Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

SHERI A. SWOKOWSKI

Administration Supply Technician, Infantry Officer, Army National Guard

2018

OH
2135

OH
2135

Swokowski, Sheri A., (1950–). Oral History Interview, 2018.
Approximate length: 3 hours 51 minutes
Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Summary:

In this oral history interview, Sheri A. Swokowski discusses her service as an infantry officer in the Army National Guard from 1970 to 2004, including her integral role in the Wisconsin Army National Guard's restructuring and force management, and her work as an advocate for transgender rights.

Sheri grew up in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, and recounts her family's military history which inspired her from a young age to pursue a life of service. In 1970, Swokowski enlisted in the Wisconsin Army National Guard in Two Rivers, Wisconsin, and attended basic training at Fort Lewis, Washington. She discusses her training, the way the draftees were encouraged to compete with the national guard soldiers, and the lasting impressions of a few of her drill instructors. She received training as a supply specialist at Fort Lewis and training as an 11C, a mortar specialist, back at her unit in Wisconsin. In 1973, she received a full-time position as administrative supply technician in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, with Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 128th Infantry. Swokowski describes meeting Gary Wetzel, Medal of Honor recipient, two times in her life.

Swokowski describes what it was like to be a young transwoman in Manitowoc and in the national guard. Throughout the interview she discusses the hardships of living inauthentically and changes that occurred in the trans community, including learning about Renée Richards and Christine Jorgenson.

In 1975, she was transferred to Bravo Company, 127th Battalion, 32th Infantry Brigade in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. The unit was re-organized, and she moved to Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and continued her duties as an administrative supply technician. In 1976, Swokowski attended Officer Candidate School at the Wisconsin Military Academy in Camp Douglas, Wisconsin. She describes the training, a helicopter ride in a Huey helicopter, and the final field exercise of the training. She received her commission in 1977.

In 1978, Swokowski was assigned to the 127th Infantry Battalion and worked as the battalion training officer in Appleton, Wisconsin. She outlines the duties of the operations and training officer at battalion level and some of the challenges that came with that position.

Swokowski transferred to the Massachusetts National Guard in 1980. She moved back to Wisconsin in 1982 after applying for the position of state readiness officer for the Adjunct General's Office in Madison, Wisconsin. Swokowski describes her role as the state readiness officer and the reorganization officer. From 1984 to 1986, Swokowski was the Company Commander for Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 128th Infantry Brigade in Oconomowoc,

Wisconsin. She recounts further feelings of compartmentalization as a transwoman and infantry company commander.

In 1987, she was promoted to major and selected for the Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. She describes the school as a very positive experience and recalls members of her cohort and the training they received. During this time, Swokowski describes creating a concept plan for force integration for the national guard and how it was implemented at the national level through the National Guard Bureau. After her graduation from the General Staff College, Swokowski accepted a position as the force integration and readiness officer with the 64th Troop Command in Madison, Wisconsin, and served in that position from 1988 to 1991. In 1992, Swokowski served as the executive officer for troop command in Milwaukee and describes this as a challenging position because of she was still a major and because of lax readiness standards in subordinate units.

In 1993, she served as the executive officer and assistant professor of military science at the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program at the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point. She reflects on how rewarding it was to see young people develop leadership skills and describes two impressive women she trained who went on to be successful officers. She also discusses her expectation that women would start playing an increasingly important role in the military.

In 1997, Swokowski was reassigned to Joint Force Headquarters in Madison as force integrator and readiness officer. She describes reorganization of 32nd Infantry Division of the Wisconsin Army National Guard from a mechanized infantry unit to a light infantry division and discusses analytical work she did with the University of Wisconsin–Madison Population Laboratory. Swokowski described her role as the strategic planner with the joint staff in 2000 and the implementation of the Malcom Baldrige Criteria to the Wisconsin Army National Guard.

Swokowski retired as a colonel in December 2004. She states that she tried retirement for two golf seasons but felt that she still wanted to work. Swokowski was hired as an instructor for the Army Force Management School in Belvoir, Virginia, in 2006. It was during this time that Swokowski had decided to come out to her family and to start her transition. She was fired from her position at the Army Force Management School after she transitioned. Swokowski states that it was this because she was fired from this position that she has become an advocate for transgender rights and specifically for the rights of transgender service members.

Swokowski was hired as the senior analyst for the Assistant Chief of Staff for Instillation Management at the Pentagon and worked there for over two years. In 2008, she worked as the human resource officer for the Rocky Mountain Region for the U.S. Forest Service in Denver, Colorado. Swokowski decided to retire in 2011 and moved back to Wisconsin to be near her children and grandchildren.

Swokowski describes transitioning in Wisconsin in 2005 and meeting other transwomen at the electrolysis clinic in Washington, DC. She explains why she decided to become an advocate for transgender rights and discusses her advocacy work, her thoughts on current legal battles over transgender military service members, and participating in LGBT pride events from 2007 to 2018.

Biographical Sketch:

Sheri A. Swokowski served in the Wisconsin Army National Guard from 1970 to 2004. In 1970, she attended basic training at Fort Lewis, Washington. Swokowski served as a full-time administrative supply technician from 1973 to 1976. In 1976, Swokowski attended the Officer Candidate School at the Wisconsin Military Academy in Camp Douglas, Wisconsin, and earned her commission in 1977. Swokowski served in various administrative and command organizations in the Wisconsin National Guard and had a significant role in the restructuring of the 32nd Infantry Division in the late 1990s. She retired as a colonel in 2004. After her retirement, Swokowski worked at the Army Force Management School, the Pentagon, and the United States Forest Service. She has also become a prominent advocate for the rights of transgender military service members.

Archivist's notes:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. It is strongly suggested that researchers directly engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript.

Interviewed by Rachelle Halaska, 2018.
Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2020.
Reviewed by Rachelle Halaska, 2020.
Abstract written by Rachelle Halaska, 2020.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH2135.Swokowski_file1_access.mp3]

Halaska: All right. Today is October 3, 2018. This is an interview with Sheri Ann Swokowski, who served with the Army National Guard from 1970 to 2004. This interview is being conducted at Sheri's home in Windsor, Wisconsin. The interviewer is Rachelle Halaska, and this interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans' Museum Oral History Program. Thank you very much for meeting with me, Sheri.

Swokowski: My pleasure.

Halaska: All right, so let's just begin this interview with where and when were you born?

Swokowski: I was born in Manitowoc, Wisconsin—it's about an hour north of Milwaukee and the shore of Lake Michigan—in 1950.

Halaska: Okay. And tell me a little bit about your background and life before you went into the military.

Swokowski: My earliest memories are basically that I worked a lot. I was a paper boy at the age of eight and continued to do that for several years. I ended up graduating from Lincoln High School in Manitowoc in 1968 and took away from my educational years a desire to serve others. So, within a year or two of graduating, I was still in Manitowoc, and I joined the Manitowoc County sheriff's department as a reserve deputy, and I also joined the Wisconsin National Guard in the neighboring city of Two Rivers. I come from a family of four. I had two brothers and one sister, and at the time, you know, it was three boys and one girl. And after transitioning later in life, unfortunately both my parents and my younger sister passed away without ever realizing that we were two boys and two girls.

Halaska: And can you just tell me a little bit more about growing up and a little bit about knowing about being a girl when you were younger?

Swokowski: Sure. My earliest recollection of knowing that I was different came to me about the age of five. I always felt like I was a female, like a girl, and I always felt I should be wearing my sister's clothes. And at times when I found myself home alone, I did, but I knew that that was not the behavior expected of a boy, and so I deeply suppressed my feelings for a good number of years. Manitowoc is a very conservative, blue-collar, and Catholic town. I attended a Catholic grade school and served as an altar boy for years before I got into the public school system.

But I've always had the feeling of being female, just it was not something that folks back in the fifties and sixties would take kindly to. It was something that was really unknown at that time, and those people that were transgender—

although that word probably wasn't even invented yet—were thought of as being mentally ill. And so there was a stereotype that was imprinted in my mind for years and years. It wasn't until after I started working for the Wisconsin National Guard full-time that I heard about Renée Richards. She was a transgender female professional tennis player in New York City, and she came out in the mid-1970s. And I was twenty-five years old before I realized that there were actually other people like me.

Halaska: Can you tell me a little bit about the experience of recognizing that there are other people like you and also how you saw other people around you reacting to Renée Richards?

[00:05:00]

Swokowski: Yes. I don't really recall how other people reacted. I'm sure it probably wasn't very complimentary, just because of the press coverage, the negative—well, I shouldn't say the negative, but the sensationalism of the press coverage. You know, prior to that, I had heard about Christine Jorgensen. I'm not even sure there were any books on being transgender back in those days. And to me, it was just very rewarding, I guess, to understand that there were other out there like me. So it was a good thing. It was still probably fifteen, twenty years prior to the internet, where you could jump online and get to know people and really become aware of all of the other people out there, or I shouldn't say all, but certainly a lot of the other people out there that were transgender.

Halaska: Let's go back to right after high school when you joined the sheriff's department and the National Guard, did you say?

Swokowski: Right.

Halaska: Can you tell me a little bit about that as well, where you learned about the Army and why you signed up for that branch?

Swokowski: Well, again, I had this feeling, this desire to serve others and to make the world a better place, and so I thought, two of the ways I could do that was number one, join the sheriff's department to help people that needed help, and the same thing really held true for the National Guard. I come from a military family. I have an older brother that served a couple years in the Army in Germany, but more importantly, I think I got my bearing from my dad. My dad served in World War II in the Army. He was a corporal, and he didn't have to. He had a deferment, because he installed communications equipment on the submarines that were built in Manitowoc during the war, but he enlisted in 1944, went to Camp Blanding, Florida, for training, and then shipped over to Europe just in time for the Battle of the Bulge.

My dad was in a unit that, like many other units, was overrun. And the only thing he ever told me about the war was that he was lucky because fifty percent of his unit was killed, and the other fifty percent were captured. So, he was a prisoner of war. He was taken to Stalag IX in Bad Orb, Germany, in December of 1944 and was liberated on Easter Sunday, April 1, 1945, in a rather dramatic fashion. On the morning of April 1, 1945, the Germans at that POW camp got all of the prisoners out of the barracks and had them assemble in a field. And then the Germans set up machine guns in front of all of the prisoners. They were frankly going to execute them. And as this was getting set to take place, there was another Germany guard that ran up to the machine gun crew and informed them that there were tanks coming through the front gate. The German machine gun crew and I supposed everybody else that was there decided that they needed to save their lives instead of taking lives that morning. And so it's—you know, the cavalry arrived on time. I'm sure it was General Patton's Third Army tanks that rolled in and saved numerous lives at this particular POW camp, and my dad happened to be one of those.

And the only reason I'm even aware of the story, because my dad never talked about this war experiences, and I never wanted to pry into his privacy.

[00:10:02]

I wanted to respect that. It was because when he came back, he and my mother were living at my grandmother's house, and my dad was on the telephone with a friend of his, I think, in Appleton, Wisconsin, and my grandmother just happened to overhear this conversation, or I wouldn't even know this about him. So it's a pretty significant event. So that's kind of my background, where I come from, and I think where my interest in serving, both militarily and as a civilian, as I've done throughout my years. That's where that feeling comes from.

Halaska: And then can you tell me about where you enlisted and what you enlisted for and a little bit about your earlier training?

Swokowski: Yes. I was enlisted in the infantry unit in Two Rivers on the eighteenth of February, 1970. I was married two months later. We were expecting a child that year. And it was an infantry unit. I was a mortar, an 11C, mortar person. I shipped off to basic training at Fort Lewis, Washington, first time I was ever on an airplane. Left out of Manitowoc in April and flew into Chicago and then flew two thousand miles away to Fort Lewis, Washington, landed at SeaTac [Seattle-Tacoma International Airport] airport in Washington, so really the first time I'd ever been away from home, and I get off of the airplane, and we assemble together everybody that was going to Fort Lewis to go down and get on the bus. And as we walk out of the airport, the first thing I see is the word "Manitowoc." Manitowoc for years, up until last year, it was a worldwide leader in, actually built cranes in Manitowoc, and there was some construction going down across from the airport, and it was just a huge Manitowoc crane that they were using. So

even though I was two thousand miles away from home, I still had kind of a sense of—a connection to my home base when I saw that.

Off to Fort Lewis we go, and this was right about the time—Vietnam was—we were past the Tet Offensive, but it was 1970, so it was closely following that. And so there were a lot of draftees going through, and the platoon I was with was from Chicago, many African Americans, and the fact that I was a National Guard, one of the few National Guard soldiers, was used as an incentive by the drill sergeants to encourage the draftees to not be beaten in whatever, pull-ups, sit-ups, you know, low-crawling through a sawdust pit, by a National Guard soldier, so there was a bit of a rivalry there, even back then.

I, to this very day, remember my drill sergeants. They tend to make an impression on a newly enlisted individual, and one of them was actually a sergeant first class, and his name was George S. Robinson, and he had done two tours in Vietnam, and he was very happy to be a drill sergeant, because he said, "it's time for you guys to have a tour instead of me having a third one," which, you know, made perfect sense to me. Rough, rough guy. Told us that the, "S" in George S. Robinson, the, "S" stands for shit-house. And he was quite a character. And then we had a younger staff sergeant, E-6, by the name of Peletier [??]. I'm not sure what his first name was, and he was transitioning out of the Army and was just hired for a state patrol job, I think, in Oregon, and so he was with us through the cycle.

And it was really a good experience for a young individual to be exposed to that.

[00:15:07]

The discipline, the regimentation, you know, the concerns about safety, you know, and it was frankly a pretty good time. It was learning to be a member of a team. It was learning to be part of an organization with a greater good than yourself. And it was very prideful experience. And graduated from basic training, and my AIT, my advanced individual training, was as a supply sergeant or a supply person. And so I had about—actually cut a couple weeks off of that, because my daughter was born, and so I was able to return back to Manitowoc in a minimum amount of time. I got back, I think, at the end of August, so it was about a four-month experience at Fort Lewis that was a very good experience for me, a learning experience.

Halaska: And your advanced individual training was at Fort Lewis as well?

Swokowski: Yes.

Halaska: Okay, and that was in supply, you said?

Swokowski: Yes. Yes.

Halaska: Okay. So you said that you were a mortar 11C, did you get more advanced training for that as well?

Swokowski: That, the additional training for my unit, because I was scheduled to go into supply position and actually, no, I was recycled due to a little stint in the hospital there, and as I'm recalling it, I did not actually go to supply AIT. I went and just acted as an admin person in a battalion headquarters, I believe it was, at Fort Lewis, and that's why they were able to shorten my AIT there. Yes. And the 11C training came—it was more training at the unit level, once I got back.

Halaska: Okay. So you told me about some instructors there. Did you make any friends while you were in that unit as well or going through training?

Swokowski: Well, sure. Oh, yes. You know, there were—this entire platoon, basically minus a handful of us, were from Chicago, and so you were forced to make friends, which is a good thing, and it really gave me a better understanding of what African Americans go through and, you know, just kind of learning their language is a step in the right direction to bring these two different colors together, if you will, and to learn about each other.

Halaska: Okay. Can you tell me, then, about coming back to Wisconsin and getting to your unit?

Swokowski: Yes. Came back to Wisconsin. You know, there wasn't a lot to it. It was just signing in when you're back, letting them know that you're back safe and sound, updating your contact information, and, you know, getting ready to come to drill whenever the schedule says, and I did that for about—that was 1970. I did that for about two-and-a-half years and then applied for a full-time job with the Wisconsin National Guard as an administrative and supply technician, and that was in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, and I got hired there, I want to say, in May of 1973 at, I think it was Company B, the Second Battalion, the 128th Infantry, and that's where I started my full-time career with the military.

Halaska: And do you remember kind of what your decision-making process was to go full-time?

Swokowski: Well, a big part of it was I like the military. I thought it was, you know, something worthwhile. I liked what happened to me during basic training, gave me a little different perspective, different people, and the importance of teamwork, and thought, you know, maybe I need—that wouldn't be too bad a job, if you could do that full-time. And so I did.

[00:20:07]

Halaska: Okay. So—I just have a question for you. Okay. I read in an article that you wrote for Our Lives Magazine in 2015, that after joining the Reserve—or the deputy sheriff and the National Guard, it made it easier for you to suppress your authentic self.

Swokowski: Yes.

Halaska: Can you tell me a little bit about this?

Swokowski: Sure. So—and I don't think it's an unusual feeling or atypical at all that for males who feel they should be female, particularly in view of the time, the generation back in the sixties and then seventies, that there was a feeling that perhaps being surrounded by other males, being in a macho, if you will, environment, that that would help define you. It would maybe make the feeling go away. And of course, that never happened, because it doesn't happen that way, when you have a medical condition that requires treatment, and it was not successful. So the feelings stayed with me through my entire career, all of my moves. I would suppress this as deeply as I could, but very infrequently, I would have episodes of being authentic, where I would go out and purchase clothing and dress as my authentic self, as a female, and do that for, you know, an hour or two or maybe a day on a weekend or, once in a while, maybe two days on a weekend.

And then the guilt would kind of creep in as you approached your job coming up on Monday morning and getting back into that role, and you know, I would purge things, or just, you know, stick them away and not look at them for a year or very long periods of time. So again, hoping that that macho environment, the businesses of the job, all of that, would cure me, if you will, if that was possible, and of course, we've come to realize with medical science it's not something you're cured of.

Halaska: Okay. So let's go back to 1973. Now you are full-time as administration and supply. Can you tell me about that job and what your role was and kind of take me through daily life at that point in time for you?

Swokowski: Yes. So by that time, I was on my second marriage, because living inauthentically—and this is just in retrospect—living inauthentically does not do anything to foster good personal relationships. So my second wife was in Manitowoc. We were married shortly before I got hired in Oak Creek. She decided she didn't want to move to Oak Creek, so you know, you can kind of figure out how that story ended, but as far as the job, there were two units in the Oak Creek armory. One was A Battery, the 126th Field Artillery, and they had one admin supply technician, a sergeant first class by the name of Bill Krueck, and the infantry unit on the other half to the armory had the senior AST [administrative supply technician] was a sergeant first class by the name of Jim Krueck. They were brothers. So we had the Oak Creek armory with the Krick brothers running the place.

And it was an excellent opportunity because both of these individuals were, you know, entirely professional, dedicated. Bill, I know, used to work at a Nike site. When they closed down, he transferred to the AST job there and I'm not sure what Jim's background was, but he was just a wonderful mentor to me, taught me an awful lot, taught me what I needed to know, and I spent just about a year with them, because I was trying to get back closer to Manitowoc to get into, perhaps, commuting distance to make the marital relationship, to give it a better opportunity, and ended up actually being approached to take a job in Fond du Lac, which I did the following year.

[00:25:38]

But my experience in Oak Creek was excellent with Jim and Bill. And one of the real highlights there was that I got to meet a young man by the name of Gary Wetzel.

Halaska: How do you spell the last name?

Swokowski: W-E-T-Z-E-L. And Gary was a helicopter gunner in Vietnam and had been shot down. He lost his left arm in the attack and did some heroic things to help save the crew and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. So that was a pretty nice opportunity to have, you know, some face-to-face conversations with a Medal of Honor winner. And ironic—well, maybe not ironically, but you know, when I departed and started my exodus from Oak Creek and traveling all over the state and nation and living all over the state, I never really got a chance to get back to Oak Creek. And about three weeks ago, I had a chance to see Gary Wetzel again. And it was at a Veterans for Tammy Baldwin rollout in Milwaukee, so I had to go over and reintroduce myself to Gary, and you know, of course, thank him for all of his service and sacrifice. And I mentioned the name Bill Krueck, and he said, oh yeah, yeah. I was just with Bill last night at the Legion post. So it was good to—and I'm sure he—well, he obviously didn't remember or wouldn't recognize me, wouldn't have any reason to recognize, but you don't forget a Medal of Honor winner in meeting him, so it was like forty-five years later, so it was very nice touch.

So I kind of left all that behind when I departed Oak Creek and transferred up to Bravo Company, of the 127, part of the 32nd Infantry Brigade in Fond du Lac. And my time there actually ended quicker than I thought it would. In Fond du Lac, we were a split element. Or no, actually, we were an entire company, but there were strength issues, you know, not uncommon at all during the Vietnam era, and for years afterwards, frankly. The armory was located right downtown, block off of Main Street in Fond du Lac, and it was an old-time armory, I want to say World War I, that resembled a castle with turrets, you know, on all of the corners, but it was part of the community. It was part of the organization. I mean,

they held Golden Glove boxing matches on our drill floor, I remember, and I worked with a guy by the name of Dwayne Kaiser, who was a sergeant first class.

And he also was a good teacher. We were a good team, and I think I met probably my most prolific unit commander at the unit in Fond du Lac. It was a guy by the name of Dick Jorgensen. And Dick was—or Captain, as we used to call him, or Sir—was a really—Dick had to be like six-foot-four and just, you know, pretty muscular. He was a high school teacher. He later became a principal. I think he ended up down at Janesville Craig, and just an excellent leader, a lot of good leadership qualities, not to be confused with a well-liked leader, because he wasn't. But he had the charisma.

[00:30:17]

He had the confidence. He had the trust, that even the folks that didn't like him would follow him anywhere. And yeah, it was a really good period with him.

So after about a year or maybe two years there, due the strength changing, declining if you will, they decided to make the unit in Fond du Lac, instead of a whole company, they would make it a half a company, a detachment. And the whole company, the company headquarters, would be at Oshkosh, because they were doing some wonderful things. Recruiting had higher numbers, higher percentages of fill, and so the second AST position was moved from Fond du Lac to Oshkosh, and so about two years in Fond du Lac, and I remember I was there during the time of that really gruesome Halloween murder, Lisa French, a young girl that ended up missing during Halloween and was later found murdered, really a sad story. So I want to say that's probably '74, '75 timeframe, and then I moved up to Oshkosh and worked with an older gentleman there until he retired by the name of Herbie Poeschl.

And it was during my time at Oshkosh that I made the decision to enroll in the Wisconsin Military Academy's Officer Candidate School program at Camp Douglas at the time. So that would have been the summer of '76, we started. So my drill weekends, instead of drilling with the unit, were drilling at the Wisconsin Military Academy for the next year. The program was based on the Officer Candidate School curriculum and hours that was being conducted at Fort Banning. So, it was a two-week annual training period. It was one weekend a month for twelve months, and it was the second two-week annual training period to earn a commission, if you successfully got through the course. We started with a group of fifty-two students, and we graduated twenty-eight. I think it was probably one of the smallest, maybe the smallest graduating class a year later.

That was a good experience as well. It was hard. It was tough, and nothing really prepares you. You can study drill and ceremonies manuals and things like that, but nothing really prepare you for going to OCS [Officer Candidate School] and having TAC [Training, Advising, and Counseling] officers standing all around

you and barking at you at the same time. So the first night—we all got up there Friday and got bunked in Friday night, and it started Saturday morning, and the TACs would come around each day and put up—

Halaska: The what?

Swokowski: The tactical officers, TAC, teach, advise, and counsel, I think is what it stands for, but they're the officer equivalent of drill sergeants. And we always had to go check the, you know, the leaderships. They had people in leadership positions from company commander, the XO [executive officer], the first sergeant, and then probably the three platoon leaders and platoon sergeants and maybe they even had it down to the squad leaders. So I remember checking the board as soon as they brought it in, and of course, everybody is huddled around it, so you can't really get too close to it, and starting at the platoon levels and looking up, and I'm seeing no, no Swokowski, great, great, great, and I go up, and platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, nothing there, so super.

[00:35:09]

And then I go up to the company, and they had listed me as a company commander for the first day. So I was—I knew what I was in for, and we'd done a lot of push-ups that morning, learned a lot about teamwork and communication. And we went to the range that day, I remember, because I did a flanking movement across the road instead of a column movement, and the TACs were impressed by that. So as bad as it was, there was still a little sunshine at the end of the day, when they all brief you on your performance. So that went on for twelve months, made some really good friends.

So it was a combination of Guard and Reserve folks that attended the military academy. One individual, I think he was a veteran, came in from my unit in Oshkosh, and it wasn't the first day. It might have been the second day. He just told the TACs—he started using some very angry words, and they just, of course, you know, drummed him out that day, so he wasn't going to put up with the BS, as he put it, and he was gone. But yeah, there were a lot of good folks in that class, and we had a lot of wonderful experiences together. The other significant memory I have of the Wisconsin Military Academy was class nineteen—and I think they're up in the mid-fifties by now—was the graduation exercise, where it's a three-day field training exercise where you're inserted, and you exercise the leadership things that you learned over the year in different tactical environments.

So they brought in helicopters, Hueys, to fly us from Camp Douglas over to Fort McCoy. I had a crew-served weapon that I was responsible for in addition to my M-16. And the crew-served weapon was a 90-mm shoulder-mounted recoilless rifle [M67 recoilless rifle]. That really dates me, because I don't think they've been around for quite a while. And this thing is a tube. It's probably six, seven, eight inches, circular, and it's probably about three-and-a-half, maybe four feet

long, and it's a anti-tank weapon, not that we were expecting any tanks, but it was—you were going to simulate, so it has sight on it and everything. They load us into the helicopters, and so I'm sitting on the door, and the doors are open of course. And so my worst nightmare is that this thing—I'm going to drop this recoilless rifle, this 90-mm, out the door.

And I think my fears were well-founded, because when they took us up from Camp Douglas over to Fort McCoy, which is only about twenty miles by road, shorter by helicopter, and we had, you know, some of the best Vietnam helicopter pilots flying us in the formation. And it was the first and I think probably the only time I had what is termed a nap-of-the-earth ride. So a nap-of-the-earth ride in a Huey helicopter with an open door and trying to hang on to a 90-mm recoilless rifle, a nap-of-the-earth ride is just what it sounds like. It's a high-speed, treetop, rolling, banking, diving down, coming up—you know, it was an eye-opener for, I think, everybody that was on those birds. It went on for—I mean, they probably did twenty, thirty minutes of that around Fort McCoy property before they landed and inserted us, so that was a pretty significant introduction, real-world certainly, to what these guys had gone through in Vietnam.

[00:40:09]

In retrospect, you marvel at their abilities, skimming the treetops and some of the places they got into, and the high speeds, it was—let's just say I enjoyed it more afterwards than during the ride.

So they inserted us, and I guess the only other thing that I really remember about that, our three-day exercise, was—I think it was the first night after we got set up in a defensive posture, and we were expecting an attack during the night or the early morning hours, and there was a violent thunderstorm came through, and it was raining cats and dogs, and you're trying to keep your equipment dry, so it would function. And yeah, you've got buddies on each side of you in their fox holes. And the lightning got so bad the TACs came out to the line, went up and down the line, and told us to take our steel pots off, because they didn't want it to attract the lightning that was occurring.

Halaska: Steel pots?

Swokowski: Steel pots are the old headwear, combat headwear that soldiers wore back in the mid-seventies, heavy, round, nothing like they have today. So that was, I guess, seared into my mind as well. And of course, the attack came at, you know, one or two o'clock in the morning, and I remember, I could not get my M16, that was firing blanks—it had a blank adapter—but it must have gotten too wet or soaked, but my buddy next to me, Tim Frang [??], had the M60 machine gun, and he had kept that thing dry enough to—and that's what I remember hearing, was the supporting fire from his fox hole, so I knew we were going to be in good shape. All I could do was yell bang. [laughs]

Halaska: Excellent. Well, I just want to go back a little bit. So when you were the supply tech, the admin supply tech, can you just tell me what your duties were, when you were in Fond du Lac and Oshkosh?

Swokowski: Sure. Admin supply technicians' duties were basically what their job title entails. We took care of all the administration for members. We filled out enlistment packets for people who wanted to join. We did everything for all their medical records or health insurance. We took care of everything on the administrative side to make sure that we had everything we needed for them and their families. And on the supply side, we had an arms room, which had all our weapons and sensitive items, and we would—you know, I would issue those out, have them signed back in. We'd check them for serviceability. We'd send them out for maintenance on regular intervals, you know, to include all the vehicles in the organization. And then in that organization, as part of the 32nd Brigade, it was a mechanized organization, so we had heavy equipment, tracked equipment as well as wheeled vehicles, that we would schedule for service and make sure that it was all done. It was a lot of fun driving them, especially across country at Fort McCoy.

Halaska: And then what kind of vehicles were those again? Just—

Swokowski: They were tracked. They have tracks on them instead of wheels. Just gives them more trafficability across country, and you could do some things in those things that you couldn't do in wheeled vehicles.

Halaska: Where there exact models that you had, or that you remember?

Swokowski: Yeah. Well, at the unit, we had basically two different tracked vehicles. One was a personnel carrier, was M113 personnel carrier, which had a ramp in the back that would lower down. The driver could lower it, and that's how the troops would get onboard and exit the armored personnel carrier. And the other one was—I think was an M125 personnel carrier, that was very similar with the ramp in the back, but it had a large hole that you could open up the steel, if you will, and inside that particular track, and there are only, I think, three of them per company, you could mount a mortar, and so you actually fired a mortar out of the back of the armored personnel carrier, that version, the M125.

[00:45:25]

Halaska: Okay. And then, just to understand your OCS, you said it was over twelve months, and it was—can you just explain the timeframe and when your trainings—not exactly were, but you said that you went instead of drill, so it was on the weekends?

Swokowski: Yes.

Halaska: Okay. I just want to make sure.

Swokowski: Okay. So the Wisconsin military program, the Wisconsin Military Academy Officer Candidate School, is about a thirteen-month program, which starts and ends with a two-week, fourteen-day, annual training period in a collective environment. It was, in my day, at Camp Douglas, Camp Williams, Wisconsin, and it's now at Fort McCoy. And in between those, which were typically conducted in June or July, the annual training periods, so twelve months in between, everybody—you want to the Wisconsin Military Academy. You were actually assigned on orders to the military academy and not your unit, so you would travel to Camp Douglas every month for the drill there instead of with your unit.

Halaska: Okay, excellent. Thank you very much. All right. And then what happened after OCS?

Swokowski: When federal employees go to OCS, and if they're fortunate enough to graduate, they have to make a decision, because the position that came into as an enlisted person will not allow them to serve as an officer. So, individuals had to accept their commission, if they wanted to. They would also have to find new employment. That happened with a good friend of mine, Tim Frang [??] from Sussex, who decided that that's what he wanted to do. He wanted to get on with the leadership portion of it. And in my case, I didn't have a job, so my option then was to accept a certificate that I could basically cash in any time once an officer position that I was interested in became open, and I could apply for it. So, there's no real timeline on that. I wasn't really quite sure, but in my case, it worked out very well, because it would have been June or July of '77 that I graduated.

And in the start of 1978, the battalion training officer at our headquarters in Appleton job, battalion training officer job in Appleton opened up, and I applied for that when I was able and was selected, and so was very fortunate to remain in the same organization with only a short move from Oshkosh to Appleton involved, and I became the full-time S–3 of the organization. The S–3 himself was a guy by the name of Major Tourville in Appleton. And I was kind of his full-time counterpart, his full-time administrator of the battalion training program for this mechanized infantry battalion of eight hundred soldiers, as a second lieutenant.

So, I spent a couple years in Appleton. By this time, I had become divorced. I was running quite a bit, because one of the things you learn at Officer Candidate School, one of the early runs—they were running us in boots in those days—and I realized I didn't have the stamina I needed or the cardiorespiratory system was not what it needed to be, and so I made a vow during early on in OCS that if I was

going to become an officer and lead, I was going to lead from the front, not from the back, and so I got very serious about running.

[00:50:13]

So I became a runner. Helped me quit smoking, not that I smoked a lot, but it helped me quit what little I was smoking, which was a good thing, and that just continued throughout my entire military career. Actually ended up running a marathon.

Halaska: Which marathon?

Swokowski: Pardon me?

Halaska: Which marathon did you run?

Swokowski: I ran as part of the Wisconsin National Guard team at the Lincoln Track Club marathon in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1989. I remember I finished in three hours and forty-five minutes and was pretty happy with that. And then vowed to myself that I would never run another marathon until I had time to properly train for it, and I never found the time after that. So, I was in Appleton, spent a couple years there, helped a friend move out to Massachusetts, a female friend. I'm twenty-eight, now, and helped this gal move out to Massachusetts. She was a registered nurse and going to work at the kidney center there as a dialysis nurse. And moved out there, and we had been seeing each other for a little bit, and while I was there, I just happened to find out that the adjutant general's office in Massachusetts was about two blocks from her place of employment, so while I was there, I went and stopped in and just talked to the chief of staff at the Massachusetts National Guard, told them I'm just putting some feelers out, no commitments, no nothing, but in case I wanted to move, what was the job outlook for operations and training specialists, which was my title as battalion training officer.

He told me what he had available, and one was with an infantry unit and one was with an armor unit at the time, and said, okay, thanks, and went back, flew back to Wisconsin, and eventually made a decision to go out to work out east, first time really out of the state, which was another very good experience for me. Had my choice of which job I wanted. I felt more comfortable with the infantry one, because that's what I had been doing, and so we ended up moving in together, eventually getting married in Boston, overlooking the harbor at the Bay Tower Room, and went to annual training there. That's just a test [referring to siren going off in the background]. Went to an annual training period at Fort Drum, New York, and my second year in Massachusetts, my now wife decided that she didn't want to remain where she was. She had come in as a shift supervisor, and then they put her in charge of the entire operation, and she couldn't—she was in a position where she couldn't count on people even to come to work, so when you're in the nursing career, that's not good.

So, we decided to look at options. So when we got married, we decided to take our honeymoon in Hawaii, so we flew from Boston to Hawaii. On the way back to Boston, we had a layover in Milwaukee, which is where my old boss from Appleton had just moved to a new position. I called him and told him we were thinking about coming back and looking for jobs, and he told me about a job that was open at the state headquarters here in Wisconsin in Madison. And so when I got back to Boston, I applied to that, flew back here for an interview, and got hired here at the adjutant general's office in Madison in, let's see, 1982 or 1983 as the state readiness officer.

[00:55:00]

And so we moved back to Madison, settled on the west side of town, had a child, a boy, Brent, is my youngest son, my only son. [laughs] And we started our life together here in Madison.

Halaska: Okay. Can you tell me just what—the operations training officer, that job, what did that entail?

Swokowski: Sure. An operations and training officer is at the battalion level, so you have responsibility basically for the training, the training plans, the proficiency, meeting all the training requirements, scheduling annual training blocks of instruction for this, in my case, eight hundred person mechanized infantry battalion. So, we made sure that we had all the requirements done each year. We had people qualifying. We had crews qualifying on weapons, and then we had the tactical maneuvers, depending on which level you were at, whether it was a squad level, platoon level, perhaps a company level, but we tended to focus on the lower levels, because that's what's most important. If you got mobilized, you would have additional time to become proficient at company and battalion level, so we tried to focus on the lower level training events.

Halaska: Okay. All right.

Swokowski: So my job was to plan it all and make sure it was recorded and people were proficient, and if they weren't, that there were steps in the process to retrain them.

Halaska: Okay. And then what was your job as the state readiness officer? Can you walk me through what that position was?

Swokowski: Yes. Early '80s in Madison, the state readiness officer was responsible for a couple of things, but the main duty was really to identify, validate, and process unit readiness reports to the national command authority. So I was particularly well-suited to do that, because a readiness report has four parts. It has personnel, equipment, maintenance, and training. So as an AST and as a battalion training officer, I had actually done those portions of the report at the lowest level

possible, and then at the battalion, we would combine all the input from the five units into the battalion level report, and that would get sent up the adjutant general's office, and that's where the state readiness officer reviews it, actually sits down with the people.

In my case, I would travel to the major command headquarters, or they would travel to Madison, and we would sit down for an entire day and go over their reports once every quarter to make sure they were accurate, to see if there was any bad math involved. Part of it, the training area, is kind of subjective, and so we would make sure that the commander's estimate of where they were in the training cycle was accurate. And if we had questions, then it would go back to the state training officer, who'd go back to the unit commander and talk to them about it. And we would put that all together. We would send it to the national command authority, who was from the National Guard Bureau in Washington. And we would then—I would then. It was a one-person shop at the time, but I would then go back and look at where the training level or the personnel level or the equipment level, equipment on hand, perhaps, was just below where it needed to be, according to where they were supposed to be.

If you were an ALO–1 unit, authorized level of organization, you were expected to be at the highest level. There aren't too many National Guard or Reserve units that were at ALO–1.

[01:00:00]

Most of us were at ALO–3, and ALO–4 or—they kind of correspond to the readiness ratings, but a readiness rating of four was unavailable for deployment. It was unsatisfactory. And so we tried to do things like looking at equipment, if a unit was short one piece of equipment, and we could transfer it from another unit without hurting their readiness. It was my job to go and do that analysis and to put that out and make a formal recommendation to a board, a readiness council that we had, and for them to approve it. And then the next time they came in, that particular area rating would meet or maybe even exceed the level they were expected to be at. So I did a lot of detailed analysis.

And the other half of my job was the reorganization officer in the state, so any time there was a new military table of organization and equipment for the fighting units or TDA [table of distribution and allowances] for the administrative units, we would take a look at that, identify well ahead of time things that might need to be done to enhance implementation. That was kind of the real fun part of it because we would re-station units, we would move units, we would consolidate, we would, you know, move them based on the success of the recruiting locality. I remember I did an individual study, a paper study. I remember it, very early in the eighties, to identify which localities or which portions of the state of Wisconsin, via population could best support a satisfactory level of assigned strength. So, it was important when we make those stationing decisions to come in with

recommendations not only from the unit, but to do our own objective analysis, because some commanders are a little overzealous about what they can accomplish. What they think they can accomplish and what the data tells you they can accomplish are sometimes different things.

So that was my job for about nine or ten years. And during that time, two significant things happened. I was a captain, and by virtue of my position as the state readiness officer, I belonged to the state readiness organization, but I wanted to get out and get some command experience, to actually lead soldiers. So when those things became available, I talked to people, and they had a company commander position of an infantry company over in Oconomowoc that came open. Interviewed with the battalion commander and was hired, and so for a two-year tour, I got to be the company commander of Company A, 2nd Battalion, 128th Infantry, and in parentheses, it was TLAT, which stands for TOW Light Anti-Tank unit. It's a very unique unit. There were only four battalions in the entire force structure, and we had TOW missiles launchers that were mounted initially on jeeps and subsequently on humvees [BGM–71 TOW, "tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided"].

So I spent two years in Oconomowoc on weekends, in addition to training meeting, commander meetings, and things like that, as the company commander of this hundred-person, TOW light anti-tank company. And I will tell you, there is nothing like being the leader of an infantry company, a light infantry company, to make a transwoman compartmentalize her feelings even more. And so I, again, suppressed deeply those feelings. I mean, they never left, they were always there, and never shared anything with my wives.

[01:05:00]

No one knew. It was my secret. And so, I found myself in Oak Creek [Oconomowoc] from 1984 to 1986 as a company commander. We converted from jeeps to humvees at the time. Each year, I deployed for exercise in Europe. The first time, the first year, was '85, and that was as part of a small, six-person cell from the battalion, because we were scheduled to deploy with the entire unit, and all of our equipment the following year.

So, in '86, I was over in Europe again with the entire company. Unfortunately, the battalion headquarters had elected to split up a company to fill all the other companies, and I ended up—my exercises was on the battalion staff instead of being with my soldiers, which I still have some ill feelings about to this very day. So '86, my tour as a company commander came to an end, and the following year, 1987, I got promoted to major, and I was also selected for the Resident Army Command and General Staff course at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. So that was a particular honor, because there aren't many Reserve component folks that get selected to go to Kansas full-time.

Halaska: What was that school called?

Swokowski: The Army Command and General Staff course, college. [coughs] Excuse me. So in the summer of 1986, packed up our house here in Windsor, wife and son, drove down to Fort Leavenworth. We rented a place off post in Weston, Missouri, and I started Command and General Staff College, five months endeavor, that was divided into two classes of study or two courses of study. One was administrative, included history and a bunch of other things, and the other half was tactics. Pretty intense. So the way they structured the course at Command and General Staff College, at least at the time, it had a thousand students, and it had them broken down into sixteen-person teams or study groups, and my team had—we had an Air Force F16 pilot, we had Army folks, we had an MP [military police] officer, a female MP officer. We had a JAG [Judge Advocate General], a lawyer. We had a reserve component. I was the Guard rep, we had two international officers.

It was really—I don't know how they do it, but they really had a good way of figuring out cross-sections of people to put together. It's extremely beneficial, the cohort style, if you will. I think I learned more from my—maybe not more. Certainly, as much if not more from my Command and General Staff College study team members as I did from the instruction that was presented. And I knew it was going to be a good time because the first day, when they have you introduce yourself to your study group members—and they assign what they call and ACE, and academic counselor and evaluator, to each group, and they're usually a holdover from the class that just graduated until they find them a position. So, our ACE was an Air Force major, a little guy, probably five-foot-four, and he introduces himself to the group, saying, I'm Major Dan Leaf, he said, but you can all call me Fig. Everybody else does. And he just, by the way, happened to be from Shawano, Wisconsin.

So I knew it was going to be a really good group. You throw on top of that the rivalry between—well, Fig happened to be an F15 pilot, so that's—smaller, shorter pilots fit more comfortably in those cramped cockpits.

[01:10:11]

So there was this constant rivalry going on between Fig and Yogi, who was the F16 pilot, about which was the better aircraft and certainly who was the better pilot. And in our introduction that day, Fig wanted to make sure that we all knew that Yogi—he told us, this is strictly for taxpayer information. He said that Yogi had one more takeoff than he had landing, which means he had to bail out of an F16, a multi-million dollar aircraft. So, it was a great group. We did things together. I think I saw more—we were—I was fortunate. We got the administrative portion of the class first, so it was probably July, August, into September before we went into tactics.

And so we had a number of golfers in the organization. We would go out and golf frequently when the school day was done. And they gave you time to study on your own, so sometimes, the school day was done at noon or one o'clock in the afternoon. I think I saw probably three or four Brewer games, when they played the Kansas City Royals. We would go as a group there. I mean, there were big doings, the Army-Navy game and how that went, and it was just a really wonderful time. And I picked up something that was extremely useful during the course of instruction, and that was—there was a draft field manual that came out that they were using, and it was called Force Integration, I think. And it was about integrating changes to the force. I picked up on that really quickly, because well, that's what I do with reorganizations. And oh, by the way, with new equipment coming out and getting down to the Guard now, like Humvees and things like that, there was no individual or section responsible for that at the adjutant general's office.

And so I got this new FM [field manual] that talked about force integration and aligning personnel equipment and all of that together and how that should come together and be managed. And so I happened to be part of the National Guard Bureau Readiness Council at the time, and I used that as a tool, once I got back, to write a concept plan on force integration, which, you know, we were doing at the Guard, but we didn't know what it was called. And so I brought back that FM, took it to the council, and they said, yeah, go ahead and do that. So I'm identifying how you manage it, the process, what full-time authorizations are needed to accomplish that mission, and so documenting all of this and working with classifiers and job descriptions and grade levels and things of that nature.

And nobody had much hope for that concept plan, because typically, things would go into the National Guard Bureau in Washington DC, and two or three years later, you might year something, but probably not. But this was different. And my adjutant general, Ray Matera, who was also an Air Guard person, ended up signing off on the concept plan, and we sent it in. And nine months later, the National Guard Bureau came out with an implementation plan and additional full-time authorizations for all fifty-four states and territories. So, I had a national impact on that in identifying the process and getting full-time authorizations that were needed to support the force integration process. So that was very—made me feel pretty good that I actually had an impact that was felt across the entire force, the entire country.

[01:15:04]

And it was a good thing, because, you know, it certainly was needed back then, and it was being addressed, being done with band-aids as opposed to addressing the entire project and requirements. And the concept plan that I did addressed all of that, and we successfully implemented it nine months later. And even more rewarding was that the following year, the National Guard Bureau, the headquarters in Washington DC, used my concept plan as their model to

reorganize the National Guard Bureau and integrate, and identify, and create a force integration division at the National Guard Bureau. So, it was a good year in 1987, 1988.

Halaska: And you said that—so before the plan that you came out with, they were kind of using band-aids. Can you describe what band-aids they were using and how your plan fixed it, just so I have a concrete example of what was going on?

Swokowski: Sure. So the band-aids that the organization, the states, were using to field new equipment were varied and different in each state, because everybody has their own way of doing things when there's no specific policy or guidance. And so in Wisconsin's case, I was handling pretty much the fielding of new equipment, new equipment training. We got some support financially from our US P&FO at Camp Douglas, United States property and fiscal officer, but then, when we got—the state readiness officer job was retitled, force integration/readiness officer, so just by virtue of having force integration first in that title, it's telling of the importance of the job, and so expanding the section that I was in from being a one-person section to a five-person section or four or six. It varied on the size of the state. It was putting things in one place, a central location, for folks, a central point of contact for all of the force integration efforts in the states and territories. So it added a lot to the efficiency of the organization, of all the organizations.

Halaska: Okay. Great. Excellent. All right, and you said that this was 1988. And now you are the force integration—what was your job title again at this point?

Swokowski: Force integration/readiness officer.

Halaska: Okay. And then tell me what was going on at the time and what you did next, so what your continuing jobs were.

Swokowski: Okay, so as the force integrator, I spent three or four years after the reorganization, after the concept plan was approved, and then I moved on, because again, I wanted to get out to a unit. I firmly believed people become a little bit stale when they tend to remain in the same unit. There was a term called homesteading, and while that increases your comfort level, it really doesn't do much to make that individual a better, more well-rounded individual. So, I applied for a job as the executive officer at the troop command, which was one of our four major units—or five major units. At that time, it was on North Richards Street in Milwaukee, and was selected by the colonel, the commander there. There was a little bit of concern on my part, because I was a major at the time, and all the other major command administrative officers or XOs were lieutenant colonels. And colonel said, don't worry about. You're going to be the next lieutenant colonel in the state, so in good faith, got it sir, not a problem. We'll march forward here.

[01:20:01]

The other thing that happened, actually, before I went to the troop command was in 1986, just before going to Fort Leavenworth for the Command and General Staff College. The Army chief of staff or deputy adjutant general, I don't remember which one, came down to me—I say came down, because our office was in the basement—and said, hey, we have an AGR [Active Guard and Reserve] slot that's showing up on our books.

Halaska: What's AGR?

Swokowski: And Active Guard and Reserve position that is showing up on our books, and, you know, I want to know if you're interested in converting to active duty. And I asked for twenty-four hours to talk with my wife and think it over, and we did some analysis. Pay was probably a little bit better. It would allow me to retire one year earlier, and went back the next year and said, yes, sir, we'll do that. He said, well, go down and get yourself a Class-2 physical at the MEPS, the Military Entrance and Processing Station in Milwaukee, and we'll start the paperwork. And so I did, and I can tell you, there's a world of difference from going through a Military Entrance and Processing Station as a E-1, a new enlistee, and as an O-4, a major. And it was nice to be treated like an actual person for a change, and that was 1986. So, I converted to active duty in like August of 1986. And that set the timeline for twenty years plus the active service that I had before that added up.

So I go down to the troop command in Milwaukee in good faith. The colonel said he was going make me lieutenant colonel, but I don't think he really understood the ramifications of me switching positions, and it's not unusual for a part-time commander and traditional guardsman to not be intricately—that's really why they have the full-time force to do the details for them, to know the details, to make recommendations based on what the actual requirements are. So we go down to Milwaukee and buy a place in Cedarburg on the north side, close to Richards Street. And during the two years I was there, we end up [laughs] doing a reorganization, and we move the troop command headquarters down the Mitchell Field on the south side of town. So I, along with my staff—it was a total team effort—we just got everything and moved it down to the airport, which was good.

It was a TDA unit, which is a table of distribution and allowances. It's not an MTOE unit, a unit with a mobilizing role. It was a support organization for peacetime only. And some of the—the troop command had responsibility for—we have the aviation battalion here in Madison. We had the maintenance battalion, the 732nd Maintenance up in Tomah. We had multiple. We had, I think, four separate units under us. Oh, and we had my old infantry battalion, the 2nd of the 128th TLAT down in Elkhart, all fell under the troop command. So I was the senior, full-time person for all of those organizations. I think we had about 1,700 troops, and I think there were more than 125 full-time soldiers that came under the purview of the troop command.

So I got to do a little bit of traveling, a little bit of sightseeing, if you will, along the way, put on some miles around the state. But the issue I had at the organization is that because it was a TDA unit, there were different philosophies about the organization. And so when it came to meeting military standards, not everybody did.

[01:25:03]

And my role as the XO, I felt, was to let the commander know and that we needed to take some sort of action.

Halaska: Can you give me an example of that?

Swokowski: Yeah. We had a—I think it was a retention NCO [non-commissioned officer] that was overweight, couldn't pass the Army physical fitness test, and so when you're overweight, you get taped. If you exceed that, then you're put on a program to monitor you, provide whatever assistance we can on a part-time basis for people to change their lifestyle or their eating habits or whatever, and it just—it didn't work. It worked initially. We got the individual off, but unfortunately, he got out of standard again right after that. And then we were forced to present the commander with the options, and the options were basically, at that point, to terminate for not meeting the standards. And the commander, colonel, nice guy—and that might have been part of his problem, he was too nice a guy—and he didn't want to do that. And it caused a rift between him and I and some of the other full-time members.

I remember we had the IG, the active army inspector general, come down and do our command inspection, and they review all the records and the personnel and the data, and the IG report came out and said, the only people in this organization that are qualified and ready to deploy are Major Swokowski and the full-time staff. And the colonel finally realized—I don't know if that was it or something else, but he ended up separating the individual that was overweight and couldn't meet the physical fitness test standards. But it was a sticking point. You know, I won't—I didn't realize—I was naive when I went to the unit, because the annual physical fitness, the traditional guardsman does once a year. The AGR people, we did it twice a year. So we're at Fort McCoy. I think it's the first AT period, and the unit's doing the physical fitness test. I'm off doing something else, because mine is done, and they wanted to run it themselves.

And then the second in command, the deputy commander, comes over and he says, hey, why don't you go and run with the commander, the colonel? And he just needs his two-mile time. So we go out, and I'm clocking him, and he's not—we get halfway there, and he's not doing it. He's not off by much, but I say, sir, we've got to pick it up, you know, and get you in, and we get back in, and he didn't make it. I said, well, sorry, you know, just retake it two months down the road or whatever, and there were people around that heard me say that. And so, it

made a—it made the situation worse that I held him to the standard as well. And that, I think, was my undoing. I left after two years instead of—I was expecting three there, anyway. And that was okay with me, because I didn't want to be part of the unit. People were playing games, and if you're entrusting me to hold the full-time staff to one standard and the military people, the traditional guardsmen, to another standard, that's not the best.

So I left and went up to Stevens Point to teach ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] for four years. And it's interesting to note that some ten years later, the colonel, who was promoted to general, who legitimately passed his run, came up to me at a function—I think it was a retirement maybe for my predecessor—and said, hey, you know, I think I made a mistake with you. He said, I think I listened to some bad advice. And so it took him ten years to come to that point, and I let him know that I appreciated it.

[01:30:03]

I said, it's okay. I said, I wish it would have been done differently, but you know, my career, it hasn't stopped me. I got promoted to lieutenant colonel. I'm just getting promoted to colonel. So thanks for saying so, but—so it was a good feeling.

Halaska: Yeah.

Swokowski: Yeah. I was glad he got there, for himself, if nobody else. So I'm thinking this might be a good place to stop.

Halaska: Yes. This seems like a good place to stop.

[End of OH2134.Swokowski_file1_access.mp3]
[Beginning of OH2135.Swokowski_file2_access.mp3]

[00:00:00]

Halaska: All right. This is the second file for the interview with Sheri Swokowski. The date is October 19, 2018. And we left off in 1993, talking about Stevens Point and ROTC.

Swokowski: During the summer of 1993, I was reassigned from the executive officer, the troop command brigade in Milwaukee, to the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point, Army ROTC program. I relocated from Oak Creek to Stevens Point that summer and met the individuals that were on the staff there. My role at Stevens Point, ROTC detachment, was as the executive officer. I was the assistant professor of military science. I worked for Chris Mortensen, a lieutenant colonel.

Halaska: Can you spell his name for me, please?

Swokowski: Mortensen is M-O-R-T-E-N-S-E-N. And there were about half a dozen of us. I was the only Reserve component individual. The rest of the staff were active duty soldiers, and as we strategized as to what we were each going to do, it was—the strategy session—well, let me back up a little bit, because I will tell you that being assigned to basically a civilian environment after twenty plus years of being in a military environment, I had some concerns about that. And I remember walking up the stairs to the office on the first day and wondering if this was going to be a good thing or not. And in summary, I think my tour as the assistant professor of military science at Stevens Point was probably one of my most rewarding assignments, and I say that because it gave me the opportunity to spend four years with the young people and to watch their development process as they progressed through the ROTC program. And it was very evident. You can actually see the leadership skills developing in these young men and women. And it turned out to be a wonderful experience and a very rewarding one.

But as I moved on, the first two years, I was teaching the freshmen classes, and at Stevens Point, the ROTC program has a big emphasis on adventure. We had approximately three hundred freshmen students each year. Of course, that got whittled down quite drastically after the second year, so there weren't near as many that continued with us, but a lot of things that attracted the students was the opportunity to do some repelling. Stevens Point had a forty-foot repel tower in their nature preserve, and we spent a good deal of time through September, October, and even into November, on the repel tower with the students, so they got a big bang out of that, and we enjoyed teaching that. It got me back into a little bit more adventuresome training and out from behind a desk, and it was a good matchup. So I spent the first two years doing that with a master sergeant, who was an Army ranger, and he was married to a Wisconsinite, and I think that's why they put in for assignment at Stevens Point, but he was a nice guy. The whole staff was wonderful. It was really a mixture of experiences and backgrounds, and it all came together well, and we all enjoyed working with the young students.

The summer of 1994, I ended up going to the basic camp. ROTC has two camps each summer. One is a basic camp, which is six weeks at Fort Knox, and it's for students that didn't enroll in the first two years of ROTC.

[00:05:03]

They can get credit if they complete that six-week endeavor. And the other camp is for seniors, and that typically is held at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, or at that time was Fort Lewis, Washington. And that's their final preparation and field training exercise, so that they can be commissioned when they graduate. But I went to Fort Knox, and that was also a great experience. It was a little challenging for everyone, because you're in the Ohio River Valley, and it's very warm, and it's very humid, and it's not the nicest of conditions, but I was a company tactical officer, so we had 100 or 125 students in the company, and I had three platoon leaders that were recently commissioned second lieutenants, and they were guided

by three platoon sergeants, E-7 if you will, sergeants first class, and they teamed up, and they would evaluate the students in each of the platoons that they were in, that they had supervision of.

What I remember most about that summer is the long hours and the weather. I remember getting up at four o'clock in the morning and getting my uniform on and walking out of the bachelor officer quarters to my car to drive over to the company area, and by the time I walked out of my quarters to my car, my uniform was completely saturated due to the high levels of humidity. So, it was challenging, especially I think for the students, although they were probably half my age. We had a good time that summer. I think I was the only unit commander that insisted that each of my staff, each of the platoon leader and platoon sergeants, actually got a weekend off while there, and they appreciated that. That caused us to—some of the other evaluators to double up and do additional evaluations, but it was worth it in the long run. There's something to keeping morale at the highest level you can whenever possible, doing whatever you can for the troops.

Came back from there and did the second year at Stevens Point. And the third and fourth years, we turned over the repelling to newer staff that came in, and it was probably only the second time in my life that I had weekends off, the first being when I attended the Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth in 1987. And for the years I was at Stevens Point, we probably worked a couple—maybe three or four weekends a year, and that was it. So that was nice. It actually gave me a little more time for myself. As the four years came to a close, I started reaching out to the folks at the joint force headquarters in Madison for my next assignment, and we had some discussions about that. In 1997, the summer there, I was reassigned to the joint force headquarters in an old, familiar role as the force integrator/readiness officer, the same role that I had done for about, oh, ten or twelve years earlier, so it was a role that I came back to willingly and certainly very familiar with.

The initial comment I wanted to talk about before leaving Stevens Point was the—talked about the leadership development of the students, but there were a couple individuals that really impressed me, and those two individuals were both women and both extremely intelligent, intellectual. One went on to do some science at the Army's research lab in Maryland, and the other one was a gal from Rosholt, Wisconsin, and she, in her last semester—the students all choose a branch during their third year, between their third and fourth year, and during their fourth year, their branch is confirmed.

[00:10:12]

And this gal wanted to fly helicopters. So during the summer between the third and fourth years, she was branched aviation, and she had an assignment, a quota, a seat, if you will, at Fort Rucker, Alabama, where the Army Aviation School is.

So for whatever the reason—let me think about this. The timing was a little bit different. Her—she was—they got their branches after they came back to school in the fall. It was not during the summer, so she had basically a semester and a half to go when she received her branch assignment and school quota as an aviator, but she was a little short on credits. And so her final semester, in order to graduate on time and thus secure her aviation training seat that she had at Fort Rucker, she had to take twenty-one credits, and she did. She was just amazing, to take that much of a workload, and she was obviously a senior leader in the cadet course. That took a lot of extra time as well, but she graduated, and we got her off to school, and she did become an Army helicopter pilot. A couple profiles in courage there. That kind of, you know, really showed me, these were probably the top two people in the Army ROTC cadet class. This was '97. So it kind of showed me what the future of our Army was going to be. There were going to be more women actively participating in leadership roles, and that sent a clear signal to me.

Halaska: What was that signal? Can you just—

Swokowski: Well, the signal to me was that women were going to be playing a much more active role. They were going to be expanding into other places that they hadn't previously, and that did come to pass, although it took maybe twenty years for women to actually get into infantry roles. Back in 1997, I knew it was going to happen. It was just a matter of time.

Halaska: And had you worked with many women before? Because I know you were mostly in infantry roles.

Swokowski: Yes. I had worked—some of the full-time staff for the Wisconsin National Guard was female, but they were typically relegated to administrative fields, maybe some maintenance fields, but fairly limited in the positions that they could hold.

So 1997, I come back to the joint force headquarters, into the force integrator and readiness officer role. And the senior leadership starts talking about reorganization our largest division, which was the 32nd Infantry Division, a mechanized infantry division, with five hundred heavy vehicles, tanks and field artillery pieces. And they had apparently done some analysis of what the future was going to hold for the military, and I'm sure some of it was probably the result of the first Iraq war, but regardless, they made a decision that we were going to reorganize the 32nd Infantry division into a light infantry division. So for the layperson, what that means is we had about 4,200 soldiers who were very used to getting to where they needed to go in their heavy equipment vehicles, their armored personnel carriers, their tanks, their self-propelled howitzers, and what the leadership was doing was proposing taking all of that mobility away and basically issuing them a second or third pair of boots.

So light infantry soldiers pretty much walk wherever they need to go, or they get moved, but not with their organic assets.

[00:15:08]

So it was a significant change and took some extreme leadership at the state level, the adjutant general and the commander of the Army National Guard to get everybody to buy-in to that scenario. Once they bought into it, I was placed in charge of making it happen. So making it happen was going to take a while. It's not something you do overnight. We had many concerns about how we were located, and although we were going to be downsizing a bit from 4,200—I think we went down to 3,500—we had to find those spaces nationally from another state. And there was an infantry organization in the state of New York that was converting in a combat support or combat service support role. And we ended up using their spaces to create the new 32nd Infantry Light Brigade.

Halaska: What do you mean their spaces?

Swokowski: Their authorizations for soldiers. The four thousand spaces that we had, those were going away, but we had to get new spaces, infantry spaces, so the reorganization that the New York Army National Guard was doing gave us the opportunity to use their spaces to form our new Infantry brigade.

Halaska: Okay. And was the total amount of spaces per state determined by a national National Guard?

Swokowski: The National Guard Bureau in Washington DC was our higher headquarters, and they of course control all the authorizations throughout the country and were pretty heavily involved in monitoring and controlling that. So it had to be done with their approval, which of course, we obtained, put together a plan what we were going to do. And the reorganization really was an opportunity for us to fix some things that needed fixing. So this was going to be about a two-year plan from approval to implementation, with many phases and many facets. We had to reduce our inventory. When you have five hundred heavy vehicles, you also have a very heavy full-time maintenance force, and our force for doing maintenance was done at the US Property and Fiscal Office in the State Maintenance Office at Camp Douglas, Wisconsin. And we had a couple of hundred full-time mechanics at Camp Douglas that we would no longer need just a short two years down the road, so we would have to figure out how that would happen, how the transition would be made, and how those individuals who were not eligible to retire would continue on, be retrained into another specialty, another company. So that was one facet of it.

But probably the things that drives reorganizations the most is the assigned strength of the units. I recognized that during my first tour. And when we got to this point, we knew we needed to do some long-range planning and forecasting of

population growth within the state of Wisconsin. So I contacted the University of Wisconsin population laboratory, I believe is what is what it was called, and contracted with them to do a twenty-five-year study to identify the projected growth of the population by county throughout the state. That would give us a better idea of not only where we could have better success soon, but also in the near-, mid-, and long-term status for this reorganization, because something this huge, you didn't want to just consider near-term and short-term ramifications.

[00:20:07]

There are secondary and tertiary things that happen, and we wanted to do this the smart way. So the population study came back. I think it took them almost a year to do that, and we identified the largest areas of growth were going to occur not only in the Madison, Milwaukee areas, but there was a corridor up in western Wisconsin along the interstates that was estimated to have the greatest amount of growth. So we looked at putting additional units, additional authorizations in those spots, to give us the best possibility of long-term success with this reorganization.

One of the other things that we did, that we took time to correct, we noticed that positions for females—and again, those were more—we had females in the military police. We had females in administrative companies and support-type units, [coughs] excuse me, but we noticed one thing that was pretty striking to us, that all of those positions were in unit locations that were south of Highway 21, which basically, Highway 21 basically bisects the state of Wisconsin from east to west about midway through the state. Highway 21 is the highway that actually goes over to Fort McCoy, if I remember correctly. So we ended up recognizing that shortfall, and of course, you know, the percent of the population—fifty percent of the population north of Highway 21 was probably going to be female, so it was pretty simple to figure out that we needed to put some female spaces north of Highway 21, and we used this as an opportunity to do this and put organizations, that could have females with them as part of their organizational structure, north of Highway 21.

So we took the opportunity to fix a lot of things. I think we did it relatively well. I guess in retrospect, that's probably why I came back to the job that I had done the first time. It wasn't because I didn't get it right the first time. It was because I had the experience to handle this reorganization, which was the largest the Wisconsin Guard had seen in probably the last thirty-five years. It worked out pretty well. The only negative effect that I experienced was the brigade commander, who actually was a classmate of mine at the Wisconsin Military Academy, so he was a one star. I think I got promoted to lieutenant colonel in 1997 or '98, so he was a couple grades above me, and he was not happy that this was going to have to take eighteen months to put on the ground. He was more concerned that people were going to leave his units if the change wasn't made quicker, and he didn't—I had

the advantage of knowing the system after having worked it for so many years and the timelines to get the resources lined up and to get everything done.

I remember he had made some comments that was like I was purposely holding up his progress or something. The folks at the state headquarters, I think the joint force headquarters, understood, trusted me, but they had a conflict on their hands, because a brigade commanders wanted to do this quicker, and I informed them that it couldn't be. So to resolve the conflict, we got on an airplane one day with the general from the 32nd Brigade, the general who was the commander of the Army Guard, and I think the adjutant general, the two star, may have been along, and we flew out to the National Guard Bureau and had a conference with them about the timing. The state leadership understood the issues and the timing issues, and it took—they had my back, basically, but it took us all getting on an airplane, flying out to National Guard Bureau, and having a two star general at the National Guard Bureau tell the brigade commander that it can't happen on the timeline that he wanted it to.

[00:25:17]

So I felt a little vindicated with that. It was good to know that the state leadership had that much amount of trust in me, even if it took a thousand mile trip out to Washington to convince the brigade commander that he couldn't have what he wanted. And if I remember correctly, the brigade commander was an attorney, and actually, I think he may have even been a judge by that time in the county just south of Dane County. So it was an interesting experience. We got the job done. We got it done and since reorganization in the late 1990s, the 32nd Infantry Brigade has been a light infantry brigade. And there are more of those now in the system than the older, heavy, mechanized organizations. So it was a good strategy that the state leadership developed, and we implemented it on a good timeline, and it was probably a lot cheaper. What we ended up doing, basically, it was making the 32nd Infantry Brigade relevant to the national requirements for war-fighting capability.

Halaska: And what are those, the requirements for—

Swokowski: Well, the requirements are—the national defense strategy is determined periodically, every couple of years, and it's basically a large war game, and the strategy in the past was to be able to fight two large-scale conflicts at the same time. And frankly, I've lost track of that. I don't know that we're capable of doing that anymore, but the strategy basically saw that we were going to be more involved in urban terrain, cities and buildings, which are not conducive for large, heavy firepower type vehicles and transport vehicles. It was more conducive to walking, to getting in, meeting people, clearing buildings, and that's kind of hard to do if you're in an armored personnel carrier or a tank. You've got to get out. You've got to get on the ground, and you've got to do a thorough job.

So the national military requirements and strategy, you know, was pretty evident that while there might be a lot of wide open spaces in the desert that might be appropriate for heavy equipment or heavy brigades, there's going to be an increasing demand for light infantry. And our leadership at the joint force headquarters recognized that on the Army side. As a result, we made the organization more relevant and secured its remaining in the force structure, because there are brigades that have gone away because they were no longer relevant.

Halaska: So you would you say, at this time—you said that there was analysis of the first Iraq war that was done to help inform these changes. I'm guess at the time, there was an anticipation of more conflicts in the Middle East as well.

Swokowski: Well, I don't know if there was anticipation. If there was, it was obviously accurate, as long as we've been in Iraq and Afghanistan, but you know, the Middle East has been a trouble spot forever, a lot of warring factions. And the senior leadership at the national level, obviously, is aware of that, so they wanted to change the makeup of the Army organizations to give us a better balance between heavy and light forces, to be more flexible, to be respond in more places.

Halaska: Okay. And then what happened after organization or reorganization?

Swokowski: Well, the reorganization—you know, one nice thing about reorganizations is that once they're done, there are some growing pains, but they work themselves out. Like I said, the most critical thing is the availability of people to serve, whereby back—post Vietnam and into the eighties, there was a draw down in the military.

[00:30:14]

There wasn't the national will to serve in the military. It wasn't as strong as it was prior to that, and there was a lot of strength-related issues with keeping units fully manned and capable of doing the mission at the level that they were organized. And I'm not sure what it was, but the National Guard of Wisconsin got a lot of assistance from the state.

We found that there were not a lot of incentives for people to join the military, particularly the Wisconsin National Guard, and the state legislature and the governor—not even sure who it was at time—realized that we needed to do something. So the state came up with the state education bill. And I was thinking this was probably in the late seventies, maybe early eighties, but the state education assistance would grant free tuition to people that served in the National Guard. It was quite a good, lucrative deal. People that serve in the Guard are not necessarily eligible for the active duty GI Bill, so that kind of took off in the early eighties. I know I used that opportunity to get both my bachelor and my master's degrees, and it was state-funded. So it was partnership between the governor, and

he has a dog in the fight so to speak, because he's the commander in chief of the Wisconsin National Guard during peacetime.

And it worked out very well. Our strengths increased, and I believe even now, some fourteen years after I've left, the overall strength of the Wisconsin National Guard is—they're in a very good place. It used to be quite a struggle for recruiting and retention managers and recruiters on the ground. Due to the incentives that have come in, it's a much easier task now to get people to sign up. And that isn't an easy task to begin with, because out of all of the students or student age, eighteen to thirty-five is what we typically look for, I think only twenty-five percent, or it might be even slightly less than that, can meet the qualifications to enlist in the military. So there is quite a lot of competition between all the services for that twenty-five percent, and the better posture you can present, the more opportunity you can present, to then the better chances that you'll actually be successful in recruiting what you need to fill the authorizations.

Halaska: Okay. So at this time, you were still working at joint force headquarters, correct?

Swokowski: Yes.

Halaska: And then what was your main task after reorganization? What was the time period?

Swokowski: After my time as a force integrator came to a close the second time, I want to say it was probably 2000, and I was reassigned. I actually had some input into what I wanted to do, and I asked to be the strategic planner on the joint staff, strategic planner—the joint staff is, you know, made up of Army and Air folks and had responsibility for strategic planning on both sides of the fence, whether you're wearing a green suit in the army or a blue suit in the Air Force. And so I spent three years as the strategic planner for the Wisconsin National Guard and actually the division of emergency management came under my purview then as well. And my duties were basically to identify and help the units—well, to identify for the leadership the strategic planning process, come up with a strategic plan for the—in this case, I worked more on the Army side, so we came up in the Army Guard strategic plan, and then we filtered it down to the five major headquarters, and I helped them develop their supporting strategic plans that would help them meet the goals and objectives that were identified in the state plan.

[00:35:12]

Halaska: And what were those?

Swokowski: Well, the goals—you know, it's funny. Strategic plans can be very detailed or not so detailed, and we just modeled ours after the unit readiness reports. Everything you do in the military is wrapped around either personnel, equipment,

maintenance, and training, and those four main categories determine your unit readiness levels. So we developed personnel goals for the personnel part, the same thing on the equipment and the maintenance side and the training side as well, and it was X percent of the units would be at ninety percent or ninty-five percent or higher, or these type of units would be at ninety percent and higher.

We had specific, yet very general, at the state level, and as it worked its way down into the amor commands, and we got to be more specific, and we let the units determine which units they wanted to have the highest strength levels of. It was a way to get them involved. During that three-year period, we successfully had a strategic plan at each major command headquarters. So at the time, it was the 32nd Brigade, it was the 57th Field Artillery Brigade, over on Whitefish Bay. It was the 264th Engineer Group up in Chippewa Falls, and it was the troop command, which by now had actually moved over to Madison, and I think we counted our 13th Evacuation Hospital as the fifth major command.

So one of the more interesting things I learned as a strategic planner and really one of the reasons I wanted the job was because it was—it dealt with continuous process improvement. And the Wisconsin National Guard had been active in what's called the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria. Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award is an award on the civilian side of the house that the federal government has, where it recognizes the very best of the best organizations. If you want to copy best practices, that's where I would go to those organizations and their plans. So the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria was adopted and made available for the National Guard and the Army Reserve. Not every organization wanted to invest in the evaluation of their organization using that criteria, but the Wisconsin National Guard did.

It was a good thing. There was a competition—well, let me go back to Malcolm Baldrige. Malcom Baldrige is a very complex, very detailed evaluation, self-evaluation of your organization. And its aim is to look at all the processes that go on from six or seven categories. You take a deep dive into leadership and things like leadership planning, and you go into strategic planning, and you evaluate your strategic plan and how it's distributed and how it's put out to subordinate organizations and the role they play in developing the strategic plan of the higher organization as well as their own organization. And then you look at the customers, and you talk about customer service and how do you best meet the needs of your customers. You look at the analysis of the organization that's done. You look at the human aspect of it, your employees, your internal customers. You look at your systems and whether they're, you know, IT or otherwise.

[00:40:02]

And the real culmination of the entire evaluation is the last chapter of the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria, and that's your business results. And you would be surprised how many people have a very significant aversion to measuring

business results. It doesn't matter what business you're in. And believe it or not, the military is a business, and our business is providing ready units that can be used in the time of state or federal call-ups. So when I started the process and got into it, it was extremely complex, like I say, and we developed teams, sub-teams, that were responsible, did this in addition to their regular duties, and it took a lot of time. But we had an adjutant general at the time by the name of Al Wilkening. He came to us from the business community. I think he was an executive with one of the utility companies, and he was an A10 pilot. And General Wilkening, to his credit, understood the value of business results, because I'm sure he was exposed to it from the civilian side of his house before he became our deputy and then our adjutant general.

So I had his full support, and each year, we would compile the business results. It's a very formal process. There's no opinion to it. It's all fact, and he would have me brief our business results every year from the packet, so we could track what we were doing well, where we had issues. And you know, this was to all the senior members of the Wisconsin Guard, so they got exposed to the business standard results, as difficult as that may be for some of them or not realizing the connection that there are actually results you can measure. So when I started, we had about ten or twelve pages of the fifty-page packet was business results. Because of my analyst background, it was rather easy for me to go in and identify additional things we could be measuring and should be measuring. By the third packet that we submitted, almost half of the fifty pages, so twenty, twenty-five pages was business results

And I submitted three packets, one packet for each of the three years I was in the position. The year before, we had actually won the competition nationally, and my three years, we placed fourth, third, and second nationally, and we brought hundreds of thousands of dollars back into the Wisconsin Guard because those packets were the prize, if you will. Our hard work was acknowledged and rewarded with funding to be used to be reinvested in the quality program. So, it was a very unique opportunity for me. Continuous process improvement and strategic planning was something that I used after I got out of the Guard and even in my personal situation and was very beneficial to me. So, it was a wonderful opportunity, training ground, learning ground, for me, and I think we learned a lot as an organization.

And you know, we overcame some of the old stereotypes about bad ratings or bad measurements, and I think my standard presentation included something, well, wouldn't you rather know where you're at, even if it is bad, so that you can apply some focus to that area and improve it and see those results the following year, as opposed to just going on blindly? The leadership kind of finally got it. We had a couple folks that were hesitant, but I think they all came around and saw the value of the program. It was time-intensive, but it was rewarding. It made the organization better, and that's what we all should be about.

[00:45:04]

It more than about us, more than about ourselves. There's a higher calling.

And so I spent three years doing that, and the last year, while I was doing the strategic planner job, I was also coming up on the threshold for promotion to colonel, O-6, and the O-6 and above promotions are handled a little differently. Up to O-5, it's kind of within state control. Once you get above O-5, the colonel and general officers, it's more a national level control and selection process, so the last year, I had an opportunity to put in a packet for evaluation for promotion to colonel. And in those days—this would have been 2002, probably—in the military, at least in the Army, you have two tracks. You have a command track, which has been thought of as requirement to make O-6, so the very best people are going to be put in command positions, and then you have the staff track, the support personnel.

So while I had command, it was command at the company level, and then leadership realized my talents were better suited on the staff side of the house to make the organization better, make it more effective, and so that was a battle. That was something that I had to explain to the department of the Army O-6 Board as to why I wasn't a battalion or brigade commander and should be considered for colonel. And that, you know, was really a trick. So I ended up going to a very wise gentleman by the name of Bernie Coy [??], and Bernie had been our active duty inspector general, assigned to the Wisconsin Army Guard. And I sought his counsel.

And he kind of broke things down. He was a colonel, so he kind of broke things down for me about what they're going to be looking for. I had the opportunity to put in a one-sheet cover letter, if you will. He said, you know, you need to explain to the board why you're in a staff track and not a command track. And so with his help, I was able to do that and came up, sent it in. It kind of goes into that big hole out there in Washington DC, and you hear about it somewhere down the road. So goes up, make the determination, they notify the state headquarters, and then the state headquarters notify the people that are selected.

And I remember hearing other folks, over the course of a couple of days, were selected for promotion, and the one star, the commander of the Army Guard at the time was General Kerry Denson, and he was a former Huey helicopter pilot, and he was a Vietnam vet, highly decorated. And frankly, I mean, I had had some challenges with General Denson in the past. I'm not sure he was one of my big supporters, but as the strategic planner, I was under the command, if you will, of Scott Legwold, who was a colonel, later to make general, as the director of the joint staff, and Scott and I had started out as battalion training officers in the two mechanized battalions. I was up in Appleton, and Scott was in Eau Claire at the time, so we'd had a pretty good relationship and worked together over the years and years. And Scott, I'm led to believe that he was a big supporter of me, and

particularly when it came to my last assignment on the staff at joint force headquarters.

[00:50:00]

So General Denson comes into my office one afternoon and says, dome on down to my office. I need to talk to you, and calls me in, and no idea what it was about. He said, "well, I just wanted to let you know that you were selected by the DA Promotion Board for colonel." He said, we have to figure out how we're going to do this, because there are only so many colonel slots, and the fact that I was on an AGR tour made it even more challenging because we had three colonel position authorizations, and we had like thirty-five lieutenant colonel AGR officers that were vying for those three positions. So, we worked it out. We didn't work it out. They worked it out [laughs] to make the director of manpower and personnel for my last year, with the understanding that I would retire after a year and open up that position for someone else to be promoted, and realizing that it's about others as opposed to myself, I was happy to do that. So, I got out at the end of 2004, retired on the thirty-first of December.

I think my only regret was that was about the time the Iraq and Afghanistan really got started, and I never had the opportunity to have a combat deployment. Both of my deployments were in peacetime. But it was for, again, the betterment of the organization and to allow them to take care of other deserving soldiers to move on. So that brought my military career to an end, at least my career in uniform, and I was retired for about eighteen months—I think I had two golf seasons in—and realized that my game was not going to improve to the point that I was going to make any money on a tour. So I contemplated going back to work. I was 54, 55 at the time, and felt I still—I still heard this calling to serve, and started looking around for positions.

Colonel Legwold, meanwhile, had deployed on a six-month tour to Afghanistan. You know, you never miss the job, but you miss the people, and so we kept in touch with them, and he indicated to me that there was a strategic planning position open with the ministry of the interior in Afghanistan as a contractor, and might I be interested in that? So I applied for the job to get over to Afghanistan and serve again with Colonel Legwold, but they never filled the position. That didn't materialize. Shortly thereafter, I get a call from the contractor that said, hey, we noticed something on your resume. Would you consider coming out to the Army Force Management School at Fort Belvoir in teaching here as force management, of course?

And that was something I seriously considered. [coughs] Excuse me. So, I'm married at the time. My wife is a counselor at Madison Area Technical College, and we had talked about this job, and I didn't know a lot about it before I had a phone call with the deputy out there. I said, well, you know, if it comes out to X amount of dollars, it's probably something I would consider. And during the

course of my conversation with the deputy at the force management school, he gave me the salary, and the salary was exactly the figure that I had quoted to my spouse. And we had some follow-on discussions with my wife and came to the conclusion that it would be a good opportunity.

So, I moved out to Washington in November of 2006, found myself an apartment in Kingstowne—it's about five miles from Fort Belvoir—and went to work at the force management school.

[00:55:07]

I was lead instructor for the Army National Guard force management course, which I had four or five courses per year. They ran two weeks, and the other times, I worked other courses for them. And as it turns out, the move to Washington DC area, the national capital region, became my personal tipping point when it came to my authenticity, because for the very first time—well, let me back up a little bit. For the very first time, I could live pretty much as myself. For the entire time, weekends, days—the only time I didn't, of course, was when I was on the podium at the school. So my hair was a little long, and coming into the schoolhouse the first day, I remember the good-natured jokes that were going around about, you know, hey, tell the Deputy, Sheri's down here with her bun—not Sheri, it was my former name—with the bun in the hair and the long hair, and it was god-natured ribbing, but it was really a sign of thing to come.

So, my wife had—I'd come out to my wife—and this was not my first wife. I had been married multiple times, because living inauthentically does little for your personal relationships, and it was probably 1999 before I shared my secret with anyone. And to her credit, she was—she understood. Not sure she approved of it, but she understood, and that was important to me.

Halaska: Could you tell me a little bit more about when you came out to your wife, what prompted it and what that experience was like for you?

Swokowski: I think what prompted my coming out in 1999, that I was—I could see the end of my military career down the road in just a short number of years, and when you're on active duty, once you get to your eighteenth year, you're pretty much locked in for retirement unless something extremely drastic occurs. And so I just felt to be in a little safer place from the job perspective, and frankly, the job has been the thing that was most consistent throughout my lifetime. I had multiple marriages, you know, they came and they went, they came and they went, but the job was always there. There was a special something about the profession of being a member of the armed forces.

So, she understood, and she even attended some transgender regional conferences. They were typically held in Chicago on an annual basis. We developed friends with other couples who found themselves in the same situation she did, and she

tried to make a go of it. So you know, I'm very appreciative of that fact. In the end, it didn't work out, understand that, due to numerous things, but probably the most influencing factor is that she was—she was not lesbian, and she—she, unlike me, who was at a point in my life where I needed to start living up to my own expectations, was more concerned about other people's expectations of her. Just as a quick aside, early 2000s, one summer, we're out at a beach here out at Lake Mills or somewhere southeast of Madison, and I'm in a female bathing suit, and she's with me, and we're just enjoying the afternoon, and I asked her to put some suntan lotion on my back, to guard against getting burned, and she could not get herself to do that. And the reason she couldn't get herself to do that was because other people were around us, and they would see a woman putting suntan lotion on another woman's back, and they would automatically think that she was a lesbian.

[01:00:00]

And that kind of told me pretty much all I needed to know about where the marriage was going to go eventually, and it did. But again, give her credit. She helped me pick out my name, Sheri. We had a couple other ones, but she liked Sheri best, a sign of the generation that I grew up in, and that was great. I picked out the spelling of Sheri, which is a combination, if you break it down, and I think they—do they call it a Katmandu of female pronouns? "She" and "her," and the personal pronoun "I." So it seemed appropriate that that would be the way I would spell it and move forward from there. So while I'm in Washington DC at the force management school, my wife would come out and visit, and we would spend time together, so 2006, 2007.

After probably six, eight months in the job, I knew I had to move forward, so came home for a break in July, I think, of 2007, came out to my two brothers, my aunt. Didn't go very well with my older brother, was more concerned about how my transition would affect him and his family than what it would do for me, to the point where—and again, he's older, so it might be kind of a generational thing, but it was—when he said, well, we won't tell the kids about you, you know, I'll have to guard my grandkids against you, things like that were pretty hurtful. So haven't had a relationship with him at all over the last six or seven years. We talked for a little bit after that, but not long. Younger brother initially understood. He was an attorney, had been exposed—had lived—my older brother had never been away from home except for his two years in the Army. Still lives in the Manitowoc area. Younger brother at least had been out, been exposed to the LGBT community, went to law school in Minneapolis. He did some law-related things before law school down at New Orleans. So, he was better about it, but in the end, he moved back to being near my older brother and for whatever the reason, our relationships deteriorated when he did that.

So I haven't spoken with either of them. The younger one probably three or four years, the older one probably going seven years now. And that's unfortunate, but I

found, especially when I was back in 2007, when I was making these changes and making these decisions, I couldn't afford to have negative people around me. I needed to focus my energy on being who I was and this task of transitioning gender. And frankly, I just didn't have the energy to waste. And so, I don't regret that. You know, I'd like to think that we'd get back together sometime, but I'm not sure that'll ever happen. So I continue on my way.

2007, thinking about how am I going to do this at the force management school, and at the force management school, they're all retired Army lieutenant colonels and colonels, and been around forever, both the faculty and the staff. The staff, the director was a retired three star. So, I figured that what I wanted to do is I didn't want to work with them. I wanted to work with the contractor itself, so I went and found their HR department in Alexandria, went over and had a talk with the HR director, female director, told her what my situation was and I was going to take six weeks off for a medical procedure, and that I'd be back as Sheri. And you know, if you needed me to—glad to have my therapist and myself sit down with the staff and faculty and educate and inform folks.

[01:05:09]

And the schoolhouse response was well, we're all retired Army senior officers here. We don't need any training. When of course, like I say, they probably needed it more than anybody.

So, I come back to Wisconsin. I have some facial surgery actually done in Illinois, and after six weeks, go back to teach the class. And as I walk into the schoolhouse and go up to the director's office and reintroduce myself, he sticks out his hand, and we shake, and he says, thanks for coming back to help us with this class. And his second sentence was, we've already hired your replacement. So, I had two weeks left there. And it was a good two weeks. My co-instructor was pretty decent. He was from West Virginia, also a retired O-6, and he had, you know, the advantage of working with me day-to-day for, you know, the previous year. So he got to know me personally. Did the class, the class went fine, complimented on my dress, my attire by students, not so much by the faculty, the staff. [laughs] And after that, cleaned out of the apartment and came home.

And one of the—boy, this goes back to the Judge Kavanaugh hearing with the Dr. Ford saying, what did she remember most about her traumatic experience was the laughter of the two individuals. And when I cleared out of my apartment for the drive home, I of course was dressed, and the management folks had never seen me. I got my name changed while I was out there, so I had to explain that, but it was not a—it was a good thing. So I go in the office to give them my forwarding address, security deposit, things like that, everything, keys, and they were professional, I guess, while I was there. And as I walked out the front door, I just heard this loud, uncontrollable laughing from the people that were inside the

organization. And so, I can really relate to Dr. Ford's remembering the laughter, because that's—that was indelibly engraved on my mind as well.

So got in the car, drove back here. My wife had decided at that point, she needed to leave. She left the day before I got back, so I came home to an empty house, which was, you know, certainly different than anything I'd experienced here locally in the past and after eleven years of marriage—ten years of marriage. So started looking around for jobs. Still had a bunch of friends in Washington. We had ten or twelve of us transitioning all around the same time, wonderful support group. One of them's a Yale-educated lawyer who was the chief of appellate branch at the civil rights division at Justice for thirty years. She's just left there to go to Lambda Legal, and still in touch with those friends. So I get on the—I guess it's a USA job site, and start looking for jobs, but it's—I had one interview with a contractor, Booz Allen Hamilton, out there for a job that actually dealt with handling the Malcolm Baldrige Award Criteria, that competition for the Guard and Reserve. Didn't get it.

[01:10:00]

Suspect that was be they were uncomfortable with me being trans.

And then had a phone call with my neighbor from Alexandria. And we got to know each other really well. And she happened to work in the building or the Pentagon as a senior—not an executive, but a very senior civil servant. And we got to know each other well, not so much initially, but while I was in DC, there was a regional transgender conference in Philadelphia that I drove up to, weekend conference, drove back, pull into the parking lot on a Sunday afternoon, and as I'm getting out of my car, my neighbor, across the landing on the third floor, pulls in. And I'm thinking, okay. Well, now what? So I waited a little bit for her and let her start walking to the stairs up to the third floor. I get out, I get my suitcase out of the back, and I kind of follow her path, but I make sure she's far enough in front of me, and wait until she goes up and I hear footsteps, and I hear a door slam, and then I start going up to the same landing and open my door and walk in and close the door.

And she—I mean, you don't get to be a GS-15 in the federal government not from being smart, intellectual, and also observant. So I'm sure she knew that this person had gone into my apartment, and I just decided, again, at the same time, I'm done living up to other people's expectations. This is me, and I went over and knocked on her door, now knowing what was going to happen. And I said to her, and she had met my wife previously on one of her trips out, and I opened the conversation. I said, "Hi. I'm Sheri. I am your neighbor, and I just want you to know that if you see a female coming out of my apartment and it's not my wife, it's me." And her first words were, "Well, that's quite a transformation."

And so, after that, I took it as a very good sign. I took it as a good sign. And we had kept in touch even after I moved here to Madison, and she told me about a couple positions that she was going to be advertising and to keep an eye out for them on USA Jobs, so I did. Applied, qualified, interviewed, hired. So, I moved back to Washington in April, so I left there after the class. That would have been November, December timeframe, so three, four months later, and had developed a relationship with another transwoman who was going through the same thing I was with a divorce, and we decided to just buy a place together, and we did. And moved back in April, started at the Pentagon as an analyst for the assistant chief of staff for installation management in June of 2008.

I had my own reservations about going and working in what most people would consider a very conservative environment as a transwoman, but my experience, my two-and-a-half years there, promotion there, being identified as an exceptional performer, my experience was all positive. I was known for the job I did, the skill sets I brought to the table. And one of my duties at the Pentagon on a weekly basis was to be involved in their strategic planning process. The Army calls it their command plan. And there's a two-hour, worldwide, secure VTC done—at the time, it was every Monday afternoon, in the operations and training suite.

[01:15:11]

And there was about sixty or maybe seventy seats in there. It's theater seating, and pretty good digs.

This is the forum that was used to bring any new idea into the Army, anything that would affect the force structure, funding, facilities, you name it. And everybody wanted to be involved in that, so there was never an empty seat. And I represented our three-star at this council of colonels, it was called. If I ran late, I never had to be worried about not getting a seat, because I had one of the eight at the front table. And it was just a wonderful experience. I worked in a SCCIF, secured compartmentalized information facility, basically a vault within an office, because of the nature of information we worked with. The Pentagon, if you're dealing with classified information, you have a separate computer for that. So, it was a really nice setup. But have this supervisor to thank. The supervisor got to know me on a personal level first, knew that I was an instructor at the Army force management school, knew I was a retired colonel. Met the qualifications for the job and started there.

She was an ally, and she was an ally—the only problem we ever had really didn't turn in to be a problem, because she didn't let it, was when our security manager came in about my security clearance and was really flustered, saying we have a big problem. I don't know if we can get this person cleared, and you know, she finally just said, "John, go back and do your job and submit it." There never was any issue with me getting a security clearance at the Pentagon because of changing gender. So spent two-and-a-half years there, like I say, very rewarding,

very well-thought of. My best friends are still back in Washington. I get back there frequently for advocacy work and other things. It was a good time.

Halaska: Could you tell me about those meetings that you went to, those Monday ones? Could you tell me about any exceptional meetings where interesting information was being presented or something that you can share from that that you remember that sticks out?

Swokowski: Well, you know, the fact that it was in a secure facility speaks to the fact that I really can't talk a lot about it, but as a general example, if someone came in with a new piece of force structure, they needed to form a new aviation organization at a brigade combat team, we would look at okay, how do we do that with the assets that we have out there that aren't already dedicated to other basic combat teams? Where would we station them? Which organizations, which installations have the most availability of square footage available? How much would have to be constructed? What would the cost be for that? And my job was basically to take the installation portions back to my organization, staff it with whomever needed to be staffed with, about putting an organization on an installation, how do we best do it, what would be the price tag? And make recommendations, courses of action, to the one-star.

And then I would go in, and I would brief the one-star. It was a regular PowerPoint briefing, very formal. For the one-star, we just had readouts. For the three-star, we had the slides. But it was just this is a course of action. This is the issue. This is the course of action to solve it.

[01:20:01]

These are the pros. These are the cons. This is the price tag. So, it was all of those things, and you know, I staffed with the other directorates in the department—well, in the Army. We would cross over occasionally and have to interact with the Navy or the Air Force on joint base issues, and it was quite involved, quite detailed, and it was a great and rewarding experience.

Halaska: Also, kind of going back to—you said you came out to your wife in 1999, and then you had these group of other transwomen that you were friends within Washington, DC, and the regional conference that you went to as well, kind of in that time period. Can you tell me over the years, what you had heard about transitioning or other people that you had met who were transitioning and kind of the learning process from the early days, where there were maybe only one or two people to where you got to a point where you knew that this was what you were going to do, and you had a plan as to how you were going to do it?

Swokowski: Okay. So living authentically or transitioning, knowing that I was transgender, you know, felt I was the only one in the world like that until I was in my mid-twenties and I related the story about Renée Richards. The advent of the internet

played a big role in my expanding and information knowledge that I acquired, but also personal relationships with other people that were transgender. There used to be chat rooms, I remember, were very helpful early on. And the regional conferences also helped, because you actually got to talk to people in person and see and visit with them and learn about them. And you know, I think I shared with you earlier the first conference I went to in Chicago, I go down to the bar to get a drink, and there's a gal sitting on the barstool I'm just trying to reach in. She says, oh yeah, you know, and so I reach in to pay, and as I reach in, she noticed my military ID card, and she looked at me. She says, oh yeah, I got one of those, too. [laughs] It turns out it's another Wisconsin national guardsman from the Air National Guard in Milwaukee, and yeah.

So it's really a small world. You know, the National Transgender Discrimination Survey that the National Center of Transgender Equality did in 2011, the six thousand respondents to that indicted that a lot of them served in the military. And the Williams Institute at the UCLA Center for Law used that information to estimate that transgender people serve in the military at twice the rate of the general population. So, it really wasn't all that unusual. I've met former fighter pilots that are trans. I've met airline pilots that are trans. It runs the gamut from—we're just part of society. We are a microcosm of society. We are in every job and do everything that everybody else does. It's just we happen to be trans. Anything else you were looking for there?

So the internet opened up my avenues here for research, if you will, so I started actually doing a following the protocols and the standards of care that were out there in, I want to say, 2005, right after I retired. I had to travel to Milwaukee to the Brookfield area in order to find a counselor who specialized in transgender healthcare, did that, met with her several times, brought my wife along once, and then she referred me for hormone treatment probably later that year in 2005.

[01:25:04]

And I also had to go to Milwaukee for that. So I wasn't aware of anybody in the Madison area. I think I fairly found someone several years later at the UW Northeast Clinic here in Madison. He was a wonderful individual, always trying to learn and share information about his transgender patients, because he always had a student with him. Yeah, so the internet did a lot for me to open up the possibilities both personally for social interaction and professionally, if you will, for following the protocols, identifying what the protocols were, timelines, you know, things like that associated with physically transitioning to the opposite gender.

Halaska: And then can you tell me about when you moved to Washington, DC, and how you connected with other people there?

Swokowski: Yes. When I moved there in 2006, one of the things I needed to do was a fair amount of electrolysis to get rid of my beard, and I found an electrologist in Alexandria, who had a fair number of transgender clients and started seeing her for an hour or two every weekend. And she was kind of the catalyst for interacting with other transgender people. My attorney friend from DOJ [Department of Justice] used to do dinner parties, and my electrologist, she went to my electrologist as well. So, my electrologist recommended that she invite me to one of her dinner parties. So, she did, and of course, it just—there's a multiplying effect, and like I said, we ended up with ten or twelve of us that were transitioning all at the same time and in various stages of transition. So, the common spot where a lot of the communication got done was in our electrologist's office while we're going through some painful hair removal. [laughs]

Halaska: All right. And then can you also tell me about what some of the trans issues were being discussed at the regional conference at the time?

Swokowski: Well, the regional conferences were very helpful. In addition to the social aspect of it and getting to know other trans people from the area or elsewhere across the country, the transgender regional conferences also had seminars. They had therapists. They had probably two or three or maybe even four different surgeons come in and talk about what procedures they offered, and you know, trying to build up their clientele. There were formal dinners. There were social opportunities to go out on the town. There were, you know, opportunities to go out and buy clothes. There were photography opportunities, to have your picture taken as your true self, which plays a very important part in, I think, your—at least early on for transgender women that want to see themselves in the mirror as opposed to somebody else.

So the regional conferences were very informative. They were always professionally done. Like I say, there were opportunities to add to your wardrobe or your jewelry, and just a social setting, you know? I can't tell you how helpful they were to me. The only downside to that is sometimes people that wanted to date transgender individuals would find out about the conferences, because they were typically held in hotels, and they would come around and try and be social with you, and you just—you know, it wasn't—we weren't interested in dating.

[01:30:10]

At least I and most of my friends were there for other reasons.

Halaska: All right. I think we left off—come back to the timeline. You said you worked at the Pentagon for two years?

Swokowski: Two-and-a-half.

Halaska: Two-and-a-half years, okay. Is there anything else that you would like to describe about that experience working at the Pentagon, or we kind of move on? What was going [unintelligible]

Swokowski: Well, the ironic part about working at the Pentagon is that I could never work there as my authentic self while in uniform, but I certainly could work there as a civilian authentically, and you know, it just goes to the falsehood about the capability of transgender individuals. If we can contribute to the national defense as civilians, we can sure just as well contribute to it in uniform. I'm going to go to the bathroom. Need to take a little break.

[End of OH2135.Swokowski_file2_access.mp3]
[Beginning of OH2135.Swokowski_file3_access.mp3]

[00:00:00]

Halaska: All right. This is the third file for the interview with Sheri Swokowski. The date is October 19, 2018, and we just ended talking about your time at the Pentagon, and it was about 2008, so if you could tell me a little bit more about what was happening then.

Swokowski: Yeah. So 2008, at the Pentagon, as a senior analyst for the assistant chief of staff for installation management, also involved in a relationship with another transwoman, and we had—this individual had spent in excess of ten years in Washington and had been longing to get back to her roots in Colorado. So we decided a change of scenery would be a good thing. She was hired in May of 2008 for a position in the IT sector with the US Forest Service in Denver, and I was hired just in August of 2008 as the human resource officer for the Rocky Mountain region of the US Forest Service in Denver. We moved across the country on the end of September of 2008 and started our new jobs on site in Colorado in October of 2008.

I had my interview, my final interview, in late July or early August of 2008, and it was at the regional office in Denver. The human resource director, it was set up that the headquarters was in Albuquerque along with that regional headquarters, but there were regional offices—there were ten altogether—around the country. And so the boss that looked at my evaluations was in Albuquerque, but the people I work for, the people on the ground, the people I serviced, my HR team services, were in about a five-state area, South Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, and New Mexico. So, the final interview I had for the job during the summer of 2008 was in the Denver office, and it was about four people from the Denver office and my boss from Albuquerque. And it went very well, got a call a couple weeks later with the offer, and we moved to Colorado.

The US Forest Service, just two years prior, had consolidated all of their HR operations in Albuquerque. They pulled all of the human resource personnel from

the regions and found out that that wasn't working so well. I'm sure it was a main effort to consolidate, streamline, increase efficiency, and cut costs. I think the verdict is still out on those things. And so, they decided to backtrack a little bit and put a handful of HR functions back in the field in all ten regions. So, I was the last HR manager hired, in Denver, of the ten. We got kind of a late start, but we made a drastic improvement in a short period of time. My employees, I only had I think three of my team in the office with me. The rest of them were scattered in the states, and Albuquerque had a few of them there at the HR directorate.

And it was kind of an eyeopener for me. The headquarters department in the Army, my previous employer at the Pentagon, had been ranked in the top ten places to work by the annual federal employees survey time and again. When I got to the Forest Service, they were on the opposite end of the spectrum, and it was apparent to me very early on a lot of the reasons why.

[00:05:00]

Much room for improvement. I think we made some headway by—I actually had three different locations, three different teams, or sub-teams, in my HR team, that we would put several employees together on a forest for coverage, but most all of our work was done remotely.

I did have the opportunity, thanks to the organization, to bring all of my team members together for a one-week session in Denver, whereby was—kind of what I had done many years ago as a strategic planner was conducting transition workshops when you had new leadership come into organizations. We had developed a mission statement for our team. We had identified organizational issues, and we had identified how to proceed with the top three organization issues that were affecting us in order to make them better and solve the problems. So it was a very good transition workshop, if you will. The folks in the Forest Service had never seen or heard of anything like it before, and we got off to a great start.

And for the most part, things went well, but there were some issues. One of the things that bothered me early on, the first year, was that money was so tight, there was no travel money available, so I had people on the force that I had met only once, employees that is, and was prohibited, basically, from going out and seeing them. And that's not the way I like to run things, to supervise anybody. So I developed a really good relationship with the deputy regional forester woman that had my back more than once, and she was kind enough to transfer some of the region's funding, so that I could send our people to training in Albuquerque. And my boss, being in Albuquerque, thought that was fine, but she needed to make sure that I understood there was no money for them to fund it on the HR side. She said, got it? Region is funding this, and we're all set. People are making reservations for travel and lodging.

So, my supervisor in Albuquerque was relatively new as well. I think she worked for the Air Force as a civilian in Alaska. And one of the things she did over this issue of funding was to—I felt questioned my integrity, because she was leaving before the training session was going to take place that I was going to have people at, and she put out an email to me, to the people that were doing the training, indicating that if my people showed up and they weren't being funded by the region, that they were to turn around and go home immediately. So, we got off to kind of a rough start, because called her on that. She indicated that wasn't her intent at all, but when you put it out in writing, it's kind of hard to deny your intent.

So, I went job hunting. I said, if this is going to be the way this is, it's not going to be a very good relationship, so this was six months into my job. End up applying for a job with NOAA, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency, Administration. They were about twenty miles north of us in Boulder, and they were looking for a national pay manager.

[00:10:05]

They flew me out to Washington, had an interview, called the next day with the job offer, and then I had to go back and make a decision. And as much as I disliked my boss, who was in Albuquerque and her questioning my integrity, I liked the boss that I worked with day-to-day in Denver. It was a promotion for me and would have put me in a better place financially and maybe otherwise, but I hadn't felt—one of the things you learn in the military is loyalty, and I felt that my work wasn't done in Denver, regardless of the circumstances, probably figured that the person in Albuquerque I'd only see occasionally, and I turned the promotion down to stay with the folks in Denver.

I think that's maybe the only time I turned a promotion down, but there was more work to do, and I felt good about it at the time. In retrospect, it may have been a mistake, but we don't allow ourselves to go there about what might have been. So, I spent three years with the folks in Denver, and as I expected, things got worse. Just different a different culture. Most of the individuals understood what I was trying to do and were supportive, but I had two or three people, all of who resided in Albuquerque, that took issue with just about everything that I wanted to do as far as improving the team services and what have you. So after three years, I said goodbye and decided to retire the second time, hoping that this time, it would work. And five years later, it has. So, I returned to Madison to be near my two kids and my now five grandchildren and returned to the home that I built with my wife here twenty years ago, 1997.

Halaska: Can you tell me about what you've done since returning to Wisconsin and a little bit about your advocacy work?

Swokowski: My initial plan, when I transitioned back in 2007, was to blend into the woodwork, like so many of my transgender brothers and sisters had done. However, that all changed when I was fired at the Army's Force Management School for no legitimate reason. And since that time, I have done advocacy work, even while working in Washington and Denver and certainly much more now so, on the behalf of other transgender people that are out there. To me, my mission is about making it easier for those who follow. While in Washington, I'd been up on the Hill and taken part in many lobby days that were sponsored by the National Center for Transgender Equality. I started working with then Representative Tammy Baldwin. After I was fired, she was interested in my story of discrimination and read my story and name into the congressional record that this was discriminatory.

And several years later, visiting her—I think her Senate office, so it would have been four or five years later at least—she reminded me of our early visits, and Tammy said to me, Sheri, do you remember when we worked together on transgender discrimination, and you came and visited my office.

[00:15:00]

You know, she said, at that time, there were only a handful of the 435 representatives who had met a transgender constituent. She says, now, thanks to organization like the National Center of Transgender Equality and their efforts, all 435 have been visited and most of them more than once. So that's a sign of progress. It's about opening hearts and minds. And the best way to do that is to meet people face to face.

So, I've continued down that road. I've continued to go back to the Pentagon for their Pride celebration that they have each June. I continue to support the National Center for Transgender Equality, and at their annual awards and fundraiser in 2014, I asked my best friend in DC, who's still working for the assistant chief of staff for installation management, to attend with me. He's a single gay man, has an ex-wife and two daughters who recently graduated from college, but he and I just hit it off very well. He's a retired lieutenant colonel, and I took him along to the NCTE [National Center for Transgender Equality] event. And that fact that we'd known each other for six years, and he knows much of my history, he was just dumbfounded by what he observed and what he heard about the discrimination that's ongoing against transgender individuals and some of the heroes that are working to right those wrongs.

In fact, he was so enthused about it, the next morning at work—he was the deputy division chief at the time—the next morning at work, he goes in and shares his experience at the NCTE event with the division chief, and the division chief, a friend of mine, co-worker—he was not the division chief when I was at the Pentagon, but I had worked with him on other issues during my tenure there, and

he—my best friend—discussed the night before, and of course, in the sequence of that, outed me to him, which was fine because I'm fairly public about who I am, even at that time, and the division chief was very interested in my background, my story, everything about it. And he had my friend call me—I was still in town—and said, hey, can you stop over and do an office visit with Armer [??] this afternoon? And I said, sure.

So I got to meet and greet Armer again and talk about old times when I was working there, but the reason he called me in or asked me to come in was because he was the chairperson of the Army Board for Correction of Military Records, so the Army Board for Correction of Military Records' job is to adjust records, including the record of service, which is commonly referred to as a DD-214, in cases where the information is inaccurate or there is a case of injustice going on. And Armer said, Sheri, I'd like you to consider getting your DD-214 corrected. And we discussed that a little bit. He had the packet, everything all set for me there, told me how to go about it, and guided me through the online instructions. And what I took away from that was how supportive he was and the backstory behind that.

[00:20:00]

Armer is a retired military officer, and when he was a young second lieutenant at Fort Riley, Kansas, he was out with some of his fellow platoon leaders and went into a bar to have a drink or two and unwind and talk about their experiences, I'm sure, from the previous week. And Armer was the last in-line. The doorman checked IDs, everybody else goes in, and he holds Armer up. The doorman holds Armer up with his ID and gave it special scrutiny and kept asking him about it and holding it up to the light to determine if it's fake and talking to Armer. Yeah, I'm just a second lieutenant. I want to have a couple beers with my buds, and this went on for more than five minutes. And Armer came to the realization that this individual was holding him up from entering because he was able to observe that he had a little Native American heritage in him. And so Armer had a—it may not have been the only time, but it was a time that he expressed the discrimination that he endured as a young army officer, and he was interested in helping me get my DD-214 corrected.

So that was in May of 2014. I submitted the packet when I got home that same month. And I've been fortunate to be able to winter in a warm climate since I retired the second time, and on my drive to Southern California, that winter, I'm somewhere in New Mexico or Arizona, and I hear that two Army individuals, for the first time, the Army had changed a DD-214 for two transgender veterans, and they were both out of New Jersey and were represented by the ACLU. The board had recommended no relief, that they do not change the DD-214, but they were overridden by the civilian in charge at Department of Defense. And so that was an historic moment. So, I had to pull over and call my best friend at the Pentagon and share that with him.

So I get to Southern California, and about six weeks later, I get a letter from the Army Board for Correction of Military Records, saying that they had granted me full relief based on the injustices I'm experiencing and to look for a new DD-214 within ninety days. And so, April, I receive a new DD-214 that reads, Sheri A. Swokowski, Colonel Army Infantry, and I want to make two points about that. The first one is that I'm eligible to be buried in Arlington National Cemetery, and I've made known to my kids that that's what I want done when the time comes. I have always been concerned about what name would be on the tombstone, because every piece of paper that the Army had had a different first name. And now that I have an official DD-214, a corrected DD-214, that's one less issue I'll have to pass on to my kids and will make me feel much better about my eternal resting place. So significantly personal to me.

[00:25:00]

On the other side of it, a little more distance is the fact that they're recognizing me as an infantry officer. This is 2015, and the Army doesn't have any female Infantry officers, and oh, I just happen to be going back for Pride in June, so I spent some time on Interstate 94 here, running up to Highway 21 and over to Fort McCoy that spring, to get a new Army service uniform, and of course, Infantry brass collars, to wear to Pride. And that occurred. I didn't have quite the uniform together, but I had all but the shoulder cord, the blue infantry shoulder cord, and wore that to Pentagon Pride in 2015. I think the speaker that year was Ashton Carter, the Secretary of Defense, and I had been in touch with his chief of staff, Eric Fanning, who is a gay male, but—not but—and was chosen as Secretary Carter's chief of staff because of his capabilities. Eric had been a senior executive in the Navy.

I think he was the undersecretary of the Navy. He had been the senior executive in the Air Force as the undersecretary of the Air Force, and the acting secretary of the Air Force for six or eight months before they got Secretary Deborah James confirmed. And I had an opportunity to meet him in person then and have met with him several times since, in uniform. The first probably three or four years, the Pentagon Pride event was in the auditorium, which happens to be in the basement of the Pentagon, and in 2015 or maybe it was 2016, we actually moved the event to the courtyard outside. At that time, that actually coincided with Secretary Fanning being selected as the secretary of the Army, 2016 and until the administration changed in 2017.

So, I use the little bit of a platform I have as a senior out trans veteran in the country to advocate for others, and I always go back and put two asterisks with me being the senior out individual. And the first asterisk is that I'm aware of at least one general and one admiral who have transitioned after they retired, although they elect to remain private. And as far as being the senior out trans veteran in the country as a colonel, it's usually by date of rank. I'm older than

most of the other ones, so I have date of rank, I should, but there are at least five, if not six of us, that I'm aware of right now that follow the same path as I did when I retired. So, it's always a pleasure to go and speak at installations during Pride month. I've been from NAVAIR in Pax River, Maryland, to the West Coast and Coronado Island at the Navy's Pride event and spots in between.

This past year, I've had the pleasure of speaking to 600 members, including Secretary Fanning and his fiancé at the American Military Partners' annual awards and gala at the Washington Hilton in May, and I continue to work locally, regionally, statewide, nationally, and I guess you can say internationally, because my story has been published in both France and Germany.

[00:30:26]

It became a particular interest after President Trump's tweets in August of last year, in August of 2017, about attempting to ban transgender military members from serving in the armed forces. He followed that up the following month with a directive to Secretary Mattis to implement it. You may know that it's been challenged in four federal courts, and all eight decisions that have come down have been in favor of transgender military service and against the Department of Justice attorneys who represent the administration in trying to ban transgender individuals from serving.

That's certainly good news. We're not resting on our laurels because all the cases are still ongoing, and we don't take anything for granted. It's made it particularly troublesome for those people on active duty, many that I keep in touch with through an organization called SPART*A that I belong to. We are making progress. All four service chiefs—five, I guess, if you count the Coast Guard—have made public statements and have testified before Congress under oath, and they are not aware of any issues caused by transgender service members. The two issues that were cited by President Trump were the cost and the cohesion/deployment availability of transgender service members. The cost estimated by the RAND Corporation as commissioned by Secretary Carter established a range of $2.4 million to $8.4 million for transgender healthcare on an annual basis.

When I speak, I address that by pointing to two transgender individuals, both in the Army. One is an Army-trained physician with fifteen years of service. She just left Walter Reed and is now at Fort Bragg. And the other individual is a TAC helicopter pilot with, I think by this time, nineteen years in service, and who just redeployed from Korea to Fort Carson. So, if you look at the amount we have invested in both of those individuals, an Army-trained physician with fifteen years of service and a TAC helicopter pilot and combat infantry badge holder, we've already crossed the $2.4 million threshold for healthcare costs. The average transgender service member, as of 2017, has eight years of service and two or more deployments. Getting back to the second issue cited by President Trump, as

far as deployability and readiness and unit cohesion, we currently have transgender service members deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Korea, aboard Navy surface ships and on their submarines. So, I think it should be pretty evident that we are deployable, just like anybody else.

There's a big question about surgeries. In fact, July of 2017, Representative Vicky Hartzler of Missouri authored an amendment to withdraw transgender healthcare from those transgender service members currently serving and to withdraw transgender healthcare from the kids, the transgender kids, of currently serving service members.

[00:35:19]

She did not withdraw that, like she had withdrawn an earlier amendment, but that forced Secretary Mattis to get on the phone and call twenty to thirty Republican representatives and get them to change their vote. The final vote voted that amendment down 213 to 208 or 209. And that has ties to me right there in Wisconsin, although not in my district, but every Wisconsin Republican representative, minus the Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, who did not vote, voted to take medical care away from transgender service members. And that to me is unforgivable.

So, we are deployable. I can tell you from firsthand experience, surgery for trans people is like surgery for anybody else. Repairing an arm, a shoulder, a knee, it's not different. I had a surgery while I was working at the Pentagon. I was off for all of six weeks. Granted, it's an administrative job I had, but there was also a heck of a lot of walking. If you've ever been in the Pentagon, you know that. So, the courts have found that the attempt to reinstate the ban is nothing more than blatant discrimination. We continue to fight. As I said, we don't take anything for granted. In December of 2017, I, along with four or five other transgender currently serving folks and retirees spent the day, again, on Capitol Hill, offering testimony to the House Armed Service Committee staffers and the Senate Armed Service Committee staffers the same afternoon. We were well-received by both parties, and the conference rooms were pretty much packed, listening to our stories.

After completing that, it was later in the afternoon, it was about three o'clock in the afternoon, we made a couple office calls, went over and saw Senator Baldwin and brought a currently serving Air Force lieutenant colonel aeronautical engineer, rocket scientist if you will, along with me, and spent fifteen minutes with the senator, who knows my story all too well, so I let the rocket scientist talk. And the senator advised me that they had three votes scheduled for that afternoon. She knew I was on my way to see Senator Johnson, who I've made attempts over—I've made at least eight attempts, have been in his offices in both Washington, DC, and Milwaukee, six to eight times over the last, well, last six years, and have never met the man. Senator Baldwin indicated with the three

votes that they were going to be having on the floor yet that afternoon that I might be told that he's down on the floor.

I'm not sure Senator Baldwin was aware, but three months before, although I didn't get to meet Senator Johnson, I got to spend an hour with him at breakfast here in Madison at the Jet Room on the airport property, and telling him a little bit about my story, but more importantly, sharing with him pictures and descriptions and qualifications of ten or twelve transgender people currently in uniform [Unclear, she might be talking about meeting Senator Johnson's chief of staff, Tony]. So, I was first transgender person that Tony ever met, and in December, when I went over to Senator Johnson's office, it was filled with people, and there were people standing in the hallway. I went in with a couple other transgender persons. We had an Iraq veteran, a brigade combat commander with us, and let them know that we were there.

[00:40:01]

We went back out in the hallway, and Tony comes out and gets us within minutes, leads us through the outer office, and before we get into the conference room, he says, "Sheri, Senator is down on the floor. We've got three votes this afternoon." And I just asked him, well, maybe we can go down and meet the senator off the floor.

So, as we entered the conference room, he asked one of the staffers to contact Senator Johnson on the floor. We go in. Tony knows my story as well, so I let the rocket scientist and the retired Army brigade combat commander share their story. Tony happens to be a retired lieutenant colonel, so he's outranked by two of us in the room, and you know, it boils down to people being people, talked about places they've been at different times, different people that they knew, and talked about families and kids, and all of it. To make a long story short, the staffer comes in, the Senator will see you off the floor. We go down, take the train over to the Capitol. Senator Johnson comes off the floor, Tony introduces him to me after six years, and Senator Johnson, although he did not use the word transgender, said to the three of us and Tony that he believes anybody who's willing and able to serve and can meet the standards should be allowed to serve.

So, I think we got a commitment from him. I thought I had a commitment from him a number of years ago in a written correspondence about the Employment Nondiscrimination Act, where he said he doesn't support discrimination in any form, and a week later, went and voted against the Employment Nondiscrimination Act, for business interests, shall we say, but I felt better about his comment this time, because he also added to that, when it comes to military issues, he relies on two people. One is John McCain and one is his chief of staff, so I think we're on pretty solid ground with his commitment. And I occasionally see his tweets online, and I have not heard him make a public statement of support

or use the word transgender, but when I see his tweets online, I remind him of the commitment he made to us on December 6, 2017.

Halaska: Okay. Is there anything else that you'd like to add about your current advocacy?

Swokowski: Oh gosh. You know, there really isn't. I'm continuing to do advocacy every opportunity I can. I have a conflict now that I'm a PhD student, because of the time required for studying, but I've been to Kansas City twice this year. I've been to Washington. I spent three out of five weeks in Washington, DC, in May and June. Again, Pentagon Pride and some other events, the National Center of Transgender Equality. You know, I do need to say that the Affordable Care Act has protections for transgender healthcare in it, and they are there because of the efforts of another Wisconsinite by the name of Andrew Cray. Andy is a trans man, who started living authentic earlier in life, during college. Went out to Washington to work for, among other things, the National Center for Trans Equality, the Center of American Progress, etc. And fell in love with Sarah McBride, a trans woman from Delaware. The two were married in 2014, and unfortunately, I met Sarah for the first time at Andy's funeral. He died of cancer in August of 2014, four days after they were married.

[00:45:04]

But his legacy is the trans healthcare that is solidified in the Affordable Care Act and will affect tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people throughout eternity, because it guarantees transgender healthcare as part of the national ACA [Affordable Care Act] or Obamacare. And that's particularly important. We're still struggling with getting surgeries for transgender service members. You know, because I'm in a different position now as a retiree, I can bring the forces of Congress, so to speak, Senator Baldwin, Senator Gillibrand to bear, and frankly, that's what it's taken in two cases. People need to get past the stereotypes. They need to understand that it's a medical condition deserving of treatment, including surgeries, just like, you know, open heart surgery or someone who suffers from a chronic disease like diabetes.

And I think those points were most recently solidified and attested to, here in Wisconsin, by the two transgender women who work at the University of Wisconsin that were denied trans healthcare by the insurance board. It was not covered. It was covered for the January of 2017, and after this administration came into office, the insurance board reversed that decision, and last week's decision by a federal court to award those two women in excess of $750,000 because the state of Wisconsin discriminated against them and refused to pay for their healthcare. It's a Scott Walker, Brad Schimel type thing. And are they convinced that it's going to be easier to pay $25,000 to cover a surgery instead of hundreds of thousands of dollars to be found in damages, if you will, court ruling against them? I'd like to think that it's more than a financial decision for this state administration, but I'm not convinced of it yet.

Halaska: All right. Is there anything else that you would like people who are listening to this interview to know, either about your advocacy or your military experience and how you felt about it?

Swokowski: You know, what I'd like people most to understand is that transgender people are just that. We're people. We are doctors and lawyers and pilots and professional soldiers and government officials. You know, I consider myself lucky, because I am the exception. You know, any time I speak, I own my privilege, because I happen to be white. I have a roof over my head and food in the refrigerator and kids and grandkids that love me. And because of being a success professionally, I've had the resources to align my body with my gender, and I have healthcare, but most transgender people don't have those things. They have few of them if any. And there's no reason. Every transgender person should be treated equally. We are human. We are moms and dads, brothers and sister, parents and grandparents, and neighbors. And I'll leave it there.

Halaska: All right. Well, thank you very much, Sheri.

[End of OH2135.Swokowski_file3_access.mp3]

[End of interview]