

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ANGELA M. RUSSELL
Administration, U.S. Army, Gulf War
2019

OH
2150

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2150**

Russell, Angela M., (1971–). Oral History Interview, 2019.

Approximate length: 2 hour 3 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to the original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Angela Russell, a native of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and resident of Waukesha, Wisconsin, discusses her service as an administrative specialist in the Army from 1990 to 1996, including her time in Germany during the Gulf War, and command of American Legion Post 490.

Russell born in 1971 describes growing up on the northside of Milwaukee, enjoying the summers, watching the women gardening and canning food, and the prevailing sense of community in her neighborhood. She discusses her mother going from welfare to graduating college, her father's work as a cook and a disk jockey and her own work babysitting as a teenager.

Russell signed up for the Army her junior year in high school. She graduated from Samuel Clemens High School in 1990 and went to basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey. Russell outlines how physical training, weapons training, and obstacle courses made the women see themselves as a team. She discusses the arrest of her most influential drill sergeant and reflects on her feelings about the situation.

She went to advanced training at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, for her 75B training. She describes a fight that broke out at the enlisted club, her training and the benefits of the master fitness program. Following that, she was sent to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, for her 75L training and discusses seeing one of her sergeants have a heart attack while running up Tank Hill.

Later, Russell was assigned to the 730th Military Intelligence Battalion in Germany. She describes the number of divorces after the Gulf War and reflects on how it changed her ideas about relationships. The 730th Military Intelligence Battalion deactivated and Russell moved to Augsburg, Germany, under the 66th Military Intelligence Brigade. Russell describes being in an abusive relationship with another soldier and becoming pregnant with her son. She was sent to Walter Reed Hospital during her pregnancy and assigned to the 902nd Military Intelligence Group at Fort Meade, Maryland. Russell reflects on the trauma accrued in the abusive relationship, a home invasion at Fort Meade and being barred from re-enlistment in 1996.

She returned to Milwaukee and started working for the postal service. She describes the postal shooting in Milwaukee on December 19, 1997, and how the shooting catalyzed a severe depressive episode.

She outlines her recovery and becoming the commander of the American Legion Post 490 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and how helping veterans helped her develop leadership skills. Russell explains what resources and services her veterans need and the importance of timeliness in recognizing their accomplishments. She reflects on instances of structural inequity, the importance of policy to the lived experiences of soldiers, and problems of representation.

Russell reflects on her time in Germany and how exposure to German culture influenced the way she sees the world. She outlines her experience at Walter Reed and discusses military members voicing their concerns about exposures in the military causing birth defects.

Biographical Sketch:

Angela Russell was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1971. She enlisted in the United States Army Reserves in 1990 and attended basic training in Fort Dix, New Jersey, and advanced training as an administrative specialist at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, and Fort Jackson, South Carolina. After training she went active duty and was stationed in Germany where she served in the 730th Military Intelligence Battalion and the 66th Military Intelligence Brigade. She was assigned to the 902nd Military Intelligence Group Fort Meade, Maryland, and discharged in 1996. After her service, she moved to Waukesha, Wisconsin, worked for Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS) and became the commander of the American Legion Post 490.

Archivist's Note:

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

Interviewed by Rachelle M. Halaska, 2019.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Service, 2019.

Reviewed and edited by Rachelle M. Halaska, 2019.

Abstract written by Rachelle M. Halaska, 2019.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH2150.Russell_file1_access.mp3]

Halaska: Okay. Today is June 14th, 2019. This is an interview with Angela Russell, who served with the 5091st Reception battalion with the Wisconsin Army Reserve starting in 1989, and then with the 730th Military Intelligence in the 902nd Military Intelligence Battalion from 1991 to 1996 through Operation Desert Storm/Desert Shield. Your interviewer today is Rachelle Halaska, and this interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans' Museum Oral History Program. Thank you for meeting with me today.

Russell: Thank you.

Halaska: All right. Can we start off just by you telling me when and where you were born?

Russell: I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on December 5th, 1971.

Halaska: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about growing up in Milwaukee?

Russell: Sure. I had the best childhood. Not—I mean—the best childhood. So, I mean, I grew up. The winters were cold. Oh, you know, like all the other families, you know, you would go to the meat market, get a slab of meat, stick it in the basement, and all we had to worry about was, like, vegetables. But we canned a lot of our—pickled, canned, whatever you call it—it would be, you know, put in the cellar in the basement, and then we'd use that as, you know, [unclear]. So I grew up in that whole system. [laughs] So I do remember, you know, taking strawberries and making preserves. I do remember watching the ladies put jalapeño peppers and all that into jars and jarring it, and we would use it throughout the year. Having sweet potato jelly made—homemade jellies and stuff, and as a girl—so I grew up. It was—it was a slower time, I guess, and you know, I remember playing a lot of games on the porch. But when it rained, we'd stay on the porch. So we'd play like jacks and—I don't know. Roll a ball to each other. We were very creative as kids. We didn't have a lot, but we did enjoy the summer months, so—I grew up on the north side of Milwaukee—I would go to Moody Pool. [laughs] They had a Moody Pool back then and it would be yellow. And they would go—all the kids were using the bathroom and [laughter] in the—in the pool, so you know, as I got older I was like, "All right. Try something else." But that was the neighborhood pool—Moody. And you know, like any other block or neighborhood, you know, there's neighborhood fights, you know, and things like that, but I think, you know, back then the teachers cared about our education. So I went to Benjamin Franklin for elementary all the way up until the fifth grade, and my sixth-grade year I went to Samuel Clemens. And it was a big difference in the school system: Benjamin Franklin was much huge—bigger. Samuel Clemens was small. So I ended up going to another neighborhood—by that time, I was a

teenager—but what I do remember more than anything is climbing trees, getting pears, and—it was pears, apples, crabapples, peaches—you know. And we'd get into trouble for being in people's yards. [laughter] I'm trying to think what else we did. Making catnip tea. I knew a lot about the earth, and I don't know if that was part of my upbringing, or—I don't know how I even learned that stuff, but you know, like I said, it was a different time. We played marbles. And then on rainy days we'd jump in the puddles. Just goofy little stuff like that. I had a dog—

Halaska: What was the dog's name?

Russell: —I think everybody had a dog. His name was Killer. [laughter] Everybody was scared of that dog, and it's kind of funny because I remember the dog—I tried to walk it, but it would pull and yank me, so everybody would be running: "Oh my gosh, you've got the dog." Gosh, I choked the hell out of that dog [laughs] one day trying to control it—"Stop, don't pull me," and it would pull me anyways. [laughter] The dog knew that I wasn't the master, and it did do what it could to protect me, so I mean, those dogs, they're not stupid. They're very intelligent, and they know who's who, and I was the baby, so it did its job to protect me. We had, in our yard—and this is what we pickled, or whatever. We had greens in the yard and tomatoes and mustard seeds, and all other stuff, and I think everybody in the neighborhood had one. And it was a big thing with the yard, so we would have, like, Kentucky bluegrass put down. And it was a lot of pride in the neighborhood, so like I said, it was way different. I learned how to Double Dutch. I knew how to play cans, play ball.

[00:05:04]

It was a lot of sports activity. We had teachers that lived in the neighborhood. I would go over there in the summertime, and they would teach us more stuff over the summer so we would be prepared for the school year. Spent a lot of time reading books. Had my core friends, relatives, family, and—it was more community based, so like, if you got in trouble in the—in the store, of course you got a call. [laughs] The call beat you home. [laughter] And you had to deal with trouble, you know. It was just a different time—it's just way different, and that's the Milwaukee I remember. We kept it clean. There was a lot of pride in the neighborhood, and family. We had a big family, and we all would meet up at the same house for holidays and Christmases and things like that, so—

Halaska: Brothers and sisters?

Russell: I have—well, back then I think it was kind of new. But I had a non-traditional family.

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: My parents were divorced, and my father remarried and he had a son and a daughter. And my mother—eventually she got married, but she had a daughter—my sister—so—from my father. He produced, you know, a girl and a boy, and my mother produced a daughter. So—

Halaska: Were you close with your siblings?

Russell: For the most part, I was more like a babysitter. I mean, like I'm ten years apart from my next sister. Well, no, I'm eight years apart from my next sister and ten from the next. And then my brother—about eleven-and-a-half years—so they were close in age. I just wasn't. So they were like the babies.

Halaska: Yeah. What did your parents do?

Russell: Well, at the time, my mother was on welfare. But I watched her leave the welfare system. She went to college—she graduated from UW Whitewater. I was there when she walked across the stage. [coughs] I—my father never completed eighth grade. I think he dropped out in ninth grade. He went to high school briefly at Milwaukee high school [unclear] where I graduated from. So he was really proud for me to graduate from his high school. He was more of a porter—cook—that's what he was. He loved to cook. He loved to entertain. And he was a DJ, so he had two jobs. So I knew all the songs on the radio. I knew all the blues songs. I had been—my father, he used to DJ at night in clubs, so I would be in the clubs—in the daytime—me and my stepsister and her family—which they never treated me any different. I was—they were “auntie” and they were my cousins; they never said, “This is my—” no. Like, my brother was their relative, but I wasn't. But they never said that. So when it was time to go clean the bar and we had to get the cans and take them to the aluminum, we all cleaned. We all got paid. The money was divided evenly with the cousins, and such. So I spent the summers with my father and the school year with my grandfather, because my mother went to school, and that's why I switched schools from fifth grade—from Benjamin Franklin to Samuel Clemens—because she had graduated college and she was ready for me to come back home.

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: And so I spent that time with my mother until I graduated and joined the military.

Halaska: What got you interested in joining the military to begin with?

Russell: So when I was a kid, we used to have—I guess it was *Divide* [??] magazine, and you know—I'm trying to think of what other magazines. You see all these magazines, and in the back of the magazines, they used to have these “Dear Pen Pals.” And people would be writing each other from New York and such. And so I'm writing these people, you know, and I'm like, “What is New York like? What is—” you know—“California like? What is—” you know, I had pen pals. We

write each other, and they would tell me what it was like, and I always knew that I didn't want to be in Milwaukee. I wanted to see the world. And what happened was, when I got to be in high school, everybody wanted me to be their babysitter, so I had a natural knack for kids. I mean, I already had a lot of siblings. They were all babies, so I had practice, you know, raising them and, you know, keeping them, and so people would just give me kids and they would, you know, have me babysit. And they paid me well. And what happened was, I met a couple—Philip and Angela. Philip had been in the military—he was a recruiter here in Milwaukee—and Angela had been in, but she got out after she got married, and she stayed—you know, she wasn't a stay-at-home mom, but she, you know, she traveled with her husband.

[00:10:08]

And then they had two kids: Samira and Philip, Jr. PJ is what they called him. And Angie would sit down and she would tell me about her military career, and the fun part—the good, the bad, and the ugly. And then—you know me—but Philip—(beeping)—and they paid me well. They were probably like the ones that kept me the most: “Come over and spend the night at my house and watch the babies.” Philip, he was—he would get me just to watch the games. So I would play with their daughter and son while he watched the games. I remember when Angie thought that was so funny. “It's his turn to watch the kids, and he didn't want to be bothered, so he went to go pick you up, so you can—” [laughter]—“he can watch the games.” And then they would provide everything that—you know, like a babysitter's dream. And that's kind of how I looked when I'd get babysitters. I would pay them, like, fifty dollars, and make sure I had, like, Doritos and sodas and chips and—same thing they did with me. So babysitters were never an issue for me, just like I was never—I mean, you want me to come over? You're going to give me this? And you're going to pay me to watch your kids while you're at the house? [laughter] No problem. So it was them who really got me interested more so in the military, and I really wanted to do a lot of traveling. And I was very lucky because I did get a chance to go to Germany, and that's where Angela and Philip was. They lived right next to the Rhine river. They had a castle that they lived in in Germany, and I forget the name of the city, but—when I got overseas to Germany, that was the only family I knew. So that started—you know, but that was the one that got me interested. And of course, Philip was very—(beeping)—instrumental in making sure that I got with the right people, the right recruiters—he wasn't going to leave me in the wrong hands, so—

Halaska: That's good. So you said that Angela kind of told you the good, the bad, and the ugly of joining the military, and you know, Philip also told you some things about it. What specifically kind of did Angela point out that you can remember, the good, the bad, and the ugly?

Russell: Well, she felt that the military was great if you didn't really know what you wanted to do with your career, you know. You could go there and see what it is that you wanted to do. It was a job, you know—you got paid, had your weekends to yourself. Like, she got in trouble. So what happened with her is they lost a child, and that's why she got out after that, because she got—she lost a child and she smoked some weed [laughs] to cope, and so she got herself into a lot of trouble. She tested positive, and—so that was the ugly part, you know. You definitely don't want to ever smoke marijuana or—she even told me about poppy seeds, you know—“Never eat the poppy seeds when you go overseas because they will test you positive as well.” So that was the ugly. “Stay away from drugs,” basically, she told me, “but you shouldn't have that problem,” she said, “because you never had that problem before, so—”

Halaska: Okay. When—when did you decide to join?

Russell: I was—so Philip and Angela left my junior year, and that was the year I—(beeping)—decided to join. They went to—I think it was Rhineland, Germany, and so I decided then—so they put me in the delayed entry program until I came of age. My mother had to sign the documents for me to join, so that's kind of how that happened. So I was in the delayed entry program, and when I came back from basic and AIT, I decided to go active duty, and that was during Desert Storm.

Halaska: Okay. How did your family feel about you joining up?

Russell: I don't know.

Halaska: No? [laughs]

Russell: You know, it's different now, because I work at the MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Station] and I see families coming in and—so I was there by myself. I didn't have any family at the MEPS. Nobody saw me off. It was scary for me. I can't tell you if my mother had any emotions—good or bad—for it. She was the one that signed me up. I've never seen a lot of emotions from my mother; she was never emotional. But my father [laughs] he was very emotional, and he was always emotional. So he showed, like—he would cry. He would go through whatever. But even—I didn't get a chance to see him prior to me leaving. Me and my father had a contentious relationship—like I said, he was an emotional person—and there was an extremeness to his emotions.

[00:15:06]

So a lot of times, it's me as a grownup, as a girl—at that time I was a teenager—you know, a young lady, I wasn't accustomed to that. My mother and her people were more calm in demeanor, and my dad and his people were not.

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: So—

Halaska: Can you tell me—do you have any memories about signing up, kind of going through MEPS, and then going onto training?

Russell: [laughs] The most I remember about that whole thing was when we had to put the tissue on and do the duck walk, and I felt—at some point—accosted. [laughter] So I remember, when we came out of the room, and I felt accosted, and I remember explaining my feelings to a young lady, and she was like, “Wow, you did—” you know, “Can they do that?” You know what I mean? [laughs] You know? Walking around with tissue-paper robes doing duck walks and people sticking fingers in our genitals, and we just—no, it was not a good feeling. And the only thing I remember is getting to this machine and them closing the door, and I had to do, like, a hearing test. And I’m thinking, “Am I hearing stuff?” You know, at some point you hear so many beeps, you’d be like, “Was that a beep or not?” [laughter] And I think that was more like the extremes—oh, another thing I remember because I was there by myself, I had to swear in before we left and then I remember a lot of families—oh, there was just a lot of—there was some people that had their families there, and they were giving them roses, and sending them off. Well, I never got any flowers; I didn’t get anything. So I remember, you know, doing the heart swallows and then being scared of going on the airplane once I got to the airport, so—and that ride there. So I was eighteen when I left for Active Duty, and I got on the airplane by myself for the first time—they sent me to Fort Dix, New Jersey. That’s where I did basic. And I did my AIT at Fort Benjamin Harrison. And both bases are now closed. They don’t exist. [laughter] But I did basic at Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indiana where they had master fitness, so needless to say, once I finished my AIT, girl. I had a body. [laughter] So I went from, you know, weighing like ninety-eight pounds to like 116 because I had muscle. And I remember loving to work out. You know, when you are trained by master fitness people, that enthusiasm for working out, it catches on. So—

Halaska: Can you tell me about arriving at basic training?

Russell: Wow. My day that I arrived. Okay, so the first night—we got role [??]—we arrived there in the middle of the night, and I remember being sleepy, and then they had us sit in, like, a waiting room. And at some point, we had to go through some kind of processing—we in-processed. And I don’t remember all the places that we went to, but I do remember the conversation we had. They were like, “This is the nicest you’re going to see us. When you get to where you’re going to get to next after this, expect to be yelled at.” So he said, “This is going to be the easiest part of your training—is the in-processing.” And then I remember they were talking about putting us in classes. So we were all sleepy—I don’t think anybody said two words. And then they finally got us to our—we had to take a bus. They bussed us. I do remember that. They bussed us to our rooms, and they

basically just—whoever was in front of you, “You, you, you, you, you, you—” [laughs] you go in these rooms here, you go in here—they count out eight, or sixteen I think it was. It was sixteen because they were bunkbeds. [beeping, shouting]—no, it was four to a room. So it was eight. So we had bunkbeds. I had a girl over me; I was on the bottom. And I remember them handing us—or issuing us—our sheets and stuff like that so we could go to bed. And I think we got our issues as well. But I don’t think we got that until the next day. I think we just had sheets and stuff, and the next day we end up getting our full gear. So those are the things I kind of remember. And I remember us all talking in the middle of the night, having some midnight conversation, when we should have been asleep, because morning came early.

[00:20:01]

I do remember them running through the halls with garbage can lids, telling us to get up. And we like, what time is it—we were still under civilian thought, like, “Are you fucking kidding me right now?” [laughter] It’s—it’s dark outside. We just laid down. [laughs] Yes. I remember that, and I remember it was hot because I got there August—I remember August 16th, 1990, is when I ended up going to—to basic.

Halaska: Okay. Do you remember what you guys were talking about in your midnight conversation?

Russell: It was very sexually orientation.

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: A lot of girls were talking about who they slept with as far as their recruiters was concerned—

Halaska: Oh, okay.

Russell: —and at that time, I didn’t—you know, this was news to me, you know. I was like, “You guys do that? What?” [laughs] These girls were sexually active, and you know, I grew up in a relatively innocent—you know, I was innocent to a lot of things. So I’m like, “Wow, you—” you know. So it was very sexual in nature. So they had stories, and I was like, “Wow, you did that with your recruiter? What?” [laughter] I didn’t have that experience. My recruiter took me out to pizza. We learned the alphabet—the numbers—we learned—this is before I even went to—I remember I was doing drill and ceremony, in the back of the MEPS, not the MEPS, the recruiting station. Those are things I remember. I remember them coming to get me. They came and got me probably about five or six times before I went to basic, so I didn’t have those experiences to talk about. So I’m listening, like, “What? What?” And I remember it was—yeah, that was the conversation.

Very sexual in nature. So a lot of listened—there was a few that talked—and I remember falling asleep, listening to them talk.

Halaska: Okay. What—what was going on the next day, then? Or like, the next kind of [laughter] portion of your training? When did you meet your drill sergeants?

Russell: That next day. [laughter] So apparently, somebody had—one of the rooms had mooned the other. They figured out that across from us was the brother group—because we had our sister and brother group—males that arrived the same time we did. And for whatever reason, there was a particular room on my floor who decided to moon the boys across the way, and their drill sergeant saw it. So we woke up to: “You filthy, nasty bitches. Which one of you all stuck your asses out?” And we’re like, “Huh? What?” Yeah. So I mean, it’s a little different now than it was back then. I’m pretty sure they can’t [laughs] call them—call us names like that anymore [laughter] but it was, “You filthy, nasty bitches. Which one of you stuck your ass out the window?” And were like, “Huh? What?” And then they were like, “Half-left face.” And we were like, “It’s early in the morning. What is he talking about? What’s a half-left?” Yeah. That was what I [laughter] woke up to. The half-left face. First night—first day, should I say. And—no, they were like, “You don’t know what half-left face is?” And we were like, “No, we don’t know.” So they had to tell us what we had to do. And so we had to lay there—well, we just, like—well, I say “laid,” but we were in plank position. I don’t know how long—I know she was yelling at us, and there was a bunch of other names she said, and after a while, you just blocked it out. And later on, we found out what room it was—it wasn’t us, because like I said, they were having a sexual conversation in the dark. I don’t know what the other rooms were doing. But you would think they would go to sleep, you know. But that’s not the case. But that was my first introduction. And of course, I’m from Wisconsin, so my other introduction is people didn’t know what a bubbler was. And I’m like, “Okay, where’s the bubbler?” “What’s a bubbler?” “What do you mean, ‘What’s a bubbler?’” So I was like, “Oh, there it is.” “A water fountain. You mean ‘water fountain.’” Oh, yeah, that is the other name for it. Water fountain. So I had to learn how to talk the talk that people could understand—understand what I was talking about. [laughter]

[00:25:03]

Halaska: Did you feel like there was—like a pretty good mix of people from all over the country?

Russell: Absolutely. What drove me crazy is the people from California and New York. The folks from California and New York were like, “Oh, don’t F with me. I’ll kick your ass because I’m from California.” And we were—we’d be like, “Californians can get their ass kicked too.” [laughter] “And so can New Yorkers.” But you know, that’s kind of how we came—we woke up the next day, and it was all like, “I rep New York.” And “I rep this.” And “I rep that.” And it’s funny,

because at the end, we didn't have none of that. Another thing—the white girls. Learning how to live with white girls. So apparently, every morning, white girls had to get up and wash their hair. So they were looking at us, like, “You don't wash your hair every day?” We were like, “Why?” You know. “I wash my hair once a week.” “Ugh, that's nasty.” “What's nasty about it?” “Well, you've got to get the oil out of your hair.” “No, we put the oil in our hair. The hair is dry.” [laughter] So we learned some differences. And so we had to adjust our schedules, because we were asking the white girls, “Hey, can you take a less shower or something? Because we need to get in too. We've only got so many minutes to get in.” So we did this for about three weeks, and after a while, it was like, “You know what? The only way we were going to do this is to get up earlier than them.” So we plotted to get up earlier so we could get in the showers before the white girls. And we got in there—they were rushing us. “Can you hurry up? I've got to wash my hair.”

We were like, “When I'm finished. I've got to wash my twat.” So [laughter] and then learning how to share sinks. So we had a bathroom situation. It was six sheets—sinks—probably about six stalls. I don't know how many stalls—it was quite a few—but it was a limited amount of sinks and a limited amount of stalls. Okay. And so learning how to—“Hey, we can have three to a mirror. Two of us can stand to the side, and we can alternate who spits and who—” we had to learn that. That was a learned behavior; that was not something that we had picked up already. Same thing with the shower situation. So when we started being first, the white girls understood that there was a limited amount of time. So they would wash their hair at night or in the sink so that we could use the showers. We were doing, like, back-front. Back-front. Shower, out. [laughs] So that we all could get a time in the shower. So we learned how to shower—five minutes or so—and then get dressed and out there. And that way you didn't have to worry about stinky bodies or nasty hair. So I mean, all of us learned to adjust. It was different. We—culturally. [laughter] But, yeah, that was the adjustment that we had to learn. And we did. We worked it out. We worked out a system. And so, like I said, in the beginning, it was, “I rep New York. I rep—” it was like, “Oh my God. I'm about to beat this girl's ass. Tonight.” [laughter] Because she's just talking way too much stuff. So yeah. I'm not proud of all that we did. We ended up blanket partying a female. We did have a blanket party. Probably not the best situation. I took part in it as well. I mean, all of us did. It was a blanket party.

Halaska: What's a blanket party?

Russell: A blanket party is [laughs] when you have a person who can't seem to follow directions, and so we was dropping a lot. “Half-left face.” It was like, “Oh, man, this girl.” And she seemed not to care. And so we were like, “We can't have this. We're going to have to make her care.” And so [laughs] we got in there, we waited until the nighttime, and we went in her room—all of us, I think we had soap or something in the bag, or in our –pillowcases, and we all took turns hitting her while she lay in the bed. [laughter] That next day, she was back right. We

didn't have to worry about her no more, because she was doing what she was supposed to be doing. But we had to discipline her in our own way. I think we were tired of dropping. It was like, "Girl. Where—" she would disappear. We didn't know where she was. There was a lot of things going on with that female, and it was like, "No, you're not going to be like this with us." I was an Alpha company. It was the mighty Alphas, so it was going to be the mighty Alphas. So that's how that was.

Halaska: Okay. What kind of training did you do?

Russell: Wow. Training. We did bayonet training—I remember that. That was funny. So [laughs] we did rifle training, grenade training—oh, we got the fire LAW—that was fun.

[00:30:03]

Halaska: The what?

Russell: The LAW. The—they call it? We called it the LAW back then, but it's called something else now. Grenade launchers, I believe.

Halaska: Oh, cool. Okay.

Russell: That was the best. [laughter] I think that gave me such a rush to fire that. And you know, you stand back—"That's the all clear." [mimics sounds of grenade launcher and explosion] [laughter] Man, it was like, "Wow." Yeah. And that was fun. We had to learn how to throw grenades. What else? We had to learn the rifle, and I got the highest mark—I remember I was real proud of myself, so—and then—so it was the grenade. We did some ruck marches. We had a lot of training to do in physical training. That was a lot. We learned how to—what was that thing called? You had to—it was an obstacle course. It was two courses. One was called "obstacle course" and the other one was something else. But—so one, I remember we had to get on a log, and we had to do, like, a rappelling down from a rope, and I remember climbing this spider-net thing. One of the girls ended up falling. We didn't keep—some of the girls didn't make it through. She ended up getting medically discharged because she let go. I mean, we were way up high, and she let go. And that was right before I went over, and I watched her fall. Mm, she fell. She let go. So when I got over there and I got tired, I listened. He was like, "Put your arm through the thing." So I put my arm up there, rested, caught my breath, and went on down the rest of the net. Went to the next group. You know, you just keep going. I remember them doing live rounds over our heads. And I'm saying live. They might have been—they call them bullets. [laughs] They're not real.

Halaska: Blanks?

Russell: Blanks. They might have been blanks, but I remember being scared to death either way. So you know, you had the back crawl, low crawl—what else? A whole lot of physical activity. And then we had to learn how to help each other over, like, a big log tree or something. The fattest tree I ever saw. [laughter] And they had no grooves. I think they took the—the tree bark off of it or something. And so what we had to do was we had to help each other over that thing. And then we had like a—something else, where you had to go up it and then come back down the same way—you know, you couldn't change direction. It was now your head is lower than your feet [laughs] at some point, you drop your legs down, and you stand up, and you go to the next one. So it was a lot of learning of how to work as a team, so when we were done with our training, we were a team. And I remember we sat—there was this one girl named Somerset [sp?][?]—and every morning, she would say, “Good morning drill sergeant!” And every time, they would say, “Half-left face.” So by this time—now this is at the end of basic—we're talking mess. We done learned how to talk the lingo. “You can't smoke a rock. You can't smoke a rock.” We're down there doing push-ups. They didn't even have to tell us anymore. We're practicing diamonds, arms open—the whole nine. Walking with it—we didn't even care. [laughter] So next time they were dropping us, we were like “Pfft. That's the best you can do? You can't smoke a rock.” [laughter] Yeah. We was talking plenty mess. We was the mighty, mighty Alphas, baby. Mm. Yes. And we took that same energy from basic to AIT. So now we mixed in with the fellas, and guess where I was? An Alpha again. So in my mind, I am an Alpha.

Halaska: That's awesome.

Russell: Always will be.

Halaska: Do you have any memorable, like, battle buddies from—that you remember—that you were good friends with?

Russell: Her name was Somerset. She was from Illinois. She was—in the beginning, I could not stand her. Oh, she said things to me that I felt were unacceptable. Like I remember I had this [unclear] in my hair, and she started laughing. “You look like Don King.” And I was like, “Your momma looks like Don King.” [laughter] “Don't every tell me I look like some damn Don King.” You know? “Compare me to a man. Shoot. Compare me to a woman.” [laughter] But, she was my buddy, and she ended up going to AIT with me as well. And it was so funny watching her transition, because she was like, “I'd never seen black people unless they were on television. We don't have any in our town.”

[00:35:01]

I'm like, How can that be? A whole town without black folks? Okay. So it was a lot of things that she just—and I had to tell her, “You can't say that. Don't say that to me.” “Okay, don't talk to me today.” You know. We went through that for

a while, and then when we got to AIT, she just blended in. She learned. So it was time—she was supposed to be my buddy. I remember switching with her. It was a white girl. This lady named Terry. Her name was Terry something—I forget her name, but she was in—she was a southern belle. Hell, we ended up switching at some point, but I didn't have—they didn't care who we slept with, you know, in the tents or whatever. And you know, I said her name—it was Bixby. Not Somerset. Somerset was the one who said, "Good morning, drill sergeant," that made us drop every day. But Bixby was from Illinois. Melissa Bixby was her name. And yes, she—I tried to look her up a couple times to see how she was doing. I have not been able to make contact with her, but I would love to see how she has grown as a woman, because we were kids, you know? And I just felt like I watched her transition from an ignorant white woman to a very world-knowledgeable white woman. So I would love to see where she's at in her life right now.

Halaska: Yeah. Any drill sergeants that you remember?

Russell: You know, in my career, it was a lot of pain. A lot of pain. A lot of disappointments. So the drill sergeant I had, his name was DS Humphry, and I really enjoyed being with him. He would spend time with us one-on-one. So like, at the time, my run was a issue, so he would get up and run with me on Saturdays so I can—On Sunday, excuse me, so I could get that run up. He was also responsible for trying to get me ready with the pugils. The battle—they call it pugil sticks. [laughter] It was big, cotton—they were like big cotton balls or something. So it was like—you know. Yeah. That thing. They're like Q-tips. That's what they look like. Kind of like Q-tips with the end. [laughter] That's what it looked like. But you know, we're battling each other—whacking each other across the head. But he was trying to make us, like, warriors. And I remember at the end of my basic, we were supposed to be pulling, like, fire guard and CQ [charge of quarters] and at some point we kind of got used to it. You know, sleeping on four hours of sleep. And I remember I woke up, and I was like, "Nobody woke me up. I slept all night." [laughter] Which was cool by me. And so I remember one of the ladies waking me up. She said, "Russell. Nobody woke me up. My alarm went off and I was looking who was supposed to wake me up." Because she went and looked on the list that said who was—and so the girl wasn't there. And she said—it was me and this other lady—she was from Jamaica. Oh man. She said, "Russell." [laughter] "These bitches in here getting sexed and we're not." [laughter] So she was like—I was like, "What do you mean?" She's like, "I looked all over." So we all went looking. We could not find those girls. And it was more than one that would just disappear on certain nights. And we were looking—and I know those girls knew we were looking, because we got our flashlights. We're checking beds. We're looking at faces. "That's not her. That's not her." Mm. Well, we were getting ready to graduate—and I think it was, like, the night before graduation, he was brought up on charges; we watched him get arrested.

Halaska: [gasps] Oh.

Russell: And—yep. He was brought on charges for fraternization. [sighs] The girls ended up telling their story, and I was angry with them. Very angry with them. It was—what really pissed me off was that two of them came with me to permanent—permanent party—they came to permanent party with me, and I was really angry with them. And I probably shouldn't have been because they probably were taken advantage of. But at the time, I didn't see it that way. Once again, I told you, at nighttime, it was very sexual conversations. Those girls were willing participants. But because he was an authority, he ended up getting arrested and lost his career. And I remember him telling me he had a family—a wife, and like, a lot of kids. So he ended up losing his career, and he probably ended up spending some time in jail.

[00:40:01]

I didn't get to see the rest of that story, because by that time, I had went to Germany for my permanent party. So he was the most memorable because he spent that time—he took that time to make sure that I was ready. He had been in conflicts and wars before. He was very knowledgeable about a lot of things, and—so—

Halaska: Moving onto AIT. Where was—where was your AIT again?

Russell: Well, I had two.

Halaska: Oh, yeah.

Russell: My first one was at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana. And that's because—remember I told you I went from—I was a reservist. And I enjoyed being at Fort Benjamin Harrison so much, and I decided to go Active Duty. And so at the time, we were in a conflict—they didn't call it a war. They didn't need any more 75B, so they put me in Lima. So the second time, I went to Fort Jackson, and I became a Lima that way. So I was dual MOS. [laughs] And—so they would put me anywhere. I could work in S1, or I could work in the mail room, or I could—the orderly room. It just didn't matter. Wherever they needed me, that's where I would go.

Halaska: How long was your training then? Like, each training.

Russell: Eight weeks each.

Halaska: Eight weeks each? Okay. Can you tell me about Fort Benjamin Harrison a little bit? Like, what—

Russell: Oh, man. I loved Fort Benjamin Harrison. So I was in the Hoosier State. You know, they allowed us to have weekends off. Like I said, I was in Alpha company. And you know there were some things that I took with me that I will never forget. So I remember there was a fight in the NCO—the enlisted club. And the guy I was dancing with—I can't tell you anything about him; I just know we were dancing. And he was in Charlie company—I can tell you that. And what happened was, we were dancing—I closed my eyes, and we were walking side to side. I don't know what I'm doing. He's showing me. And all of a sudden, I felt him fall, you know? So I opened up my eyes, and I'm seeing him on the ground. [laughter] And while I'm trying to pick him up, somebody punched me in my stomach. Pow.

Halaska: Ooh.

Russell: So I'm balled over—bent over—he takes me out of there. He gives me a kiss. It was my first kiss. I'd never kissed before. [laughter] So it was my first kiss, and I'd felt like the star-spangled banner—[sound effects]—like, what is all these emotions I'm feeling? This boy just kissed me. [laughter] He sends me outside, tells me to go. He had to go back in. He goes back in and he gets to fighting because he—you know, he's trying to help his people. Anyways, when it's all said and done, we get—we wake up the next day. They called us down. We're in formation. We get yelled at. And they asked us—the drill sergeant said did we help each other? You know—“You didn't just watch them fight, did you?” It was like, “No, we helped.” And he was like, “That's all I need to hear. As long as you all helped each other.” Well, Charlie company got in trouble. They asked the same question, I guess, and they were like, “You're all in trouble.” So they had, like, for the rest of the training, we didn't see none of Charlie people. They were all [laughter], they had to stay. But we still had our privileges to go off post or whatever. But one thing that taught me—and it reiterated that in basic training that we had—is that we stick together. So once again, mighty, mighty Alphas. We stick together. We're Alpha company, and that's what we do. We stick together.

Halaska: Good. What—during—during that training, what were you schooled on? What were you taught?

Russell: So, at Ben—Fort Benjamin Harrison, that's where I picked up my personnel administrative—so we learned SIDPERS, how to do a 4187, how to process DEERS, how we filled out forms for finance—payroll, I guess you call it now—you know. How we do a 4187 to get our people paid. Because back then, you could go to the finance office and they would cut you a check for whatever you needed it for—if you were in some kind of financial situation—I guess they would give it to you for up to three months, or something—pay. But then you had to suffer the consequences. You got your pay, but then you wouldn't get nothing else.

[00:45:03]

So—[laughs]—it could be a tight budget for you, per se. But you know, they always looked out. We had NWI [??]. We had—they would give us coupons for the commissary to go get free food or whatever. Oh, and we also had—what do they call it? I want to say cafeteria, but they didn't—mess hall. That's the word for it. We had the mess hall, so we could always go there if we needed to as well. So they taught us how to process things like that to help the soldiers and the family if they found themselves in a situation—especially when they were going overseas. I ended up doing that, too, a few times; I had some soldiers who—for whatever reason—they had to use their BAQ and BAH—which they had to pay them back later—and they had no money, or very little money. So we had to, you know, use resources to help them, so they taught us how to fill out the forms for that, and they taught us how to, like, enroll—you know, people who had gotten married and—on the DEERS, and stuff like that. And of course typing was important. How to sit—because we use typewriters back then. I know. Typewriters. You would never think that we would go without typewriters, but [laughter] there was no typewriter nowhere. So it was always a typing test at the end. And then to see how fast you had gotten. In fact, one of the guys ended up getting a job at the Pentagon because he could type a hundred-something words per minute.

Halaska: Ooh.

Russell: He was fast. I took the the test, and only did sixty. So [laughter] I can't type sixty anymore. I can do about forty. But sixty's pushing it.

Halaska: And then—let me see. Do you have any other stories from that AIT that are kind of coming to your mind right now? Like any other events or people, or things that surprised you about that training?

Russell: Well, when I got there, you know, we had people who were prior service who were taking training with us, and I didn't know they could do that. And I was there—it was a joint service—[beeping]—so I was there. I'm looking all over. I see ambassadors. I'm like, "What are those uniforms? What is that?" So we had to learn. Like, I remember, there was a guy—he had like a—not a—excuse my ignorance, but he had some kind of wrapping around his head, and he had a sword. And I was like, "Well, how can you wear that in uniform?" And he was like, "It's my religion." So part of his religion allowed him to be able to wear the sword and the thing on his head. And then I don't even think that he was American, because he had a heavy accent. [laughs] So I'm like, "They have people coming from foreign countries to join the military? The American army? Can we trust them?" I mean, you've got to understand, too, we were in training—Okay. It was two videos I'll never forget. One was the sexual disease one. So I didn't want to go to career because I didn't want to have the black syphilis. I was scared to death of that. And we saw the video of how it looked, and man, it would make you close your legs. You were like, "Woo. Oh my God." [laughter] "I will never have sex,

ever. I don't want those diseases." So they had, like, a serious scare on STDs. And then the other one I remember was we were talking about espionage. And I remember talking about the Ames. And the Ames is the one I remember. It was some other people as well, but—you know, and that's one thing that stuck to me to this day. And I'm like, "How is this person selling secrets and not in jail? They're an enemy of the state. Shouldn't we be, like, hanging them, or cutting their necks off, or—" [laughs]—"shooting them?" You know—

Halaska: Who was the—Ames? The Ames?

Russell: The Ames. That was their last name. It was a husband and wife who had—they had some kind of high position, and they had access to top secret documents they were selling to Russia.

Halaska: Mm. Okay.

Russell: Yeah. So they—that was like, your—"You don't want to be in this situation." You know. "It's not even worth it." But they were civilians. They weren't military. But it was some military people who got in trouble for selling documents, so they lost their career. I mean, you become—you don't want that. You're just stripped of everything. So you really just don't want that. So we watched those videos. And I guess I remember the Ames because I remember them—they had, like, a nice house, and a—I think they lived in Maryland or something. But they were living very lavishly, and they were—above their pay rates, you know?

[00:50:05]

They were going on trips they shouldn't have been, you know. "Why are you going to Russia? Why are you going to Ukraine? Why are you going—" right? Because they were making drop-offs. So they were—you know, they were basically telling us, you know, "Look out for certain things, like," you know, "people living above their pay range, people who are taking obscure trips to places," you know, "that we never really would go. Why are you going to Russia again? You just went. You're going again? Okay." [laughter] And then you have to—you know, when people are asking you questions about things they ought not to, you're—"What do you need to know this for?" You know. So once again, it's some need-to-know information. "Why do you need to know this?" You know. That's because they were selling secrets to a foreign government. So those were some things that you have to look out for. And I do remember them. So that was one of the trainings that we received. And I do remember when I was there, they said it was the Navy, the Army, the Air Force, Marines, and I'm looking at all these different uniforms—I'm like, "Your hat isn't right. Your hat doesn't look like mine. Hold on. Let me look at your—" [laughter]—"you're BDUs look different. Your design is different." Or the Navy. They had the cracker jack uniform at the time. [laughter] And I'm like, "Wow, you're wearing bellbottoms in the summertime. Interesting." But that was part of their uniform, you know.

And then I do remember receiving drown proofing there. Yeah, that was—we had drown proofing class.

Halaska: You had what?

Russell: Drown proofing.

Halaska: Oh, okay. What's that?

Russell: So [laughs] that is where they teach you how to use your uniform to survive in the event that you have to jump out of an airplane. So, like, you take your pants—and I don't know how the hell you do this in the water. You're drowning. You're going to take your pants off. [laughter] I'm serious. You take your pants off, and then you wrap the legs around your neck, and you take the pants itself and you make, like, an air-bubble suction thing, and then you use that to keep yourself afloat. And they also teach you how to jump, you know. We had to jump off a board. It was not a plane. But we had a plank that was kind of high, and you had to jump into the water and then come back up. [laughter] So we had to learn how to do that, and then they taught—because I didn't know how to do that. I mean, I took some lessons in high school, but I wasn't a strong swimmer, so I had to learn how to, you know, swim better. And so I learned that and the drown proofing.

Halaska: Okay. So was that in basic or in AIT?

Russell: That was AIT.

Halaska: AIT? Okay, cool.

Russell: At Fort Benjamin Harrison.

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: Fort Benjamin Harrison was a little different, and I know this, comparing—

Halaska: Yeah.

Russell: —but this was—you know, Jackson to Benjamin Harrison, you know, where they had master fitness, and nicer barracks—a lot of things that were going on that was—that was afforded to us, because we were there—because of the training that they had for the master fitness folks, that we were able to receive that you probably wouldn't have received if I went to another post for training.

Halaska: Okay. So after the 75B? Training.

Russell: Mm-hmm.

Halaska: Then what did you do after that—after you graduated from that?

Russell: I came home.

Halaska: Came home? Okay.

Russell: And I went to the 5091st, where I found out—

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: —we were activated. [laughs] And I was like, “Oh, we’re activated? What does that mean?” And they were like, “Well, we’re going to start sending people, you know, yadda yadda,” and I was like, “Well, I don’t really want to be going nowhere with you all. I’ve been on active duty and I’d rather be with active duty people.” So that was when I went back to my recruiting officer; I was like, “Mm. Sign me up for active duty.”

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: I was doing that—I was about to start getting in trouble anyway, because I got back home and I was like, “What am I going to do? Get in trouble.” So I was like, “Get me out of here.” So they send me to Germany, but first I had to go to Fort Jackson. Now, Fort Jackson was a lot different. I got there; I was depressed. [laughs]

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: I’m like, “What the hell? They sold me a dream; I went to the best. I went to Fort Jackson—” [laughter]—“Fort Benjamin Harrison, then I come here.” And I had—and they had Tank Hill at Fort Jackson, so we had to run up and down Tank Hill, which was—I mean, if you had to be—your mind had to be right for Tank Hill. I’m sorry, you just had to mentally get your mind there because that was a hill that you were going to have to deal with. [laughter] So if—while you’re on the hill—you had to consider that. “Okay, I’m doing it.

[00:55:01]

I’m almost done.” And we had a drill sergeant named DS Henry. And we had another drill sergeant before that. But DS Henry came because one of our drill sergeants—after we had ran—and I’ll never forget it. We had stretched out. We ran. We were stretching out. You know, we were cooling down. And I remember he was walking, and next thing you know, he fell. And he—they took him to the hospital, and we found out he died—which then made me have a fear of running. So any time I would get like a pain in the side, I would be like, “Oh, I’ve got to stop running.” You know? And I would stop. And that really hindered my career, of course, because you have to learn how to block that kind of stuff out, you

know? Like, just because I've got a pain in my side doesn't mean that I was going to have a heart attack and die. That was an extreme thought. But you know, it scared me, and that was my reaction to it. But when you get to there, they were stricter. So the barracks sucked. We had roaches. [laughter] We had roaches in the barracks. I mean, not normal roaches. I mean—I'm saying normal for Wisconsin. We see a roach; it'll be like, this big. It's little. Oh my God, these damn things were huge. They flew. They would fly in your face. They're very aggressive. [laughter] So you could not leave anything in your room. Period. Doing that meant that you were going to piss off all of your room—I remember one time I left some powder out, and the damn roaches were around my powder. It was a sweet—it was like a Johnson and Johnson's cornstarch. They were around the powder, so I had to learn how to put everything up. And we didn't eat in those barracks at all—period—because we did not want those things in our rooms. That—it was a way different—so we, like, had all these passes and freedoms—you know, we had master fitness. We didn't have none of that there. It was much more grundier—much more, grimier place. It wasn't the cutest thing. And I'm like, "Well, this is ugly compared to where I've been. And I had—they wasn't as liberal with the passes, so you know, they would take your pass away with a quickness. Real quick. So yeah. Real quick they would take your pass away. A little different. So what was unique about this place—I told you about Tank Hill.

So when we had passes, you always have to have a buddy. Well, my buddy decided that she wanted to change into civilian clothes, which left me exposed. I wasn't thinking at the time, so it left me exposed. So it was like, "Who is your buddy?" I couldn't be like, "Well, she's right here." Because she would have gotten in trouble. I said, "Well, we're in the cab, and the cab—" I said, I gave him something, and that sufficed. But they were like, "You need to keep with your buddy or you're going to get your pass taken away." So I had to hang with people—it was always me and three—in the group that weekend. And so the difference between that is we had—it was a bigger base. They had more hotels. There were hotel parties. I mean, the hotel parties were off the chain. [laughter] I'm not even going to talk about that. That's a whole different lifestyle. I was like, "Wow, I never knew." Like I said, I was innocent. I had a loss of innocence. I'm not going to lie to you, I really did. Drinking, sex, all that stuff. There was a loss of innocence there. That was before I went overseas. And—so—but we—when I got there—because I had come from that mindset that, you know, we're a team; we work together—that's—that's—we all had that same mindset. We did work together. We did our best. And once again, I was in Alpha company. [laughter] So I was an Alpha in Fort Jackson. And the classrooms were different. It was hot in the classrooms. Like I said, it was not—it was poorer condition, whereas, you know, if you come from master fitness and you've got the best this and the best that, and you go on to the—it was a culture shock, needless to say. And I'm like, "The army sold me a dream." [laughter] I felt bamboozled. [laughs] I was like, "What is this?" But you know, I got through that, and I ended up graduating that—but there were a couple faces I'll never forget. DS. Henry was one. And I can't remember anyone else that was there. My memory doesn't really serve me. I

have—I've tried to keep in contact with some of my friends from there, but they all got married, changed their names, and—I mean, I've seen a couple of them.

[01:00:03]

We were permanent party. We had permanent party together. And you would think that we'd have this, like, long-lasting relationship. But I think, you know, for me, I became more of a loner. That war that we had—was not called a war at the time; it was called a conflict—it really jaded me in relationships. And I'm going to tell you why: when I got to be a permanent party, I got there in '91. Like, February of '91. So—

Halaska: In Germany? Just to, like—

Russell: I'm sorry. It was—it was, like, April '91, because I did basic. So I had—February, I left, so I had—I think in the April, May timeframe of '91. And what happened was, about a couple months after I got there, maybe three, six, I don't know how many it was, but it was right after I got there, the conflict ended. And so a lot of the spouses weren't telling their spouses they were coming home. [sighs] My office was busy. I never did so many 4187s returning dependents. So once again, I'm sitting at my typewriter; I'm hearing all these horror stories. “I came home and surprised my wife. I got surprised. Had to fight a dude out of my house—he was in my bed, in my robe—” [laughs]—“when I came home, there was a man hiding in my tub.” I mean a man. “A woman hiding in my tub. My husband—” a lot of that. And I'm hearing these stories, and I'm doing these 4187s, early return of dependents, sending them back stateside, because these folks are getting divorced. And I'm hearing the horror stories. So that jaded me. Of course, I tried to have relationships myself and I got hurt. That jaded me more. So I became somewhat of a loner. Yeah, I was there, but I wasn't—I didn't feel like I was there. And what I ended up doing is—just traveling.

I wanted to travel. So I would get outside of my—on the weekends, I would leave. I went—I can't tell you how many cities I went to. A lot. I was all over in Germany. And I did reach out to some of the ladies I was in basic with, in AIT, and—because you could look them up on the global and all that was there—so I was doing a lot of traveling. I went to Berlin. I got to see nothing of the Berlin Wall, because when I got there, there was nothing there. I managed to squander a little piece of what I thought could have been part of the wall [laughter] that was left. So you know, Berlin looked like the States to me, and it was more like a New York compared to where I lived in, because I was in Munich, Germany. And it was a little bit faster in New Berlin, but I went to places like Cape Town, and—I don't know. So many. Wurzburg. Vicksburg. [laughter] Rhineland. I was all over. Every weekend I was going someplace. And I did that because I just didn't feel connected to my—the people in my unit. I mean, yeah, during the week, I was there—went to all the parties, and—you know. Things like that. And I learned about the Masonic Lodge and the Eastern Stars and the—it was a lot of stuff, you

know, that you learn about when you're overseas. But you know, I felt more—overseas we were more connected, so I thought I was, you know, the bubble, you know, in the room by myself. But when I got to the States, I was really [laughs] it was really like everybody for themselves. I came back into town; I was like, "I came back from Germany. Where is everybody?" Yeah. No, it was way different. So I became to—when I came to the States, you wanted to find everybody—you went to the gym. And that was funny to me because the men would be competing. "I can do more push-ups than you." I'd be like, "Ooh, a lot of testosterone in here." You know? They'd be down there doing push-ups, and me, being the woman I am, I was down there right with them, because I could do push-ups. I could do push-ups. I could do sit-ups. But that run—remember I told you that, that guy dying is what really scared me. So I really struggled with the run, when I was in Maryland. And that's where I ended up getting injured, because they put me—it was five days a week; I had to hit PT. Monday, Wednesday, Friday, I did cardio, and on Tuesday, Thursday, I did muscle groups. So we would run different places.

[01:05:01]

We had the airstrip and we had the—it was the airstrip and the golf course. The golf course is what injured me, so I ended up going back and forth to the hospital, which is funny because now they're missing my military records. They can't seem to find that part. [laughter] And now they're like, "Oh, yeah, you've got RA." So you're telling me I had RA back then? Did I develop it, or what? I've been complaining about this bilateral knee condition for years. It's not going to change; I still have it. So now I have RA in my knees. Interesting, right?

And then the other thing that happened while I was there was that my house got broken into. My house—my apartment—where I found myself fighting my attacker and—and—and he ended up taking—taking me and he bounded me, so what I found out later was that we had, like, a serial rapist or something—I didn't get raped. So I don't know what was going on, but we had, like, a serial rapist in the city, and I don't even ever—when I left, I don't think he was found. I'm not sure. But I lived in Laurel, off the base, and that is where I was attacked in my apartment. In the evening. So that was one of my issues then that I had after that—being able to sleep at night and deal with the trauma behind that. So that's where I got my first trauma. No, my first trauma was when I was in Germany.

So what happened is, I got pregnant with my son—my oldest son—and the guy that I was dating at the time—he was infantry, but that's why I was at Vilseck, because of my boyfriend. I was going to Vilseck to see him at the infantry base. [coughs] He was out in the field a lot. When he was not in the field, he was in Munich. [laughs] He got away too. And what happened was, Munich ended up—the base ended up closing. It was Kaiser—McGraw Kaserne. The base closed, and then they moved us to Augsburg. So he came to Augsburg. And I remember I had went—I went to the club for whatever—I was bored. All my friends had left me.

And I was like, “I’m just going to go to the club and see what’s going on.” So I walked up there, and there he was, flirting with a young lady. And he didn’t want me to see that, so he told me to leave. “You take my child; you get up out of there.” I’m like, “You’re acting like I’ve got a baby on my arm. [laughs] The baby is in my stomach.” But he didn’t like that, so he dragged me out of the club and he picked me up, by my throat—and I remember my legs were kicking. I was—you know, I couldn’t speak. And so what happened was this man had saw it, because we were, like, in between two parked cars. And then—so it was, like, in between two parked cars, and he picked me up by my throat, and I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t say nothing. And my feet were dangling. And this man happened to walk past. He was like, “Hell, what are you doing? That girl’s pregnant.” I was very pregnant. [laughs] So he saw it, and he pushed him, and when he pushed him, I immediately fell to the ground. So I’m watching these two men fight in the middle of the night, and I’m like, “Oh my God, they can’t be fighting. They’re going to go to jail.” And I didn’t want nobody to go to jail for me, so I tried to stop it. And he was like, “Oh, you’re a damn fool. You’re trying to protect him?” That’s not what I was trying to do, but in his mind, I was trying to protect him. And next thing I know, I saw him—he took off running, and I never seen him again. Next time I got in contact with him, we both were in the States. He was at Fort Benning, Georgia. I found him there. And we did a DNA, and he was not the father. [laughter] Right. So, that’s the dirty part. [laughter] I had broken up with him and ended up dating this other guy, and that was my kid’s father.

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: I didn’t find that out until my son was seventeen, here, in the United States. He was living in—he went to Fort Lewis, Washington, and that’s where he lives—in Tacoma—and I am here in Milwaukee. So I found him on Facebook, believe it or not, and that’s how we made that connection. And so he’s been in my son’s life ever since. So, yeah. We did a DNA, and it was like, 99.9999—it was so many nines, it was unbelievable. There was no way he could not be the dad.

[01:10:01]

So—he was the father, so—and I was embarrassed, you know, because how do you explain that to your family? So I had, like, that as a setback. “No, the dad did not try to kill me in Germany, was not—he was not my kid’s father, but the one who I did—I mistreated—was my—” because I didn’t like him. He was, well—“What did I do that for?” It was—it was only that one time, so that’s why I didn’t think that he could ever be the dad, you know? Who does that—get pregnant the one time. And I don’t even feel like—you know, it was kind of like—you know what an interception is? In football? There’s an interception? You can’t—

Halaska: Yeah. [laughs]

Russell: We had an interception, so I'm thinking to myself, you know, "Hey, we didn't even complete the mission, and I got pregnant from that?" You know? But I did. I got pregnant, and from that, this guy I couldn't stand—hated to see the sight of him after I did it, and I broke up with him—the guy that was my boyfriend that I ended up dating forever, was not. [laughter] The one who tried to kill me. But I had to learn how to deal with that, because I felt like I put my son—my unborn child—in, like, a vulnerable position, so it was a lot of—like, guilt feelings behind that. And then with me getting attacked in Maryland, that didn't help my outlook at all.

So, you know, when I came back from the military, I just had, like, a lot of garbage, that I carried with me? A lot of baggage. You know, like I said, one thing I did carry back with me was that pride. Remember? I'm an Alpha. And it took a long time for me to become humbling, because, you know, when you've got the military behind you and you're an Alpha, all you know is that, you know, whatever you're going to do, you're going to ace it. You're going to attack it. You're going to knock it down. And so I didn't get any help for myself because I was going to ace it. I was going to knock it down. Nothing—nothing is going to stop me from achieving what I need to achieve. But it did. It took a long time, and it really didn't hit me until I got a job in the post office. And so—[sighs]—you know, when I came back from the States—I mean, came back to the States and got a regular job working in the post office—I did not—I wasn't a happy person inside. It was some things I never rectified, you know, before I left for the military, plus with the combination of, you know, being attacked in the military. I was physically abused. I was a physically abused woman. And I'm just talking about one instance where he choked me. He actually jumped on me a couple times. [laughs] I thought I had to get a bat to protect myself. But that was later—I mean, that was early on, before we got to the point where he actually tried to choke me, and—this guy was infantry. And you know, even my thinking was wrong. I mean, how do you go against a guy who is trying to kill? That's just stupid on my part. "Oh, I'm going to fight him back." Girl, please. [laughs] If I could talk to myself back then, I would have told myself, "Girl, run." He ran. Best thing he could have done for me.

Anyways, going to the post office, I had been there probably about six months, and, you know, you—I thought the whole military was behind me, and the post office depressed me, because you know, so many people there, so you were always hearing about dying and death. Such and such died. You know? Damn. [Halaska laughs.] We had a person that hung himself in the garage, and then right before the postal shooting, we had a person I used to work with—he was working on a house. He had a house. You know. He was—it was his investment property. He was getting it ready. And there was a leak in the house. And what happened to him is, you know, we had been working seven days a week because of the UPS strike. And so he got tired, and I guess he must have thought he was just tired—you know, he was going to go to sleep. He laid down and he never woke up, because he had that gas in the house and it killed him. So that happened right

before the postal shooting, and I'm grieving over this, and I'm grieving over that—we lost another person—just a lot of changes that were going on prior to this, you know. People living and dying and things like that. And what happened was, the guy that I was sitting with, he was talking to me about—his name was Tony—he was talking to me about, you know, how this was a good guy, and then, you know, he told me about his wife—how his wife was cheating on him—not the guy that I was talking about—the one that ended up dying.

[01:15:11]

He was a good guy. His wife was no good, and she cheated on him. And I didn't know all of this stuff, but he would sit down and tell me stuff. And he was like—how do—“Why does God take good people and keep those that are not?” You know? “Why do we have to deal with those people?” And I'm sitting there, just listening—I have no words, because once again, I'm telling you, in my heart, I'm still going through—you know—what I didn't ever deal with in the military and even before. And so what ended up happening is, I remember one day he came in, and he was like—he used to wear a backpack, and he went from a backpack to a duffel bag, and he put it on the table, and it said, “Clink.” And I'm like, “What the hell do you got in there?” You know. That sound. That didn't sound right. And he says, “Oh, I've got things in there.” And then he had, like, a notebook he used to write in. So I walk up one day—and I heard the—I heard the bag go “clink,” and I see him reading his notebook. Okay. And I said to Tony, I said, “Tony, what is you writing?” He said, “I'm writing a time capsule for my son.” I was like, “Why?” “Well, I'm writing this time capsule so that my son will know my thoughts when he gets older, and—” you know—“we're going to—me and my wife, we're putting this thing together so when he gets older, he'll have it. We're doing videos and all this stuff.” Well [laughs] I didn't realize that was a red flag. The “clink” of the bag. The time capsule. The notebook. The videos he was saving to do for his son. He had a—he was married to a white woman, and he was a weird dude. He was Navy. And I'd come to think that every dude that came out of the Navy was weird. I'm like, “You've all been on the ships too long or something, because when you all come out, y'all ain't the same.” [Halaska laughs.]

So what happened was—and this was like the coldest day. I mean, it was freezing outside. It was Christmas. And I remember having the red and green lights out at the post office. I hate them. Every time I see them now, my stomach hurts. But they had the red and green lights out. And I see him get out of his van, and he had the shortest damn shorts on I've ever seen.

But it was too cold for me to talk, because I thinking to myself, “My eyebrows are freezing right now. If I cough, the little the little particles are going to turn into little ices and just drop to the ground.” So I'm like, “I'm going to keep moving. I'm going to catch him when I get upstairs.” So I went to 3M—and that's where we had our locker room—and I went and put up my stuff and I put on my sweater,

because in the post office, it's hot or cold. You need a sweater so you can take it off or put it back on. So I went to go get my sweater, I came down, I saw him working, and I asked him about the supervisor. He was like, "Oh, she's not here yet." Then I went on him. I was like, "Boy, I saw you get out that truck with them little-ass shorts on." I was like, "Look at that boy with the Daisy Dukes on." [laughter] And then I went and I started the, [singing] "Who wears short shorts?" And he got mad at me. He was like—because he was sitting at his case at the time—and he was like, "Can't you see I'm trying to do work?" [mimics whining] And I was like, "Well, [mimics angry cat noise]." And I did like a nail-scraping look, and I went [angry cat noise] like a cat. And I was like, "I see somebody's cranky. I'll catch you later." No, I didn't catch him later, 'cause I don't even think it was five minutes later, that fool [laughs] got to shooting at the post office. So, I didn't know who it was, because I had left the area. My thought was, "Well, Joanie Chitwood isn't here." That was my supervisor. "She ain't here, she's gonna to have to find me." So I was like, "Well, I'm gonna be over here; I'm going to call my sister on the phone." So I went to the hallway and I called my sister—I remember sitting in the phone booth, talking to her—and no sooner had I said that, I heard them holler that it was people people there, that was shooting. And I'm like, "People shooting? What?" Then you can hear the guns. [mimics gunfire] So I left, I dashed down the stairs. Mind you, this is six months after me being there—because I started in June. So that was December. I was still in good shape, and I had been out of the military probably about a good year.

[01:20:01]

But I was still working out. I still had my body. Yeah, girl. [claps] Had that body. And I was running down the stairs, and I was thinking to myself, "I didn't sign up for this. Is there danger pay? Are we going to—" I mean, there were a lot of things in my head that I just—you—random thoughts. So I've seen—going downstairs was even a trip, because I have old people, and they—it was old people, there, and they have like—some people have walkers. They're trying to go downstairs in a walker. And they're going as fast as they can. You've got people going down with a cane. So I decided to run down the middle. When I get to the middle, there's people in the front of me. I'm trying to push them out of the way—literally. I realize that, if I am not that girl to save people. [laughs] I'm saving me. Primary uno. And I thought that I was going to be able to scream and warn people. There was no sound coming from my voice. I'm screaming. There's no sound. There's some things that you find out about yourself when you feel like you're in imminent danger. I mean, literally. There's no sound coming from my voice. I'm running. I'm not trying to figure out nothing. I'm trying to get the hell up out of here, because I don't want to die. And people are in my way. I'm trying to get out of the way.

So I go and I see everybody assemble across the street. There's no way in hell I'm assembling across the—"Well, these—well, these shooters come out and decide to—" first of all, what kind of guns have they got? They might spray people

[laughs] coming out. I don't know. I didn't stay there. I ran past the assembly of people who was lined up across the street. I ran to—it was a WE Energies, and they had a phone booth in front of it. It was cold as—whatever. [sighs] And I called my grandma. I said, “Grandma, can you come get me?” “It's too early in the morning to be playing with me!” [click] “Grandma?” She hung up in my face. So I ran some more, and I ended up going to—the hotel had not been there that long. It had—on Sixth and Wisconsin, I think it is? Whatever it is. And they had, like, a bunch of taxi cabs sitting out front. And I remember knocking on the cab, begging them, “Hey, can you please let me in? It's cold out here. I left my purse, and my keys, and my coat.” [laughs] “I left everything back at work. I just need to get home.” And then getting home was something else, because then when I got home, I couldn't get in because everybody was sleeping. I'm banging on—knocking on door, and I can't really get in. Finally, somebody came in and was like, “What are you doing here? You should be at work.” I told them the story. We called my mom—let her know that I made it home safe. I did pay that cab driver when I got home. But I didn't know if anybody was going to have any money when I got there. But I was able to pay the cab driver. And I went and lay down in the bed, and I didn't get out of that bed for days. And I remember getting a call from the post office: “You coming back to work? You know, we want to get people in and talk about what happened.” Whatever. And I just really wished I would have just retired, because the next ten years of my life was hell.

And so the person you see today is not that person anymore. But yeah, that was a struggle. I spent a lot of time in poverty. I couldn't leave the house. I couldn't—I didn't brush my teeth or nothing, because—you know, you've got to keep in mind that I carried a lot of baggage for me, and I didn't deal with things because I was an Alpha, and Alphas don't have mental problems. We don't have issues like that, you know? We deal with it, right? But I didn't know how to deal with it. To be honest with you, I didn't even know how to feel. What emotion do you have for this? How do you pick one? How do you determine—you know—what's healthy and what's not? What had I been faking the whole time? I wasn't happy, you know. I didn't like how my military career ended. I didn't like anything because I was unhappy. I wanted to spend twenty years in the military—and I even skipped over that, and I kind of got to go back and go over what happened in the end. So I was at Fort Meade, Maryland, and I was working for a civilian.

[01:25:04]

And I remember the civilian I was working for was a GS-13, and I was a nice little specialist. And what happened was, my military person left—they PCS—and we had, like, a gap, so she had to be my boss in the interim. And what happened was she went back and told people I had an attitude, which then gave me an attitude. “You're telling people I've got an attitude, so now I'm going to have an attitude.” And she wrote me up for everything: I remember I came to work. I didn't have pantyhose on. It was summertime; I didn't feel like putting pantyhose on, but I did wear my Class Bs—[beeping]—skirt and the jacket—or, no, the shirt.

And I had all my medals on my shirt—whatever was required, I guess. And she wrote me up for that. And she kept writing me up. I remember I took a memo, and it was somebody with a real funny last name. I took the information down. I told her who called. She wrote me up because I spelled the person's name wrong. She said I should ask him how to spell his name. It didn't matter. I was getting none of my—remember, my counseling statements were spectacular. But then after that, all of them were not. And so what ended up happening is I was supposed to re-enlist, and I got barred to re-enlist. So I went to find out why I was getting barred. "What am I doing?" They were like, "We don't feel like you're military material." And I'm like, "I did five years. How am I not?" So they had tasked us with certain things. I'm watching everybody that was tasked with that getting awards. I didn't get an award. Not anything that I did was recognized. We, like—we had gotten accountable—commendable as a unit. Everybody that—I did their files, and they all got commendables. I didn't. So I went through a depression. I was angry. I was angry. I was bitter, because I felt like I was being singled out. There was a female who—now, mind you, we were in the military intelligence. This is MI. So at that same time I was going through, I watched them—certain soldiers got disciplined and certain ones didn't. So for example, it was a guy who worked in the motor pool. Now, I had—I had access to a govy but I only used my—

Halaska: What? I'm sorry?

Russell: A govy. A GOV [Government Owned Vehicle].

Halaska: Oh. Okay.

Russell: I had access to one. I had my own personal one. But I only used it for what it was used for. At the time, they had me working at S4. Remember, I told you, I was 71L. I could go anywhere. They had an S4; they put me in there. And what happened was—yeah, I remember this young man, because I had to take my vehicle in—you know, every so often, so it can—they had to see it so they could make sure that it was maintained properly. So I took my vehicle there, and—anyway, this guy, what happened was, he—I asked about him that weekend. I said, "Where the—" they said, "Oh, he went home for the weekend." What he did is he took a govy He drove it home for the weekend and got into an accident. [sighs] When he came back, for two weeks, he had to stay in the barracks, and then he was discharged. Just like that. He got a dishonorable discharge, so—at that same time, there was a female who was married. And what she did was she took—piece by piece—a government computer home. In the military—in our MI group—piece by piece, she took that home. She was unauthorized. You know that had stuff on it. It wasn't scrubbed. It wasn't anything. It was unauthorized. Now, for her, her job—she was an MI. That was her job. My job was a 75B or a 71L. That was not my job. My job didn't require a TS. Hers did. I got a TS because I worked in a TS building.

[01:30:03]

My people I service were TS. So her job required her to have a TS. She was a linguist. She took the computer home, and they let her. They moved me out—at the time, I worked in the orderly room, that's why I ended up at S4, I was working in the orderly room. They put her in the orderly room for six months, and then she stayed there until they gave her back her clearance. She should have been processed and put out of the military. So when it came to me, and they processed—they barred me to re-enlist. That's why I could not re-enlist. Therefore I had to go home. So to this day, I can't—my code on my DD-214 states that I can never return back to Active Duty. It's a code on there, and only the people that work in there know what that code is for, because I don't know. Anyways, the only way I could get past that is if I wanted to go back, I would have to be a reservist first, and then from reserve—because I would have a new DD-214, and that DD-214, I could have used to go back. Or I could have went reservist and then join the Air Force. I could have done a lot of things, and I was like, "I'll just—I'm so disgusted." So like I said, I have that. And then getting jumped on and the—my house getting broken into, my apartment. So I felt violated. A lot. So when I came home, I had an attitude. You know, I was disgusted. And it showed. I cried a lot. And I didn't want people to know that. You know, I was ashamed of my military career. I felt like I'd failed.

And you know, then to come to this, at the post office, you know. When you're faking—you know, because you don't want people to know that you're feeling failure from your service, or you don't want people to know that these things happened to you—because like I said, I'm an alpha. I faked it. So I was trying to fake being happy. And I remember somebody told me, "You have to learn to become one person." Because it was too much work, on me faking over here but I'm not over here. I wanted people to believe that I was what I wasn't. And that—when that happened, I had been faking for so long, what emotion do you pick? I mean, how do you begin to process—you know—me running out of this building [laughs] you know? How do you even begin to—so it took me a lot of years—it took me ten years to get back into work. And even now, I have my reservations. I come to work, but it's a process. You know. People scare me, and I try not to go to extremes. Remember, I told you, my mind is an extreme. First thing that happened—"Oh, an extreme." You know, that's the craziest thing ever. So—yeah. And that pretty much was my career. I mean, I had the good. I mean, I had times where it was great. Like I said, I learned teamwork, I learned—I made friends. I had a loss of innocence. [laughs] I was able to grow up. It taught me how to be self-sufficient. So that was the good, the bad, and the ugly. I dealt with all of that. And then I had my injuries, like my knees and my back—and then of course my heart and mind. But I wouldn't change it—what I went through—for nothing, because that was an experience that I can now share with others. I understand how it feels to hurt. I understand how it feels to have to battle that every day and deal with it. And I understand that, you know, sometimes our minds go to extremes, and how do you get out of that extreme? I had to learn those—[beeping]—those

coping skills. And I thank the military for that. So I am a commander of the American Legion Post. And at first, you know, I didn't want to do it. You know, I still have some shame. You know, "Why am I commanding the post?" And "I'm dealing with these demons, and these people are going to see it."

[01:35:00]

How transparent can you get with these folks?" You know, "What do you tell them? What don't you tell them?" You struggle with that every day. Sometimes I tell too much. Sometimes I don't tell enough. But my job, at this point, is to help veterans get better. How do you do that? Well, my testimony—to some of them. You can go through a lot of hurt and still walk out. And you use all the experiences to navigate through life. Now I continue, after all these failed relationships I've had, I'm ready to try marriage. I can tell you now that, even though I've been hurt, I have buoyancy. I know that I see that, and I still do believe that I am an Alpha. [laughs]

Halaska: Well, that's great. Can you tell me about when you decided to be—like, the commander of the American Legion? Like, when did you join, and when did you start—

Russell: So—

Halaska: —doing things with other veterans?

Russell: —I joined four years ago. Well, it's five now. Five years ago. And how I joined, I was—so I went to a recruitment fair. The VA has these fairs. And what happened was, at the end of the fair, I saw these two guys packing up. And I didn't know what they were there for. So one of them started talking to me—Charles Staples. That was the one. The other one didn't say too many words. But Charles Staples was like, "Well, have you ever thought about, you know, joining the American Legion?" "Nope." [Halaska laughs] "Well, you know, you can get some of those things that you're missing, like—" so I decided to try it. I was, let me go in here and see what this meeting is about. I go in there; there's about five of us there. I'm like, "I thought you said it was a post—" [laughter]—"this isn't even a squad." [laughter] But, you know, that's when they said, "We're trying to open up this post. We're recruiting as many members as we possibly can." You know, "We want to do this and that—" it was a visually—and so I get there, and they were like, "We need an adjutant." No, they needed a finance officer. And they were like, "Angela, would you do it?" Well, I've never been the type of person to say no, so I was like, "Okay, I'll do it until you find somebody." Of course, they never found somebody to do it, so I was stuck being a finance officer for about two years. So later on, Charles and Leon asked me to have a drink with them.

"Hey, after the meeting, let's have a drink." By that time, I had transferred from the VA to where I am now, with the MEPS—which is a humbling experience, you

know. You're going back to zero. "Hold on, I've been here before." [laughs] Remember I told you about the toilet paper and being accosted and all that? Yeah, I'm back here. So I'm on the other side now. But, you know, I'm working for the commander, so I don't get the chance to, you know, to interact with the applicants. You know, they do sometimes stop me—some folks are a little bit more apprehensive—but yeah. So I'm back there. And they come to me and say, "Hey, we see that you've got a new car, and you know, you seem to be doing better in life, and would you be interested in becoming the commander?" "Nope." "Why not?" "Well, why would I?" I said, "You know I don't really talk that much. I don't try to say too much." And they were like, "Well, we really would like for you to do that, because it'll afford me an opportunity to move up." And I was like, "[sighs] Okay. Well, we'll see." So of course, you know, when the election came, they nominated me. And I looked up at everybody raising their hand, they were like, "Yeah, we want her to do it." "What?" I'm the only one [laughs] nominated. There's no one else here. So that's how I became the commander. I had to give a speech of course, and after I gave a speech and told them what my plan was—which I had no idea. So you know, you don't know what the hell you're talking about until you get into that position. And it's so funny, you know, because when you watch the presidential—same thing. They don't know what the hell they're talking about. "This is my plan. This is my vision." Bullshit. You don't know what you're talking about. [laughter] Go in there and finally come back and say, "This is my plan." They should let people job shadow for a week or a month or something, so you know what you're talking about. So that's what I did. I'm tellin' them about my plan and vision. I have no idea what the hell I'm talking about [Halaska laughs] but you know, you fake it until you make it. Like I said, I looked up and they all selected me.

[01:40:00]

So I've been doing this for two years, and it's been an honor. What it has done for me, it has made me speak in public—you know, like at—when you go through what I went through, the last thing you want to do is anything in public. I don't want to talk to nobody. I want to—just let me—just let me be. But you didn't want to talk to anybody, so it brought me out of my—my—what is that called? Shyness. [beeping] Where I don't want to be shy, but I don't want to talk too much either. Like I said, you always battle with how much do you tell, how much you don't. You know? How much information out there. So then it made me say, "Okay, let me learn more about this American Legion." So then I took an American Legion class to find out the history about the American Legion. I've been in it already for two years—still didn't know anything about it. So when I went to the conference, I got to learn some more. I brought that knowledge back as much as possible. I tried to encourage my people to take the class so they could have the knowledge I have—and then it made me be a little bit more creative on how you deal with people.

So I'm learning some things, like, I just joined a new organization where I'm not anything, and I like that. And one thing I learned from doing this new organization is that initial contact from the person in charge is important. So now I go out of my way when I get new members to make sure that I—that they're welcome. I do an initial call, I send an email, and after that first meeting, I do another call because I want to make sure that they're okay, you know, that their experience is all right. If you want to—I let them know that there's nothing they can't talk to me about if they have any issues or problems. I'm able to set up—so I have a VS—so I have two. When I first started, we didn't have that.

We have two VSOs, and then we have a treasurer—I have a first adjutant—I mean an adjutant. I have a vice commander, first vice. And by me being from Milwaukee, I'm the only black female commander. I'm the first for the American Legion. So I have that honor. I never thought that would be something I would be saying. And what it has given me was leadership, whereas I probably would have shied away from it before. Because once again, you know, when you're going through stuff, you just don't feel like you're good enough. And another thing is that I only became a specialist; I didn't make E5. Although I wanted to—I was promotable. But—[plastic piece drops]—because of me being able to not re-enlist this, I never saw that. But that's the good, the bad, and the ugly. But it what happened here is it brought me once again full circle. It's like the round table I'm looking at, you know? And that's a completion for me. I feel complete. I didn't do what I wanted to do in the military—I've done it on the outside. And I think that military training—and the other thing I thank the military for is now I'm in this big fraternity that I probably would have taken for granted at eighteen—seventeen, when my mother had to sign me in. So you just take some things for granted. But as you get older, you get like, okay. These are the tools that I've picked up along the way. I have my foundation on how to be an adult, from the military: how to clean, how to cook, how to—I learned all that. Not necessarily from the military, but you know, you learn it from being in the military. Your peers. [laughs] Your peers will teach you how to—a lot of things. You know. That peer pressure. And then I always wanted to be a leader, you know? I just—I felt like I had to choose. You know, me, this girl who couldn't fight an attacker, who—when it was time for me to try to be brave, I ran [laughs] out the building to save myself. I couldn't even scream. I didn't envision myself like that in the beginning because I was going to save the world, you know. A big *S* on my chest. [growsl] She-Ra man, I'mma beat up people. You come to find out you really aren't as tough as what you think you are [laughs] and that's a humbling experience.

[01:45:04]

So then you learn diplomacy. [laughter] Yeah.

Halaska: Tell me about learning diplomacy. [laughs]

Russell: Man. You learn diplomacy when you find out that you really can't fight. You know, you go into the military, they give you all this training—you're like, you know, "I'mma beat up people. I'm going to elbow somebody. I'm going to—" what was it then, they taught us? How to knee and hit somebody in the throat and push their noses up. I didn't do any of that—I ran. [laughter] I did. So when you actually come to battle somebody and had to fight—and I had a couple of fights—remember, I told you? We were fighting in basic and AIT and permanent party, even. You get your butt kicked a number of times; you'll be, like, "Well, maybe I should be nicer." "Hey, let's not fight. Let's talk it out." [laughter] "We adults. We women. Let's talk it out." [laughter] Yeah, you learn diplomacy. Remember I told you before? I was like, Oh," you know, New Yorkers get beat up too. Californians get beat up too. Guess what? Milwaukeeans get beat up too.

Halaska: [laughs] How has learning diplomacy helped you be a commander of the American Legion?

Russell: Oh man. So one thing I learned—especially when I had that civilian boss—that horrible [laughs] civilian boss—

Halaska: Oh, when you were in Maryland?

Russell: Yes.

Halaska: Yeah.

Russell: So she could never—now, Maya worked in the S4, and one thing we had to do is we had to work with EPW. And whenever she called, they would never come. We had an issue—we had an old building. We had heating and air conditioning issues. I could call; they would come right away. She would call; they would not come. And I learned that you get more accomplished with honey than you do vinegar. You can spew vinegar all over this place, and all that's going to do is make people find you unworkable—they don't want to work with you—tearing down relationships. Whereas I was able to bridge those relationships, you know? I can get anything I want—to this day, I can. Like—so with this American Legion, I worked with SDC. I worked—

Halaska: What's SDC?

Russell: Social Development Commission, I believe?

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: I worked with the head there, and his name is George Hinton. And then I've worked with the Vet Center. And what I'm trying to do is get these resources together for my veterans. I worked with the NABVETS—the National Black

Veteran Association—once again, trying to get resources for my veterans. I've worked with USO, helping Healing Hearts, the DOM other—

Halaska: What?

Russell: DOM.

Halaska: DOM? What's that—I'm sorry—

Russell: That's where they house homeless veterans—

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: —on the VA grounds.

Halaska: Oh, okay.

Russell: Because I'm all about trying to find greater resources for my post, I've worked with other posts. In fact, I've—so my district is broken, and that's because it's too much testosterone. Everybody wants to be an Indian, and they want to yell and beat their chests, but no one is working with each other. So I decided that I was going to do something different. I support you; you support me. So like, this last year, I had a big turnout for my fundraiser. I've also decided to bring in the fraternities, sororities—Eastern Stars, the Masons—because those are dollars that they can spend—help out veterans. So you want to get as many people involved as possible. I'm still trying to make relationships. What I want to do is—with—folks at the council, Senate, the police department, wherever—willing to work with anyone who is willing to sit down to talk to me about how we can better help these veterans.

[01:50:00]

I've also worked with Dry Hootch—so a lot in the community—and what I'm trying to do is bridge gaps. Give people something to look forward to. I've also joined some organizations. So for example, I joined the Steppers—the Milwaukee Steppers—I learned how to step—

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: —which is funny. Hilarious. But I'm learning.

Halaska: What's stepping?

Russell: Stepping is a dance.

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: It's more like—I want to say it's kind of like line dancing, but it's sexy. It's more of a—like a cha-cha or something. It's sexy. You know. It's two partners together. But I work with them because they're a community-based organization, and they do this big fundraiser for cancer research. And in that access, that afforded me the ability to meet the president of the NAACP, Milwaukee chapter; the previous superintendent of Milwaukee School Board—I'm trying to think. It's a lot of people that I've been able to associate with and get to know on a personal basis. So when you learn how to talk to people—and that diplomacy—it goes a long way. So anything that I need—especially when it comes to my cause—I can pretty much get.

Halaska: That's—so post—American Legion Post 490 is one of two African American posts—in—or—

Russell: Actually, we have way more.

Halaska: —way more now? Okay.

Russell: So I'm in district five.

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: And I wouldn't call it African American—

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: —but at least now I try to—because I want it open to every—I don't care who comes—

Halaska: Yeah.

Russell: —white, black, Hispanic—I just want veterans with a heart to want to come in and better help the community. How can we help these veterans? How can we get them what they need? And I have veterans of every economic background. I've got some that are a little better off than others. Some like me. [laughs] Working. And some that's not. You know—what do we do with the ones that come in and they don't follow protocol because they can't? They need help. What if I've got a person who's homeless? What do we do for them? And what I've found is [laughs] it's funny that—for whatever reason—the VA, when they have people that they can't help, they send them to me. And I'm like, “If you can't help them and I—I send them the same resources that you sent them through, how am I going to help them better? You would all be more fit for that, because—” yeah. People who are out there are a meds and combative. I can't work with somebody combative. I don't have the training for that. Where you all have staff that's trained for that. [laughs] You have people who are married in situations; it's

domestic violence involved. You know, how do I get past the façade and get them the help?

So that's why we see—I'm working with the Vets Center and the—I want anyone who's willing to be a resource for my veterans. Like just recently, I just had a conversation with Mission BBQ, and they do some feeding. So if I have a homeless veteran, I can always ask a Mission BBQ to come down and feed my veteran. Or I can give them something to get some kind of food. I mean, that might be a meal for a day, but at least it's something. And then another thing we do is the poppies. You know, the poppies, like—so all we have to do is that goes to our Veterans in Need program. You know, you may have a veteran who needs a—we don't have a lot to give, but maybe 150 or something can go to a veteran who's in need. Maybe they can get some toiletries or whatever. And then the other one is the VSO office, because they do have stuff like toiletries and bus passes and stuff like that. And I also try to bring that program to us. I really would like someone to issue out so I can give a person a bus pass or whatever they may need or—just give me the resource to get them to where they need to be. And then—that's kind of where we are right now. But that's where diplomacy has come in.

[01:55:01]

You—you can't get those type of resources if you're not willing to, you know, sit down with people and tell them—what I learned is when you have a mission—or something that you're excited about—and I am excited about this, you know, helping veterans—that a lot of people will be willing to get behind you. Like my—I don't worry about myself anymore with my military career done. Like I said, it was good, bad, and ugly. Who I worry about is my Vietnam vets. My Vietnam vets. So that's my biggest group I have. I have maybe one or two World War II vets left. I have probably about five or six Korean War vets. But the rest of them—for the most part—are Vietnam vets. [beeping] And you have to know the history. It's taught me a lot. When the World War II vets came, we had a big parade. A big welcome. When the Korean War vets came home, they had a big parade. They were welcome. The Vietnam vets came home; they came with a big parade, but they wasn't welcome. When they had their parade, they were walking—walking through people spitting on them, calling them “baby killers—” they were against the Vietnam War. And what they did not do was show support—[beeping]—for the Vietnam veterans. Now, you've got to keep in mind, this is like the sixties. They come home—there's this crisis going on. We have Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, walking around here, talking about—you know—there's police brutality. There's a lot of things going on. And for the most part, my Vietnam vets are a little shy when it comes to them—rightly so—when you talk about putting—[beeping]—them out in public. “Hoo, no, I don't want to do that.” You know. “I don't want to be out in public. I don't want to be a speaker.” You know. So you have to have a person like me who can come and speak on their behalf. I can tell you a lot, what they're going through. Some of

them have PTSD. You've got to keep in mind that these people came home—some of them had families, just like me. But in my case, it was pride that stopped me from getting the mental help that I needed. In their cases, they couldn't stop. They had wives. They had kids. They had families to feed. What did they do? They went to work. And they worked until their retirement. And yes, they had issues going on, but just like me, I'm sure that pride kept them out. "I'm not going to see—no, I'm not crazy." You know? So here we are. We have them eighty—some seventy—some sixty-nine, you know? You've got a nice little age group, depending on how old they were when they went in. You have some that were seventeen, eighteen when they went in. Some of them were a little older. Some were officers. Some were enlisted. And when they—when they initially went in, they were drafted. These folks didn't have a choice. I had a choice. I signed up on my own. They did not. And they were drafted into the military, and then they came home and they were in a situation where they had to deal with police brutality. They had to deal with—it was a different world altogether. And—and trying to find a job. Some of them became alcoholics. You know, trying to cope. You know, some of them became abusive. Trying coping skills. Just a lot of things going on. And so this is what I've seen. These folks—either they're married, some are not. And they—you know, they're older. And they have issues that have never been addressed. And that is why I always say that, for me, the Vietnam vet is the most important to me. Because of that. Like, me, I can go get treatment. I can go—they started—I get thanked for my service. These folks came home; they didn't get thanked for their service. They just didn't. It's a whole different pride. And so now I can—I could—even though I had the good, the bad, and the ugly, for me, I'm very proud of what I did and what I came from, whereas them, you know—some of them are—they're still struggling with that, you know? When your initial reaction to everybody—you don't forget that. You've got people coming at you, calling you monsters and all kinds of crap. So I really, really try to work with that group the most.

[01:59:59]

Halaska: What resources—actually, I'm going to pause for a second.

[End of OH2150.Russell_file1_access.mp3]

[Beginning of OH2150.Russell_file2_access.mp3]

Halaska: Rolling again. This is the second file for the interview with Angela Russell, and we're going to start with a few, just, follow-up questions about the American Legion. So what—you were talking a lot about connecting your veterans with resources. So what are the most valuable resources that you have found for your veterans, and then what also is needed the most?

Russell: So I have veterans—[coughs]—that can't join my post because of their discharge. [beeping] I have an uncle who I love dearly. His name is Jerry Roberts. And he

didn't want to share his story, because he was shamed for it, but what happened to him—and he's a Vietnam vet. And when he went in, it was a different military than when I went in. You know. Way different. [laughs] So he ended up—his military career ended because he ended up getting into a fight with a white dude. So the reason why he got into the fight with the white dude was because he was called some explicit names, you know, like, nigger and things like that. And you know, that—that didn't jive with him. And so they ended up getting into some kind of fight. Well, what happened was he got arrested—the white boy didn't, the white man, excuse me, didn't. And he ended up spending some time in jail. So they let him go back to his unit to let them know that he was going to have to spend that time in jail. And then he went back to serve his time. Well, I guess while he was serving his time, whoever was the-powers-that-be, they must have PCS'd, or something. So he came back. They were like, "Who are you?" [laughs] "We don't know who you are."

Then he explained to them who he was and what happened, and they ended up giving him a discharge. Now, the discharge was supposed to be contingent upon, I guess—I'm not exactly sure what all was supposed to happen, what was the contingency, but something that was supposed to happen, because he kept—he was adamant that it was supposed to change after six months. So he got a dishonorable, but it was supposed to change to an honorable or general after six months. Well, that never happened. And at that time—[beeping]—you know, he had a wife and kids. And all he was concerned with was, you know, providing for his wife and kids. He didn't have time to take off work and—and fight, you know? So him and I guess—a few others out there that I know of—who need that discharge changed because, you know, ultimately he was discriminated against because he was black. And you know, when you get into a fight, both of them should have been arrested—not just him. He didn't get into the fight by himself. He didn't start the fight; he just wasn't backing down from it. He didn't have that [laughs] diplomacy, I guess [laughter] that was needed. "Hey, instead of calling me nigger, can you call me some other names?" I don't know. [Halaska laughs] So he just didn't have that diplomacy to do that, so he ended up going to jail, coming back, and being dishonorably discharged. Because he got into a fight. Isn't that what they teach you in the military, to fight? The very thing that they taught him is what got him kicked out with a dishonorable discharge.

So he wants to change that. He's been going all these years with that shame that needs to be fixed, and I wonder how many others are out there. And I do know there's a couple others, but that is a resource that needs to happen. They need to have that discharge changed from dishonorable to honorable. He fought honorably for his country. He served. He was drafted. He did what he was supposed to do. So that's one resource that needs to—and there needs to be some legislation behind that, you know? They really need to start going through these files and seeing what's happening to these soldiers. I mean, you've got to keep in mind, it was a group of ladies who worked in the mail room. So it was a two-year backlog of some females—I want to say in Germany—that they sent a black

troupe of females. And then two or three months, they were able to get that mail done. And seventy years later—seventy—these ladies are mostly gone. I mean, if there are some left, there's very few.

[00:05:02]

They're just not getting awarded. Seventy years [laughs] later, they enact the legislation to get these people awards. So I think they need to be doing something a little bit quicker. You don't want to wait seventy years later. People are dead in the ground, people are gone on in life, to give them awards for stuff that they should have gotten awards for. And my uncle would be one of them. That discharge should have been changed a long time ago. That's one.

And then like my Vietnam vets—and my Korean War vets—when they came home, they had to work. They didn't have time to take off—you've got to keep in mind that the job situation was different back then. You couldn't keep taking off of work. "I need to go to the VA and I need to handle this business of my discharge." They didn't, so they just ignored it. They ignored it altogether. And they should have been getting—God, I don't—compensated for their cold weather injuries, their PTSD, their alcoholism because of PTSD, or their drugs because of PTSD. They should have been compensated for that, and they haven't been. It's a lot of them working right here with that. People need to start looking at them and bringing them in and say, "Hey, what is your story? We need to know about it." And see if they're willing to talk. But like I said, you know that once bitten, twice shy? You know, like, "I don't know if I want to go through that again." And you know, that pain that you have to deal with that people don't want to deal with, and that's why they are supplementing with narcotics and alcohol. So that's one big thing.

And then getting them someone who can submit a claim on their behalf, because they're lost. They didn't know they had—they didn't know they had benefits coming. GI Bill. Who's going to go to school? The VA loan. They didn't even use the VA loan; it's still sitting out there for a lot of them. Just sitting out there. They done bought houses without it. And like I said, that claim, that's a big resource. Getting their meds, getting their claims processed. I got folks that are like, "I got Agent Orange. I can't hear out of one ear because I had to use an M-60—" [laughs] "to shoot." So they're yelling at you, like, [mimics yelling]. "Okay, I'm right here." You know, because they can't hear out of one ear or whatever. They have to have hearing aids, some of them. So some of them don't even know that they have injuries. I mean, they don't understand that the injury was caused from the military. So that's kind of where they're at. And those are the resources we need. They need to be re-educated to say, "These are the programs that are here. This is how you need to be compensated for your time."

Halaska: Okay. Kind of following some of the things that you just talked about, tell me a little bit more about the systematic [correction: systemic] racism that you saw while you were in, and how it affected you and others.

Russell: That was one of the reasons why I was so angry when I came out of the military, because—you know—here I am. I tried to get help. I went to—well, let me explain what happened. So I—[sighs]—I got in trouble. I'm going to tell you why I got in trouble. [laughs] [Halaska coughs] It's stupid. Why I got in trouble. This is my fault. What happened was I had gotten sick. But I was too sick to get up to go to the doctor. I just couldn't. Back then, I used to have a real bad period. The first two days of my periods were murder. And—and I would throw up. I would get sick. You know. Throw up and then, you know, I guess menstrual cycle—that was out— That was like hell. And it didn't get better; it got worse. [laughs] So I was in the service. I had this menstrual cycle. And every month or so, I—I would have to take a day or two. So I didn't feel like driving to the nearest PX. My... PX. Hospital. I just didn't. I couldn't even—I was throwing up all over the place. And so this guy that worked into—he worked in the hospital. He gave me a slip, and I wrote my own [laughter] I wrote my own note.

[00:10:00]

And I turned that in. And that's what got me in trouble, because it was a fake. I was in big trouble. Anyway, I got in trouble behind that. And what happened was, my—what's the word—integrity. My integrity was placed on the line, you know. So now I told this big lie. People looking at me, like, "Oh, that girl's a big liar." That right there was the dumbest thing I could have ever done. So I got myself in some trouble because of my—you know—then when I get to the hospital, I falsified some documents, turned it in, and [laughs] I had to—I did a—I did like a month or so of staying after work and coming in on the weekends. And that's why I got good at doing files, and that's why we got commendables. [laughter] So I got real good at reading the regs. I was reading the regs, learning stuff. So I mean, it was a good/bad thing. Yes. And every experience you have in life, there's good and bad. So I got myself in trouble, so of course, my integrity is—now they're looking at me, like, this lying *B* [laughs] I guess. And that's—that didn't help my situation. And then when I got to later on in life, when I got the civilian and—supervisor, I'm complaining, they're not listening to me because I done told a lie before, so you know, where do you draw the line? "We're gonna believe the civilian because you done lied once." Right? "You turned in some falsified documents. You lied. Your credibility is no good." So that's one thing I never wanted ever in my life again. So sometimes I'm brutally honest because we're going to clear the air. This is this. I don't never want that feeling ever again. I would never do that again. Never put my credibility on the line. I don't care if I'm sick. I'm going to tell you: "I'm sick. I can't get up. I can't go to the doctor." Not with—what are you going to do with me? But that's what happened. And so, going forward, how did that translate? I guess I had that lady, and I guess she was

just telling all these lies on me, and making things as extraordinarily difficult for me. “You didn’t wear pantyhose today. I’m going to write you up.”

Halaska: And this was the GS-14 woman—

Russell: She—yes.

Halaska: —from Maryland?

Russell: Yes.

Halaska: She was a white lady?

Russell: Yes. [laughs] She was a white lady.

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: And so she was writing me up all the time. It didn’t matter. I took a phone—a note, and I spelled the name wrong. I got wrote up for that. You get write up enough, that’s enough for them to kick you out of the military. And that’s why I got barred to re-enlist. Now—not that I was doing anything that was out of the crazy. I had already been disciplined for that other thing, so at this point, I’m trying to be on my best foot. I’m trying to be good. And it didn’t matter what I did, because this lady kept writing me up. And every time she wrote me up, I would reboot it. Reviewed it. Excuse me. So I went to the sergeant major, and he was like, “I know what you did.” “What did you know that I did?” At that time I was pregnant with my son. No, my daughter. And, you know, I had a top-secret security clearance, and I didn’t know her father was married. Found out later. So—so I was like, “You know what, you go your way and I’ll go mine, because I’ve got a career I’ve got to do.” Well, he was, like, telling me, “Well, I know. I just can’t prove it.” That’s what he told me. He couldn’t prove my kid’s father, so therefore, they were going to dance around here—they’d bar me to re-enlist—off of her statements. That burnt me up, because we don’t have a credibility issue anymore. We don’t—I’m not doing anything. I’m not selling secrets. I’m coming to work. I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing. But because she is writing me up for every little thing, now I’m barred to re-enlist? So I went to—I went over the sergeant major’s head and I went to another one at the headquarters. I get there, and she goes, “You’re not barred to re-enlist.”

[00:15:00]

You can go back and re-enlist. Go back to your unit and re-enlist.” I get there. The re-enlistment men say, he says, “I was told not to enlist you.” I was like, “But why? Can you give me a reason why?” He said, “I don’t have a reason.” I said, “So enlist me. Re-enlist me.” He said, “The sergeant major said no. I can’t. And I don’t know why.” And then I decided to do a congressional, to find out why I was

being barred to re-enlist. I did a congressional—Tom Barrett was the congressman at the time. I know, right? So they had thirty days to respond. Well, in that time, I had hit the retention control point, which meant that I couldn't re-enlist. So I just out-processed. That was me. What did I do that was so wrong? I was doing the best that I could, you know? I had been bamboozled, yes. I was still, you know, going through what I was going through. But, you know, let me re-enlist. I was going to leave anyways—I was going to go someplace else, but that—they didn't do that.

And then the soldier who took the vehicle—and I'm not saying that he was right, but he took his vehicle—the GOV, and he took it home, and he had an accident. And when he came back—he was a black soldier—they didn't give him a chance to rehab himself or—they out-processed him right away. He got a dishonorable discharge. The female who—now, mind you, his job was the motor pool, whatever their MOS was. I'm a 71L, B. We don't require a top secret. I could have went to Fort Benning somewhere and been in a line unit and still have been able to work. But this young lady required a top-secret security clearance. She lost her clearance because she stole a top-secret computer [laughs] out of the office. They took me out of the S1 and put me in the S4—that's when I started working for the civilian. And they put me in the S4, and they put her in that position in the S1 to work with the commander, and they left her there for about six months, and they gave her back her clearance. Now clearly, there was a [laughs] a difference in the treatment. How do two people—I was barred to re-enlist. I mean, I got honorable discharge, yes. That guy was dishonorably discharged. She should have received the same thing because she lost her clearance—because she stole a government computer, essentially. And she didn't receive that treatment. So that's what I saw, you know. “You all are covering for this white girl, but you would easily—with no problems—getting people like me out. And why? Because I worked in MI? You didn't want me there?” Because what was going to happen was they were going to send me to another MI group. Another military intelligence. Because, you know, once you have that clearance, once you have that background, they send you from one to the next to the next to the next. [beeping] So that's what I saw with my enlistment. And I was hurt, because I knew I was discriminated against. I never—the whole time I grew up in Wisconsin—never felt discriminated against. I leave the military and I get it there. So I didn't get a chance to re-enlist like I wanted to. I did five years. I made it to specialist. I never made any rank higher than that. And that's what caused my shame, you know? And there was nothing I could do about it. Even with the congressional. That's it. So yeah, I looked at—I have access to DEERS. I looked in there, and it still said that I'm barred to re-enlistment. There's no other documents in my DEERS but that. That's crazy. Where's the rest of my documents? [laughs]

Halaska: Right? Are there any other—just kind of for the historical record—any other, like, instances of institutionalized racism in the military that you want to—

Russell: Wow. I'm glad you brought that up. [laughs]

Halaska: —Yeah.

Russell: So it's so funny, because I remember—so, I believe it was 1992? '93

[00:20:08]

Somewhere in there. I forget what year. But Clinton became president. And what happened is—when he came in there, he did this Don't Ask Don't Tell. Now, we all knew that there were gays in the military, but you know, we just—as long as they wasn't doing open displays of affection and things like that, nobody bothered them. They were there. I didn't understand why some received different treatment than others. I think you remember I told you that there was a loss of innocence for me. That [laughs] was one of them. So we had, you know, these people that identified themselves as gay, and they wanted the same treatment, you know, as a female spouse—or any spouse, excuse me—of anybody who's in the military. They want the same treatment. And so what happened is President Clinton enacted this Don't Ask Don't Tell. So what was going on during that time, if they found out that you were gay or identified yourself as homosexual—or whatever the name is. I don't know the PC term, and I'm probably chopping this up wrong. Please nobody be mad at me. [laughter]

Halaska: You're fine.

Russell: They—they would process them out of the military. You know. And then I don't know what the code was for that, but you couldn't join back—that either, if you were identified as such. We had females that were gay. Some were not bothering and others were. And I don't know if it was because some were more flamboyant than others. I—I really can't tell you. I just don't know. But when Don't Ask Don't Tell came out, they couldn't be—as long as they didn't bring it up, they couldn't be processed out of the military anymore. So—excuse me—I don't know why it was such like that prior to me getting there, because that Don't Ask Don't Tell—I think I was in about a year or two—no, I was in about three years at that point, and I was at Fort Meade, Maryland. I was ecstatic, that I was there and that they had that rule. Because some of my friends that were in the military that were gay—they identified as such—they were able to keep their jobs as long as they did their work. And there's nothing wrong with, you know, you identifying yourself as such. I didn't have an issue with it. But once again, you could not have any PDA. You know. You didn't display. You didn't show. You didn't anything. You just came to work; you left. And for the whole—I think for the most part, we all had to go—you know, the military is conservative. It's not like they're going to be happy seeing a man and a woman slobbering each other down and pulling on each other.

At any point. I don't care if you're at work or not. [laughs] You know. You have to show that professional decorum.

So that was one. And then the other thing I thought was crazy was our hair. You know the black woman—the African American woman's hair has always been a topic. [laughs] So when I first came in, I was in basic. I remember braiding my hair. And nobody had an issue, but I did basic at Fort Dix. So Fort Dix/Fort Benjamin Harrison—remember, I told you I was sold a dream. [laughs] But when I came back to go active duty and I was at Fort Jackson, I braided my hair—it was a problem. There was a reg out that said you're going to have one or two parts in your hair. When you braid your hair, you have many parts. So what am I supposed to do? You couldn't have your hair dreaded—well, why not? You know? It was a standard of beauty, and the beauty was not us. Our hair was an issue. So I mean, you can be disciplined because your hair was braided. We're about to go in the field; we don't want to come back with our hair all matted. [laughs] You don't want to come back, you know, dealing—you've got to deal with your hair every day. Braids were just easier to put in, you know, as long as we met all the requirements of the regulation. I didn't understand why we could not do that. So I don't know if they ever changed that rule or not, because I—because I was out-processed, and I got out after five years. I ETS'd. But at that time, our hair—and even like, why is it such important that people be concerned about our hair as long as it's neat and tidy in appearance?

[00:25:09]

So that—those were the two that I saw that gave me great strife, I guess? I had—I guess—I didn't realize at the time, but I was developing anxieties, you know, for that. When you know that they are enacting legislation—so now my friends that were gay, they would tell me, “Well, why can't we show PDA and affection?” If I want to kiss my husband, I can't do that. Because you might lose your job. You can't wear your hair as a black woman—African American or however you identify—because you have too many parts in your hair? You're going to be disciplined? So, I mean, let's just face it. I don't have straight, fine hair. I have coarse, curly hair. And it's easier for me to maintain in a nice and neat appearance as long as I meet the other standards. So those are the two that I saw. When you enact legislation—but the Don't Ask Don't Tell—

Halaska: Yeah.

Russell: —came in, and it was probably—saved a lot of young lives, because before, it was no consistency. It was uniformity at that point, and that's what that brought. So the Don't Ask Don't Tell saved a lot of jobs. You know. Because before—like I said, I don't know why—certain people were able to stay and others had to go. I didn't get that. And then they would put on their DD-214 that they could never join the military again. These people proudly served the military until they were not able to anymore. So I kind of understand what's going on now. So the

President, 45, has made a—has passed legislation, I guess, basically stating that all people have to—you know, if you're in the military, you have to be able to go deploy. You have to be deployable. Well, you know, people with HIV status are not deployable, so they would stay back and do all of the other jobs that—you know—folks who—those jobs that need to be done. And they were still active. They were still doing the job, but you can't be a deployable status. So now I understand that that is another act that they're using to out-process people who are HIV status.

Halaska: Hmm. I haven't heard about that. Okay. So that's interesting. Thank you for reflecting on—just kind of like the general laws and how legislation affects people.

Russell: Oh, absolutely.

Halaska: Are there any other—just kind of—issues with that that you want to kind of reflect on and talk about?

Russell: Hmm. I can't think of anything else.

Halaska: Okay. [laughs]

Russell: But that right there is [laughs] when you enact legislation, you have to keep in mind that it's going to affect people. And is this fair? Is it justified? Is it right? You know? Is there a moral, ethical code behind this? Well, if you're told that, "Well, you know, we're going to start kicking out people with HIV status. They're going to have to go home." That's who it's going to affect. So I mean, you had to keep in mind that we have something called the Disability Act. You're taking people who are disabled and kicking them out for whatever reason.

Halaska: Okay. So I just want to go—just go back to Germany. I know you gave me kind of, like, a brief overview of all the places that you went. Just tell me about some of the places that you went and what you saw and what your reaction was when you were there. Like, just take me as if I was going with you—you know—through that memory, and describe it for me.

Russell: Wow. So, what I saw—which I was amazed.

[00:30:00]

I was an MI. So, you know, it was kind of like being in Wisconsin. You know, I'm used to being the one too few, you know, African American representing—well, when you get to the line units, which is mostly infantry and cavalry and ordinance and things like that—that's where you see the most blacks. So I get there, and we have some MI people who are unable to—and I mean military intelligence. That's their job. They were supposed to—part of their job was they

were supposed to go out in the field. They are supposed to be able to infiltrate, you know—at the time, they were undercover first person. And they would not send people that was dark-skinned—brown—they wanted to send out the white ones. And I guess they felt more secure feeling like they could—they could do the job. They could go out and capture the people that were selling the secrets. [laughs] So they would not allow folks like that to go undercover. That's—

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: —that's one thing I forgot. That's one of the things I remember thinking. I remember one of the ladies complaining. "I'm just as good as this white man over here, but they won't let me deploy because of my skin color. They're not saying that—" of course they would never say that, but you know, "Why can't I go? I'm just as qualified as him. Why would the military put all this money in, allow me to be an MI, and I can't deploy into the field and do the job that I'm supposed to?" They would not do that. And I don't know if they changed that or not, but that was one of the things that I saw. That was the first thing I saw. And I didn't know at the time what was going on, because I would just be hearing and hearing these folks complain. This is outside of the work hours. Of course, you know, we're drinking. We're having fun. They're upset about their status. "When am I going to get a chance to deploy? When am I going to get a chance to go in the field and, you know, do what I'm trained to do?" And then we have linguists as well. A lot of times they would put the linguists in back—so that they could out and speak, you know—they put them back, and then they would be the interpreters. So you have a white male out in the field. He might have on some kind of device. He's being recorded. They have the black in the truck somewhere [laughs] translating. Same thing with the linguists. And that's what I saw when I first got there—and I completely forgot about that. And I don't know why that was like that. I don't know who put that in place—if there was any legislation put out there for that. I can't tell you. But that's what I saw.

And then what I thought was funny—and you still see this today. So you go to line units. Mannheim was a line—a line unit. They had their cavalry or whatever was there—ordinance—I forget exactly. So I get to Mannheim, and I'm like, "Why are all these black people coming—" [laughter] like, "Washington, D.C., was chocolate city." And you never, ever, ever saw, like, a camera pan on them. You always see it on the white people. [Halaska laughs] So most people think that we're not even in the military. Join the military? And that's why it's so hard for them to identify with people like me. Yeah, there's a few of us here. You know. But we do represent a lot—you know, you've got to keep in mind that the most poverty-stricken people are the ones that join the military the most. And that was us. Why would you need to go if your dad is rich and powerful? You can just get a job working at the senate. [laughs] Anyways. [Halaska laughs] So the most poorest people was the one that joined the military. And then—you don't see the numbers. So when you see military, you think, automatically, "Oh, white men." Not, "young black woman," or "young black men." Every so often, they might,

black or brown people, “Hey, was you in the service?” “Yeah.” [laughs] That’s kind of where that’s at. So I thought that was different. I was like, “Why does the television do that? Why don’t they pan on us?” And that—so that was me in Germany. I used to watch AFN. I’m like, “Damn, you would think there were no blacks over here in Germany. I go to chocolate city—you all should be able to capture at least twenty of them in this area right here—” [laughter] “right here. What happened?”

[00:35:00]

Did you find an area that had none at all? Come on, now.” Like I understand like the MI with me, but if you’re in Mannheim and you’re reporting, come on, now. There’s more blacks there than anything else. And then, you know, you’ve got your Turkish folks there. They’re brown, too. So you don’t see them represented at all on television, and you’re in Mannheim. Come on, now. [Halaska laughs] It’s just like going to DC and not finding one black person to put in front of the television. Come on, now. [Halaska laughs] No, that—that—that, to me, is crazy, in a sense. So we’re going to get represented. We don’t get represented in the—in the higher echelons, either. So you look in the military. You pan around. You start seeing generals, and we aren’t represented in them. You might see one or two. We don’t go higher than major. Lieutenant colonels. Colonels. Brigadier generals is a rarity. That’s like finding a spotted cow or something. “There’s a brigadier general that’s black.” [mimics speed] [laughs] “There she goes.” [Halaska laughs] Or a four-star general. Like Colin Powell. Have you ever heard of anyone else that was a four-star general besides him?

Halaska: [laughs] I don’t think so.

Russell: Right.

Halaska: Yeah.

Russell: How come we’re not represented in the higher levels? What happened to us that we can’t make the higher levels? You know, you’ve got people that spend a whole lifetime in the military and they never make it to the higher levels. Why is that? That was a question I had to ask. So, like I said, that’s very rare that you see that. And that’s what I mean when I talk about—like—systematic racism. What’s going on that we can’t get higher? They’re going to the schools. You know. I’m seeing it. I’m on this side now. I’m a civilian. And I’m seeing that we’re sending people to these schools, but at some point, they either get out-processed of the military before they can make generals, or—why is that? It’s not that we’re not intelligent. We showed that. So what’s the issue? You know, when—we’re underrepresented, completely, altogether. There’s no one—I mean, if this—I don’t know how many blacks that were in the military when I was in, but let’s just say it was twenty percent altogether—can we get two four-star generals? Can we get two to represent the twenty percent [laughs] that’s here? Can we get a—a one-

star general? I mean, come on, now. Can we get three? [laughter] We're not represented in those higher echelons, period. It's a rarity you might hear. And then you hear, "She's the first black brigadier general in the reserve!" I'm talking about Marcia Anderson now.

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: She's like the—really? Like, how did—Okay. We're talking about the 2000s. We're not talking about the sixties. Really? Okay. So it's very rare, and we're really proud. You should see us. We like—speckled—we're not like the speckled cow, but we're like the peacock. "You made brigadier general! What?" [laughter] Yeah, so, we're not represented at all.

Halaska: Yeah. I have—do you remember, like, first hearing about her being a brigadier—and like, what your—

Russell: I was ecstatic. I was shocked. In awe. And like, "Can I see her?" I mean [laughter] "You got a picture? Can I see what she looks like?" What was it about her that, you know, she was able to go up to the higher—yeah. But I heard about her for the first time, really, when they did—last year, when they did the black history program at the VA.

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: Really. I would have never have heard about her otherwise. Like I said, you don't see that on television. And when you do, it's in disgrace. "Who was the first black—African American brigadier general was ousted out of the military because—" [laughs] "she was writing defraudulent checks." It was like, "Wow, why would you do that? That was dumb." We hear about that. But you know, a successful one? Oh, no. Never.

Halaska: So unequal representation, and you see that in the news and in journalism kind of things—

Russell: Absolutely.

Halaska: —and then also in museums—

Russell: Right. Right.

Halaska: —I would assume as well. What do you think needs to happen to fix that?

Russell: Well, they probably need to hire more people. I don't know if it's one person in the room, pining over the books—you know, you hear about it later on. "Well, it was an African American who was—" was it post—what is the word after they're dead? They get awarded.

[00:40:01]

You know. For heroism.

Halaska: Like—yeah.

Russell: And—come on now—

Halaska: Posthumously? I'm bad with words.

Russell: Right. You know what I'm talking about.

Halaska: But yes. I know what you're talking about. Yeah.

Russell: You're like, "Come on, now." So the family who cried over this years ago—you know, the daughter, the son—"Oh, my father would have been honored—" this person's eighty years old now—"my father would have been honored if he was here today." You know, the father would have been 120 years old [laughs] or something. [laughter] Come on, now. We've got to do better. I feel like they need to hire more people and—and to do a better job at researching. You hear stuff like, "This person was awarded seventy years later." Well, damn. What was going on that you just started awarding these people seventy years later? Or just the craziness of it all. I think that they could do better—they need to hire more people to do more research to find out what these folks did, because obviously we know that these folks were not awarded. They didn't get the gist—they didn't get the noto—

Halaska: Notoriety?

Russell: Notoriety, or the recognition—that's the word I wanted—that they should have had received while they were here, now. If you have two units that go over to World War II, Germany, and you hear about one and not the other, for whatever reason, who—and then you never find out until, like, way later. And so I remember talking to this Jewish guy. He was telling me—he was an older guy—he was telling me he was a kid when the blacks came. That's what he called them. "The blacks" came. And they were so happy to see them. And this is why a lot of Jews had an affinity towards black people because when they looked up and they were getting freedom, you know, and they were all emaciated, it was the black folks that showed them compassion. "Here's some water, here," "let me help you to—let me pick you up and walk you over to this truck so you can leave this concentration camp." It was them who—Where's that unit? You know? Who are those people? Why are they not being recognized for, you know, coming there and getting these people out of there, and giving them the help that they need? And you hear about all these war heroes, and you rarely hear about us. And like, for one, they need to do better. They need to go through the records and start

pulling this stuff out. They need to hire a team—a special team for that, and let them do so. You hire a special team for everything else, hire a special team for that so that these people can get recognition—they finally can get recognition for serving this country. Because we served to. We served—[beeping]—right alongside them, a lot of times, and they built relationships. When you see a white and black together and they're seventy years old or eighty years old—“Well, this one saved me in the bomber. I was about to go down, and he came and shot down the planes behind me.” But no, they can do better, because you hear the stories sometimes—rarely—but they're not getting recognized.

Halaska: Yeah.

Russell: A lot of blacks out here who are injured in war who never got a Purple Heart. And like I said, it's time for them to do better. Hire a special team and get these folks the recognition they need.

Halaska: All right. Just kind of for a—kind of looking at the end of this interview. Is there anything else about your experience that—in the military—just kind of overall or any other stories that you want to talk to me about right now?

Russell: You know, there was one. I remember—so I was at Walter Reed when I first came back in the States. You know, I had my—my son. My baby. [sighs] So I was pregnant with my son, and I was brought back to the States because the Germans—I was in a German hospital—and they found out my son had an omphalocele. Basically, he was born with his intestines out. So what they did was they sent me from Germany to Walter Reed. They gave me choice: I could have went to Walter Reed. I could have went to Texas. Fort Sam Houston. It was another place where all these, you know, basically had the best military hospitals.

[00:45:05]

And when I got there, it was a guy named Toriana Sledge [??]. He'll probably kill me for using his name. [Halaska laughs] But his name was Toriana Sledge. We were in elementary school together. It was him and his wife Simone, and we were like, “Well, what's going on with your child?” “Well, my baby—” I forgot what their child—I think she didn't have, like, a butthole or something. I don't know the proper word for—or a sphincter muscle, or something was missing.

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: And they had to bring her there for some kind of surgery. And I don't know where they came from; I don't know if they were sent like me—Medevac'd. I was Medevac'd from Germany to Walter Reed. And it was a group of us—a lot of us—who had children either with defects—and things like that. Well, it's been rumors going around that we may have caught something while we were on service that made our children's defects. And they were talking about the—so

when I got ready to go, they—back then, when they would give you, like, a shot, you would just raise your little arm-sleeve up, and they would inoculate you like with these inoculation guns. And now that I think about it, it was probably unsanitary because you don't—you take a step forward, shot, go to the next one. Take a step forward. Shot. We were all using the same gun. There was no changing—I don't remember seeing them change anything. What was in those inoculations? How many people—children—were affected by that? So, like, the girl—my son was born June 30th. So like June 23rd—it was a couple and I can't remember their name. They had a daughter. And we were all at Walter Reed. Her daughter had the same defect that my child had, but their daughter had a heart defect as well. So my child was a fifty-fifty chance—fifty-fifty. I didn't know if this boy was going to live or die. So the little girl, born—[beeping]—she died after twenty-three hours of living, because she had a heart defect along with an omphalocele. At the time—and I don't know how good research is right now, or if they—this is, we talkin' my son is twenty-six. Twenty-six. I don't know if they did some kind of research, now, or the medication's gotten better, they can help all those kids. I don't know. But I always wondered, you know, what was it that caused those genetic defects? Was it something from service? Is it me? I would like to know more about that. And it's like, there's no anything. I mean, I heard there was something for kids, who—I'm not sure how true this is, but this is a rumor. I heard that they had some kind of—they found out that people who have Agent Orange, or something, their kids have some kind of genetic defect. And then they were supposed to be giving the kids some kind of compensation for that. What about our kids? What about the kids who were born during Desert Storm and after? My son's father was in—when I met him, he had just came in from Saudi Arabia. He had still dust in his boots. I was laughing. I was like, "You've got dust in your boots." He said, "I didn't get a chance to shine my boots yet." That's how soon it was. What was going on? Is there any research for that? And that is a question for me that I always wanted to know. You know, when you have a secondary issue, and then you have these kids being born, what research are they doing for the kids? And that's my question.

Halaska: Okay. [drumming] I guess one last question that I have—just about Germany, and in one of our previous conversations you mentioned that it was a lot—when you went there, you were surprised because it was a lot like Wisconsin—

Russell: Oh my God.

Halaska: —and you were also just excited to, like, learn all of the history that was there? Can you just tell me a little bit about that experience of going to that new place and learning about all those places and getting to go there?

[00:50:00]

Russell: Wow, so I think I had, like, no knowledge of Germany. Remember, I told you when I was a kid and I was reading the magazines and my pen pals—New York,

California, Nevada—all these different places. But I never thought, “One day I’ll be in Germany.” I took Spanish in high school. I said, “Well, one day I might have to speak Spanish.” Never thought in my life I would speak German. So I get over there, and it’s this culture, and I’m looking, like, “Okay. I’ve seen this before. These houses kind of look the same.” I mean, there were some subtle differences, you know. There’s German houses in Wisconsin. So I got to learn a lot more about Wisconsin in Germany as well. You know. That was interesting. So I got to learn a lot about the culture there, where, you know, I didn’t realize that Americans were despised by them. Oh, I didn’t tell you about that. That was a trip. [laughter]

So going to Germany, and going out in economy, for the first time, I was not black. You don’t know how freeing that is. I was so glad; I was like, “Throw the coat down. I don’t have to carry the black coat no more!” [Halaska laughs] Oh my God, that was so rewarding. I wasn’t concerned about people not liking me because I was black. People didn’t like me because I was American. [Halaska laughs] I’m an American. I never felt as much as an American had I had over there. So, you know, going into the culture, meeting German—I had German friends—[beeping]—and finding out stuff like World War II. So I’m coming—there’s people that look like me—that’s my age—they speak German. They’re curious, because they didn’t get a chance to meet their biological parents. Fathers. “How do you do your hair?” “Huh?” “How do you—” I’m seeing all these people. “How did you get your hair like that?” “Like what?” You know. So that was something that was different. When they came to my apartment, they saw this big old huge space. They’re like, “You Americans. You got big apartments.” I go out on the economy and I got to see what they were talking about. They live relatively in one room—they were all studios—mainly because it’s so many people there, there’s not a lot of space. The culture was way different: it was much more freeing. Like I said, for the first time, I was an American, and I was a dirty, nasty American. I was a hypocrite. “You Americans are hypocrites.” “Really? Why do you say that?” I learned a lot about my culture because of them. Took a lot of that back. Another thing that I noticed is that these people had no idea of personal space. That is truly an American thing. I mean, I felt like I was rubbed against, accosted—I know I was going—I was like, “Okay, did this dude just rub my butt?” [scoffs] “Are you getting that close to me for a reason?” Because they don’t have issues with personal space. You don’t get personal space there. In America, we’re like, “Stay this far back.” And you push and stretch your hands out as far as it will go “That’s how close you can get to me. And this way, too.” You stretch your arms again. “Don’t get no closer than that.”

So the culture was way different. Like in America, if you’re sitting at a restaurant, and there’s a whole table with just you in it, and there’s no place else to sit, they’re going to sit with you. [Halaska laughs] You’re going to have a whole, total stranger you don’t know sit at the table with you. It took a minute to get used to that. And then they’re trying to talk to you in German. And so this is a—this is a little thing that they used to do, especially the older people. The older people did

not like Americans—the Germans, ok? They were not a big fan because they felt like American was trying to—Americans were trying to come there and take over their country. And rightly so. We got over there; we had no idea about American—German culture, and we tried to Americanize everything. We brought our McDonalds. What else? Taco Bell was there. And they Germanized it. So you go in there—you can get beer. You had to use a French fry straw, because you dare not use your fingers to eat. That was rude. So what we call finger food, that's rude there. “Why do you use your fingers to eat a hamburger?” “What do you use to eat your hamburger?” “Oh, you cut it. You use a knife and a fork.”

[00:55:00]

“Okay.” And then the other thing was learning how to cut a pizza. Once again, finger food. You have to cut that with a knife and fork. Of course, they had—I had to learn how to do it the proper way. I was taught by my German friends. “This is how you cut your pizza. You cut behind—” no, you cut—yeah, “you cut behind the—the piece that you're about to put in your mouth.” So they taught me how to do that.

Courtship was different. So I had a guy that was interested in me—German guy—and he came to my house, and he showed me his HIV status card. He was HIV negative. They go every six months. That's how they court. And then they bring you these pink flowers. So the flowers have different colors; they mean different things. If you got red flowers, that's love. Pink is what they normally give you when they first start off. They give pink roses—pink flowers. Red—and I either got pink or white roses. And then when it's love, you get red roses. The guys are a lot different there. It is a machismo society. I mean, very masculine. The men want you to be a woman, and they want so much for you to be—you need to tell them no. They like that. They make advances, you say no. If you don't, then they won't. They don't really want to—they'll view you as kinds a loose women. So that was something that was different. Like the personal space, you lose. The dating—wish we could bring that here, you know, actually. If we had a six-month card with your HIV status, that would be helpful. [Halaska laughs] We don't ask those questions here. We don't even ask, “You—by the way, when was the last time you had your HIV test?” We don't do that here. And then—trying to think what else was different. Hold on. The French fry fork. So remember I told you that they don't eat with fingers. So you had to use your French fry fork to pick up your—it was a little—it was like a toothpick [Halaska laughs] that had, like, three prongs to it, and eat your French fry. That was different. Same thing with breakfast. They would serve you an egg in a cocktail glass. And I'm like, “Why am I getting an egg in a cocktail glass?” [Halaska laughs] That's how they serve the food there. It's a little different. There was some—like I said, some things you had to get used to. They shop every day. Everybody gets a little bitty refrigerator and you go shopping every day. So you leave work, you go shopping. You come home, and you get your fresh food. That's just how they do that—because there's not a lot of space. You can't hoard food. And that's what we do here. I mean,

literally, we do. And some people are disgusting to me, because they'll have sick food—I mean, meat in their refrigerator for six months. I have a friend who feels like the expiration date doesn't mean anything if you put the meat in the freezer because it's still good. I'm sitting there, like, "Are you kidding me? Everything has an expiration date. You need to check it." But he doesn't believe me. But in Germany, you don't even have to worry about that, because where are you going to store it? Your refrigerator's so small, you can't store it. So every day is a shopping trip for food.

Oh, the other thing that was big. They had universal healthcare. So like, when I got pregnant, we found out that my son had omphalocele—I didn't pay a dime. I went to the hospital. I walked in. They saw me. I left. They didn't send me a bill or nothing. The technology was advanced. You know, I had a level four at the time—we called it a level four ultrasound, which was new. We're talking about, like, twenty-six years ago, which is today's ultrasound standard. [laughs] Before, the baby looked like a blob. You were like, "What is that?" [Halaska laughs] Yeah. They had to know how to interpret that. So now you can actually see a baby in these new ultrasounds. So I had that in the German hospital, and—so in Germany, if you have a boy and you—and that attains German citizenship—they do pay you for your boy. You get extra money in your checks for having boys.

[01:00:00]

So it was a little different society. So that was another thing that I encountered. And I really thought that we could bring some of that—I was really hoping we would have universal healthcare, so we can be concerned about our citizens instead of, you know, concentrating more on the dollar aspect of a human life let's concentrate on saving this human life. Let's take the money out of it. So they're taxed at a higher percentage. So we might—they might pay sixty percent taxes or fifty percent—I don't know what it is—than we do, because they have that free healthcare. So that's not an issue. There's a lot of things I liked. Got to go to the Englischer Garten—I was in Munich—Englischer Garten—

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: —which is a nude beach. And so they have what they call "partially nude" and then they have "nude nude," and little kids are out there, and they don't—they don't associate sexuality with nudity. It's just, okay, you're nude, and—whatever. Like, that was another thing that I was taught there. So it was nothing for you to come into somebody's house after work and they start changing in front of you. I mean like, where was they gonna go, they in an efficiency? They could have went in the bathroom, I suppose, but they didn't have an issue with that, and that's what they call—and that's why they said that Americans was hypocrites, because, you know, we go run—you know—first of all, we associate nudity with sex, and therefore we exploit our kids when they're nude. And then the other thing they talked about with me was the pornography. We have a lot of sexuality—we have

magazines—now it's on the internet—we—we say that we're a closed society. Everybody needs to be closed up to their necks or what have you—or at that time, that's what we were—but then, we'll go in our homes and we'll look at porn. And they thought that was hypocritical. So like I said—“You're hypocrites. You're hypocrite Americans.” I was one of them. And I was like, “What are you talking about?” They had to explain it to me.

And then some of them identify more with me than they did the whites, because they didn't like how we were treated. And I was like, “I wasn't born yet, but thank you for identifying with me a little bit better.” [laughs] I had a little bit—like I said, my—I don't ever remember encountering racism coming up. I lived in Wisconsin all my life and I joined the military and that's where I encountered it. So I didn't see it until later, after I came back from Germany—I was in Maryland when it happened. So like I said, it was a little bit different. The society was different. Much freer with the bodies. I'm like, “If I see another nude body,” [laughter] but you know, when I came home, I appreciated it. So now I have friends I find that are like, “You need to put some clothes on.” “Well, sorry, I picked this up when I was overseas in my formative adult years, and this is part of my culture now.” You know. You get to so many cultures, you pick them up. They become part of you. So there's some things that I thought was different. Like it's OK in Germany to go behind your car and change your clothes into your swimsuit. Nobody's going to say anything to you, and nobody's going to look at you. They don't even care that you're butt naked outside behind your truck, you know, changing your clothes until you go to the beach or whatever. There's no issue. Or you can go partially nude—depending on the beach that you go to—or completely nude. [laughs] Just depends on where you are. And they have places for that.

So that was kind of a culture shock, I mean, going on the beach, you'd be like, “Oh.” I was the only one—I was pregnant at the time, and I went—and I was the only one fully pregnant, and they had never really seen a pregnant black woman at that time; it was like, “Oh my God, you're beautiful.” And I'm trying to figure out, What is your guys' standard of beauty? Because I'm not feeling beautiful right now but I appreciate it. Thank you. They had a different standard of beauty. I was exotic to them. You know. I was accepted a lot, but I had to learn the—the attitudes that they had against Americans. A lot of them. So the other thing I thought was funny—living in Germany—so you know that you had to learn how to catch the bus or whatever. So I get on the bus, and I get lost.

[01:05:02]

Oh my God, my German was horrible. So they give us, like, a week of learning German. Are you kidding me? A week. So I get out there, I'm on economy and I'm lost. I'm trying to find a train station so I can get back. So the Hofbannhausen and the Hofbrauhausen are like almost the same, right? One is the beer house, and one is the train station. [Halaska laughs] I'm asking the lady, “Where is the

Hofbannhaus?” And they gave me some directions: “*Links, rechts, gerade aus, links, rechts, gerade aus,*” I don’t remember. She said it so fast, I’m like, “What?” [Halaska laughs] So I go down a little further, I see this older white lady. I’m trying to explain. “*Wo ist der Hofbrauhaus?*” She got to start talking or whatever, so I’m trying to ask more questions. And she looked at me and she goes, “What are you trying to say?” “Are you kidding me, woman? When I came up to her initially, I said, “*Sprechen Sie English,*” which means “Do you speak English?” She said, “*Nein,*” which means no. “*Nein.*” “You don’t speak English, so I tried, and I slaughtered your language.” And then she looks at me, and she put her— “What are you trying to say?” So the older Germans did that a lot. You could talk to a younger German and they would be more lenient, because what—the attitude was, you know, you all come over here to our country; you don’t even bother to learn our language or our culture. You just come bombard us. You guys are hypocrites. If we came to your country and made it German, or tried to— you know, persuade to do it our way, you all would be upset. And I understood that. So I learned about our attitudes, and that’s why I try not to fall into that groupthink, you know, when people say, “Oh, these dirty,” whatever, I’m not falling into that. Why do they have to be this? Why do we—where did this attitude come from? Why is it here? You know. So that’s what it taught me— being in Germany—but I was able to learn some things about Dachau. Dachau.

Halaska: What’s Dachau?

Russell: Dachau was one of the concentration camps. I learned a lot about the topography of Germany and the other countries around me, because I was able to travel to some of those countries—like I was able to go to Paris while I was there—I mean, they bump right next to each other. Really, the only way that you know you’re in another country is because you have to go to some kind of border, and they’ll ask you for your documents. Come on, now. I’m in another country now? We only drove an hour. Boom, I’m in Czechoslovakia? Come on, now. [laughter] And this is different, you know. Now these people, they speak a whole different language? You all should be speaking two or three different languages, here. It’s a—it’s like going to DC, Maryland, Virginia, and everybody speaks different languages. You would think that at some point, they would all speak three different languages, right? [Halaska laughs] Yeah, so it was different. All of them knew English. All of them knew English, and that’s because English is their second language cross the board. And they were like, “Well, you all don’t do that for us.” You know. And that’s where the hypocrisy comes in, and that the—what’s the other word they used to—arrogance. That’s where those words come in from. And I had to learn that. So me living over there gave me a different perspective altogether. And then it’s old there. When I say old, I’ve seen castles. I’ve seen a castle. I was like, “There’s a real castle right here in front of me.” There’s traditions. You may see somebody in traditional German garb, you know. And this is how they operate in their day. And then the food there—oh my God. So when I came back to the States, I was in—I was majorly—I’m still now. When I was in Germany, I would go there—first you would go to the *Getrinkemart*. And I remember when I lived

in Munich, we used to have one. We used to live on *Kimgarstrasse* [??]. I loved that block. There was a *Getrinkemart* and a guy named *Helmut* [??] on it, and I would go in every day, and the smells—the fruit would compete with me. I would be like [sniffs] “I smell peach today. Let me have a peach today.” And one day it might be the apples. “Ooh, the apples smell so good.” You go into the store here, you cannot—I don’t care how close you stand next to an apple. You would never smell it. You could smell the bananas. “Wow, that’s nice.” And you bite into it. Man. Awesome. Fruit. You pull out the orange, the juice squirting all over your face. You’d be like, “Oh my God, this is going to be good.” It’s just—your mouth is enticed trying to get to it. So I’m like, “Oh my God.”

[01:10:00]

A lot of things they don’t do there, on their fruit. They don’t put a lot of pesticides on it. I don’t know what they use, but oh my God. And while they’re shopping every day, you’re going to get a fresh fruit. You’re going to get a fresh meat. You’re going to—now the meat was like undesirable for me, because I remember going to the window, and I’m looking in the window [Halaska laughs] and I’m seeing flies hanging over the meat. And I’m like, “You’re all just going to let flies lay on the meat and I’m supposed to go *das dis—ihr?*” I mean, *das dis*—how do you say? *Das dis*—I forgot how you say it, but you’re supposed to say, “this piece here? I’m good.” Same thing with the dessert. I don’t know if they made the dessert by design to be nasty, but you don’t want to go and get a donut. [Halaska laughs] You’d be like, “What the hell? It tastes like bread and icing. We good.” So you want to eat more healthy. So when I came back from Germany to the States, I just ate extremely healthy. People were looking at me like, “You’re eating healthy? You don’t want no chips?” “Well, I haven’t had that since I’ve been here, so I don’t really miss it, but okay.” After a while, you get back into the swing of things. So like the stores—I don’t know if they still do that. But everything closed at like, six or seven. It wasn’t like you could get up in the middle of the night and like, “You know, I have the taste for a Snickers. I’m going to run to the store at night” [laughs] “and get a Snickers.” [Halaska laughs] You can do that here. You can’t ask—go back—“I need ice cream.” All the stores are closed. You’re not going to get an ice cream. It’s just not going to happen. So if you have a sweet tooth and you haven’t done anything about it prior to—guess what? You’re out. [Halaska laughs] Absolutely. So that’s kind of where the differences come in at. So they force you a little bit—not—I shouldn’t say force you. It’s suggested by the culture to eat more healthier. You go to the *Getrinkemart* you have those competing smells. You’re going to want that. “Let me have the fruit of the day,” I guess. It’s a little different. And then everybody walks or bicycles. I mean, I’m looking at a lady—it’s like she’s at least 110 years old. She’s just running around there with the babies—I mean, little bitty babies—on bicycles. [Halaska laughs] I’m like, “How did you teach that baby how to—is this baby eighteen months and he knows how to ride a bike?” [Halaska laughs] Come on, now. “You’ve got an old lady about 101 and an eighteen-month old on a bike.” Okay. And they’re riding. So that’s a little different.

Halaska: When you were in Germany and you got pregnant, how did your unit react to that? Because I know the rules and things about women and pregnancy have kind of changed throughout the years. So what was going on at that point in time?

Russell: Wow. So, here I am—I mean—you get a lot of shame for that. Here I am, an unwed mother about to deliver a child. There was nobody, really, saying—“You know, we should have a baby shower for this lady because she’s by herself and she’s probably going to need some stuff for the baby.” You don’t get that over there. That was the kind of attitude altogether, and I don’t know if that was just an American thing, or if that’s—you know, if that’s all societies. Why—you, if you get pregnant, if you don’t have a husband, there’s nobody who’s really going to want to stand—it was kind of a shame thing. “Hey, we should have a—” you know, I really could have benefited from a baby shower [laughter] me. You know. Not somebody that’s married and got, you know, two incomes coming in. But I definitely could have. So I didn’t really have that—“Wow, she’s pregnant.” Wow, how great. It was, “Oh, are you happy or sad about it?” “Well, I don’t know how to feel because you all are looking at me funny.” [Halaska laughs] But no, I didn’t get, like, any reprimand behind it, mainly because I didn’t stay there long enough—remember, I told you once I found out that I was pregnant, and then I finally let the command know, I was going back to the States. It was like, “You’ve got to go because your baby has omphalocele and it’s going to need to be taken care of.” Nobody wrote me from Germany. “Hey, how are you and the baby?” Nothing. I went into obscurity.

Halaska: Okay. So you waited, like, a little while into your pregnancy before telling your unit?

Russell: Mm-hmm.

Halaska: Okay. Like about how long? Just to—

Russell: I was three months.

Halaska: Three months? Okay.

Russell: And partly because I didn’t know I was pregnant.

Halaska: Yeah.

Russell: But first I was in denial. So when I got pregnant with my son—so I must—I found out December 4th.

[01:15:02]

My birthday's December 5th. Happy birthday—that I was pregnant. And I was like, "I'm not pregnant. I have the flu." They were like, "No, you don't have the flu. You're pregnant." "Well, I don't feel pregnant, and I'm still bleeding." "Oh, let's see. Hop up on the table. Yeah, this is going to be your last period." "No it's not." "Yes. You're at the end of your cycle, right? And your blood is brown. This is the old blood coming out, so you're not going to have any more periods anymore." And sure enough, I did not, but I was still in denial because I just had a period. I didn't get back into denial—I mean, get out of, until I heard the heartbeat. That's when I was like, "Oh, I probably should let my command know I'm pregnant." So I did, and that's when they—so I had to have an ultrasound, and that's when they discovered that something wasn't quite right with the baby. And they were like, "Well, what are you going to do?" First, they were going to try and let me PCS, and then my doctor AIRVAC'd me because it was taking them too long to come down with orders to send me to go, so they skipped protocol and sent me to Walter Reed.

Halaska: Okay. So how long were you out around Walter Reed?

Russell: A while.

Halaska: A while?

Russell: I was—I got to Walter Reed. I was probably a—late six months. I barely made the cutoff for the plane.

Halaska: Okay.

Russell: And I stayed there a year. So my son was a year before they put me back in the MIs.

Halaska: And then did you—wait, did you go back to Germany after that? Or did—

Russell: No. They put me at Fort Meade.

Halaska: —you stay—Okay. Okay. At Fort—that's right. Okay.

Russell: And that's why I ended up at Fort Meade.

Halaska: And then in your unit at Fort Meade, you lived off post with your son?

Russell: No.

Halaska: Or it was—

Russell: So at first, I lived off post. And then I found it to be a little bit more difficult. So—I mean, especially when I got pregnant with my daughter. [laughs] It made it—more sense for me to move on post.

Halaska: Okay. Okay.

Russell: Because the childcare was on post. Everything I needed, my whole support system was on post. I had a neighbor who watched my son for me so I could get PT and stuff, and then I would come home and we would go to the—the—what do they call it? Childcare for the—I don't even remember the name of it. It was something. It had a name. But it was childcare for people like me. You know, parents who were in the military. So I would drop my kid off there, and then like, if the child was sick, then I had to have an alternate care. Of course, you had to come up with a family care plan, so like if—and I don't even know why they said this, but, you didn't have a family care plan. Or maybe there was something that they put in for the army, because there was no way they were going to send me to the front line with an MI, you know what I'm saying? "Oh, yeah, we're going to send this one up front." No, they were not going to do that, because I had a top-secret security clearance, and why would you spend all that money to send someone to the front line to die? But I had to have a family care plan in the case we were activated and had to leave. When was that going to happen with MI? Never. I'd never seen field. When I had that civilian as my supervisor, I was begging. Please send me to a field unit. I'd rather be on the field for six months than deal with this bullcrap. I'd rather dig a hole and do my business in it [laughter] rather than be here in this unit. Hey, that's where I was in my mind.

Halaska: Yeah.

Russell: But yeah.

Halaska: So your kids went to the daycare then on post, and they got to, like, got to play with all the other, like, little army kids and that kind of stuff, too?

Russell: Mm-hmm.

Halaska: That's good. Like you said you had, like, one neighbor who was—who would watch your kids, right? Were there others? Like a little babysitting network or something like that going on? No? Okay. Was there—

Russell: How I got babysitters, a lot of them—like I told you, Angie and Philip showed me how to be so I would get one of my people's teenagers and I would just get them everything they could possibly need.

[01:20:00]

I got cookies. Soda. Ice cream. Oh, they always wanted to come to my house. [Halaska laughs] “Can we babysit? Are you going to pay me?” “Yeah, sure, I’ll pay you.” You know. Sometimes they just wanted to get out from their parents, you know, because they’d come to my house and eat all the junk food and watch TV, and—I used to have—you know, back then there was a—video cassettes. You know, you put in the VCR and I had all the latest, so they wanted to come babysit. My stepfather, he was in the military. He was in the Air Force. And he just knew, “Hey, I got a—” he’d send me all—at the time, it was—what was the name of that show? *In Living Color*. He had all the episodes from *In Living Color*. He’d record them for me and send them to me. So the kids would come over. “Oh, we can watch *In Living Color* at your house.” Yeah. So—

Halaska: All right. Are—are there any other stories that you have that you want to tell? That—

Russell: Well, you know, we used to do hail and farewells in the military, and it’s so funny because now that I’m a civilian, we don’t really have a hail and farewell. And maybe it’s because I’m at the MEPS, that’s why I would really like to experience: going overseas again. I’ve been trying and trying to get a job overseas [laughs] you know, so we can get back into, you know, that part. But you know, I still have a connection, you know, because I worked for the Department of Defense. But yeah. It’s a little different now. They don’t do—a lot of the traditions have changed, and they don’t look out for the soldier. I don’t think they get that same training that I got, where you look out for your people. You’ve got a buddy, it doesn’t matter if you’re in leadership or not, you’re trained to look out for your people. I think that’s the big difference. I don’t know what’s happened, but when I see people come in and come in—my little cousins that go in, they’re not trained like I was. Way different.

Halaska: Oh. You have cousins that are in the military now?

Russell: Mm-hmm.

Halaska: Do you want to talk about their experience and how you’ve kind of seen them going in?

Russell: All right. So I had—one of my cousins that went in the military—he’s out now. The stuff that he would do. I would just—I don’t understand how—first of all, how he got in the military. I don’t know if they lowered their standards or what—I mean, I probably shouldn’t say that. That’s my cousin. But like, he never could speak. Even until now, I’ll be like, he’ll call me. He’ll go, “Cousin Angie.” That’s all I understand. [mimics indistinct speaking] [laughter] And I’ll be like, “Wait a minute. Hold on. Say that again. Say it slower.” You know. It’s mumble. It’s all mumble. I’m like, “All right. One more time, please.” Because I don’t understand you. But—so he gets in the military. They have cellphones. You know, if I had a cellphone, I wouldn’t know what to do. Look, we had to write letters because

there was only so much time we could spend in that hallway. There was a phone booth, and I remember sitting on the stairs and lying—shining my boots. They don't have to shine boots anymore either. The uniform is changed. You don't have to sew. It's Velcro. [mimics Velcro] The only thing that isn't Velcro is the rank. They actually sew in the rank. Oh? Some of them don't? That's funny. But yeah. I'm sitting there, like, "What?" You know, we had to have a regulation on the uniform itself. You have to have this a quarter inch, and this, and this— even the boards. You could order them. You could order your board. We were sitting there with the reg—Okay, so this award comes first. This one's next. And then if it was wrong on somebody's, we would have to fix it. We did it ourselves. We didn't have—go online and order. It's just a very different military.

So they have more free time, whereas we didn't have that much free time. I don't know what basic is like, but I do know that my cousin ended up getting in trouble while he was in there, because he got into a fight. So once again, he had those attitudes—New York, California—so he got into a fight with a guy from New York. You know. And I guess he wasn't liked. I don't know what it was about his personality that they didn't like him, but he had a very hard—getting through basic and AIT, and then he became permanent party as a reservist, you know, so they only had to see each other once a month, and he couldn't hack it.

[01:25:02]

The military has changed a lot, because I understand that there are gang members in the military. We left everything back on the block. We became Army—[sighs] "Be all you can be" is what I went under. Now it's "The Army of One." And I'm like, "Maybe they need to go back to that old slogan," because I'm not going to lie to you: I tried to be all I could be. It's way different. Way. And the men just not talking about—the only one I think that kept their standards is the Marine Corps, but then you go into the Marine Corps office, you look at the wall, you'd be like, "Oh my God." It's the culture. You know, they all have to have mean mugs. Mean faces. Like, "I'm going to bite you if you get any closer," look. So their chain of command all looks different, but that's the only one I think that kept the standard. All the rest of them have relaxed it completely, whereas I'm concerned—you know—for the people coming in now. And it's less people joining than it was when I was coming here. I don't know what's changed, but there has been a big change. And I think that's all I have.

Halaska: All right. Are there—so someone listening to this interview, what is, like, the thing that you want them to know about you and about your story and service?

Russell: Can you repeat that one more time? I'm sorry.

Halaska: No, it's—for the people who are listening who are listening to this interview, what is the thing that you want them to know about—or to take away from this interview.

Russell: Wow. I mean, so I told you the good, the bad, and the ugly, and I can say the military was my mom and daddy for a long time, and they shaped me. Like I said, now I look at life as an experience. I mean, that was a period of my life—I was young. There was a lot of great things I took back. A lot of experiences that I learned. I mean, mainly, like I said, diplomacy is one. I learned how to take initiative, which is big in jobs—they want you to take initiative. You see a gap; you fill it. We still do that to this day. If I see something that’s not being done and needs to be done, I fill it. I get in there and I do what I need to do—which I don’t see that happening so much anymore. People see something that needs to get done and they’ll wait on the next person. That’s not where I was; that’s not where I ever will be. That’s why I was able to become the commander of my post—it was a gap that needed to be filled. I became—I filled it, and any other positions going forward. So the military has given me that—afforded to that tenacity to want to move forward to learn more.

One thing I learned, too, in the military is that the only thing that’s constant is change. And I remember they used to say that. And I didn’t quite get it—quite get it, but I do now. And you have to be able to embrace that change. So, you know, where I came through, we had regulations and books. They were... [things you could] touch... now everything is online. You can go online, order regulation, download it, put it on your desk—you don’t even have to do that. You can control-F and find exactly what you’re looking for. Back then, I knew those regs back and forth because they were on my desk, and I had to know. So I highlighted it. It was underlined, highlighted—little stars—I had little tabs on it so I could find stuff right away. It’s a little different now, how things go, but you—you have to keep in mind that in order to survive this world, the only thing that’s going to be consistent is your ability to change and adapt, and you have to change and adapt to the circumstances. Yes, everything wasn’t great in my military career, but there was some great times. I had an adventure. I got to go to Germany. I was able to go to France. I would like to go back. I mean, I have no fear about going overseas. Since I came back from the military, I’ve been to Costa Rica, and I would like to go other places. When you leave and go overseas, you have a more, broader perspective. You can see that the world isn’t as small as what you think it is. If I had a lot of money, it would probably be smaller. [laughter] If I become rich, the world would probably be smaller. I’d probably be like, “I’m going to go—this afternoon—to the south of France and have a glass of wine.” [Halaska laughs] “Be back over the weekend.” You know? Yeah. It’s a little different. But you know, it isn’t as far—isn’t as far away as people think it is. You know, if you really have a mind to get out and go travel, you will.

[01:30:03]

On your own. And I’ve done that. I think I’ve seen probably 25 of the 50 states—because I’ve always wanted to do that. I always wanted to travel. And then, you know, you have a global perspective, which helps. I think that I follow politics a

little more because of the the military, so I'm much more aware of what's going on in the world than the average citizen. I had to learn a little bit more—like, you know, most people can't tell you there's an executive, judicial, and—what is it? Executive, judicial, and the legislative branch. They can't do that. They don't even know what that is and what they do—how they function. People probably think the president all by himself can make decisions—and the president probably can think that too, but [laughs] "I'm the president. I can do whatever I want." [Halaska laughs] No you can't. You can't declare war. Congress does. [Halaska laughs] But like I said, it's because of the military that I'm a little bit more aware, and the fact that I did go overseas—I did see these things that I saw—and just like you have people who go to the Middle East, they come back with a different perspective on the Middle East.

I feel that where the military fell short—and I don't know if they ever corrected that—is that they didn't teach you the culture. When you're going to send somebody overseas, you need to learn the culture first, because that is rude, and they do have a point: we are arrogant to think that we're going to go over there and we think that they're going to speak English—like the German lady made me speak German. I can't expect that, because I'm in their country and I'm an American—you're going to speak my language. I had to learn theirs and learn their culture. I've spent a week learning German and German culture. That did not get me prepared for what I needed to know. It was my German friends that I met that helped me along the way to better immerse into the culture, which was funny how it made me see my own state—the state of Wisconsin—even Milwaukee—a little different, you know, because I understand that the Germans were here—and I understand why they picked Wisconsin. The climate is very similar. The topography is very similar. And, you know, I'm pretty sure at the time when they came, it was a farming community, and they had to come here and farm in this community. I don't know how many forests—[beeping]—or trees or whatever they had to destroy to make it a farming community, but that's where we are now.

Halaska: All right. Thank you very much.

Russell: Thank you.

Halaska: All right. [Russell laughs]

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