RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRENDA SMULL

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Kathryn Tracy Rizzi: This begins an oral history interview with Brenda Smull, on April 12, 2022. My name is Kate Rizzi, and I am in Branchburg, New Jersey. I am joined today by my co-interviewer. Gwen, please state for the record your full name and where you are.

Gwen Allen: My name is Gwen Allen, and I am in Newark, New Jersey.

KR: Brenda, thank you so much for meeting with us to do this oral history interview.

Brenda Smull: Thank you. It's good to be here.

KR: Can you please state for the record where you are today?

BS: Yes, I am in Phoenix, Arizona.

KR: Where and when were you born?

BS: I was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey, right down the street from Rutgers, in July 1967, so I am a Generation X. [Editor's Note: Generation X is a term used to define the generation of Americans born between 1965 and 1980.]

KR: Usually, we like to start off talking about the family history of the narrator. What family history would you like to share?

BS: Sure. I am one of five siblings. I was the fourth born. My parents are from Jersey City, New Jersey, and some of their grandparents came and immigrated from Europe. They moved from Jersey City to the suburbs of New Brunswick in the early 1960s. I had a happy childhood, a lot of support. The first wave of children--my brothers and sisters were born in the '50s. Then, there was a second wave of children born in the late '60s and early '70s. So, it was almost like a two-part family. Of the five children, I'm the only one that graduated from college. My parents didn't go to college at all. They were quite happy when I got accepted to Rutgers. My mom was blue collar. She worked as a porter in a factory (Carter-Wallace), and my father worked for Western Electric, which was part of AT&T, for many years. That's the family.

KR: I am curious if any immigration stories got passed down from your grandparents.

BS: Yes, there was a bit. My grandfather on my mom's side (Bertotti) had family from Italy. My grandmother on my dad's side was from England. My father was a veteran of World War II. My parents had me later in life. My dad served in the Army during World War II. All my aunts and uncles were much older than my father, so a lot of them served in World War II. [There were] a lot of stories about that as well. My family certainly was a big military family, actively involved in veteran organizations like the American Legion and the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars]. But all of my grandparents passed away before I was even born, so I never really got to hear a lot of their oral history. It's mostly passed down from my parents and my aunts and uncles. That's the story there. I don't think any of my grandparents served in the military though. It was mostly the Silent Generation that was born in the 1910s and 1920s that served, and then of course the Vietnam and Korea-era wars. [Editor's Note: Typically, the Silent

Generation (1928-1945) is the term used to describe the generation of Americans born between the Greatest Generation (1901-1927) and the Baby Boomers (1946-1964).]

KR: Yes, go ahead, Gwen.

GA: I was wondering if your father's involvement in World War II influenced your decision to join ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] when you were at Rutgers.

BS: Yes, I believe so. My father and I were close. I looked up to him. I ended up in the same profession as him; after the Army, I went into the field that he did-- telecommunications. Looking back, I attended a lot of things in my youth that my father was involved with in the military veterans' groups, in the VFW, all through the '70s. He was a commander of the VFW post in my hometown. All through the '70s, before I even went to high school, I was exposed to a lot of people who served in the Army and the Navy. I liked the adventure of it, and he instilled in me a sense of I could do anything. My parents, even though they were born in 1928, 1930, they were very much, I'd say, feminist, believing that it doesn't matter if you're a boy or a girl, you can do whatever you want. There were no restrictions, and they encouraged me. It's funny, when I joined the Army and signed up for the Rutgers ROTC scholarship, I didn't even ask my parents. I just did it. Then, I got approved, and I came home, "Hey, Mom and Dad, I'm going to join the Army." My father was quite pleased. I didn't tell him that I could have gone into the Air Force, but I don't think he would have cared either way. I certainly am proud of my dad, looked up to him a lot and what he did.

KR: What do you know about your father's service in World War II?

BS: I know that he was an occupational force in Japan, in Tokyo. He was military police [MP]. I believe this was after the bombing, which is kind of scary, when you think about it. [Editor's Note: The U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima on August 6 and on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. Japan surrendered unconditionally within a week and signed the formal surrender on September 2, 1945. U.S. forces occupied Japan in the post-World War II period, from 1945 to 1952.] He was at the very tail end of the war, probably one of the youngest World War II vets there were. He trained and went out of San Francisco, and they all loaded up on these large aircraft carriers or whatever and went across to Japan. He didn't talk too much about it. I don't think it was as traumatic a combat situation as some of my older uncles that served in Europe. I do have an uncle that served in Germany that had a more traumatic experience in the deployment. My father just said he was an MP and he kept order--occupational--which is kind of interesting. That's all about that.

GA: I was wondering if you bumped up against any--I know you said your parents were very supportive--but any other resistance. I guess it was the '80s when you were at Rutgers, the late '80s.

BS: Yes, 1986.

GA: You chose biochemistry as a major and were thinking about going into medicine. Was there any resistance at that time to a woman doing STEM things?

BS: That's interesting. I decided to become a biochemistry major early in high school. I had this goal to be a doctor. My first year of college, my first year at Rutgers, I commuted. Again, my parents didn't have a lot of money. My mom was helping to pay for my college, and so I commuted to New Brunswick every day. I wasn't in ROTC or the military for my freshman year. It was my sophomore year that I made the decision to join ROTC, primarily for financial reasons. The whole biochemistry track, it was already my goal. I wasn't going to change that just because you go in the Army. I'm like, "Well, I'll probably just be Reserves. I can go in the medical corps; everything will be great." It didn't actually work out that way. Even though my major was biochemistry, the military that particular year I graduated decided that I would be Signal Corps. I was like, "Signal Corps, what is that?" I had no idea. It turns out it was a great field, and I chose not to go into medicine. In retrospect, that was probably a good decision, and it just took me a whole different way.

The whole STEM thing, there was no resistance. People in ROTC are usually studying multiple different fields, and sometimes you get to go into a branch related to the field you're studying, but sometimes you don't. I would say, I think, as a woman, in 1989, when I graduated, we only had certain branches of the military we could serve in. Combat arms were not allowed for women yet, so it was combat support or combat service support. That limited my options of being placed in a particular branch. Medical corps could have been an option, Signal Corps, transportation, logistics, those kinds of things. They needed a certain amount of women that particular year to be in Signal Corps and on active duty. I didn't know I would be active duty. It's just luck of the draw on what kind of people they need each year per branch, and it's just allocated by--I don't know how they do it. I learned my lesson when I was graduating. I'm like, "I'm going active duty?" I didn't think that [would happen]. I said, "The R in ROTC stands for Reserve. How could this be?" I had a scholarship. I didn't know we'd be going to war within the year, but that's a whole other story we can talk about. I'm happy I was STEM. I love science. It served me well.

GA: How did your parents respond to you going to war or being called up for active duty so soon?

BS: I wasn't living at home anymore. As soon as I graduated and I got my commission, I left New Jersey, and I have not moved back since. I was already gone for a few months. Yes, they were pretty shocked, as I was, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and I was going away. They were very supportive, oh, my; they had yellow ribbons up everywhere and posters at my mom's locker room at the Carter-Wallace factory. It was quite amazing the amount of support I got when I was gone, the Girl Scout troops, the Brownie troops all sending me care packages, my school all being very supportive of me. By my school, I don't mean college; I mean grade school. [Editor's Note: On August 2, 1990, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein ordered the invasion of Kuwait. A coalition of thirty-five nations mobilized in response and waged the Persian Gulf War, which lasted from August 2, 1990 to February 28, 1991, when Kuwait was liberated.]

Now, I will say, ROTC at Rutgers was very supportive and trained me well. I certainly felt prepared to be a platoon leader going into a war right after college. I was only twenty-three years old when I was deployed. But I was a strong woman leader. I was a good communicator,

so it all worked out. I do feel that the professors I had in school instilled in me a sense of, "You can do this. You are strong. We're training you. We're giving you the skills you need to go out into the world and do whatever." So, there were a lot of good role models inside the military studies and outside. I do remember a really strong woman professor I had in psychobiology. I believe her name was Judith Stern. I believe she was a strong advocate of strong women, and she inspired me. I don't remember many of my professors' names, but she's the only one outside the military that I remember. [Editor's Note: Dr. Judith Stern is a Professor Emerita in the Department of Psychology at Rutgers-New Brunswick. She specializes in Behavioral Endocrinology and Developmental Psychobiology.]

These kinds of memories have been coming back. I went to Rutgers last month to visit, on a family visit, and just walking down College Ave, I had memories of how I came to come to the Army ROTC building and why I didn't go down the street to the Air Force ROTC building. I can tell you, there's a reason for that. It was a fun time and a good experience.

KR: The director of the Rutgers Oral History Archives is actually interviewing Judith Stern tomorrow.

BS: Oh, you're kidding. She's still there?

KR: Yes. She is a Professor Emeritus.

BS: Isn't that something?

KR: Yes, small world.

BS: Well, you can tell her I remember her thirty-three years later.

KR: Yes, I will tell the director to pass that on. That is really wonderful. While we are on the topic of ROTC, can you tell us that story about what swayed your decision to join the Army and not the Air Force?

BS: Yes. [laughter] It's kind of a funny story. It's true, yes, my dad was Army, so I was more familiar with Army, but here's the real reason and it's kind of funny. In retrospect, after the war, I always said, "I wish I was in the Air Force." Let me tell you why I wish I had joined Air Force instead of Army, and then back to how I ended up in Army. The reason I wish I had gone Air Force is, one, there was more technology; two, they had better-colored uniforms. [laughter] No, the real reason was they got to stay in buildings more in the war zone, and they had running water and plumbing. I was always envious because when I was in Desert Storm, I was in the field, in the desert, the whole time, so lack of water, lack of privacy, not having a building, it wasn't as optimal to me personally. So, that's just a personal, fun reason. [Editor's Note: Operation Desert Storm refers to military operations that took place from January 17 to February 28, 1991, during the Persian Gulf War, when American and coalition forces invaded Iraq and Kuwait and drove Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Prior to Operation Desert Storm, American forces deployed to Saudi Arabia in Operation Desert Shield, from August 2, 1990 to January 17, 1991.]

Here's why I ended up in Army. I was at school, and I had stopped at the dining hall that's on College Ave in New Brunswick. I came out of the dining hall, and just on a whim, I made a right-hand turn. Down a little ways on the right is the Army ROTC building, next to the library. That was my first stop. I had full intentions to go to the Air Force one, but it was further down the street, so I never ended up getting there. I went into the Army building, and I signed some paperwork. The next thing you know, I've gotten it. The reason is is because it was closer to the dining hall. [laughter] That's my funny story.

When I went back, I noticed that the Air Force building is in a different location. It used to be much further down the road than it is now. Things have changed up a little bit on campus, but that's my story. It all worked out. I just don't go camping as much as I used to, due to so much time in the field. It just took away the glamor of being in a tent, and it was pretty harsh conditions. [Editor's Note: The Air Force ROTC building is now located at 190 College Avenue, across from the School of Communication and Information.]

I was there for about ten months. Saudi Arabia and Iraq, in those months, there were seasons where there were monsoon rains and winds. I'll never forget, one time, I'm in my tent, and a huge windstorm came. It literally blew the tent off me, and it's just me on a cot in the middle of the desert. That was quite interesting. Everything you owned was in two duffel bags, so you didn't have a whole lot of clothing. We did have services that occasionally helped launder our clothes, but, oftentimes, we would wear the same pants for days, and I did not take a shower every day. Then, when we went into Iraq, water was limited. I remember, I went thirty days without a shower. As a woman, that wasn't as ideal. We had bird baths, but for anybody who's been camping, birdbaths are good for like two or three days. Thirty days is a whole other experience. Again, I was young. I survived. It wasn't that bad, but it was just very uncomfortable. Your body doesn't stop doing what it does, even though you're at war in the middle of a desert. That was that experience. That's why I was always envious [that] the Air Force people were in buildings, at least most of them were, and I didn't get to be in any buildings.

At the end, when we were leaving country, we went to Khobar Towers, which is actually famous because later, a few years after I was there, there was a big bombing there. Khobar Towers were in Saudi Arabia, there was a big bombing, and I believe some were killed and injured. I was only there for a week or two before they flew us back home. That's the story about that. [Editor's Note: On June 25, 1996, a truck bomb detonated near the Khobar Tower housing complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, killing nineteen members of the U.S. Air Force and injuring over four hundred American and coalition military personnel. The Khobar Towers housed coalition forces engaged in Operation Southern Watch, the no-fly zone operation in Southern Iraq after the Gulf War of 1990-1991. The Iranian-backed Saudi Hezbollah al-Hejaz terrorist group was responsible for the attack.]

GA: I read that you were twenty-three years old and a signal platoon leader when you were called to active duty in Desert Storm.

BS: Yes.

GA: I was wondering if that had challenges, in terms of establishing yourself as a leader, as a woman leading men and women who were your peers.

BS: That was a challenge, and most of them were not my peers. Let me share with you how a signal platoon was in 1990. My platoon had seventy people, and I was the only officer. All the other seventy were enlisted or non-commissioned officers, like higher-ranking sergeants. Some of those sergeants were much older than me--old being in their mid-thirties, early forties, which seemed old at the time. They were the experienced ones, the ones that you trust to get the job done. I was more of an executive manager, if you put it into civilian terms. I was the leader, but I had the least amount of experience; you know, I had more than the privates did. [The non-commissioned officers were] at varying ages. I was the only Caucasian woman in the platoon. There were probably eight other women, and they were all sergeants, super smart, and I trusted them. All of my non-commissioned officers were very experienced and professional, and I trusted them. To gain their trust, I had to show them that I was willing to listen and willing to learn, but when the big decisions came, they had to also then respect and trust in me to give them the correct orders. Usually, the orders were handed down, but occasionally, we'd have to make on-the-spot decisions of leadership, and that's what I did.

There wasn't a huge resistance. There was a funny story of some smart aleck; they were playing a prank on me early on about technology. I knew most of it, but they tried to trick me into something that was from a movie, *Back to the Future*, the flux capacitor. Luckily, I didn't fall for it, but they were just testing me. I said, "I know that you're just pulling my leg." That's where being a STEM student--I wasn't the top of my class in biochemistry, but I was smart enough and well-versed enough to know about the technology, so that they couldn't just snow me, but they tried. But they probably do that for all lieutenants, no matter who you are or where you come from, unless you're too intimidating and they don't want to try. They tested me, and I pushed back, held my own. That was funny, the flux capacitor. They tried to tell me that that was the problem with the system outage. [laughter]

KR: Some of the things that you have touched upon today, your ROTC experiences, your Gulf War experiences, I want to ask some more questions on, but first I would like to circle back to your childhood. Can you tell us what it was like for you growing up in Spotswood?

BS: Sure. Spotswood is a pretty small town. We had two elementary schools, a high school. My class in high school was only 160. Everybody knew everybody. The neighbors all knew each other. We looked after each other. I had a lot of adventures outdoors. I was a tomboy. I liked to play ball, soccer and football. I was pretty active. I loved climbing trees. I loved being in the woods, so maybe that's why I wanted to be in the Army as well, because I always thought it was like an extension of being a Girl Scout or a Boy Scout; you can go camping a lot. I got the camping, but there were no trees in the desert.

Anyway, Spotswood was a fun place. Again, my town was pretty small, but it had two veteran organizations. It had a VFW and an American Legion, which is a lot for that population. Again, I was immersed in Memorial Day parades. Fourth of July was a big deal. A lot of displays of patriotism were in my town. The town was mostly blue collar. Not a lot of people out of my high school class even went to college, compared to the percentages now. It was positive. It was

fun. Maybe that's one of the reasons that I had an affinity towards the military, I think, because so many other people had done it. A lot of my neighbors that went to Vietnam, I remember them coming back, and being influenced by their stories. It was kind of more negative and scary, the things that happened to them, but I respected them. I was very interested in their story and how they were treated. I knew back then, even as a kid in the '70s, I knew that it wasn't right how a lot of Americans treated them. It wasn't their choice to go to war; a lot of them were drafted. Why would you treat someone so poorly when they came back? I think that, in retrospect, that did have an impact on my view of the military and serving your country.

I will say that there were a few people in Rutgers in the 1980s that said negative, bad things to me while I was walking on campus in uniform. That was, I think, the first time ever I felt discriminated against by civilians. I remember being on a campus bus; I was going to Busch Campus from College Ave, and I'm in uniform because on the days where you do ROTC class, you're supposed to wear a uniform. These are the ones, they're called BDUs, Battle Dress Uniform; they're camouflage with the black leather boots. I'm in that, and someone on the bus called me a baby killer. That's kind of harsh to say to a twenty-year-old woman. I'm a cadet; I'm not even officially serving yet. That certainly stands out in my mind as an interesting event that happened on campus. [Editor's Note: The Battle Dress Uniform (BDU) was the green, brown, tan and black camouflage uniform of the U.S. Army from 1981 to 2008.]

I did know there is a history of that ROTC building on College Ave, of people trying to harm the building during Vietnam. There were protests there. I certainly understand it was a very controversial war in the '70s and late '60s, and that building particularly was a focal point of a lot of people's anger. Certainly, you had to have some courage, even more so today I think, to be on a campus, it's a liberal arts school, and not everybody is going to agree with the decisions of joining the military or supporting or going to war. I kind of knew that, but Spotswood supported the military, so I think I was insulated in that view. Then, once I got out of the larger world, I realized not everybody's in agreement on your decisions on what you do with your career.

GA: I've recently been working on a project, thinking about the reassimilation of veterans from Vietnam. Some of them said that they felt that they needed to hide the fact that they'd been in active service. Although it was a different climate and Desert Storm was a war that was seen very differently by the American public, have you ever felt like you just needed to not mention your service, even though you must be so proud of it?

BS: Not really. I need to always be aware. I'm always aware of who I'm around. If I'm around people that didn't have a lot of exposure to the military and I know might be politically not aligned with the concept, I might not bring it up as much. It's kind of self-censoring based on your audience. But, most of the time, I'm not in that environment. I'm not in academia anymore. I feel pretty comfortable. Here, in the world today, you don't always put a flag up at your home because some people don't like the flag anymore and that's a bit upsetting to me, but it's been true that displays of the flag at certain points in our history the last five years have been viewed negatively. That's a whole other [issue], but as far as me being a veteran, I was greeted with welcome home and parades. I almost felt guilty. I'll never forget, I was in a parade, when I came back in 1991, and I marched with the VFW, with my father, and there were Vietnam vets there. I felt guilty of all the positive praise we were getting that they didn't get. I told them that,

and I gave them the respect and they appreciated it. The Vietnam vets were a little bit--seeing the Desert Storm vets come back, some of them were not happy about it. They were happy we were back and safe and that this particular war didn't kill as many. It was an easy war. I feel like I'm a veteran, but I had the easiest war. The Vietnam vets, guys and gals, had it much harder than me. So, I felt guilty. It was an interesting emotion that I didn't expect.

KR: Yes, along with that, at ROHA, we interview a lot of Vietnam veterans, and we interact with a lot of veterans' organizations. It seems like now Vietnam veterans are now getting their fair due of respect for their service. What I want to ask you is, how have you seen the treatment of veterans and the recognition of veterans change over time, especially over the thirty years since you were serving in the Gulf War?

BS: Yes. I go back to, again, the late 1970s, where I was interfacing already with Vietnam vets through the VFW. Again, my father was World War II. In the late '70s, most of the leadership in these veterans' organizations were World War II and Korea. The Vietnam vets were the younger ones, the rabble-rousers. I remember, they were part of it, but they were still not respected very much in the '70s and early '80s, from what I could see, just on the interactions. They hadn't come into their own yet. Over time, let's fast forward to the 1990s, early 1990s, when America's gone to war again with Desert Storm, and there were a few other wars or conflicts we did in the late 1980s, but in 1990, I think Vietnam vets were finally getting their due and people were saying, "Welcome home," because they were seeing all these Desert Storm vets getting their welcome home, and people realized, "Wow, these Vietnam vets didn't get their proper welcome." I think that was the turning point, from my perspective, on when they really started to get appreciated more. Maybe it was the contrast between my generation and their generation and how we were treated.

Through the '90s and the early 2000s, more and more of the Vietnam vets were stepping up and taking leadership roles and getting more involved, coming into their own, as the World War II vets were aging and, unfortunately, passing away. I'm in organizations, now it's 2022, and it's all Vietnam vets leading in my particular post, not a lot of Afghanistan or Desert Storm veterans at all. So, it's been a dramatic shift. I do fear for the future of these veteran organizations because the younger generations are not joining or volunteering as much as the Baby Boomer generation did. It's just been fascinating, the change in perception, and it's evolving and changing now.

Now that we have another war going on in Europe with Ukraine and Russia, I think the perceptions of the military are changing again. Remember, when I joined in '86, the Soviet Union was the enemy. I was trained that it was the Soviets, the Russians, that were the bad guys. They didn't focus on China at all, I recall, in the '80s. Now, we're seeing, in a horrible display, with what's happening now, we don't know what's true, what's not true, you know, social media. It's just a crazy, crazy time, compared to what happened in 1990, where it was only CNN and they were the trusted source. From my understanding, they shared the war with everybody, but it was different than it is today. I didn't have a cell phone, I didn't have a computer in 1990, so you don't talk to your parents for months on end. It's very different in just thirty years.

GA: Brenda, it is clear that you have maintained strong links to the military in your civilian life. Do you feel that your public speaking work and attending veterans' events and your membership

in veterans' organizations have really enriched your civilian life post-service? Did they help you in your transition back to civilian life?

BS: Yes, the veterans' organizations certainly helped a lot, just to have that sense of camaraderie that you miss when you leave the service. Yes, I've kept involved since I got out. A funny story, when I came home in 1990 to my hometown in New Jersey, my father had for me a VFW membership card that he handed me. That was sweet and nice, and he actually paid for my membership for fifteen years after that, every year, even though I had moved away. I definitely have been active. I'm in a veterans' organization here at work, at my corporate job, and we do things to help in the community, job training. I give speeches on behalf of veterans.

In fact, I've been in another organization called Toastmasters, and that's public speaking. It was someone I worked with that was a Navy officer that recommended that I join Toastmasters in 1994. Twenty-eight years later, I'm still doing that as well. The communicating in Toastmasters, it was almost an extension of what I did in the Army. The Army Signal Corps is communications, and then you combined being active in veterans' organizations, I've kept a strong link. I still do color guards, where we post the flags at funerals and parades, and I think it's important. It's helped enrich my life. It's helped almost keep a link to my parents. My parents both passed away twenty years ago. The VFW represents my family. My mother, my father were active, all my aunts and uncles. They've all passed, but it's a link to history almost to be in these organizations. That's what I've been focused on.

I wrote a book. I published a book last year called *Strong Words and Simple Truths: The Courage to Communicate*. One of the chapters in the book is veterans. One of the chapters is communication, and another fun chapter is the 1980s and what it was like to grow up in New Jersey in the 1980s. Among them are it was fun and adventurous, and kids were allowed to go out and play without parent supervision. We were allowed to go ride our bikes and not tell anybody where we were going. We had no GPS and no cell phone. So, it was a time of freedom in the early '80s, freedom in that on a college campus, I would just wander in and get a scholarship from the Army without even asking my parents or telling them until it was a done deal. [laughter] I don't think that would happen as much today.

GA: It is funny listening to you say that, Brenda, because in the opening pages of your book, you quote Steve Smull. I do not know if that is your father.

BS: It's my husband.

GA: "If you insist on being who you are, you will never become who you could have been." I was just wondering if you could explain how this sentiment has been important in your life and career and if there was one particular moment in which this was really important in your decision-making process?

BS: Sure. Wow, I get to quote my husband; what I could have been. My husband is a very creative man. He didn't join the military like I did and took a different path in life. He doesn't like to have any labels or boxes or categories, because you want to be all you can be, which is a military slogan, but being all that you can be is you don't put a boundary on yourself on what you

can do. My husband is a photographer and his thing is, "Always look for the angle that somebody else doesn't see." We're always looking at things from a different viewpoint than others. Again, you never know what you can become if you don't consider it from a different way or perspective. That's the meaning of that quote, my take on it. I certainly haven't limited my thinking at all, and again, that started from my parents raising me. There were no limits. You can do whatever, "If you want to be an astronaut …" I was going to be a doctor, remember, but then organic chemistry came, and then I decided maybe being a doctor wasn't what I wanted to do. Again, I'm glad of that.

KR: Going back to your Rutgers years, how do you think Rutgers shaped you overall?

BS: It shaped me in a lot of ways. The first way was being around so many highly educated and technical people, specifically on Cook College and on Busch, the College of Engineering. I had never experienced so many super high-level educated people in my life. Being at Rutgers opened up a new world and was my first exposure to high-level technology and engineering.

The second thing would have been the diversity. My town at the time was primarily Caucasian, and I didn't have a lot of interaction and friends with people that didn't look like me. Living on campus--I started in my sophomore year, thanks to the scholarship, I lived on Busch Campus and I lived on College Ave--exposed me to many other cultures. Then, certainly being in the Army and the military exposed me even more to other people's cultures and religions. I had a number of friends and boyfriends that were born outside of the U.S., so that certainly expanded my horizons, expanded my vocabulary in other languages. So, that was fun.

I loved it. I loved Rutgers. I loved the energy, at the time, the open-mindedness, the tolerance for protest. There were protests that were going on against apartheid at the time, in the '80s, on College Ave. I remember at the Student Center, there were people sleeping on sleeping bags and protesting South Africa's apartheid. But, at the time, as an Army cadet, I didn't feel that I was supposed to get involved in those protests. When I became an officer, I was told that we're not supposed to be political. We're not supposed to speak out against the government. I tended not to protest actively when I was on campus at Rutgers, but I observed it. I appreciated it. It seemed like Rutgers was a very liberal arts and open-minded place to be. There were all different types of thinking. I kind of had a feeling--I didn't know what my parents' politics were, we never talked about politics--but I had a feeling of where I was leading in my ideology, but nobody talked about it. You didn't break up into groups based on politics. Everybody was open and talked to each other, and we just talked about ideas. Yes, it was fascinating. In retrospect, I haven't been a student for so long. I don't know what it's like now, but from what I hear, it might not be the same openness as it was. Rutgers shaped me in a lot of ways just to be open-minded and tolerant.

KR: Just for the record, which of the undergraduate colleges did you go to?

BS: Rutgers College.

KR: Okay, Rutgers College.

BS: Here's a story about that. I was a biochemistry major, and I didn't know that I would be getting a B.A., a Bachelor of Arts, in biochemistry. I didn't realize that until graduation day, when they handed me my diploma. [laughter] I knew that if you went to Cook College, you got a B.S., a Bachelor of Science, but it all worked out. It didn't really matter. But it's liberal arts; I guess, at the time, they gave out a Bachelor of Arts, even if you were in science. That's interesting.

KR: That is so interesting. I never actually heard that from anybody before. It makes total sense. Of course, now there's the Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences, so they would confer BAs and BSs, but, yes, of course, Rutgers College would have been the liberal arts of the undergraduate colleges at Rutgers-New Brunswick.

BS: Right. Yes, because I didn't apply to the School of Engineering. I did apply to Douglass. I got into Douglass, but I wanted the Rutgers College name. That's why I chose Rutgers College over Douglass. It's just interesting. I got my diploma the day after I got my Army commission, so I became a second lieutenant on one day and then I got my diploma the following day. Then, a few weeks later, I went to Officer Basic Course (OBC) at Fort Gordon in Augusta, Georgia. I packed up my car, my mother accompanied me, and we went down. It was fun, but I didn't have a whole lot of time between graduating and then starting active-duty training.

GA: Brenda, in your book and on your blog, you speak of the importance of both telling a story and clear and concise communication. I was wondering, is that something that became obvious to you through experiences at Rutgers or in your active duty? Where exactly did that become clear as an emphasis in your life?

BS: Now that we've been talking about some of my professors that I had, specifically Judith Stern, she told stories, and that's why I remember her and why I remember her class. She told powerful stories about how people in other countries lived, in a psychobiology class. That was probably the first time that storytelling became important to me. One, you learn better when you're hearing it as a story. You learn better, you remember, you retain. Obviously, I'm retaining her stories after thirty-five years. That was one aspect of communications. Then, the other part came from my military studies, from the captains at ROTC. They had a mantra called "Shoot, Move and Communicate." "Shoot, Move and Communicate." I became Signal Corps, which was the communicate part. As I've learned in the world, working in corporate America, communication is one of the most important things to be successful. If you're a good communicator, you tend to be more successful. The other thing I learned about communication is: shorter is better. Clear, concise is better. Especially now, with Twitter, people have a smaller attention span, so the fewer words you can get your message across, the better. I've always been rather direct and succinct. I think part of that is being a Jersey girl. We don't mince words; we get to the point. I pride myself in that. I love Bruce Springsteen and his communication. I do like Billy Joel as well. It's always a competition of who's better, Billy Joel or Bruce Springsteen, but that's another story. Communication is what I've been focusing on most of my life, it seems.

Another interesting aspect of that is that my mother was hearing impaired. My mother wore hearing aids all her life, and she struggled. She didn't have high-quality hearing aids because we didn't have a lot of money. I think she read a lot of lips and looked at body language. She didn't

need sign language, but I think that impacted me as a child more than I realized, that I wanted to have a strong voice. I wanted to communicate, so that she could hear me clearly. I always spoke very loudly, and I enunciated my words. It all worked out that I ended up working in the military in the Signal Corps, and the emphasis was on short direct communication. Then, my father, working for Western Electric, that's all about the telephone systems and communication. As I look back, it all is coming together as maybe why communication is so important to me personally, these kinds of influences and stories.

I didn't take a lot of other communication classes at Rutgers. With biochemistry as my major, I had to take a lot of math and science and then I had my military training, so I didn't take any communication or debate classes at Rutgers. I took some religion classes. I was a psychology minor with a religion mini. Now, in psychology, they certainly talked about communication there as it relates to humans and brains and all of that, but I don't recall specifically doing anything communication-oriented other than the military.

KR: I have a few questions about your ROTC experiences at Rutgers. How diverse was your cohort?

BS: I'm trying to think. I'd say, of the class--I don't remember how big my class was--a handful of women, maybe five other women in my class, and as far as non-Caucasian, just a handful. I wouldn't say it was as diverse as the Army was. I will say proudly that one of my classmates is now a brigadier general. His name was Shan Bagby, and he was in my class, so he's a Rutgers alumni. Now, he's a famous general. He was a good guy. I think he became a dentist. I was proud of him, good friends. I had a good lot of friends there from other cultures. One close friend I had was from Colombia. He became an Army person. So, they expanded my horizons, but I don't recall it being too terribly diverse at the time. [Editor's Note: Brigadier General Shan Bagby serves as the Chief of the Army Dental Corps. He is the first African American dental officer to be promoted to the brigadier general rank in the Army.]

KR: Tell us a little bit about your training in ROTC. What would the daily or weekly routine be like when you were a student? What would you do during the summertime?

BS: During the week, we had two days of military classes. As I recall, they were Tuesdays and Thursdays. Those days, we were supposed to wear our uniforms. Sometimes, it was in the classroom, and sometimes, we would go to the park down the street and do drill and training and more things that are outdoors, learning how to march and all of that. Sometimes, we'd go over to Livingston Campus and go in the woods and do maneuvers and training for infantry in the woods there. So, two days a week, we did that. Occasionally, we would have off-site cadet training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, where we'd spend two weeks over winter break embedded with a basic training unit. That was fun, except for it was January in New Jersey and it was freezing cold, snowing, but other than that, it was fun.

Then, there's the big summer boot camp between junior and senior year, and that was a six-week program. It's called advanced camp, and you would go to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. That was an amazing adventure. I loved it, except for the fact that at week two, out of the six weeks, I broke my hand. I fell off of a bridge and fell twelve feet down. It was like a rope bridge, and I

landed my hand on a rock or a stump and I broke my hand. That was a bummer, but I told them I didn't want to go home. I didn't want to do it again, because I already had to do the gas chamber. The gas chamber is at week two of the training, and then I fell. The gas chamber is when you're testing and getting confidence in your gas mask. They have this kind of gas, like tear gas, and it's in this enclosed tent. It's very smokey, and you go into this tent with your mask. Then, you have to take it off and breathe in the awful fumes and then put your mask back on. It's a miserable experience. It burns your eyes, mucus everywhere. I remember the reason that I stuck it out and I didn't want to go home--I was adamant that I can finish with a cast, even though it was on my right arm, and they let me. Thank God, they let me stay, and I finished it with a cast, which was quite difficult because your right hand, you kind of need it for most things. But I was able to still shoot the M16 weapon and qualify, just barely. I couldn't do a couple of things. I missed out on bayonet training, but that's okay. Grenades were a little scary, grenades with a broken hand, but I did it. [laughter]

The hardest part of having a cast while you're in a camp--well, a number of reasons--one is you're out in the field in the woods in North Carolina in the summer, so there's a lot of bugs. There's a lot of sand. We got out of a helicopter once, the rotors are still going, and I just remember the sand blasting into my cast, which was quite itchy for another five weeks. So, that was uncomfortable. The other challenge was getting ready, putting on your boots, making your bed, showering. Luckily, in the barracks, I had a lot of other female cadets that were there with me that assisted me, washed my back, literally. They helped me wash my back, so we can get in and out of there. They helped me make my bed. You learn. That was my first big challenge was overcoming a physical obstacle. That's what we did. That was the biggest camp.

On campus, the other big things we did, I think twice or three times a week, we would do PT. PT stands for physical training, and we would run around that park in New Brunswick. We would do our PT tests there as well, the run, two miles, push-ups and sit-ups. I spent a lot of time in that park. I think it's called Buehler. Is that the name of it?

KR: Buccleuch Park.

BS: Buccleuch, yes, a lot of time spent there getting fit. Luckily, I was an athlete in high school. I was a soccer player, and I did track. I liked running, luckily, and eventually I could do up to fifty push-ups, which for a woman is a lot. We did a lot of push-ups and a lot of running in that park. Good memories.

KR: What other recollections do you have of Rutgers or of ROTC?

BS: Another big day was when Rutgers football, the Scarlet Knights, were playing the West Point Cadets. We all decided to go up to West Point for the football game. All of the Army ROTC Rutgers people, we were all dressed in red, and I remember painting my face red. It was weird. It was like, "Who do you root for, the Military Academy, or do you root for Rutgers?" I'm like, "Well, we have to root for Rutgers," and I'm glad I did. I don't think we won that day, but we did push-ups. We had a lot of fun. We had a lot of spirit, because we went as a group and we did push-ups every time we had a field goal or a touchdown. So, that was a great adventure.

It's interesting. The class I was in for OBC, Officer Basic [Course], right after I graduated, was one of the first classes after, and most of my class were West Point Military Academy grads, not ROTC. I remember them thinking that they were better than us, that they were the more elite. I was from New Jersey, and I ended up marrying a West Point Academy grad who was from Pennsylvania. Not only did he pick on me for being ROTC, he picked on me for being from New Jersey. That was interesting. Those guys were very smart. They were top of their class in engineering certainly, but quite frankly, I had a more well-rounded education. I felt that I was a better leader in a number of ways being at a state university versus this prestigious military academy.

As it turns out, when you go to war, it doesn't matter what school you go to. You get paid the same for your rank and your time and grade, and it didn't really matter. When I was in Desert Storm, my commanding officer was a West Point Academy grad as well. He was from New Jersey. He was a good leader. He was a good man. I respected and liked him. He knew that I was calm under pressure, more so sometimes than he was. That surprised me, that as a younger woman that was ROTC, that when the proverbial stuff hit the fan, I remained calm. Why is that? I don't know. Was it my family upbringing because we had a tougher life? Who knows? But I remember him commenting on that one day when we talked about what it was like to be under the pressure of the Scud missiles coming. A lot of people freaked out that first hundred hours of the war, because we didn't know if we were going to get hit by a chemical attack from a Scud missile. I remember one night having to sleep in my gas mask and my full--it's called the MOPP [Mission Oriented Protective Posture] gear, your protective garments. So, that was interesting. I guess I didn't have a lot of fear. Maybe that's just the way I was raised or the way I was born, but I guess if you're going to be a girl and join the Army, you have to have some courage and fearlessness at the time. [Editor's Note: A Scud missile is a tactical ballistic missile used by the Iraqi Army during the Gulf War that could be modified to deliver biological, chemical or nuclear payloads.]

KR: Overall, how do you think you were treated as a woman cadet?

BS: By whom?

KR: In general, in the ROTC program.

BS: Yes, my peers and the people within the military, I was treated very well. Some of the professors appreciated it, and some of them didn't comment or have anything to say. I think it was most interesting when I went into my religion classes. I remember my religion class was on Tuesday and Thursday right after my military, and it was fascinating to have the different mindsets. I remember going into the first religion class in uniform and wondering if the professor or the other students would be more judgmental of me because I wasn't as peaceful, I wasn't a pacifist obviously. But I don't recall any of the professors being outwardly disrespectful to me. I did perceive different looks, like, "Who is she and why is she wearing that uniform in a religion class?" Again, I just wanted to learn more about the different ways people think and different ways people worship. I wanted exposure to a lot of different things.

It actually did come in handy deploying to a Muslim country. I was raised Catholic and I had a lot of Jewish friends, but I didn't have any Muslim friends and we certainly had to learn about Islam very quickly to adapt to their customs, being in their country, especially as a woman. When I was in-country, if we ever interacted with the locals, we would keep our faces covered, which I did anyway because of the sun and the dust. That was an important aspect of being respectful. But, most of the time, we stayed away from the towns and just lived in our tents in the middle of the dirt. Some other units did have more interaction with the civilians, who, at the time, the Saudis were quite appreciative of Americans for being there to protect their country from Iraq. Religion was important to learn and understand.

Overall, as a cadet, I felt well respected by most, even though people might not have agreed. Realize, there were still people in that generation, in the '80s, that had a bad taste from Vietnam and had possibly a negative connotation for the Army or the military or people that would join such an organization. I haven't really thought about it like that.

KR: What was your commissioning like, and how did you feel getting commissioned?

BS: Oh, that was a great day. I have a lot of photos of my family. Getting the commission as a second lieutenant and you get the bars (rank), I had my parents put the bars on my soldiers, and there's a picture of my dad on one side and my mom on my other and they were just beaming. This was at the Student Center, the Rutgers Student Center, on campus. It was one of the happiest days, I remember. All of this hard work over the three years, and now I was officially an Army officer. Just that verb, commissioning, to commission, it just sounded exciting to me. I was more excited about that than getting my degree. It was a fun time. It was a happy day. All my family came. We got a lot of pictures from College Ave.

But it was also sad. It was sad because we knew as cadets that we're now officers and we were all going to go our separate ways, my cohort, my class, because we stayed together the whole four years, so we were close. It was almost a fraternity/sorority. We knew that a lot of us would not see each other again, and we would go off to our units and start our own lives. That's what happened. I haven't really kept in touch with many of my classmates. I just remember being sad as well. Interesting time though.

KR: What was officers' basic training like in Georgia?

BS: That was fun. It was in Fort Gordon, Georgia, which is Augusta, where the Masters golf tournament occurs. I'm not a big golfer, but I knew about it then. It was almost like graduate school. We had an officer dorm, which was nice, apartment-like. My particular field, Signal Corps, was more technical, so lot of classroom, learning about frequencies and radios and communication. We did do the physical training, the PT, that continued. Unfortunately, our commander of our class was a marathon runner. This guy, Captain Phelps, he was a storyteller. He loved to run. Luckily, I could run, but he ran us long and fast, faster than I would have liked. That was my recollection. Again, it was, I think, nineteen weeks of classroom training in your specific branch and then field time, learning infantry tactics in the woods.

It was hard, but luckily, I had supportive classmates. Again, most of them were West Point Academy grads. It was easier for them because, realize, when you go to the Academy, you're immersed in the military every day. But when you're an ROTC cadet at a regular college, you're not living and breathing the military like they are. That was probably a transition, especially because I had part-time jobs during college, as well as my studies. When you're in the Military Academy, you don't have a part-time job. You live, eat and breathe what they do. So, that was an adjustment. I had support. I had good friends I made there. I enjoyed it. It was a lot of fun.

Realize, being in Georgia, this was the first time I ever really left New Jersey. I realized things are different in the South, so that was eye-opening, going to Savannah or Atlanta, going to other churches there, where they don't consider Catholics to be the same type of Christian as the others. That was an awakening for me, Christianity in different ways in the South than in the North. I loved it.

After that, I went to Texas, and that's a whole other world. Texas is its own country, again, very different from New Jersey or Georgia. I think I liked Texas better than Georgia. The Georgia environment was hot, humid, lots of bugs, and it just seemed more oppressive to me. Texas was more open, just as hot, but I don't know, I can't say the weather is any better than New Jersey though. [laughter]

KR: After Fort Gordon, you were then stationed at Fort Hood in Texas.

BS: That's right.

KR: What were you doing at Fort Hood?

BS: My first assignment was in the First Cav [Cavalry] Division at Fort Hood in a signal battalion. I was a platoon leader in a signal battalion. We basically set up cellular networks on the battlefield for the tanks and the troops. The fun part of what I learned at Fort Gordon was brand new technology at the time. It is old technology now, but it was called MSE [Mobile Subscriber Equipment], and it was digital cellular communication. Desert Storm was really the first time that we used it, and we had mobile phones in the tanks. The M1 Abrams tanks had mobile phones in them. My unit set up and tore down the whole network structure, the routers, the switches and the radios. When the tanks moved, we had to pick up all of our stuff and move it with them. I was one of the first to learn that and be a platoon leader of that kind of military technical unit. That was cutting edge.

We did have computers that they gave us at Fort Gordon. It was funny, they were laptops, but they were really just mini desktops because they weighed probably twenty, thirty pounds, and just had a green screen. I think I was probably, in 1989, one of the first units that issued any kind of computers with modems, a modem dial-up. It was pretty rudimentary by today's standards, but that was the precursor to IT [information technology] and the precursor to network engineering, which is what I did all through the '90s, and that's thanks to the Army.

Back to Fort Hood, with the First Cav Division, I'm in a signal unit. There's multiple platoon leaders, and we all have these little systems that we set up, our little network. I did that, and that

was the unit I deployed to war in, that platoon. I started in January of 1990, and then we deployed. We got our orders in August of 1990. I wasn't in-country very long there before we went away.

We had one deployment to the desert, the Mojave Desert, in June of 1990, and that was actually good training and preparation. When we went to the Mojave Desert in California, we didn't know what was going to happen in July and August of that summer, so it was timely. It got me used to being in the desert. [laughter] I'll tell you, the Mojave Desert is much prettier than the Iraqi desert. We have beautiful mountains and at least some plants and cactus. But in Saudi and Iraq, it was nothing. It was just flat, not a lot of features. I much prefer the American deserts, given the choice.

KR: That is really fortuitous that you did the training in the Mojave Desert. That would have been two months before Iraq invaded Kuwait in early August of 1990.

BS: That's right. Yes, there's this center called NTC. It's called the National Training Center, and it's been around for a long time. It's in the desert, and it trains people to know what a desert deployment is. We did fight in Africa, in Northern Africa, in World War II. I think a lot of units have to go through this NTC, and it was like a three or four-week training exercise. It was good timing. It definitely prepared us for what was to come. But we didn't know it at the time, like I said. We didn't know until August that we were going.

GW: Brenda, the ten months that you were in-country, did you find that--although unlike the Vietnam War, you had accessibility to news and what was going on at home--did you find that you became disoriented and kind of lost touch with home?

BS: Yes, I did, because I think I only spoke to my parents, that whole time, two or three times, tops. Luckily, I was in a signal unit, and I could actually, from my Humvee [HMMWV, High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle] in the desert, get patched through many links to my parents' home phone number. I did get through once. Again, it was hard for my mother to hear because of her hearing issues, but my father, I spoke to him. There was a good five to ten-second delay with all of the [links], but we did speak. There were a lot of letters written back and forth. I wrote my parents a lot, and they wrote me. That was my mom's favorite way to communicate was to write letters. I still have all of the letters that I wrote her and she wrote me. But, yes, when you go that long without any communication with your family--three, four months--it gets disorienting, and your sense of place, time, and space--because you're working twelve to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, for months on end. You didn't get a day off. You didn't get a leave. You just sat in the desert. No computer, no cell phone, no CNN. The news we got just came from if there was a newspaper. I think there was *The Stars and Stripes* that they would ship in from Europe, but it was all old news. The news was just intel that we got from the leaders saying what's happening in the world, just high level. So, it was a strange ten months of my life, where you didn't have a whole lot of overload like now.

I read a lot of books. I had paperback books. I'm a big reader; I always have been. I probably read four or five books a week. We played a lot of cards. There's a game called Spades, and that's what we played quite often. That's where I learned it. That's what we did. It was very

boring. When you're setting up your unit, you'd just watch the radios and make sure the network is working and people can pick up the phone and get a dial tone. The excitement came when we had to move, and we call that "jumping." You'd jump to your next site. We did that, in the ten months, I think we jumped four or five times. Most of the time, you're just sitting around worried about a Scud missile, because the number one target for the enemy is to take out your communications, your command and communications. We knew that we had a target on our back with our antennas. There were a couple of Scuds that hit nearby, but they didn't hit us, and thankfully they didn't have chemical or biological weapons that we were aware of at the time, so that was good.

It was always top of mind, because another additional duty I had was called NBC officer, Nuclear, Biological, Chemical officer. That was just a special assignment I had within my unit as platoon leader. My job was to learn about chemical attacks, nerve agents, what to do in a nuclear-biological [attack], handing out the gas masks and the monitoring. So, I did that as well. It went with my biochemistry degree. It was fascinating, but it was pretty scary to know what the risk was.

The other thing they gave us, that I don't know if a lot of people talk about, but they gave us pills to take in preparation for a nerve agent attack. I remember, at the time, wondering if they were FDA [Food and Drug Administration] approved and if there were any safety risks. It almost looked like birth control pills. When the war started, they instructed us to take one of these pills per day. I don't even remember what they were, but they were supposed to make it so that if we were attacked with a chemical agent, that we would fare better. I don't even know, but that's just something that sticks out in my mind. There was a little thing, and we kept it in our gas masks. [Editor's Note: Pyridostigmine bromide (PB) was a self-administered anti-nerve agent pill used by U.S. military personnel during the Gulf War. It came in a twenty-one-tablet blister pack. PB was used as a pretreatment to protect from death in an attack with the nerve agent soman.]

Remember, when you're in-country, you don't go anywhere without your weapon or your gas mask. You sleep with them, you shower, you go to the bathroom, they never leave your side, especially the gas mask. You can have your weapon guarded with other people's weapons, but there always has to be a guard looking at them. Every night, I slept with my M16 and my gas mask. That was weird. When you get home and you don't have that, I remember waking up one day in my off-post apartment in Texas, and I woke up and I was disoriented. I was like, "Where's my mask? Where's my mask?" [laughter] I got used to it, but for, I'd say, over a year after that, when you're with something and you get in a pattern for that many months, it takes a while to get used to not doing it that way. But humans are very adaptable, as we've seen these last two years. We can change our patterns. Some people go back to their old patterns, but some people will never go back to their old ways and patterns. It's been a fascinating experiment in the world.

KR: I am curious if you remember how long it was between when you got orders and when you were actually shipped overseas to Saudi Arabia.

BS: I remember exactly, and I'll tell you there's a story about that, too. I got orders to deploy I think the last week of July 1990. This was right after my birthday. I guess I had just turned

twenty-three. I was living with my fiancé at the time, the person I met at Fort Gordon, and we were supposed to get married the following year. This was July. We were engaged. We got engaged in February, and we ended up eloping and getting married over lunch on August 15th. That was fifteen days after getting my orders. I didn't tell my parents I did that either. [laughter] I called my mom and dad, and I said, "Mom and Dad, you know I'm going away. Oh, by the way, I got married at lunch today." I was wearing my Army combat boots, and we went to the courthouse in Killeen, Texas. There were eight other people, eight other soldiers and their fiancés, all getting married that day, because for a lot of us, we knew we would be going away. Now, ironically, my fiancé did not get deployed. He was the West Point Academy grad, and he didn't go. He stayed back, and I was the one--the ROTC girl from Rutgers got deployed, and he didn't. I always thought that was funny.

I got married on August 15th. We got our orders two weeks prior, and then we did a lot of prep work. We ended up flying out of country [at the] end of September. So, a lot of time and stress--that was the worst part--getting our vehicles painted that sand color, because, remember, all the Humvees were green at that time. We spent a lot of time in the motor pool getting our vehicles painted, packing up our vehicles with all the necessary equipment, because we then had to drive these trucks from Killeen, Texas, many, many miles south to the Gulf of Mexico to a place called Beaumont, where we put the vehicles on a ship. Then, they went across to meet us in Saudi Arabia. That was an interesting time, not the most pleasant, very stressful, not a lot of sleep. Once the vehicles were off, then we had a couple weeks of additional training and preparation to deploy.

The other day that I remember distinctly is getting all of my vaccinations. They had this whole big gym, and they had stations where you prepare to deploy to a war. One station was you need to write your will, your last will and testament. I didn't have a lot of possessions at the time, and I was married, newly married, so I wrote a will. Then, you'd go to a station, and you'd get all of your shots. At the time, there was this anthrax vaccine and many others. They gave me so many shots that day, and I was sick as a dog because the dosing--so here's my chemistry background--the dosing on these shots is the same for a 110-pound woman as it is for a two-hundred-pound man. So, you can imagine how that impacted me physically. The anthrax shot, I just remember burning. It just goes in your arm; you can just feel it on fire, but they were all necessary, I'm sure. They gave us things for malaria and all kinds of vaccines. There were many other stations for various things to prepare you to deploy. That's when it really hit me, like, "Oh, my gosh, we are really going away to another place, and it's going to be unknown and dangerous." But, hey, at least I got my vaccinations. [laughter] I was--I still am--very pro-science. I ended up working for a pharmaceutical company for a time after the Army. I believe in vaccines. I didn't particularly like getting eighty at a time. No, I don't know if it was eighty, but it was very many. [laughter]

KR: What was being communicated to you and your unit about the mission? What did you think about the mission?

BS: Yes, the mission was very clear, and we all supported it. We knew that our mission was to get Saddam Hussein and his Iraqi troops out of Kuwait. They had invaded a country. We were part of an amazing coalition of countries across the world, and we all had a common mission to

go from Saudi Arabia and into Kuwait and push the Iraqis back into their country. It was very clear what our orders were. The part that we didn't anticipate was the waiting. We all formed up in northern Saudi Arabia and we just waited there, and then, in January, we all went north. We were part of a very big force. It wasn't just my unit. There were many units across the whole country, and we all worked together. Communications were much improved because we had phones, so they didn't have to rely on radio as much as prior wars. Now, realize, there were some personal mobile phones at the time, but they weren't widespread and they certainly weren't used. This concept of having a mobile phone so that the generals could talk and then put the orders down to the colonels, the majors, the captains and then me, there was a lot more communication and understanding down through the troops probably than in the other wars. We had a clear mission, and we were all enthusiastic to do this, because it seemed like it was the right thing and everybody agreed. There was no questioning of, "Why are we here?"

KR: What was your trip to Saudi Arabia like? Tell me about that trip.

BS: Yes, they chartered commercial planes, the military did. We were on a commercial plane, but it was only military. There were no civilians on there. I remember, we had to carry our M16s with us on the plane, but we had to take out the bolt. It was the weirdest thing. We had a weapon with us that couldn't fire, because the bolt was taken out and put in this big box, and then when you got off the plane, they handed the bolts back out. I think we had our gas masks as well. I could be wrong. I definitely remember having the weapon. It was a long flight. It was a commercial flight. I remember stopping in Rome for a layover. We didn't get to leave the plane, but at least that was my one time I got to go to Italy. That could have been on the way back, but one of the ways to Saudi Arabia was going through Rome. Then, we flew to a place in Saudi called--what was it called? Not Bahrain; that's the country. It was on the Persian Gulf.

KR: I do not know how to say it, but is it Dhahran?

BS: Dhahran, that's where we went and got off the plane, and then they just took us to this big warehouse. The thing that struck me there is it reminded me of Houston. It's very, very hot and humid. This was, what, late September. That was just the most disorienting time. You've got jet lag, you're in a new country, and you're in a huge warehouse on a cot with thousands of other people, before we deployed out to the desert. We probably stayed there a number of weeks.

The flight was long. I don't remember [what I did on the plane]. We were younger then, and when you're younger, you can sleep a lot more. Especially if you're in the Army, you just learn to sleep when you can, so I think I slept a lot. No iPhones. What did you do on a plane for eighteen hours? You read books. You talked. You slept.

GA: I am interested to know, Brenda, do you feel like you would have found your way to the military had you not done ROTC at Rutgers?

BS: Probably not. That was the time. If I had just graduated Rutgers and become a civilian, I probably would have gotten a good job, started a family, and then the military wouldn't--that was the time and the place. I don't regret it, but it could have taken a different turn. I could have stayed in. I only stayed in for four years and then I got out. Some people make it a career. I

don't think I wanted it to be a career, but I got a great education that I didn't have to pay for at great school. That was the good part. I paid in other ways; I just didn't pay with dollars.

KR: Once you got to Saudi Arabia, take us through your unit's experiences, where you were and what you were doing.

BS: Sure. Once we left that port town, we got all of our vehicles, and then we convoyed north into literally the desert. There weren't a lot of roads, paved roads. The United States military, in the year that we were there--and we were there longer--built a lot of roads in the Saudi Arabian desert--they weren't all paved. We convoyed north for a number of hours and then just set up our little network in the middle of the desert. Now, my unit was dispersed geographically by many kilometers. We had a node center, and then we had a RAU [Radio Access Unit], which was like a cell tower, which was further away, and then other extension nodes. I had to go around to these places in the Humvee and visit my troops. We set up and stayed there for many months, and then we jumped north one more time at a place near Hafar al-Batin. That might've been the first place, and then we went to KKMC, King Khalid Military City, I think it was called. That was the final stop before we went north into Iraq in January. I just remember, once we all got the equipment set up and then we're just monitoring and then going to visit, it was bizarre, to say the least, just sitting and waiting.

The other interesting thing that most people don't realize is, at that time, they didn't give us any bullets for our M16s. We're in the middle of the desert, this is, what, October, November in Saudi Arabia, and we're sitting ducks. We have M16s, and we don't have bullets. They didn't give us bullets until January--what was it?--19th. When the official war started, I remember them finally handing out magazines of bullets for our M16s. I wondered, "So what are we supposed to do if an Iraqi troop came upon us?" I never really got an answer to that question, but, yes, no bullets until January. [Editor's Note: On January 17, 1991, U.S. and coalition forces launched Operation Desert Storm with a campaign of air and missile attacks on targets in Iraq and Kuwait. Desert Storm lasted from January 17 to February 28, 1991, when a ceasefire was declared.]

KR: How well supplied do you think you were in general, especially in consideration of this really rapid buildup and quick deployment?

BS: I was surprised at how much food we had. We did have a big enough site that we had our own mess truck tent, and we had a dedicated mess sergeant, so we had food. We had MREs [Meals Ready-to-Eat] a lot, but we also had a decent Thanksgiving. It wasn't great, but at least it was a hot meal with meat, potatoes and gravy. The food was good. We had enough water. They kept us supplied with water. We didn't have a running water bathroom. We had plywood showers that we made with tanks of water above, so you had to fill the tank for your water. Again, we didn't take showers all the time. Logistics, I think the U.S. Army, we do logistics pretty well, aside from we should have had bullets earlier, but that's just my personal opinion. [laughter] I'm sure there was a reason. That's all we needed. I mean, what do you need? You need food, you need water, and you need shelter. Now, the shelter was tents. We lived in tents the whole time, which got a little uncomfortable. The trucks where our equipment was were air-conditioned. We had diesel generators, and you had to air-condition them. A lot of soldiers that

were on duty would just stay in their trucks with the doors closed and could sleep in there; they're not supposed to, but they probably did. It was well supplied.

Then, of course, all the care packages that came from my family. I did make a mistake once of putting the care package of food underneath my cot in my tent, and there were oatmeal packets. One night, I heard the crunching of little rodents eating my oatmeal. Then, one of them--I think it was a mouse--I was on top of my sleeping back and I was wearing shorts, and I just remember the scurrying of the mouse up my leg. That kind of upset me. After that, I moved out all the food from my tent. Lesson learned: never keep your food where you camp and sleep. That was interesting. I did eat a lot of oatmeal and a lot of peanut butter. I recall those were the staples of things. I wasn't hungry, but those were the comfort foods from home, different from an MRE or the mess hall.

The other strange thing of being in the middle of the desert is we didn't exercise as much, because you didn't want to get all sweaty. Where are you going to go, run around a desert of your site? I think a lot of us just got out of shape. I don't think we got fat, but we were just sitting there and not doing the running that we were used to back at Fort Hood. I don't remember doing any push-ups or exercising a lot during that time. Those MREs have a lot of calories in them, a lot of salt and a lot of calories, so we probably gained weight, if anything. I hadn't really thought about that.

GA: I am wondering, Brenda, did you ever witness or was bullying a challenge within, for example, your platoon? As a platoon leader, did you find that that was a challenge that you had to deal with?

BS: Yes, there were definitely power plays, and there were hierarchies within the unit. I came in as a new platoon leader, so the platoon sergeants were already there and knew each other and they had the knowledge and the power. But, again, you respect it, almost like at a prison, and you learn who's who. If you're strong, they'll respect you, and it all worked out. But there was some bullying. I did observe that people that have similar backgrounds tended to stay together, be it culturally or certain religions. There were people that would pray in the morning, and they would be one religion or another got together. People did group with people that were like them. There wasn't a whole lot of animosity, but I observed it for the first time. This was primarily the African American community and then the Latino community. But we were all one team. This was more when we were relaxing and just having fun with each other. It did strike me when things were getting scary how people would start praying more and going to their religion. Back home, they never did that, but, now, some of them [did], and it was more Baptist. I wasn't raised as Southern Baptist, but I remember them doing prayers and even singing gospel songs. That was kind of new and exciting to me, being interested in religion. The bullying wasn't too bad. The worst was probably me being the only officer amongst my platoon of enlisted. It's different. It's a different mindset.

GA: Would you say that was kind of lonely at times?

BS: Yes, for me, it was very lonely. For a while, I had a tent all by myself in the beginning, because, typically, enlisted don't sleep and fraternize with the officers. But I didn't really like

that. After a few months, I remember I asked to move into the tent with the other women that were my sergeants. Then, it wasn't as lonely. It was quite sad for me the first few months, especially being away from home and being away at Christmas and Thanksgiving in the middle of nowhere. You're not supposed to actively show your faith in this Muslim country. You're not supposed to have outward displays of Christianity, so we kept our Christmas trees in our tents. We didn't put up a lot of Christmas decorations at all. But it was neat seeing a camel at Christmastime in the desert, reminding you of the whole Bethlehem story with the Wise Men going across the desert on a camel. Yes, it was interesting. I'm at eleven percent power on my iPad that I'm communicating on, so I think I have at least fifteen to thirty minutes.

KR: Okay, sure, thanks. My next question you have touched upon a little bit in some other questions that we have asked you. Once Operation Desert Storm was being launched and the invasion of Iraq, what were your experiences like and the experiences of your unit?

BS: Once the big launch in January occurred, we left our base, where we had been for many months in northern Saudi, and we convoyed north into southern Iraq. We left in the middle of the night. I just remember driving in this huge--it was a deuce and a half--a two-and-a-half-ton truck, very, very uncomfortable, for hours just driving north, but it was pretty exciting, because we knew this was the big thing we'd been waiting for. We're traveling, and it's exciting because we're seeing other tanks and units from Britain and other countries alongside us traveling in the same direction. Then, we got to a location, and we stopped. This was where we were going to set up our communications. I only have one picture from the whole war. There was a burned-out military--it looked like a tank and it was an Iraqi tank and there were dead Iraqi soldiers on the ground. It was taken out by a U.S. missile or an Apache. My soldiers had to call and get body bags and put them in. I made a decision that I didn't want to see the bodies, the corpses, because I didn't want it to stick in my mind. I didn't go near it, but we set up camp maybe a hundred meters away from that. It was kind of creepy to be there. We were there thirty, forty days. We stayed there, and it wasn't long before we won the war decisively. We were all told, "Okay, time to go home now."

I thought we would go on to Baghdad, go north, and a lot of us thought that we would continue the mission, but that really wasn't the mission to go to Baghdad. We got Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, so we did that. We got orders to retreat--not retreat--but to leave Iraq and to go back south into Saudi Arabia probably within forty days, and then we stayed in-country a bit more before we got to go home in May.

Yes, it was a blur. It all happened so fast, a hundred-hour war. Again, we won decisively with our tanks. The communication, I'd like to think that I helped with my unit supplying the communications between tanks. I mean, that was kind of cool. It was just hard not having a lot of water. You only had one tank with the water, and that's all you had, so we rationed it. Most of us didn't use more than two or three gallons of water a day for cleaning, bathing and drinking. You become well aware of limited resources. I think I washed my hair three times in that month. I cut my hair short, and I dyed it. I was blonde. I had long blonde hair. I cut it short and I dyed it brown before I went away because I knew that I didn't want to stand out, and long hair isn't as good. I didn't do the crew cut like in the movie with Demi Moore [*G.I. Jane*]. I didn't do that. [laughter] In fact, they didn't really want women to do that at the time. There were hair codes for

women. I think that's changed now. [Editor's Note: The hundred-hour war refers to the ground campaign during Operation Desert Storm, which lasted from February 24 to February 28, 1991, when President George H.W. Bush declared a ceasefire following Iraq's retreat from Kuwait.]

KR: How does it sound if we do a couple more questions for today, and then, Brenda, you and I can meet for a second session?

BS: Yes, sure.

KR: Does that sound okay?

BS: Yes, because I'm down to eight percent.

KR: Gwen, I will turn it over to you, and you can ask a couple more questions today.

GA: I was wondering if you could speak about the dichotomy in your life that you have mentioned on your blog and in your book of being very in favor of technological advancement and science and knowledge and yet often longing for a return to more traditional ways of doing things. I was wondering if you would like to speak about where that comes from in your history and how that affects the way you conduct your life and work now?

BS: Wow, that's a profound philosophical question. I haven't had one of those since I was at Rutgers. That's good. But it's true. I am a traditionalist in certain values, but I also embrace change and new technology. I think my more traditional leaning is from my family and growing up in an analog world, where we played outside more, we read books, we play-acted. I personally think that that's better for human connection and communication to be more face to face. Someone today at work said, "I live in a hundred percent virtual world." I thought to myself, "Well, that's kind of sad. I don't. I live in a real world." Most of the people that I work with are virtual, but I don't ever want to be in a hundred percent virtual world. So, I am definitely someone that's traditional in analog communication. But, on the other hand, I'm Generation X, I had computers early on, and I love technology. The military trained me to think about and use technology. All through the '90s and since, I've been in IT, information technology, which is a very male-dominated profession. Not a lot of women choose to go to school and learn STEM, and not a lot of women are in IT. I've been in this world for thirty years now. I think my experience being in the military has helped me, has helped giving me promotions to director that I'm at now, that a lot of other women don't have. A lot of it is confidence. A lot of it is just knowing what you want and persuading and influencing others to follow you and to trust you. I learned that long ago in school and even before that.

The other thing I'd say is being more real and analog and more traditional helped me be a better leader at work. The relationships and the people [are] important, too. You can't just be all technology and all virtual; you still have to connect with people. That's probably the last question I can take right now before my battery runs dead. I'm sorry I left my thing at home, the charger. See, the limitations of technology.

KR: [laughter] Brenda, thank you so much for meeting with us today. I will email you, and then

we will set up a second interview session.

BS: That'd be great.

KR: Okay, great. Thanks again. You have been so generous with your time.

BS: You're welcome. Thank you. Great questions.

GA: Thank you so much.

BS: All right, bye-bye.

KR: Bye, Brenda.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

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