Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

RACHELLE M. HALASKA

Medic, U.S. Army, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn

2018

OH
2132

OH
2132

Halaska, Rachelle M. (1988–), Oral History Interview, 2018.
Approximate length: 4 hours, 56 mins.
Contact WVM Research Center for access to the original recording.

Summary:

In this oral history interview, Rachelle Halaska discusses her service as a medic in the United States Army, C Company, 27th Brigade Support Battalion, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division from August 2007 to August 2011. Her service included two tours in Iraq, participating in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn. During her first deployment in Iraq, she also was attached to the 1/9th Cavalry Squadron and at another time to the mechanic unit B Company, 27th Brigade Support Battalion, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division.

Halaska notes that she and author Kurt Vonnegut share a birthday. She grew up in Hartland, Wisconsin. Her father managed a Sherwin-Williams paint store and her mother was a therapist and director of programs at a psychiatric hospital. Rachelle recalls a culture of strong military recruiting in 2006 and 2007 and decided to join the Army in her senior year at Arrowhead High School, a college preparatory school. Despite a family connection to the Navy, the Army was the only branch of the service she desired to join when she was eighteen years old. She mentions a "pre-program" prior to entering the Army that made her a private before she formally got in.

Halaska left for basic training in August 2007. It was her first time away from home. She trained at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and recounts scenes of screaming sergeants and walking dotted lines between points. She signed up to be 68W, a medic. Men and women of differing ages and marital status were integrated in the training that lasted nine weeks. She speaks of recruit training, the firing range, and getting "smoked," supportive drill sergeants, the gas chamber, and ammo duty. Halaska knew that she would be deployed to Iraq.

For advanced individual training, Halaska went to combat medic school at Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas. Women were still not allowed to serve in combat roles, so she was designated a health care specialist. As a private, she states she received sixteen weeks of good medic training. Halaska spent eight hours a day in the classroom and describes in detail the various areas of training and hands-on medic experience. Graduation came only after successfully passing trauma lane testing.

Halaska arrived in June 2008 at Fort Hood, Texas, assigned to 4th Infantry Division that was in process of being reflagged. This resulted in the 4th Brigade Combat Team being reassigned to the 1st Cavalry Division. Halaska was immediately aware that she would be deploying. She describes her unit as being cohesive as they had trained together and had good morale. Now a private first class, she spent two months at Fort Hood, her first duty station.

Halaska deployed with C Company, the medical company of 27th Brigade Support Battalion

(BSB) on a year-on/year-off rotation. The entire brigade was going to southern Iraq. She spent one month in Kuwait. Halaska explains why females were attached and not assigned. Females could not be assigned to a combat unit at that time.

In Iraq, attached to 1/9th Cavalry Squadron Halaska worked at the burn clinic at Convoy Support Center Scania where they treated many locals. Although a personally sad time, and suffering from insomnia, she describes the work as fulfilling. She treated children as well as adults. After two months she was sent southeast, along with the unit to build a new base near the Iranian border. She states that the calm of an area in Iraq is dependent upon the good favor of the local sheik. After a leave at home, Halaska and her entire unit moved to Tallil Air Force Base. The 27th BSB remained at Tallil to run the aid station and Halaska rotated out with her platoon to Forward Operating Base (FOB) Hunter, an eighteen-hour convoy trip. She recalls her reception as a female among the Iraqi populace, her relationship with her fellow male soldiers, and shares her impressions of the Iraqi people and land.

Halaska describes her time at FOB Hunter. Temperatures soared to 140 degrees and sand flies swarmed. After water, air-conditioning was the most critical necessity. The fear of being without her M4 carbine was ever-present in her dreams. Typical issues that soldiers were treated for included skin infections, foot issues, and dehydration. She speaks of hearts-and-minds missions setting up clinics in towns. Rocket and mortar attacks sometimes disturbed the base's calm. She accounts her base very lucky that none of its soldiers were ever injured. She recalls guard, latrine, and garbage duties. Medics also were on construction detail. Halaska was at one point assigned to a mechanic company. She was not performing the duties of a medic but did meet her next girlfriend who worked in Bravo Company's office. The story of Phoenix, the dog who befriended her unit and elevated the mood of the guard shift, highlights Halaska's love of animals. She remembers the excitement of a night Chinook flight over Iraq. Halaska also had the opportunity to visit the ancient city of Ur near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and get a tour of the Great Ziggurat of Ur near Nasiriyah.

Upon returning to the United States, Halaska went to Fort Hood. She had a hard time getting used to the presence of so many people around at all times after a year of contact exclusively with military personnel. Bright lights and strong scents brought on stress. She notes that she saw more guns at off-base parties and heard of fatal shooting accidents. Working sick call at the troop medical clinic, taking classes at a community college, and maintaining vehicles, filled her day. She states she did not try to pursue sergeant rank, knowing she would be leaving service after four years. She was at Fort Hood on November 5, 2009, when a soldier killed thirteen in-processing soldiers. Halaska talks of what she was doing on the post at the time: the uncertainty, their response, the resulting lockdown. She was also present for President Obama's visit to the post soon after. She reports on the marathons she ran, the office work performed for her company, and her enjoyment setting up radios. With her second deployment looming, she went to Fort Polk, Louisiana, for brigade-level field exercises. Helicopters, sunrises, wild horses, and Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) heavy vehicles populate her narrative. Resuming medical training, Halaska comments on the valuable goat lab as a means of learning to apply treatments and stop bleeding.

Halaska's second tour of Iraq, now Operation New Dawn instead of Operation Iraqi Freedom

started in September 2010. She states that the situation in Iraq had substantially slowed down. Her unit, B Company, 27th Brigade Support Battalion, 4th Brigade Combat Team**,** did not have a combat mission but rather training and assisting Iraqi police and army personnel. At Camp Marez/Camp Diamondback Halaska had her own room. The camp was near Mosul, Iraq. She states that mortar fire was less, but still a concern. She speaks of the interaction with the Kurdish population in the northern part of Iraq. Not setting up clinics on this tour, her platoon instead went out on logistics missions in the MRAP ambulances. Halaska was due to be discharged from the Army in August 2011. Halaska explains roll-over training safety practices in an MRAP vehicle and conveys a sense of what it was like to be riding in an MRAP ambulance.

On November 29, 2010, Halaska was in a MRAP that rolled multiple times. Although she had her harness on, her helmet came off and she suffered a concussion, as well as other injuries. Halaska covers the trauma she endured and her hospitalization and convalescence. She worked out in the gym but suffered from frequent headaches and started having panic attacks. She mentions an incident of an Iraqi Army recruit who was revealed as a terrorist when he killed former 1/9th Cavalry comrades and underscores how she was still in an active war zone. She found parts of Iraq to be beautiful and the people fantastic, causing some regret in leaving.

After eight months, Halaska returned to the United States for out-processing. While being driven from the airport by family, the height of a Texas highway overpass, the sensation of speed, and light sensitivity induced a panic attack. Halaska returned to Fort Hood and was removed from all jobs except guarding an empty motor pool. She knew she wanted to use the GI Bill to go to school.

After discharge, Halaska returned to Wisconsin and continued her education. She worked at a family practice clinic and completed pre-nursing classes. She obtained a bachelor's degree in 2015 and a master’s degree in anthropology with a certificate in museum studies from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2019.

Halaska praises the Veterans Administration’s programs for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Halaska is grateful for the treatment for anxiety she received from the VA hospitals both in Milwaukee and Madison. At the time of this interview, she was working on her master’s degree and worked part-time at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum as the oral history program assistant in Madison, Wisconsin.

Biographical Sketch:

Rachelle Halaska was raised in Hartland, Wisconsin. She served in the United States Army, C Company, 27th Brigade Support Battalion, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division from August 2007 to August 2011 as a medic. Her Army service included two tours in Iraq. During her first deployment in Iraq she also was attached to the 1/9th Cavalry Squadron and at another time to the mechanic unit B Company, 27th Brigade Support Battalion, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry.

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 Ellen Bowers Healey, 2018.
Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2019.
Reviewed by Kate Rowell, 2020.
Abstract written by Jeff Javid, 2020.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH2132.Halaska_file1_access.mp3]

Healey: All right, I've started the tape. Today is September 21, 2018 and this is an interview with Rachelle M. Halaska who served in the Army, 4th Cavalry Division, 4th BCT [brigade combat team], 27th BSB [brigade support battalion], C Company, from August 2007 to August 2011. And she served in Iraq. This interview is being conducted in Madison, Wisconsin. I am Ellen Healey. I am the interviewer and this is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Program. There are no other people present today. All right, we talked just briefly before got online. Why don't you go ahead and say your name and the name that you go by?

Halaska: All right. My legal name is Rachelle Margaret Halaska and most of the time I just go by Rachel.

Healey: And Rachel, where did you grow up?

Halaska: I grew up—so I was born in Milwaukee, November 11, 1988. Born in Milwaukee and then we lived there until I was about five. And then my parents and my brother and I moved to Hartland, Wisconsin because the school systems were better. And then so—

Healey: And did you have siblings?

Halaska: Yes. I had one younger brother named Harrison. He is three years younger than me. And so I grew up in Hartland and around—let me think. I have family in the area as well so my grandparents lived like a few blocks away from us and then my aunts and uncles lived there too as well, on my mom's side. So basically my mom's entire family lived in the area. And so I grew up there and I went to Arrowhead High School.

Healey: And that's located where?

Halaska: Hartland. All very close in Hartland, Wisconsin which is part of the Lake Country area.

Healey: And I noticed you were born on November 11?

Halaska: Yes.

Healey: When did you kind of realize the significance of that date, if ever?

Halaska: Not until I think after I joined. More so before that I just knew it was Kurt Vonnegut's birthday. He's a writer. [Laughs] But then, yeah, I got it kind of afterwards. So now Veteran's Day is kind of a double whammy for me.

Healey: So you had a high school education, graduated from high school. And what were your parents doing in Hartland, Wisconsin? Were they employed or?

Halaska: Yes. So my—let me see. My dad, he worked at a few different—kind of—he worked at a few different like paint stores and that kind of stuff. Sherwin Williams and a few other places managing stores. And then my mom, she worked as a therapist. And then she worked for Rogers Memorial Hospital in the area, which is a psychiatric hospital in Oconomowoc. They have two branches. Anyway, but she—so she worked as a therapist there and then kind of moved up and ended up directing a few programs there as well. So that's what they were doing around that time. When I was about sixteen they split up and then I just stayed living with my mom and my dad moved over to Waukesha.

Healey: What did you do right after high school?

Halaska: Pretty much directly after—I graduated in 2007 and directly—I decided my senior year in high school that I was going to join the military.

Healey: What got you interested in the military?

Halaska: I didn't—so Arrowhead High School is a—basically like a college prep school. They track basically most of their students to go to college. And yeah, so but I wasn't a focused student at the time. I enjoyed school.

[00:05:00]

And I like took AP biology and like got there and did that and a few other AP classes which are basically for college credit, but mostly because I was interested in them but I wasn't necessarily sure what I wanted to do yet. And I—so at that point I had a few friends and some of them were going to UW [University of Wisconsin] Madison, they'd gotten in. A few of my other friends were going other places, but I just wasn't sure what I wanted to do yet and I felt like I needed to do something though.

Healey: How did you find out about the military?

Halaska: There were posters around. It was—they were recruiting pretty hard in 2006 and 2007.

Healey: Did they come into the high school?

Halaska: They came into the high school. There—I was, I think, one of the—so the classes at Arrowhead were pretty large. I think there were about 600 students in my class, my graduating class. And there were very few that joined the military at the time. But yeah, so there was one there and I did pick up some information from them and go out and talk to them a little bit more. And it was pretty much the Army from the get-go.

Healey: Why is that?

Halaska: I'm not sure. It just kind of had the feel that I was—that I wanted. Everyone else—I don't know. Just like looking at the Air Force I was just like eh, they look a little bit too uptight. It wasn't—which is not the—but you know, I was seventeen years old, I didn't know. It was just like the Army looks like it'll be a good place for me, so—

Healey: Did you have someone in your family history who served in the military?

Halaska: My grandpa was in the Navy and that did not interest me at all. I did not want to be on a

boat for any extended period of time. That seemed like it would be incredibly boring. I liked the idea of getting out and going places. I kind of had a—I wanted to get out and travel and see things and get out of Hartland, I think.

Healey: So did you actually sign up when you were in high school or not?

Halaska: I can't remember exactly if I did. As soon as I was eighteen I did. So yeah, that would have been—I was in my last year of high school. I was going to sign up a little bit before that when I was seventeen, but I could not get parental permission to do that. My mom was supportive. She said, "I will support you in what you want to do." My dad said he would not sign it. So.

Healey: And you turned eighteen when?

Halaska: November. And then I signed up. And there was a pre-program to get—so you wouldn't go in as an E fuzzy. You would get your first little—get your private basically before you went in. Or so you would come in a little bit higher. And before that—so you had to do basically pass a PT [physical training] test before and do a few other things. I can't remember exactly.

Healey: Tell me about that, passing a PFT test. Did you have a recruiter that took you out?

Halaska: Yeah, we went out and did running. We ran. I remember running down the street in Waukesha and doing pushups and sit-ups and that kind of stuff. And just—which I was fine with. I was a pretty active kid. I was in—I've been playing soccer since I was about five so I did that and then I played—I did softball, I did field hockey and then I was in cross-country. So I stopped playing field hockey after one season because I was really afraid of the ball and it was just this hard little nugget and I had had my fingers smooshed between the sticks a few times and I just like hurt so bad. It's like I'll go to cross-country and just run for hours instead.

Healey: So when did you actually go to basic training?

Halaska: So basic training, I left in August 2007. And I remember getting dropped off at the hotel area where they—

[00:10:00]

So we stayed in a hotel for a night and then we were shipped down to Missouri to Fort Leonard Wood. And I remember getting dropped off and just being in a hotel room and just being like excited but also so sad. Because like leaving my mom—

Healey: And you were eighteen or seventeen?

Halaska: I was eighteen.

Healey: You were eighteen by then.

Halaska: Yes, I was eighteen by then. But it was still like my first time leaving home. And then getting herded on the bus with a bunch of other new recruits and going down to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

Healey: And tell me about your experience at Fort Leonard Wood.

Halaska: All right. So getting to Fort Leonard Wood I just remember getting off the bus and having—you know, like having all your bags thrown and having the drill sergeants come on the bus and it's all kind of scary. And then my most memorable things about like that first—we were still in in-processing at that time. So was like before basic training. So this was we're still like in our gray. They didn't even give us real uniforms yet. We were just kind of like in the gray PT things. And that night we were just in this large bay and it was just me and probably about forty or fifty other women in this large bay on the bunk buds which are just skinny and tiny. And as soon as the lights went out you could just hear people starting to cry all around the bay. Because everyone, I think, was just emotional. It's your first night, everyone's yelling at you, you have no idea what's going on because no one tells you. They're just like, "Stay in line, be here." And I do remember one time I was walking—so I just remember being in lines a lot. They had us walking in lines and on dotted lines to and from places. And going in the opposite direction of me was the one other kid from my school who joined the military. His name was Dieter. And I'm just like, "Hey." And he was going to MP [military police] school. He signed up as an MP. I signed up as a medic so 68 Whiskey.

Healey: How long did you stay at Fort Leonard Wood?

Halaska: Let me see. That was—so we had the pre-week and then basic training was nine weeks long. So I got to—I remember getting to the company and we were in barracks—they're older barracks of course because everything is kind of old—and just being in the middle of nowhere. Also, one guy tried to run away during induction week. He just ran off into the woods and then like three days later he came back because he got lost because it's just a whole bunch of woods around there and nothing else.

Healey: Now, was your training, you mentioned being in a barracks with all women. Was your training integrating men and women?

Halaska: It was, yes. It was integrated men and women, but we had separate bays. So we had—so it was one building and I think there were three floors total. And between—basically it was split in two right down the middle. So there were doors in the middle that were alarmed. So we had alarmed doors here and alarmed doors at the other side. So they would be alarmed each night so no one got out and so there wasn't any shenanigans. But the alarms were finicky or people were terrible, but I think they were also finicky and I think they also just had them go off randomly because they went off quite often and we would all have to get out and get into formation in the middle of the night and they would have to check to make sure everyone was there and then they would yell at us for the alarm going off because someone's trying to get out or trying to get into the male and female barracks. Yeah, so that was—

Healey: What were the hours like during training?

Halaska: Oh, they were—it was up—well, we had to be up with the flag in the morning for PT. Get up, do PT. Which I thought was fun and easy. I was fine with it. I wasn't—some of the ab workouts—so having to—

[00:15:00]

Doing the bicycles or doing leg lifts or staying in the prone position for very, very long periods of time were difficult, but PT in general was pretty good. It was getting—why is that word escaping me right now? Smoked. There we are. It was getting smoked that was bad. That when they were like, "You did this wrong" and then they make you sit in the front leaning rest or do pushups for a few minutes straight or something like that. The PT was pretty good. So we would do that in the morning and then we would go to breakfast which I always loved because I loved food. And I was fine with cafeteria food. And then they would have us—you always wanted to be at the front of the line in that situation because front of the line you had slightly more time to eat. If you were at the back of the line you had about like a minute and a half to eat all your food. And so it was just like shoveling as much as you could in as possible. And that was actually the first time that I ever ate biscuits and gravy. And I know that the Army's biscuits and gravy are not the best because I've had more since then, but I was just like what is this magic? I was pretty excited about it.

And then after that it would be time for training which I just remember never knowing what was going on. Like just that feeling of just being like all right, we're going to go do something, but I don't know what it is we are going to do. They just told me to have these things ready and that's all I need to know. And then just like being of the mindset that you just need to have what you need ready and be ready to go. And that's kind of a new thing to get used to if you're used to trying to plan things and like know what's going on. So it was something to get used to. And I think me going in as a younger person was helpful in that regard just because like I was used to just going with the flow as other people made plans. I think it would be much harder now to just be like—anyway.

Healey: In your training group what was the age kind of spread? Was eighteen the norm or not?

Halaska: There were some other eighteen-year-olds or younger people, but there were also a good number of like people in their mid-twenties. There were a few people in their mid to late thirties and just a smattering of people in their forties. Yeah, so and then—

Healey: What was the attrition rate? Nine weeks. How many did you start with, how many did you end with?

Halaska: It was actually pretty good. We didn't have that many people drop out. I think our drill sergeants were good actually at having—I mean some people did get hurt and they had to get recycled back in. Like if you have stress fractures or if you have things like that or are put on medical hold. There was one woman who was on medical hold. She was on medical hold, I can't remember what for, but she was from the last cycle so she already knew everything that was going on. And so she was kind of our go-to person who we're just like, "What's happening?" So the first few weeks were just a lot of just getting us used to military life and then after that we started doing things like going out to the ranges or other things like that, doing weapons training and things like that. The weapons that we had in basic training I had an M—

Healey: Before we get into the weapons let me just follow up on attrition a little bit. If people wanted to get out was it easy for them to get out or not?

Halaska: Well, there was one guy who was trying to—they strongly discouraged it. They—I think they knew that some people would kind of freak out in those first few weeks and so they

emphasize that we signed a contract and that we need to do this and everything like that. You find out later that you can get out. I had one friend who did. She got through basic training just fine.

[00:20:00]

And then once we got to AIT [advanced individual training] she was just like, "I miss my daughter a lot. This isn't for me. I just want to go home." And she just went and talked to them and they were like, "Okay." But I think it's because it was after that. We had one guy who he said he wanted to get out, I think, but they said no. And then so he decided he wasn't going to do anything anymore. So we had to carry him everywhere.

Healey: [inaudible]?

Halaska: Yeah. And so they kind of added the peer pressure into it as well because then you are not just—it's not just you, it's your buddies. It's everyone else in the group who is now very upset that you are an extra weight on them. So kind of that group—we're a group mentality as well.

Healey: What was the motto of the Army at that time? Do you remember?

Halaska: Oh, I cannot remember.

Healey: Was it an Army of one or had they gone beyond that or hadn't gotten to that?

Halaska: I think it may have been an Army of one at the time. So yeah, we had that. But there were a lot of—let me think. It wasn't—a lot of people just kind of got through it. It wasn't—the drill sergeants were pretty good at—you know, they would be hard on us, but then they would also help people through as well. They were also supportive.

Healey: You mentioned you had quite an age group span and in your last comments someone missed their child. How many folks would you say came in with families in the group that you were in, in basic training? Either a spouse or children.

Halaska: I can't remember, but I think it was—there were a lot? I'm not exactly sure. It was not necessarily significant either way that people were single or people were—had families. Does that make sense?

Healey: Okay.

Halaska: So it was just kind of like, "Oh, you have a family," "Oh, you're single," oh. It wasn't—there were a lot of people who had fiancés or hopeful, very hopeful. I had a girlfriend at the time who was at home and we were trying to stick it out at that point in time. So there was that. But and I think that was true for a lot of people, a lot of the younger folks as well, that they may have had someone back home that they were trying to keep things together with as well, but not necessarily married.

Healey: And then you mentioned going to the range.

Halaska: Yes.

Healey: What was your experience there?

Halaska: All right, going to the range.

Healey: Had you ever fired a weapon before?

Halaska: I had not. That was—so I was good at PT, very good at PT, no problems there, but firing weapons was, I was just like well, I hope I get through this. Because we had to qualify and make a certain number of shots in an area with our weapons and I had never done that before. The equipment, I remember, was a little bit big. I'm kind of a short small person so the equipment was kind of big. Like the helmet, I just remember when I was laying down in the prone position going to shoot, I just remember my helmet going forward and into my face a little bit and kind of getting in the way of the glasses and just being overall uncomfortable. I—even though it was a less steady position I liked the kneeling position a little bit better because it was easier to see things. And I had the M16 at the time. That was our main weapon, which is pretty big. I remember having bruises on the back of my legs from—because we had to wear it slung. Bruises on the back of my legs from where it tapped against me when I was walking or running around somewhere. But it was still kind of—it was fun to learn. I didn't know anything about weapons so when they were like, "We have to zero the weapons" I'm like what does that mean? But I figured it out. During that time also—so I did not like getting smoked and I did not like getting yelled at and all those things.

[00:25:00]

So the thing that I figured out in basic training was that if you volunteer for details you get away from the group and anyone who might—and the attention of the drill sergeants because the drill sergeants, if they just see a bunch of people sitting around they'll pick something out that they're doing and smoke the bunch.

So and make them do pushups or something. There's just a higher chance. So but if you're on a detail you have to get up earlier, you have to go somewhere and do extra work, but there is a less likely chance that you are going to get smoked basically. You get left alone. So I volunteered for ammo detail quite a few times which is you just have to get up in the morning and you just have to go load magazines for a few hours. And which is—it gets hard on your thumbs, I guess, but it wasn't bad. It was mostly—it was blanks, a lot of blanks and a lot of that kind of stuff, but also like we loaded real stuff too for some ranges. Because a lot of it was just getting people to be safe with their weapons as well because if you have over a hundred people who've never really used weapons before and you're going to a live range you want to make sure that everyone is doing everything perfectly and safely. So learning how to clear your weapons. So drop the magazine, pull the thing back, look in the chamber, make sure everything's out and everything like that, and then going to the clearing barrels and doing all that was emphasized. And also learning experience. So there was always that anxiety like did I do it right, did I do it right? Okay, I did. good. Good to go.

Healey: Did you fire with any other weapons other than the M16?

Halaska: Yes. We—I can't remember. We did the fifty cal. I got to fire the fifty cal. That was really, really fun. That was—it—and the—so it has—it was mounted and—or not mounted. It was on a little tripod. Basically just had to stand in line and then we went up

and we got to sit there and it was just [firing sound] and it was just really big and very happy. It was really good. And then there were two smaller machine guns, the—I can't remember. I think one was the Bravo—I can't remember exactly the names. There was a smaller one and a bigger one. And I enjoyed the bigger one. That was really fun too. We didn't qualify with those. It was just you get to fire these. And then we got to throw a grenade which was terrifying. I was happy to never have to really touch those again.

Healey: Why did you find that terrifying?

Halaska: I don't really—even at that point in time I didn't really like explody things, but it's like I know what I'm doing, I know what I'm doing, all right, do the thing, do the thing, and do it. But yeah, it was still just—it didn't feel as controlled as the other weapons. Yeah, so, but and I think we did have one person who didn't quite throw it right and it like went really close to where they were. And I mean they were behind everything, but the drill sergeant was still very unhappy with them. Yeah, so, and then we did have to do—let's see—the gas chamber as well. So in that you have to—it's to make sure that you know how to put on your mask, your NBC mask, and doing NBC training. And so you have to put it on, you have to do the thing, and then you have to be like, "I'm good." And then they make you take it off so that you know basically what it feels like. And then they—it's just terrible. It just gets in your eyes and you can't really breathe and everything hurts and then everything just starts running and then they open the door and let you out and then there's someone on—you know that there's someone outside who's just filming it for the—because they made a video for us of our training, which was pretty cool, but we're all just running out just like, "Ugh" and flapping our arms. I don't know why they told us to flap our arms. I think because it was funny.

Healey: While you were in basic, all the way through basic, did you know that you were going to be a medic?

Halaska: Yes. Yeah, it was in my contract. I knew that I was going to Fort Sam Houston next.

[00:30:00]

And there were a lot of medics, potential—yeah, there were a lot of medics in my training as well. I think there were—there was—the majority of people in my training were NBC truck drivers and medics. There were a lot of medics.

Healey: And those were the women or men?

Halaska: Yeah. Both.

Healey: Did the infantry training go there too or not?

Halaska: I don't think so. I don't think many of the men were infantry. I think they sent them to whatever place it was that they were going to do all of their infantry training. I think this was mostly people who were going into some other specialty.

Healey: Did you make some good friends in basic training?

Halaska: I made a few friends. Let me think. So my friend who was later in my AIT training and then dropped out, she's actually—I've kept in contact with her just over social media

kind of the most. And then, I don't know, I was just friendly with people, but they kind of just cycle you through and then you get kind of split up afterwards so much that it's kind of hard to stay in contact with people. So yeah, but I will say during that time I did have very good drill sergeants. So let me think. One of my main drill sergeants was Drill Sergeant Shot and he was fun. So one of my fun memories of him is that he—so he was an, I think, air assault kind of guy, one of those specialties where people are not afraid of heights. So I just remember him sitting atop—we had to do an obstacle course and one of the main ones—one of the end parts of one of them was that we had to climb up—so you have to walk across a log that's about fifteen, twenty feet up in the air, so you have to walk across that with nothing on. Walk across that and then after that you have to climb up an additional fifteen to twenty feet on—it's just wooden—it's not rungs really, just boards, and they're kind of far apart so a short person is kind of reaching a little bit. Like I had to tiptoe to reach from one to one and he was all the way at the top. There was just another log at the top that you had to climb over to get to the cargo net on the other side to climb down. And he's just sitting at the top like kicking his legs and just being like, "You scared, you scared?" Like mocking you and like having a—and he's fine. He doesn't care. And then as I got to the top he's like, "Oh, are you scared or something, Halaska?" I'm just like, "Yes, Drill Sergeant, I'm terrified" and he's like, "You're doing fine." And I just like climbed over and went down and then there was another drill sergeant at some point that shook it as you were climbing down and just like, "Ahh."

Healey: And all this without a harness on?

Halaska: Yeah. So and I'm kind of afraid of heights so, but I'm just like well, you don't have a choice in doing this and just don't show that you're afraid and walk across and just do it, it'll be fine. Don't think about it too hard. Yeah, so that was fun though. Like it felt good to do it, which I think a lot of it kind of is. The thing where you break you down and then build you back up again, they have that pretty well down at that point in time. So he was good. We had a few other—the thing about my drill sergeants at the time is that a few of them, I think, had just been through some really not nice deployments and they—a lot of them were pretty—they were pretty hard on us, but they wanted to impress on us that this is real, like what we are getting trained for, like we will be going to Iraq and what we are training for is like not a game. And like they—a few of them, they—because you know how it's—you're supposed to—the drill sergeants, like we know that they're going to mind mess with us a bit and that they're going to yell and scream at us and that kind of stuff. But there were a few times that they—a few of them kind of lost it a bit and it wasn't a—like it wasn't an act and you could tell. And it was like oh, there are probably some PTSD issues here that are happening because people just got back and they're seeing these people who aren't taking this seriously.

[00:35:00]

Which it was good to see, but it also—it didn't quite dawn on me, I guess, still like how serious things were.

Healey: While you were in basic did you anticipate that you would be going to Iraq or?

Halaska: Probably, yeah. There was—I was hoping that I wasn't, but there was also just kind of the—yeah. I also kind of thought that it would probably be something that would happen during my four years.

Healey: So when did you graduate from basic?

Halaska: All right, so I graduated—let me see, then nine weeks after that so about three months, September, October, November, around the end of November. And then we got—so it was just starting to get pretty cold in Missouri and then we were shipped down to San Antonio.

Healey: Before you go to San Antonio, did—your graduation, did you have anyone come to your graduation?

Halaska: Oh, yeah. My family came, my mom and my dad. My grandparents, I think, came. Yes, they did. And then my girlfriend came, which was nice. And then my—like another one of my friends came too. So yeah, it was nice to see everyone, but it was also—it was such a short period of time because it was only a day that it was also weird to see everyone for just a short time, but it was nice as well.

Healey: Did you have leave after that or not?

Halaska: No.

Healey: Went straight to Fort Sam Houston?

Halaska: Yes.

Healey: And it was for medic school?

Halaska: Yes, combat medic. And one of—I remember one guy when we got there it was like San Antonio, home of the combat medic, and he was like, "What?" He was like, "I wanted to go work in a hospital. What's this combat medic stuff?" Because at the time they were calling it a health care specialist which was the name that they called so women could do it. Because at the time women still could not serve in combat roles. They could not be signed up in combat MOSs [military occupational specialty] was the legal thing for it. And they could not be assigned to combat units either at the time. So but we'll get into that a little bit later.

Healey: Sure. Go ahead and tell me more about your combat medic training.

Halaska: Combat medic training, all right. So combat medic training was—Fort Sam Houston was nice. It was right next to San Antonio and it was in the wintertime so it was beautiful. There was kind of that Texas breeze that happens sometimes that's pretty cold, that desert cold that I wasn't used to, but it was still nice. Anyway, so we did—the first thing that we did while we were there was we needed to get our EMT. Yeah, so we did civilian side certification. So we got our EMT basic knocked out in a few weeks. And that was just kind of doing the basics of emergency medical treatment. And we kind of like joked around that time, it's like the answer to everything is give oxygen and transport because as an EMT basic we couldn't really do much else besides that. It's like oh, so we're ambulance drivers. That is what this role is. And that was fun. It was classroom eight hours a day. I just remember being really, really tired in the classrooms because it was just warm and you were in there for so long and just sitting and it was just the same thing over and over again.

Healey: Did they have you PT or—

Halaska: Oh, yeah, we PTed in the morning, every morning. And so we did that and then we did our schooling, walked over to the schoolhouse, then we got food, and then we were kind of like released at night to do our own thing. And we had a lot more free time than we did in basic. Basic we didn't really have any. Like we had some free time, but not much. I think Sundays were the only time that we got time for ourselves. And most of that was cleaning. Learned how to shine floors and that kind of stuff. And there was less of that at Fort Sam Houston.

[00:40:00]

They gave us more time to study or do what we wanted. And then eventually we get—we got privileges. So we could go—like after a few weeks we could go out and about into the city and wear our civilian clothes and that kind of stuff which was fun.

Healey: What did you do for transportation to San Antonio?

Halaska: Cabs. Which were expensive. And so we'd pack in a bunch of people. And I was young at the time so I couldn't—a lot of people went out drinking and that kind of thing so I couldn't necessarily do that. But there were parties to attend on occasion which was probably a terrible idea, but I was young and out of the house and very excited. So but training—

Healey: What did you think about the pay?

Halaska: The pay? Oh, the pay was great. I loved getting money.

Healey: You'd not really had a job before that?

Halaska: No, I had been working. Let me see. I worked at Cousin's Subs in Hartland since I was fifteen. And I had worked there all the way up until I was—until I went into the Army. Like a few weeks off and then—yeah. But yeah, it was substantially more money than I had gotten before working part-time. So that was very nice. I enjoyed being able to go out and buy clothing and food and actually—yeah. So have money for things.

Healey: What was your pay grade at that time? Were you E2, E1?

Halaska: E2. Yes, I believe I was an E2. That's—yeah, I think I got E3 when I got to the unit. So I was an E2 at the time so it wasn't a huge amount, but it was still pretty good for an eighteen-year-old. And then I did get a bonus which I got after training, but we'll get into that at that point. Because they were recruiting at that time. But anyway, going back to training, so yeah, we did PT in the morning, chow halls were fine. And lots and lots of classroom work just to get people kind of brought up to speed on the anatomy and physiology of things which was—I was fine with that because actually I had taken—in high school I had taken an anatomy and physiology class and I had taken AP bio and I had taken a medical terminology class as well. And so I was just like eh, piece of cake. I was pretty happy about that. I'm like all right, the book stuff I'm good at. The hands-on stuff was all brand new to me and so we had a lot of practicals to do. So doing—just doing our CPR and those as well. And then so after we did the EMT basic we moved over to doing our whiskey training, as they called it, because it was 68 Whiskey. So that

was our medic training. And our medic training concentrated primarily on trauma. So stopping bleeding. Like the long and short of it was stopping bleeding and keeping people breathing. So we learned how to do needle chest decompressions. So if someone got shot in the chest or had shrapnel in the chest and their plural cavities were filling with either blood or air you basically needed to relieve some of that so the lungs could expand and they could get oxygen.

So we learned how to—where is the good place to shove large needles basically into the chest cavity in order to relieve that. And then we learned how to use different blood stopping technologies, I guess. So tourniquets. We were basically given tourniquets at the time—in basic and told that this is going to be your best friend, you need to carry tourniquets at all time. The CAT tourniquet specifically. So these were made to go over arms or legs and they—you could—there was a Velcro aspect of them so you could crank them down that way and then there was a twist on it that you would twist and then lock into place so that you could constrict as much as possible. And then there was also some clotting agents that we were using at the time.

[00:45:00]

What was the one that we were—there was a—there was one that used shellfish and I think that may have came later. QuikClot I think was what we were using. And it was a powder that you would—and this is for wounds where you can't necessarily get to it with a tourniquet. So if—and the reason that they came out with this, that we were told, is because Blackhawk Down situations. I'm not sure if you're familiar with that, but they had—so in Somalia they had someone who was hit in the upper leg, upper thigh area, and basically they could not stop that bleeding with a tourniquet or anything like that. Like they tried to clamp off the major femoral artery that was busted, but they could not. So what this stuff is made to do is you don't need to—it just clots, clots over. And then I think some of it also burns a bit as well, but it stops the bleeding very, very well. And so it's for areas where it might be difficult to do a tourniquet but you really need to stop the bleeding.

So that was what we were told there and then also just—so how to use all of your equipment. Oh, how to give IVs as well. So yeah, IV fluids is another thing because if you have someone who is losing blood you need to give them fluids in order to help their circulatory system. And so giving IVs under very stressful conditions. So doing it initially, so having no medical experience how to find a vein in the first place which on some people is very easy and some people it's very difficult. So we were trained on how to do all these things and those were the major ones that I remember. But also, like how to use our radios, how to call a medevac, how to just trauma assessment in general. So you get to a patient what's the first thing you do? All these things. And then we had to do trauma lanes in order to pass and become medics. So let me think. We had to—and the trauma lanes were hard. I got—the first one that I did, I did everything perfectly except in when calling for a medevac I said papa instead of pahpah and I got failed for it. And I was so angry, but also it was like I don't think anyone passed that drill instructor's lane that day. She was really hard on everyone, so. And then the second one I did something silly because I was stressed out because I didn't pass the first one and so I had to do a third one. And these were spread out slightly so it wasn't all on the same day. But these were—they were theatrical a bit.

So they—it was in a room and they had a stereo playing like music and gunshots and

explosions and that kind of stuff and you were in this little cube that was set up with a dummy with certain wounds on it that you had to treat. Oh, burns as well. So what do you do with a burned airway. Like what do you—we had to learn how to do emergency trachs. So cutting into the throat and putting in a tube so people can breathe if their airway up here is obstructed. Up in their face. I'm sorry, I made a motion. So let's see, yeah, we had all that training. And I passed my last one, that was good. But okay, as I was saying they not only had all of that but then they had—it was kind of—the area was dressed up like a room or a combat zone or something like that. They did a very good job of making it feel very stressful. And then you had, yeah, a drill sergeant who was yelling at you, just being like, "Are you sure you want to do?" and questioning you and everything like that.

[00:50:00]

So it was difficult. They wanted their medics to be good which—and not everyone passed.

Healey: I was going to ask, what was the attrit rate?

Halaska: I can't remember exactly what it was but there were—we did have a few people who dropped out and did something else.

Healey: How many soldiers went through that training with you?

Halaska: There were a lot. I cannot remember exactly. Sorry, I should have found that before the interview. There were a couple hundred in our company and there were, you know, people coming through every week. There were—or every few weeks.

Healey: And again, how long was your medic training?

Halaska: Sixteen weeks. That was longer. So it was a long time at San Antonio doing this kind of training. I think it was split too. So like kind of our introductory stuff was eight weeks and the other stuff was eight weeks. Yes, so there was that. And it was a very nice feeling to pass everything. And then so it was almost a year after I joined that—so we were going—it was in the spring, then we got our orders to where we were going. And of course they gave us like—they were like, "Fill out your wish list of places that you want to go," and it was like I would love to go to Germany or Japan or Italy or, you know, anywhere nice. That would be awesome. No. I got Fort Hood.

Healey: That was your first duty station?

Halaska: That was my first duty station. Fort Hood, Texas. So it was a short drive from where I was.

Healey: Did you have a vehicle?

Halaska: I did not have a vehicle at the time. I went—what did I do? I—they bussed us, I believe.

Healey: Did you take leave after medic school, combat medic school?

Halaska: Yes. Yeah, I got some leave after that. I went home for a little while, visited people. So

that was good. And then I also—I made a few good friends. One of my friends, William, he was—he's a good guy. He was also a medic. Very good medic, very good EMT, knows his stuff. I think he's still in. I think he's over at Fort Benning right now, but he also got Fort Hood as well. We didn't get the same unit though. I think he was in a medical brigade so like a hospital unit and I was attached to or assigned to—it was 4th ID on my orders, but they were just getting reflagged to First Cav.

Healey: And ID stands for what?

Halaska: Infantry division. And so then I was in—so that was originally what the unit was, but they were getting reflagged or reassigned to First Cavalry Division.

Healey: When did you arrive at Fort Hood?

Halaska: I got there in June. No. I can't remember. It wasn't quite—no, it was in June because we would have been gone. It was sometime in late spring.

Healey: Of 2008?

Halaska: Yes, 2008. Yeah, late spring 2008. And I got there and immediately upon getting there they were like, "Hey, we're deploying."

Healey: Okay, were you happy about that?

Halaska: So I was like oh, okay, well, I guess we're doing this now. I was kind of bummed because I was missing my mom's wedding. She was getting married to her person, Mr. Bill, and I'd been planning on going to their wedding and being there and then it was like oh. It's like no, we're leaving and we will be gone by the time your wedding happens so—

Healey: How much time between the time you reported in and you deployed?

Halaska: I think like a month and a half, two months, not even. It was really fast. But that's—they needed people in their unit. Like that's—they needed people in their unit to deploy which was, yeah.

Healey: How much workup time did you have with their unit, with the unit that you deployed with?

[00:55:00]

Halaska: Not very much. We pretty much got there, I sort of got to know a few people. We didn't—they had already done all of their training together. They had done all of their field exercises, they had been out to do the big ones like in Louisiana and those places and then I got more leave to go home right before. So it wasn't—I sort of knew people in the unit. I met a few—I had a corporal who kind of took me in a little bit. She was really good and there were a few really nice people that I got to know. Like they were very welcoming. It was a good unit. They had good morale and I think a lot of them had been on previous deployment together as well. So they had good group cohesion.

Healey: And where were you deploying to?

Halaska: We were deploying to southern Iraq. I can't remember exactly what the assignment was.

Healey: And you say quite a few people in that unit had already been to Iraq?

Halaska: They were basically on a year on/year off deployment. That unit was on a year on/year off deployment at that time.

Healey: And was that your expected duration, one year in Iraq?

Halaska: Yeah. So they had had their deployment, their previous deployment, come back for a year, and now they were going again.

Healey: Something I didn't ask you about is communication, whether it be in basic training or in your follow-on training. Did you have cell phones, were you allowed to use cell phones?

Halaska: I had a cell phone. I got a cell phone later on in my AIT training, but before that we could write letters home and there were pay phones which—

Healey: AIT stands for what?

Halaska: Advanced individual training. When I was at Sam Houston.

Healey: So you were letter writing and using telephones?

Halaska: Yes, using their pay phones. So and in basic training. And letter writing was fun. I was okay with that.

Healey: Did people show up with cell phones for basic training?

Halaska: Yes.

Healey: What happened to the cell phones?

Halaska: They were confiscated. Same with the cigarettes and whatever else they had. We had a few locker shakedowns in basic training where the drill sergeants came through and they opened up your lockers, dumped everything out, and went through all your stuff looking for contraband, and they found some. That usually happened in the middle of the night when we already didn't get a lot of sleep. It was another thing that was meant to break us. I think that—

Healey: So no cigarettes allowed at all during basic?

Halaska: No, nothing. Or dip, smokeless tobacco or anything like that, and especially not alcohol. But people did try to get lots of things in. Any unapproved of medication or recreational medication was also not allowed, but people—

Healey: If any of that was found what happened to the individual?

Halaska: Article 15 probably. Maybe for something they might get kicked out. If it's something like cigarettes I don't think—maybe it was an Article 15 but we did have some people in

my unit, my unit that was deploying—so they did urinalysis tests on us quite frequently for drugs and we did have a few people who tested positive before we left, like four, I think, or more?

Healey: Four out of how many?

Halaska: It was probably, I would say, sixty to eighty people in our company. So not like a huge amount, but also significant. And they lost rank and pay, but they weren't kicked out or anything like that. It was just kind of a don't do that again.

Healey: When you deployed how many did—to Iraq what was the size of the unit that you deployed with?

Halaska: The—it was—so I was—I was in—okay, I was in Charlie Company which was the medical company of the 27th Brigade Support Battalion which was the support battalion for the entire brigade.

[01:00:00]

So our entire brigade was going, I think. Yeah. I am not exactly sure how many there were. I was just like trying to get my footing at the time [laughs] and figure out what was all going on.

Healey: How did you get from Fort Sam Houston to Iraq?

Halaska: Or from Fort Hood to Iraq.

Healey: From Fort Hood, excuse me.

Halaska: We went on a bus to the airport and then from the—and all the families were there at the buses to say goodbye to us and everyone was crying. My—did my—my family did not come down. I told them not to because I'm like, "I will see you on leave and don't come down for this because it'll be too sad." But yeah, so we did that and then we took a commercial flight to, I can't remember if it was Ireland or Germany. We went first to Maine and then commercial flight to Maine and then from there we went across the pond over to Europe to either Germany or Ireland. I can't remember because on those flights I've been to both of them. I think it was Ireland. So the Shannon Airport. And then from there we went to Kuwait and that was all on a commercial flight with all of us in there. very full but also not uncomfortable. And then I was in Kuwait after that. So we—they give you—they send you to Kuwait to acclimate to the weather in the region because it is hot and it is dry and even if you're in Texas you're still—the heat can be very jarring. So we were there just kind of being familiarized with everything and waiting for all of our things to arrive before we moved into—all of our equipment to arrive before we went into Iraq.

We—that was the other thing. Everything—by the time I got there everything was already packed and ready to go basically. All the CONEXes were already shipped, all the vehicles were already shipped, everything was gone so I didn't get to experience the joys of that until next deployment, but anyway.

Healey: Okay.

Halaska: So we got there and then it wasn't long after we were there that I was attached to another unit. So I was attached to One-Nine Scout. Yeah, One-Nine Scout Squadron. I forget kind of what all the names are. So this is an example of a female soldier not being able to be assigned to a combat unit but being able to be attached to one. Because there are other support units in the area that have female soldiers so they needed female medics and they also female medics just in case they encountered female civilians in Iraq because you can—they don't like men touching Iraqi women at all. Like you can't touch them or talk to them so you need women soldiers to do pat-downs of other women and you need women to talk to other women and treat other women there as well. So it kind of—the sexual divisions in Iraq kind of necessitated women soldiers in a lot more roles, I think, but also because there was just such a need for people there and the mission was always changing. The Army needed to be more flexible with where women went anyway. I had a friend in the unit who was telling me she was a radiology tech.

[01:05:00]

And she got—her last deployment she got put on a team kicking in doors in Baghdad because that was just where they needed her. So yeah, so anyway.

Healey: So did you get assigned to the scout squadron when you were in Kuwait or when you moved—

Halaska: Yes, I did. So I got assigned—and they were coming after us. So my unit left and it was me and three other women. So there was Sergeant Davis who was awesome and then my roommate was Cash, that was her last name and then, oh, gosh. I'm still friends with her on Facebook, why isn't her name coming to me? Anyway—Cross, there we are. Vanessa Cross. So those were the—so it was myself and those three women and we were assigned to the One-Nine. And their medical company or platoon. It was a platoon, yeah, because it was smaller. So we got assigned there. And so our unit left and then we were waiting in Kuwait for longer. So I was in Kuwait for about a month total when normally people were there for about two weeks. So it was a very long time to be in a—it's a very boring place if you can't go anywhere. Like I'm sure if you can go off base and go to the cities and see things that would be really cool, but we were just in the middle of the desert. It was incredibly flat, it was very, very windy. We had a few dust storms so you just had to walk around with everything covered. You had to wear your goggles, you had to wear stuff over your face, you had to—you didn't necessarily have to wear gloves but the sand just stung everything and then it would get all in your weapon as well. So I was carrying the M4 for this deployment which is like a smaller version of the M16. It has a collapsible butt stock but it's still an assault rifle so it's—which I liked because the M16 was very large and this you can basically shrink it down and make it smaller which was awesome.

Healey: What was the base in Kuwait like? Was it a buildup, were you in tents?

Halaska: It was built up. Well, it was built up but we were in tents, large, large tents that were very well air conditioned. There was a gym and there was places that you could go. They had the McDonald's and the Burger King or whatever. And then they had the phone, like the place where you could go for phone and internet to talk to people at home and you had to use the phone cards. I remember doing that a lot. I was still with my girlfriend at the time so contacting her, seeing how she was doing, and also just like getting—you know,

because it's a lonely jarring time just trying to connect with home. But also I think working out and doing that kind of stuff. But then we got with the One-Nine and then we went—we were going to—the place where we were stationed was CSS Scania and it was basically a truck stop. It was a place where people could refuel and it was nice and it was built up and it was secure and everyone got their own—it was called a CHU [compartmentalized housing unit] which is compartmentalized housing. So we got there by Air Force flight.

Healey: And you said SS Scandia?

Halaska: Scania. S-C-A-N-I-A, Scania.

Healey: And that was a base or no?

Halaska: It was not—it was small. It was, like I said, like a truck stop. It was tiny, but it was nice.

Healey: Located in which country?

Halaska: Iraq. So that was—we flew there. I think we had to—so we flew into Baghdad.

[01:10:00]

And then we had to take—because it was such a small base, they did not have a runway. We had to get there by Chinook which is the two-propeller helicopter which approaching those—they have really—they have powerful engines I think on the back or something. Approaching them you just—from the back because that's where the gate is down—you just get this like blast of just hot air at your face.

Healey: Had you ever been in a helicopter before?

Halaska: No. So that was fun. Yeah, that was really cool. And they're just so loud. Like it sounds like chainsaws going. So we had that. And then we got to Scania and then I was on night shift medic. I was on the night shift team with the medics. So there was a day shift and a night shift and we had to run the medical center, team C. We had to run that. That was ours. We had—so we had medics, we had a few physicians' assistants and then we had I think one doc. So like one MD with us as well. He was an internal medicine guy who—he was a cool guy. He was an internal medicine guy so I think he was actually—and he was used to practicing in the United States a little bit before he joined the military so he didn't have—there are some times when it's—like he would send a patient somewhere because he's like, "Well, we can't rule out this really rare thing so we need to send this soldier to this place to get tested because we don't have that test here" and some of the physicians assistants who were used to practicing in the military were just kind of like, "That's—we're in kind of a different setting. You need to readjust how you are practicing because we can't just be like losing soldiers like this basically for something that it probably isn't." But anyway.

So we had that and it wasn't long after we got there that my girlfriend and I broke up which was very sad for me. So I was still eighteen, or nineteen, no. I was nineteen now. And so working night shift which we had a few really good friends there, but that was—it was a sad troubling time. But what I did, because I was having trouble sleeping just because I was upset, so there was a burn clinic at this little truck stop. This was kind of

like its specialty. There was a burn clinic that was set up for Iraqi civilians and it was run by our unit as well. So we had to basically staff a few people on it. And it was all set up and ready to go and there was—it was a very good thing to have because—so I would work at night and then I would go there during the day because I couldn't sleep. But also, because it was really fulfilling to do—to treat—we were treating mostly children. There is a—they use propane tanks a lot for their heating and food and other things so we—sometimes they explode or sometimes there's just accidents in the kitchen or sometimes we would also see child abuse as well where kids would come in with burnt feet or they would come in with burn marks on their bottom, like small children as well. And that was upsetting for some people because the parents would bring them in and we were like oh, you did this to your kid and now we're treating them and you're just right here. But you want them to keep coming back because you want the child to actually get treated.

So we did mostly debriding of burn wounds. And we had everything from children and some adults with first degree burns all the way to very severe third degree burn cases.

[01:15:00]

And our job was when they brought people in we would have basically our sterile saline and we would have some of our bandages and our little tweezers and we would go through and remove all of the skin around the wound basically and on the wound that was kind of like—it was to keep it kind of fresh so that it could heal better. And then so we would debride and then rebandage. So usually they were coming in every few days and we were offering this treatment free to them. So they could go to the hospital, and a lot of them also went to the hospital for treatment, but then we would also treat them. So they don't necessarily have insurance the same way that we do. They have to like pay per service for a lot of their medical care. So one thing that's interesting about that is that we used something called Medihoney which is not FDA approved in the United States, or it wasn't at the time. Basically, it's a honey medicine, and we're getting it from Australia, that is used to treat wounds because it has—honey has antibacterial properties. So we would slather the Medihoney on bandages and have those ready to go and clean off the wounds and then we would dress them with these wounds. And then sometimes there would also be other medication that we would put on if they had keloids or something else.

Let me see, during that time, oh, we also had—I'll just tell you about a few patients. So we had—well, I had one guy who I remember coming in and he was one of the parents and at this time we had two, at least two translators who were working there and these were non—these were United States citizens like contractors. And one woman, her name was Layla, she was from Chicago. She was fantastic. So she was a—specifically I believe she was a medical translator so she was really, really good. So I just remember one time when I first started working there trying to communicate with a mother of a child without a translator, like Layla had gone somewhere, and realizing how restricted you are if you—because even if you talk to someone who speaks Spanish like there is enough commonality between English and Spanish that you can like get something somewhere. You can like throw out words until something sticks, but if you—if it's Arabic and you haven't ever spoken that and you don't know any words or you know like three words, you just can't do anything. You're just like oh, I don't know how to communicate. And you try to use hand signals, but none of your hand signals are the same either so—like I mean thumbs up still works, but you also just—it was very, very difficult and just being like oh, no, I am absolutely dependent on my translator.

So let me think. We had one man came in and we weren't—we were kind of communicating a little bit and he was basically expressing that he loved the Americans and he loved that we were there and he was like so happy and everything like that, that we were there. And he showed me a scar that was on his forearm that it just looked like a hole with like a spider web around it. Like it was pretty big. And he communicated to me that basically he—he just like pointed at it and he was like, "Saddam, Saddam." So I'm guessing he was saying that he has this scar on his arm because of something that Saddam's police did or something. Which kind of told me—I wasn't necessarily familiarity with the brutality of the Saddam regime beforehand. Like of course I heard things, but it was still surprising. Like you know, just to see it kind of firsthand. And so we also had—so we had the children. So we had one child, his name was Razul, and he—I remember his mom [laughs] she would stock up on stuff when she was there.

[01:20:00]

So all the women wore the black veils and like kind of it was a full body black outfit for the most part. Not all women everywhere, but in the area—in a lot of the rural areas where we were that was kind of the regular garb. But we had stuffed animals or other donation kind of things or like food items or other things that people could kind of take and she would. Just kind of like [rapid sound] storing stuff in there. Like it's there for them to take so why not?

And her—he was so skinny. He was probably ten years old and he was burned from basically the neck down and he was very, very thin. And the thing that we were—and he was healing basically nicely everywhere except for a—it was a wound on his back that was basically not healing because he wasn't being rotated properly because he is laying down all the time because he couldn't really move. Because even with his healing wounds if you still have burns all over your body it's hard to move with that scar tissue.

Healey: Did he actually stay in the clinic or—

Halaska: No.

Healey: —he was home with his parents?

Halaska: When we opened the clinic people would be allowed on base and then they would walk in. And usually it would be family members carrying their children or loved ones on stretchers and they had traveled there and maybe they parked outside the base and then they got the stretcher and brought them in, but they had to be checked through a gate before they were allowed in. And so they brought them like every other day. And so, but they were in charge of their care at home and he—you could just tell he wasn't being rotated properly and he wasn't being fed properly and it was just frustrating because no matter how many times you tell people what they need to do, like you can't make them do it. And then there was another young woman named Fatima and she was fifteen and she was—she had been brought into our clinic like emergency brought into the TMZ during the day. So the day shift had treated her like for emergency wounds and everything like that. And we—but we—then she was coming back to the burn clinic during the day, but she was also being treated at the hospital. And so she had very, very bad wounds. Or very bad wounds and like—

Healey: Burn wounds or?

Halaska: Yeah, very bad burn wounds, just—

Healey: Did you know what they were from?

Halaska: I don't remember exactly. I think it was like a propane tank instance or something like that or a cooking accident or something. But I just remember the thick yellow like scarring almost or—it was unreal to see a person in that condition because it was like her face was badly burned just everywhere. It was—and especially around her chest. And because when you get burns on the chest it constricts so you have—she was having to go to the Iraqi hospital to basically have incisions in the side on the scarring to allow her to be able to continue to breathe. And so I treated her and I remember her—we would ask her if she wanted water and—like, "You want water?" and I can't remember the word for it and she, "No, no." "Well, what do you want?" kind of a thing. "Pepsi, Pepsi." And I'm just like okay [laughs] like I'm not going to deny you Pepsi. But there was also like the mixture—burns have a very strong smell about them even like healing burns do. So the mixture of that and the honey smell and the exact medications that we used and it would just fill up the entire—because it was basically a CONEX that we were working out of. And then were also, there were cots that were set up outside and then we had like an awning for shade.

[01:25:00]

But for the most part it was just in a CONEX that most of this was being done that was kind of fitted as a clinic. So most—a lot of the care for people was outside as well. But we actually had a pretty low overall infection rate, which was interesting, I thought. I've no idea why, but we did.

Healey: So you were working night shift and also burn unit during the day. When did you sleep?

Halaska: Well, I usually did that for a few hours kind of in the morning and going into the afternoon and then I would usually—and then I would sleep after that for a few hours, but I was having trouble sleeping. And then it was usually every other day.

Healey: How long did you work at the burn unit?

Halaska: I worked there until we left. So that was going to be our deployment and we were—they had a really nice DFAC [dining facility].

Healey: DFAC meaning?

Halaska: It was the chow hall. They had a really nice chow hall where they would make you salads and they had fresh fruit and they had all kinds of nice things and good breakfast. And we lived in our two-man compartment housing which was just like a trailer basically that two of you get to stay in with your footlocker and your bed. It was very nice. And then—

Healey: Did it have a rest room in it?

Halaska: No. No, no, they had those. There were some of those, but you had to be much higher rank to get those. That was called the wet CHU. So what happened was we were going to

be there, but then that assignment was—it was going to be very boring. There wasn't a lot happening there at that time. Part of the reason actually was because of the burn clinic. The sheik in the area—oh, one more patient, I'm sorry.

Healey: Okay, go ahead.

Halaska: He was probably sixteen, seventeen. So I just need to go back to Fatima real quick. She ended up dying in an Iraqi hospital because they gave her a medication that you probably should not give burn patients and our doc was very upset about that. And I was also upset about that because I had been treating her. So that was very, very sad. Her mom came in and talked to us and her mom was a sweet, sweet lady. Yeah, so that sucked. Yeah, and then we treated another guy who was probably around sixteen as well, a young man who was burned because he had been trying to build a bomb. [Laughs] But he—it had exploded and he had burned himself. So he had burns and his were—comparably his burns were not that bad. They were like all up his arm and a little bit on his face and on his neck, but we still, we treated him. But his uncles would bring him in and every time he'd be like, "Oww" and you know, like, "Stop" and they would just like make fun of him and mock him because they were like—I think they knew that he had done this trying to do something stupid and so they ridiculed him. But they also brought him in for treatment so [laughs]. But I just remember having a picture of him being kind of like this and then his uncle like with his arm around him next to him just being like, "Haha." [Laughs] It was really silly. So anyway, we had that assignment for probably only about two months and then we were—our colonel had—or lieutenant colonel of the unit—

Healey: Of the medical unit or—

Halaska: No, not of the medical unit. Of the scouts. He decided—he picked up another assignment for us because this was going to be a very noneventful deployment basically. Not a lot was happening there because the sheik in the area, his—one of his children, his son, had been brought into the burn clinic and basically treated and saved. So we didn't have anything going on in that area at the time because in Iraq if—

[01:30:00]

The sheik runs everything in the area. He's kind of the head guy and so if you get on the sheik's good side then you are protected basically. So nothing was going on there. So our unit called our next assignment Operation Full Bird because we knew that our lieutenant colonel wanted to get a promotion and he wanted to go work in the Pentagon. So we got a new assignment which was we were going to go south and further east nearer a bunch of swampland and the Iranian border because there needed to be—basically to disrupt smuggling operations, weapons in the area. And so we were going to need to go down and build an entire new base out in the middle of the desert. So that was our—the next assignment that we had.

So what we did—I went on leave shortly after that and came back home for the week and during that time we had moved back to—our entire until had basically moved to Tallil.

Healey: Go ahead and spell that.

Halaska: T-A-L-I-L [sic]. Tallil Air Force Base. And so we were living in tent city and then the guys were basically being rotated out by platoon to go out to what would be FOB

[forward operating base] Hunter, forward operating base Hunter. Which was—so the conditions were so bad that they didn't want basically anyone living there for more than—because they didn't have any facilities set up yet. They were just constructing and setting everything up and putting up barriers around the area and everything like that. So and they did not send any of the females attached to the unit out there during that time because it was mostly us medics.

Healey: So where did the females stay?

Halaska: We stayed in a tent in tent city with a bunch of—at Tallil with a bunch of the—like we were still attached to the medical unit. And then so other women would be in there too so it was about a forty-man tent, I think, or more. So that was another period of time where it was just kind of sitting around and waiting for—

Healey: Were the tents—the forty-man tent, was that all women or was it mixed?

Halaska: It was all women, yeah. They had usually like one women's tent per five or six men tents around and then any women that were attached to anywhere or any women in units would all kind of just get put in there together. But there wasn't—like if I wanted to go visit my friends in the male tent I could. Like there wasn't something like that. I mean I couldn't stay over, but yeah, anyway. People weren't as strict about things. And I had a really good crew of guys that I was friends with at the time. The medics were really good. They brought me in well and they were—it was good to have like a good group of guy friends in the medic area because it being one out of a couple hundred—you know, being—there are four females out of a couple hundred guys basically and so having a few really good guys who were kind of like my older brothers was really nice to have. Because it kind of deterred other people from coming and talking to me a whole bunch if—yeah. Because sometimes that happens where it's like oh, a woman to talk to and then they just go and talk to the woman. And the woman's like, "You are the seventh person to do this today. I'm tired of talking to people. Please go away." And then they call you names. But if you have a good kind of crew of guy friends around then it kind of stops that from happening.

So we were there for a while and then we moved out to FOB Hunter. And out at FOB Hunter we lived in—

[01:35:00]

It was basically an old Air Force base. Not Air Force base. Well, Iraqi Air Force base. So they had airplane hangars and there was a runway. I'm not sure if it was operational. Launched drones from there. That was pretty cool. But so there was that. And so there were a lot of hangars around, big cement hangars, and then also bunkers which Iraqi bunkers kind of look like little pyramids that you—with a door that you kind of just like tunnel into and then go down and then it's enclosed kind of underneath this pyramid. And so the bunker that—the hangar that we were in was concrete and there was actually a hole blown in the middle of it. So the top—at the top of the airplane hangar there was a hole blown in that and we had some white owls that lived up there. That was pretty cool. So we lived in here and they had given us materials to basically build our rooms in there. So there was plywood rooms that were built up. And so we had our clinic that was built and then a radio room and then the guys all shared a room. There were a few different rooms for the guys to share and then the women also had a room. So there were four, sometimes five if another woman was coming through and she would stay with us too. And then

they had—we had air conditioning units that we put in as well because it's like after water—after you get water in a place—like that's your first concern is water. The second concern is air conditioning because at that point in time it was really hot.

Healey: What time of the year was that and what year?

Halaska: This late, late fall. Or like end of summer going into the fall.

Healey: Of 2008?

Halaska: Of 2008. So it was hot. There were some days when they were out there—and that was another reason why people couldn't stay out there before they had air conditioning units because it was so hot like in the day it would be 130 degrees, something like that, 120, 130 degrees. And then you would also—there would be sand flies which are just these tiny little irritating things that bite you and you just get these itchy bitey things all over. And so you want to be covered because of all these little bugs, but at the same time it's just so hot so you can't like cool down in order to sleep and you're just itchy and dirty and there is nowhere to shower or wash your clothes. So that's why they rotated people before they got the air conditioning units. Because air conditioning units help to keep the bugs out because they don't like the cold, which is also nice. And also, then it's cold so you can sleep and get reprieve.

Healey: Did you carry weapons with you on a daily basis?

Halaska: Yes, all the time. M4 for myself still. It was my assigned weapon that I got and it was my baby throughout the entire deployment. I often had dreams about losing it because that would be the most terrible thing to happen. But that never happened so that was nice. I would just like sometimes wake up in the middle of the night and be like, weapon, and be like oh, there you are, okay, good. Just reach out and have to like touch it and then I'd be like all right, I can go back to sleep now.

Healey: And were you performing medic duties on a daily basis?

Halaska: Yes. So—

Healey: Did you work six days a week, seven days a week?

Halaska: It was—we were working in some capacity basically every day because if we were not doing our medical duties, we had other details that we needed to do, other assignments around the base. So some of our medics in our medic unit were attached to platoons or squads that were going out and they were line medics then. They were our line medics and field medics who would go out with the guys on a daily basis and go out and do patrols. They did not have the females do that unless the guys went on leave and then we basically substituted in, but for the most part they did not—

[01:40:00]

They kept the women in the clinic to do that or do stuff around base. Just another—because it wasn't—it was still this idea of keeping women out of combat necessarily. And at the—

Healey: And did you ever get into a position where they took you out because they—to do pat-downs or searches?

Halaska: No. We—I did go out on—we did basically feel-good missions where it was hearts and minds where we would set up clinics in different towns. So that was more to do medic stuff and that was treating children for sore throats and giving them—giving everyone ibuprofen and vitamin C basically and just a little bit here and there kind of and just to like take a look at people and people would—when we went to towns to do these and we would bring medical supplies for their clinics as well and be like, "Look at all these medical supplies we are giving you" to the clinics that they had in town. So we went out and did a few of those, but yeah, I never got attached to any of the platoons going out on patrol. That was not something that I had to do. I was—I did all of the other details [laughs] besides that. So yeah, we did—we rotated night shift and day shift. So they would have basically you'd do night shift for like a week and then they would kind of like bring you back. We had one guy who was our—he was a medic, but he did—he was the radio guard night shift pharmacy guy for the entire tour. We called him—so the—we were—our nickname was the voodoo medics and his nickname was the voodoo stop-loss. So he got stop-lossed right before deployment.

So basically when your unit is deploying if you—during a time of need when the Army needs people such as during this point in time, if there is a—if your date of getting out of the Army—so your contract is ending—is within a certain few months that your unit is deploying you basically get fenced in for that deployment. And that is what happened to him is that he was supposed to get out of the Army. He already had previous deployments, he was supposed to be getting out, he wanted to get out, and he got stop-lossed for this entire deployment. And so he wasn't—his morale was not very good and they didn't necessarily want to—they were good to him though. They just said, "All right, here, you can have this job." And so he let his hair grow out a little bit and just—he was actually—I think he had his master's degree too in like library sciences. And so he just ordered books all the time off of Amazon and he would read a book in a night or two. And so he just had a library that was going and he was in charge of all the medications and he did a fantastic job and he guarded the radio. And so getting night shift with him was really fun because then you just like sat and chatted and read books. Yeah, and he knew his job really well and he did it very well. He just wasn't—he did not want to do the other play the Army things that may have been required of him during the day. So he didn't have to do that, but—

Healey: You talked about treating Iraqi civilians and what kind of things did you routinely see in terms of treatment or injury for soldiers?

Halaska: Oh, for Iraqi soldiers?

Healey: No, American soldiers.

Halaska: Oh, American soldiers. Oh. So we were lucky at that time that we did not have many people coming in for trauma injuries at that point in time. Things—because we were there—like we had just set up a base, we had just gotten there and there wasn't any—we were way out in the middle of nowhere. We were very much in the country.

[01:45:00]

We—there was not an insurgent force there right away to kind of start things with us. They weren't necessarily set up in the area very well. They started to more and more as we were there, but fortunately—we were very, very fortunate. The majority of things that we saw were related to people not washing themselves properly. So we saw lots of skin infections, lots of staph infections, things like that. So people having to come in and getting their gross skin things taken care of. I'm sorry, that's not the right way to say that, but yeah, it was treating people's infected skin things that were happening. Like, "I have a spider bite." It's like no, you don't, you need to shower. We have showers here. Like we built some and they had the tents. It was basically like a tent shower thing. And they had times set up that we could go and shower and do that. We weren't—by the time we were there they got that set up pretty quickly. You had to wash all your own clothes, but a lot of people chose not to shower even though there was the option. And sometimes I think they made people shower as well, so yeah. We didn't have a problem with that in our unit, but we saw the results of it.

And then like foot issues, people getting athlete's foot or something. Yeah, fungus infections on their feet, things like that. Dehydration was a big one. People would be drinking energy drinks or caffeine laden things as well and not drinking water as much as they should and that was a very big issue. People would have that happen. Kidney stones too because of that. Because people weren't drinking enough. So we had a lot of that. So some of the—so—

Healey: Along with drinking let me ask you what were the latrine facilities like?

Halaska: Oh, yes. Well, that's one of the details that I had to do. So when we first got out there, there was—we—it was a barrel. It was a barrel that was in a hut with a toilet seat over a hole. And everyone went in the barrel. And basically—and they wanted us to only go number two in the barrel. Do not go number one because we had to burn it. So we were encouraged to find—they had another—it was basically a tube that went into the ground and that was for the area to go, your number to urinate. And just on the other side was just like the place with the hole for the women to squat. But so we had that. And then—

Healey: Were those sheltered areas or were there just—

Halaska: Yeah, it kind of sheltered. It was like a plywood structure that was made.

Healey: So some privacy?

Halaska: Yeah, there was a little bit of privacy which was nice. But everything was also like super far away. Everything was really spread apart here. So there were four or five—I think four airplane hangars and so you had basically—and they were pretty spread apart and then you had maybe a few tents, but for the—everyone was really spread apart which was very good because when we did get rocketed or mortared it was less likely to hit things which was very nice. And then we also had—so surrounding the base were Hesco barriers which are—it's basically dirt in a giant bag. So there's a like metal kind of structure. They're collapsible so they open up and then you fill them with dirt and then we had—so a double layer Hesco wall around with concertina wire on top.

Healey: How do you spell Hesco?

Halaska: H-E-S-C-O.

[01:50:00]

With the concertina wire on top or razor wire on top. And then there were also guard towers around as well. So that's the structure of that. And so anyway, going back to the rest room situation, one of the details that we had to do was to burn what was in the barrels and I got that duty a few times. And that was an entire day job. You would fill—you would have some kind of—I think it was gasoline or diesel, I can't remember. You would pour that in and then they gave you a real long stick and you—it was just stirring it and keeping it going until it burnt down to almost nothing. And that was a job for basically an entire day. And so you would just be out there doing that and maybe you'd do two at once. So and it actually was not the worst detail because everyone was like, "That's gross" and it's like, "Yes, yes, it is, but no one bothers you." No one wants to come hang out with you or bother you or try to make you do something else because you have an important job and you are doing it. And so you would just sit out there, just get a chair, and just go sit out there all day. [Laughs] So yeah, that was that.

And then there were other duties that we had to do. So we did have a tent where they had phones set up and so you would just—the MWR [morale, welfare, and recreation], the morale tent. They had computers and internet. And so you'd be out there just helping people like sign up and just making sure that people aren't on there for too long if there's people waiting. So doing that. And keeping a log of how much it's being used, doing that. There was also a trash detail as well. So this was my least favorite. This was definitely the grossest. So there was a five-ton truck that you had to drive around and it was you and whoever else from one of the other platoons was put on garbage detail. And you had to go around and to all the different trash points on base and throw all the garbage into the back of this five-ton truck. And then you had to go and the one—the KP garbage was the grossest. That was the cook one, the one with all the food. Because there's lots of liquidy stuff and everything like that and it's been in the sun all day and it was disgusting. So you had to do that and then you had to take—you had to drive off base because there was a giant burn pit outside the base where we threw all of our trash and anything else that we wanted to because there weren't any rules about what you could and could not burn, to my knowledge.

So then you basically had to back up to the burn pit which was kind of like an empty swimming pool where it's shallow at one end and then just gets deeper and deeper. So you had to back up to it and then you could not get out and because you're going off base you have to wear all of your gear. So you're having to wear your bulletproof vest and with everything on it, your helmet and you have your weapon. And so but you can't get off and down—you can't get down from the truck though because they have wild dogs. And so there are wild dogs in the area who also like the trash and who like to scavenge from it before it starts to burn basically, because they know that we throw out food because they can smell it. So there's usually like six dogs, something like that, or more around the truck. So what we had to do is get—open the door, and these trucks are pretty large so you're probably like—you're about five feet off the ground so they can't necessarily reach you, but you kind of have to like get out and then like climb to the back from the door. So kind of jungle gym over.

[01:55:00]

And in all your gear and then throw off all the garbage and then climb back into the truck

and then you're done. But that was always my least favorite because it was just uncomfortable and smelly and gross.

Healey: Who ran the dining facilities or who were the cooks? Were those soldiers or was it a contract?

Halaska: They were cooks. Soldiers. They were soldiers. We had basically the giant MREs. It was not great. It was like boring and repetitive. We had MREs to eat too and those are fine for the most part. The vegetarian ones are pretty good. I liked those. The—I don't know why they keep making the omelet MRE. It was always the worst and no one wants it ever because it—eggs just should not be in an MRE. Anyway.

Healey: So the cooks were making MREs for you?

Halaska: Well, it was kind of like by giant MREs I mean it was basically readymade food, just in gigantic containers so all that they needed to do basically was like add heat and water and it would cook up for us and then they would serve it to us. So the dining facility was not super high tech.

Healey: Did you have the option of just doing your own MREs?

Halaska: We did have that option as well, yeah. But just sometimes you're just bored with either one or the other. We did have lots of care packages come in and would ask for—like we had a microwave in our medic area and we—so made a lot of ramen noodles, things like that, or macaroni and cheese, that kind of stuff. But yeah, the food was not notable out there.

Healey: So when you're out there it doesn't sound like you really have liberty time or what did you do—

Halaska: There was—

Healey: —read books, movies?

Halaska: When you were—yeah, lots of movies. They were pretty good at—

Healey: Is that MWR?

Halaska: No. Pretty much everyone has like computers and we had a screen, I think, that—we had the Air Force—not Air Force network, AFN [American forces network]. So like the TV basically. We got a few channels on that. The Armed Forces Network, that's what it's called. We got that. I have no idea how, but we got that. But everyone—pirated movies were readily available. So basically, one person would have an external hard drive full of movies and everyone would just kind of pass it around and take what they wanted. And then yeah, so that there was usually one or two people who were really good at getting movies who would then disperse them to everyone else. And it was—once we—we did have—and then we had an interpreter who could sometimes get us movies if we wanted them to from off base. Or he would bring us food too sometimes which was really awesome. So we would get like falafels or just like cooked meat with like actual vegetables or something like that. And that was always incredibly exciting. His name was Gobman [??]. He was cool. I was really sad one day and I'm just like, "I just want to go

home. I'm tired of being here." And he was like, "You want me to take you home? I can get you out of here." Kind of like joking, but also just like—I'm just like, "Yeah, where would you take me?" He was just like, "I'd take you to Syria and then you can go to Europe from there." I'm just like, "You'd just drive me out?" He's like, "Yeah, no problem." I'm just like, "That's nice. Thank you for that option, but I'll stay here." [Laughs] So anyway.

That—like—yeah. We just kind of hung out, listened to music, we watched movies. We got internet in our tent—not our tent, in our area, at some point and that was really nice just to be able to like talk to people back home over Messenger or something like that. Yeah, so that was good. And then we also—oh, just back to the details. We got put on construction duty basically. We had a few of the medics had been—they had done construction at some point.

[02:00:00]

So they assigned us to construction detail to make a gym. So we made a gym and then we also made another area—we made an area for them to have meetings, like a building for the higher-ups to have meetings with local Iraqi officials. And that's also where they brought bad guys too sometimes. And they would bring them in usually at night where people—or people who had been out when they were on their missions and they were running away and then they arrested and brought them in. And then the medics would have to do a health assessment on them so they would call the medics over and I had to do that a few times, just go over and take their blood pressure and take their vitals. The doc would come with, make sure that they weren't bruised up and everything like that. So it was a check to see that they were doing okay health-wise but also that like abuses had not happened to prisoners basically.

Healey: So did the Iraqis have any objections to having female medics if they were male?

Halaska: They were not seeing anything at that time if they were brought in like that. They had basically bags on their heads so they didn't know that I was female and they didn't really have any say in it anyway.

Healey: So I take it your unit had interrogator translators and interrogators.

Halaska: Yes. There was some intelligence around as—but they kind of more kept to themselves and so it was like harder to—I didn't spend a lot of time talking to them. We also had an EOD [explosive ordnance disposal] unit that was right next door to us and they had a dog and that was really nice. Except he killed my soccer ball one day. I was outside just like juggling and kicking the ball around and then the dog ran out, and he was a large German shepherd, ran out and basically attacked the ball and his handler was very upset that he had done that. So he went and grabbed him and drug him back to the—put him in his crate for a while because they're not supposed to do that. They're supposed to only do things when they are told to do things. And I was upset because I didn't know where I was going to get another soccer ball. [Laughs] Because it took a few weeks for anything to get to us because it not only had to get to Iraq, but then it had to get from the main base out to us and they only did convoys out to us every few weeks as well. So yeah. And at that time they were still bringing water out to us as well so on occasion we would go black on water was what the term was. So that meant that we didn't have—that's when our showers were rationed basically and we could only take a shower every few days. But

that only happened if there was like some logistical problem or people basically were wasteful.

Healey: How far was this forward operating base from where you had to get supplies?

Halaska: That would be Tallil. I'm not sure like mileage-wise, but I know it was about 18 hours by convoy which doesn't necessarily mean that it was super far away because it just takes forever to get anywhere by convoy. So we were there for a while. We got rocketed—

[End of OH2132.Halaska_file1_access.mp3]

[Beginning of OH2132.Halaska_file2_access.mp3]

Halaska: —a few times while we were there. We also had a 582 field artillery on our base with us and they were in charge of mortaring and those kind of things. So if someone shot things at us they were in charge of shooting back. And then we had a quick response force, QRF, that would—they were—their entire thing was that they needed to be able to go out the gate very, very quickly. So they would, if someone—if something was happening they would be the first ones out and they would go get the bad guys basically or try to go to the point of where things were shot off from. Most of the time they didn't find anyone because the rockets and mortars were put on timers. And so someone would just set up a rail system so just a metal system that would hold the rocket and then the timer would go off and then it would shoot. And some of these, the rockets, were—and mortars were being smuggled in from Iraq—or Iran. And that was our job was to make that not happen or that the unit that I was with, that was their job. So we—those were terrible. I really—they were very large, the rockets were, and they—so one time I was going to the shower so I had my little bag with all of my shower things and my little flip-flops on and was walking over to go take a shower in the morning and—it was usually in the morning. And then I just heard the like [rocket sound] kind of thing which is the—a rocket is going off somewhere. And it was just like oh, no. And the shower is like out in the middle of unprotected land and so my immediate response was I need to get back to the hangar basically. Because our hangar is basically also—it's a giant cement structure so it's also kind of the bunkerish. We didn't have other bunkers.

Healey: So that was your kind of protocol when you were rocketed is get to the—

Halaska: Yeah. Or get to the nearest one. So I ran back as fast as I could. And there was one point when I was just in the—because, as I said, it was a—everything was spread out. So there was still some distance between places. So I was in the middle of basically an open field and I could just hear this rocket and it went directly over me and over the Hesco barriers right next to a tower. And I was like oh, thank God and then I just kept running. But it—and it was very large and shook everything and a piece of shrapnel from that actually went into the hangar. It was about like four inches across and just like a heavy chunk of metal. So they were large and—

Healey: While you were there was any soldier on your camp ever injured—

Halaska: Nope.

Healey: —from the rockets? No?

Halaska: No. We were incredibly lucky that they were such a terrible shot. And then we had—we—there was one time when a mortar almost basically got an entire platoon. People were in formation for something and then we got mortared and so right—the mortar landed right on the other side of the T wall which is just a concrete barrier. And had that been a rocket that would have been much, much worse. But because mortars are just—they're smaller and they just are different. But that was—our Sergeant Davis took us out to go see where the mortar had landed versus where the people were, an entire platoon, and where the barrier was and just being like, "This is how close we were to a mass casualty situation because this would have been very, very bad." Just like to remind us that we always had to be ready for this to happen even though our daily things were a little bit slow sometimes. We had to be ready for it.

[00:05:00]

She had had previous deployments that were—where they got mortared a lot more and where they had more people injured and lost people. So our—one of the other scout units, 27, Gary Owen, did lose two soldiers to IEDs [improvised explosive devices] while it was in—that was in October actually, 2008.

Healey: You said Gary Owen. Is that the name of what?

Halaska: Oh, that was—I'm sorry. That was the name of their—the base that they were at. It's also kind of the name of their unit. Kind of like One-Nine were the Headhunters. So we were at FOB Hunter and their—like Gary Owen is part of their unit name. So they lost two guys to IEDs. And I just remember talking to one guy who was there at one point and just being—he was definitely troubled by it because they had been the gunners and so the gunners are the most vulnerable when it comes to IEDs. I mean unless it's coming from the bottom, but a lot of these—the IEDs at this point, they were targeting the gunners because we had—if we weren't in Humvees we were in like mine resistant vehicles that were better protected on the bottoms and from the sides. So they were aiming at the gunners. And so they would shoot up and explode at the gunners. And what it normally did is it knocked basically the turret off of the vehicle. Basically cutting the person in half. So it was a traumatic thing for the unit. And that unit, they were also on a smaller base that was a little bit more crowded and so they did get mortared a little bit more often and their surgical tent did get hit.

Fortunately, no one was hurt, but Sergeant Davis, one of her best friends who's their radiology tech, she was there at the time. And the surgical tent is also where the people lived. So as soon as—and we heard everything over the radios. As soon as Sergeant Davis heard that the surgical tent was hit I just remember seeing her—just like her expression and everything just changed because this was like one of her best friends and she basically knocked the other person out of the way and was like, "Give me the radio. I am on this. I need to find out if my friend is okay." And she ended up being fine and good, but that was like another—when you're so young it's still hard to realize what kind of situation you're in even if it's in your face and it's only when you see the reaction of the other people around you that it kind of like becomes real. And that was definitely one of those instances. So we were out there for a while. I also got moved out to another post for a little while, while I was out there. I just got sent out because that just happened from time to time. This one was right on the Iranian border. It was probably less than a mile. We could see them. We could see the Iranian soldiers on the other side. The camp wasn't even—there was less than—there was probably about fifty people at this camp.

Healey: Did the camp have a name?

Halaska: I cannot remember. But I just remember having a rucksack and being kind of like, "Oh, you're just going out there for a week" and I think I was out there for two or three weeks, something like that. And then so I was out there and we—that was kind of fun. [Laughs] We—they had a really nice—they didn't have much, but they had a very nice gym and they had a very nice clinic set up. They had built it very nicely. And they were—the sergeant who was in charge of the clinic was also—he was an avid weightlifter.

[00:10:00]

He was huge. And him and his best friend kind of were, they were both just like these gigantic muscly men who had set up this awesome gym that was like attached to the clinic.

Healey: What was in the gym?

Halaska: They had weights and lots of weightlifting equipment mostly. I can't remember if there was any like cardio. I don't think so.

Healey: Air conditioned?

Halaska: Yes.

Healey: In a tent or?

Halaska: I think it was in a structure that they built. They also had showers that they had built, but you had to—there you had to fill up a like five gallon jug basically and go out and fill up your shower bag and then hoist it over your head and then—it was like a field shower that was set up. And you could only take—you had to—they were very strict about water there. You had to—you could only shower every—I think there was a schedule for showers, but it was every other day or every three days. And you could—you had to take short showers and the way that you had to take showers was basically run the water, wash yourself, like get that and then turn it off and then soap, and like you had—but there—I was one of two women on the base and they didn't have female showers so basically I had to have a guy guard the shower while I was in it. Which was—like I understand why because they didn't—there were just like, "No, no one else can come in right now, there's a woman in there." So I was extra just like all right, I'm going to go quickly because I don't want to interrupt anyone else's shower time. But that was a good time. And we watched movies. There was a guy with a really nice—he had a really nice computer that played Blu-ray disks and at that time that was like a big thing. And so it was like ooh, like oh my God, the picture is so great, and that was fun.

Healey: Forty, fifty people out there. What were they? Were they infantry?

Halaska: Scouts. More scouts. And watching the border and watching people like trucks that came through and everything like that. I wasn't necessarily fully aware of their mission. We did have—so the Iranians on the other side, they obviously knew that we were there, we knew that they were there. Our protocol in case they decided—because there was one time when we had to basically go to red status which is that we had to walk around with

our magazines in because we had to—there were some, what was it, American hikers? Or Iraqi people that they thought were spies who were in Iran who were being held, or vice versa. I can't remember the exact situation, but tensions were high between the two and for the listener, in case they do not know, Iraq and Iran were at war with each other for like ten years straight. Like they were not friendly with each other and that entire area that we were in, like at that Air Force base that I was at, you just kicked the ground and there's shrapnel. And you could see where different either bases or like little forts or fighting positions had been made all along the border. So you could just see where people had been fighting like just etched into the landscape. And so when tensions were extra high, we had to be aware that the Iranian Army over there, who they had tanks and they had a lot more people than we did, our protocol was to run as fast as we possibly could if they started coming our way. [Laughs] It was like no, we're not fighting with them. We are getting out of their way as quickly as possible because we are a speed bump. Yeah, so that was—we had to be on the lookout a few times.

Healey: And for evacuation you had trucks?

Halaska: Yeah, we had—specifically the medics there had an ambulance and that was our—also just our vehicle.

[00:15:00]

And it would be, yeah, that would be ours to go. I also did training while I was out there with the scouts, combat lifesaver training, and that was fun because we then ran them through lanes. Kind of like our medic training trauma lanes where we made them give IVs and carry people and do that kind of stuff in order for them to pass to like get the certificate. And that was fun to be able to train people in just like these basic kind of ways so that they could help their buddy if they needed to.

Healey: Did they actually give IVs?

Halaska: Yes. A few of them did. They weren't necessarily very good, but it's something that we also wanted them to be able to know how to do in case they needed to do it. But mostly we were just like, "Learn how to stop bleeding." Sometimes we just—it was just fun to be like, "Here, poke each other." [Laughs] So anyway let me see. Then I got back and not long after—so this is probably nine months through the deployment—I—there was kind of always the like you—my unit, the 27th BSB, on occasion they like would come out and check on us and they'd be like—they were stationed at Tallil. They were there. They were running the aid station there in Tallil. And on occasion they would come out and see us and kind of just like a "we know you're out here and just so you know, we care about you and we remember that you're out there even though you're way out here. And you know we can rotate you back in." And we were just like, "We don't want to be rotated back. We like where we are out here. We've gotten used to it." And they were like, "We'll rotate you back." And we're just like, "No, don't." And then I got rotated back. [Laughs] Which was a bummer.

But not to Charlie Company, to my unit. I got then attached to Bravo Company. Which is the mechanic unit, mechanic company. But we were mostly doing guard duty at the time. So I was on night guard shift at the gate which was basically nothing. We watched a lot of movies. I was forced to play cards. I don't like playing cards. I'm not a card player. But he's an angry man. He made me be his Spades partner. I'm terrible. Like I don't

know this game, why are you making me my partner? And he was just so angry all the time. I'm like this is going to be terrible. So we played and we lost because I didn't know what I was doing and he got angry. And I'm just like oh, I wonder why. So anyway, after that we or I—I did that for a while. And you know, it wasn't—that wasn't bad. It was just kind of relaxing almost. And I also did some tower duty which I was guarding a tower that was inside the base by like a very long way. I have no idea. We were just assigned this tower to guard and so I just remember we watched movies. I remember watching the movie *Marley and Me* with one of my friends up there and we both were like crying because it's a movie where a dog dies and we're just like sitting there like bawling.

We didn't have anything to worry about because the Romanian soldiers had other guards around other places and there were also Ugandan soldiers or contractors who were like the security force for the perimeter at Tallil. Because it's a very well-established Air Force base so everything there is contracted. Everyone—you have people to do your laundry. You bring them your stuff. All the food was contracted as well. And then you also had then the security basically. So that was—

Healey: When you were on guard duty did you also have medic duty or it was just you were off medic duty and—

Halaska: No. I was off medic duty completely at this point. That was just my job out there was to sit out there.

[00:20:00]

And then—

Healey: How long did you do tower duty?

Halaska: Tower duty only a few times. Most of it was the gate duty which was basically just a CONEX or a container that you would sit in with a few other people and the gate was closed because it's nighttime. Gate duty during the day is a process because you have to check people and check workers who are coming on base because the base employed Iraqi people to come work and to just do like day laborer things. And I did that for a little while too, guarding people who were putting up lampposts or something. And it's just standing there with your gun just being like, "Don't do any shenanigans" and they're like, "We're just doing our jobs" and you're like, "Yeah, I know." And then they would bring us food on occasion from off base which was always delicious. So that was nice.

Healey: Did it surprise you or what was your attitude toward not being used as a medic?

Halaska: I was kind of used to it by that point because I was kind of figuring out that being—that they had a lot of medics and that medics, you're a medic when they need you to be a medic but you're also whatever else they need you to be. So a lot of medics are also truck drivers or they are—yeah, it's whatever else they need to be done. And especially if you are in a—so the medical unit that I was in, it was a lot of medics. You want to pause for a little bit?

Healey: I'm okay unless you want to pause.

Halaska: I might need to, yeah.

Healey: Okay. We will go ahead and pause.

[End of OH2132.Halaska_file2_access.mp3]

[Beginning of OH2132.Halaska_file3_access.mp3]

Healey: Well, it flipped over to number one here so I'm not sure what's going to happen, but we are starting the recording again at approximately 11:55 and this is the oral history being done with Rachel Halaska. So we will continue. Okay, one of the last things that I had asked you about is whether or not you were upset with not being used as a medic because you were doing tower duty and guard duty so—and you're on your first tour of duty overseas in Iraq. So you want to pick up from there?

Halaska: Yes. All right, so I was not upset about not necessarily being used as a medic because by this point I was kind of used to it. And the clinic kind of had their own rotation all going on and that would have been working with all new people. So it wasn't bad. So I just kind of wanted to get done. I just wanted to go home at this point in time. I wanted to go back to the United States. Since my leave had been at the beginning of the tour it had been a very long nine or more months since being back in the States and I was getting very excited to go home. And so one thing that I remember is that my—because of the excellent job that they had done out at FOB Hunter the One-Nine got to basically leave first to go back home and our—who I was with now, we left later because we were on a nice comfy cushy base. And so just being like, "All right, bye, friends" and they're all having fun in the United States again and seeing their families and me just being like I'm over here for another few weeks, that's great. I was a little bit bitter about that, but at the time I had met someone who would become my next girlfriend while I was in Bravo Company and that was a nice, exciting experience. So she was in Bravo Company and worked in the office so we had met while I in-processed into the unit. And that was fun. So we like watched movies and played Guitar Hero and that kind of stuff and just kind of got to know each other before returning to the States. So that was nice. And at this time, I don't really remember much about the end of the deployment except just really wanting to go home and then being very excited about homecoming. And my mom and Bill met me there and I think my dad was there too.

Healey: They met you where?

Halaska: Oh, at Fort Hood. So we flew back commercial airline. We flew back into—we left Iraq in the Air Force airplane to go to Kuwait and then flew out from Kuwait. And yes, those were good. So two things I want to just—two good stories that I want to fill in about my second deployment kind of before I move on or we end here is one when I was going—it was a helicopter ride that I was taking. I'm not sure exactly where I was going. I think it was from Scania to Tallil when we were leaving. Yes, that is when it was. Scania to Tallil. And so we were taking a Chinook and I had all of my gear. So this is two big green bags and then an additional bag that was about as big as myself. So it's about four feet long and just a huge duffel bag. And then also a rucksack. So I had these four giant bags. So one on each arm, one frontloaded, one on the back. And the one on my back, it goes down to about my ankles basically. And so trying to get onto a Chinook with all the stuff on is very challenging and also my weapon. So I had all these things. And it's very dark because they don't like to light up their helicopters at night as well. Even though you can hear them they don't like to put lights on everything. So it was very awkward getting up

there.

[00:05:00]

And so it was taking me some time and so I was one of the last people. And so they filled up in the back so what they had me do is they put all of my bags in the back and then I got to go ride up in the front. So I got to sit up in front in between two of the pilots on a Chinook at night going through Iraq. And so they gave me headphones—or not head—they gave me the big headsets so I could listen to what they were listening to and hear them talk. And I got to—they were playing music over it as well so I got to listen to music and sit up in the front of a Chinook as we were flying over Iraq at night and I remember there was a lunar eclipse happening too. And I was just like this is the best night ever, this is so cool. And I was very excited. It was really good. And then we got there and I got all my bags again and walked off, but I was just—I was flying high. I really enjoyed that experience. It was really cool to see all the little fires all down below you. Because most of it is pitch black and then every once in a while you'd see just a little house with a little light because we were way out in the country.

And then another one was—so a cool thing at Tallil is that Tallil is right where—it's right next to the ancient city of Ur. So it's right—you've got the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that are coming through and you've got this beautiful fertile crescent and then the city of Ur is right there. And so there is a pyramid there, the Ziggurat, and there is also an old city there and so there were ruins there as well. And we got to take a tour while we were—this is in between when I went to FOB Hunter and Scania while we were kind of waiting there. They were like, "Hey, we've got this pyramid and a tour." And this was before the United States basically handed that territory back over to the Iraqi people. So it was still within our—the boundaries of our base. But there was a tour guide who was an Iraqi guy who spoke English and he gave us a wonderful tour of the ruins there. And so there was an archway that was—and it was just a skinny little thing, but it was an archway that had been standing for thousands of years and so we got to go take our picture next to it and that was cool. And there were just piles of just stone and like pottery shards all over the place. And then there were blocks that you could just pick up that had cuneiform written on them. Or just like a wall with a bunch of cuneiform all written all over it.

And so our [laughs] tour guide just like went up and splashed some water on it and was like, "Here, lookit, you can see it better." And I'm just like oh my God, I can't believe I'm seeing this. And people are just going up and touching it. I'm like, "Don't touch it." Oh my God, it's amazing. And then there were some royal tombs as well and I just remember him standing, kind of showing us at a distance and just being like, "And over there are the royal tombs." I'm just like oh, the royal tombs, that's great. And he's like, "All right, come on, let's go in." And I'm just like, what? Because I'm used to American tours where it's like, "See that famous thing from a distance? We're not going to go in, that's for the scientists." But here everything had already basically been removed very long ago either by the English or by looters. So it was just kind of this structure that was there and so we got to go walk down into these royal tombs where on one side would have been where the king was and then on the other side would have been where all of his slaves were buried along with a bunch of other stuff that he might need in the afterlife. So it was a two-chamber tomb on either side. It was really cool.

And then after that we got to climb the pyramid so there was a really long stairway and

we basically got to go all the way up to the top where there would have been up on top a temple.

[00:10:00]

And so like getting to stand up on the top of this temple and just thinking this is about 5,000 years old. Like this is amazing. This is the oldest thing I've ever stood on by far that's human-made and just thinking about the history of the area and that people had been like looking out over the area and just thinking this was an entire city. And people lived here and they did things here and they farmed here and they—you know. It was just really a cool thing to be able to do. And I was like this is worth the entire thing by far for me. Because there's no way—you know, I might get to go see some other ancient ruins but I'm never going to come back and see this again. And not many people are going to get to come here and see this. So that was outstanding. I was very happy about that.

Healey: And that was just a few weeks before you were about to leave?

Halaska: No, that was back more when I was living in the tent city while they were getting FOB Hunter ready to go. That was then. And then because we were getting all of our deployment pay and everything, everyone was feeling very rich so we gave the tour guide, each of us gave the tour guide like twenty to forty bucks which is a lot in Iraqi currency. So he was very, very happy with us as well. Because he did a great job and it was just an amazing experience to have overall. And also, when I was on guard duty—this is just going back to guard duty, small little detail—we had—there was a dog who had befriended the unit there. He was a wild dog so just an out and about wild dog, but he had figured out that the Americans will give dogs hamburgers and so he would—his name was Phoenix and so he was just a black fluffy dog. And one day I was—one night I was on guard duty and no one had told me about Phoenix and so I'm just sitting there and all of a sudden there's this dog who is standing in the doorway looking at me like, "Hey, lady" and I'm just like, "Ahhh, get out of here." And he's just like, "What?" and kind of trots away.

And they told me, "Oh, no, that's Phoenix. He's basically our dog here. He lets us know if anyone's coming. So he will start barking if any non-Americans start approaching because he likes Americans and they're fine, but he's used to the local nationals, Iraqis, throwing rocks at dogs." And so he was—he warned us a few times when people were coming. And they were just fine people, but it was also just nice to know a heads up. But we liked him. I liked him. It was nice to have a dog around just because if you're going for so long without animals around it gets weird. I like having them around. It's just nice to have a little cuddle buddy. I mean we didn't cuddle with him, but I'd pet him and play with him a few times. I'd put on like gloves and play with him, but so yeah, those were—I'm trying to think if there's any other things that I missed from my first tour before we—

Healey: So what were your impressions of the Iraqi people as a whole? And of the Iraqi soldiers if you had contact with them. It sounds like you had a fair amount of contact with Iraqis.

Halaska: Yes. My—oh, there's another—okay, another good story. When I was out at a clinic there was—it was mostly I was just in the room in case the doc needed me but it was mostly the mother of a child talking to our doctor. And so I was just sitting there with one of their—with the kid. And we were just kind of like sitting there both kind of bored because they were just talking for a while. And so I started—I took a piece of paper and I

started drawing a picture. And so I drew a picture of a house and then I gave it to him, like just slid it over to him with the thing, and then he drew a little picture of a truck. And we passed it back and forth and drew things to each other. And so it was a cool way to do something without having language necessarily, but still being able to like have a positive contact. Yeah, we did have some Iraqi soldiers.

[00:15:00]

Iraqi soldiers and police that were being worked—that some of the scouts were working with because they were trying to do more joint operations. I didn't have a lot of contact with them. My impressions is that they were not very good with gun safety. We had one instance where someone accidentally discharged their weapon, and I wasn't here for this. This is, I think, when I was on leave. Accidentally discharged their weapon and shot a few people in the legs and they had to be medevacked. And this was, I think it was one of the lieutenants, one of our lieutenants, and then a few of their own soldiers as well. And I don't think that was the only time that there was an accidental discharge because—and they carried AK-47s as well. And so I don't think their training was as great or they were just more casual with their weapons and didn't have safeties. But there was that.

For the most part my impression was that most of them are just normal people going about their day to day business. We were—the place where we were at primarily was in—way out in the country, a very rural area so most people were—they had some cattle or they worked in the towns, but they lived in basically like little mud huts basically with like stick fences around them. They were incredibly poor. And the water quality around the area was not good and there was just—and in the towns the infrastructure was so terrible. There wasn't great electricity or anything like that and there wasn't any garbage pickup so usually by the town there was just a giant pile of garbage and like a child playing in it. And just a lot of poverty. A lot of poverty that wasn't—and the infrastructure just wasn't necessarily being taken care of for the most part. And then also from what we heard, a lot of the people who necessarily like set up the bombs or the rockets or the mortars, a lot of them were being blackmailed to do it. Because you had insurgent groups who didn't want to risk themselves to do it so they would say, "You need to do this or I'm going to kill your entire family." Or like, "You do this and we'll give you 5,000 bucks." Like there's—of course there were those people who also did it for that reason, but usually a lot of—there was also a lot of blackmailing and violence against the Iraqi people and they didn't have necessarily the protections. Also, if they associated with us in positive ways, they were definitely putting themselves at risk.

One of my friends did have to respond to a place that he went, he was out on patrol where there was a guy who had been, I think, tortured and killed and he—they were like, "Here, have the medic come look at him." He's like, "What do you want me to do? He's definitely dead. Like there's nothing I can do here. Can't give you ibuprofen. That's not going to cure that." So like there—but any time that we stopped anywhere they would bring us tea and they—you know, the—I did get yelled at once by an old lady. She was upset that my hair was showing. There was—and because of the area that we were in too, it's still very tribal for the most part so it's very different tribes and this woman, she had tribal tattoos. So she had some tattoos on her hands, so just like black dots and stripes kind of a thing. And she also had a few on her face as well. Like so like under her lips going down like her chin and then a few on the sides of her face as well. And she was—it's hard to say how old people are in some areas because she could have been forty-five, I don't know, but she didn't have any teeth and she was wrinkly and she was like four

feet tall and just—she was like smoking like a cigarette in her like gnarled hand. And just like smoking a lot.

[00:20:00]

And just like looking at me and just like yelling in [imitates nonsense language] and motioning and I'm just like what does she want? Like asking my interpreter and he's like, "She's just upset that your hair is showing." I'm just like oh.

Healey: When you went off base did you have to wear something different or you just—

Halaska: No, I wore my uniform. I was a soldier. And actually, for the most part like they understood soldiers—women soldiers as soldiers. Like for interactions with women they understood them as women, but they didn't necessarily, I don't think, see us as women for the most part. Like I don't think they would interact with us completely the same, but there was—we weren't—we didn't fit into their woman category as well either. We were still like kind of weird outsiders within that category. So there was definitely that. But there were people who were more in the city were more—so closer to Baghdad and things like that were less conservative. So people would go out dancing and people didn't wear—women didn't cover themselves completely and people were a little bit more relaxed about gender relationships in general. But yeah, I think that's—

Healey: All right, well, as I recall you already told me about getting back to Fort Hood and your mom and dad both being there.

Halaska: Yes. Oh, it was great. I just remember being very happy and then the woman that I was about to start seeing, she was also there and she had met my parents so that was really cool. And yeah, so that was—it was a good time to reunite and everything like that. I think the biggest thing with coming home was getting used to so many people around all the time. Yeah, I think we can go into that in the next section because readjusting is kind of its own—and kind of what happened after I came back from first deployment. Might take a little bit longer.

Healey: So you want to hold that off until another day?

Halaska: Yes, I think let's hold that off for another day.

Healey: Okay.

Halaska: All right, excellent. Thank you very much.

Healey: Thank you.

[End of OH2132.Halaska_file3_access.mp3]

[Beginning of OH2132.Halaska_file4_access.mp3]

Healey: All right, good morning. This is a continuation of an oral history interview with Rachel Halaska. It's being conducted on Friday, October 12, 2018, in Madison, Wisconsin. And when we left off you had just returned back to the United States from your first tour in Iraq. So pick up from there and tell me where you returned to and what your duty

assignment there was.

Halaska: All right, well, I returned to Fort Hood, Texas with my unit. And we—

Healey: Remind me, what was your unit at that time?

Halaska: Twenty-Seventh Brigade Support Battalion. And I was back with them so I had been attached to the One-Nine for a while and then I was attached to Bravo Company in 27th BSB for a while as well and now I was back with Charlie Company. And we were back in Fort Hood, Texas. And that was—it was nice to be back.

Healey: And can you put a time frame on that? When did you get back to Fort Hood, Texas? Do you recall the year?

Halaska: Oh, I can't remember. It was 2009. I think it was spring, summer. Beginning of summer. Yes, because it was starting to get very hot and I was not used to Texas summers. So we got back and we kind of did the normal stuff that people do when they get back from deployment which is we got our leave when we got back and went home and visited with family and friends. And then went back to Texas and we partied a lot. We went to lots of parties and that was fun, just getting to enjoy being back. In Texas something that you go do during the summer because it's too hot to do anything else is you go float down the river. So you get your innertube and a bunch of other people also have innertubes and then you have one innertube that is your drink carrier. So you put a cooler in it and then you just drink and float down the river. And because none of us had been drinking for an entire year it was fun and I don't remember parts of that river. So but it was a good time to be back with everyone and just get to go out to eat regular meals and that kind of stuff.

I do remember having some issues coming back just because when you're on deployment for an entire year you get used to being only around military people. You get used to only being around a certain number of people, especially when you're out at a certain size base, a smaller base. So being around a lot of civilians in some place like Walmart or another busy place, it can—it was stressful. There was one time—and also a lot of things change over a year as well. So I remember we—when we left leggings were just becoming a thing, you know, everyone wearing leggings and they would wear leggings but then they would wear a skirt or shorts over it or something. And then those just went away and then everyone was just wearing leggings and I remember thinking that was weird. And everything was neon when we got back. Like the entire color scheme of everything had changed and there was all new music on the radio. So just a lot to take in kind of all at once. So it was a little bit—and then when you're also just deployed for an entire year you get used to—your senses change a little bit. My sense of smell was a little bit different. And you can just—we use a lot of scented products in the United States. They don't everywhere else and especially on a military base in Iraq. You don't necessarily use a lot of scented products so your—you become more sensitive to them, at least for a while.

[00:05:00]

I remember one time I was in the big Walmart in—outside of Fort Hood and I just had my cart and I was in the middle of the shampoo and body wash aisle and so there were all the smells and then all of a sudden there were people coming down one end of the aisle and then the other end of the aisle. So it was just me in the middle of this super smelly

bright area with people kind of enclosing on either side and I just went hmm, no, no. And I just left my cart and everything in it and I walked out because I just couldn't handle it. And I didn't really—it's kind of like oh, it's just little things and they'll kind of go away. And they did. Just you get used to it again, but it's just kind of that your sensitivity to certain situations changes. And that's even without combat necessarily or anything like that. I mean we were taught to be vigilant and that kind of stuff during deployment, like you always have to be aware, but it still changes the way you perceive things when you get home just being gone for even that amount of time.

So we got back and everyone was doing their party thing and everything like that and not long after we got back a Sergeant Ryan Schlack from Bravo Company, he was killed by another soldier at a party. Two soldiers, they were intoxicated, they got in a bit of an argument and a fight, and one soldier got a gun and he went to go shoot the other guy and Sergeant Schlack stepped in between. He was trying to settle it down and then he got shot I think in the abdomen and he died. I was not at that party, which was good, but we heard about it the next day.

Healey: Was he someone you knew?

Halaska: I had briefly known of him. He wasn't someone that I necessarily knew personally, but he had been with the unit I think for a while. He was from Wisconsin too. He was from Oshkosh. I just knew that he was a nice friendly guy. But because I was bounced around so much during last deployment, I didn't really get to know people very well, but it still hard to kind of go through an entire deployment and not necessarily lose anyone close but as soon as we got home that's when it happened. And there was also just I don't know anyone in particular, but I know that there were vehicle accidents when we got back as well, motorcycle deaths, things like that. Because people come back with all their money and that kind of stuff, go out and buy a motorcycle, get drunk, drive dumb, and die. But that was what happened to Sergeant Schlack. And I remember having the service with—the memorial with the boots and his weapon and his helmet. We did that and it was sad for our entire battalion because we hadn't lost anyone from our battalion during deployment, but get home and that happens very quickly afterwards.

And there were—I wasn't used to people having guns. Like I was used to having my weapon in the military and having that, but I wasn't used to being around people who had handguns necessarily. So I went to another—I was at another party and this was—it was in Killeen and then some people started fighting outside and one of my friends, and it was his house, and he just pulled out a handgun and put it on the table and I just remember being like, "We're leaving now." Like that is not OK and we are leaving now because this is obviously turning not into a good situation. And just kind of how it was like a thing that people had and it was more casual but it was also terrifying.

Healey: Were personal weapons, is that something that was primarily off base, for people who lived off the installation?

Halaska: Yeah, primarily people off base. I wasn't—I'm not sure what the rules were for people on base, if you could have them in your vehicles or anything like that. But there is a Guns Galore, at least one or two, right outside of Fort Hood. They're very readily available. So I'm not sure exactly what the installation rules were for having personal firearms because I never tried to get one.

[00:10:00]

Healey: Do you think that personal weapons were more prevalent after the deployment or you don't know?

Halaska: I'm not sure. I think part of the reason, because I wasn't there before the deployment necessarily. I didn't really know people. I didn't go to parties where there was that happening. But it was just something that stuck out in my mind afterwards. So let me see. We had a good summer though. I had to get used to—summer in Texas is hot. It is hot and it is dry and you can get sunburn at five o'clock in the afternoon. It doesn't matter. I was used to Wisconsin where the hottest part of the day might be one o'clock in the afternoon, one, two o'clock in the afternoon, and that's about the time when you get sunburnt too. And then going—and summer is the time when you go out and do things in Wisconsin. You go out and you go hiking, you go camping, you go do all these things. You can't do that in Texas in the summer and you kind of learn that the hard way. We did go camping a few times, myself and my partner at the time, which was fun. But there was one night I remember when we were—we set up the tent out at—it was called BLORA. That was the recreational area on Fort Hood and it's right next to a lake which is pretty nice. So it was nice to do things next to water.

Healey: What was your duty assignment at this time?

Halaska: Oh, yes. So the working part. I got transferred actually immediately when we got back to the clinic. So I was working at the TMC [troop medical clinic].

Healey: Which stands for?

Halaska: Tactical medical clinic? I'm not exactly sure. So I got sent there which was nice because I actually got to work with some of the physicians' assistants that I worked with on deployment as well. So it was a nice kind of segue back. I got to work with Captain Holmes and at least one or two other officers that I had worked with before.

Healey: What was your pay grade at the time?

Halaska: I was—I believe I was an E3. I would make specialist soon and that is where I would stay. I knew I was going to get out after four years so I didn't necessarily try for sergeant. And it was at this time also that I started—while I was working there, I asked my sergeant like, "Can I sign up for college classes?" because right behind the TMC was Central Texas College which was kind of a community college. It served the base. A lot of people and a lot of soldiers went there, a lot of spouses, those kind of things, went there. So I started taking classes over the summer as well. I think I took a history class and—just one or two classes. And I know one was in person and another one was online, but it was nice to have that again. I enjoy school. And so we would just do a daily sick call at the TMC and I would work from—we opened at six so I would work from about six until two. And I didn't really have to report back to my unit at all during that time. I was kind of on my own. I would just show up for work and do that. And because of the timing of things I was—I had to do PT on my own. So I would wake up in the morning before work and do PT then because I did try once to do PT after work and I just about fell out trying to run in Texas at two o'clock in the afternoon. I definitely started to overheat and then I had to stop and just like sit under the shade of a tree for a little bit and then just walk back to my barracks.

Healey: How would you compare the temperature in Texas in the summer to Iraq?

Halaska: They were both bad. They were both not great. I—yeah. I don't—once you get to a certain point of hot it doesn't really register as being significantly different. So as soon as you are over 120 degrees it's really bad. There was one time—there was a very short amount of time that was, what, 140 in Iraq?

[00:15:00]

And that was definitely the hottest I've ever felt. But you just go outside and you're just like this is terrible. And then you go immediately back inside. So I like to say that it is equivalent to it being incredibly cold outside. It's not that different. You go outside, you realize that the outside probably wants you dead and you should go back inside where it is temperature controlled. So their summer in Texas is like our winter here in Wisconsin. It is not the time to go outside. So you just go—or you become nocturnal. You only go out after dark. It was nice in the morning so I would go out in the morning and go for my runs in the morning which was fun because there were jackrabbits that would be out in the morning. So if you go running at four o'clock in the morning in Texas you'll see skunks and jackrabbits and other kind of critters which I thought were pretty cute. And no one else was awake at the time either so I just kind of had the base to myself which was kind of a cool feeling.

So I did that for a while, a few months, and then I got transferred back to my unit, back to Evac Platoon, so Evacuation Platoon and we were in charge of keeping vehicles up to date and keeping the vehicles well maintenance and packed with things and things like that. So it was more about equipment and less about treatment necessarily, but we still got to do training and things like that. I don't necessarily remember a lot of the work that we were doing at the time. I think it was just preparing—oh, we did field exercises as well, but that was later on in the year. We didn't go out in the—they let us have our summer a little bit to ourselves. I think they wanted to give us a little bit of cooldown time after deployment. And then we started training again in the fall and into the winter. And—

Healey: Did you know you were going to go back to Iraq?

Halaska: Yes. We knew we were going back the next year.

Healey: What was the typical rotation schedule for going to Iraq, staying there, coming back, time off?

Halaska: Year on/year off basically for our unit, and for a lot of units at Fort Hood. It was a deployment area. So then I will go to November fifth at Fort Hood. That was the day of the mass shooting at Fort Hood.

Healey: You were there?

Halaska: Yes. I was at Fort Hood. I was out on the range actually. So we were out on the range zeroing our weapons, doing target shooting and that kind of thing, and then the radios got very busy and we didn't know what was going on. And then there were helicopters overhead and we still didn't know what was going on. And then we heard that there was a

shooting going on. There was an active shooter situation, there was a shooting going on, but we didn't know—the thing about the situation is no one knew what was going on. We didn't know how many people were involved in the shooting, we didn't know where it was, we just knew it was on Fort Hood somewhere. We didn't know where it was. We didn't know how many shooters there were. They were saying that there were multiple shooters at first and so it was just very confusing. And so we had weapons, but we were kind of at the end of the range day so all of our ammunition was packed up. We didn't have anything. We just had our empty weapons. But we did have our vests on which felt nice, to have our bulletproof vests on. The IBAS [??] system. So we had that and we were sitting out at the range and one of our sergeants just—there weren't many of us that were left out there. One of our sergeants just decided we need to get back to our—to basically our headquarters. So you're not supposed to take military equipment in civilian vehicles. That is just kind of a general rule. So we are not supposed to take our weapons in a civilian vehicle.

[00:20:00]

But we broke that rule that day and we just all piled in his minivan and we drove very quickly and swiftly to headquarters and we were just given the instructions to sit low in the vehicle as we were driving. So we're all kind of just hunched down in his vehicle kind of looking out the windows, seeing anything. There were a lot of emergency vehicles around. And then we got to head back to our company headquarters and he just opened up the door, the sliding door, and we just kind of like low—it wasn't—we didn't crawl or anything but it was kind of a lower profile, just kind of got out and into the—into our company headquarters where they had the doors locked. The doors and everything were locked. So we got in there and then we were on lockdown for the entire evening. So and it was still very confusing. We didn't know what was going on.

Healey: With your medical training there was no call to have medical people—

Halaska: No, they had—there were some people who were first responders in the area, but it was mainly civilians who were first responders. It was on the other side of base and I don't—well, not the other side. It was basically down the street. They—we didn't want to—we didn't—the thing is that we didn't know what was going on. Even with medical training they tell you, you are no good as a dead medic so you do not put yourself into a situation that might be dangerous because if—as I said, we didn't know what was going on. They didn't know how many shooters there were, they didn't—we didn't know anything. So we're not going to go, a handful of medics with no equipment, to a site where there might be an active shooter happening.

Healey: Did you have radio TV on?

Halaska: We—I can't remember exactly. I just remember information kind of slowly coming in, but it was—that it was one guy and they got him and—but there were thirteen people died and these were soldiers who were coming back from deployment or getting ready to go. It was at a—it was a place where you went to get your medical stuff checked off before and after deployment. So you went and got your shots, you went and got—make sure everything was good basically. And so what happened was there was basically just the sliding doors in the front so you walk up, there's sliding doors and then there's different stations that people went to. The guy, he was a major, Major Hassan, I think that was his name, he basically just walked in the front doors and then the people who were at

the first station, he just started shooting there. And the building is broken up by a bunch of barriers that are not very substantial so there were forty—over forty people injured and then thirteen people died. So that was not a good day, but I also remember being impatient about just wanting to get back to my barracks because they were making us stay at company—the entire base was locked down. No one was coming in our out. And I just remember being like I just want to go to my barracks, they're right there, why do I have to stay here?

And not—it's kind of—when you—when something terrible happens sometimes your brain doesn't process it right away. It's just kind of like this terrible thing is happening, this terrible thing is over, all right, I want to go home now and I don't want to think about it anymore. There's nothing more that I can do right now so just let me go home.

Healey: How long were you on lockdown?

Halaska: We were on lockdown until probably nine o'clock at night or more. And then I just remember we—so the clinic that this happened at was on the main road and so that was where we would do our company and battalion runs. And so just running past it every day basically and just seeing—because they had it fenced off as a crime scene.

[00:25:00]

Healey: What was the next day like in terms of routine?

Halaska: I can't exactly remember. I remember the day of, I don't necessarily remember the follow-up except for just having to run past it. I'm not sure if security was tighter after that or anything because what are we going to do? President Obama did come though at some point to give a speech. I remember that. He—they set up—so he was giving a speech just kind of saying, "This is a terrible thing happened," everything like that and they—it was at the main big base headquarters and around that large building they had stacked CONEXes. So the big metal containers. They had stacked CONEXes, maybe two or three high, all the way around it and then put up metal detectors as well that everyone had to pass through in order to go see his speech. And you couldn't bring anything in that area. And then they had snipers on the roof and I think also on the CONEXes around there too.

Healey: Did you go see the speech?

Halaska: I did, yes. And I just remember there being standing room and I remember being excited to hear the president speak and just to have that opportunity. Yeah, so that was that event. And let me think what else was happening during that time. Oh, during that time as well, so I was a runner, I enjoyed running a lot and I decided that I wanted to do a marathon. I just thought it would be a fun thing to do. I started running longer distances and did my first half marathon on my twenty-first birthday down in Austin and that was really cool. I enjoyed that a lot. So I did my first marathon and I went out and got a beer. That was really nice. And they actually had beers available for you at the run so I don't—it's good carbs [laughs] is the idea, I guess. So that was fun. So I started doing more long distance running and then I made a plan to do a full marathon. And the full marathon that I was going to do was the Bataan Memorial Death March marathon in New Mexico. And it's—it takes place on an air base out there. I can't remember the name of it off the top of my head. Nope, it's gone. It's right over by White Sands. It's a very pretty area.

But my company was pretty awesome in that my—I told my first sergeant what I wanted to do and he said, "That's good, you can do that, I just want you to"—I needed an officer basically to kind of—they don't want an E3 going out and doing their own PT basically even if they have a plan. So I kind of needed an officer to accompany me or to supervise me in this role. So we had a brand new—

Healey: While you were training?

Halaska: Yeah. A brand-new second lieutenant who was also a very good runner, Lieutenant Newsbaum [??]. Do not ask me to spell that. I can't remember exactly, but she was a cool lady. So she would run—we would go on runs together. Because we were running faster and longer than the company would in their regular company marches so in order to train for a marathon you have to do—most of your runs are going to be six miles or more for the most part and then you'd also do interval runs where you would do five minutes/five minutes off of fast and slow running. So you would do a certain pace for a certain amount and another pace for another amount. And then on the weekends is when I would do my very long runs. So you start at ten miles and then you kind of go up two miles per week until you get to about twenty miles.

[00:30:00]

And then after twenty miles you don't do the entire twenty-six because the idea when you're training for a marathon is that that's just too long for you to do too often. And I agree.

So I did—I ended up doing that marathon and it was incredibly hard. But it was cool to see because they had veterans from that conflict, from the Bataan Memorial March, people who had actually been involved in that. They had them there and it was an interesting reminder of what they did. And they purposely made this marathon very hard. So there were—there was about five miles that was basically all uphill and you kind of went up and around a mountain and then after that it was rolling hills as well. So you're just going up and down and up and down and up and down. And then by mile twenty your quads and your knees are just shot from all the hills. And then they had a—what's it called? A sand pit. You had to run through a sand pit at mile twenty-two. So you're just running through this length of sand and you're just like slipping and sliding and sinking into it and I kind of cried a little bit around that part because it was very hard and it hurt a lot. But I also thought about the veterans who had to do a terrible march in the Philippines and their suffering and I just thought what I'm going through is nothing. And it actually helped me keep going. Because at some point you just don't feel anything anymore. About mile twenty-four. You're like everything hurts, but also, I can't feel anything at the same time. So then you just keep going. And then it was over and I was very happy when it was over and they just let me lay down and they had massage people there to just work on your legs a little bit which was very nice.

So I had that going on. And then the next day or that evening I had to fly back from New Mexico back to Austin and then my sergeant picked me up in Austin and because I went from running this marathon to driving to the airport to flying my legs had all tightened up by that point. So I couldn't—my quads basically didn't work for the next few days. So me trying to get into a car, I couldn't lift my legs. So I just kind of flopped into the back seat of her car and she was just pointing and laughing at me. So that was fun. And at this

point actually I was working in the office. That's where I got moved to next. I was worked in the office. So—of the company. So I—it was just another thing where it's like I'm just getting passed around all over the place to do all these different jobs.

Healey: So when you worked at the company office you were not doing your medic thing?

Halaska: No, I was not doing my medic thing. I was keeping track of people's paperwork. And my sergeant in the training room, Sergeant Lennox, she was a cool lady, she was a bit—we were both a little—very energetic people. So it was a fun talkative loud office. But we got our paperwork done and I didn't know anything about the paperwork system at all in the military, about keeping track of all the paperwork, so it was kind of a—it was a steep learning curve, but I tried very hard to keep everything organized and to not mess anything up for anyone. Because it was their leave, it was their—you know, there were actual consequences for not getting things processed. And then just building relationships with people up in S1, the different shop offices up at battalion headquarters. Yeah, and that was—and then on our field exercises that we would go do I would be in charge of counting personnel and reporting and doing our green reports. I would also be in charge of putting up our radios in our company headquarters as well. So doing that.

[00:35:00]

And that was fun. I really enjoyed setting up the radios and getting those working and then reporting in. So I'd have to get up earlier than everyone else and go around and count all the people, count all their weapons, and then send in our report during our field exercises.

And the thing that I remember most about the field exercises in Texas is that it rained the entire time. It was basically a camping trip where it was cold—because it was winter by the time we went out and did our field exercises. So it was cold and not Wisconsin cold of course but forty degrees, forty, fifty degrees and then just that wind that sweeps across the plains because there's nothing to interrupt it that is just bone chilling. And then it just rained the entire time and I just remember seeing a little water just coming right through the tents and just having—I remember our battalion commander telling us all to remember our galoshes and us all laughing because he used the term galoshes. [Laughs] But it was good, it was fun. It was good to kind of get out and do stuff as a company. And there still is medical training that we were doing. I'm not sure exactly when we did the—we did a live tissue lab and I think we may have done this before my first deployment. I can't remember exactly. I just remember doing it. So a live tissue lab. Also called the goat lab. A lot of people have a lot of problems with this and I can understand why, however I have to say from a training standpoint it was the most valuable training I ever had because trying to stop bleeding on a dummy is one thing, but you don't understand how much pressure you need to put on a limb or how much Kerlix you need to pack into a wound in order to get it to stop. You think oh, yeah, that one roll that I have, that'll be enough, and it's not if you're trying to stop—and so we were working—

Healey: And what is Kerlix?

Halaska: Kerlix is—it's basically just a roll of gauze and it's made for you to just pull some of it out and then you just pack a wound with it. So it's meant to take up space and soak up blood. And you can also use it to wrap as well. So it's a versatile tool that medics use a lot for many different kinds of wounds. So live tissue lab was very, very good. So we—

one thing that we did is we—so we walked into this room and there were probably ten goats all lined up on stretchers and they were laying down on these. And they were still alive, but they were highly, highly medicated. And so there are veterinary specialists in the Army and this was one of their jobs is to keep these animals basically in a state of they don't know what's going on and they cannot feel any pain. That is their entire job.

And so what we did is we got to practice doing regular IVs and those kind of things. I got to do an emergency trach so getting to and putting in the air tube in the throat on a goat. Which was pretty cool. You don't really realize how long a goat's neck is until it's stretched out before you, but they have the same markings. So you have to find the—a landmark basically in the throat. And you're like okay, this is where I have to do this and this is where you cut. And it was valuable to see how much blood starts, how quickly it does, and how you have to wipe things away and how you have to get things out of the way and then how you have to put everything in. So that was good and then they also did other—they cracked the check as well so we could see into the check cavity so we could see what it looks like when there's shrapnel or something like that. So they basically cut part of the cavity so you can see what's actually happening to the lungs and why you need to do a needle check decompression to help get some of the air out or some of the other stuff.

[00:40:00]

And then they also put dye in as well so we could see how fast injectable—something going in the vein, how fast it disperses throughout the entire body. Which was really cool because it's a matter of seconds that that blood just goes throughout the entire body. So it went from the goats—we did it in the carotid. So we did it there and you can just see this green dye just spreading throughout the entire goat until its entire heart was this color and its tongue. And yeah, it was really cool. And then they basically euthanized the goat after that.

And then later we did training where it was—they had us go way out into the middle of the woods and we had a large 250-pound dummy and that was of course our hurt guy and we had to carry that all the way back to the tents. And once we were in the tents we had to one at a time kind of run in and then we were—it was kind of like the trauma lane thing that I had in my training all over again where it was dark and they had smoke machines and they had flashing lights and they had really loud music playing and then you had to go over to your goat and you weren't sure exactly what you were going to get. There were a bunch of series of problems that you might have to encounter. The one that I had was basically there was a large laceration on the leg and I needed to stop the bleeding. So I needed to put the CAT tourniquet up on the leg and cinch that down and then I needed to pack the wound. So it was actually one of the easier ones because it was just like stop bleeding. But it was very, very valuable to see how that was. And it was nice that they had professionals there that were providing medical care for the animals. And I wouldn't necessarily say like I did a thankful prayer, but something like that where I was just like, "Thank you, goats, for this. I know you didn't have any say in the matter, but I appreciate it and I'm not sure what happens next but maybe you'll get reincarnated into something else."

So there was that and then we went to Fort Polk for training as well. And this was—so we had been doing basically smaller company and battalion level field exercises and now out at Fort Polk we were doing brigade level exercises. So where this was one of the big

training facilities where they would have situations—and this was to test all levels of the unit, but it was—a big part of it was to test our ability to move equipment. It was to test our ability—the ability of upper command to keep things organized and to respond to situations and to run things well. And they would simulate incoming and that kind of stuff. And I was still working in the office so I was still in charge of comms and all that information. So I don't really remember much about the training other than we were using MRAPs [mine resistant ambush protected] during this training which is the mine resistant vehicles. They're very large. And I believe one of them tipped over during this training which happens to those vehicles because they're very large and they're very top-heavy so sometimes they tip over. So that happened, but everything else went well. Oh, and one other good memory. There was—

Healey: Were there casualties from—

Halaska: No.

Healey: No?

Halaska: Everyone was fine which was—yes. Because that also does happen. When those vehicles tip—they weren't—I don't think they were going very fast. I think it was just a—like either the road wasn't great or something and it just tipped right over. But not necessarily on its—it just fell over on its side, not on its head.

[00:45:00]

There was one other kind of cool moment at the end of an exercise that we were doing where we had to bring a casualty to a landing zone point where they were going to be picked up for medevac. And the place—and they had a real helicopter come and pick people up too. That was pretty cool. But at this area it was early in the morning and so the sun was just coming up and there was this glittery beautiful pond and then there were wild horses playing in it and I was just very happy about it. I was like oh, this is so nice. All this other stuff is going on, but that's happening. So what our—the big thing that our unit trained for—so my company was split into the headquarters and then there was the Evac Platoon and then the Treatment Platoon. Treatment Platoon was in charge of the clinic basically, but they were also in charge of MASCAL [mass casualty] situations. That was a thing that we were training for is mass casualty situations. So where there are multiple people who are—it's the worst-case scenario is that you have a lot of people who are injured.

And so we had our ambulances which were ready to go, go pick people up and bring them back to the clinic, and then our clinic which was set up for emergency lifesaving treatment. And I mean we still might send them to a better hospital, but it was mostly to stabilize people before that point. So we did a lot of training on that as well. And then we were leaving again for second deployment. And this time we were going to—we were going north. We were going to Marez which is right by Mosul, the Marez Diamondback was the base. So it was an Army base that was right next to an airfield.

Healey: So when did you actually go over to Marez, Iraq?

Halaska: [inaudible] [pause] September. Sometime around there. So it was a—we had a little bit over a year back at Fort Hood.

Healey: So September of 2010 by this time?

Halaska: Yes. Or was it September—it might have been less than that.

Healey: I believe you said you were at Polk in November, but don't let me lead you on.

Halaska: No, we weren't at Polk in November. That was more towards the spring/summertime. But I know it wasn't—maybe around September. Septemberish. Yeah, sorry, okay. The timing of things. Anyway, so we were going back there and we were going up north and so what was different the second time—how we got there was the same. I was there for more of the load-up. So taking everything out of CONEXes, counting everything, making sure all the paperwork—making sure everything was straight. That was the duty of the officers, but we had to physically pull everything out and make sure all of our equipment was straight beforehand. And then moving our vehicles and other equipment to the railhead to get it shipped over. And everything left a few months before we did. And then once all of our equipment was gone that was awesome because that meant that there was less for us to take care of back home. Everything was already gone. And at this point I will just point out that we had gotten a new commander after deployment and there was a few new people who were kind of coming into the unit as it happens. But our—one of our other soldiers, a sergeant, she had been in this commander's company before. This was his second command. He didn't necessarily do well with his first one and so they gave him a second one to kind of try again.

[00:50:00]

Healey: This was the company command?

Halaska: Yes. And he was—I would say I would probably like him fine as a person and sometimes you get those people in your life where you're like I like you as a person, you are a fantastic person, but you are not a great teacher or you are not great at the position that you are in. And because of that it just kind of—it hurts the dynamic of everything. And he had—he also was not necessarily super competent in a lot of things that are—that you want a commander to be very good at. One of them was weapons safety. He flagged us. So he had a loaded weapon and he pointed it, like he was gesturing with it or something, and one of our sergeants who he had had multiple combat tours and had lived through some stuff and he had to be held back by some of the other sergeants and soldiers in our company because he was ready to kind of go after him. So there were things like that. He also tried to fire our first sergeant for something, I can't remember what. I was working in the office and it was weird. It was like having mommy and dad fight a little bit and just being kind of stuck in the middle of it. So there was kind of that feeling going into the deployment too, which wasn't fantastic.

So but we also knew that we were going to an area that had kind of been safe for a while. Things had been slowing down in Iraq substantially. We were now part of Operation New Dawn instead of Operation Iraqi Freedom which meant that we weren't—we no longer had a combat mission. Our unit did not have a combat mission. What we were doing was training and assisting. So training and assisting Iraqi police and Army as well. And also, being in the northern part, we were—there were the Kurdish people up there as well so we also interacted with them a bit. Yes, so we flew over there and the flight was kind of the same, but just kind of knowing what was happening, knowing okay, we're

going to go here, we're going to go to Kuwait for a while, just hanging out in Kuwait for a while and then getting our flights up to Marez and getting settled in. And where the clinic was on this base, the clinic was basically right next to the wall of the base and then right next to that was a highway right on the other side. So there was an Iraqi highway right on the other side and also right next to us was an Iraqi police station, like right on the other side of the wall. And we—everything was closed off basically. We kept very, very separate from them for the most part. But so and we—instead of being intense this time we had—so there was more compartments that a lot of people were in. Behind the clinic was a—it was a building. So it was an old Iraqi building and it was a few stories tall and there were different rooms in it and I had actually a pretty large room to myself for the majority of the deployment which was pretty cool.

So we got to decorate that and make that our own and there was actually a balcony on the back that I could go—it was very thin but it was nice to go sit back there and like watch the sun rise. We had a weather balloon behind us as well, or a weather blimp. Well, weather blimp, it was actually a spy blimp. [Laughs] It had cameras on it and was used to monitor the area. So that was kind of cool getting to see the intelligence people come in and reel it in and fix it and do stuff with it and then they would squirrel off back to their little intelligence holes and it would be left up there. It was also though a target that people might aim for as well.

[00:55:00]

So we didn't have—there wasn't really many mortars that were coming, but there were still some on occasion and we did have ones that landed right back there. And I just remember running—hearing the incoming stuff and running down the stairs and going—there wasn't necessarily a bunker that was super close so just running more towards the center of the building underneath the stairs and just as the mortar hit back there just kind of feeling like the building shake. Which was startling of course. But we had good amenities during that deployment. We had the little shops and everything like that. This was also after stop-loss had gone away. So they were not necessarily in need of us, the soldiers, as much now that this operation was kind of coming to an end. So what they had us—so I was due to get out in August 2011. So I was only going to stay for eight months. So I needed some time to out-process after coming back from Iraq and then out-process from the Army to meet my deadline of getting out by August '11. So I was leaving by May.

Healey: How many soldiers were at this installation, Diamondback? And civilians, American civilians.

Halaska: Oh, yeah, we had a lot of those as well. It was [sigh] I'm not exactly sure. It wasn't a huge, huge base, but there were definitely thousands of people, but not—it wasn't as large as Tallil was last time. So it was a little bit smaller. There were a lot of contractors. Contractors were doing a lot of the truck driving at the time.

Healey: Did you leave base often or not?

Halaska: Not really. We—so one thing that ended up happening, so our—as I said before, our company was—our medics were made to go other places. So something that happens is that our medics are doled out to other companies. So one of the other companies had more of a logistics mission. They were meant to drive supplies out here and drop those

off. So they had different teams and that was what they were responsible for. And so we sent medics to go be out with their teams. So they had medics. What we ended up doing, we didn't have—we didn't end up setting up clinics anywhere or doing anything like that, but at some point our command decided that we had these nice big fancy ambulances, MRAP ambulances, and they should be put to use. So they, and I believe this was my company commander's decision, was to have us have our Evac Platoon, our evacuation platoon, go out on these logistic missions in the ambulances. And we were not—and I was back with Evac Platoon by this time. So they rotated me out of the office back to Evac Platoon.

So during this time we weren't necessarily that excited about that just because it's not necessarily something that we had trained for nor had personnel for. We had our ambulances to go get people and come back. We weren't necessarily staffed in order to be running these missions where we needed three people. So we needed the driver, the TC and then the medic in the back. So three people and then these were longer missions as well so it would be about a day and a half or an entire day. And then you would need that entire day and then you would need a day off afterwards. And so we didn't have that many people in our platoon. So it was kind of—it was stretching us a bit thin doing this. And then also having people to watch the radios and to do the other things that we needed to do, other general maintenance and other tasks.

[01:00:00]

So we—yeah, we weren't necessarily that happy about it. I also kind of was of the opinion that they had medics out on these patrols or out on these logistic missions, they have them there, and we also have medevac so if the weather was considered black or red where you couldn't fly something, then maybe have an ambulance go out so that you would have that support, but otherwise it's just an extra vehicle kind of out and about.

I will also just use this opportunity to talk a little bit more about MRAPs. I told you that we had one kind of fall over or flip during training. When we got to Kuwait one of the training simulations that they had us do was rollover training. So they had us all sit in basically the body of an MRAP that was stuck on this machine that would basically roll it over. So we were all sitting inside and we had the five point harness on and we had all of our stuff and then we all sat in there and then someone would yell, "Rollover, rollover, rollover" and then we would start to tip and then we would—it would flip us all the way around and then we'd hang upside down for a little bit and feel what that felt like. And then they'd flip us back over. Because—and then we also had to—so rollover, rollover, rollover, or if there was—if you were going into water you had to say that you were going into water, something like that. But I'm not really sure why it mattered if you were saying these different things because it was happening whether or not you—it was just to prepare people, I guess, and then you were supposed to brace a certain way.

But so they were—by this point they were used to these vehicles doing this. This is something that had been happening. The—it was the tradeoff for having vehicles that were resistant to explosions. They did a very, very good job of that, but they also—the tradeoff was that they were tippy. And they were big and they were heavy so they would fall into canals. Like if the road wasn't sturdy enough, they would slide into canals. And all of the doors were big and heavy and so they all opened—okay, so the side doors themselves were about 500 pounds. The one in the back was about a thousand pounds. So those two things, if you didn't have the hydraulic system working you were going to be

hard-pressed to open those things on your own. There's the hatch up top and that was probably your best way of getting out was out the top hatch. So just to give you kind of a look at what MRAPs were all about. And so we were going out and doing those missions and I actually did not have my license for the MRAP. It had lapsed sometime during the year. I did not renew my training on it. I missed that training date or something. So I actually couldn't drive. So I was the medic in the back. And the thing with ambulance vehicles is that they don't have a gunner. So most of the other vehicles, they have a gunner. I was just sitting in the back. I was the one who would pop open the back if need be and help load someone up and then I would monitor the patient in the back of the truck if we needed to do that. But most of the time I was just sitting in the back for hours and hours and hours on that, just kind of bouncing around and listening to my iPod.

And then highest-ranking member was our TC up in the front so they were the one who communicated and they were the commander of the vehicle. They're the ones who are telling us where to go. They communicated with people and then you had the driver. So I went out on those. I had my rotations out on those missions and then I will get to the day of November thirtieth, November twenty-ninth or thirtieth, it was one of the two, 2010, when we were out on one of these missions and one of our drivers—our driver was not an experienced driver. She had done the training, she was licensed on this, but the training they have you do is slow.

[01:05:00]

They have you driving on base forty miles an hour maybe. When you're going off base, you're going at least sixty on a lot of these roads. Because people want to get done. You don't want to go super slow. You just want to get home. And you have experienced truck drivers who are used to driving these large trucks at this pace. So she wasn't super experienced, but she was like okay, she was the one who was licensed, she was the one who was up, I didn't have my license on it so I couldn't drive it. So I was in the back, she was driving, and we got out to where we were supposed to get out and then dropped off the supplies and then I can't remember where exactly we were dropping supplies off. It was just a little, little base that was out west, very far west.

And so we were on our way back and I just remember it being even more bumpy than usual. And I think she had hit a few potholes and I was just like whoa. I hit my—like I bounced and I hit my head on the roof on one of those and I was just like—I think I said something just like, "That was a good one" kind of a thing. You know. And I didn't mean anything by it, but I don't think it helped having the peanut gallery. Because she was probably feeling kind of nervous about having to drive that big old vehicle down that bumpy road to begin with. But then we were driving and then all of a sudden I just remember feeling a jerk in this—jerk one way and then the other. And I just remember feeling like I was rolling backwards. And because the seats are along the side of the vehicle so you're facing—you're not facing the front of the vehicle, you're facing kind of the middle of the vehicle.

Healey: No seatbelts?

Halaska: No. Seatbelts. Definitely seatbelts. I had the harness. Because they had good harnesses because that was one of the things that made people die in rollovers is that people weren't wearing their seatbelts so they would just get flung around the back of the vehicle. I had a very good seatbelt. It was the five-point harness that went over your legs and over your

shoulders. So like the best roller coaster harness. And it was good and it was tight and I was wearing my vest and I had my helmet on and I had my weapon and then I just remember feeling us start to go backwards and I just remember being like, "Shit." And then I remember nothing for a span of time until I woke up and I saw—I just remember seeing our medic in front of my face and she was the medic for that group.

Healey: Was she on the vehicle?

Halaska: She was not on our vehicle. No, all the medics in our vehicle were all inured [laughs] because our vehicle flipped over a lot. We were going fifty, sixty miles an hour and I think my—the driver kind of veered one way and then another and that veer was enough just to send us flying. And so we rolled over I think at least five times. Just [dadadada]. It just kept going. And the Sergeant Chambers, she was our lead, her door flew off. The 500-pound door flew off because it wasn't combat locked, I guess. So that flew off. The back axle also flew off as well to the vehicle. So it was just like a shell. But because that door flew off, we were actually able to get out a lot faster. They didn't have to attach a truck to it and pull the back door off or something like that. So it was actually very lucky. And I just remember coming to and just feeling confused but feeling myself constrained to the spine board and on a litter and feeling the C [cervical] collar on my neck and just feeling myself being strapped down. And they had called the medevac and the medevac was going to be there. Took it ten minutes to get there, ten minutes ride back. But I just remember when I came to just kind of doing the okay, you were in an accident, that happened, that's very scary, and then just wiggling my toes, just feeling that.

[01:10:00]

And just being like oh, thank God, all the toes wiggle. That's real nice. And then I kind of—I cried a little bit just because I was thankful that my toes were wiggling and that it wasn't that bad, but also I was scared. And then I vaguely remember being loaded up onto the helicopter and having the—another medic back there, a flight medic, and I remember his patch was—it was like—it was a kangaroo with a little nurse's hat on with a little beat up joey in the pouch. So like the little kangaroo, that was cute. He gave me a patch too. So I think I still have that somewhere at home. But then flying back and then being offloaded into the hospital and then everyone was in the hospital. Like our brigade commander was there, everyone. The entire chain of command was in like the emergency room and kind of like watching. So I just remember I had—

Healey: How many people were in the vehicle that you were in?

Halaska: Three.

Healey: Were you all in the hospital?

Halaska: Yeah, we were all there. We were all medevacked from the site because it was a substantial crash and so they needed to make sure that everything was okay. So one of the first things that they did was get us a CT [computed tomography] scan just to make sure—which they had that at the hospital which was really cool. So they did that to make sure that there wasn't any bleeding going on in our noggins or any internal bleeding. And they didn't find any which was very good. And they brought us out and gave us some pain management as well which was very nice. And then they—for me I had a cut above my left eye. I had a cut up there and then also a few others on my head where it got

knocked around. My helmet had come off while we were flipping around. My helmet had come off so something hit me in my face. It might have been my weapon, it may have been my helmet. I couldn't really feel it at the time, but I had—so I had the cut and bruise up on the top of my head, my—something had hit me right on the bridge of my nose. I would end up with black eyes and then my lip was also cut and then I would just have—I had bruises all on my arms and on my legs where the seatbelt was on my legs. I—the harnesses that were keeping me in place on my legs, because I was bounced around so much and actually at the end I was hanging upside down in the back of the vehicle, I had bruises just along my legs that were—my entire thighs were just bruised completely. And it's something that like I can still feel it today. Like the bruising actually scarred my legs basically. It was very weird. I did not know that that could happen, but so I was real beat up.

So they were doing a good job though. They sewed me up and there was one time when they were—oh, they were trying to numb up my forehead and they put the needle in and started to put the—and I just swore really, really loud. And they were just like—it was not an intentional thing, it just came out because lidocaine hurts. It burns. And they gave me more medication after that which was nice to help simmer things down a bit. And my—I just remember there being a lot of people around and then my battalion commander asked us if we said, "Rollover, rollover, rollover." [Laughs] And I said, "No. It was so much faster than the training that you had us do." That was so incredibly gentle in comparison. The amount of time that you had was zero and there wasn't anything that you could do about it. So I ended up staying there overnight and I got released back. My partner at the time came to see me, but she didn't get there until basically after everyone else left because our entire command was there. And we of course—I mean this was still during Don't Ask, Don't Tell, but she was there as my "good friend."

[01:15:00]

And just to see how I was doing. And it really freaked her out a lot. But her command was a bit—her first sergeant knew and he was cool with us. I would go and hang out. She was working night shifts. And actually, he was a cool guy. His nickname was The Dragon and I painted a dragon on his door for him, on his—the door to his office. So he liked me and he knew about us and he was fine with it, but he was worried about people above knowing about it. So he discouraged her from coming out right away to come see me because he didn't, I don't know, want us to get emotional or something and give ourselves away.

But she came out and then she actually helped me out. My command basically let her come and stay with me as I was getting better and she made sure that I got my medication, because I was on pain medication for about two weeks. I was kind of out of commission for that time. I had a pretty severe concussion. Like I was incredibly sensitive to light during that time. I basically had a headache for days, weeks. And very sensitive to light, very sensitive to sound, smells, everything. Just very, very sensitive. So I recovered through that. And they kind of just had a policy after that that they weren't sending me out on any more missions. Like you're done with that. And actually, our missions, the logistic ones, got cancelled after that because it was just seen as too risky. So that was good, I guess. [Laughs] It was like oh, that's not worth it and it wasn't seen after that, that—my commander actually had to go back to the States for a while because he had lost some equipment. The paperwork for it was missing, they didn't know where things were. So and the most important thing, I guess, for a commander is not losing

millions of dollars' worth of equipment. So he had to go back and do that and I was on the road to recovery physically which was good.

We kind of—my—it kind of left me with some anxiety about being a passenger in vehicles for a while after that. That would kind of come out a bit later. So after that kind of the next big event was in January when—so the other—so the scouts and the other infantry guys and the field artillery guys who were all with our unit, their entire job during this time was to train and assist Iraqi Army and Iraqi police. And so they would do basically like basic training kind of stuff where you take them out to the range and you do this stuff, except they didn't let them have live ammo. So it was mostly about tactical movements and those kind of things. Yeah, so they didn't let them have live ammunition on the base with our soldiers. But one day, January fifteenth, we had—I was actually—it was another thing where you just hear things kind of coming in and One-Nine, the guys who I was with last time, they were out at a training exercise and it turns out that one of the Iraqi Army guys who was a newer recruit, he was actually part of a terrorist organization, he snuck ammunition on base and he went into a Porta Potty, took out his blanks, loaded in a clip of live ammunition, and came out shooting. And he killed two soldiers and injured one. And there were two younger soldiers who were brand new scouts who were just out of basic training who reacted very quickly and very well and took him out very quickly. Which was very good. Otherwise a lot more people would have died.

So Sergeant Lamar and Sergeant Bartley both died pretty much instantly. There wasn't really anything that we could do as medics responding to that scene.

[01:20:00]

So we—that happened and then it was basically an entire day of—we were on complete blackout, complete communication blackout. And I was working in the evac office that day and then I took my dinner break and I came back and the ambulance was gone. And I said, "What's happening?" It turns out they had our ambulance go pick up the body of the insurgent who had been left outside all day because you still need to bring him to mortuary affairs and that was our responsibility. So our medics, our two medics, had to go pack up that guy's body, bring him back in the truck, and drop him off at mortuary affairs. And I missed that by about fifteen, twenty minutes. So I was very happy about that.

I feel like I missed out on a lot of very terrible things kind of just by the skin of my teeth throughout both my deployments. So that happened and then I was selected to go with my first sergeant and when they were sending the bodies back home. So they had the caskets draped with the flag and they were loading them up onto the plane out at the flight lane. And so everyone—every company had their representative out and I was the flagbearer for our company at the time. So this was in the middle of the night, it was dark, and it was actually kind of cold and rainy as it got in that part of Iraq actually. Cold and rainy and dark and I just remember having to hold that flag for a very long time as it was going on. But it was just so sad and I remember just hearing when it was One-Nine I was just like, "Not my guys!" You know, because they were the guys that I was with last—during the last deployment and I was very, very thankful that none of the medics had been hurt, but I also just felt bad for them that something like that happened in their unit because they were all great guys, of course. So yeah.

But that was kind of another example of how things just kind of went from, you know, we're here and we're just watching our movies and going to the gym a lot and doing that kind of stuff to like oh, this is still where we're at actually, this is a very real war zone that we're in. But after those two things happened the only thing I remember is just going to the gym a lot and doing twice a day gym routines and getting in really good shape. And then one day I was, what, like five minutes late for something. Me and one of my buddies, Stoker, he was kind of the—he was a private under me. So I was a specialist at this time and so I was kind of in charge of him and we were given a very, very short amount of time to go get ready and be back where we needed to be. And we were less than five minutes late. We were—it was like a minute, but our sergeant was not in a good mood that day and so she smoked us. And I just remember being in the front leaning rest and then just feeling something in my shoulder just—it didn't feel like it snapped or any—it was just a burning in my shoulder that I had never experienced before, in my right shoulder. And just—because I was still—everything was still kind of sore still. It was like months afterwards and things were still sore from the accident. Like my head didn't feel quite right still. But after that I went and got myself on profile because—a medical profile basically where I was not going to be made to do pushups like that again because it hurt so bad that just tears just started rolling out of my eyes.

[01:25:00]

And I'm like I'm not—this is not what I want to do because I don't want to cry because I don't want to show weakness because I'm just more angry than anything else that this is hurting so bad.

And previous—before that I could stay in the pushup position, front leaning rest, I could stay there all day. That wasn't a problem for me. I'd get upper body strength. So that was just a very weird thing to happen and I didn't like it so I went and got on profile so that wouldn't happen again. And then not long after that it was time for me to go. So my—I didn't get leave during that tour at all so I had been there for a straight eight months. I think I missed the leave window, so the ability to get leave, by a few weeks. It's like if you were staying a few weeks longer then you would have got midtour leave and you would have gotten to go home, but instead I get to see everyone else go and I got to stay. But then I was getting to leave early so that was also awesome. So leaving was probably—it was a good experience. It was fun. We were not priority going back. So people who were going home on leave were priority. People who had to go someplace for a mission, that was priority. People who were just getting out were not priority. So I had to go down to the—I had to pack up all my stuff up and I went down to the flight line and I just had to wait until there was a flight that could take me somewhere else and maybe Kuwait.

So just had to go talk to people and like, "Hey, where are you going? Got room for me?" And I was actually pretty lucky. I only had to wait in that first airport for a day. So I watched a lot of—I started watching *Game of Thrones* at that point in time because that had just come out and there were just the first few episodes. I was like oh, this is really good. So that was nice. But the flight that I ended up getting was—it was on a cargo plane, which a lot of them were, but they had a lot of stops to be made. So there was five stops, I believe, between northern Mosul region and then we kind of bounced south. And I think we—yeah, we actually stopped at Tallil during one of those and we had a little bit of a longer break down there and we got to go get pizza or something like that. But this entire time I—my head was still not feeling fantastic. I was still getting very frequent

headaches and I also was very anxious about being in moving vehicles and I hadn't really realized that I had started basically having panic attacks. So during this flight, which was—it took eight hours to get to Kuwait because we were taking off and landing so frequently and every takeoff and landing was terrible because there was also a sandstorm. So we were being jostled around a lot and we were doing the combat landing so it was fast and very bumpy and my brain was very convinced that I was going to die every single time.

So that was stressful and I was very, very glad to get to Kuwait and just to go sleep. Just being exhausted after that. And I didn't actually have to stay in Kuwait that long, which was nice as well. So then I got to go home and I just remember leaving and thinking goodbye, never coming back. Which was a little sad just in the—parts of it are a beautiful country. And the people, some of the people were fantastic. Some not great things happened there, but also there were very beautiful parts. Some things that I remember. So at Mosul behind the base there was a tank cemetery. So there was a bunch of old Russian tanks and other things that were all back there. That was really cool. They had really gigantic magpies. So the big black and white birds with really long tails that would fly around. And then they had jackals as well. There was the golden jackal.

[01:30:00]

And my partner got a picture of it. Very, very excited. So that was cool.

And oh, the European rolling is another bird that I remember seeing and it was just this beautiful blue and green bird that was gorgeous. And they liked to hang out near water reservoirs that were on base, just kind of all these cool exotic birds. So that was really cool. And then also just getting to see—you could peek over the walls and see sheep and sheep herders on the other side and that was cool. And northern Iraq was very, very pretty. There was lots of—there was actually grass and fields up there. So it was very beautiful country. I will say I got to—one of our translators was Kurdish and he introduced himself basically by saying, "Hello, my name is, and I am Kurdish, I am not Iraqi." So [laughs] we're like oh, okay. I didn't really know much about the divisions there. I knew that they existed, but I didn't know how severe they were, just that idea that like I am Kurdish, I'm not Iraqi. It's like you live in the country, but it's not seen that way. And they actually had Kurdish soldiers because they have their own military force that is separate from the Iraqi Army. They had them paired with Iraqis and Iraqi police in the area which went well most of the time, but on occasion people would fight and kill each other. So that was also just something that would happen.

Healey: Where did you meet the Kurdish translator?

Halaska: It was on a mission. It was on a mission at some point, but he was a nice little guy.

Healey: Was that about your only contact with the Kurds?

Halaska: Yeah, that was about it. I know other people had more contact with them, but I did not just because limited missions, things like that. So getting back home was nice. We—my mom and her husband Bill came and visited me right when I was getting out or right when I was coming back. They were there to meet me which was awesome. But one thing that I remember very vividly is—so just getting in the car and driving and in Texas they have these great big over—or not—kind of exchange areas where it's like fifty feet

off the ground or something just going around this large curve that's super high up and I just remember driving in the car and when you're used to driving no more than forty miles an hour, fifty, you know, something, going seventy or eighty miles an hour on the highway when you get back, you can feel it. So feeling that and then just having that anxiety that I had about being a passenger in a vehicle really kind of compounded on each other and I just remember having a pretty bad panic attack in the back of that vehicle. And my mom and Bill just being like, "What's happening?" I'm just like, "I'll be okay, I just need to, whoo." And that lasted—those lasted for kind of a few years. It's like once your body learns a certain reaction to something it's hard to untrain it.

But oh, another thing. So after my accident my commander was there and I just remember him saying that he was going to call my parents. And this is—I am—this was when I was still in the hospital so I was on a lot of pain medication and everything. You know, I was kind of out of it. And he was like, "Halaska, I'm going to call your parents" or something like that and I'm just like, "No!" [Laughs] Like you are not calling my parents.

Healey: Why was that?

Halaska: Because I didn't want my parents getting a call from my company commander saying that I was in an accident. I wanted them to hear it from me so that they knew I was okay. And like even through like the fog of medication I thought about that.

[01:35:00]

Because I'm like that is not what my parents need to hear and I also just did not trust him necessarily to be tactful or to present it well, to be like, "She's okay, here's what happened." It was like, "Rachel was in an accident." It's like oh my God, you're going to give my mom a heart attack. My dad's heart isn't that great to begin with, this isn't going to be good. Like let me do it. I'll do it. And I did it the next day. I told them what was happening or what happened and it was fine. But yeah, so came back and then just started the out-processing at Fort Hood and I had—one of my friends was there, Romero was his name, and we were out-processing at the same time. And which was fun to have a buddy to go through all that. So just returning equipment, going to the different classes, and kind of debriefings and those kind of things. And then yeah—

Healey: How long was your out-processing?

Halaska: It was a few months. So it was a few months of just kind of being in between which was a little bit weird. So you kind of had a unit. You were with the rear detachment which that's where some of the pregnant ladies were or some people who were not fit to deploy. You just need some people back there to keep things kind of going.

Healey: You weren't doing medic duties?

Halaska: No, I was basically removed from all jobs except for occasionally guarding the empty motor pool. So just sitting in a little box for twelve hours and I just—I had an iPad at the time. It was brand new. I was excited. That's what I spent my deployment money on. Not all of it, but you know, I treated myself. So I would just watch movies while guarding nothing. [Laughs] And I was ready to go. So we had a—

Healey: Did you ever give any thought about reenlisting?

Halaska: Uh-uh. I was pretty good. I was done. My—I knew that I wanted to use my GI Bill and go to school. I had been taking classes during deployment as well. I had continued to take distance classes, so online classes. And I think I actually got four classes done over the course of that year. Which was pretty good considering I was working too. So that was nice. That would transfer well and help me kind of get through my schooling faster in the future. There—no, I did not really want to enlist at that point in time. I was done. I was feeling like I wanted to kind of get out to the world on my own because I felt like I had gone from living with my parents to being in the military and being a lower enlisted soldier, it is a lot like being babysat. There was one time when I had—I missed an FRG [family readiness group] meeting because I got lost on a run. So I was running out at—and this was before my second deployment. So I had gotten lost out—because there's a lot of mountain biking trails out there and I had meant to go on a short five-mile run—that was short for me at that time because I was running a lot—and just get it done. And I ended up just getting completely lost back there and I ended up running for more than ten miles. And just lost and I called as soon as I got back to my car and I was like, "I am so sorry. I am going to be late. I will change."

I had my uniform in the car because I had planned on going directly there. So I changed and got there and I got there right as it was ending. And I got chewed out by not my sergeant, because she was kind of a mild-mannered lady. She was just kind of like, "You missed it. That's not good. We should probably do something about that." But there were a few other sergeants who were not my sergeants but they were in my platoon who just laid into me and just screamed at me. And I was—I'm fine with getting yelled at, like I just kind of turn my brain off, but it was still just like I—it—I was lost. I wasn't trying to, I'm sorry.

[01:40:00]

And then afterwards I just turned to my sergeant, I'm just like, "What did I miss during this very important FRG meeting that warranted like three different other sergeants coming and yelling at me for that amount of time?" I know it was because you don't want to have a soldier out of ranks basically is the idea and I understand that, but it wasn't anything. I didn't miss anything that applied to me because it was a family readiness thing and I didn't have family. It was nothing for me. And so it was something like that, that kind of made me want to get out. That was like I understand why this is happening, but also I did not feel that the response was warranted by what happened. So I was ready to go.

Healey: As you were doing your out-processing did you have a plan? Had you signed up for college courses or were you going to take a year off?

Halaska: It was kind of a loose plan. I knew that I wanted to come back to Wisconsin and go—start going to UW Milwaukee. And my partner was coming with me. So she got out not long after I did. So I was out while she was out-processing. So I just had another—and that was weird because it was—I was actually living in an apartment, well, it was an apartment house off base that was one of my sergeants, it was her place. And because I didn't have anywhere on—I couldn't stay on base anymore basically afterwards, but I still needed to stay in the area. So I was staying there. And that was the summer that it was like two weeks where it was over 120 degrees. And because I wasn't working and I

wasn't going anywhere or doing anything I just became nocturnal and just I read a lot and would occasionally—oh, we'd go to see—go eat some barbecue at some places, go visit Austin. There was a minor league baseball team, the Round Rock Express, Romero and I would go see those games. Because it was really cheap tickets and then you could be really close, like right behind home plate, and you would just get big old beers and sit there and drink beer and watch baseball and it was super fun. So that was a good time after I got back. And then I came back to Wisconsin.

And then I did—oh, when I was out-processing the thing that they always tell you is that anything—basically anything that hurts on you at all, document it as you're out-processing because that's—if it isn't documented then you're basically not going to be able to apply for veterans benefits or to claim it as disability. So just going through and everything that hurt. And by that point in time I was still having headaches, I was still sensitive to light, I was having panic attacks, my shoulder was giving me more and more problems which was upsetting to me because it was especially hurting when I was running. And as you can tell from this interview, I liked running a lot. It was good for me, it was good for my brain, it was kind of my release and my escape from everything. And so the fact that I was having issues running because when I ran for long distance my shoulder would start to hurt. And it wasn't just like a pain, it was just this deep ache. And I remember going to the office and telling the woman that my shoulder was really giving me problems and she was like, "Well, lift it up, and do this and do this and rotate it." And she's like, "Well, you have full range of motion, probably fine." I'm just like, "Well, document it please that it's hurting because it's fine now but I might sleep on it wrong and then I can't move it." Or like my hand would just start to shake or something like that. But I ended up—when I got back, I would end up filing for disability and getting it for a few of these things.

[01:45:00]

Not the shoulder initially. That would come later as it persisted to hurt over the years, but for headaches and anxiety and those kind of things. But then I started going to school and I had initially planned to go into nursing and so I did my pre-nursing classes and everything like that. Made it through those just fine, but then—and I started working at a clinic out in Oconomowoc. I worked at a family practice clinic. And that was good. I enjoyed it a lot, but it also became apparent that it wasn't necessarily what I wanted to do. I—my interest lied elsewhere. So I looked at what I could basically do—what I could do as quickly as possible with my 9/11 GI Bill in the fewest amount of months basically and a degree in sociology kind of went up nicely. I had already taken a few classes and enjoyed it a lot and so I started doing that. And I started working with a professor who was looking at medical technology, which was pretty fun and cool. So I was doing quantitative data analysis with her and doing transcriptions. She did a lot of interviews with doctors. So being familiar with the lingo was very, very helpful in helping transcribe these and identifying different patterns that people were talking about just because I had a basis of knowledge for this. So that was fun. And my partner moved back with me and we were together for a few more years and then we split and I went—I moved back to Milwaukee, moved in a few other students out there and finished up my bachelor's degree and then I went on to get my master's degree. Or in the middle of getting my master's degree rather.

Healey: So when did you get your bachelor's degree?

Halaska: I got my bachelor's degree—it was four years—oh, years, 2015.

Healey: When you decided to get a master what are you—master's degree what are you working on?

Halaska: Master's degree in anthropology with a certificate in museum studies. And cultural anthropology so I work with quantitative data and ethnography are my specialties.

Healey: Did you do all your master's degree work at Madison or any at Milwaukee?

Halaska: Milwaukee. I did it—I met—the last year of my bachelor's degree I took a really cool class called Nature, Knowledge, and Technoscience from an Anthropological Perspective and my teacher for that was Dr. Tracey Heatherington. And she's just a real cool lady and I enjoyed her class a lot and I—basically after class one day I went up to her and just asked, I'm like, "Do you have any projects that you're doing? I would love to work with you." Because I had had that experience working with my other professor for a while. And she said, "Actually I do. How would you like to go to Iowa for the summer and go hand pollinate corn?" And I said, "Okay, that sounds great." So I've been studying seed saving and biodiversity conservation for the last few years. So I did that over the summer of 2015 and then—so that's technically still in my undergrad that I did that, but I've been using that research in my master's degree. So I took a year off and I met my current wife, Kiki, around that time and moved out to Madison and we moved in together. And started—I was working on an organic farm out there for a while. Worked there for a year. It was fun. It was a CSA [community supported agriculture] farm so community supported agriculture.

[01:50:00]

And the thing that I would do there—I started off as a field hand which was—it was fun. I still like to go outside and work outside and get my hands in the dirt and dig stuff up. You know, kind of all the physical kind of things that you got to do in the Army. That's still—it feels nice still to do those kind of things and to work with a team as well. Because you're harvesting and planting with a bunch of other people. So working on a farm like that was really fun. And then I got the opportunity to work in the office there as well which was fun. I enjoyed working in the office. So I got to actually help them with their organic certification. So keeping track of everything basically. Keeping track of everything, keeping track of records and their paperwork system and then also helping with their delivery logistics because they delivered in Chicago. And at that time my brother was also working on the farm. He had graduated from Whitewater and was in between—he graduated with a degree in fine arts and he was taking a year off. We were both taking our gap year and decided to work on this farm together. So he was living at the farm while I was working there which was pretty cool.

Healey: And that's a farm in Madison?

Halaska: It's south of Madison. That was a good job. And getting to—and it was during that time that I applied for my master's degree and I wanted to continue working with Dr. Heatherington and that is what I'm doing now. And then she also suggested that I do the museum studies because I had said that while I do want to get my master's degree I'm not sure about doctoral because I'm enjoying living in Wisconsin and I don't want to have to move somewhere else which is something that I would probably have to do if I

wanted to work in a university is move somewhere else. Because it's a moving job. You have to move from place to place and work on different projects. So I wanted to stay here so it's like I don't know what I'm going to do but I'll figure it out. And she suggested the museum studies which was great. It was a fantastic program.

Healey: How long have you been doing the museum studies with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum?

Halaska: Only since the summer. So August. I started in August. And the oral history program works well for me because working with qualitative data. So getting—doing interviews with people is something that I was familiar with, with ethnography. And so sitting and just talking with people and then trying to bring out their stories or their experiences and kind of get at that is similar between the two mediums. Something that cultural anthropology—it's history basically because as soon as you write it down it's already happened, it's done, but it's—a lot of it is firsthand experience. So I was very excited to get this position. It's like oh, I do get to use things. Excellent.

Healey: So what are your projections? You're working on a master's degree. Do you have kind of a target date for completion of that or is that unknown?

Halaska: I am finishing up my thesis this semester and it's on biodiversity conservation and specifically looking at corn. So the production of weird varieties of corn in the Midwest. And so like landrace varieties or heirloom varieties as well. So looking at that. I'm looking to graduate this semester so I'm finishing up.

Healey: Have your VA [Veterans Administration] benefits—schooling VA benefits run out?

Halaska: No. Okay, so I've used my entire 9/11 GI Bill which that was fantastic. The BAH [basic allowance for housing]—you get E5 BAH allowance for housing while you're going to school. So I did not have to work. So that in conjunction with my disability meant that I did not have to work and I could concentrate on schooling which is why I could work with those professors and basically volunteer my time there. Which was very helpful. It was awesome.

[01:55:00]

And then that's also how I could go to Iowa as well because I had that allowance for housing. Because they were not able to pay me. I didn't—technically I did an internship there but they couldn't pay me. They gave me free housing at their farmhouse which was very nice, but it was good to that have extra money. So the VA education benefits have been fantastic and I have used them to the max. And then actually for my master's degree I still had a few months left over from my 9/11 GI Bill but then I used the—it's a rehabilitation program. So because my disability is over a certain amount I basically qualified for this other program. I can't remember it right off the top of my head, but it's a Wisconsin program so it's through department of—Wisconsin department of veteran affairs. And it's for disabled veterans and most of the time it's used for not master's degrees [laughs] I don't think because we've had to work it.

But they've been good and flexible. I think a lot of times it's used for apprenticeships or shorter programs like that, but it has also been very helpful. And I still have my Wisconsin GI Bill as well. So there's another four years of tuition that I could possibly

use or could transfer to a family member if I needed it. So those have been fantastic. And I get my health care through the Wisconsin or the Madison Veterans Hospital. I've been there and it's great. I went to the one in Milwaukee for a little bit and that one was not as good. The one in Madison is very, very good. And I think it's just volume. It might be volume, it might be proximity to the clinic, it might be that they're run by different people, I'm not exactly sure, but my experience with especially the therapists and the—what are the medication therapists called? Psychiatrists are better here. Which is very, very nice. So yeah, that's good. I did go through—I've been in therapy kind of on and off for anxiety since I've been out, related to my accident and also just that hypervigilance that is kind of taught to you during your time in the military. And it has been helpful. It's also helpful that my mom is a therapist so I have a high amount of buy-in kind of going into it.

So but I have heard that the—a lot of the programs that they have don't necessarily work for a lot of soldiers with anxiety and PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] because they're very individual and even though they have group therapy as well it's—a lot of veterans have said that it doesn't necessarily work for them. for me it did because I think—so some things are a little bit more individual. There was—when I was home on leave during my first deployment, I experienced sexual assault and that kind of stuck with me for a number of years. I didn't really talk about it at all until a few years ago and so getting treatment from the VA helped with that a lot. And just general anxiety and coping mechanisms. So it's been very helpful for all that. And then the physical stuff of course. So just being able to go and get health care and not necessarily have to worry about—so because of my level of disability that I have my health care is covered through the VA so I don't have to pay anything. And having the freedom to not have to pay for health insurance or to get a job that will—get basically a fulltime job that will have to—that will give me insurance.

[02:00:00]

Not having to do those two things has led to greater flexibility which has also helped with my schooling, I believe.

Healey: And since you've been out what type of contact, if any, have you kept with other veterans other than VA hospital?

Halaska: So I have friends over social media who have—we've stayed in contact through either Facebook or Instagram, something like that. But I—I'm not necessarily—I have a few friends here and there kind of, but I kind of have a more difficult time keeping close long-distance friends. But we kind of stay on each other's radar, a few of us here and there. So one of my friends, Sergeant Skinner, she was one of my first roommates in Texas. She is from Louisiana and she killed a cockroach for me because I was too scared to kill it because I'd never seen a bug that big. She was like, "Oh, it's just a cockroach" and she killed it. It's like you're so brave. But I stay—I see her posting stuff about her kids and everything and we comment on each other's things. And my friends Adams as well and a few others here and there. But it's nice to see people kind of—it's nice seeing your friends have kids and kind of moving on with their lives, seeing what they've done afterwards. So Facebook is good for that, but not much else.

Healey: Okay, it's been ten, twelve years since you graduated from high school. Thinking back at it now, are you—what's your attitude toward having joined the service right out of

school? Would you do it again or would you not do it again?

Halaska: I think joining right out of school is the only way to do it. [Laughs] For me anyway. I mean if—because I feel like once you've been out for a bit—I mean unless you go into a profession where you are just going and doing that job, but the constraints that they have or needing to live on base or something like that, it was a good segue basically for me. Because it kind of felt like a dorm living situation and it was a way to kind of get out into the world without necessarily being completely on my own. So it was good that way and to have just like a supportive group of people and friends around. So it was good. I support seventeen, eighteen-year-old Rachel's decision to join directly out of high school. I think it was good for me. I think it got me out and about and to see the world a little bit outside of Wisconsin, and a little bit more of the United States too and to come in contact with more people from other places as well which was nice. Like I haven't—we kind of forget that you're just kind of up in Wisconsin and that there's an entire big other country and with lots of other people who think about things a little bit differently and they have different food, but you're all Americans but it's different—slightly different flavors. So it was nice to get to meet so many people from so many different places. Everyone knew that I was from up north though because I had a pretty strong accent at the time. Wisconsin accent, just the way that we say our vowels and everything and [exaggerates accent], "Oh, you guys." I don't know, that kind of stuff. They could always—everyone could always tell. I'm just like, "How do you know?" It's like, "It's the way you say bag." [Laughs] But anyway.

Healey: Now you're working with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum and obviously probably knew about—when did you hear about the fact that Wisconsin Veterans Museum had a pretty active oral history program? Did you know that before you started kind of working for them?

Halaska: I did an internship here actually over the summer and so I did a little bit of research into the program and saw what they were doing and thought it was pretty cool and signed up for an internship.

Healey: And so why did you decide—you've been working with the Veterans Museum for a couple of months. Why did you decide now in September and October, not necessarily this time of the year, but why did you finally decide to do it? Was that something you really wanted to do from the outset when you learned about it or did it take a while?

Halaska: Oh, doing oral history?

Healey: Doing an oral history.

[02:05:00]

Halaska: I think I wanted to do it kind of—I'm not necessarily sure if as soon as I heard about it, but I thought that it would be something good to do just to have it done and recorded. And also, while it's fresh. I didn't necessarily want to wait too long. It's already been a few years, but I still have some good descriptions. Maybe not necessarily always the units and the names and the times, but some of the narratives are still pretty fresh in my mind. So and it's also it'll be good to have for my parents as well because I may—I've talked about stuff to them kind of in bits and pieces, but it's different than getting to sit down and recount the entire process and the entire thing that happened. So yeah, I guess that's

it.

Healey: Now I've just asked a couple of questions toward the end after you've done a very good and detailed narrative of your—for your experience. Is there anything else that you want to add or talk about?

Halaska: No, I don't think so. Other than everyone that I served with was great and I was happy to serve with them.

Healey: Okay, good. Well, thank you very much. I appreciate this oral history as well as your service.

Halaska: Thank you very much.

Healey: All right.

Halaska: Yes.

[End of OH2132.Halaska_file4_access.mp3]

[End of interview]