

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
BROOKE BOUSHON
ICU nurse, Air Force, Operation Iraqi Freedom
2008

OH
1221

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1221**

Boushon, Brooke. Oral History Interview, 2008.

Approximate length: 1 hour 35 minutes.

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Brooke Boushon, a resident of Madison, Wisconsin, describes her work as an intensive care unit (ICU) nurse with the Air Force during Operation Iraqi Freedom, including her deployments to Jordan and Iraq.

After graduating college with a nursing degree, Boushon joined the military as a way to travel. She said she was looking for a sign of what she should do with her life and “truly wanted to serve my country.” Boushon enlisted in the Air Force shortly before the events of September 11, 2001, and she discusses how 9/11 affected her officer’s training. She was assigned to Travis Air Force Base (California) for the duration of her enlistment and was deployed twice, once to Jordan and once to Iraq, with each deployment lasting three months. Boushon describes her daily life and training as an ICU nurse in Jordan and how much of that training was self-taught. Boushon volunteered for deployment to Iraq and describes her volunteer work with Iraqi civilians and flying with critical patients in helicopters.

Boushon reflects on the relationships she formed with her international colleagues and how the military both positively and negatively affected her life. She suffered a severe illness while in Iraq and was eventually diagnosed with fibromyalgia, and she explains how fibromyalgia affected her work and personal plans for the future during her transition back to civilian life. Boushon admires the military’s values of discipline and respect for authority and feels young people today could benefit from those values.

Biographical Sketch:

Boushon grew up in Madison, Wisconsin and joined the Air Force in 2001 after graduating college with a nursing degree. She served for four years as an ICU nurse and was deployed to Jordan and Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Archivist's Note:

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

Interviewed by Catherine Plane, 2008.

Transcribed by Victoria Page, 2018.

Reviewed and abstract written by Caitlin Downey, 2018.

Interview Transcript

[Beginning of WVM.OH.1221.Boushon_tape1_A_access]

- Plane: This is an interview with Brooke Boushon, who served with the air force in Iraq and Jordan. This interview is being conducted at Brooke's home, at the following address, [REDACTED], Madison, WI, on the following date, August 17, 2008. The interviewer is Catherine Plane. Okay, tell me about your background and life circumstances before you entered the military.
- Boushon: Um, before I entered the military I had graduated from nursing school, and had been working at the VA hospital for about a year. I lived in Madison. My family had moved away so I was here by myself, and decided that I wanted to travel. But I didn't feel that one year of nursing experience was enough, so decided that it--another way to be able to travel was to be able to join the military.
- Plane: So, you joined in Madison?
- Boushon: Yup, joined in Madison. I--it was kind of a spontaneous decision, and I was sitting at work one night and all the patients were asleep. So, I was surfing some things on the internet and I had the week before received something from the Navy, offering to have me come out and tour one of their ships out in California and trying to recruit me. And I'm like--well I'm terrified of water so I would never be interested in the Navy. But it got me thinking about--well maybe it would be kind of cool to serve in the military. And back my freshman year in college I had served in Air Force ROTC, but had dropped out after one year. So, I had already had some interest in the military, but I had just--I had been afraid to kind of commit myself to it. So, I'm sitting there in the middle of the night. I sent in a thing to request to have a recruiter contact me. Next day somebody called me and within a week I had signed up.
- Plane: And what year was this?
- Boushon: This was back in 2001. So, it would have been like spring time. Um, then I had to go through all the meps (??) and all that kind of stuff, so I didn't--I got commissioned on the four--July 3, 2001. But then I actually entered active duty on September 2nd in 2001. So, that summer was just kind of getting ready for everything and figuring out what I was going to do about my house and letting my dad know that I was leaving. It was quite a chaotic summer, but it was exciting too. I didn't want to wait any longer than I had to. So, as soon as there was another class coming up for officer training, I was like get [laughs] me in that class, I don't want to wait another six months or whatever it was to be able to get into the next class.
- Plane: And you were able to be an officer because you had a college degree, right?
- Boushon: Correct. That--there are certain professions--I was with a bunch of doctors, lawyers, chaplains, dentists, and then nurses. Those are the ones that can--that are commissioned prior to going to training. So.
- Plane: So, how did your family react to it?

Boushon: Um, well my family was actually very supportive. Um, my mom was surprised, but she said she had a feeling that I would probably make some sort of major life decision that year. She said you could tell I was just kind of antsy. And I had been looking for what it was I was supposed to be doing with my life. I was kind of watching for signs. She kept telling me that I would have a sign. And so I told her this was what I was being told to do. Um, she was not as okay with it after September 11th happened, but she realized that I was going to be going probably overseas. But they were still very supportive. My friends thought I was insane [laughs]. They thought that I didn't think it through thoroughly. They thought that I was running away from my life. I got all sorts of interesting comments, but I just--I wanted to do something different. I wanted to leave Wisconsin. I wanted to try something else.

Plane: And where did you go to college?

Boushon: At UW-Madison. So, I grew up in Madison, went to school in Madison, and I just wanted to go do something else.

Plane: Yeah. So, after two thousand and--September 11th happened, did you get more worried about your decision, or were you still okay with it?

Boushon: I kind of--it was a bit strange. I remember after we were told about the attacks, they pulled all of us inside and we were walking down a flight of steps. And it was really, really eerily quiet and the cour--I mean normally everybody is talking and everything, but nobody was talking at all. And it just kind of struck that this is what I'm here for. This is the type of things that I went into the military for, 'cause I didn't have them pay for my college education or do anything like that. I actually truly wanted to serve my country. So, I'm like, you know there are--how many thousands of people that just got injured. I'm a nurse, this is what I'm supposed to do is to go take care of people. So, it kind of validated why I joined the military at this point in time. It kind of felt like it happened for a reason.

[00:05:25]

Plane: So, you hadn't even done your basic training at this point, right?

Boushon: No [both laugh].

Boushon: Nope, it was in the middle of it. So, it made thing kind of strange. I mean, for two weeks of my basic training all of our teachers were gone. They deployed just tons of them, 'cause we were out in Alabama so we were close by. And they were all nurses and doctors that were doing our training. So, they deployed all of them, and then we kind of sat there and watched CNN on the TV every day in an auditorium. And it was weird because you couldn't do any outdoor activities. So, we couldn't march, we couldn't practice, any of those types of things. At the end of the course, you're supposed to go through like a field exercise. Well, we couldn't do any of those things. So, we missed out on that kind of stuff, but I think for our group it really hit home why--what the military was all about. And it changed everything, you know, we kept hearing before we joined the military, "Oh, you'll be able to take incentive flights, and you'll be able to go to Hawaii, or overseas, and you know the military is so relaxed". It completely changed that day. They became a lot more strict about things like--wouldn't allow incentive flights because they needed room for cargo and passengers and things like that related to

the war effort. So, I never knew the military as anything different. But I noticed that a lot of people who had been in for, you know, ten or fifteen years, had a really difficult time with the way it changed. When I first got out to Travis--would have been in October--you--it would often take an hour to get on base, 'cause they were searching everybody's cars, they were looking in everything. So, you had to leave for work extra early just to make sure you got to work on time. 'Cause you never knew how many people they were going to stop, if they were stopping everybody, what was gonna happen.

Plane: Wow.

Boushon: Yeah, it was crazy for a while there.

Plane: So why weren't you allowed to go outside?

Boushon: They were afraid that because we were an officer training school, that we would be a target.

Plane: Okay.

Boushon: So, they just didn't want us to be visible or outside as much as possible. The first couple of days they would actually have us run from place to place. So, like if you had to go to the cafeteria--well, the first day they wouldn't even let us out of the building. They fed us MREs. But then the second day they finally said, "Okay, we can start to allow people to go in groups of five". And then you have to run to the cafeteria or wherever it was that you were going, from building to building, because they didn't want people outside for a period of time. It was just--it was weird [laughs].

Plane: Wow, I guess as time went on, that they let up on that a little bit.

Boushon: Yup. Mhm, yeah. Then by the last week we were finally able to march. Well, and we had drill competition, but we hadn't had been able to practice. So, it was quite interesting [laughs].

Plane: So, your basic--or your officer training school, is that what it was?

Boushon: Mhm.

Plane: It was in Alabama, is that what you said?

Boushon: Yup. Yup, Montgomery.

Plane: So, you went from Madison to Alabama?

Boushon: Yup, and then I had to fly home on an airplane, after September [laughs] 11th like, within a couple of weeks. So, it was kind of scary. I mean, you could tell at the airports there were a lot of people that were stressed out. Um, but yeah, 'cause then I flew back to Madison and my parents drove with me from Madison out to California.

Plane: So, what was officers training school like, besides the-- not being able to walk from building to building, but--

Boushon: It was mentally challenging. Their whole goal is to make you as tired as you possibly can [laughs], and then make you think, and make critical decisions. Because it was a lot of--you know you would get home from your classes at eight or nine o'clock at night, and then you would have a couple hours of homework, and you'd have to iron your uniform for the next day. So, it wasn't anywhere near as psychically challenging as what enlisted personnel go through, but when you're then waking up at four o'clock in the morning, and you've only had four hours of sleep, and you're doing that every single day, it--and then they're throwing case scenarios at you or putting you out in a--before--they every once in a while they would take a couple of us out to a--it's like a training camp like thing where you would not be able to face whatever the activity was behind you, and they would give you a scenario. Like, for example, you've just been dropped in a mine field, there are five of you, the only supplies that you have are this rope and a bucket. You need to be able to get from here to the other side of the mine field, within the next ten minutes, 'cause you're being chased. And so then you would have to turn around and complete the task. And they were watching your leadership skills, your ability to delegate things to other people, all of that kind of stuff, trying to work on that. But when you've only had four hours of sleep per night for the last month, it gets really hard to think straight [laughs].

[00:10:31]

Plane: I'm sure [laughs].

Boushon: So, there were a lot of us that would just really get really, really tired. And then on the weekends, you'd be studying and--or whatever, because there was lots of papers and lots of tests, and stuff like that.

Plane: Well, was it tests on nursing stuff, or was it--?

Boushon: It was all Air Force stuff.

Plane: Okay.

Boushon: Because most people--for most people, basic training is twelve weeks. For us it was six weeks, but we still had to learn everything that we could about the military: military history, what it means to be an officer, all about the different performance appraisal system, the-- all of that stuff they crammed into six weeks. So, it was a lot of stuff to learn, memorize [laughs].

Plane: Do you--were you able to meet any people or make any friends while you were there?

Boushon: I met a lot of people, and when I was there, I was friends with them but I didn't really keep in touch after we left. It was one of those things. There was definitely a division between the doctors and the nurses. We were a lot younger than the doctors, and they treated us like we didn't know as much. Even though it was completely nothing related to medicine, this was all military stuff. But they were a lot more assertive. I mean, they were older. They had graduated from medical school, they--you know, and then the couple of nurses in my group--we were all still kind of shell-shocked and trying to figure out what exactly what was going on. So, it was just interesting watching the dynamics of our group. I--once I got to Travis, discovered that there were a couple people that were in class with me that got stationed at Travis. And so, I kept in touch

with a couple of them. But, the rest of them, it was like, maybe an email a month, for a year, and then we didn't really talk after that.

Plane: So, after you left Alabama, you said you flew back to Madison?

Boushon: Yup.

Plane: So.

Boushon: And then I drove out to California. My parents came with me, and stayed out there with me for the first week, trying to find a place to live. Um, that was probably the most nerve-wracking part of things, because I just wanted everything to be settled, so that I could focus on learning my new unit, and what was going to be happening there. But I was given a--I can't remember how many days, but a couple of days to be able to search for an apartment. And every place that I was finding was either too expensive or they weren't going to have an apartment available for another like, two months or things like that. So, I finally found one that was fairly close to base, and one of the girls that I was in officer training--her apartment wasn't going to be ready yet, so she actually stayed with me for that first--I think it was like the first month that we were out there. So, it was really nice, 'cause she was also a nurse. She worked at a hospital, and I didn't feel like I was so alone. I was used to having a huge group of friends and lots of people to go hang out with, and it wasn't like that out there. It was the first time I'd ever been completely on my own. I had to learn how to go to the grocery store by myself [both laugh] and little things like that that I had taken for granted, 'cause I had roommates forever. Um, but I--when I first got to my unit and checked in, my commander had actually been deployed. So, until I had--like 60 percent of the staff. So there were not a lot of people left behind. So, they were struggling with staffing, and trying to figure out how to take care of things back stateside. Um, they ended up combining the medical and surgical ICUs together, to be able to staff it better, rather than having two nurses on one side of the department and then two on the other. So I--it actually ended up being a good thing for me, because I was cross-trained then to all medical and surgical patients, rather than specializing in just one area.

Plane: Were you before---were you specialized or was it--?

[00:14:30]

Boushon: I wasn't an ICU nurse at all before I went into the military. They were the ones who trained me. Training wasn't that great but [both laugh]. I mean, it--I uh--because I joined at such a strange time--my preceptor was really, really good. But I only had, I think six weeks of orientation, and I was a brand new ICU nurse. And I didn't really get a lot of critical patients while I was in orientation. So then the day that I got off of orientation, there was one of these patients that was so sick that I couldn't even turn him to be able to get the bloody sheets out from underneath him, because his blood pressure would drop. And I kept asking them--the nurses that work with me for help, and I would get the response that, "Oh, I'm walking my patient", or "I'm giving my patient a bath", or things like that, and nobody would help me. It was very much a--in the nursing world, people who have been around tend to eat their young. Nursing's kind of known for it. And this was one of those departments that was very much like that. So, if I wasn't working with my preceptor or with a couple of the nurses that were helpful, my shifts

were just terrible. I'd be given two really, really sick patients, and I would be offered no help and they'd pull the texts from me so I'd have to do everything by myself. I actually had the surgeons teach me how to use some of the equipment, because I didn't know what I was doing [laughs]. I was like, Okay. I learned a lot of things by reading the textbooks. So, it was scary, and at the time I hated it. After being in for about six months I wanted to quit. But I couldn't. I mean, I had signed up, and I'm like, I'm gonna get through this. I volunteered for every single class that they possibly would offer to me, and read tons of textbooks, and I learned from the people that were willing to teach me. I learned as much as I could. And it actually--when I got deployed then was a benefit, because I was so used to learning things as I was doing it, that then-- I'd ever seen a gunshot wound or a blast injury or anything like scipial (??) burns, except in a textbook. So I--but I still felt comfortable. I never felt like I was overwhelmed with the patients we were taking care of. I mean, emotionally yes, but not intellectually. I knew what I was supposed to do, and I knew how to take care of them.

Plane: Wow. So, it's like--being at Travis was really the training for being deployed.

Boushon: Yeah.

Plane: So, who were your patients at Travis? Were they--?

Boushon: We had all age groups. We were-- we took care of pediatric ICU patients, and then a lot of them were retired vets.

Plane: Okay.

Boushon: Huge portion of them. Most of them were men. We had some female patients, but it was primarily men that were retired vets. We would occasionally get some VA patients, not as often. And then some active duty. But because the ICU--the age group, it was typically older population. It was primarily retired vets. There's a lot of them in that area, around northern California. When the base in the Philippines closed, a lot of them moved to the San Francisco area.

Plane: So, how long were you at Travis?

Boushon: Except for my deployments, I was there for my whole four years.

Plane: Okay, so you just went from there to your deployments, and then came back?

Boushon: Yup. I had the opportunity to be stationed in Bittburg, Germany, but I would have had to extend my enlistment--or my, not my enlistment, but extend my time. And I didn't want to do that, I wanted to my four and get out. So, I opted not to go to Germany.

Plane: Were you offered that early?

Boushon: No, I had already been in for three years, I think. Yeah, so I would have had to extend by two years. Would've been another three, instead of just one more year. At that point I was ready to just get out.

Plane: [Laughs] So, what happened--when did you get your first deployment?

Boushon: So, my first deployment would have been--I found out on Valentine's Day, in February of 2003. I found out that I was going to be deployed. Um, and we were deployed right before major combat operations happened, and they were trying to get us in theater, with the hospital set up and ready before they went into Iraq. So, it was quite crazy. I got--I mean, I got the phone call saying that we were being deployed. And I wasn't--it wasn't my turn to be deployed. They go in cycles, and everybody has a specific slot that they're plugged into. But the person that was supposed to go had a back injury. So I got pulled to go for her. Um, my initial thought was, I don't want to go, because I'm getting married in May. And I was going to miss my wedding, so I'm like--I freaked out at first. But then I realized that everything happens for a reason, and I just--then I got excited. I'm like, Oh my gosh, I'm going to be deployed. I'm gonna get to experience something completely different. This is what I've been training for, and this is why I joined, and my parents were able to fly out and see me. And my fiancé, at the time and I decided that we would just have a small wedding, in Nevada, quick before I got deployed. So that if anything happened to me while I was gone, him and our stepchild were protected. So, got married and a couple days later got deployed.

[00:20:33]

Plane: So, did you get--did you go to Iraq or did you go to Kuwait, or--?

Boushon: Jordan.

Plane: Jordan. Okay.

Boushon: Yup. The first time around we went to Jordan. And our base was set up for primarily search and rescue. We didn't do any combat operations or anything like that out there. But we were 30 miles west of the Iraqi border.

Plane: Okay.

Boushon: So, it was--people would say that when you would go out on a highway, you could actually see the border. But I never went out there. It was interesting being on a Jordanian base though, because it was actually an active Jordanian military base. So, there were actually Jordanian soldiers on base, and because of that we were not allowed to wear shorts--er the women weren't, men could. Women were not allowed to wear shorts, short tank tops, anything like that that was considered revealing. So, it was really hot over there. When we got there it was snowing. But within like a month it was 120 or 130 degrees. So, to not be able to wear shorts or tank tops was not very fun. But--

Plane: So were the men allowed to?

Boushon: Yeah, the men could. Because it wasn't offensive to the Jordanians, and we kept being told it was for our safety. I can understand that, I mean it was a bare base, there wasn't much there, we had some port-a-potties, some nasty, nasty showers. And then we had--I think it was 25 or 30 people per tent. We slept on army cots. It was a basic deployment--there wasn't--it wasn't--people always think of Air Force deployments as, Oh you're in a hotel someplace, and you got maid service, and air conditioning, and laundry and--yeah, no. I washed my clothes in the shower with me in the morning and then hung them dry. And by the time I got them off the line they were typically so full of dust it didn't really

make a difference to wash them. My beatie used I would typically wear for a couple weeks before I--rather than trying to clean them.

Plane: Wow.

Boushon: Yeah, you just kind of got used to the conditions and--I actually enjoyed that Air Force--er, that deployment better than my typical Air Force deployment. You--because you didn't have a theater and a gym and all that kind of stuff, you really needed to bond with the people you were with. So, you had more of an opportunity to talk to them and get to know them and you felt more like you were connected with the people you were there with.

Plane: Yeah. Do you still keep in touch with any of them?

Boushon: Mhm. Yup, I do.

Plane: Do you have any memorable stories or anything, like that happened on base?

Boushon: Um, let's see. There's--well, normally it has something to do with alcohol. [Plane laughs]. My--one of the single nurses that I was there with, she was enjoying that fact that there were all these men around. And she was dating--er, whatever--as much as you can date in the milit--out there. I mean, he would carry her bag for her and stuff like that. But she was dating one of the doctors, and then she met an Army pilot who she became interested in. And one night we were out at a little gathering at the Army side of things, and the doctor showed up [both laugh]. So, Moon freaked out and didn't know what to do, and turned off all the lights, and created all sorts of chaos. And of course it ended up drawing even more attention to herself, and her attempt to hide from him. But yeah, there was--it was a lot of stories like that. Um, that one was longer ago [laughs]. I feel sorry for people who have to remember even farther. Um, when we first--oh, actually I got--when we first got there, they dropped off all of our supplies on pallets, out by the flight line. And we were told that we had to build the hospital a ways away from there. Well, I mean they didn't send us with a forklift. So, that was quite interesting, finagling a forklift from the Army to be able to move our stuff. And then, because of the way the landscape and stuff is, we needed to build a wooden platform first to be able to put the tent on top of. And we had one hammer [laughs], and a couple of nails, and some pieces--old pieces of wood that we managed to get from the Jordanians. But they actually made us take turns with the hammer, going through and trying to build this platform to put our tent up on. And of course we're on this time constraint. They're telling us you've only got two days to get your hospital up and running, because we're going in regardless of whether you're ready or not [both laugh]. And so we're sitting there going, oh my god, you know [laughs]. And so--and then our pieces of wood started disappearing at night. So then they had us actually doing patrols at night, watching our wood pile to make sure [laughs] that nobody came [both laugh]. But we didn't have any--I mean all that we had was a radio. So, it would be funny. It'd end up being two girls sitting out there with the radio, because the guys during the day were doing the physical labor. So then, the girls had to at night watch the wood pile [laughs]. That was crazy [laughs]. But I'm like, yeah next time more than one hammer would be beneficial [both laugh]. And then when we opened all of our supplies, a lot of them were full of mold, because they had been packed back in the 1980s.

Plane: Really?

[00:26:15]

Boushon: All the stuff was expired. Yeah, it was interesting [laughs] but--

Plane: So, what was the main thing that you did while you were on base there?

Boushon: Um, I primarily worked in the ICU, would help cover in the ER when we would have casualties come in, or the floor. Wherever the patients were, I'd work. And then during the day, because I needed to stay active--if you sit there and you think about things, then that's when it gets difficult to be gone. But I got to know one of the Army dentists. So, I actually would go to the little Jordanian clinic with him during the day, 'cause I worked my shift, and learned all about dentistry. So, all about the different amalgams, and when you take a tooth out, and it was actually quite interesting. I got to meet some of the Jordanian military people that were--he introduced me to a lot of them. Got offered--they have this tea that they drink, and it's considered very, very rude not to accept it. But it's like scalding hot, and really, really, really sweet. So, it's like you're sitting there trying to sip it to be polite, and it's like--I don't like tea anyways [both laugh]. So, I'm like, oh gosh. But one of the really sad stories--we had heard that we were going to receiving some casualties, and we're waiting, and waiting, and waiting, and they didn't show up. Well, then finally, probably a couple hours later, a vehicle pulled up and this guy comes running, and he's like, "Hey, my buddy's wounded, you need to come help me". And they--I can't remember how many patients we had, but one of them was gripping an American flag. And he would not let go of the flag, he was just adamant that we not take it away. It was almost frantic, like screaming at us to get away from him, 'cause he needed to keep the flag. And so one of the nurses finally said, "What's so important about the flag? We can hold it for you; we can make sure that you get it before you leave." But it turned out that on their trip to us, one of his buddies had died. And before he died he gave him the flag and said, "Please make sure my family gets this."

Plane: Wow.

Boushon: So, he was protecting the flag. So, I mean it was really sad. There were some of those types of things, and then you can always tell based on the demeanor of the people coming in, what type of experience they'd been through, 'cause we weren't told anything. It was mostly Special Forces that we were taking care of. So we had no idea--they wouldn't even tell us mechanism of injury, which often times was pretty obvious. All their legs are broken? Well, they were probably jumping out of something [laughs] Um, but [coughs] they--sometimes they would come in and they would be really excited. They would be like, "God did you see that!", and "Wow!" And they'd be talking about wanting--so, they'd be really excited and they'd be chatty and they'd be like, "When am I going to get back out there?" And you'd tell them that they had such severe injuries that they were going to have to go back stateside, be rehabilitated, and they might never make it back out. And they'd be just devastated, saying, "No, you don't understand, I have to get back out there. My group needs me, I'm--I need to be there with them". And then you'd have other groups that would come through and they would be completely silent. They wouldn't talk to each other, they wouldn't look at each other, they wouldn't look at you, they--it's like they were scared shitless. They--whatever it

was that happened, didn't happen the way that it was supposed to, and they didn't want to talk about it.

Plane: Wow.

[00:30:11]

Boushon: So, it was very interesting to--and so then you'd watch the news, trying to see if you could figure out what happened [laughs]. You know, oh hey, we just bombed a--or took over an airport or this or that. And you'd try and guess what was going on. And of course you never really knew if that was what it was or not. But it would get complicated though, because our patients didn't exist. So, we didn't know their names and we didn't know who they were--we didn't know anything about them--I didn't even know how old they were or where they were from or---I mean they were a number, number one, two, three, four, and five.

Plane: Because they were Special Ops?

Boushon: Mhm. So--and when you would go over to the cafeteria to order food, you might have five patients, but you'd say you wanted ten meals. And then the next day you might have seven patients, so you'd say you wanted seven meals. And the next day you'd have two patients, so you'd say you wanted eight meals. And so you never wanted to say exactly how many patients were over in the hospital. So, we ordered just weird amounts of food, depending upon the day, to kind of cover it. And the patients would be a separate ward, with the flap closed and only--it was very restricted who could go back there. It was weird. You kept getting in this--these people are not here, you're not documenting them, you're not--you could check their vital signs and do all your checks just to make sure they're okay, but you're not documenting them or anything.

Plane: You don't write it down in a chart or anything?

Boushon: No. So, it would get complicated sometimes, trying to keep track--number one is taking sulfa, and number two is taking penicillin, number three is allergic to vicodin, and I mean it was like--you'd have some paper, but it wasn't anywhere near as detailed as a chart normally is.

Plane: Wow.

Boushon: Yeah, that was probably the most complicated part. But, it was interesting. I mean, I get to meet a lot of really cool Special Forces guys, and I get to fly in a Chinook.

Plane: What's a Chinook?

Boushon: It's the helicopter that has the twin blades on the top. We got to know some of the Army colonels really well, and so they took us up on a flight. They had to go out and we had A-10s, which are the Warthogs. They have the huge bullets that shoot tanks. But they had gone out--for some reason had a misfire with one of their rounds, so they had dropped it in the field. So, we were out searching for the round in the field, to be able to tell EOD so they could go blow it up. And so it was quite fascinating. I got to sit on the edge and put my legs over. Oh, it was like the most amazing experience ever. I was just-

-I fell in love with helicopters on that trip. I mean, it was--I've never experienced anything like that. You know that--have you ever been to an IMAX movie before?

Plane: Yeah.

Boushon: Then you know how you feel, like you're in the movie, and you're moving, and--that was the kind of sensation you got. Except that it was live, and it was real, and--knowing that you could fall out. That was kind of scary, but [Plane laughs] I mean it was amazing. So, I liked that. That was probably the highlight of my deployment, was the helicopter ride.

Plane: That's cool.

Boushon: So, that's--I didn't have a bad experience when I—

[End of WVM.OH.1221.Boushon_tape1_A_access]

[Beginning of WVM.OH.1221.Boushon_tape1_B_access]

Plane: Um, you said you had a bad experience, do you want to talk about it at all, or--?

Boushon: No, not really.

Plane: Okay, that's fine. Um, so were the people that you were treating--they were obviously fighting in Iraq--

Boushon: Yup.

Plane: And they were coming--how long did it take them to get from Iraq to the base to get treated for, by you guys?

Boushon: Uh, we have no clue because we had no idea where they were coming from. They were just--I mean it--and it was one of those things that the whole communication system sucked, because you'd be told that you were going to get four gunshot wounds, and you'd get three people with leg injuries that--broken legs. And then the next day you'd be told that you have two patients who are pulseless, none breathing--and you'd have two people walk in. So, I mean you didn't even know what type of patients you were truly going to get, when they were going to show up, what--I mean, so you were constantly on guard just waiting to see what was going to happen. We--one of the pharmacy techs that I was with--he was this really, really nice guy, and so he would try and help out, even though he didn't really know much about nursing, or ER, or anything like that. He just took care of drugs and supplies. And the one time he came in and was like--wanted to help and he noticed that the vehicle--the ambulance that they had come in was actually a Humvee--was the--the door was still open. And so he went in there to try and see if there was another person and let them know, hey someone will be out to get you shortly. And then he was going to come let somebody know. So, he went out and he touched the guy on the leg and said, "Somebody will be out here. Just hold on a minute." And then he realized that the guy was dead.

Plane: Wow.

Boushon: Totally freaked him out, 'cause he'd never seen a dead person before in his life. And yeah, that traumatized him for a while after that, because he kept talking about it. And then a couple weeks after that, we sent him to the supply tent to get something that we were short on, and [laughs] he walked in there and that was our temporary morgue. Well, in this group that had come in, there were some casualties. And so he walked in on three bodies in the supply tent. Just about lost it, he was like, "I am not a medical person, even though [laughs] people think I am. I'm a supply tech; I shouldn't have to deal with this type of stuff." I mean, he like--so it was interesting to see how different people reacted to it. Some people were just like, oh yeah, this is no big deal. I worked in downtown Chicago at an inner-city ER. And then you have other people that worked in a clinic, and that was their experience as a nurse before they came in so. It was very interesting to watch other people's reactions to things. For me, it was just kind of like, Oh whatever they throw at me, I'm just going to take care of it [coughs]. So, I didn't get too high-strung about anything. It was more--I was going to enjoy it the best that I could, and learn the most that I could from everything. So, I asked thousands of questions. Seriously, my way of dealing with things. The more I knew, the more I felt like I was in control of things, and then it wasn't so scary then.

Plane: Yeah, that makes sense. That's how you got through every day, was just learning more.

Boushon: Yup, because then you're focused on learning. You're not focused on the fact that your patient is missing an arm--or you're focused on, "so what am I going to have to do for this person", or "how am I going to make sure that they get out of here", "how am I going to control their pain". You don't--I mean I had guys that would ask me for, Can I see--can I have a mirror? I want to see what I look like. And it's like, Uh, no. I don't really think that you want--so you'd lie and be like, I'm sorry we--I don't have a mirror with me. I can't-- Because it's like, you don't want the first time that they see that their face has been all scarred and blown up from shrapnel to be right now, when they're in the middle of their healing process. I was like, eek. But there was--it was hard telling groups that one of their guys didn't make it, 'cause you could tell they were all very very close knit groups. So [coughs].

Plane: So, how long were you in--in Jordan, on that base?

Boushon: That deployment I was there for three months. At approximately--I don't know--two and a half months, they decided that they were going to forward deploy half the group into Iraq. And then half of them--half of us were going to go back. And I was originally going to be part of the group that went forward, but the deployment was causing significant marital strain for me. So, they felt that I needed to go home and take care of my family life. So, they wouldn't let me--I actually volunteered to go forward, and they wouldn't let me [laughs].

Plane: Oh, really? [Laughs]. You wanted to go into Iraq?

[00:05:10]

Boushon: Yeah, I didn't want to go home and deal with my husband [laughs]. So. [both laugh] I--plus at that point I had--I felt very comfortable with the people I was over there with. And I--I got used to the way of life over there. I mean it's--there's not as many politics, it's--you do what you need to do to take care of your patients. And that's your whole

focus, where stateside you have to worry about the joint commission, and you have to worry about the state coming in and inspecting you, and you--there--I guess it's the military not the state but, normally you have all these regulations, and paperwork, and all this other stuff that you have to worry about. Over there it's just--you take care of your patients.

Plane: Less frustrating forward?

Boushon: Yeah, it's more--and you get--you have to be creative, because sometimes half your supplies wouldn't show up, or it was going to be another couple of weeks until they would get there. So, you had to figure out a way to be able to take care of them with what you had. So, it felt kind of like--you had to be more creative about things, so it was actually kind of cool. I'm one of those nurses who likes to make my own rules [both laugh]. So, I fit very well in the deployed environment.

Plane: So, you ended up going back to Travis?

Boushon: So, I went back to Travis. At that point, my nurse manager was back and so they were starting to expand the ICUs, because we were having more and more patients. We would occasionally get them from overseas that would be flown back. But, yeah I just came back and worked in the ICU for a while. I divorced my husband, and then I had just started dating somebody else. And a year later I found out that I was going to be going back again. So, that time I volunteered. I had requested to go. There was--I had wanted to go earlier, but they wouldn't let me. There was a guy who had--his wife was pregnant and was expecting--I think it was their third child. And so I volunteered to go in his place, 'cause we had all of the same credentials, same qualifications, and everything. And they wouldn't allow me; they told me it was his turn. So, I was a little bit frustrated by that kind of stuff. I had friends of mine who would have children that were six weeks old, and they'd be deployed two or three days later. And that was actually when we decided to get out of the military. I knew I wanted a family at some point. And I didn't want to have to be worried about, Are they going to send me away from my kids? So, I decided that it was better for me to just get out. Plus, the politics were starting to get to me. So, I didn't like having to do--what they told me to, because they told me to [both laugh]. I wasn't very good at that. I mean, my boss I could handle. But sometimes the hospital would decide to do things that just didn't make any sense. It was like they didn't check with people who actually are the ones implementing this stuff, and--it would be frustrating. Yeah, and then I found out that I was--'cause I had been in ICU for four years, that I was going to have to do a different kind of nursing. And I didn't want to leave ICU, so.

Plane: So, let's talk about your second deployment.

Boushon: Okay.

Plane: So, did you go to Iraq then?

Boushon: That's the second time I was in Iraq. I was at Tallil Air Force Base in southern Iraq, by Nasiriyah. That was more of a typical Air Force deployment. We had four or five people to attend, and I had an actual bed [laughs] which was amazing after having a cot the first time around. I had laundry facilities, there was a gym, there was a theater, they had all sorts of stuff for entertainment. And Air Force tent city was walled off from the rest of

the base. So, you had to have an Air Force ID card to be able to get in and out of that area, or you had to be with somebody. So, they wouldn't allow just anyone in there. Which was kind of interesting, because the Army people always wanted to come over and use the laundry, or whatever, and we weren't allow to let them over, because there wasn't enough for the Air Force people. But for that deployment, our living situation was a lot better. But I was--it was a lot more difficult for me, the second time around, because I was--there were only two of us from Travis that were sent. We were added onto a team out of Lackland, and so I didn't know anybody at all. At least the first time around I had met a couple of them, worked with a couple of them, kind of had an idea who people were. Second time, it was very cliquey. It was like the group from Lackland already knew each other, they all hung out, they didn't need another person to hang out with them. And so I--my first couple weeks, wrote lots of letters, [laughs] lots of emails, and watched lots of movies, and then I finally met one of the girls in my tent, Michelle--discovered that she used to go over to the Italian tent city on a regular basis. And so she invited me over there with her. And so I met all of these Italians, like nurses, and doctors, and pilots, and stuff. And so I started spending the majority of my time over there. But one I got to know those guys, then it was fine. I had a good group of friends that I could talk to about things with; bad things would happen at work, or whatever, somebody that I could just kind of unload. And yeah, but it was completely different, because we had so many options of things to do, people weren't as close to each other, they didn't talk, they didn't--it was very different. Plus, that group definitely treated me like, she's an officer, we can't talk to her. Whereas the first group, it didn't matter what rank you were, everybody was kind of friends with everybody. When you were at work, you definitely respected whoever was in charge, but outside of work we were all just kind of-- we didn't--they'd call each other captain and everything like that. Second deployment, they treated me like I was different.

Plane: What was your rank by this time?

[00:12:11]

Boushon: I was captain, or I made captain actually, during my second deployment. So yeah, but they just--it was one of those, oh she's an officer, we can't talk to her. And all of the other officers were married, had kids, and their whole focus was going back to their tent and writing letters to their kids, or calling their kids--or I mean that--whereas I didn't have a family to keep in touch with. So, I wanted to go out, and explore, and do things and whatnot. So, it was difficult. I did get to do some cool things though. They let me go off base to go volunteer, and see some of the veteran families in the area. We would bring them water, and food, and basic medical supplies. So, I would explain to them what their medications were for, and if they had a wound or something like that, take a look at it, and you'd give them some Band-Aids, or explain to them how to clean it. The little kids were the cutest though. I mean, they'd come up and they'd be sticking their hands out because they wanted candy, so used to the soldiers bringing them candy. But all of the Iraqi people that I met were very thankful that we were there. They were terrified, because that was at the time when al-Sadr [Muqtada al-Sadr] and his men had overthrown the Italian stronghold in Nasiriyah. And so there was tons of unrest and things going on down there, and they felt safer knowing that we were close by. But they didn't want to speak up against al-Sadr, because he could at some point be the political leader in the area, and they didn't want to upset him, and end up being killed because of

that. So, it was interesting. I appreciated being able to go off base and see what--the veterans, their lifestyle is just so different. I mean they live in tents, but typically it's just a top, and there's no sides to it. The more well-to-do veteran families would have donkeys and chickens, and stuff like that, that they would kind of cart around with them. They were all really really short, [laughs] I mean, nobody came up past my shoulders. And the women were funny though, they came up and they were all trying to touch my face. They wanted to know what they could do to make their face so white, [both laugh] because they thought it was beautiful, wanting to know if they could use some special creams or something. So, I mean it was interesting to see how somebody else lived, kept offering us food, but I--based on the way the kitchen looked, I didn't feel comfortable eating the food. I mean there were flies everywhere, just tons and tons and tons of flies. But then when we'd have the dust storms come through, or the flooding--we had serious flooding for a while--I'd think about, I wondered what--how they dealt with that. They had to sides to their tent, there's no--

Plane: Yeah.

Boushon: --Protection from the wind, and I couldn't even get the--it took two of us to be able to get the front door of our tent open, because the wind was blowing so hard against it. I mean, you couldn't--you didn't even know where you were going. If you didn't have the basketball court on the ground to be able to kind of know which direction you're walking in, there's no way I would have known where the hospital was. But I really had to go out to the bathroom, so I had to [both laugh] go out in the middle of it.

Plane: 'Cause of the sand blowing?

[00:15:45]

Boushon: Mhm. Yeah, it would be just really thick. You'd have to wear your goggles and wear a thing over your mouth so you wouldn't inhale all of it. Yeah, the dust storms were crazy.

Plane: Wow. Was it safe for you to go off base to go visit the veterans, or was it pretty dangerous?

Boushon: We went with--it was dangerous, they--we went with security forces and had to be all--I had to wear full armor and all that, but it wasn't anywhere near as dangerous as--I would do helicopter transports for patients. So, if we had a patient that needed transport up to Baghdad, or wherever they needed the CT scan, or something like that that we didn't have, they would typically choose a nurse to go with, because a nurse can run the ventilator, and medications, and monitor the patient, and stuff. Well, I was the lightest of all of the nurses over there that could do all of those things. So, I would often be able to go on the helicopter flights to transport the patients. And normally on your way up to Baghdad, you're not paying attention to anything else, because you're so busy focused on your patient, and keeping them sedated, and everything. But then once you drop off your patient, and you start hearing explosions around the base that you're at, and they're like, "We need to get out of here before dusk, because that's--it's going to get a lot worse" [laughs]. You're like, oh okay; this is a little worse dangerous than you--because you weren't even thinking about that when you left. And then you realize that yeah, they gave you a gun, and they [laughs] made sure you had a copy of your orders with you, and your ID cards, and stuff before they took off. And I'm like, oh god [laughs]. So,

yeah my first flight, I had asked some of the techs to get me breakfast, 'cause I had gotten up a little bit late. And so they were supposed to be bringing me back breakfast. Well, then they got a call that we had some casualties coming in, so they weren't able to bring me some breakfast. But I wasn't in fact concerned about it. So the guy came into the ER, and they determined that he was going to need to go to Baghdad. So I was the one who got chosen to go with him, and so by the time I flew him up there and got back, it was five o'clock in the evening. I still had two more hours in my shift left, but I hadn't eaten breakfast or lunch, and I was completely dehydrated, because it was 130 degrees, and I had all of my armor on, and was flying in a helicopter where there's lots of dust and wind and stuff. And I'm like, oh my god; I thought I was going to die by the time I got back. [laughs] I was just so hungry and so thirsty, but exhilarated at the same time. It's like--I don't know, there's nothing comparable to flying in a helicopter. I didn't even care if we were being shot at, [laughs] actually the birds were more dangerous than the people. But they fly really really low, so people can't see them coming up, and so you can actually see the faces of the people as you're flying over them. It was kind of creepy--freaky. But and then you'd be out in the middle of nowhere, and there'd be just desert, nothing around for miles. And you'd see people out walking.

Plane: Really?

Boushon: Yeah, on their mecca, their religious mecca.

Plane: Wow.

Boushon: I know, I'm like, that's just insane, I cannot imagine just being out here walking in the middle of nowhere, trying to--I don't know. Yeah, it was crazy.

Plane: So, it sounds like you--I mean, even though you're in the middle of a warzone, you were so into it, your job, and what you had to do that it didn't distribute as much as it could have.

Boushon: No. Yeah, I was a lot more focused on my patients. I mean there were sometimes--the patients-- it would bother me. We had two young Iraqi boys who--scrap metal is like a hot commodity in Iraq, they sell it. So, anytime the military puts out any sort of metal anywhere, it--whether it's like concertina wire, they go, and they chop it up, and then they take it back, and they sell it. So, one day the army was out blowing up old tanks, so that they couldn't be used again, they were old Iraqi tanks. And they made sure there was nobody around when they were blowing them up. But so they had the initial explosion, well then all these kids ran in to grab the scrap metal, and it exploded again. So, two of them were severely burned, like fifty percent, and were transported to us. And I knew that they weren't going to make it. I mean, even if we could have flown them back to Germany for further treatment, fifty percent burns, and that kind of environment, I mean they're going to get infected, and they're going to end up dying. And we wanted to try and let the family on base, to be able to come say goodbye to them before something happened, and the commander wouldn't allow it, because this was when all the unrest was going on with al-Sadr. And they didn't feel comfortable having anybody on additional on base than necessary--we had just been bombed, it wasn't long before that. So they were very nervous about letting people on. So we ended up making an arrangement with a local Iraqi hospital to transport these two kids back to them in exchange for donating a couple of ventilators. So we--they each went in

different ambulances. The one ambulance was so old that it wouldn't even start, so we ended up having to push start the ambulance to be able to get it to go. And that was really sad. And so we finally--we got off to the edge of the base, and we met the Iraqi ambulance crew that was going to be taking them from there. And I didn't realize that in Iraq, it's just a driver, there's nobody in the back of the ambulance with the person. So I had to put this child, he was like fourteen in the back of an ambulance and strap him down with his ventilator, and all of his drips to keep him asleep and comfortable, and pray to God that he doesn't go over a bump, and the ventilator becomes disconnected so he can't breathe anymore, or his arm kinks off one the medications and wakes up or, I'm like--it was like, not a very cool experience to make them have to be like that. Because you knew that they weren't going to make it, and that--I just kept hoping that they would be normalized, that their parents would see them before they died.

Plane: Did you ever find out what happened?

Boushon: No. No, you never really found out anything. I mean, we had suicide attempts, and we had a guy who had a massive heart attack, we had all sorts of things. But you never had any clue what happened to them afterwards. That was probably the hardest part, there was no follow-up, there was no way of knowing if they made it or not. So.

Plane: So, was your base getting bombed while you were there too?

Boushon: We only got bombed once, and it was in the middle of the night. I was sound asleep, and I was really really sick. I was running a fever and throwing up [laughs] my guts. I was in serious pain. And so when the bomb went off, all of us in our tent were like, was that a bomb? Because they sirens didn't go off right away, we're all like, I think we should probably get on the floor [both laugh]. And so I was so sick that I just kind of rolled off of my bed and pulled my flak vest [laughs] and just set it on top of me with my helmet. 'Cause I just--I didn't feel well. And my only thought was, I don't feel well enough today to be able to take care of people, please don't let this be happening today. I can't deal with it today. I mean I had no concern for myself being blown up or anything like that, it was all just, I can't take care of people today, today's not a good day for me [both laugh]. But it was kind of weird though. I mean when it hit, you could see the size of the tents sucking it out. That's how close it was.

Plane: Wow.

Boushon: Yeah, so unfortunately, even though it only happened once, for a long time after that, anytime I would hear loud noises, I would roll on the floor. I mean you just kind of--it got programmed into my brain. And because I was on call 24/7, and constantly being woken up in the middle of the night to come in, because for a while I was the only ICU nurse there, the other one was forward deployed, so I took care of everything anytime anything came it. I lost the ability to sleep real deep, because I was kind of always on alert, waiting for somebody to wake me up.

Plane: Yeah, like you can't relax totally. You're just always in that zone, where you're awake.

[00:25:04]

Boushon: Yeah.

Plane: Almost--

Boushon: Listening for footsteps or whatever. So, even today I sleep with earplugs, and a fan, because I'm so sensitive to noise. Somebody will close a car door outside, and I'm like, wide awake, heart racing, thinking that I need to go respond to something, then it's like, no, [laughs] I'm at home asleep. So it's kind of weird how--I mean, I guess for six months, between the two deployments--it was three months for each deployment--you're on call all the time.

Plane: Yeah, it's amazing too that you were the only ICU nurse that was there.

Boushon: Yeah, tell me about it. There's supposed to be four in our group, and the one hospital just didn't have any ICU nurses that they could send. One was replaced with an ER nurse, and then there was myself and John, and they needed John up north, I think, I can't remember where he ended up going. But he's got all these cool pictures of him touring Saddam's palaces. So they sent him forward, and I just stayed behind. And that was of course when everything started happening, and we started having lots of really sick and critical casualties come in. So, I mean they would tell me, they got a patient on a ventilator, and they're like, oh well, you could just train one of the other nurses to be able to watch your patient, so you can go home and get some sleep. And I'm like, You don't understand, ICU medicine is a very specialized type of medicine. I can't just--I can teach somebody how to physically, manually turn the dials and stuff, and run the ventilator. But I can't explain to them all the intricacies of--when you go up on the peeper, or when you change the tidal monitor, how you know to do--I can't teach somebody how to do that in a day. So it's--a lot of it is very intuitive.

Plane: Yeah.

Boushon: Yeah, they would want me to take a clinic nurse and teach them to be an ICU nurse in a couple days, and I'm like, It's not going to happen. I mean they can help me, and they can get my vital signs for me, and they can do some of these things, but so much of it is critical thinking skills and observation, knowing what you're looking for, but it's so intuitive that I don't even know what it is that I'm looking for until I see it. So, yeah. That was a--I think he was gone for like a month. It was a very long month, I was very glad when he came back. Yeah. So.

Plane: So you said you were there for three months?

Boushon: Yup, three months. Three months each deployment, so a total of six months.

Plane: Are there any other stories you can think of from that deployment that would be interesting to share?

Boushon: It's like, I have all sorts of weird little things--I have pictures that run through my head of you know, the one night I was out at the Italian place with my friend Michelle, and I hate seafood. I am not a seafood person. So Michelle disappeared for a while and she came back out, and she had this big--it was like this huge fish. She had put a pair of sunglasses on it, and [Plane laughs] brought it out, and she was dancing with the fish, trying to convince me that the fish was harmless, and that I would be perfectly fine eating the fish, and if I would just try it, I would like him. And he was very sad, because I didn't like him [both laugh]. She did this whole comedy routine, and I was just like, oh

my gosh. She could tell it's been a stressful week, because that's how you relax, you do stupid things, and kind of lofts you in that way. And on my second deployment, I was so sick for a couple weeks there that--that was the worst part of my whole deployment. I--they accused me of drinking alcohol, saying that I got pancreatitis from drinking. So they tested me for alcohol poisoning, and of course it came back negative, because I didn't drink at all. My second deployment, we weren't allowed to. And I was not going to throw away my commission, and at the time I was still considering going to Germany, [laughs] I wasn't going to throw that away for a drink.

Plane: Right.

Boushon: It just wasn't going to happen. So I was really, really, really, really pissed off at the military, during that deployment, for testing me, and not asking me about it first, because if they would have asked me, I would have no problem with it. But they did it behind my back, and then my records disappeared for a while. So I couldn't even look at them. I was very upset with my commander. He was very paternalistic, and I was the only unmarried female officer from my second deployment. So he kind of acted like he needed to protect me, and be my father, and so he would actually put restrictions on me and say, "you need to be back in tent city by such-and-such a time, and you need to sign out, and tell me where you're going, and--" I was so mad, because he didn't do it to everybody. It was just me. And then he realized he couldn't do it to just me, so then it was all of the females, and then he was told that that was racist, er, sexist. So he finally said that everybody needed to write a log. But Michelle and I were the only two that were talked to when we came in late, or his version of late. I never missed work, and I was always at work on time, and fully functional. So I--yeah, I was told that I needed to be careful of those men, the Italians, because of their reputation, and I'm like, they were a lot nicer to me than the Army guys. You know Army guys--you would walk past and they would snicker, or they would make comments, or you would sit down at lunch, and you'd have twenty guys come up and want to sit next to you. And so the Italians were a lot more respectful than the Army guys, they would get very grabby and try to put their arm around you, or "why don't you come back to my tent?" I got a lot of that kind of stuff, so.

Plane: Yeah, I guess that's from being a woman in the military, you kind of have those experiences.

[00:31:54]

Boushon: Yeah, it is different being a woman. I mean--and unfortunately for me, I'm young, and I'm a woman, and I--not to sound like I'm bragging--but I was more attractive than a lot of the women that were over there. There weren't many of us, but a lot of them were older, they were married, and had had a couple of kids, and they were in their forties and fifties. Well, I didn't meet that age group, and I definitely wasn't--didn't have any kids or anything like that, so I was treated very differently. People acted like I didn't know anything, like I was a dumb blonde that I--the only reason that I was working in the ICU was because they had no other place to put me. It's like, I would say something, and people would just totally discount it because I'm the one that said it. And I would get so mad. So then I'd have to pull out a textbook, or look it up on the internet, or show them, "Hey, no. This is actually what the research says." And then they'd be like, oh okay, well maybe she knows what she talking about. But it's like I constantly felt like I had to

prove myself, because then otherwise people just wouldn't take me seriously. So, I did notice a difference though, going from a lieutenant to a captain. Soon as I got--I hit captain that seemed to inspire respect in some people. It was like, oh she's a captain, and she must know more. That means she's been a nurse for a while. But what they don't realize is, you could have been a nurse for a while and still be a lieutenant, because you just came into the military. But they don't think about that.

Plane: Right, yeah. So how did you get home from Iraq, did you--?

Boushon: I was--trying to remember--my first deployment, when I went over we were on a little cargo---

[End of WVM.OH.1221.Boushon_tape1_B_access]

[Beginning of WVM.OH.1221.Boushon_tape 2_A_access]

Plane: Okay, so we were talking about the cargo plane?

Boushon: Yup. So it was quite interesting, 'cause there were jump seats. They had two little metal poles sticking out with a little mesh seat in the middle of it, and then your back is right up against the side of the plane, and you're flying sideways. So when we got there, I couldn't figure out what was going on. It's like my balance was off, and I kept walking funny. And then I found out it was just that my equilibrium was all off from having to sit sideways in the airplane, Yeah, it was bizarre. That time we flew into Qatar, spent the night there, and then they flew us in a really small plane, and dropped us off in Jordan. Um, I just remember that it smelled like gas, and it was really overwhelming gas smell. A lot of people got sick on that little flight. And they did combat landings, they're like crazy. I mean, they basically go straight down and land, so.

Plane: Wow.

Boushon: You feel like your stomach is dropping out of your body. [Plane laughs]. But, it's kind of like being in a rollercoaster at the same time. So, that was--that was quite interesting. The--that time they came out and they--it was a regular passenger, like a continental or something like that that flew us back, that came and picked us up in Jordan. Um, the second time, we flew out--I think I flew just a regular passenger flight out to Baltimore. And then from Baltimore, we got on a military hop that took us out to Germany, and then from Germany we had to get to Qatar. And then we spent a couple of days in Qatar waiting for a flight into Iraq, and that flight I don't remember as much. On the way home we stopped in Qatar also, and they had--you could get a forty-five minute massage for twenty dollars or something like that. So, I went and got a massage and I got my nails done, and all this stuff. They had all this really cool stuff in Qatar that I was like, oh my god I feel like I'm back in civilization again. So, I spent my couple of days just relaxing. And then they flew us back to some place around Baltimore, it wasn't there, it was some reserve base. And then bused us to the airport, and it was one of those times when they were having really bad storms, on the east coast. So, there were tons of delays and backups, so they basically said, "find whatever way you can to get home, and just keep a copy of all your receipts." [Both laugh]

Plane: Wow.

Boushon: So, I was traveling with another girl, who was also named Brooke. And so our flight was--I think we had three different layovers to be able to get from there all the way back to California. And then I--yeah, that was--no that was my first time back. I'm getting them confused. Yeah, that was the first time back, 'cause I called my husband and asked him to come pick me up at nine o'clock at the airport, and he threw a fit, telling me that that was too late [both laugh]. I was like, oh. And then he didn't recognize me at the airport, even though I had only been gone for three months.

Plane: Wow.

Boushon: He said he was expecting to see me in my uniform, and he didn't so he didn't know who I was. I was like, yeah okay. But yeah, so it was the first time around when we came back that they dropped us off and just said, "Figure out your own way back" [both laugh]. I was like, okay. But Brooke was very assertive and had no problem pushing to the front of the line in order to get us a flight. And I--one of my bags was like ninety-seven pounds, and the cutoff is a hundred pounds or they can't take it at all. So, it was nice, they didn't charge us extra for any of our stuff. We went to the bathroom, because we had been flying for a couple of days, and we're still in our military uniforms and smelled really really bad. Went into the bathroom, tried to wash my hair in the sink, and was using baby wipes to wash off and put clean clothes on, threw away the clothes that I had on, 'cause it smelled so bad. Yeah, it was interesting. But the second one, we did stop in Baltimore overnight, and then I just flew back from there. That was--there wasn't anything weird about that trip.

Plane: So, how long were you at Travis then after you got back from your second deployment?

Boushon: Um, I had another year and a half after I got back.

Plane: And you just continued to work at the ICU there?

Boushon: Yup, kept working in the ICU. Made my decision that I was not going to stay in, turned in all my separation paperwork, and then just kind of bided my time. But, unfortunately that second deployment, that illness that I got, the high fevers, and the vomiting, and abdominal pain, and stuff--it never went away. It got better, but it never completely went away. So, when I came back I went through months and months of tests, and they could never figure out what was wrong. But, they finally diagnosed me with fibromyalgia, and started me on medication for that. And I finally felt like I was closer to being back to myself. I never completely have been like I was before in my deployments. You know, I used to be very active, and very involved in lots of different things, and have boundless energy, and I was all for volunteering for things. And now I have to pace myself, I just can't do as much anymore. And--but it was kind of nice, because my nurse manager at the time was very understanding. And she actually--'cause I told her I needed regular work hours, 'cause I would work days and nights for--'cause we flip-flopped back and forth all the time--she needed someone to cover down in the GI center [dog barks] for a couple of months. So, I got to go work down there. So, I was working straight days. And then they needed someone in the interventional radiology lab for a month, so I got to work down there for a month. So, she did everything she could to try and keep me off the twelve hour shifts and keep me on a day shift, so that I could have a regular schedule. So, it was kind of cool for me though, because I got

cross-trained in all these different kinds of nursing that ended up being beneficial to me in the end.

Plane: So, you were able to keep a regular schedule even though you were sick, the medication helped you function?

[00:06:25]

Boushon: Yup. The first couple months I couldn't. I mean, I thought that--I would get up and try to drive to the grocery store and I'd fall asleep at the wheel. And I just--I felt like I had the flu that just wouldn't go away. I hurt everywhere, and I was sick to my stomach every morning, and then was having terrible stomach pains, and--it was just not fun. Yeah, it took a couple months of them finally saying, oh maybe there really is something going on. And then I saw somebody else, and he's like, oh that sounds like fibromyalgia. So, I hadn't really believed in it before I got diagnosed. But, once I was diagnosed, I found a book that was written by a nurse who has it. And as I was going through and reading all the symptoms, it was like reading a diary about myself. So, it finally clicked that yeah, there--it wasn't something that I could control completely on my own, that I needed help with it [dog barks]. And so.

Plane: Well, it's good that you found a doctor that was willing to diagnose you with it, saw that you had it.

Boushon: Yeah, 'cause that would have been--I was thinking that I was losing my mind. I thought that I was imaging everything, and that I was crazy. And I thought I was having a nervous breakdown, that I--especially 'cause everybody kept telling me, "You're depressed, you're depressed, you're depressed". And I'm like, No I think I'm [laughs] too tired to be depressed. You know, I'm not depressed. I want to go out and do things, and I want to read my books, and I want to have an active life. I just can't physically do it. It's not that I don't have the desire; I just don't have the physical capacity to do it right now. So, I used to get--I would get really pissed off at my doctor for telling me I was depressed, 'cause I'm like, No I'm frustrated. [both laugh]. I want you to figure out what the heck is going on so I can have my life back.

Plane: So, you finished out your time at Travis?

Boushon: Yup, I separated--I had about a month of vacation time saved up. So, I left beginning of August, and came back to Wisconsin. My grandma was sick, and I wanted to be closer to her and my family. So, I decided to move back here.

Plane: So, it then--were you out of the military then, did you get discharged or--?

Boushon: I was discharged about a month after I got out--a month after I moved back here. So, they did--they went through all the discharge paperwork and everything, but I still was collecting a paycheck and stuff like that from them.

Plane: So, how did you feel coming home, and did it feel totally different from what you had been doing for so long?

[00:09:14]

Boushon: I jumped right into a nurse manager position at a brand new hospital. So, I jumped right into a nurse manager position, so I was working eighty hours a week. I didn't even have time to think about anything. I did run into some issues where people thought that I was mean or whatever, because I actually made them work and do things. And often times my military side would come out, where I'd be like, No, you're going to do this. And I had to learn how to not scare the hell out of people [both laugh]. So, I really really had to work on my--learning to ask people to do things rather than telling them, and being more in tune to how people responded to me, 'cause I was just so used to being able to give an order and having it followed, [laughs] and it wasn't like that anymore. So, that took me some adjustment. Um, the hardest adjustment though was actually when I got back from Iraq each time. I think I felt it more the first time than I did the second time. But, it's--I don't know quite how to explain it. But, I felt like when people looked at me, they should be able to tell that I was different. They should be able--they should recognize that I had just participated in something greater than myself. Something--like I was in the war for my country, and I saw all of these things, and it was like--I felt so different. But, I'd be walking through the grocery store, and I'd be like, These people have no clue what I just went through the last couple of months. They have no idea what my life is like. And I remember I got really pissed off, because there was a guy that wrote into a magazine, saying that people needed to stop putting the "Support the Troops" magnets on their car, because if you weren't in the military, you had no clue what it was like to be in the military. And I'm like, you cannot tell by looking at somebody if they are in the military, or if they were in the military. I mean, Jason, he looks like he was in the military, especially when he gets his hair cut and you watch the way he carries himself. He looks like a military guy. I don't look like him, a part of the military. People don't associate me with the military. And so I got really offended by that, because I'm like, You don't know. You don't know, they could have a brother, they could have a sister, and they could have somebody--if they want to support the troops, that's their [laughs] own--they can do it. But, yeah, I just--I felt very different. And I felt like people should recognize it. And I wanted to share stories, and it was like nobody really got it. You know, like--the second deployment with Italians, they--their port-a-potties are way different than ours. It's a hole in the ground, and that's the port-a-potty. So, you know, me being a medical person was like, Well, what happens if you got the runs? Well, you squat over the hole and pray that you make it in, and don't splash it all over your feet. I'm like, oh my god, you know [both laugh]. Or the women--there were not a lot of Italian females, but they had to use the same stalls. So, they'd have to squat over the hole in the floor to go to the bathroom. You know, and--I don't know, I just--I felt like I had changed, and I felt like people should notice it, and I felt like people should recognize that, and--then I finally realized that, No, I knew that I had changed. I knew that I had--I was a different person, and I just needed to learn that not everybody wanted to hear about it.

Plane: Was your family pretty understanding when you came home?

Boushon: Yeah, my parents told me that it was going to take me time to adjust. And I'm like, No, no, I'm fine. I'll be perfectly fine. But, it really was. You know, to adjust to making decisions about what you're going to wear every day, 'cause you're used to wearing your uniform all the time. Making decisions about what you were going to eat, 'cause you ate in a cafeteria. I mean, it was like all these things that I didn't have to do for several months, I had to kind of re-acclimate myself to doing. Um, friends that I had before I

left had now been transferred to other bases, or they were deployed now, or--it's like my friends were changing every time, so yeah, it was different. Um, coming back to Wisconsin, I think it helped that I did not move back to Madison right away. That I moved to Wausau, 'cause the group of friends I had before I left, you know, only one of them ever called me while I was gone. The others--

Plane: Wow.

Boushon: --You know, if I was in town, they might stop by to say hi. But, nobody ever wanted to see any of my pictures, nobody ever wanted to hear any of my stories, nobody ever called me while I was out there, nobody ever came to visit me. And it was like, this is just a phase that Brooke is going through, and she's going to snap out of it and come back someday, was the attitude that I always got. So, then when I got out, I didn't want to come back here. I didn't want to be around that same group of people, because I was different, and they were still treating me like I was the same person I was before I left. So, in Wausau nobody knew me. I was a brand new person. So, there was no preconceived ideas about how I should act. But, it did make it hard when Jason and I first started dating, because we were friends with the same group of people before we joined the military. We both joined the military a couple years apart, but we were both in the military. And then we were both separating, so Jason and I have very--some similar experiences, and we have both changed and grown up. And it's like our friends never left--I don't even think they've gone on vacation outside of Wisconsin, since we left. So, its--they judge us differently than they should, but I mean, I can't change the way they think about it, so. They still compare us to what we used to be like, and expect us to go out and do things that we used to do. It's like; I'm not a twenty-two year old college kid anymore, [laughs] so.

[00:15:59]

Plane: Was Jason--did Jason go to Iraq too?

Boushon: No, he never was deployed. So, he doesn't understand a lot of the stuff I've been through. He likes to tease me that I'm not part of the real military, that the Air Force is the "air farce", and that it doesn't really exist as part of the military. It's like a civilian group that just tries to attach themselves. He Marine Corps, so I mean, that's kind of what they're trained. But, I then remind him that I'm the one who was flying around over there, sewing people back up, and making sure they made it back home, and he sat at a desk here. And then he kind of shuts up. But, yeah.

Plane: Well, it sounds like, I mean, you had such a unique experiences that most people wouldn't be able to relate to them.

Boushon: Yeah.

Plane: You know.

Boushon: I would think so. I mean, I think that they're interesting things, some of the stuff. And I've got pictures, and I still haven't put a lot of them in an album. But, you know, I mean it's different things, I mean, like the bed ones. One else is going to be able to go out and visit Iraqi people and talk to them and find out what their life is like? I mean, that's completely different, or station with the Italians, and the Koreans? I mean, I had one

Spanish troop that came through as a patient, and he didn't speak any English, and the ophthalmologist was Korean, and he didn't speak any English. So, basically the patient would talk to me in Spanish, I would translate it to the Korean nurse in English, and then she would take it from English and translate it into Korean for the doctor.

Plane: Wow.

Boushon: And it was crazy, you know, but there was so many different cultures and—

[Recording Breaks]

Plane: We were talking about cultures--different cultures.

Boushon: Oh yeah. So, I mean, I wouldn't have been able to meet that many different cultures in such a short period of time any other way. I mean, my first deployment, the Australians were there. Second deployment, it was Koreans, and Polish, and--you name [door closes] it people from--all different sorts of countries were coming through there, so. Yeah, so it was a wonderful learning experience for me. I got to learn more--we had an entire Asian Pacific heritage party, to learn more about the Korean culture, and they had Korean food, and Korean dancing, and--I couldn't understand anything the people were saying to me, but I could understand that they wanted pictures with the American girl with blonde hair [laughs] that was about as much as I could get out of it [both laugh].

Plane: Well, that's cool. So, after you left the service, you said you went back to work--?

Boushon: Yup.

Plane: You were working eighty hours a week now. And I know that you went back to school too.

Boushon: Yup, I'm going back to school for my Master's degree. I figured with the GI Bill, I really needed to take advantage of it. And for me, with all my health problems, I can't work full-time as a staff nurse very easily anymore. But, eighty hours a week as a nurse manager, I loved my job. Absolutely loved it, but I couldn't do it. I mean, 'cause that was all I could--all I did. I didn't have any other life. I would go home, sleep, get up, and go back to work, go home to sleep, get up, and go back to work.

Plane: Yeah.

Boushon: I just didn't have the energy to do anything more than that. So, right now I'm back. I have three more classes until I get my Master's in nursing education.

Plane: And then you're going to try to teach?

Boushon: Yup, I think. [Plane laughs] I haven't quite figured that out yet. I want to start a family, so I'm getting married in December. And then we want to start having kids. And so that will kind of make a difference in what I decide to do as a job, 'cause I don't want to work full-time. I mean, as it is I know that there are going to be days that I'm going to be too tired to take care of my kids, and that scares the heck out of me. So, I want a job that's going to be flexible enough that it doesn't take too much out of me, that I can spend time with my family and be a good mom.

Plane: So, do you get any veterans benefits, or--?

[00:20:00]

Boushon: Um, I do, because I'm within my five years of getting out. I get care at the VA for that, because I was part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. But then I just recently received my disability compensation, so I'm considered fifty percent disabled. And that takes care of my medical care for anything that's service related, which considering I was spending several thousand dollars a year on medical care, I was very happy when that came through [both laugh].

Plane: And did you get any medals or citations?

Boushon: I got the Air Force Achievement Medal for Meritorious Service, and the rest of them were the Global War on Terrorism, and some were those. I don't remember what I all--I think I have six of them.

Plane: Wow.

Boushon: Yeah.

Plane: Um, okay. Have you attended any reunions at all?

Boushon: No.

Plane: No.

Boushon: No, I haven't--there was some big thing this summer for Iraqi War vets, but I haven't been back to that. And it's like I still keep in touch with a couple of the people that I was stationed with at Travis, but all of us have gotten out of the military now. So, it's different.

Plane: Um, looking back, how do you feel about the whole thing, like what has it meant to your life?

Boushon: It has changed my life in many ways. I don't regret ever having--I don't regret having gone into the service. I learned so much about myself, and about people, and about commitment. You know, I learned that there's--the military, it was something much bigger than myself. It was something that I didn't always understand what we were doing or why we were doing it or anything like that. But you just--you had to do it, because somebody made that decision that that was the right thing to do. And knowing that I was making sure that those guys made it home to their families, or at least back to Germany, was a great feeling. And it was one of those things that gave you a really strong sense of pride, and it made you feel like what you were doing was worth it, just to make sure that they got home, that was my whole goal. And then I think of all the special training, and the advanced classes, and some of that kind of stuff that the military allowed me to attend that I wouldn't have had the opportunity to in the civilian world, because I'm a nurse, and they're assigned primarily for doctors. So, I had a much greater understanding of ICU medicine than most civilian nurses ever would. I like that. But at the same time, it took a lot out of me. My health has suffered significantly after being in the military, and I don't know if it's related to the virus that I got. I don't know if it's emotional trauma. I don't know exactly what caused all of it, I just know that I was

a very healthy person, and then I joined the military, and now I'm not. So, that has been the hardest thing, and that's the thing that I regret about it. I wish I still had boundless energy like I [laughs] used to.

Plane: Um, is there anything else that you can think of, that you wanted to talk about that I haven't asked you about?

Boushon: Nope, nothing I can think of off the top of my head. I don't know. I think that the military is a great organization, and I think that everybody should have the opportunity to serve, not necessarily for four years or anything like that, but for a year or two. Just to understand what it's all about, because you know with people protesting the war and everything like that, I'm glad that they have not lost support for the troops, because as a person in the military, I stayed as far away from politics as I possibly could, because you didn't want to have a side. You wanted to just do what you were told. And a lot of young people today don't get that. They just don't understand. And then there's the discipline, I mean, you don't--you cannot call in sick to work. You show up to work throwing up, or dying, and then they determine that you can go home. There is no such thing as, "I just don't feel like going to work today." And respecting your elders, you do not talk back, you do not sass anybody. I mean, it's--they really do instill with you a lot of values that I think would be good for a lot of the youth today. I mean, having been a nurse manager, a lot of the people that worked for me, they just--it's like they had no respect for anybody. It was all about them, and they couldn't see beyond their own little world. So it does really open up your eyes. That's it.

Plane: Well thank you for the interview.

Boushon: Thank you.

Plane: And thank you for your service.

Boushon: Thanks.

[End of WVM.OH.1221.Boushon_tape 2_A_access]

[End of Interview]