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AN INTERVIEW WITH SALLY STENTON

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins the third interview session with Lieutenant Colonel Sally Stenton, on April 29, 2021, with Shaun Illingworth, soon to be joined by Maria Marin. Thank you very much for calling in again.

Sally Stenton: I'm happy to do it.

SI: We want to pick up with your deployment, your second tour, in Germany. Tell us a little bit about that tour.

SS: Okay. After I spent my year in D.C., I got to go back to Germany for a second time, and I was actually out of the JAG Corps for the first eighteen months of that tour. I worked directly for the USAFE commander in what was called his CAG, his Commander's Action Group, and I was the legislative liaison. [Editor's Note: The JAG Corps is the Judge Advocate General's Corps.]

The legislative liaison, you have congressional delegations and staff delegations, CODELs and STAFFDELs. They come over from D.C., and they do these visits. So, they would come over either en route to Iraq or Afghanistan or on their way back, and they would come to Ramstein, which was a hub. Ramstein Air Base is a wing there, and also, like I said, USAFE is United States Air Forces in Europe, it was the major command there. Also, NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] was there. I would run these delegations. They were a very big deal, both strategically, and we also had Landstuhl Regional Medical Center right there as well. They would fly into Ramstein, and these were usually two or three-day visits. They were very labor intensive. The congressional representatives could have been senators, congressional representatives. There was usually anywhere from three to ten representatives, and they came with an entourage. So, they were a very big deal. We would set up, like I said, visits to Landstuhl to take them to visit the wounded troops. A lot of times they would be constituents of theirs, the wounded. Ramstein is a huge base. So, we would try and get volunteers--we'd find out, obviously, what state they're from, what district they're from. We would send out basically a call to any airman, officer, NCO, family member that lived on base or in the local area, first, if it was from that representative or senator's--well, the senator's is the state--if it was from a representative's actual district, then if it was from the local area or their state--hi Maria--and get them involved in either a breakfast, a lunch, a dinner. Then, there was briefings for these congressional representatives. When I say briefings, I mean, everybody from the four-star [general] would brief them, to sometimes they were classified briefings, sometimes they were unclassified briefings, on the war effort. They could be logistical efforts for the bases around Europe. Like I said, it was really a very interesting, a very educational job, and it was obviously something very different from what I did as a JAG. It was very high speed and very high powered, and it was really a great opportunity for me. In fact, I got to know many of the staffers, many of the representatives. I've gone to D.C. many times, and there're still a couple of them that I'm actually in contact with, staff members and a couple of representatives.

I did that for eighteen months, and then I went back to working at the USAFE legal office. I was there for a couple weeks, and they were looking for someone to--I always call it my hardship

deployment. I went from there to EUCOM [United States European Command] headquarters, which is in Stuttgart, Germany, for six months. So, I was there in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. I literally drove from Ramstein to Stuttgart, and I stayed there at another base, a local base. I was housed there for six months and worked at EUCOM just as support. They were very involved in--at the time, I guess Central Command was still in charge, but there was a lot of people from all over the world working with--EUCOM has a lot of different NATO organizations that work with it, and General Jones was the EUCOM commander at the time, a four-star Marine. He was dual-hatted as the EUCOM commander and, out of Belgium, SHAPE is NATO. So, I went there and worked with the EUCOM legal office just doing whatever they needed me to do in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. [Editor's Note: Operation Enduring Freedom was the name used by the U.S. government for the Global War on Terrorism after the September 11th attacks and primarily refers to the War in Afghanistan. General James L. Jones is a retired United States Marine Corps four-star general who served as the commander of United States European Command (EUCOM) and Supreme Allied Commander Europe from 2003 to 2006. The United States Central Command, or USCENTCOM, is one of the elven combatant commands of the U.S. Department of Defense. It oversees operations from the Horn of Africa to Central Asia. Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) is the headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Allied Command Operations (ACO).]

That was a really nice time, and I met the [new Staff Judge Advocate]. His name was William Lietzau, Bill Lietzau, a Marine colonel. I guess I went there in May, the end of May, and he came in the very beginning of July as the new SJA [Staff Judge Advocate], and he was the boss. So, I worked for him for six months, and he actually became a very close friend of mine. He is to this day. He ended up being my retirement official, which is pretty rare for an Air Force member to have a Marine be their retirement official. He went on to be what's called the deputy assistant secretary for DOD [Department of Defense], he actually ran all of Guantanamo, all the black sites. Our paths crossed over the years in Afghanistan. I always say he's the best boss I ever had, and I've had some good bosses. Go ahead. You have a question? [Editor's Note: Colonel William Lietzau served for twenty-seven years in the Marine Corps and retired at the rank of colonel. After his military career, he served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Rule of Law and Detainee Policy from 2010 to 2013. Blacks sites refer to clandestine jails where prisoners generally are not charged with a crime and have no legal recourse.]

SI: Were the duties in the legal office similar to the duties you had outlined at other places?

SS: Up until that point, no, because they had a very different portfolio. USAFE was in charge of the Air Forces in Europe. EUCOM was a combatant command over all the different branches of the military. In the Air Force, you have wings, numbered Air Forces, and then major commands. Then, throughout the military, you have these combatant commands, and EUCOM, European Command, was one of those combatant commands. It has all the different service departments under them. At EUCOM, we had Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines working in the legal office. It was a very different environment than I had ever worked in, so it made it very interesting.

In fact, I think I told you that I now represent veterans in their claims and appeals. In that capacity, when you put in a claim, it goes to what's called a regional office. If you have an appeal, the first things that happens is that it goes to a different regional office, and they hear it. Then, it goes to the Board of Veterans Appeals, and then you can appeal it to the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. One of the guys that I worked with--his name was Scott Laurer--he's a Navy guy, and I worked with him at EUCOM on that deployment. He is now a judge on the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. They always say it's a small world. Well, it's an even smaller world in the military, even if you're in a different branch of the service, because your paths end up crossing over and over again, which is great. It's a great community.

Yes, what a combatant command does, legal office wise, is very different than what a major command in any of the branches in a single department do. What an Air Force major command legal office does is probably very different than what the Army, what their brigade law office does, their command does. I did that for six months, and, again, I think pretty much every job I did, probably like anything, you just learn so much.

When I was there, I probably had what I consider the best TDY [temporary duty; it's the equivalent of a civilian business trip] of my entire career. The Department of Defense General Counsel--his name was Jim Haynes--came to EUCOM, and Bill Lietzau had worked for him. At one point, Mr. Haynes had been the Secretary of the Army, and now he was the DOD General Counsel. He was doing, basically, a European tour; when I say a tour, he was going to see some ambassadors. It was a very critical point in time. So, he was coming to Europe for, I think, a week or ten days, and my job was to put together, because I had done these CODELs, I hate to do the Julie the cruise director reference, but that's the best way I can describe it. [laughter] I mean, it was very important. I had to put together this trip, put together the itinerary, who he was going to meet with. We were going to Switzerland. We were going to Romania. Actually, we were going to go to Ramstein. I'm trying to think what other countries we were going to. We were going to Spain. He was going to meet, like I said, with different generals, different, actually, ambassadors. I was setting up all these meetings, doing the itinerary, working with their people. It was going to be Mr. Haynes and his executive officer, who was a Navy captain, Colonel Lietzau, and then I was going to go. So, it was just the four of us. [Editor's Note: William James Haynes II was General Counsel of the Army from 1990 to 1993 and then General Counsel of the Department of Defense from 2001 to 2008. Julie the cruise director is referring to Julie McCoy, the cruise director played by Lauren Tewes on *The Love Boat*, a sitcom that aired on ABC from 1977 to 1986.]

I remember we got to fly on our own little--I think it was a C-9. It's the military's version of a private Learjet, although it's not a Learjet. Then, because we were going to Switzerland and Switzerland's a neutral country, we had to wear civilian clothes. We didn't bring a uniform. So, it was really great. It's good to be king, because that's what it was like meeting these very influential, high-power people. I got to sit in on meetings that I've never had an opportunity before or since, with, like I said, ambassadors. I got to sit in with the High Commissioner for Human Rights. I mean, these are people that go to speak at the United Nations. I still hear today about--have you ever heard of the Uyghurs? There's this population in China that the Chinese

are trying to destroy this population. Have you heard of the Uyghurs, Maria? This is a current day issue. They're indigenous, I believe, to China, and they're trying to--I hate the term ethnically cleanse because it sounds like it's a good thing, but the Chinese are trying to ethnically cleanse the Uyghurs. Way back even then, the High Commissioner for Human Rights was working with Mr. Haynes and these other people at this meeting to try and find a country that would take the Uyghurs, and you still hear about it today. That was the most incredible TDY that I ever got to go on because I just sat there like a fly on the wall in these rooms just taking notes because, like I said, I will never be in that type of position again.

I did six months there. I got promoted. I talked about General Foglesong in the last one. He wrote me--it's a thing called a PRF, your performance review form--I can't remember what it stands for. Coming from a four-star [general], I didn't even get what's called a DP, a Definitely Promote, I just got a Promote, and I was one year above the zone. I sent it home to my mom. I'm like, "I don't know who this is about, but it has my name on it." I remember him coming down. They send these packages to the promotion board, and he was like, "I'm sorry, Sally, I tried as hard as I could to get you the DP." I'm like, "It's okay," but then I ended up getting promoted. So, I ended up pinning on lieutenant colonel when I was at this deployed location and having this big party. So, it was great. Like I said, it was not a hardship deployment at all. [Editor's Note: Robert H. "Doc" Foglesong is a retired Air Force general who served from 1972 to 2006.]

I came back from there in November of 2005, came back to Ramstein. They were giving out assignments, and then I found out I was going to go to Izmir in Turkey. Usually, you do your Permanent Change of Station, your PCS, like in the July timeframe, but they needed me to come early. So, I left in early April. I went early. I was curtailed. From November to basically March, I spent at the USAFE legal office, and I did, again, military justice. At that level, you're an administrator again. You're just overseeing all the other bases, doing statistics. It was very interesting. I find it interesting because it's criminal law, but I really didn't have long to do it.

I did one back-to-back U.S. tour, and this was a back-to-back overseas tour. So, it was very interesting because I took a ferry. I shipped a lot of stuff. Some stuff I put in storage. I got in my car, packed up my cats. [laughter] They're multilingual and have lived on as many continents as I have. I drove from Germany to Italy, and I got on a ferry. It was like three nights and two days because you got on it at night. I had only been on ferries that went from like Manhattan to Staten Island. I had never been on a ferry that you [took overnight]. It was not a cruise ship, by any stretch of the imagination.

SI: Did you have sleeping quarters?

SS: The military pays for this. This was your mode of transportation. Usually, they would fly you or whatever. So, I'll never forget, you get on, you go, you check in, you wait for hours, and you get in line, and you pull it on the ferry. It was hard because I just had like a small bag for overnight, but I had all my stuff for my cats. I had them in two carry-ons, and food, and litter pan, litter, and there's no elevators. You're just walking up several flights of little steps. Like I

said, this is not luxury at all because there are people that buy passage on these that basically sleep on deck chairs. They have communal bathrooms and showers, and then there's different levels of rooms. I thought I got a nicer level room, but I get in my room and I couldn't even do this [turn around] because the room was so narrow. [laughter] It had bunkbeds, and the bathroom, the toilet, sink and shower were like one. I was like, "Oh, my God." I didn't even know where I was going to put the litter pan. There was literally no place for it or no room, and I'm like, "Oh, my God." I swear this is not what I booked. Like I said, it's not like a cruise ship, but I swear in the brochure, it was a different room.

They do make an announcement that if you would like to upgrade--it's not full--you can come upgrade. So, I go, and I said, "I don't believe I booked this room, but I definitely want to upgrade." I said, "I want the biggest room you have," which sleeps four; it's for a family. So, they give me the key--I'll never forget--it was the same room, just on the other side of the hall. I go back up, I'm like, "No, this is not going to work. I have two cats. I can't even put the litter pan down." Finally, I do get the biggest room. It's nice, spacious. The bathroom's actually a bathroom, where you have a toilet, a sink, it's small, it is like a cruise ship bathroom with a small shower, and I'm able to actually have a spot for the litter pan for my cats.

We get underway, and I think it's like fifty-six hours. You get on at night, the next day, next night, next day--maybe two nights, two days--and then they dock in a place called Çeşme, Turkey and get off, load everything, put your cats in. I had to go through all this stuff to get my cats, make sure they were vaccinated and have all the paperwork. I pull out, and I have all my paperwork and the people are like, "Oh my gosh, your cats are so beautiful." "That's great, thanks, bye." They didn't check anything. Then, I pull out, and there are people waiting there for me, so that I can follow them back to base. That was my start in Turkey, which was two-and-a-half years.

That was like March of 2006. I was there until July of 2008. I loved that tour. It was a great tour. That was NATO, so I was dual-hatted working for the U.S. Air Force. All Americans there are dual-hatted, because you're all working for the Air Force and you're also working for NATO. That was just great. I loved Turkey, loved the people, loved the food, the travel, the shopping. Again, there's all these different NATO countries that are there. There's no housing on base, and so everybody lived on the economy. It's considered a remote; for the U.S., it's considered a one-year remote tour. All the other nations bring their families. I don't know why the U.S. does that. I guess, at the time--and maybe still--Turkey is considered a more dangerous location. Incirlik Air Base is up on the Syrian-Iran border in the very north. I was in the very southwest corner, right on the Aegean. Incirlik is in the very northeast of Turkey. I got extended, so I did an extra year, because I had been curtailed.

We did a lot of NATO conferences. About once a quarter, you'd go to different NATO countries and you'd do conferences as the JAG for the commander, who was always American, a general. Pretty much everybody on the staff goes, and they're usually four days. Usually, you'd go in on a Saturday, and Sunday's like a tour day for all the people that come in. Then, Monday and

Tuesday is the conference. So, I pretty much always briefed on the rules of engagement because they were always changing depending on what country you were in.

If there was ever any disciplinary matter with the Americans, the general was in charge, so I worked with him. I would do military justice. I was basically a one-man band. If people needed help with their landlords, if people wanted advice on wills, if somebody brought in divorce papers, I was like a one-person legal office--like you would have in the States--and then all your NATO work for the NATO countries. You do a lot of traveling when you work for NATO, which was great. I mean, I literally had to send my passport away and get extra pages put in it. [laughter] I ran out of pages in my passport. I think in my thirty months there, I think there was two months that I did not travel.

SI: I am curious, you are dealing with the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), which is U.S. based, but is there also a NATO equivalent that you have to deal with?

SS: Well, we were in Turkey, and we had a SOFA, a Status of Forces Agreement, with Turkey. I think I talked about that when I was in Korea. If we had an airman that got in trouble in Turkey and anywhere--I mean, like I said, we had a support unit, and my very dear friend Lori was the commander. It was a group. It was a group, and they were at another location. Again, nobody lived on it, but they were there specifically to support the U.S. people that worked in NATO. So, she was the group commander, so she had authority. If it was somebody, like an officer, that got in trouble, it would have to go to the general. If somebody did something that wasn't a crime in Turkey, but it was a crime under the UCMJ, it got handled through the UCMJ. If they committed some sort of offense--they stole a car--and Turkey wanted to handle it, they had primary jurisdiction. If they said, "Nope. Your guy stole his roommate's car. We don't really care," then we have jurisdiction. In the military, you are always under UCMJ authority anywhere in the world, anytime, twenty-four/seven, 365. In the United States, if you are on federal property and you commit a crime, if you're on the base, and the base is under military jurisdiction--some bases [are] under state and federal jurisdiction, sort of weird--if you commit the crime on the military jurisdiction part, military has primary jurisdiction. If you're in the state jurisdiction, they have primary jurisdiction and they can turn it over to the military, and same with places that have a SOFA. If they want to take jurisdiction--I mean, say, God forbid you murdered a Turkish citizen--you were driving a car and you were drunk and you hit a kid on a bike--they would have [jurisdiction], according to the SOFA--and the same goes for family members. We did have some SOFA issues with family members. The SOFA gives some protections to the military member and some to family members but not when it comes to criminal stuff. The country has primary jurisdiction. Now, that's to the family member. The military member, like I said, if they get caught, and Turkey wants to handle it, if they give them back to us, and we want to get them out of the country, we'll get them out of the country. Yes, we did UCMJ stuff there. We did court-martials, not in Izmir, we would send them Incirlik, to an actual base.

SI: I was curious how relations were with the Turkish people and also whatever aspects of the Turkish government you might have had to deal with.

SS: You know, it was very interesting. Everybody got along really well. The Turks and the Greeks have been lifelong enemies for a really long time, and yet in NATO, where we worked, the Turkish military members and the Greek military members got along really well. All the other countries, everybody got along. There really was never any issues. We had a lot of events. We would have dinners celebrating different countries' holidays and stuff. It was always really interesting, we would talk about this among the different countries, how it's the governments that end up creating all the problems, that the people themselves, the military members, the citizenry, don't really have any problems. When we were over there, I forget which country shot down which country's fighter jet. It was a huge deal but not amongst the people in NATO. The pilot was killed. But these officers, we were all friends. It was really nice to see, and we did; I remember people commenting on it. Even the Greeks and the Turks were like, "Well, these are my friends. It's our damn leaders that create all the problems."

People would come to Turkey, like family members, and you could only stay in Turkey for so long and then you'd have to leave the country for a day. There was this ferry that would go from Izmir to Chios, which is a Greek island. You'd go there and spend the night in a hotel and come back for another month or three months. I can't remember what the time was. Greek territory is literally like a thirty-minute ferry ride. The NATO countries, it's called Article 5 of the UN charter. Any NATO country that's attacked, all the other countries support it. So, [I] found that very interesting. Yes, some of the best friends were Greek and Turkish officers.

That was a great assignment though because, like I said, you did a lot of entertaining. I mean, [it was] a lot of work during the day. Every year, they did an international day, where every country--it was usually outside--set up a tent or an area, and whatever their specialty was, there was food and music and arts and crafts, whatever. Like I said, there were also a lot of dinners. It was, again, just a really good, very educational experience. I was lucky because I did have that experience at EUCOM, so I was much better prepared for it than I would have been if I had just never worked in a NATO environment previously.

Something else about Turkey, right outside of Izmir is a place called Ephesus, and that is the largest Roman ruins in the world outside of Rome. It's also, from Ephesus, I think, ten kilometers is the Virgin Mary's house. I forget which Apostle took her after Christ was crucified, and it's where she lived out the rest of her life. When I say her home, it's almost like a cave. It's like a little hovel, but for Christianity, it's one of the most visited sites in the world. [Editor's Note: The House of the Virgin Mary is located on Mount Koressos near Ephesus.]

SI: Maria, do you have any questions at this point?

Maria Marin: At this point, I do not. I think Lieutenant Colonel Stenton has answered all the questions that I had. I had a lot of questions about NATO, which I found really interesting.

SS: Yes, NATO is really interesting. Yes, it was really fun to work with NATO. When I was in Afghanistan, I ran into some of my friends from NATO from other countries. Speaking of cats, I

will give you one interesting tidbit. They have a huge, huge wild cat population over in Turkey because Atatürk, the father of Turkey, they believe he is going to come back as a cat. Wherever you go in Turkey, there are all these wild cats, and they're not malnourished or emaciated. They're all really well fed, people just leave out foot and stuff, but you do have to be careful because they carry rabies. Anywhere you go, cats everywhere, and they are beloved in Turkey. [laughter] People like to take them home, Americans, when they leave the country; it's really hard thing to do. I had my two cats when I got there, but one person gets to take one cat. I literally had to bribe them to take my second cat home with me. [laughter] Yes, very old world. I went to a building, a bunch of old Turkish men on typewriters with cigarettes. It was something out of a movie, and I had to get the interpreter. She finally just was like, "Just offer them money," which I had been told, so I did bring money. I'm like, "But I had them when I came, and they don't look like any cat in your street." Yes, they just think he's going to come back as a cat. [Editor's Note: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk served as the first president of Turkey. He held office from 1923 until his death in 1938.]

SI: Were there any restrictions on things you could do off base?

SS: I'm trying to remember. I don't think so. Well, you always had to let people know where you were. I mean, you'd put in your leave paper. There was really cool things. We'd go to these different places and go scuba diving. They had a really cool place where you could go hot air ballooning, but there was terrorism in Turkey. I think it was called the PKK terrorist group. If Americans were caught in it, they were really just collateral damage. It was a Turkish terrorist group against the Turkish government. I was on one of my TDYs, and there was a bomb that went off right outside of our gate. We walked everywhere because we lived in the city. There was a little local British pub that we'd all go to. The night after a group of us had been there, the one right next door--and I mean, it's as far as away as that window--somebody threw a grenade into it, a hand grenade. Several people were killed, luckily no Americans or nobody from NATO. That's one of the reasons they made it a deployment for Americans--I mean, a remote tour. I can't remember anything that you weren't allowed to do. Like I said, you just had to put in leave paperwork. Obviously, they needed to know where you were going and a way to get in touch with you, more so, if you needed to be recalled, if anything happened. Then, if you were doing something particularly dangerous, which scuba diving isn't considered particularly dangerous, but if you were going to go into a hot air balloon, you had to do a request. The general had to sign off on it, on a particularly--we were just talking about this the other day--risky activity like paragliding or hot air ballooning, you know, they crash. Were you thinking of anything in particular? [Editor's Note: PKK refers to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a Kurdish militant political organization and armed guerrilla movement.]

SI: No, I just knew about the PKK issue.

SS: Right.

SI: My understanding is that the government and President Erdoğan were fairly friendly at that point.

SS: Right, right.

SI: I was just curious if there was any issue.

SS: I don't remember when I was there, but most bases--even Stateside--but in Europe, there are what's called places that are off limits. They're usually bars because of drug activity, gang activity, terrorist activity, but I don't remember, in Turkey, that we had places that were off limits, at least when I was there.

SI: Then, after Izmir, you came back to Langley Air Force Base?

SS: Yes. Yes, I left Izmir in July of 2008 and came home, took leave, and I got to Langley in August of 2008. I was there until the end of my career, when I retired. My retirement date is July 1, 2012. So, I was there. Langley, I was at ACC. It's funny, in Turkey, I was at ACC, which was Air Component Command, and then ACC at Langley is Air Combat Command. It's a major command but not a combatant command. I was at the ACC headquarters legal office, and I was the chief of military justice. Again, the umbrella, so I was over the NAFs [numbered air forces], for all the ACC NAFs, which were over all the wings under--I can't remember how many bases. [I was in that position] from August 2008 until May 2010, so a little less than two years.

When I first got there, General Burne--he was the SJA--brings you in, "What do you want to do? What's your goal?" The timing was just bad because in Turkey, I was two below the zone, one below the zone, to colonel, and both times, I had gotten a Definitely Promote from the three star. In my one below, I had been ranked the number one O-5, lieutenant colonel, among all of his lieutenant colonels, including the pilots. Then, I get to Langley, and there's three people in the office, including me, who are all in the zone for O-6. I had only been there a few months when this PRF is due. I wasn't even in the top five. Out of the three in our office that were in the zone, I was the last one there. The other two had been there for a couple years, and they were great people. I was really disappointed. [Editor's Note: Lt. General Christopher F. Burne was the Judge Advocate General of the U.S. Air Force from 2014 to 2018.]

I was actually supposed to be a judge on the Air Force's--each branch of the military has their own appeals court. The University of Virginia has the Army JAG School, and everybody goes to the judge's course at the Army JAG School, all the branches of service. It's a three-week course. It was my dream job, I was so happy, and I'm at the judge's course--I'm about a week into it--and I get a call from the assignments colonel. [laughter] All the other nine judges were colonels, and I was replacing somebody. I was the only lieutenant colonel. They called to say that they were changing my assignment because they were going from nine judges to seven judges. The one judge was retiring, and the other judge was PCS-ing, so they weren't going to replace them. I was the most junior person. So, I remember thinking, "You're kidding, right?" This was a three-week course, and in the middle weekend--or one of the weekends--I was going to go to D.C. or

Alexandria or wherever and look for a home. They said, "Well, we wanted to make sure we got you in time before you went and bought a home or rented a house."

Langley not only wasn't my choice of jobs, it was not where I wanted to go. I had no choice. All of the assignments had been given out by then. Yes, I was pretty bitter by the time I got there. The general had several people up for [promotion]--I mean, he's over ACC, so anybody, any JAG, in the zone, he had to rack and stack and decide who was going to get a DP. There's two other people right in that office, so I knew then and there. So, I did not get the DP, the other two in the office got it, and like I said, great people, they certainly deserved it. I was not ranked very high. On my one year, I was ranked number one by a three star of a combatant command type thing. But I told them that I wanted to deploy. I was very upfront. I'm like, "I don't want to be here. This isn't what I wanted." The irony is I was a lieutenant colonel, and the job that I had was an O-6 job. All these jobs that I had--at NATO, that was an O-6 job. At Langley, it was an O-6 job. When I deployed, it was an O-6 job, and I did all these jobs as an O-5. [laughter]

Anyway, so, I did a really good job as the chief of justice. I did that probably for a year and a half. Then, they made me the chief of operations law because they rotate you around, other people. I probably started that in January of '10. I remember he called me in, probably October of '09, and he said, "Sally, you wanted to deploy." I said, "Yes," and he said, "Well, I have a deployment for you." He said, "It's a year, and it's in Afghanistan." I just remember I was so shocked. I'm thinking, "Okay, I'll deploy somewhere for ninety days or 120 days." I was instantly really scared. I had been to Kuwait and to Germany, and I thought, "You know what? I asked for it; I asked for it from the day I got there." I wasn't going to say no. You know what they say, be careful what you ask for because you just might get it. All I said was I wanted to deploy. It's like *Private Benjamin*. I didn't specify. I said, "Yes, okay. Let me in." [Editor's Note: *Private Benjamin* is a 1980 comedic film about a woman who joins the U.S. Army.]

I went for training probably in like March, April of 2010. I know we had a month-long training at McGuire Air Force Base, and then we had another week of training out in--not McChord--might have been McChord--out in the Seattle area. Then, I left on May 26, 2010, landed in Kabul on May 28, 2010, and started definitely the most grueling year of my life. Afghanistan, it was hard. Again, I was dual-hatted because we were an air advisor wing. Did I tell you about Afghanistan before? Did we talk about this in the very beginning, or no? [Editor's Note: McChord Field merged with Fort Lewis to form Joint Base Lewis-McChord.]

SI: No.

SS: Afghanistan, I was at the 438th Air Expeditionary Wing, and we were air advisors to the Afghan Army Air Corps, and within a couple of months of it, it became its own air force. So, it went from being the Afghan Army Air Corps to the Afghan Air Force, similar to what we had back in the '40s. In World War II, it was the Army Air Corps, and then we became an Air Force. I was the advisor to the Afghan legal community. They are very fledging. Basically, they have a military justice program for their law community, and I say that because they had very few lawyers in their legal offices. My main counterpart was actually a lawyer, but his deputy, I

believe, had been a tank driver. I mean, he was an officer. They just drew from other parts of the service to fill these positions. So, they had lawyers and they had paralegals, and my job--an advisor is there to teach, advise, and assist.

I was based out of Kabul, at the International Airport. So, there's a military side to the airport, and then there's a civilian side, which is literally Kabul International Airport. They had a wing there, and they also had their headquarters there. So, I worked mainly with the headquarters JAGs--I call them JAGs--and paralegals, and then, every once in a while, I would work with the wing. There was an Army legal office on the other side of base that I would go to [a] couple times a week because although the Army had advisors, they didn't have them at the airport. Then, for a while, I went over to the hospital in another part of Kabul. That was really hard to do because you had to get a whole convoy together. I forget what happened to their advisor. So, I went over to the hospital because they had their own legal people over there, which going into that hospital was--oh God, it was just so tragic and horrifying to see because these are all Afghan military that had been wounded. Compared to our hospital on base, it was such a tragedy. That was at Kabul, and then they had wings at Shindand and Kandahar. Maybe once or twice a month--starting probably in the October timeframe--I would fly to those bases and work with their JAG communities because we didn't have the Skype setup or anything.

Then, I was also, like I said, the SJA for the wing. People would come to me for wills, powers of attorney, if they're spouse was having problems at home with, again, landlords. It's sad. People wanted to get divorced when they were there. People got divorce papers when they were there. We did have some disciplinary issues, so I worked with the commander on those things.

It was very grueling. It was seven days a week, and we got half a day on Fridays because Fridays are the Afghan day off. But it was twelve-hour days, seven days--well, other than Friday--seven days a week. You're in a combat zone. We were what they call inside the wire, and when you wanted to go outside the wire, which was outside of the compound--I lived on what we called the NATO side, the coalition forces side. We had dorms. I always think of them as like the trailer part of a tractor trailer. That's your room, basically. They have a door on it and a window, but they're all just these containers that are put together, rows of them, usually two stories high. We were lucky ours were enclosed, so you could walk inside, and then we had men's and women's showers and bathrooms. They were communal. I mean, nobody had a bathroom. [laughter] So, I think my container was probably seven by ten. I was lucky I didn't have to share it ever, most people did except for the commander and the senior enlisted advisor.

We had the U.S. Air Force offices, which were basically--we called them K-Spans. They're a corrugated building, no windows, just doors on either end. On the inside, it's just this big open space. They put plywood walls up because our mission was to work with the Afghans in their office. So, the one side of base is all the coalition forces, and we, the air advisor wing, were the only ones allowed on the Afghan side of base. We had a special pass because the coalition side, they're doing all different missions. Like I said, they had a whole mission over there, and that was all different NATO countries. There was a big berm that [separated]. We had a runway, not the international runway. We had a military runway, planes coming, going, helicopters coming

and going. The Belgians were the security. They were the guards for the NATO side of base, and we had no guards on our side--well, the Afghans. The Afghans guarded their base, but we were [a] completely organic unit. I mean, we didn't have any Security Forces. We didn't have any convoy drivers. We didn't have any dining facility. We just all would go back for lunch to the other side of base.

You either drove--we had some vehicles, some vans or Humvees or up-armored vehicles. Then, you'd just walk in the morning and then walk back at night. We always felt like the most dangerous part was there was a side road. So, you would come out of the coalition part, and you'd be on this dirt road. All there was was a chain-link fence, and there was the highway and Kabul and any terrorist up in the hills with a rocket or a mortar ... So, we would drive down this side road like maniacs because that's when we felt we were the most vulnerable because those were vans. They were like Volkswagen vans, I mean, no protection, no armor. We were armed every day; we carried our weapons every day. This was a combat zone, and there was no safe place.

Depending on what base I was at, there were more rocket attacks at Kandahar and Shindand. I mean, we had them at Kabul but not as many. [laughter] I remember I learned to play Angry Birds at three o'clock in the morning sitting in a bunker in Kandahar because we got rocketed. I was there working with my counterparts at Kandahar. They always had guest quarters, which was just an empty container. [laughter] You don't sleep in your uniform, but whenever I was away, I would just sleep in my PT clothes. The sirens went off, and you could hear the rockets and you'd jump up. I don't know, I probably threw on my shower shoes. The bunkers are right at the ends of the building. I ran out. Everybody's in their pajamas, shirts, t-shirts, shoes. For Kandahar, this was pretty much a daily occurrence or every couple of nights. Somebody had brought their iPad, and we're just sitting there and they're like, "Hey, Ma'am, do you want to play Angry Birds?" I'm like, "Yes. I don't know how." I'd heard of it; it was a big thing back then. I'm like, "Okay." So, I spent like the next hour and a half just playing Angry Birds because you had to wait for the rockets to stop raining down and wait for the all clear. Then, you just went back to bed. But several people had been killed at Kandahar with rocket attacks. It's very scary. You sort of make light of it when you're in the bunker because, knock on wood, you're safe. Sometimes, they [had] gotten killed coming out of the DFAC [dining facility] or hit driving trying to get to a bunker. Did you have a question, Shaun?

SI: Yes. I was just curious if your training before deploying covered any of this or what to look out for.

SS: Oh, yes.

SI: Did you feel like you were well trained when you got to Kabul?

SS: Yes, we went through what was called the Expeditionary Center, and we had like two weeks of classroom training, cultural training, language training, and then two weeks of combat training, which--other than my Army basic training--was the best training I ever had in the Air

Force. Weapons training, vehicle training, clearing a building, we called getting off the "X." Yes, it was really, really good training, and we all had it. Everybody had it. It didn't matter whether you were a lawyer, infantryman, pilot, doctor, chaplain, cook. You didn't go to Afghanistan unless you had this training because bullets don't discriminate and rockets don't discriminate. When you're in the combat zone, you're a fighter first. [It] doesn't matter what you do. That's why you're all armed, and you're all trained, and you all are qualified on your weapons because when the bullets start flying, you'd better be able to shoot.

Daily, like I said, you'd get up, go to your office. We had what were called ITs, interpreter-translators. Your IT would come to your office, and then you'd go and work with your Afghan counterparts. I worked with the legal office, the prosecutors and defense counsel, and the CID. Their offices were right in a row. So, I helped all of them. I worked with all of them. I would train the prosecutors and defense counsels on different methods, how to prepare a case, an opening, a closing, a direct exam, a cross exam. They worked together. I mean, it's a very different system than ours. They don't have innocent until proven guilty. They don't have any rules of evidence. It's really interesting. I remember we did have one court-martial that I attended, and it's a three-judge panel. I definitely have pictures; I may have video. The guy's sitting up there smoking a cigarette, it's getting to be lunchtime, and he's literally on his phone while the guy is testifying, and he's like, "Hold on a minute. Is this okay for lunch for you?" talking to us. [laughter] The Americans are like, "Oh my …" It was a circus. Anything can come in; it doesn't have to be authenticated.

Our Army has CID, Criminal Investigation Division. The Air Force has OSI, Office of Special Investigation, and the Navy has NCIS [Naval Criminal Investigative Service]. I would train them on investigation techniques, statement techniques. I remember I worked with [a] couple guys, and they came over and I taught them how to do finger printing. I enjoyed working with my counterparts. Most of them wore uniforms. They just didn't have what we had. Sometimes, they'd come in civilian clothes. Sometimes, they'd come in--and I forget what the Afghan men wear; it's very baggy, and I forget what the type of clothing is called. The officers always wore their camouflage uniforms.

One of the prosecutors came to me one time, because I would get them equipment that they needed, cameras, TVs, video cameras, even the SD cards, so they could take statements and they could review them and record them. One of the Afghan prosecutors came to me, and he wanted my help to get him a service weapon because they have them, they got issued. I was talking to him about it, and I'm like, "What do you mean you want a service weapon?" He's like, "Well, everybody else has a service weapon, and they won't issue me a service weapon." When I say they're tribal over there, they literally have tribes. He wasn't part of the tribe that pretty much everybody in the legal office was, and I forget whether it was Pashtun or what. I went to Colonel Amir Jan who was the SJA, and I said, "Is everybody in here carrying a service weapon?" He's like, "Yes. " Everybody's pulling up their shirt. Under the uniform, it's baggy. In the States, the only people that are armed--not just the States--outside of the combat zone, the only people that are armed are the Security Forces. So, I didn't realize that in Afghanistan--it's a war zone--

everybody there is armed, all the military. They're all carrying their service weapons, which was a bit shocking to me. I mean, I'm carrying my weapon, but I'm there.

That became important later on after the massacre, because when the U.S. was investigating, they kept saying that there're fourteen Afghans in that room and they said none of them were armed. My Afghan CID counterparts took statements from the Afghans in the room, from several of them, and at least two of them admitted, that day, that they had their weapons on them. But several days later, when they were interviewed by the Americans, they all claimed they weren't armed, and that's just crap. [Editor's Note: On April 27, 2011, Col. Ahmed Gul, an Afghan air force officer, entered the Afghan Command and Control Center in the Afghanistan air force headquarters, North Kabul International Airport, and shot and killed eight U.S. Air Force Airmen and one civilian contractor. Ahmed Gul died of wounds sustained in the incident.]

Anyway, so, I would go with my interpreter, and we'd go and go over what they were working on, if they'd given out any discipline, working with the other commanders. They would talk about what they needed. It was very interesting because we, the Americans, mainly, and other coalitions, had given them everything, and my counterpart, Colonel Amir Jan, [a] very smart man--these are not stupid people at all--used his computer as a paperweight. He still had the cover on it, the plastic. I always said Afghanistan is where *The Flintstones* meet *The Jetsons*. Are you familiar with either of these, Maria? [laughter] Okay. We're *The Jetsons*, and they are *The Flintstones*. We go by a different calendar. I was there in 2010-2011, and their calendar was 1389. They're on a lunar calendar. Giving them electronics when they don't even know how to write was ridiculous. Seventy percent of the Afghan population is illiterate. The people I worked with were not, but they were still using pen and paper. Why are we giving them computers? I had an SJA at Kandahar, a young captain, who wanted a printer. He wanted me to get him a printer. I'm like, "Why do you want a printer?" [He said], "Everybody down the hall has printers." I wasn't being facetious, while I was talking to him about his computer, I said, "You don't use your computer." He didn't even really understand how to turn his computer on. I said, "What you want actually is a copier," because he wanted to make copies of stuff. I said, "I can get you a copier." He said, "I don't want a copier." This is all through the interpreter. He was a very traditional Afghan. One, he was younger. Colonel Amir Jan was my age. In my main office, I was the only woman, pretty much everywhere I went, and I never had any problem as a woman. Some of the younger females did have problems with the Afghans. I don't think I did. I was fifty years old when I went there. I was always treated very respectfully, but this young captain at Kandahar was not particularly female friendly. He was very insistent. He wanted a printer, and I was working through my interpreter trying to explain to him why he wanted a copier versus a printer. He literally did not know how to turn his computer on, let alone what to do with it or how it would work with a printer. It was a very frustrating conversation because he was doing everything with paper. I'm like, "Well, that's fine. We can do everything with paper, and then you can make copies of it." But if one Afghan had something, all the other Afghans wanted it. So, if one of them had a digital camera, everybody wanted a digital camera, if one of them had a TV for a specific purpose. This guy, everybody else had printers, he wanted a printer, having no idea what it did or how to use it. [laughter] So, I just always felt that we, the Americans, the military, were coming in, and instead of trying to

work with the Afghans within their culture, we were trying to impose our culture on them. I thought it then, and I think it now. I think we should pull out, a hundred percent. Clearly, we did not learn from what happened with the Russians. [Editor's Note: Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and withdrew in defeat in 1989.]

Like I said, there is a difference between intelligence and knowledge, and I think the Afghan people are very intelligent. They're just not knowledgeable because they haven't been taught it. If you don't teach somebody how to use a computer, it doesn't make them stupid; it means they don't have the knowledge. I found most of my counterparts to be very intelligent, from the young enlisted to the senior [members]. I mean, they all had smart phones. They knew how to use them.

It was very interesting. I would go out on a convoy to go someplace, and I have pictures of it. You would see a person riding on sacks of food on a donkey cart, down the main thoroughfare with trucks and cars and motorcycles and Humvees and donkey carts, riding on sacks of food and fruit and stuff, with his donkey, talking on his cell phone. That's how this country was. We were trying to institute a pay system, where we would give them a debit card and they could go get their money from a money machine rather than the pay system they had, which was like what we used to have, a paymaster that would pay them cash. This was great, right? Well, not when the vast majority of them are illiterate and they don't know how to use a money machine because they can't read the numbers and they don't know how to put a decimal point in. Here we were building these buildings for them, putting in all these electronics, I'm telling you, when the lightbulbs burned out, these buildings were going to stay dark. I was like, "Man, I don't think we're teaching them the right things," because once we're gone, yes.

I felt like I did some good over there. I would fly around. There were a couple women, U.S. females, that had been inappropriately touched or sexually assaulted, and I would go either to that base to help their legal offices work through interviewing the victim, the suspects, things like that. That's the place where I, in all my years, found the most sexual discrimination in the Air Force, in the combat zone. Maybe it isn't surprising, because we treat our women in combat zones like they need to be taken care of instead of treating them like fellow airmen.

MM: What would you want the military to do in Afghanistan that you think would be more helpful? What strategy should they do instead of bringing in technology? What would you rather them do?

SS: I would rather them work with the Afghans with what they have. It's like taking someone who's in kindergarten and putting them in a graduate class. It's not because they're not intelligent people, but you started your education in kindergarten and then you went through elementary school. You didn't start in first grade, and then they take you right to graduate school. So, I think they should work with the Afghans starting at the beginning. You just don't plop down thousands of dollars' worth of computers and say, "Okay, here you go," turn it on for them and say, "Here's your PowerPoint program. Here's your Excel spreadsheet." You give it to them, but you don't train them with it. So, if you're going to give it to them, send in people to train them on

it. Like I said, a lot of these people can't read. They can't write. The higher ups can, but your young enlisted troops, they literally don't know how to read and write. They know enough, literally, to use a smart phone. I don't think we should come in there and impose--Kabul is the largest city in Afghanistan, but it is not a western city at all. They don't have an electrical grid in their country. It runs off of generator power. It's a country that will never know a landline phone system, which I always find so interesting. They went from no phones to cell phones. There's no phone system there. Like I said, there's no electrical grid. Everything on that base ran on generator.

There is immense, immense corruption. I've been out of there ten years. I got there May 28th, and I got home May 28, 2011, so exactly a year. I spent two weeks out of country on what's called your R&R [rest and relaxation]. I didn't get out into greater Afghanistan to walk around, but working with the Afghans, working with the NATO countries, at least ten years ago--and I don't imagine it's any different--the corruption is just off the charts. There's what is actual corruption there, and then there's what is just a way of life, which we would think as corruption or nepotism, which is not really corruption to them. For example, in our military, you get promoted based on your job and your performance reports. There, if you're the son of a general, you're going to get a good job and get promoted. That's not corruption. They have nepotism there, and that's okay. Now, to us, that's corruption, and you don't do it and you get in trouble. What is corruption is stealing jet fuel. We used to take our water bottles and slice them, or cut the bottoms off, because they would take the water bottles and steal fuel. I mean, that's just one minor thing. These aircraft would land and they'd bring out caskets, not probably so much in Kabul, but sometimes you didn't know if those caskets were filled with bodies, drugs, guns, maybe all three.

I'll send you the link. We just did an article for the tenth anniversary of the massacre on Tuesday; it was in military.com. What happened with the massacre, there's a debate, but those of us that were there, it'd been going on for a while, problems in what's called our ACCC, Air Command and Control Center, but from on high. I mean, I'm talking like presidential level on down, "Stop the corruption in the Afghan Air Force," because what they were doing was using the Afghan Air Force for all these nefarious purposes, drug running, gun running, people being thrown off planes, so paying passengers, and I'm not talking military, like civilians with their goats and their chickens, and I'm being serious. They would literally throw people off while it was on the ground; somebody would come up with money and they would throw a legitimate passenger, a military person, off the plane or the helicopter and let people on with goats and chickens. These were Afghan crews. Sometimes, our people were on it, and that's what the whole court-martial was about.

There was also a law that had been put in place that we would not deal with any former warlord who was involved in drug dealing. Well, it so happened that the vice president of Afghanistan at the time was a former drug lord. At Kabul, our commander said, "We're going to put a stop to this stuff. It's just crazy." At one point, he had what was called a standdown, and he refused to provide any fuel for any of the aircraft. We also had in our wing what was called the presidential squadron, so this was the squadron that flew Karzai, President Karzai, and all the ministers, all

the big muckety-mucks around Afghanistan. That standdown affected everybody. What the ACCC was supposed to do, it's a national level command and control center. Every military flight is supposed to go out of there, who's on it, where it's going, when it's taking off, where it's going to land, a passenger list, a manifest, what's on it. What was happening is this would happen, and then, literally, somebody would call on a cell phone and say, "We're changing that," and it would get changed. [Editor's Note: Hamid Karzai was the first elected president of Afghanistan who served in the position from 2001 to 2014. From 2009 to 2014, Mohammad Qasim Fahim served as the vice president of Afghanistan.]

The commander, like I said, stuff came from on high, we're changing the ACCC, and a lot of it is classified. There was stuff I didn't know, for sure, but he did the standdown, refused to give the Afghans any fuel all over the country. I think it only lasted for like a day, but it made an impact. Then, a new directive came down about how the ACCC was going to be run, and a lot of these corrupt people were going to lose a lot of money, because they weren't going to be running the aircraft like a charter airline.

His name was Ahmed Gul; he was a colonel in the Afghan Air Force. It was traced back that he was paid 250,000 dollars at some point prior to the massacre. The night before the massacre, we had had a staff meeting and I had been away. I had come back like maybe a week before. I'd been away for like three weeks doing different training, because they had just overturned "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and in my U.S. Air Force hat, I had to go to the different bases and brief the airmen and the leadership on how this was all going to work. Then, at two different bases, there was sexual assaults reported on female airmen by Afghans. So, I went to work with my counterparts on doing the investigation, and I got back--the massacre happened on a Wednesday--and I got back probably the Thursday or Friday before. [Editor's Note: "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT) refers to the former U.S. policy (1993-2011) regarding the service of homosexuals in the military. In 2011, during the Barack Obama Administration, DADT was formally repealed, allowing gay and lesbian service members to serve openly in the armed forces.]

Things were very tense, and because of these assaults--that didn't happen on our base--at the staff meeting the night before, our wing commander was on his R&R, so our vice wing commander said that he had sent back a directive that none of the females were going to be able to walk to their advising duties alone. They had to have somebody walk with them. I was the senior female in the wing. He's like, "Any questions?" I said, "Yes," and I said, "Can a female walk a female?" He's like, "No, that's just a more target rich environment." I will say, his name is Bill Anderson--I love Bill Anderson, we're friends to this day--but I was very bothered by this new [policy that] women have to be escorted. So, that came down; it was going to start the next morning. After the meeting, he called myself and a woman named Mel Moon-Brown--she was a major--into his office about this new policy. I told him, "It's bad. It diminishes your females. We're all armed. We've all been through the same training, and the guys are really going to resent us." I said, "How am I supposed to go to Captain or Major so and so and say, 'You can't do your mission today, so I can do mine.'" We came up with a plan; I was going to put together a spreadsheet. There was only ten percent women and ninety percent men, but it was always going to be the same guys because some guys were always doing convoys. I said, "I'm going to

put together a spreadsheet, and when it's your turn to walk a female, you can't be saying, 'Oh, I'm on a convoy.'" I said, "I'm going to do a cover letter for your signature," and he's like, "Done." I said, "Okay." Then, Mel left.

I had put in for a convoy the next day. I was going to go to a local base with my interpreter and do some training for a place close by, a FOB, a forward operating base, that didn't have any JAG, and he said, "I see you're on a convoy tomorrow." He said, "Do you have to go? Is that mission essential?" and I said, "No, it's just training." He said, "Okay, because we're getting some intel that the roads are going to be black," meaning that they were expecting some attacks. I said, "Okay, I won't go. I don't need to put myself in danger or anybody else." So, we already knew that something was going to happen, didn't know what. That night, I called the sergeant that I was going to work with, and I said, "I can't come tomorrow." You never talk about why because these are open lines. I said, "I can't make it tomorrow, but do you still need my interpreter?" and he said, "Yes." So, I texted my interpreter, Biset, and I said, "I'm not going to be able to make it tomorrow. Can you just meet Sergeant Nestle?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Okay, I'll see you on Saturday," because Thursday was an Afghan holiday and Friday was their day off. Then, I finished up whatever I was doing, and I went back to my barracks.

I had done a PT test that day, and oh, my God, the next morning, I had just this terrible migraine. Instead of going in at 7:30, I waited and walked by myself, but I wasn't going to my advising duties. I guess I got in at like nine, and I was doing work in my office. I had had Biset contact Colonel Amir Jan to say I wasn't going to be there that day.

At like 10:15, my cell phone rings--it's Mel Moon-Brown--and I walked into the hallway because our cell phones notoriously dropped in my office, God knows why. Before that--after the staff meeting, after meeting with Colonel Anderson--I was the very last office. I had my own office because I was a JAG, if people needed to talk confidentially, but I shared a little plywood wall with a big office that had the advisors for the ACCC in it, Frank Bryant being one of them, a very good friend of mine. We got there about a week apart. So, he called me in to ask me a question about something, and so I answered him. We started talking. I was going home in three weeks, and I said, "You must be close." [He said], "Yes, a month." He was so excited. We were talking about his wife Janice and their little boy Sean, who had just turned one, and he was two weeks old when Frank deployed. We're just talking about that and about going home and what a relief it was and how excited he was. There was only a couple of people in the office. Yes, and that was that, left, went home. [Editor's Note: Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Frank D. Bryant, Jr. was killed in the massacre on April 27, 2011.]

Like I said, I got there about nine, and at about 10:15, my cell phone rings. I'm standing in the hallway, and I'm like, "Lieutenant Colonel Stenton, may I help you?" and it's Mel. She said, "Ma'am, where are you?" I said, "I'm in my office. What's up?" She said, "We're in the headquarters building, and we're taking gunfire." I looked down the hall, and the first sergeant was standing in the hallway. He was about twenty yards because it's just a long building with one hall and all the offices are off to the side. I yell to him, I said, "I've got Major Moon-Brown on the phone, and she's in the headquarters building and they're taking gunfire." I'll never forget,

he looked up, and he's like, "We're in the headquarters building." I'm like, "Mel, where are you?" and she must have heard him. She's like, "Afghan headquarters," and I could hear it. I could hear the gunfire. I just yelled at him, I'm like, "Afghan headquarters." The command section was the complete opposite end of the building. I just remember him taking off, and I have her on the phone. I'm like, "Tell me what's going on." She's like, "I don't know." She's like, "There's gunfire, and I hear it," and I said, "Okay, who's with you?" She told me who was with her, and she's in an inner office. I said, "Mel, I'm going to call you right back. I've got to put my body armor on."

We all had been told by Colonel Anderson, who'd only been there like two weeks, but he was a special ops guy, he was like, "There are no security measures here." He's like, "Everybody bring their body armor." We all had it back in our rooms, body armor, helmets. In two weeks, he set up a lot of security measures. So, I call her right back, and I'm like, "What's going on? I'm still hearing gunfire." I'm like, "Are you locked in the inner office?" She's like, "Yes." There were four Afghan girls who were taking English. They had finished officer candidate school. They were the only four females who had done well enough to be considered for pilot training, which is amazing for the Afghan Air Force because they're all males. Mel and I had lived with them. I had moved back to the other side of base; she was still in charge of them. She said, "The girls are outside. They're being shot at." She's like, "I can't get to them." She said, "They can't even speak English." They were terrified. She told me where they were. We had three of these K-Spans, and they were between them. I said, "I'll call them," and I said, "You turn your phone on silent. I'll call you back." I grabbed somebody who spoke Dari, and I got the girls on the phone and they are petrified. At this point, I mean, literally, it's probably been a minute and a half, if that. Everybody's in fight mode. I mean, people in the building are getting their weapons locked and loaded, getting their body armor on, calls are going out. Lisa is on the phone. She speaks Dari, and she's asking where they are. They're at the other end of the building where I am, in this little courtyard area, but they can't get into the other buildings. Everybody's locked down. Nobody's opening any door, which they shouldn't.

I run to the front of the building. These doors open out, and if you let go of them, they lock--we had a keypad lock--they lock automatically. I mean, I had my weapon. It was probably the most scared I've ever been in my whole life because we think we're under a full-scale attack. Everybody's standing there. I'm like, "I know where they are. We have to let them in." I open the door, but I can't see them. I'm like, "Hold this door open." Everybody was like, "Don't go out there." I really am thinking, I'm like, "Oh my God, I'm about to die," but I'm like, "I can't leave them." They're in civilian clothes; they're unarmed. So, I hold on to the door as long as I can, I walk out, and somebody's holding it open, and people are crouched down with their weapons. I can see them. They're like fifty yards away, and I'm like, "Run! Run!" They come flying, and they run into the building. Of course, you find out hours later that it's a lone gunman and he's in this other building, but at the time, it was petrifying. Then, I get Mel back on the phone, and I tell her I had the girls. People are jumping out of windows. It's a two-story building. She answers the phone. I'm like, "What's going on?" She's like, "They're kicking at the doors. They're kicking at the doors." [Editor's Note: Sally Stenton is crying.]

SI: Do you want to take a break?

SS: No, that's okay. I said, "I'm going to hang up." I said, "Do what you've got to do." It was her, another U.S. major, her IT, her Afghan counterpart, I think another Afghan. I gave it a couple minutes, and I called her back. She didn't answer. It just rang and rang. I'm in the hallway. I think I'm down at Colonel Anderson's office. He's like, "Okay, what happened? Tell me what me what she said." I was telling him. I called her; she didn't answer. Then, my phone rings, and it's her. I'm like, "Where are you?" and she's like, "We're in the bunker." She said, "I couldn't answer." Thank God they were on the first floor. She's like, "We had to climb out the windows."

It's an hours-long ordeal. At one point, I remember the first sergeant saying to me, we're standing in the hallway, we're hearing it's three active shooters, a suicide bomber, and he said something to me like, "Ma'am, you walked to work alone today." I said, "I know," and he said, "Well, you know, there was an order in place." I said, "Well, that order was about going to advise," and I said, "I think it's OBE [overcome by events] right now." I had said to the colonel, the night before, I said, "Sir, nobody should be walking alone anywhere. It doesn't matter if you're a male or a female. We should all be going in pairs." I said, "If an Afghan wants to kill us, it doesn't matter if it's a male or female. They're just going to shoot us and drag our body away," which is actually pretty fortuitous, sadly.

As the day is going on, we're getting these reports. Well, first of all, we're trying to get a head count, because our wing is spread out. I mean, there's people in every building. There's literally people in aircraft, on the flight line. There's people in this place called Thunder Lab, which is where the Afghan male and female pilot trainees were, except the females are in our office. People are calling in from all over. We hear one person has a minor wound, and we're like, "Oh, thank God, thank God." Then, we hear we have one of our guys with a head wound. Then, we hear we have one KIA, and we think it's Frank. It just goes on like that. Then, it's three. Then, at one point, Colonel Anderson says, "Sally, I want you …" Oh, a friend of mine was--his name was Colonel Werchen. He worked on the NATO side of base. He was the vice commander for the whole base. I think, at that point, the Romanians were in charge. It was a Romanian commander. He called me, and he said, "We're getting a report of five KIA." I'm like, "What?" We're still trying to get the head count. So, he said, "Call Andrew Gear," who was our Security Force advisor. So, I call Andrew on his cell phone, and I said, "Andrew, it's Lieutenant Colonel Stenton." I said, "Colonel Werchen just called, and he said we have a report of five KIA." He said, "That's right." He said, "I'm over at the French …" we had a French hospital, run by the French, a full hospital on the other side of base. He said, "We have a wounded here at the hospital." I said, "Well then, how do you know there's five?" I was getting mad at him. I'm like, "Well, if you're at the hospital, how do you know there's five KIA?" He said, "Ma'am, I counted the bodies." I'm like, "Okay." I called Colonel Werchen back, and I said, "G, I just talked …" that was his call sign, I'm like, "G, I just talked to Captain Gear, and he has confirmed five KIA in the room and one at the hospital," because he said she was in surgery. It ended up being nine KIA.

At one point, Colonel Anderson, he's like, "Sally, I want you to call all these people and find out how many they have and who hasn't reported in," because every unit has a designated person that gets the head count. I got everybody, and the people I talked to, the civilian contractors said, "We haven't heard from Jim McLaughlin. We're trying to get him, and Dave from Thunder Lab." I don't know how we got Frank Bryant's name, but we knew Frank, and then they were like, "Well, we haven't heard from Major Brodeur. We're trying to get a hold of Major Brodeur." They were the last two. [Editor's Note: Retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel James McLaughlin, Jr. was serving as a civilian contractor when he was killed in the massacre on April 27, 2011. Air Force Major David L. Brodeur was also killed in the massacre.]

The U.S. wing building, because that was the command, we were the last ones evacuated, and that was probably not until about six that night. In the interim, I mean, there was times that people had to go out and get certain equipment. They had to leave the building. Again, for several hours, we had no idea. It took what I call our first responders, our two Security Forces advisors and people they had grabbed that are other advisors to go to the building, it took them an hour to get in. They had found five bodies. They found Tara, Master Sergeant Tara Jacobs Brown, and she was still alive at that point. They got her out of the building. There was an Afghan clinic sort of caddy corner, and they had taken her there. Nate's body was already there. He was killed in a firefight in the hallway. Eight were killed in the room, and Nate was killed outside the room. Apparently, the shooter had come outside. There was a firefight in the hall. He had run into the office where I worked out of--he ran into the legal office--engaged in a firefight. The Afghan quick reaction force was in front of the building shooting into the building. He was shooting out of the building, yelling something like, "All good Afghans put down your weapons." There was literally a bullet hole in the chair that I sat in every day, which I would not have been sitting in at that point, I guarantee you. [Editor's Note: Air Force Master Sergeant Tara Brown was killed in the April 27, 2011 massacre. Air Force Captain Nathan J. Nylander was also killed in the massacre.]

Then, I don't know if it was before or after he came out of the legal office, but there was a second firefight. Nate ended up being shot in both legs, and his weapon jammed. He ended up getting shot in the head and basically fell--there was two glass doors, and he basically fell out of the building, or crawled out, and one of our guys was there at the back door, pulled him out, and took him to the Afghan clinic. He was pretty much DOA [dead on arrival]. It wasn't until our guys--after they had taken Tara to the hospital, which they couldn't get an ambulance because nobody was allowed on that side of base but us. They ended up having, basically, to put her in an armored vehicle and driving her down the flight line. Having no windows in our building--I mean, it was a military operation, it wasn't chaos, it wasn't anything like that--it was just a complete unknown.

At one point, probably around one in the afternoon, my Afghan counterparts, my CID guys--all of my guys, I asked them later what they did, and they had all jumped out of the windows--they called me and they asked me if I could come and help them take the statements from the Afghans in the room. "Colonel Anderson," I said, "My Afghan counterparts want me to come over," and he said--the first time that day--he said, "Sally, I'm not letting my females out of the building."

You know what? He's in command. I'm certainly not going to argue with him then and there. Years later, we talked about; he didn't even remember saying it, but he does remember about he wasn't going to let his females go anywhere. Years after the fact, he's like, "It was a mistake." He said, "I should have let you go." I also asked him when we realized it wasn't a suicide bomber. It wasn't an all-out attack. We had to go get the bodies, and I asked him, I said, "Can I be one of the people to go get the bodies?" By now, we knew who everybody was--well, actually, that's not true. We knew there were nine bodies. Tara was out of the room and Nathan was out of the room, and I said, "I have no desire to see some of my good friends or any of these advisors dead." I said, "But I've seen dead bodies before." I said, "You're going to ask some of these young guys, and I just don't want to have to put them through that." He said, "Sally, nope. I'm not letting you or any of the females deal with this," which, again, I'm so sorry he didn't because, one, we were all in really good shape and we could've handled it. But a couple of these young airmen--and actually, there was one Navy guy--the scars of seeing those bodies, but it was a command decision and he made it and I'm not going to question it. I mean, it left everybody scarred, to say the least.

It was, needless to say, the worst day in my life, and something I obviously still have a hard time with. It ended up being nine total. There has been a number of investigations over the years. None of them have really--and anybody who was there or any of the family's opinion have--come up with the truth. We're still trying to get it, because all of them said it was basically a lone crazed shooter. The evidence says it was one person doing the shooting, but it was pre-planned and well executed and a coverup, because Gul, this colonel, ended up going upstairs in the building to a general's office. This guy, we knew, was literally the most corrupt Afghan in the Afghan Air Force. The quick reaction force went up into that room. He was wounded twice. I don't think he would've died, but he was seriously wounded. He was shot in the wrist. He was shot in the side. He was bleeding profusely, and he was literally sitting on a couch. He had his weapon, he had Frank Bryant's weapon. The Afghan QRF disarmed him and then shot him with his weapon and with Frank Bryant's weapon, which is literally a war crime. You cannot disarm somebody and then murder them, but that's what they did. The reports that have come out have all said, "You know, we know about all this corruption and this 250,000 dollars, but we can't connect it to why he shot them." It's just very, very disturbing, to put it mildly. We're still trying to get another investigation. That was horrible.

Then, that night, at like three in the morning, we had a rocket attack. It was later that night that I actually found out there was one person from Kandahar that was killed, and it turned out that it was my friend Charles, who--whenever I was at Kandahar--oh, hold on one second, I have to plug my computer in--Kandahar, the visiting officer's quarters shared a common wall with Charles Ransom. He was from Langley as well. We used to always joke because I'm a big Eagles fan and he's a big Dallas Cowboys fan, so we used to always get into it. We had a lot in common, like I said, both from Langley, East Coast. He was a great guy. I found out that night, when their first sergeant came to Kabul, I was talking to him and I'm like, "Shirt, I'm so sorry. I know you lost one of your guys today." He's like, "Ma'am, don't you know who it is?" I said, "No, I didn't get the name," and he's like, "It's Major Ransom." So, it just was like, "Wow, the

hits just keep on coming." [Editor's Note: Air Force Major Charles A. Ransom was killed in the massacre on April 27, 2011.]

We did the dignified transfer of remains the next day. Again, I had asked Colonel Anderson, I said, "The females would like to carry Tara's casket." She was the only enlisted and the only female in the room that day. He's like, "Have you ever carried a casket before?" I said, "No, because women don't get to be pallbearers." He's like, "Well, I don't know if you guys can do it. It's heavy," although these are caskets, but they're aluminum. I didn't say, "I'm going to put my foot down," or anything. I said, "Sir, we will be able to carry Tara." There had been several dignified transfers of remains through Kabul, because from all over the country, whenever a plane would land and a casket was coming out, everybody stopped, but this was from our base. Man, that day, hundreds--it was like everybody on base stopped what they were doing, came out. There was no shortage. The civilian contractors all carried Jim McLaughlin, and then, everybody from the wing, there was plenty of pallbearers. He ended up letting--there was four females, including myself, and then he had four guys for Tara. I'll tell you, it was a great honor and one that I never want to have again, to be able to carry her casket. It's like you see on TV. They all have the flags on them, you get in that plane, and you see these caskets. It's an awful sight.

That was a Wednesday, and I think we went back to the other side of base, back to advising, the following Monday. They cleaned up pretty quickly, but all the bullet holes were still there. They were still there when I left three weeks later. Then, needless to say, nobody walked anywhere alone, and we had what we called Guardian Angels, which was us. When I was advising, we wore our body armor and our helmets. Before, we just advised in our uniforms and carried our weapons with our magazines. Now, we were carrying them loaded. Actually, we had our magazines in that day, but we didn't have a round in the chamber. Now, we had rounds in the chamber. The only thing was we had our weapon on safe, but body armor, helmets. When I was advising, another advisor was standing at the door with their rifles; we carried our rifle. So, we had two weapons. We had a 9mm and a rifle. Then, I'd finish my duties, and I would go be a Guardian Angel for them, so they could do their advising duties. I did that for three weeks. [Editor's Note: Guardian Angels refer to service members selected as security to safeguard against insider or green-on-blue attacks.]

In the interim, they were trying to do my next assignment, which, again, I didn't get the job that I wanted. I didn't get the location I wanted. I had been passed over, again, for colonel. The second discriminatory issue was the awards. Usually, you would get put in for a Bronze Star, and it seemed that the females were getting put in for what's called a Meritorious Service Medal. They were putting me in for a Meritorious Service Medal. I did the statistics. It turned out that seventy percent of the men were getting put in for Bronze Stars, which included like almost a hundred percent of the male lieutenant colonels and I think ten percent of the female lieutenant colonels. So, I contacted the general's exec, and I talked to him. I said, "I'm only doing this because I found out what I'm getting put in for, and I want to warn the general, as his JAG, that there's an issue here. I know that he is not a sexist, but I ran the numbers and it's giving the appearance of discrimination because, overall, seventy percent of his men are getting put in for

Bronze Stars and only thirty percent of his females. It looks like a problem. I'm not saying that these guys don't deserve it, but if they deserve a Bronze Star, I deserve a Bronze Star." At first, he was like, "Oh, the general's too busy. He can't talk to you, blah, blah, blah. We're getting ready to go on a TDY," because the general didn't live with us. He lived at Camp Eggers because he was dual-hatted.

A half an hour later, I got a call from the general. This happened before the massacre, and he was livid with me. He's like, "If you're trying to get me to put you in for a Bronze Star, this is not the way to go about it, threatening to say that I'm discriminating." I'm like, "Sir, I'm your JAG. I know that you're not discriminating. I don't think you're a sexist in the least. You've always been great with all of your troops." I said, "I'm your JAG. I'm trying to protect you," and I said, "I've done the numbers. I've looked at them, and during your tour, this is what's happened." He's like, "I want you to show me proof." I said, "Fine, I'll send you the list," and I did.

Then, like two days later or maybe a week later, they said, "We're putting you in for a Bronze Star and give us bullet points for what we're going to base your award on." That was Tuesday the 26th, and I was supposed to have it in Wednesday the 27th of April. Needless to say, that didn't happen. It was a week later, and his exec called and said, "Look, we all know what happened, we're all very sorry about it, but I need those bullet points." I'm like, "Okay." I said, "I'll give them to you in a couple days." First of all, I'm not supposed to do that. You're not supposed to write your own bullet points. I was in no frame of mind. One, I know what to write on my performance report. You do a draft for your supervisor, and they wordsmith it. They've known what you've done. I'm like, "I have no idea what to put on a Bronze Star." So, I wrote some stuff up, including some stuff that had happened during the massacre, and they pretty much took what I said word for word. It was ridiculous. It was a horrible, horrible package, and not shockingly, it got denied. Well, it got downgraded to an MSM, and I appealed it. It goes to a five-person panel, and you need three of five to get it. I got two, and it was so badly done that one person said they didn't even think I should get an MSM for my year in Afghanistan, which tells you I think how angry they were at me and how little they wanted me to get it. I know what I did, and those that served with me know what I did, including Bill Anderson, who hadn't put the package in. He hadn't even been the one who put me in for the medal.

When I came home, I was just not in a very good place at all, and I was very bitter they were going to send me to Cyber Command at Fort Meade in Maryland. When I got home, I put in my retirement papers. You can put it in for a year out. That's what I did. That was June of '11. In July of '11, my uncle died, in September of '11, my aunt died, and then February 14, 2012, my mom died. By the time I did my retirement ceremony, which I did at the [Military] Women's Memorial at the entrance of Arlington [National Cemetery], as proud as I am of my service, I was pretty bitter at that point. I've gotten less bitter as time has gone on. My last year in the Air Force was not a particularly happy one or good one, but I spent it at Langley.

I don't remember a lot of that year, honestly. I spent a lot of time getting some mental health help and trying to work through my grief. My last two years were really tough. It was a sad and

bitter ending to my really, really great career. Like I said, as time has gone on, I feel a lot better about it. Those last two years were very difficult, and I was very disappointed in my Staff Judge Advocate. He didn't back me. He went on to become the Judge Advocate of the Air Force, and we are still friends. I went to his retirement, although it's ironic because when he was being vetted to be the Judge Advocate General--you have to go through a whole big thing--some people put some complaints in about him for sexual discrimination, nothing like harassment or anything like that. The deputy, a guy named Gordo Hammock, he and his wife and I and kids are great friends to this day. He had asked me at one point, and he said, "Were you one of the ones?" I said, "No, I never complained." I'm like, "It is what it is." But I just thought it was ironic. I mean, he still did become the Judge Advocate General, but I'm sure they were very uncomfortable months for him. Like I said, I like General Burne. He and his wife are lovely people. I consider them friends. We're still in touch. But he very much disappointed me in my last year in the Air Force, in that he didn't fight harder for me to get a better assignment.

It worked out. Because of my time in the Army Guard, way, way back in the '80s, I was a lieutenant colonel over twenty-four years for pay purposes, and at that point, you don't get any more raises. You get a cost-of-living raise, but I wasn't going to get any more raises because I think it's at the twenty-two-year point you cap, you max out for pay purposes. For me, at that point, it was all about the job or the location or it was all about fun because at that point I'm like, "Hey, I just want to really enjoy what I'm doing." I was not going to enjoy Cyber Command at all. [laughter] Yes, I am not a tech person. That's how I ended my illustrious career, and it was illustrious.

That's why, because of what happened with the massacre and my survivor's guilt, I felt for a very long time, one, I should have been there. It's a 365-day deployment, and I'd been there eleven months. I'd been in the Air Force over twenty years, and you're an airman. You're in the combat zone. This is your primary duty, to protect and defend your fellow airmen. The one day in my entire Air Force career I needed to be some place was that day, and I wasn't there. I would have been in the room literally across the hall from the ACCC, and I would have likely had another American with me, another male, unless they had just dropped me off. I don't know what I could have done for anybody in that room, but Nate Nylander might still be alive today if I had been in the place where I was supposed to be, or I could have been killed just like them. I'm single, divorced, no children. My cats would be well taken care of. I just was like, "If any one of them could have lived instead of me, it's like, why?" I was like, "Why am I here and not one of them?"

It wasn't until I started practicing veterans law and being able to help fellow veterans get what I think they are very justly entitled to for their service to our country--it doesn't matter if they spent one day in a combat zone or never made it out of basic training, because something that happened to you then while they were serving our country that they should be compensated for--I think maybe that's why I was spared, so that I can go on and help others who need it. That's why I do what I do. That's why it's my passion because I couldn't help my friends, so I want to help others. I want to help veterans. I don't want to end this crying. [laughter] But that's my oral history. Please ask me questions. [laughter]

SI: A lot of folks that I have interviewed have survivor's guilt. It sounds like you have maintained relationships with other people from that deployment.

SS: Yes. I am very, very good friends with many of the families, and I'm still friends with people from the deployment. In fact, my co-writer on the article that I'll send you, Forrest Marion, was our historian at the time that it happened. He's still a very good friend. Yes, I still have several good friends from that deployment, which is nice. It's nice. Maria, please ask me a question. [laughter] Ask me to describe some reference that I made from way last century, if you have any questions.

MM: Sometimes, you will say like DOA or NIT or something, and I will just be, "Okay, what is that?" So, I will Google it as we talk.

SS: Oh, DOA is dead on arrival.

MM: Right, yes, I realized that after.

SS: Did I use any other acronyms? Oh, I told you ACCC stands for Air Command and Control Center.

MM: Yes, you said something about KIA.

SS: Killed in action.

MM: Okay.

SS: WIA is wounded in action, and KIA is killed in action.

MM: Okay.

SS: Any other ones?

MM: I do not think so.

SI: Yes, I was curious about something you mentioned a while back.

SS: Okay.

SI: You mentioned, I think when you were in Turkey or Germany or Langley, about operational law. You were in operational law.

SS: Yes, I was at Langley.

SI: Yes. What is operational law?

SS: It's really a conglomeration of things. It's so hard to describe. Operations law is wherever the Air Force is operating in like a deployment zone, a combat zone. It can involve contracts law. It can involve space law. It can involve environmental law. It's really a conglomeration. When you're not in the combat zone and you're doing exercises, so you go into an exercise, or in the combat zone, and there's an issue with the rules of engagement, you have to go to the JAG and then say, "Okay, we want to take out this school." I hate to use that it's part of an operation, but operations law is going to encompass that because--is it justified? Is it during the day? Are there children in it? Is the target Bin Laden and there's a hundred kids in that school? Is that target a big enough target, and this is the only time we're going to see him in ten years? Can we sacrifice a hundred kids to get Bin Laden? That's a rules of engagement question. Then, operations law, contract issues with the builder of the tank or the aircraft and are they fulfilling their contracts? We have to go do these missions and you were supposed to supply us with X-Y-Z part for our Humvees and you didn't. Now, is the contract null and void? Do we go to this other bidder? What happens now? Our troops are down range, and the armor plating is failing. That might come under operations law. It's sort of hard to explain because it's nothing that you would have in the civilian community. It really does combine a whole lot of other laws. Environmentally, you're out in these locations in these other countries, and you might have to drop a tank load of oil or fuel or a bomb somewhere and it's going to do damage to the environment. Is this covered, or are you going to have to pay reparations? Some of it is easy, but some of it--I'm not an environmental law lawyer, I'm not a contracts lawyer. Hopefully, you have somebody you can reach back to, or I'm back at Langley and I'm ACC and somebody from a different base, their team is somewhere in a deployed location, a remote location and they have this issue that falls under operations law and they send it up, and we're the mack daddy. I'm like, "Okay, I'd better go talk to my environmental people." [laughter]

SI: Well, can you give us an overview of your civilian law career over the last decade or so?

SS: Sure. When I got out, I didn't practice law right away. As I said, I taught military law at Rutgers for a few semesters, and then I taught criminal procedure one semester. I used my GI Bill and I went to Temple and got an LLM, which is a master's of law, in trial advocacy because, one, I consider myself a litigator. I like the courtroom, but I think any time you are going in front of anybody, it's like going in front of a jury or a judge, it's litigating. If I have to speak before an officer panel, if I have to speak before an administrative law judge, at the Board of Veterans Appeals, I figure I need those litigator skills. When I first got out, like I said, for probably a year, I didn't really do much. [laughter] I was fortunate in that I had a lot of leave built up and they pay you for that time and I had my retirement, so I was fortunate in that I didn't need to go back to work right away. I think I told you I'm part owner of a winery and a vineyard out in Arizona, and I went and managed the wine-tasting room. Then, I became an adjunct, which paid a little bit. I put in for my disability compensation, and I got a certain rating. I had my retirement pay, my adjunct pay, and then my disability compensation.

Then, I got involved with the New Jersey State Bar Association, and they had a section called Military Law and Veterans' Affairs Section. Through them, I met a gentleman named Bob Ebberup, and he has a small firm in Toms River, which is about fifty-five miles from where I live. I actually had a gentleman named Chris D'Alessandro. [laughter] Have you heard from him yet, Maria? Did he answer the email, or no?

MM: No, he did not.

SS: Well, Chris in the National Guard, and he wanted to discuss an issue with me. I wanted to help him out. I talked to Bob, and I just needed some space and I don't have any place in my house. He said yes, I can be what's called of counsel, meaning that he'll pay my malpractice insurance, I can use his office, and we have an agreement with any money that I bring in or get paid or whatever, we worked it out. Chris was in law school at the time. That's how I ended up getting with Bob.

I had been to this symposium about veterans law, and I thought, "Wow, I'd like to do that." I started studying it, and I got what's called accredited. So, you have to be an accredited attorney to represent veterans. I worked with a woman named Nancy, she's a partner in a firm in New York. I have a couple of friends who are veterans who were putting in claims, and I helped them.

To do a claim for veterans, it's a process. The first thing you do is you put in your initial claim, and nobody can get paid for that. I tell veterans all the time, "If somebody tries to charge you for that, it's illegal." It wasn't until probably fifteen, twenty years ago that lawyers could even be involved with this claims process or get paid. If you do your initial claim and you're happy with the result, great, but if you're not, if you don't think they gave you the proper rating, or if they denied you what's called service connection, which is how you can get your rating, then you can come to me, as an accredited veteran's attorney, and I will appeal it. There's several different ways you can appeal it, but long story short, I appeal it. If we get service connection and you get a rating or an increase in rating, I get, based on my fee agreement with you, representation agreement, the minimum amount, by law, by statute, is twenty percent. I could charge more, but I don't. I take the statutory minimum. Then, I get twenty percent of the past-due benefit and they get eighty percent, and they get everything going forward. As an example, if you put a claim in 2015--that's your initial claim--and they denied you everything, and I got involved. In 2021, I got you a disability rating of fifty percent, and, say, fifty percent is two thousand dollars a month--I'm just making that up. Two thousand dollars a month is twenty-four thousand a year. Twenty-four thousand times six years--I don't do public math--that's a lot of money. Let's just say, twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred, 120. Let's just round it to 150,000 dollars. You'd be entitled to 150,000 in past-due compensation. Twenty percent of 150 is thirty thousand dollars. I'd get thirty thousand, you'd get 120,000, and then you get that two thousand a month going forward. Now, if it were only that simple, but that's the gist of it.

Then, if you wanted to go back and put in for an increase, say, you have a back problem and they gave you twenty percent for your back, but over the years, your back has worsened, you've had

to get surgeries, you can put in for an increase. Maybe now they're going to make your back fifty percent. Good. If they turn you down, then you can come back to me. Once I'm your attorney, I can put you in for an increase, and if they grant you an increase, again, I don't get any money for that. It has to be on an appealed issue. That's what I do.

As long as it's appealed to any level and we get a granted decision and there's compensation awarded, I get twenty percent. You could put in for hearing loss, which the biggest claim overall that the VA gets is for hearing loss, and they deny it. They say it's not service connected, and I appeal it. They say, "Yes, your bilateral hearing loss is service connected, and it's a zero percent rating." I could have worked on it for three years, five years--and this is good for the veteran because now if they need hearing aids, their hearing is covered, their hearing aids are covered, any issue with their hearing, the VA will cover--but I get no money because they got no money. That's the way it goes. They are contingency fee cases, meaning my compensation is contingent on them winning and getting a monetary award.

I also do some other type of cases. When you get discharged from the military, you can get different types of discharges. The best one, of course, is an honorable, full honorable. There are other types of discharges. There is general under honorable conditions. There is under other than honorable conditions. Those are administrative. There are punitive discharges that you can only get if you are court-martialed and convicted. There's a bad conduct discharge or a dishonorable discharge--they're for enlisted--and then, for officers, you can get a dismissal. If you have any type of discharge other than a full honorable, there are going to be certain military benefits that you're not entitled to. If you are trying to get a discharge upgrade, I can represent you on that, and that is an hourly fee-based rate. I have a client right now who had an honorable discharge, but he had what's called a bad separation code. He wants to come back into the military, but based on his separation code, he can't. He needs a waiver. I'm representing him on putting together a package of character statements based on the regulations that say that the Secretary of the Army--because he wants to go back into the Army National Guard--the Secretary of the Army has to make a recommendation to the adjutant general of the state of the National Guard that he wants to go into. Then, the adjutant general of that state's National Guard makes the determination if he can get in.

Veterans law is my main practice, and then I do work with veterans on other types of issues and with veterans that want to upgrade their discharges, which can be critical because if you have a general other than honorable conditions, you lose your GI Bill benefits. They are worth thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars. If you were discharged under dishonorable conditions, you lose virtually all of your benefits and you may even lose your compensation benefits, so no GI Bill, no VA home loan, no compensation benefits. If you can get your discharge upgraded, it's worth a lot of money. That's what I do. I've been pretty successful, not a hundred percent, but I have a good batting average.

SI: Let us see, Maria, do you have any other questions for today?

MM: No, I do not have any other questions, and I have a class at four.

SS: Okay, yes.

SI: Okay.

SS: I can't believe it's been two hours and forty-five minutes.

MM: I know.

SS: Does this conclude our oral history? [laughter]

SI: Yes. We will end this session here. Maybe in a few years, we will come back and see what you have been doing, if veterans advocacy has changed. I am always interested in that aspect. Going back to the World War II period, we have interviewed people about veterans' affairs. Things change, but things do not seem to change that much, particularly in terms of the government's reticence to part with money.

SS: Well, I still appreciate the time you guys have spent with me.

SI: Oh, we appreciate it.

SS: This is probably the longest oral history you have ever done.

SI: No, no.

SS: Oh, really? Okay.

SI: It has been extremely interesting, and we appreciate your frankness. I think this helps us a lot in terms of, as we are moving forward, exploring new experiences in these more recent conflicts and the career military aspect as well.

SS: Well, good, thank you. Maria, I will keep in touch with you, and I will get Chris to get ahold of you.

MM: Yes, of course.

----------END OF TRANSCRIPT----------

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