

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

LAURA NAYLOR

Military Police, Army National Guard, Operation Iraqi Freedom

2008

OH
1417

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Naylor, Laura. (b.1981). Oral History Interview, 2008.

Approximate length: 1 hour, 20 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Laura Naylor, a Waupaca, Wisconsin native, discusses her service as a military police officer with the Army National Guard 32nd Military Police Company in Baghdad, Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 to 2004. Naylor explains why she joined the military and how it felt to be deployed. She describes her role as a military police officer in Iraq including: her role as the lead driver, searching for insurgents, traffic stops, and working with Iraqi police officers. Naylor describes being a female soldier and how those around her reacted to her position. She details combat including IEDs, mortar attacks, and firefights. Naylor gives descriptions and anecdotes about an IED hitting their convoy and the bombing of Iraqi police stations and a particularly terrible patrol in Baghdad. She comments on media portrayal of the war and popular opinion. Naylor describes returning home and suffering from depression and PTSD. Lastly she reflects on the continuation of the conflict in Iraq and outlines what she feels should be done. Other stories/topics of note in the interview include: stop loss, Iraqi army, Iraqi civilian reaction to freedom after fall of Baathist regime, relationships with other soldiers, close calls, reflects on the growth of the insurgency, conditions on base in Baghdad, women in combat, equipment.

Biographical Sketch:

Naylor (b.1981) served with the 32nd Military Police Company, Wisconsin National Guard during Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2003 to 2004.

Archivist's Note:

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

Timestamps reflect the entire length of the interview, which was filmed in three parts.

Interviewed by Jeff Kollath, 2008.

Transcribed by Helen Gibb, 2016.

Reviewed by Rachelle Halaska, 2017.

Abstract written by Rachelle Halaska, 2017

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of Interview]

[Part I]

Kollath: Pretty basic stuff.

Naylor: Okay.

Kollath: So, we'll start out with the easy ones.

Naylor: It's so funny, my friends are like 'What's going on, what are you going to do?' I'm like, 'I have no idea.'

Kollath: Why don't we just start with give us your name, your hometown, branch of service, rank you achieved, and years of service, that kinda stuff?

Naylor: Okay. Do you want me to look at the camera, or you? Like, what's the preference?

Kollath: Look at me.

Naylor: Look at you? Okay. Is it recording?

Kollath: Yeah.

Naylor: I don't see a red light.

Crew: We shut it off.

Naylor: You can edit what you want, right?

Kollath: Yeah. No, all this is going to go.

Crew: It's all being recorded.

Naylor: Okay. Well my name--

Crew: Try ignoring us, and--

Crew: Yeah, and just look at him.

Naylor: Okay. My name is Laura Naylor, and I'm from Waupaca, Wisconsin. I was in the Army National Guard as an MP. I started in March of 2001; I'll

officially be out in March of 2009. And we were in Baghdad from around April of '03 'til July of '04.

Kollath: What unit were you with?

Naylor: 32nd Military Police Company.

Kollath: Are you still with them today, or--

Naylor: No, I am inactive right now, so I'm just essentially paperwork in the scheme of the military.

Kollath: So, you joined in 2001, right outta high school?

Naylor: I actually joined the second semester of my freshman year in college. I was in crew, and I didn't know what I wanted to do that summer. I couldn't afford to stay in Madison and pay for college and an apartment, and I did not want to go back to small-town Wisconsin, so I decided to join the National Guard to help pay for school, and to have some adventure in my life. And that was six months before September 11th, so I had no idea that there was an impending war.

Kollath: And your family has a history in the military as well, too?

Naylor: Yes. My dad was in during the Vietnam era. He never actually went to Vietnam, but he was a military police officer, so that was one of the incentives for me to become a military police officer as well. And then, my older brother was in Iraq the same time I was, and he was a medic.

Kollath: What did your parents think about having two kids in Iraq at the same time?

Naylor: It was very hard on them. I think it was almost, if not harder, on my twin brother, seeing as how both his siblings were over there at the same time. Um, I forgot my train of thought. Never mind. I was going to go off on something else, but I can't remember.

Kollath: But when you decided to, decided to enlist, it was after your brother had enlisted?

Naylor: Yes, that's what I was going to touch on. I enlisted six or seven months after my brother enlisted, and my parents were happy that he enlisted, because—this is not going in the video, his life was essentially not going anywhere, but I was in Madison, I was going to school, I had a good solid foundation, and loved school. But I decided to join, and they were a little

upset about their little girl going off to war, and joining the military. They didn't think that that was right for me, so.

Kollath: So tell us about your first experience—getting, mobilizing for war and what was it like to receive the news that you were headed overseas?

Naylor: There was a lot of mixed emotions when I first found out that I was going to be deployed. A little angry for the fact that I was—I did have a life here at home, and I was in school, and I had to get taken out of the middle of a semester. However, when we got over there, it was more of a really cool adventure at first, and it wasn't that scary, and I loved the adventure aspect of it. Until we started getting extended, and extended, and extended, and then we were over there for sixteen months as opposed to six months, and things just went from bad to really bad, so.

Kollath: Talk a little bit about the emotion of getting extended.

Naylor: I wrote an email home when we got our last and worst extension. It was-- we were two weeks away from going home, we had everything packed up, ready to go. We had almost stopped all of our missions, and I just remember calling my mom, it was Easter Sunday, and I called my parents that morning and I said, you know, "Happy Easter, can't wait to see you. We're going to sit out on the deck, and we're going to enjoy coffee, and watch the birds." And about five hours later, they called us back to the company and told us that we were extended for four more months. And I had a trip planned in New York City, I had a trip planned with my family to Washington, D.C., tickets all bought, everything. And I had to cancel all of that, and I ended up writing them an email after the fact, and I'm like, "It is as if we are walking zombies now, I don't care if I get shot at, I don't care if a bomb explodes around me, I just want to get the hell out of here, whether it's to die or to get hurt and go home," I'm like, "I just don't care anymore." I felt like they had taken my soul. It was horrific; it was the worst thing I've gone through.

[00:04:58]

Kollath: What was the reaction of your fellow, of your fellow military policemen?

Naylor: Everyone was pretty down about it. Obviously, you're gonna have the soldiers who are very gung-ho, and will do anything they can to better the country, and stay in the war. But I am more of a civilian than a soldier, and I realized that while I was over there, and it's not really the lifestyle I wanna lead, so it was really hard on me and others, as well.

Kollath: Was there any one thing that made you come to that realization, that you're more of a civilian than a soldier?

Naylor: I actually realized that at basic training, right from the get-go. But you sign a contract, and there's nothing else you can really do about it. When I—I'm very independent, and I'm very strong-willed, and I feel like I have a good moral base, and I listen to authority, so when they tried to break me down at basic training, it made me feel very upset, and as if they were trying to break down the goodness in me, too, and I did not like that or appreciate it. So, I don't like the way the military is set up, in that they feel like they have to get across to people through negativity. Instead, they could just tell me to do something, and I'll do it, and it's not a problem. I'll go run my ass off, I'll go shoot the gun at the target, I'll do whatever they tell me to do, but they don't have to treat me like crap just to do it. So.

Kollath: Do you regret that you joined the National Guard?

Naylor: No.

Kollath: No?

Naylor: I try and live my life with no regrets. I feel like everything I do in life has a purpose, and I learn from the things that go wrong, or the things that are not the best in my life. And being in the military has opened my eyes to what the military life is like, and I got to experience Iraq, this incredible country, and experience a different culture, and I'm going to admit, the money side of it was good. I came home, and I don't have any college debt. I got to go on trips, I toured Europe, I went to Central America, I've been all over the US, I don't regret it one bit, but it was a very hard part of my life.

Kollath: So can you—why don't you talk about the culture, and being in Iraq?

Naylor: The culture.

Kollath: And what you thought about it. What you thought about the people, your interactions with them, and that kinda thing?

Naylor: When I first got to Iraq, I didn't realize—everyone says it's a different culture, but you don't realize what a different culture means until you're completely engrossed in it like we were. So, when the Iraqis would stare at me nonstop, and like, give me—just stare at me, and I try to give them faces, or I'd, you know, look away, look back, and they'd still be staring at me, I just had to realize that that's what they do. And then you see the way that they build buildings, and erect things, is so—seems to us to be the beginning of the nineteenth century, but to them, it's their current technology. And as well as their mentality, they're—one of the translators said it best. When we first got there, she said that the Iraqis don't know

what to do with freedom. They don't know how to deal with freedom. So instead of treating it as something positive in their life, they were trying to get away with whatever they could. Because now they weren't going to die, or get their hands chopped off. Or go to jail. So they could drive down the wrong side of the street with their lights off in the middle of the night, because no one was going to do anything about it. They could loot a store, because chances are, they're probably not gonna get caught. They can blow this up and shoot at that person, because what, they're going to get stuck in jail, and then get released two weeks later? So, they took their freedom to a different level than we ever thought that they would. So that was interesting to me. That was a whole new perspective, a whole new ideal about the actual, the culture. And the fact that they eat different foods, they talk to each other differently, they interact differently, they sleep on the roof on cardboard when they're on duty, because they're too afraid to go out in the city, because it's dangerous even though they're the ones that are supposed to be stopping the danger. So it was just, it was very interesting, and I said that I learned more in the first month in Iraq than I ever did in college, because you can't understand until you're actually there, so.

Kollath: What were your day to day interactions like with the Iraqis?

Naylor: It varied throughout our mission, but we essentially worked in the police stations alongside the Iraqis for twelve hours straight, for the first three months we were there. So every single day for twelve hours, we were at the police station, and we would try and talk to them, whether it'd be through translators or international language. Some of them knew some English, I knew extremely little Arabic. But we would often talk, and actually in August, after being there for a month, two months, I have a twin brother, and it was very hard being away from him, it was our first birthday away from each other. And it was very emotional for me, and one of the Iraqi police officers had his wife bake me a cake. And he brought it in, and he said, "We are your new family now." And he presented the cake to me, and we ate it. And then another Iraqi translator went out and bought me a cake, a heart-shaped cake. So, they are nice people, and they do try and make a good impression, and you find some very intelligent Iraqis, and you find some that—just like in the United States, they have the whole spectrum. And so, that was my interaction with them, I talked to the translators a lot while we were there.

[00:10:33]

Kollath: What were some of the negative things that you found out, that you discovered about?

Naylor: Iraqi culture? Well I'm kind of a feminist, so to speak. And one of the translators gave me a book to read, because he thought it'd be really

interesting, and the whole book was based on how women should be submissive to their fellow man. And how wives should stay home, and cook and clean, and should not be intelligent, because that's all they're there for, and he believed this book. And so, I put my foot down, I said, "I'm not doing what this says. I'm here with a gun you know, I'm not going to do what you think I should do." So that was interesting. That was negative, they definitely—women are very, very, very submissive. We walk out on the streets, and the men would stare at us, and the women would put their heads down and not even look up. And sometimes I'd try and catch their eye, 'cause I'm a woman, and they don't realize that there's some women soldiers, too. And then when they'd see me, they'd be very surprised that I was a woman, and—but they were very, very submissive over there.

Kollath: What did you—was it difficult to be a woman in that culture, you know, visiting that culture?

Naylor: A woman soldier?

Kollath: A woman soldier in that culture.

Naylor: At first it was very interesting, and it was difficult. We were disrespected by the Iraqi police officers. In fact, the first day we got to the station, my platoon sergeant said, "Naylor, you're in charge of cleaning of the police station, and here's the Iraqi police officer who's gonna do the cleaning. You just have to point out what needs to be done." So, I was trying to tell this police officer what to do with a translator, and the police officer would shake his head and say, "No, I'm not gonna do it, because you're a girl, and you're telling me what to do." And so, another Iraqi police officer came up to him and slapped him on the side of the head, and yelled at him in Arabic, and then he finally listened to what I was saying, and actually cleaned. But he would just like, put the dust underneath the stairs, and I would tell him to clean it up and throw it away, and he had a fit about that too, but that's one of the things. We were getting shot at one time at the police station, and I had my rifle and my pistol, and I was down while we were getting shot at, to stay out of bullet range, and an Iraqi police officer tried to pull the gun out of my hand, because he thought he would be more valuable with it than I would be, so.

Kollath: As far as, you know, being out on the streets with people, I mean, if—I know there's a—I've met several of the women that were in the 32nd, I know there were quite a few of you.

Naylor: There were a lot of us.

Kollath: What percentage?

Naylor: It was, I believe, 40 percent? Maybe not that many, 35, but in my own platoon, out of 31 people, there's 13 females, we were almost half female in my platoon.

Kollath: Wow.

Naylor: Yeah. And then you had another platoon with four females out of 31 people, so.

Kollath: So, when you were split off into, you know, in your platoon, would you split up into squads?

Naylor: Yup, squads, yup.

Kollath: Did you always have—I mean, was there ever a time when it was all women, was there always men with you guys?

Naylor: Mm-mmh. And the reason being is that unfortunately, the majority of us women were all specialists, so we were lower in the ranking, so we always had a team leader with us, or a fellow team member who was usually a male. So, I think that if we were to go now, some of us are team leaders, some of us are squad leaders, it would be a lot different, and there probably would be some all-female teams going out.

Kollath: One of the stories that Norra related was about using—like things that we take for granted, like mainly using the bathroom, and stuff like that. The cultural things like that, as far as, are there any stories that you have about that, or?

Naylor: I have some good ones. In fact, I wrote a book and it's called *How to Pee Standing Up*. before I left, I bought a funnel from Fleet Farm. And I taught myself how to pee while standing up. So, when we would stop and get out of the Humvees, the guys would go to the corner of the Humvee and open up the door and pee, and I would do the same thing with my funnel, and I would stand up and pee. And I would pee off the top of the police station at night with my funnel. And there were often times Iraqis who would know that I was a woman, and then see me peeing standing up, and they'd be like, "What's going on?" And I'd whip around my funnel, and they'd be like, "Oh, I get it now." But it—I can't imagine going there and being a woman without a funnel. Because you're in an urban environment, you have to squat, and show your rear end, and having the funnel was probably the best buy I made before I went. I can't donate it to the museum though, because I threw it away in Kuwait.

[00:15:17]

Kollath: Well you can tell us what it looked like.

Naylor: I can go buy another one from Fleet Farm. But I camouflaged this one. So it's--

Kollath: You camouflaged it?

Naylor: I just spray painted it tan and green.

Kollath: Wow.

Naylor: Yeah.

Kollath: So you actually wrote a book?

Naylor: I did, I did. It's not published yet, I wrote it last spring, and thought it was done, and now I've reread it and decided that there's a lot of changes that I want to make before I present it to some publishers. So I'm going to make those changes and hopefully get it printed. Yes, but its entitled *How to Pee Standing Up*.

Kollath: That's a good title. Why don't you talk a little bit about actually working and kind of back to this Iraqi thing.

Naylor: Yeah, that's fine.

Kollath: Why don't you tell us about actually working with the Iraqis side by side? You know, trying to—well first of all, describe what your job with them was in the first place, and then talk about actually working with them.

Naylor: Okay, well I was the driver in my team. And so whenever we were in the vehicles, I was the one driving. But when we were at the police stations, I would mostly pull security, sometimes I would search the women who were coming to the police station, to make sure they didn't have any bombs on them or guns, or anything of that sort. The women themselves, when we searched them, were very offended, and sometimes they didn't know I was a woman, because I had sunglasses on, my hair was up into my Kevlar, and I'm wearing a man's uniform, and I have a vest on, so you can't see any sort of womanly figure at all. So I would have to—sometimes I would just take my sunglasses off, and if they noticed I was a woman then, then it would be okay. Sometimes I actually had to pull my Kevlar off and show them my hair, and then they realized that I was a woman. Some women laughed and giggled when we searched them, and some women were very upset about it, and slapped us away, and yelled, and yelled in Arabic.

As far as the Iraqi police officers would go, they were very much about getting to know us, and present a positive outlook about the Iraqis to us. One of them had told us that if we leave the police station, everyone's gonna quit, and they don't ever want us to leave because we are the only reason why they felt safe. And then, our police station was bombed in October, and we had been there since the beginning of July, and we lost five Iraqi police officers, and a lot of the other ones had quit. And so, everything we had worked up towards for those months was pretty much ruined. So, that was a very difficult time. The—we worked a lot with the Iraqi military as well, and they were very stubborn for the most part, in that they wanted us to go out and do all the missions first, and then they would kind of watch and back us up. And they were afraid to do a mission on their own. So that was another thing. They were very, very reliant on us. They needed us by them to give them that security.

Kollath: What kind of missions were standard when you were over there?

Naylor: We assisted the infantry a lot in busting down doors, if they had a neighborhood where they thought there was some insurgents, they would oftentimes go and knock on the doors, and if they didn't answer the doors, they'd bust them down, they'd search the houses, search the people. And the reason why we went along is because we had women to search the woman that they were searching the houses. And I actually found just huge bundles of money on the women. And so, you think okay, is this stolen money that they're trying to hide? Or do they not trust us, or the Iraqis who are in the military, and so they feel like they need to hide their own money from the people who are supposed to be helping them? I mean, it could be either way, and I think it's more of the second, that they're afraid that we're gonna steal their money, so they want to keep everything that they need secured on them. We also did a lot of traffic control stops. So when the traffic would go through, we would search the vehicles, we'd look at their ID cards, and the Iraqi police officers and some Iraqi military would come with us for that, as well. The majority of the time, while we were there, we did work in police stations, and we trained their police officers how to use Glocks, how to search people, all that kind of stuff. So, and in fact, one time, my team leader was searching me, and I was on the ground, and he was patting my whole body down, you know, because he was demonstrating how to do this to a prisoner, and the whole time the Iraqis wouldn't take him seriously, because he was doing this to a woman. So, it didn't matter if I was a soldier or not, I was a woman first, so.

[00:20:08]

Kollath: You talked about prisoners, capturing prisoners and things like that. What-I actually asked you this, what years were you there?

Naylor: '03, '04.

Kollath: '03, '04. So—

Naylor: It was during Abu Ghraib.

Kollath: Yeah, I guess that's my question. I know your brother had some stories to tell about stuff like that, as well. So let's talk about capturing prisoners, what you did with them, and that kind of thing.

Naylor: Well, our specific police station had a prison in it, and it was extremely disgusting, it smelled, there was—holes, you know, toilets are little holes in the ground, and theirs kept backing up, so there was constantly sewage in there. There was barely any running water, we barely gave them enough food. The prison system varied a lot while we were there within the jail. At first—for the most part, the Iraqis would just bring in these prisoners, and we would have no idea why they're there. Sometimes they would just be people walking down the street, and the Iraqi police officers were bored, so they would bring 'em in, put 'em in prison, and they'd stay for two weeks, and they'd be able to go. That or they'd stay for two weeks, and then if they really were criminals, they'd get shipped over to Abu Ghraib, or to a bigger prison. We did have a soldier in my platoon who was pretty much in charge of the jail, making sure that everybody got their food, and seeing if they needed anything. So, I felt pretty disconnected from it, so I don't want to go too far into detail, because I don't have many details. But that's pretty much it.

Kollath: Did you ever see the folks that you guys had apprehended, you know, get released, and did you have any emotions about that?

Naylor: I don't. And the reason being is, like I said, for the majority, the Iraqi police officers would bring these people in, and you have no idea what they did wrong. I mean, they could have been drinking alcohol and going against the Koran, as opposed to the actual laws, and so, when they were released, I never really felt anything, because I wasn't the one who detained them, they weren't doing anything against me personally.

Kollath: Did you have any criminal justice background when you were here stateside at all?

Naylor: Just the military police training.

Kollath: So, what was it like to see their interpretation of law versus our interpretation of law?

Naylor: A lot of the stuff that—or a lot of the reasons for their arrests, were based on religion, and not so much law. And sometimes, they took their police work too—what’s the word I’m looking for? They were too into it, and they want to just arrest anyone they thought was doing anything wrong. And sometimes, there was somebody setting up a bomb, but they were afraid to get blown up, so they wouldn’t go arrest that person. And fear really rode what they did a lot of the time.

Kollath: You know, we heard, especially in recent years, you know, trouble recruiting policemen and that kind of stuff. Did you think that they were—the Iraqi policemen that you’d worked with, I mean, were they adequate, did they do their job, do you know what I mean, what do you think the—

Naylor: I think the majority of the Iraqi police officers over there did a lot of the work simply for the money, because it’s a \$100 paycheck they know that they’re going to get every single week. They’re able to feed their family, even though their family might be in more danger, because they’re helping the Americans, it’s still something stable in their lives that they can rely on. And there were some really good Iraqi police officers, but there were others who you knew were just there for the money, and while we were there, we had three Iraqi police officers who went out and followed a cart, there was gunfire in an alley down the road that they were—they stopped the cart at. They came back, ends up that the three Iraqi police officers stole these kids’ money that they had made throughout the day. And they used their police authority to take advantage of these kids. And so, we fired all three of them, but I think that you’re going to have corruption anywhere you go, and there might have been more there than there is here. But what almost Third World country wouldn’t have more corruption? Especially when I go back to that freedom, like they just don’t know how to deal with the freedom that they have, so.

Kollath: One of the things you mentioned a few minutes ago was about the bombing of the police station. Can you talk about that at all?

Naylor: Yeah.

Kollath: When was it, first of all?

[00:24:28]

Naylor: It was October 21st, 23rd? It was a Monday. And we were getting ready to go on our missions, and our missions for the day were to go to separate police stations that my company and my platoon—or, I’m sorry, my company had worked in while we were in Iraq. So we were gonna probably stop at like, three, or four, or five, and just check up on the police stations, make sure they had everything they needed, make sure everything

was kosher, and going to our standards. And as we were getting ready to leave, we hear on the radio that Al Shaab [Al Sha'ab] just got hit by an RPG. And so, we're like all right, gear up, let's go. And I was the lead driver in this convoy, and so my team leader just had me just go as fast as I could and this usually forty minute drive took us only twenty. We were going on the wrong side on the street; we were going through intersections, you know, we were just going anywhere we could just to get to this police station. Well it wasn't an RPG. An RPG would probably make a hole about like this. The entire—when we got to the police station, the entire side of the building was destroyed. Including across the street, that entire building was destroyed as well, including homes and businesses, windows in a four block radius were blown out. This was a huge, huge vehicle-borne IED. Meaning somebody drove up next to the police station and blew up his vehicle that had bombs in it. There were 100 injuries, 21 casualties, and then 5 of those people were Iraqi police officers, and the rest were civilians who lived or worked around the area. When we first got to the police station, there was no other—or there's no other Army there, so we were the first ones.

The crowd was huge. They estimated about 4,000 people just swarming to this police station to see what was going on. So we had to do crowd control when we first got there. It was literally like parting the sea, trying to get to the police station, I mean these people were just like, opening up in front of us, and opening up, and then you see this huge devastation of the police station. So we got out of our vehicle, and my specific job at this point was to clear out the area by the crater. And while we were doing this, the Iraqis who lived in the area, and some other police officers, were taking out the bodies. So, as I was pushing the crowd back, I had this circular wire in front of me, and I was just pushing the crowd back, and trying to get them away from our area, so we could secure it. I would see just these little baby girls, who I'd watch every single day while I'm sitting on the roof pulling security, I just saw them being dragged out, and they were burned, and charred, and dead. And it was just very, very, very emotional for everybody to see this happening, and to know that it's because we were there. It's because they are against the Americans, and against what we are doing. And so, it was very difficult to see these children's lives, these people's homes, being destroyed because of us.

Kollath: Did that happen—did similar incidents happen while you were over there too, in other police stations? You said you visited other ones, so.

Naylor: Yeah, yeah. And then, when we got extended, we actually worked two hours south of Baghdad, and we started working in I think five other police stations down there. And while we were there, one of those police stations was destroyed by a bomb, and I think there was anywhere between five and ten Iraqi police officers who were killed during that

time. And since I've been home, in fact, like the first couple of months I've been home, I know at least probably seventy-five, if not all of our police—seventy-five percent, if not all of our police stations, have been bombed since we've come home, and while we were there.

Kollath: Were any of them ever bombed with you and your company actually present?

Naylor: Actually, one of the squads from 3rd Platoon was at a police station when they were bombed. We had three people inside, and one was a lieutenant who, he had to get stitches in his head, and his ear was partially removed, but they put it back on. Another person got knocked out, there was little shrapnel wounds on some people, and some of the people, their Humvees were ruined from the explosion, but everybody survived, and was very, very lucky, and they got straight to a medic, and got everything taken care of.

Kollath: Did you—your unit suffered KIAs, correct?

Naylor: Yes. Just one.

Kollath: That was Michelle?

Naylor: Michelle Witmer, yeah.

Kollath: Did you know her?

Naylor: Yeah, it—my personal level with her was simply that we both gave haircuts to the other girl in the company, so she would cut my hair, and I would cut hers. She was probably the sweetest person, the sweetest person there. She was always so nice, and so humble, and it was—when I found out that she was the one that died, it was just, it took my breath away, 'cause first of all, anyone dying in your company is going to be horrific. But she just seemed like such a promising person, and like she could really make a difference in the world. And the fact that she was taken at such a young age was really difficult for everyone. And the fact that she had a sister in our company had a twin sister that was also in Iraq.

Kollath: She wasn't in your—

Naylor: She was not in my platoon, so I didn't know her as well as I knew other women in the military.

Kollath: What was you—I mean, you went over with the Wisconsin unit, so do you think that made the experience easier and better than it would have, had you gone like, with your brother in a regular Army unit?

[00:29:55]

Naylor: I don't think it really matters. It was good because I knew some of the people before I went; it wasn't like I was stuck with strangers. But when you're in a situation like that, you're going to get to know these people in and out, or inside and out, and you're going to know their history, their family, the way they work, what they like, what they dislike. And they become your family. And I know you've heard this before, everyone talks about the band of brothers, and how you fight now for your fellow soldier, as opposed to for the war, and that's exactly what happens. So, when you're over there, there's this connection that is—you can't describe, and to this day, when we talk to our fellow soldiers, it's just like, you just know, you just understand that we were there together, we went through the same thing together, and some things can be left unspoken, because, because of that connection.

Kollath :Did--

Crew: We have to change tapes.

[Part II]

Naylor: Yeah.

Kollath: Okay, we're going. I guess I kind of forgot where we left off, but I have other questions. Talk about your—the enemy, the folks that—

Naylor: Oh gosh.

Kollath: —what you thought about them, as far as their ability goes, interactions with them, that kind of stuff.

Naylor: Well, the enemy always seemed like this, like this ghost, or this essence that you could never really get your hands on. I'm always asked the question, "Did you kill anyone? Did you shoot your weapon?" And the answer's always no. And the reason why is twofold; one being that I'm the driver, I wasn't the gunner. So if I had eyes on, I couldn't shoot, because I'm driving my Humvee. And my team leader wouldn't let me hold my pistol out either, so. There were many occasions when we were getting shot at, and I wanted to retaliate and shoot back, but there was, there was no enemy in sight. Whether it be we're driving through skyscrapers, and somebody's shooting down at our Humvee, but you have no idea where it's coming from. Another time, we were in a horrible IED, and that's a whole 'nother story that maybe we can touch on, too. But everyone got out of their Humvees, and were like, "Get 'em, get 'em, get them." But it's an IED, it's a radio activated device that you can blow up, so these people

could be sitting in their living room, and you never know who it is. One other time, we were driving through this circle, this driving circle, or this—whatever it's called.

Kollath: Roundabout?

Naylor: Roundabout, thank you. We were driving through a roundabout, and there was a huge protest going on at the time. And we're like, "Oh man; this is going to be bad." The roads are filled with people, the roads are filled with cars, we can't get through, and we're surrounded by people with their AKs, like, shooting up in the air. And so I was just hopping curbs and going across lawns, and I wasn't even following the roadway. And all of the sudden, we were taking fire. We were getting shot at, and they're like, "Haul ass!" And in my head—or out loud, I said, "Holy shit," and then it took me like 10 seconds later I realized that I said that. It's just one of those things, it's just so automatic, it's just what your body does, or what I did in the midst of getting shot at, and so we got through, and no one was hit. But it's one of those things, you don't know who was shooting at you, because there's so much chaos around there already, and there's no way that you can shoot back, because you're gonna kill civilians. So, you're left with no choice but to just run. Just get out of the kill zone.

Kollath: Go back to that IED explosion that you referred to.

Naylor: Okay. We were driving home; end of the day missions, and this was when we were working two hours south of Baghdad. So it was like, it was a very long, long drive, we were in up-armored Humvees with no AC in mine, we had to keep the windows up, in case if we got blown up, so you're just dying of heat, and you're tired, and exhausted, and you just wanna get home. And all of the sudden, I swear, my gunner took his hands and slammed them on top of the Humvee as hard as he could, and I looked up at him, I'm like, "Thompson don't do that." And as I was saying that, one of the Humvees, I saw in my mirror, comes just screaming past my Humvee and slams into a building. Come to find out, that Humvee was two Humvees behind me, and it was hit with a very powerful IED. And so, we all stopped immediately, and the slamming of the hands was the IED going off. It wasn't my gunner doing that.

Anyways, we all got out of our vehicles, and run—well my team leader ran over to that vehicle to find out if anyone was okay, and there was four people in that vehicle when they got hit with the IED. The gunner was at her gun, and she was one of, one of my favorite girls there, she kept me stable, like she was always funny, we just got along really, really well, and the fact that she was in that vehicle scared the shit out of me, that I might not have her there anymore with me. And so, what happened with her is, they couldn't find her at first, they're yelling, "We can't find Garcia, we

can't find Garcia!" Come to find out that she was in the fetal position, tucked up in the back of the Humvee, and knocked unconscious. She had shrapnel wounds in her face and on her arms. She actually—they thought that she had compound fractures, two compound fractures in her arm, and there was actual bone sticking out, but it wasn't, it was just shrapnel sticking out of her arm. She was bruised a lot on her chest, with shrapnel wounds. And she was medevac'd. Then the driver, because of this huge impact of the explosion, it like, pushed against the Humvee, and then it sucks back out again, it actually popped her door open and pulled her out of the Humvee. So she fell out, and was rolling through this dust and sand and mud, and all of the sudden she comes walking towards the convoy, and her hair is sticking straight out, she doesn't have her Kevlar on, she's pure black and gray, and she's like, "I'm Okay, I'm Okay," and the next thing you know, she just falls down. And she is bruised, externally and internally, down her entire left side. And she was actually off missions for like a month or two, because she was just bruised so terribly bad. Then she had a passenger behind her, and he was also knocked unconscious for a very short period of time, and I believe he had shrapnel in his leg as well.

[00:36:18]

So, the three of them were all medevac'd right after the explosion happened. And then there was a driver—or I'm sorry, the team leader was sitting in the front passenger seat during the explosion, and he looked over and noticed the driver was no longer in the vehicle, and they were headed straight for a building. So, he decided to jump out of the Humvee. And he was the only one that was, for the most part, okay. Out of—after that explosion. But it was a very, very emotional time for me, simply because I was so close to Garcia, and the fact that I almost lost her, they didn't know where she was, I didn't know if she was going to be able to make it, or even stay in Iraq with us. It was, it was really hard. And then we just had to get in our Humvees and head back after all of that.

Kollath: So, after something like that happens, what is the, what is the SOP[standard of procedure] after something like that happens?

Naylor: Well, we headed back, and the—I'm pretty sure they gave us all the next day off. Every single soldier that was—or the three soldiers that were medevac'd, they stayed in Iraq, the guy who was sitting in back who was hit in the leg, he resumed missions after I think, a week. And then, Garcia still to this day suffers hearing damage from it, but she had to go back to missions, I think, two weeks after, she only had two weeks off. And then, like I said, the driver had like a month or two months off because of it. And you have to go on, I mean, that's part of being at war is you have to keep going. And I am surprised that they gave us the day off after, because you know, it's one of those things, you've got to get the mission done first, so.

Kollath: What was the psychological impact of the IEDs? You know, that's one of the things that we always hear about here at home.

Naylor: Right, right. The IEDs were very difficult, and I found myself, when I was at home, steering clear of garbage in the road, because you didn't wanna hit the IED, and that's exactly what you did in Iraq. Every single time you saw something in the road, I would have to steer around it. Or stay in the middle of the road, and so that was difficult for me. IEDs were really scary, because you never knew when they were going to happen, and you'd hear a loud bang while you were driving, and you wouldn't know if that was an IED, or just a car backfiring, or someone shooting a gun somewhere in the distance, so it was always just one of those things that you were constantly aware of, and worried about. It never actually happened to my vehicle, but it happened in quite a few convoys that we were in. In fact, one convoy, their entire windshield was blown out, but no one was injured, and so we continued for like two hours of driving with their windshield blown out. The worst, the worst thing for me coming home has got to be—the worst like, with nightmares and with thoughts about the war, are the actual—I just had the word in my head, and now I can't think of it. What is wrong with me? The—[hand motions and whistles sound of incoming mortar and explosion]

Kollath: Rockets?

Naylor: Yeah, the rock—but mortars.

Kollath: Mortars.

Naylor: That's what I was looking for. Did you like my—? There were many times when we were either at our FOB, our forward operating base, where we lived, and mortars would come in, or we were at—we were running a mission, and mortars would fly by. And you would actually hear the launches; it's kind of like a thump, thump. And you count the launches, and then you would count the impacts, and you can hear them getting closer, and closer, and closer. But you knew if you counted seven launches and then seven impacts, you knew you would be fine. So, that was probably the thing that scared me the most, and my nightmares are always about mortars flying in, whether they're duds or real mortars, that's what my nightmares are always about, are mortars flying in.

[00:39:57]

One morning, we were—this was after we got extended, we moved into a compound that had tents, and we slept in tents. And we used to sleep in a building in the basement, so we were a lot safer there, and then we moved into a place with tents. And we got hit with mortars a lot in this compound. One time, I woke up in the morning after a mortar strike, and

five tents down was completely destroyed by a mortar. And I mean, how easily could that have been shifted over just that little bit to get one of our tents. And this tent, thankfully, didn't have any soldiers in it. Another time, one of my most unique stories is, I was at the gym, at this place where we lived in the tents, and I had to go off to use the bathroom, so I used the porta-potty, and I went back to the gym, and as soon as I got back in the gym, mortars started landing all around us, and everyone was like, "Get in the center of the building, away from the walls and the windows." And so, we all run to the center of the building, and as soon as the mortars were done landing, we all ran outside, and that porta-potty was gone. You couldn't even tell it was a porta-potty anymore. Another time, a mortar landed in the same FOB, and you could see the shrapnel skidding across the ground towards you after the bomb landed. So there was a lot of really close calls.

Kollath: So these folks were actually fairly accurate up there with their mortars?

Naylor: Yes. They were one of the few—but yeah, they actually, when I was—the near miss at the porta-potty, there was a soldier in my brigade who died, who was in the motor pool at the time, working on a vehicle. He got hit, so.

Kollath: Back to the IEDs, the sophistication of them did you—I mean, do you know anything about how they were built, like, did you ever see any defused?

Naylor: Yes, I saw some IEDs, and I wouldn't say there's much sophistication related to the IEDs. There are a lot of okay, here's a bomb, and here's the igniter, and here's the detonator, you know? Or whatever, I mean, it was very simplistic, and whatever they could get their hands on, they would use to make an IED. In fact, we weren't allowed to throw batteries away, because they could use that for the detonator. I think that might have been the only limit for us. But yeah, they're—I mean, I think they would find whatever they could to make one, and I don't know if they had just, you know, a group of people who made them and dispersed them throughout the country, or if everyone just kind of, by word of mouth, figured out how to make 'em, or what.

Kollath: Did an IED ever go off, but it didn't necessarily damage anything, and did your company ever catch any IED—

Naylor: We never—

Kollath: —builders or was there anything like that, ever saw any of them?

Naylor: Not my platoon, or no one that I was closely related to on any of my missions, we never did, which was very, very, very frustrating. Sometimes you just wanted to take it out on any Iraqi you saw, and obviously you can't do that.

Kollath: Sure. We talked a little bit about combat situations and things like that. Can you describe, you know, just the idea of combat within Baghdad itself, within the cities? I mean, what is it actually like?

Naylor: Wow. It's very diverse. And each, I guess, part of Baghdad has its own little means of war. We worked really close to Sadr City, which is pretty much the slums of Baghdad. And there was—that was—it was just a lot of crime there to begin with, and there was a lot of opposition towards the Americans there, so there was a lot of gunfire in Sadr City, or gunfights, sorry, in Sadr City. And it was not a very safe place, but I didn't feel like we would really hit an IED there, or nothing too sophisticated, it was more of the small arms fire that I was more worried about there. But we'd go into a different part of Baghdad, and you knew that this is where most of the IEDs are set up. So when you're driving, you have to be a lot more aware. And then you go to another part, and you know that this is where the mortars land really close to here. So like I said, it's really different wherever you go, and probably whoever those insurgents are, and how they fight, or what their choice is for fighting. And it is really guerilla warfare in an urban environment, because you don't know who your enemy is the majority of the time. All of the sudden, you're just—there's a bomb that just goes off, or there's—like I said before, there's random gunfire, and you don't know where it's coming from. And that, to me, was what the war in Baghdad was like. It was just, it was like the enemy was just this nonexistent being who was killing us, and I felt like you can never fight back, you could—it was not a fair war.

[00:44:51]

Kollath: What could we, what could we—

Naylor: Do?

Kollath: —have been done differently to improve the situation? At least from your—when you were there?

Naylor: I have no idea. I honestly have no other tactical means to alleviate the guerilla warfare that I can think of in my head. One of the interesting things was; I believe that the insurgent grows exponentially, insurgency grows exponentially. Meaning one time when we were getting shot at, we retaliated and shot back, and we killed one of the two bad guys, but we ended up killing two civilians. So those two civilian families turned against us, and they hated the Americans, and they wanted to kill us. So,

you have one single fight with the terrorists, or the insurgents, and all of the sudden you might kill two civilians and guess what? Now you have even more insurgents and terrorists that are against us. So, one of the things that we can do is stop killing civilians, and people who are just everyday folk, and in Baghdad, and really zone in on the terrorists. But then again, how do you know who the terrorists are? And you might have a police officer standing right next to you who one minute is your friend and your buddy, and the next minute, like that night, he's going out and laying IEDs, 'cause he knows what route you're going to take the next day. So you just don't know who they are, and it's a very, very difficult situation that we're in.

Kollath: Do you feel like your training prepared you for—

Naylor: No. Okay, so our training at Fort McCoy, in the spring, it was snowing some of the time, and we were learning infantry tactics, what they used in Vietnam. So here we're running through the woods, trying to be as quiet as possible, we're not—like we were training how to be not police officers, we didn't know—we didn't train how to drive through an urban environment in Humvees. When we are loud, and there's no element of surprise, that we're coming, so it was completely off, our training did not correlate with what we did in Iraq at all. But, then again, when we got to Iraq, we were pretty much—we were the second wave through, so we started a lot of the things. We were the first people to live in this compound; we didn't have any chow hall set up. It was very, very, very remote, and we kinda wrote the books on how to work in the police stations, essentially. And we did what we thought was best. I know that now the training has changed a ton. They train more in the South now, where it's warmer, so you can adapt to the environment better than training in the snow, in Fort McCoy.

Kollath: How did—where did you learn how to be a driver?

Naylor: I'm just really good at driving. I just beat my boyfriend at go-karts, so—no, my team leader was actually really good about taking me out at Fort McCoy and saying, "Okay, now get us home." And he was—and at first I was like, "What are you doing? Just tell me how to get back." But he was really good about training me in that way, and that he would show me what kind of elevation I could drive up on, and go down on. And then, take me to, like I said, a remote location, make me find my way back home; which I'm pretty good at directions in general, so I never really had a problem with that. But a lot of it was, you'd learn as you go, too. I mean, there are sandstorms flying up, and you have to stay between, you know, three feet away from the vehicle in front of you, otherwise you would lose them in the sandstorm. You can't see the road. All you could see was the little tiny shadow of the gunner up on top of the Humvee. Otherwise, you

would be lost forever, essentially. And so, there was a lot of really dangerous situations that we were in driving, just up to Iraq and back down to Kuwait. It was very interesting.

Kollath: What—the responsibility of being a driver, what was that like? I mean—

Naylor: I liked it, because I like to be in charge, and I felt like when I was in the Humvee, I was in charge of where we went, and how we went, and if it was—what route we would take, sometimes my team leader would be like, “All right, we can take these two routes, take whatever one you want.” You know, and that was fun, and I actually led the convoy quite a lot of the times too, so I had to maintain a certain speed, make sure everyone made it through a certain area, and I liked it. I like to drive, and it was very—it was a good position for me, because the gunner loved to shoot, and I love to drive, so we were all set.

Kollath: Back to the idea of combat again, was there any—we’ve talked about several instances, but was there any one that we haven’t discussed that really stands out in your mind?

Naylor: Well the two, the IED and the bombing of the police station, were definitely the most detrimental. There was another time, oh, it was horrible, and I don’t know if you should put it on video or not. Because it was based on how our leadership failed us miserably.

[00:50:03]

Kollath: Feel free.

Naylor: Oh man, I’m going to get in trouble. No.

Kollath: No.

Naylor: So my team leader, who I trust with my life, obviously, he was a great, great man, is a great man. I always felt safe with him, and he would never, ever, ever put me in a situation where it was dangerous, and he was gone home on leave at this point, so we had our platoon sergeant in charge of my gunner and I. And he was riding in our Humvee, and we got to this situation, and all of the sudden, like we all stopped, we were in a convoy, and we all stopped, and this was a horrible, horrible night, we were all over the place, we were getting shot at, someone just got hit with a rifle propelled grenade, and she got one of her nerves cut in her leg, and still can’t walk normal to this day, and we had been out already since 4:00 a.m. that morning, and it’s already 10 p.m. at night, and it was just this horrible situation. He gets out of the Humvee, and he leaves us, and we’re stuck, and we have no idea where to go, what to do, and we’re just sitting there,

and there's gunfire and Bradleys, and all this stuff going on around us. And I was just like, this is horrible.

And then all of the sudden, the LT leading this little group decided to take us to a different location. So we get to the location, and the whole time I'm just thinking in my head, "Okay, I'm in God's hands, this is his will, if I die today, like this is what he has planned for my life, so I'm just gonna, I'm not going to—I've just got to relax." And I just have these thoughts, and then I started thinking about my mom and my dad, and how horrible it would be if something happened to me, and how they would never forgive themselves for letting me sign up for the military, and you know, all these horrific thoughts are going through my head. And we get to this location that the lieutenant wanted to take us, and he's like, "Oh sorry, I took the wrong bridge." So now, with all this warfare going around us, insurgents running wild, we have to drive back across the same bridge with this ten vehicle convoy, and then go to another bridge. And this is in a very, very dangerous part of Baghdad. Remember how I said where, you know, you go over the IEDs land, or the mortars? Well this was like right in the middle, so we were getting hit with all of it. And then, we had—I mean, I could go—this whole night was just horrible. We had to park by this cemetery that was behind this mosque, and we had to go on foot and walk across this field, and I had to lead the field, and my platoon sergeant was just yelling at me, and I was doing everything wrong, and I was tired and exhausted, and I fell in this big mud hole up to my knee, and then I fell down these steps that went down to the canal, and I was—it was just, it was so horrible.

And then we get home, and I had to fill up the Humvee with fuel, and all of my fuel cans were empty, and I hadn't used any of them. So someone else had been taking my fuel and filling up their vehicle instead of going to the fuel pump. So, I threw—I was like, just swearing, and just mad, and angry, and just wanted to start crying, I mean this whole night was just so horrible, so scary, and just, it was horrible. I mean, that was the first time that I was in the scenario where the Bradleys were actually firing against the insurgents and downing buildings, and yeah.

Kollath: How do you recover from a night like that? Like, how do you—I mean, first of all, how do you come down from something like that? And then, how do you get yourself—

Naylor: I think a lot of—having twelve other girls there who were in the same situation as me, we were all staying in the same room, sitting down and talking to them about it, and knowing that they went through the same thing I did, and just saying, "Oh man, that sucked," you know? And if someone cries, everybody helps them out, and lifts them back up again. And we were really there for each other the whole time. I worked out a lot

when I was over there. I would run a lot, and swim a lot, and swimming is a really good way for me to really think and take deep breaths, and relax, and that was really therapeutic for me when I was over there. I also would go—we had a rooftop that was on our building, and I'd go sit up on the roof, and I would just listen to music, or just cry, or just sit there and look at the stars, and think my family might be looking at these same stars, you know, and you just have to find that part in your life at that moment that's going to take you away, and make you feel better. And you have to indulge in that, because you have to come down from it. If you stay in that high tense moment, it's not good for you. And it's—you can't sleep, you can't focus, it's just—so you have to find that outlet that'll help you.

Kollath: You mentioned music. Talk a little bit about—was there a particular kind of music that you listened to, a particular artist, anything like—is there anything that you hear today that reminds you of being overseas?

Naylor: There's, there's a Dave Matthews Band CD, and then there's a Jack Johnson CD, that every time I listen to it, it reminds me of Iraq. Because I—those were, you know, it's slower, it's mellow, it's just a way for me to just chill out at night and put on my CD player and listen to music. There—funny enough, there's actually a hand soap, it's Aromatherapy by Bed, Bath, and Beyond, that I smell, and it takes me back to the bathroom in Iraq. And my—I was just staying at a friend's house last night, and she had this, I was like, this is so weird. Like I smell it, and I literally feel like I'm back in that bathroom again. Because that's what we—my mom sent it over, and we used that in there, and then someone else had gotten some, and so we used it, so.

[00:55:24]

Kollath: Did you guys have music in the Humvees?

Naylor: No. We tried to set up a boom box and put bungee cords up on the Humvee, but it would bounce so much, and then there's no way you could leave it on the Humvees because it would bounce on there and skip all the time, so we didn't have any music. So, I would often sing to myself, and it was always like, "Stand by Me" or some random song like that.

Kollath: Yeah, one of the other guys that we talked to talked about, they would put the iPods and run the line through their earpieces, which they weren't supposed to do.

Naylor: Oh wow. We did not have earpieces, so that's lucky of them.

Kollath: What did you do—you talked about exercising, and yeah, just kind of hanging out on the roof. Is there anything else that you did for recreation here? You and your fellow troops?

Naylor: One of the girls bought two bongo drums. So we would go up and have like a little drum circle. That was always fun. We would watch a lot of movies, or, you're going to get a kick out of this, we would watch TV shows. "Sopranos" was one of them, and so whenever we turn on a Sopranos DVD, we'd get out our guns, set 'em on the table. And then we'd get out our knives, set those on the table. And we'd just sit back and clean our rifles and watch "The Sopranos". So that was fun. And we watched, like we would sit together and have movie nights, and make popcorn, and so that was really—I mean, those were good times, and movies is a really good way to get your mind off the situation, so if anybody in Iraq wants anything, movies is a really good thing to send them.

Kollath: Talk a little bit about support on the home front. I mean, obviously, your family—

Naylor: Since I've gotten home?

Kollath: No, when you were over there.

Naylor: Oh, when I was over there?

Kollath: I mean obviously, you have a military family, so it was probably a little bit different.

Naylor: Right, it's so weird to hear that. I mean, it's not really military. My dad was only in for like four years.

Kollath: He's on the board now, so.

Naylor: That's true. He's very involved. One of the things that bothered me a lot when I was over there was hearing animosity towards the war, because when I first went over there, I decided for my own sake, I was going to maintain a neutral idea about what I was doing. I wasn't going to be for it or against it, because I knew that the minute I turned against the war, I would be hurting myself, and maybe even potentially hurting the people around me. So when my family would call and say, "Oh, this darn war, I can't believe it's going on, it's so terrible, and we're wasting money," and this and that. I'm like, "Wait a second, I'm over here risking my life, my sweat and my blood, putting my whole being into this war, and you have nothing but terrible things to say about it?" It was very, it was very difficult for me to deal with that. Because everything I've done in my life has been positive, so to do something that people actually don't agree with was really difficult for me. And when I got home, I was at my parents' house, and my dad has a book, and it's called, "Vietnam: The Tragedy."

And I was like, “Oh my God, what if people think about Iraq? What if I just spent sixteen months of my life for a tragedy?” I mean that’s, that’s horrible to think about, because like I said, you put your blood and your sweat and your tears into something, and your whole body, your whole being, is just this war, for sixteen months, and then it’s a tragedy, it’s for nothing, I just wasted all of that time for nothing. All those police stations that we rebuilt are destroyed. All those Iraqi police officers we trained are gone. It just really feels like it’s this unending horrible thing that happened, and that’s happening right now. So that was kind of how I felt when I was over there, and then since I’ve come home, but there’s a lot of people who see the good too, and there was good. We worked in an orphanage that got blown up. We did train the Iraqi police officers, I know that we made a positive impact in a ton of their lives, and they will forever like America because of some of the people they met in my company. So, I don’t know.

Kollath: Do you feel that the media’s portrayal of the war when you were over there was fair?

Naylor: I—you know, I get asked this a lot, and there’s a lot of soldiers who would say no, it’s not, but I think how else could they really portray it in some cases? I think that it’s a difficult place to be in the media, and they have a very difficult job to do, and some of ‘em try to do good things, and some of them don’t. And I was actually interviewed, or my picture was on the cover of the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* on Christmas Day, so my parents got to get the paper in the morning and their daughter was on the front page while she was in Iraq, I mean that was—that’s pretty cool, like there was some really good points. And I have been interviewed a lot since I’ve gotten home. And so, they’ve been putting the positive spin on things that I tell them, and so, I think that from my viewpoint, the media’s doing an okay job. They don’t give the individual story on the broader—on like the CNN and Fox News, which is a little bit frustrating, but at the smaller level, like Madison news, they do give the smaller story, and that’s what I think is really—not the smaller story, but the more personal story. And I think that’s unique, so.

[01:00:44]

Kollath: Did you have any journalists embedded with you when you were in Iraq at all?

Naylor: Yeah, the one who took the picture, the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, was with us. And I believe Three Thousand News, whatever, or Channel 3 News was with us, too, for a little while, I’m not sure, I can’t remember how long.

Kollath: What was it like having those?

Naylor: I didn't associate with them too much. And then when I was home on leave, there was more people there, more journalists there when I was home on leave. So I didn't really associate with them a whole bunch, but when the photographer from the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* found out that we were having our little Christmas party, the girls in my platoon, so all thirteen of us got together and we put on the only Christmas CD we had, which was Destiny's Child's Christmas CD, and we put that on, and then we all listened to that and opened our presents together on Christmas morning. And so he came, and took pictures of us for that. So that was really fun and nice.

Crew: We're going to have to change tapes.

Kollath: Okay.

[Part III]

Naylor: Is that you beeping? Because my phone might be on beep, so I should turn that off.

Kollath: Whatever else you want to talk about.

Naylor: Alright.

Kollath: Can you talk about when you met your brother once you were over there?

Naylor: Oh wow. Alright. I'm going to rewind a little bit to the point where we had gotten in contact, and I realized that Joe could come to Baghdad, to the airport, and I could go to the airport and see him, but my team leader said no, and my squad leader said no, and it was very difficult for me, and I was very upset, because they just shut down the idea right away, and I was like, "My older brother is here in Iraq with me, and you're telling me you're not going to let me see him? This is not right." And then my team leader said, "Well none of us have anyone we love over here, so why should you go see your brother?" And it was very, very hurtful, and I just didn't agree with it. I didn't agree with a lot of things, and this was one of the major ones I didn't agree with.

Well finally, finally, like two months later, we worked it out where Joe could actually come to my base for multiple days. And, oh my gosh, we—I went on the mail run with the TOC, the tactical operations center, 'cause they do the mail run. And I went with them, and we pulled up, and there was Joe, standing there with his bags, and it was just like, one of the best feelings I had while I was over there, to see such familiarity, and to know that this was my brother over there, and we just gave each other a hug, and

we both teared up, and we wouldn't let go, and you know, said I love you. While he was there, it was incredible to have him there. But he's my brother, and we actually had ESPN on the satellite, so he would not leave that room. And I had to make him his meals and bring them into the room for him. It was great having him there, but he is my older brother. We went over and looked at Uday and Qusay—I think are the names of the—I always screw it up. We went over to look at their lions, 'cause the infantry's base was right by ours, and they were housing the lions. So we walked over there, and saw them, and we—he came on a mission with us for a day, and he's like, This is so different from what I do.

And he was also very taken aback by the fact that us female soldiers were carrying around Mark 19s, and we were cleaning SAWs, and he said, I would never think of myself sitting in a room with thirteen women all cleaning huge weapons at one time. And so, he was—and you know, he's in a company with all men, so it was very, very new to him. And he did have a really good time, and we played pool and stuff, that was actually—and ping-pong ball and stuff, while he was there. So it was really, really, really great to see him, and very hard to say goodbye again, and know that he was going back to Ramadi, and I was actually leaving for home on leave the next day. So I got to see my entire family all within three days of each other, which was really cool. But it was one of the best things that happened while I was there, easily.

Kollath: Can you talk about the—earlier on in the interview, you described yourself as kind of a feminist. So, but—

Naylor: Okay, okay.

Kollath: No, but just—

Naylor: No, it's fine.

Kollath: Yeah. But talk about—I can tell you're really proud of that, to have served with the women that you served with. Can you just talk a little bit about—I mean, the reason I'm asking this, you bringing up Joe saying that he never pictured being in a room with thirteen women, you know, cleaning guns. Can you just talk a little bit about that?

[01:05:17]

Naylor: Okay, well—

Kollath: And how it made you feel then, and how it makes you feel today?

Naylor: I have to rewind a little bit in my life to when I was a child, and the way that my parents raised me was very equal to my brothers. They never said,

“Laura, go play with your dolls; boys, let’s go play football.” I was always out playing football, I was always very equal with my brothers and with all of their friends, and I could play tackle football with the rest of ‘em. And so, when I joined the military, I was always out to prove myself, that I was equal with the men, always. Oh, guys can lift up the seventy-seven pound Mark 19 on the Humvee? Well so can I, you know? Guys can do this? Well so can I. Don’t ever, ever put me in a different grouping than the men. And as far as the pushups went and the sit-ups, I was always striving to do their minimums, not mine, because I believe in full equality. And that’s just the kind of person I am, and that’s because I was raised that way. And I can achieve equality, and that’s what’s really important. So when I am in a situation where someone says, “Oh, well the women can do it this way, and the men can do it this way,” I’m like, “No, no, no, stop right there.” Like, on a volleyball team, it’s got to be every other women and men, women and men, and then a woman has to touch the ball. And I really—it drives me crazy, because you know what? I’m better than a lot of guys. There’s a lot of guys better than me, but still. So anyway, so while we were over there, my whole goal was also for the equality reason. And I tried to be as strong, and tried to do everything that the guys could do, and I did. And to my surprise, so did all the rest of the women I was serving with. We had some people who are very much so girly girls, and who you would look at on a daily basis and be like, you wouldn’t be able to do any of that, but they can, they can lift the Mark 19 up, and they can shoot the big guns, and clean the big guns, and everyone is there for each other. So if there is a girl who’s got a little bit of a problem, I’ll help her out, instead of going and asking a guy to help her out. You know, we’re always helping make sure that we do serve that equality as best as we can. Does that make sense?

Kollath: Oh, absolutely. Were there any other—do you know of any other units that had as high a percentage of women in it?

Naylor: Not any that I know of. There’s medics which is very similar, but I still don’t think it’s as high as a percentage of females as we had. And we worked a lot, as I said, with the infantry, and oh, I’ve got a story for you. We were driving into our—the Green Zone, you know what the Green Zone is? Central Baghdad. And 1st Cav had just gotten in like two weeks earlier, they had just started their missions, and one guy was at the gun right at the checkpoint to get in and out of this Green Zone, and he looks down at one of my fellow females, who’s on the gun, she’s the gunner. He’s like, “You even know how to use that thing?” He says to her. And as soon as we got off the Humvee, she’s like, “I can’t believe he said that to me, I want to go kick his ass, and let’s go take care of him, Laura,” you know, and all this stuff. We were very irate that a fellow soldier would even take us down to such a level. But, if you’re an infantry person, you don’t work—or infantryman, you don’t work with women, they have no

idea what we're capable of doing. Just like my brother said, "I never thought I'd be here with all these women and all these guns." And so, it—there was a lot of stereotypes to break while we were over there, and I think we did a very good job of breaking them.

Kollath: Yeah, it really sounds it, yeah, absolutely. Can you—there's a famous quote that our former Secretary of Defense used, Mr. Donald Rumsfeld, and he said, "You go to war with the army you have, not the one you want." Can you talk a little bit—that kind of goes back to equipment, and being outfitted properly and stuff.

Naylor: Right.

Kollath: Do you feel that you were given—everything was at your disposal to succeed?

Naylor: No. Well, like I said, when we first got there, we were the second wave through, so I think our first two weeks of missions, we didn't have plates in our vests. It was just the—wow, I'm failing here. I was just the vest without the plates. We did not have up-armored Humvees for the longest time. We even went and got quarter-inch diamond plating put on our doors, which the Iraqis did, just to help against shrapnel, but after a while, probably right around the time of our extension, we finally got some up-armored Humvees, but not all of them were up-armored. And then we got what are called kits onto some of our Humvees—or on some of our Humvees, we got up-armored kits. So it would just be the doors would be up-armored, and then like a plate down below would be up-armored, but that'd be it. So, you're using this engine that's made for a non-up-armored Humvee, and you're putting on thousands worth of pounds of plating, and you don't have as strong of a Humvee anymore, and that's actually what got hit with the IED when Garcia was shot—or was hit with the IED. They were the only ones in the kit Humvee, the rest of us were in up-armoreds. So they waited for the kit to come by, and then they got them.

[01:10:21]

Kollath: Did you ever get your body armor?

Naylor: We did, two weeks after we got there. So it wasn't very long without it, but we never had any neck, or we never had any shoulder. And which I know most of them do now. We also did not have any, on the turrets on our Humvees, they didn't have any sort of armor around the turrets, now they've got like, practically you're in a tube now. There was a lot of the random things that we had to buy ourselves. And I'm trying to think—well I brought my own pistol holster, and those are like \$70, and there was just a lot of random, like I said, random things that made our life easier over there that we had to spend money on. That could have easily been

issued to us. And we got things issued to us that we're never going to use ever. Like long johns. In the winter it got a little cold, but I never would put long johns on. You just put like another sweater on or, you know, a jacket over everything.

Kollath: Did you get digital—did you have BDUs at that time, or did you have woodland stuff, or what?

Naylor: We had the desert DCUs.

Kollath: Okay, okay. You brought up the temperature. Weather, what was it like to adjust to that?

Naylor: When we first flew out of Wisconsin and got to Kuwait, it was the very beginning of May. So, as you can tell, Wisconsin May weather is very versatile. And then we flew into Kuwait, and it was 88 degrees at 4:00 a.m. in the morning. No sun. So it was boggy and hot, and just took your breath away. And then that day, it got up to 120. So, it was just this huge gap in the temperature. And it was really, really hard to adjust to at first. You just wanted to lay there and not do a single thing. Even the thought of moving or putting in your gear was just the last thing you wanted to do. And when we got into Iraq, it was obviously just as hot, and kept getting hotter. I believe it actually got up to like 145, or 150 degrees on a couple of days, which you think, oh once you get to 120, you can't really tell the difference, but you certainly can. And it hurts everywhere, like you're just dripping sweat; you can't touch a single thing. Like I was the driver, so I had to PMCS the Humvee, preventative checks—maintenance—preventative service—whoa—PMCS, preventative maintenance checks and services, the Humvee. So I'd have to lift up the hood and touch everything, and I would have to do it with a cloth the whole time, because the minute you touched the steering wheel or touched that metal, it would seriously feel like it was going to burn your hand off. But you had to move on; you had to keep moving through it, so you would just drink a ton, a ton of water. I would drink seven liters in a day, and pee one time. I mean, it was horrific. You literally, I was putting C wire down, and just drip, drip, drip, drip, off my Kevlar. I mean, it was constant soaking through of sweat.

Kollath: Do you get used to it after a while?

Naylor: I wouldn't say you get used to it, you learn how to live with it better.

Kollath: What's the coldest it was when you were in Iraq?

Naylor: It got—one time at night, I think it got to the high thirties. And so, sometimes we would go on our missions, and it would be chilly. I would

get cold. I mean, fifty degree weather is not that warm when you're out for eight hours straight. When it was really hot at night, to sleep, we didn't have AC the first two months we were there, and we were sleeping outside, so what I would do is, I would soak my entire cot with water, and then sleep in my underwear so that the water would evaporate up, and cool me down, and that was pretty much the only way I could fall asleep, and then you're up four hours later, because you just can't—you're sweating, you just can't sleep anymore.

Kollath: You briefly touched on it earlier, but can you talk about your readjustment to what life at home, after getting back from Iraq?

Naylor: So, as I said before, I consider myself a very strong-willed person, I think that I've got a good head on my shoulders, I'm very analytical when it comes to thoughts, and I feel like I'm one of those people who—I thought I was going to be able to adjust just fine. I mean, I'm intelligent, you know, I can think things through, but when I got home, I was, I was just dumbfounded by how depressed I had become. And I couldn't—I wasn't my normal self. I would look at pictures from before I left, and I'm like, "Wow, look at how happy I am. I'm never going to achieve that level of happiness again." I felt like I was scarred from what I went through in Iraq, and I could never, ever be happy again. So it was very depressing when I got home, and then I talked to some of my fellow soldiers like six months later, and realized that we were all going through the same thing. And that lifted every—like it lifted the brick off my shoulders, it made me feel better knowing that I wasn't the only one with these thoughts, that I wasn't alone in all of this. So that was the most difficult part, and I think the reason why I felt that way is because when you're in Iraq, you think of home as being almost a heavenly façade of something that is unattainable while you're in Iraq. So to come home and actually be able to get in the car, turn on the music, and drive wherever you want to without telling a soul, that's unheard of, you know? That was so foreign to me when I was in Iraq. So being able to do that, but then I came home, and I realized oh my gosh, I'm still going to have hard days, I'm still going to hate school on some days, I'm still going to have problems with my roommates on other days, and to realize that life isn't as heavenly as I had thought in Iraq, was a very difficult thing for me to realize. Then, following that, that spring, I actually started suffering—or I'm sorry. We'll keep going to August, the August after I got—or the second August after I got back, so just a year and a month after I got back, I went to—

[01:16:09]:

Kollath: 2005?

Naylor: Yeah, 2005. I went to Sergeant's School to get my sergeant stripes. And while I was there, we had like a three day war reenactment, where we had

to each take turns being in charge in certain war situations with, you know, fake grenades going off. We were wearing miles gear, which is essentially laser tag, but you know, you'd hear the gunfire, and your laser tag would go off when you got hit, and it actually took me back to Iraq, and it—I was filled with panic, and I was hyperventilating, and I was crying, and I couldn't get Iraq out of my head, I couldn't breathe, I couldn't walk anymore, I was just overwhelmed with these thoughts of Iraq, and I just broke down. I had a panic attack while I was at Sergeant's School, because of what happened in Iraq, and this is the first time I really had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, was while I was at AIT. Well, I ended up finishing AIT and continued on in the military—I'm sorry, not AIT, Sergeant's School, and continued on in the military, and I was still having breakdowns and panic attacks, and I was so incredibly depressed, and I couldn't get out of the funk, I couldn't carry on with my life, I couldn't be happy. I was just always so sad. Finally, one day, I was driving to school, and I called up my older brother, and I said, "You have to come get me, I can't drive anymore, I'm crying, you have to come get me and take me to the VA. I just can't do it. I cannot carry on with my life right now." So, he took me to the VA, and they got me in right away, and saw a therapist, got on some medication, and after five months, I was doing 100% better. I mean, I was off medication, I was off—or I was done seeing a therapist, and since then, I've had a couple of relapses, not nearly as bad, but times when I had to go back and see a therapist because I was having more nightmares, I was experiencing more—they're called intrusive thoughts, as opposed to—I wasn't having flashbacks, I would have thoughts about Iraq, and it would be bad thoughts, and it would make me very upset and depressed again.

And so, now I'm at the point now where I watched fireworks this Fourth of July and didn't have the urge to go hide underneath a table, or go in my car and drive away. I was actually enjoying them for the first time since I've gotten home, in four years, I could enjoy fireworks again. So, that's a very positive thing. But it's been a very hard journey, and that's why I like sharing it with people, so that they can realize what it's really like for some people. Granted, some soldiers don't go through PTSD, so they're fine, and there's no story to tell there. But I definitely had a lot of struggle with that, so.

[Break in tape]

Naylor: My story?

Crew: We're on again.

Kollath: Okay, I ask this of everybody, but we have a fancy version, which is, reflect on your feelings about the conflict. Put simply, should we stay or should we go?

Naylor: Straight up, we should go. That's what I say, but there's also a very in-depth answer to that as well, and that being I think it's really important to realize that the Iraqis have a different culture, a different thought process, a different mentality than we do. So for us to assume that we can instill our democratic values on these people who have never thought that way in their entire lives; to me seems a little asinine. We should look at their culture, their way of life, their way of thinking, and try and adapt to that and create some sort of government that will work for them, and that they will appreciate, and that they will use to the best of their ability, as opposed to democracy that they, like I said, they just can't grasp like we can. Because that's the way we think. So first and foremost, I think it's really important to get into their culture, and figure something out based on what's best for them. And they are grown adults, they can think for themselves, so why don't we ask them what they want to do? Why don't we let them kind of take charge of the situation, and figure something out for themselves because there is some intelligence in Iraq, believe it or not. You know we, just because we're the world power doesn't mean that we're the only smart people out there. Another thing that we need to do, obviously, is talk to the surrounding countries. Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Kuwait, we need to come up with some sort of collaborative plan where we can all work together and we can create some sort of pact where they won't invade, or they won't take advantage of Iraq, seeing as how it's at a very weak state right now. So, by doing that, and by letting the Iraqis kind of take ownership, and take charge of what they're all—what they believe in, and what they think is right, I think those are the two most important parts of getting out of Iraq. And I always look back at Vietnam, and how we were there for ten years, ten years was the war, right?

[01:21:18]

Kollath: Or thirty, depending.

Naylor: But we didn't solve anything while we were over there. We just caused death and torment to everyone involved. But we left, and look what happened. North Vietnam invaded, but through political talks, through non-violent ways, we have come up with a plan to help Vietnam and to create a better country for the people. So, why is—why do we assume that violence in Iraq is the only way that we can help them? That's my point.

Kollath: I thought of something else to ask you, too.

Naylor: Okay.

Kollath: If there's one thing that you want people to know about what it's like over there, what would it be? Like people, somebody like me that's obviously never been in the military, has not set foot, what would be the one thing that you think would help somebody like me better understand—

Naylor: I would say you need to talk to more than one person. Because when people talk to me, I will—when I give my presentation, when I talk about Iraq, I try to do it non-biasedly, and I try to give you the down and dirty. I try and tell you the good and the bad, you know, this is the crappy stuff we went through, but this is how we dealt with this, and this is some of the fun stuff we did. We decorated for Christmas, for God's sakes. I mean, we did stuff, but then you need to talk to other soldiers who loved being over there, and who fought a good fight, and who feel like they came away with doing something really good. And then you can talk to the soldiers who were the post office workers, and they sat in the post office all day and were bored out of their minds. And so, for—yeah, the one thing I would tell you is talk to more soldiers if you really want to know a lot about it. But to sum it up, I would say that it's a very versatile war. There's a lot of different things going on all at once, and yeah, every story is very original, I think. So I don't know if I could sum up my experience in just one sentence, because there were so many different things that we did. But it's pretty hellacious. It is a war, it is a war, even though some people think that it's not. And there's a lot of negativity, and a lot of bad things happening over there, but there's a lot of good things, too. So you just have to hear different perspectives, and not get stuck in one place.

Kollath: I think that's a good spot to end.

Naylor: Okay.

Kollath: You just justified my whole job, so.

Naylor: Yes. So yeah. This was good.

Kollath: I'm glad to—yeah, it was very—

[End Interview]