you said that Hurricane Katrina and the aftermath is part of what led you to not want to re-up?

Rasmusson: Yeah.

Brooks: Could you explain that a little bit?

Rasmusson: It was almost we do more for other countries than we were doing for our own. We had, I want to say a good chunk of our unit that volunteered and said, “We know exactly what needs to be done.” I understand that the local entities in stateside—the Army National Guard—they don't have civil affairs. Civil affairs was assigned for overseas infrastructure, dislocated civilians, and you're watching part of the US just crumble, people on houses, and people not knowing where to go, and people in the stadium. And you're going, “Okay, this is—my efforts are going the wrong direction; they need to be more Stateside.” Must have been four or five years ago I decided, “Okay, I'm going to go back to school.” I had the GI Bill that I'd never really taken advantage of. Hadn't completed my degree, because I got deployed after a couple years—I was doing school in between the times I was home. And went back to school and decided emergency management would be a nice little side gig if I needed it, and got to kind of tie my current job into it, to my military job and say, “Okay, if there was a natural disaster up here, you have a ton of tourists—what are you going to do with them? How do you get people to work together?” It's still in the early stages, but at least it's a little calm in the back of my head that I can take some of what I've learned and apply it and use it more Stateside.

Brooks: Tell me when was the first time that you remember hearing that term PTSD?

Rasmusson: Probably two years at least after I got back. Before that, it was—well, maybe it was—“You have anxiety issues. You're depressed.” There were always labels for different things, and it wasn't until you started seeing all the reports of the PTSD, and the fight

just to get the anxiety code—coded through your medical records—was unbelievable fight. You had to go in and prove that you had gone through any of this stuff, and you were almost faulted and ridiculed for not being able to cope with it. The more you see it, and the more you see people cope with I think it's easier to identify. I know, I'm just starting to go through the process to maybe trying to start the process over, and, uh, see if they know more now than we did when we first got back, but there's more of me that's pulling into, "Just leave it and figure it out than start this whole horrible VA process all over again." I remember one of my first VA trips, I had to have a nerve removed from my foot, and went down to the Milwaukee VA, and you're shuttled into this waiting room that used to be a hospital room where the paint is peeling off and the wallpaper is half there, all the chairs are different, there's a dial TV—I mean, this is 2004, and you're looking—there's no sink—it's just this disgusting hospital. And you're looking out this window in this waiting room, old hospital room, and you see this billion-dollar Miller Park stadium. And you can't help but think, "Okay, look at all these vets around." And I ended up having surgery there—the wrong nerve was cut out, after two years of injections, and I ended up having to go down to Fort Knox to get the right one removed. And when I had to go back, I was waiting in the waiting room, and my other half—my spouse now—was there, and there's a guy peeing in the corner in one of the rooms, and another just basically reaching out and crying for anyone on a—he's on a gurney, reaching out and trying to get the attention of any nurse because he's been sitting there as long as we have—which was like four or five hours—just to get into an appointment that you didn't know was going to happen, and nobody cared—they just kept shrugging him off. And just this horrible, horrible, like, "What have I done." No, I could say that the support was definitely not there—hopefully it's gotten better.

Brooks: What had happened to your foot?

Rasmusson: Just wear and tear on boots. You're walking on crap, you're—insufficient gear that you were deployed with. The Marines that we were with didn't have plates either, so we got to shell of the vest that could barely stop shrapnel and obviously none of the Humvees were up-armored. And the Marines were cocky enough to say, "Okay, well I'm not going to get shot in the back, so we're going to take these plates, and we're going to share them," because they got a handful, and they only put one plate in the front. What would happen when they'd get shot is it would ricochet off the front of the plate and do more damage so that was definitely a fail. [laughs]

Brooks: So just walking around on those boots?

Rasmusson: Yeah Mm-hm. Yeah, you go through the injections they, you know, try to figure out—pinpoint where it is, and two years of that, and then they decide, "Okay, we can have it removed." And then to go back in and I remember taking of the bandages and going like, "Okay, the marker line's here, but the cut is over here." And she goes, "Well, they're normally over here." I said, [laughs] "Well, I don't think that's okay." So we got it right, and I've no nerves in the middle of my foot, but I don't feel any pain either, so—

Brooks: What about your neck?

Rasmusson: My neck, there's still—they couldn't pinpoint what it was, so it's still an issue, but just,

keep going every day. Unless you can prove what it is, they're not going to support it.

Brooks: Did you meet anyone along the way who was supportive? Any doctors or nurses or therapists who seemed to be doing their job?

Rasmusson: Once you could get in, and I think that the, the doctors that I always had were very supportive and wanted to help. And I don't know if it just wasn't their resources, maybe, were limited, but if you wanted to get an MRI you had to go down to Milwaukee and sit for a few days until they maybe could get you in. You didn't have designated appointments, but you get all the tests that but hey're kind of grabbing at stuff too. Psych was good—they tell you you're below the point of depression, and it's when you come back up that it gets hairy. I just went down to the new Green Bay VA about a month ago, and seems like they've got quite a bit figured out. I did e-mail my doctor—the local VA and the VA Milwaukee put me in touch with—my doctor started looking into the effects of mefloquine, because that seems to be some of the symptoms and signs that are tied to everything I've been going through the last few years. But even then, until you can prove that that might be it, there's no support there.

Brooks: So what do you think about, or what were your experiences with the media attention stateside and not a very popular—

Rasmusson: Mm-hm.

Brooks: —operation that you were a part of. How did that affect you?

Rasmusson: Since we were one of the first units to go over and one of the first to come back, you know, you have that sinking feeling that you hear from all the Vietnam vets, and how they were perceived when they came home. And I remember the flight in, we flew into Green Bay from Fort Bragg, and I remember when the plane banked out of Austin Straubel [International Airport] and you could see a few thousand people with signs down there waiting. And I remember going through the entire deployment barely losing a tear to that moment, and then hitting the ground, and just all of the support from the media. They all wanted to hear your story, and it was almost too much. It was all in your face, and, uh, my dad was working part time at the Appleton Airport and had asked if he could bring in the plane at the Green Bay Airport. And so I get off, and they keep all the family, and you see this big group, and we're getting off, and I hear, "What? I don't even a hug?" And my dad had landed the plane, and was the only parent, only spouse, and there was this picture—somebody was great enough to get the picture of me—literally, I mean, first time seeing your dad in how many months. And you finally made it home, and you're pretty much scar-free, and got a great picture in black and white that of me hitting the ground and the unit hitting the ground. You know, the interviews haven't stopped, I don't think, since I've really gotten home. Everybody still wants to hear your story, they want your side—they want to hear if it was worth being over there. But at the same time they're going to pick up what they want to pick up. You can tell them all the great things you did, but then you look back and you see they're blown up again, or the lives that have been lost. "Oh, it's fifty-three. It's two hundred." And then before I left I think it was 2345 people that had lost their lives in just the first fourteen months in Iraq. You just remember how young you are. When you're over there, the lieutenant that's

barking orders at you that's been on the ground for two days and been in the Army for six months, and here you are, you've been on the ground for six months, and you're going, "Okay, sir." [laughs]

Brooks: What would you tell the reporters or the interviewers if they asked you if you thought it was worth it?

Rasmusson: I think it would have to be broken down into what "it" is. Is it what we've done for the country? Is it how we've come together as a country? How we now support our troops? Is it the [inaudible] in the international realm of things? You know, did it pay off going there in support of the people? I think it's "it" that has to be defined to answer that question. When you're over there and you're doing all that stuff, and you're seeing the changes and Saddam's gone—I was over there when they found Saddam in the hole, and [laughs] you're part of history. Yeah, of course it's worth it. And then you get back and you kind of process everything, and you see the whole picture, because you don't see the whole picture over there—you see your little bubble. And you know there's probably other troops doing the same thing you are, but you don't realize the impact until you get home, and what the cost of some of these troops. The friends that you stay in touch with, the ones that have passed away, the ones that have committed suicide, the ones that—just that whole impact of "it" is pretty powerful.

Brooks: What do you think about the support for the troops?

Rasmusson: I think it's getting better. I think community support is tenfold, probably, what any of the other vets would have probably gotten to go through, which is unfortunate that any of that had to happen, with the Vietnam vets. Maybe that's part of why we get so much support, because you see what happened then. Community, definitely but I think there's still, obviously, the support on that other side, the medical side, of being able to take care of the troops that are coming back. That's definitely still an issue.

Brooks: Tell me about joining the VFW.

Rasmusson: [laughs] I don't think I knew what I was getting in for—into. I knew that it existed, and people had told me that they don't take anybody younger than—they won't even take Vietnam vets. Finally, I run into these guys, then one of them—I had placed a call and said, "Hey, I'm interested in maybe joining." Life gets busy, and you kind of blow it off a little bit, and one day Marv shows up—old Korean vet—and he shows up and he's got the jacket and he goes, Well, are you going to sign up?" And I said, "I think I will now. I mean, you're at my work." [laughs] Just try the jacket on, and he goes, "We don't march. We just kind of meet." They literally get together and tell stories. The new life, the new blood—hopefully we can get some more funds to funnel into that to be able to keep supporting that. But you never realized what the VFW units do, and not only the support for each other, but the community and the loved ones that were left behind, the spouses can come to the lunches and the dinners. And the flags and the cemeteries—every Memorial Day they go out and make sure that every vet has a flag. I think it's a little bit more than that old VFW you used to hear that was so biased. So far it's been good—I don't know what I'm in for, so [laughs] right now it's pretty good. Every month they kind of reveal a new thing that I'm responsible for, which most of them are—all of them are

retired—and here you're juggling two kids, a full-time job, and everything else. But yeah, I think it's all the way around a pretty good experience, now that I'm getting to know some of the other VFW units, and what they're doing. So far so good.

Brooks: How long has it been?

Rasmusson: Since I joined them? I think one year.

Brooks: Okay. And how did you end up being commander?

Rasmusson: They volunteered me and elected me. [laughs] They, I think, were—they know everybody—all the vets from when they were in, from around town. And a lot of them, they're passing away quicker than they can replace them, and to bring in a little bit of younger blood, and maybe some of the people that have deployed more recently, like with me, to try to bring more of that life and more of that reputation of the VFW back into the communities and the support, I think, is kind of their long term goal. [laughs] They seem to be pretty proud to have a female commander. I didn't realize it was that big a deal until they said, "I think we should call the papers. I think this is our first female commander."

Brooks: Have there been some stories about you, then?

Rasmusson: Yeah, there's been a couple up here—more spotlight features, the veteran in civilian clothing, kind of that nobody really realizes it until somebody writes an article about you, and got a lot of feedback. It was very humbling. It was very revealing to tell the story, and then to have everybody who sees you every day—they look at you a little bit different, which I don't know if I like or not. I don't know. Vets can sense other vets and, you get all those people that will tell all the bullshit stories and you question if they were in or if they went through it. And when you get those genuine people that have been through it, and you see that glimmer in their eye you realize that they've been there, they've lived it—there's definitely a bond that—it might be the first person you meet off the street that you've seen or a friend that you've known for years, but you do, you keep these vets close, no matter what generation it is.

Brooks: Can you do me a favor? Can you pull your hair away from that? Perfect. Thanks. I'm wondering. If your daughters are five and two?

Rasmusson: Five and three—just registered one for school.

Brooks: Wow. So they're still pretty young. Do they have any sense that you're a veteran? Probably not the three-year-old, but—

Rasmusson: Yeah. As you can imagine in Door County, everybody's kind of spread thin for everything they volunteer for so, being part of the VFW, you're responsible for selling poppies. But being part of the community, I needed to volunteer to do the beer tent, too, so we got my youngest—my oldest—in my old boonie cap, and she had a camouflage jacket. And she sat there in the beer tent with me, and sold poppies, and gave everybody the look, like, "You're not going to support me, or my mother?" And they'd ask her, "Oh,

is your dad in the military?" and, "Nope, my mom is. My mom wears combat boots." I think she's slowly starting to understand, you know, you watch the movies and she sees camouflage or combat boots—she ties it back. I don't know if she'll know the real impact, probably, for a few years. You go through the pictures and you show the kids that are in the other countries, and this is what Mommy did. Even the VFW dinners, there's still that stigma, you know—god forbid, a female couldn't have done any of that. And here's my husband who has no military background at all, and they're going, "So what unit did he serve in?" And the rest of them laugh and say, "No, no, no. He's her other half." [laughs] We need to pull some more female blood out, and I think, just kind of blur that line a bit more, that there's not really a line between everything that we all do—we all make the same commitment.

Brooks: Do you know if there are other female vets in Door County? There have got to be some.

Rasmusson: I heard a rumor that there's one in Jackson Port. [laughs] A very elder vet that I haven't had the pleasure of meeting but all of the rest of the unit has had a chance to talk about her and tell her story. I wish I knew half these guys that they told stories about. I know the vets that I served with—I had an interview a couple years ago with a reporter, a local reporter, who says that she was actually part of the 432<sup>nd</sup> and she, uh—[Sirens]

Brooks: Where is it?

Rasmusson: I don't know. She never deployed with the 432<sup>nd</sup> but she was part of that unit. It was kind of different to see somebody else with a different era that was part of that same group.

Brooks: So you moved up here to Door County. Why Door County?

Rasmusson: I think Door County was my Alaska. I think it was the furthest point I could go, get away, and still not freak my parents out that I was jumping ship. It was off the beaten path. It's getting better, but mobile service, and nobody knew me; it's far enough away that I could still be kind of close to home, still have that Midwest feel, and be able to escape. I think, a lot of people—a lot of vets—find of that, you know, that there's that safety and security of Door County, that you don't get in a lot of places. Like Alaska, where you can just kind of disappear and just live off the grid, and this is my off the grid, I think.

Brooks: Let me take a look at your request form, and see if there's anything we haven't touched on.

Rasmusson: I didn't give you much, did I? [laughs]

Brooks: I mean, you gave me—you said you weren't sure where to start. It is hard to— [Rasmusson laughs] We talked a lot about your, you know, your role as a female, PTSD and anxiety. Is there anything that you've learned in the most recent years in terms of coping mechanisms? And I know, I keep using that word, and I feel like it's kind of a technical, term, but—



Rasmusson: No.

Brooks: —is there anything that you kind of developed?

Rasmusson: Yeah, you definitely find your—and I think I'd found that when I'd just gotten back—extreme sports was my first go-to, which obviously was a little living on the edge and probably not the safest thing. Once you have kids then you realize, "Okay, I don't want you to do it so I probably shouldn't do it either." But my biggest sanity has been scuba diving. And I don't know if it's that halfway point of when you're kind of sinking that you have to hear yourself breathe, and you have to just take in your surroundings, and it's so primitive, and so basic, and you're so weightless, and there's nothing else to think about besides breathing. When I first got scuba certified after I got back, I would keep my gear in the back of my truck, and any body of water, I'd take a can of Cheese Whiz and feed the northern pike, and just sit. And one of the new services locally though the Green Bay vets center—is—I may screw it up—EDRM [EMDR—Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing]. Now I'm going to forget what the anagram stands for. It's all about eye movement. And they basically try to reset your brain with the flashy lights that you look back and forth, uh, and they find that calm point, which mine was breathe, and to sink. And they try to almost unlock all the memories and have you process them through this EDRM [sic] system. And it's pretty interesting—I went a few times, and she had to cancel for one. I didn't pick back up on it, and I should.

Brooks: Interesting. I hadn't heard of that. EDRM, I'll have to look that up. What about any other vets organizations or is the VFW enough?

Rasmusson: You know, social media; you kinda stay connected with IV—Iraqi veterans—Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. That one you stay in touch with, DAV is always out there. I probably found the most support just by tracking down people that I had deployed with, because they're always—they're there. You got 'em all over the world, but you know what? They all come back together when you post something. I've got a friend, we were doing a photo shoot for Door County, and we wanted to get the Ice Age Trail, and I had just found maybe a week before, one of the guys that was overseas with us and he was walking the Ice Age Trail from the other side, all the way over here. And it was like, "Can you just pause and come here?" And just catching up with him, and meeting his daughter and family, and you realize that, "Okay, you're not in this alone, and there are other people that are going through this, and that have lived this same [?] last ten years of coping, and trying to figure out how they cope. " And his was, you know, he walks and he bikes and he canoes, and I think a lot of the, the people in our unit have kind of found that same peace—that they're not living that high-speed life anymore. They've been there, done that, and eventually they'll get there. I think I jumped right back into it, but—

Brooks: With your extreme sports.

Rasmusson: Yes, yes, yes.

Brooks: What kind of sports did you do?

Rasmusson: Oh, boy. Diving was the big one. I mean we would dive as deep as we could, and anywhere. We'd go from rappelling in Belize to cave-jumping in Belize, to underwater cave-jumping in Belize. The rappelling, the rock-climbing, the hang-gliding—pretty much any kind of sport you could find that just kind of got that adrenaline rush again. I don't know if it's the being in combat, but—just kinda brought it back up to remember—reminding you that you're still alive, and it's a different kind of rush. Kind of that accomplished rush instead of that I'm-getting-shot-at rush, and [laughs] I need-to-duck-and-cover rush.

Brooks: Along those lines, is there anything like that rush? Is there anything else that you kind of miss from being in the military?

Rasmusson: The rush is the big one. I kind of made that in addition to the Katrina thing, and just where the support was going, the other one was family. You want to do that twenty years, but there was no way I was gonna have kids and be deployable. And like I said, the little kids with flags—I can't even do it. I can't even watch coming-home things—it's the only thing. I could sit there and do combat movies all day long, but soon as you show that kid singing goodbye or hello to their parents, I can't do it. It was kind of that cognitive decision to say, "Once I get out, then I will start a family." And that's kind of how it went.

Brooks: Okay. Is there anything else? Are there any other—I mean, I'm sure I can come up with some more questions. [Rasmusson laughs] But is there anything else you feel like we didn't touch on, that—

Rasmusson: Should almost put two vets in a room and just let them talk back and forth. [laughs]

Brooks: Yeah, that's—that could be it. The issue with that is then, you get this, like jargon, and—

Rasmusson: [laughs] And you never translate it, I'm sure.

Brooks: Us civilians are sitting here being like, "What are they saying?"

Rasmusson: When I first came back and I couldn't get into the, the VA, I went to a civilian psychiatrist, because I figured I had to get in to somebody. And she literally sat there like I was telling a story, just like, "Tell me more about these bombs." And so I was like, "You are not going to help me one bit." Like, it has to be a military doctor—they have to know at least the background story, they have to know what it's like to go through some of like that stuff, and—

Brooks: Yeah.

Rasmusson: Civilian doctor's not the way to go when it's [laughs] military-related or combat-related.

Brooks: And I think that—from my position—I'm trying to help, kind of, like, bridge that gap, because in terms of therapy and that type of help, you do—I mean, everyone's different—but I think a military specialist is the way to go. But on the other hand, I think a lot of civilians want to know the stories, but they don't know how to access them,

they don't know how to ask them, they don't know how to talk about them. I feel like these interviews are helpful from that perspective. I mean, I'm sure we do miss some things, but we're not inside. But I think it's nice to kind of think that way, in terms of helping civilians talk to veterans.

Rasmusson: You talk to my husband—he can figure it out. [laughs]

Brooks: Maybe I will. Any advice in terms of what kind of questions to ask, and everyone's different.

Rasmusson: Yep. Exactly. I'm sure the stories that come out are just unbelievable. Like, the biggest one with Brian is that he's just, "Okay, you don't—you don't say that, or do that," and I think that he probably has a little bit of underlying anxiety too, from just—from being up here all his life. I know. You know, you don't to the big crowds anymore, and you don't do—there's a lot of things you just completely avoid. And he gets used to me being awake and staring at him at two o'clock in the morning because I can't sleep. [laughs] He's like, "Why is the house clean when we went to bed at the same time?" And I sleep at two hours on, four hours off, and you just fill in your time. I bartended for a while, just what else are you going to do? You're awake, and you go to school full-time, and you work full-time, 'cause you're awake. So, you kind of learn to adapt with it. And then you have kids and you realize you're not that awake. [laughs] There's a whole different set of awake when it comes to kids.

Brooks: Now you don't have the sleeping option.

Rasmusson: Oh my lord. And it'll be interesting to see the kids come up, and how they—if they go that route, or if they go a different route, but, you know, we have—our two daughters are so completely different. We've got princess, and then rough and tumble. And rough and tumble's the youngest. So we said, "The oldest would be the cheerleader for the youngest's rugby team." And I can definitely see the military. Our second turned out what the first one was. [laughs] But they are spitting image of everything we are, and it will be interesting to see how they take that. You couldn't tell anybody any things—you couldn't tell your family what was really happening. And my mom would sit back and listen when she'd get around a couple of us vets talking, and she's like, "You never told us any of that. You said you had a nice ride today, and the sun was out," [laughs] and I said, "Yeah, I missed the part where our thermometer broke at a hundred fifty point eight, and we were taking incoming." [laughs] But you know, you don't want to tell Mom that. We'll just, "It was fine, no, we sat in the sun. I got sunburned, you know." [laughs]

Brooks: "Nice tan."

Rasmusson: Yeah.

Brooks: Why do you think you agreed to sit down and do this interview?

Rasmusson: I don't know. It was probably us arm-wrestling that you won. [laughs]

Brooks: I'm very strong.

Rasmusson: I think I'm trying to lead by example, and hopefully some of the other guys that don't talk about it will come forward, so when you come to the meeting tonight, you can say, "Okay, she made it through, mostly unscathed." And I think I'm just completely fascinated by all the stories that I hear from some of the vets. I think back to my uncle telling me stories, and none of them being recorded because he's telling a five-year-old, and, you're like, "You should have written these down—you should have archived them" Just to have that history. You see what's in the movies, and there's the movies that got it spot on, and that's our reference to it. You look back, and, "Oh, is that how World War II was? Was that how that was?" If there are stories that are there that kind of supported it, and hear that other side of what it was like. I think that's probably part of the reason.

Brooks: Great. Well, I really appreciate it.

Rasmusson: Thanks.

Brooks: Yeah. If you have anything else to add, I can always come back.

Rasmusson: If you think anything, like any questions, let me know.

Brooks: Okay. Great.

Rasmusson: Perfect.

Brooks: All right, then I'm going to turn this off now, thank you.

**[End of Rasmusson.OH2003\_file2][End of interview]**