

WOMEN IN MILITARY SERVICE FOR AMERICA MEMORIAL FOUNDATION, INC.

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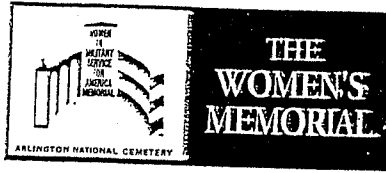
200 N. Glebe Rd., Suite 400, Arlington, VA 22203-3728

SAYRA SALAS SANCHEZ  
OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM



Interviewed by Kate Scott on 14 September 2005 at the Women's Memorial Foundation Office on Columbia Pike in Arlington, Virginia for the Women's Memorial Oral History Program.

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*Intv # 818*

The Women's Memorial Oral History Release and Consent Form

Scayra Salas ("Interviewee") and Kate Scott ("Interviewer")  
each agree to participate in the Women in Military Service For America Memorial Foundation,  
Inc.'s ("Women's Memorial's") Oral History Project ("Project") under the following conditions.

I understand that the purpose of the Project is to create and collect audio- and visual-  
taped oral histories, and associated transcriptions, of American women military veterans  
(collectively, "Documentary Materials"). The Documentary Materials will serve as a record of  
American women veterans' military experiences, and will be used for scholarly, research and  
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I hereby grant to the Women's Memorial all right, title and interest in and to the  
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Interviewee Signature Scayra Salas Date 09/14/05  
Interviewer Signature Kate Scott Date 09/14/05

Accepted on behalf of the Women's Memorial by  
Kate Scott Date 9/14/05

Please use this revised form.

# Biographical Data Form

Intv # 818

To ensure inclusion in our National Registry of Service, this form must accompany each submission. Please use a separate form or additional sheet for service in more than one war.

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY

Veteran  Civilian  Sayra Sanchez  
first middle last maiden name  
(Salas)

Address [REDACTED]

City [REDACTED] State [REDACTED] ZIP [REDACTED]

Telephone [REDACTED] Email [REDACTED]

Place of Birth Lodi, CALIFORNIA Birth Date 11/30/82

Race/Ethnicity (optional) HISPANIC Male  Female

Branch of Service or Wartime Activity ARMY DEF

Battalion, Regiment, Division, Unit, Ship, etc. 3<sup>RD</sup> SFG (A)

Highest Rank SPC (P)

Enlisted  Drafted  Service dates 25 July 2000 to 25 July 2004

War(s) in which individual served DEF

Locations of military or civilian service FORT BRAGG N.C.

Was the veteran a prisoner-of-war? Yes  No

Did the veteran or civilian sustain combat or service-related injuries? Yes  No

Medals or special service awards. If so, please list (be as specific as possible):  
Joint Service Achievement Medal, Global war on terrorism medal (Service and expeditionary medals)

Are photographs included? Yes  No  (If yes, please complete the Photograph Log in this kit.)

Are manuscripts included? Yes  No  (If yes, please complete the Manuscript Data Sheet in this kit.)

Does the veteran or civilian have field maps Yes  No  or wartime-related home movies Yes  No   
that he or she would like to share with the Library of Congress? (If yes, we will contact you shortly.)

Interviewer (if applicable) Kate Scott

Partner organization affiliation (if any, i.e. AARP, etc.) Women's Memorial Foundation, Oral History Program

Please use reverse for additional biographical information.

# Women In Military Service For America Memorial Foundation, Inc.

PC=REC

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If you are registering yourself, a friend or veteran, please complete the entire registration form, top and bottom.  
# 398664 If you are donating only, please complete just the top portion of this form.

### Contribution Information

Name: Sayra Salas

Address: [REDACTED]

City: [REDACTED] State: [REDACTED] Zip: [REDACTED]

Day Phone: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ Eve: ( ) [REDACTED]

E-mail: [REDACTED]

### Donations

- I am contributing to the Memorial Fund  
\$5    \$10    \$25    \$100    Other: \_\_\_\_\_ \$ \_\_\_\_\_
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\_\_\_\_\_ name(s) at \$ \_\_\_\_\_ (\$25 suggested per name) \$ \_\_\_\_\_
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Expiration Date: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_  
Month    Year

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Computer Registration Data  New  Update

For women veterans, Active Duty, Reserve, Guard, Public Health Service, We Also Served and servicewomen living or deceased.

Please Print or Type All Information

Name: Sayra Salas

Address: [REDACTED] [Maiden Name in ( )]

City: [REDACTED] State: [REDACTED] Zip: [REDACTED]  
[If deceased, last known address and date of death.]

Day Phone: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ Eve: ( ) [REDACTED]

E-mail: [REDACTED]

Birthdate: 01 / 30 / 1982  
Month    Day    Year

Place of Birth: Lodi CA.  
City/State

Hometown: Lodi  
City/State

Highest Rank/Rating: E-4P

Service (circle one) USA USMC USN USAF USCG  
USPHS Guard Reserve Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Retired from military service     Nurse Corps

### Service Dates

Multiple entries for Active, Guard or Reserve Duty or breaks in service.

From: July 25 2000 to July 25 2004

From: \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

From: \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

Military Decorations: (2) ARCOMS

(1) JSAM (Joint Service Achievement Medal)

Global War on Terrorism Service Medal

Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary

Memorable Military Experience (Use additional paper if needed):

Photo taken in uniform enclosed (if available).  
The woman being registered is (indicate relationship):

3-24-05

Please return ENTIRE form.

# WOMEN IN MILITARY SERVICE FOR AMERICA

## Sayra Salas Sanchez



Member 598664

HIGHEST RANK: PFC

SERVICE: Army From Jul 25, 2000 to Jul 25, 2004

WAR/CONFLICTS: Operation Enduring Freedom Serving in: Afghanistan



NOTE: This is to be used for proofing. The actual Memorial Certificate will display the picture to fit in the larger rectangle.

BORN: Jan 30, 1982  
BIRTH PLACE: Lodi, CA  
MAIDEN: Salas  
PREVIOUS:  
NICKNAME:  
SERVICE NAME:  
DECORATIONS: Army Commendation Medal w/ OLC  
Joint Service Achievement Medal  
National Defense Service Medal

HOMETOWN: Lodi, CA  
MIDDLE:  
AKA:

### MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES:

In the Army, I learned to appreciate the smallest things on earth. The people I worked with were awesome. I met people from different cultures and backgrounds and I'll never forget them. Of my three deployments to Afghanistan, the first will always be the most memorable. Who'd have thought I'd be in a combat zone with a Special Operations Unit! From seeing locals praying five times a day to hearing mortars going off every night, the first few weeks were quite an experience. When we landed in Afghanistan, I was one of only four females who lived out of ugly tan tents, ate "wonderful" MREs and "showered" with baby wipes for two weeks! I couldn't sleep the first week. I'd get up during the night, hear live fire going between villages and see mines exploding; then at 5 a.m., village loud speakers rang out with the daily call to prayer. I was a telecommunications operator/maintainer (MOS 74 B/C), better known as "The Computer Geek." I buried cables, deployed servers and computers, and mounted communications devises on the HUMVEES. We had no MP unit with my advance team, so we stood guard duty. At first, our guard tower was a metal chair near a strip of razor wire enclosing the compound. Later, we built a tower of scrap metal, sand bags and an unused bunker. The first few weeks weren't so great, but as time passed, slowly but surely, we improved our living conditions. All in all, I wouldn't change my four years in the Army for anything in the world!

REGISTERED BY:

HONORED BY: Brig Gen Wilma L. Vaught USAF Ret



Kate Scott: Good afternoon. Today is September 14th, 2005. This is the oral history of Sayra Salas Sanchez, a Specialist Promotable E4 with a third Special Forces group, 74 Charlie. She experienced three deployments in Operation Enduring Freedom.

This interview is being conducted for the Women's Memorial Oral History Program in partnership with the Library of Congress Veteran's History Project. My name is Kate Scott, and I will be the interviewer. Please go ahead and introduce yourself, and first tell me when and where you were born?

Sayra Salas: My name is Sayra Salas, I was born in Lodi, California. I am the 12th in my family, seven sisters and four brothers. And my parents have been happily married for 46 years.

KS: Tell me a little bit about your folks, what are their names, what are they like as people, what do they do for a living?

SS: My dad's name is Prudencio - it's probably hard to pronounce. My mom's name is Esperanza, which means "hope." They both immigrated from Mexico about 40 years ago. They both retired, and they're very humble people. Nobody in my family joined the military. I was the only one. The youngest, and the only one to join the military. So that was a little hard on them.

KS: Were they -- what was your religious background?

SS: Catholic.

KS: And were you active in the church, or was your family active in the church?

SS: I was pretty active growing up, and the fact that my Dad and my Mom are pretty old-fashioned when I finally brought up military idea, they were like, "Oh, no. You're a female. You definitely cannot go. That's not for you." But they took it in eventually.

KS: And tell me, when did you graduate from high school, and where did you graduate from high school?

SS: I graduated from high school in 2000, graduated from Liberty High School, and that's also in [unintelligible], California.

KS: And did you know, when you were graduating from high school, what it was that you wanted to do with your life?

SS: At the time, I think I wanted to be a firefighter. I wanted to do something active, because I didn't really enjoy sitting around. I wanted -- I loved being active, I played soccer; I played basketball. I was pretty active. I was somewhat of a tomboy, but got over that, too.

KS: And did you end up going to college right out of high school?

SS: No, I didn't. I actually was enrolled in MEPS like three months before I graduated, so I think I told my parents about it, and they thought it was a joke. They didn't believe me. And I'm like, "I already signed the paper. I'm going."

KS: Could you define, just for the record, what MEPS is?

SS: Military Entrance Program Station.

KS: So you were hooked in.

SS: Yes. It's called Delayed Entry Program, and it's pretty much, you just wait until you've graduated from High School, and I had just turned 18, and yeah, January 30th, and then that July of 2000 is when I joined.

KS: Wow. And tell me about basic training.

SS: Basic Training was in Fort Jackson, South Carolina, which a lot of people call Relaxin' Jackson, because it's co-ed, female and male, and actually, I think it all depends on your drill sergeants, whether you're really going to be relaxing or not. But I think I had it pretty tough, only because I had some pretty mean drill sergeants. Extremely mean, actually. But I got over it. I thought it was good when I was done, finally. It was a good discipline.

KS: But you know, I think that it sounds like you came from a very old-fashioned, disciplined, Catholic family, with a lot of siblings where there had to be order or there was going to be chaos, so maybe the -- in retrospect, it may not have been as bad for you, the transition, as it might have been for others.

SS: I don't think it was, now that I think about it. Because I used to see people, and be like, "You know, this really isn't that hard. Get over it." And when people grew up back talking, or being rebellious or whatnot, and just being disrespectful to their parents, or never got reprimanded for anything bad, then you could see that right away, when those people would stand out. But I think if you just kept your mouth shut and stayed awake -- I had a problem laughing, though. Whenever they'd make me do pushups, I would laugh. And so that would get our platoon dropped all the time, because I would always be laughing, and my nickname was salad, or salsa. So they were like, "Oh, Salsa, make your platoon drop."

KS: Were there any other Latino women, or Mexican American women in your group?

SS: Actually, I think there was. There was probably two other women. One was Puerto Rican, and another I think, was Ecuadorian, or El Salvador. I'm not quite sure. And I know there was a girl that's actually stationed here, at Bowling [spelled phonetically] Air Force Base, now, with my husband. Her last name's Chu. She's, I think, Chinese. And it's pretty cool; I've been seeing some people.

KS: Good. If you could just summarize basically, you went in, you graduated in 2000,



you went in only two years later, or you were deployed only two years later. If you could just summarize that two-year time frame, what is it you remember most about your service during that time, prior to 9/11?

SS: Well, basic training was a little longer than it was supposed to be. I went in to basic, I think it started, like, at the beginning of August or mid August, and then we were done October something. I can't remember the exact date, but I was a holdover for six months after I graduated, and I had to stay at the basic training at Fort Jackson for six months after that until I could go to train, because I didn't -- it takes a while to get a Top Secret security clearance, and that's what they were waiting on, and me and like another five soldiers had to wait on that until we were cleared and they would let us go to our training site, which was at Fort Gordon, Georgia. Then once they finally got that, they gave me my clearance. That was around March. My AIT, which is my job training probably lasted I think -- I think it was 16 weeks, or something. It was pretty long. So I was there for a long time, and that was actually really hard. The only thing that made it a little easy was that you got weekends off depending on how you trained or what you did during the week, and if you deserved it. It was more like a privilege. You know, if you get this done, or if you do this well on PT, you're going to have your weekend off. So everyone was working really hard, and striving for that weekend, because that was the only time off we had.

KS: How was it that you got involved in all of this top-secret security, high-level clearance?

SS: I don't know. They give you a test at the beginning, I guess it's the -- what is it? I forgot what it's called already.

KS: Like an aptitude test.

SS: Yeah, it's just like an aptitude test, and depending on what you score on -- different people score high on different like, technical or analytical skills. And I guess I scored high on technical, and on the spot, they gave me a typing test. And with that, they said, you know, you scored this high; you qualify for these jobs. So when they chose -- they gave me three jobs. And I think one was like a helicopter -- something maintenance, and another one was like a tractor specialist or something like that, and then the other one was 74 Charlie, which was a telecommunications operator and maintainer. And that one just sounded sophisticated, so I was like, "Oh, yeah, I'll take that one." Little did I know that I was going to wait two years to get my security clearance, but it was worth it in the long run.

KS: And during that two-year period, 9/11 took place. How did that event change your obligations as a soldier?

SS: Wow. It changed everything. Because when I got to the unit, Third Special Forces Group -- actually, just getting to Fort Bragg itself was really intimidating. Because it's the home of the Airborne, and Special Forces, and everyone's just like extremely dedicated, and you know, the "Hoo ah, Hoo ah," word that they call out.

KS: Hardcore.

SS: Yeah, extremely hardcore. And as soon as I got to this in processing station there at Fort Bragg, everyone was looking at my orders, and people share information, and say, "Hey, which unit are you going to?" And I'm like, "Third Special Forces, what is this?" And they were like, "Oh, you're going to be in the jungle all the time, you're going to be in the desert." So here I am, thinking, "Oh Lord, say hi to being a girl -- I mean, say bye to being a girl, I'm going to become like a complete jungle person." I didn't know what to expect. But I got there, and it was a completely different role. But shortly after I got there, people were talking about deploying to Africa, and people had just gotten back from Africa. And I'm like, "Wow, people are out there now." But I was like a new little soldier, so I didn't think anything of it. Then they got back, and then September 11th happened.

And it's weird how it happened, because I was actually on a water jump, and I got to be a Zodiac boat driver. A Zodiac boat is like these really cool, super-fast boats that the SF scuba guys use. And they trained us for it, we all got trained on it, and they had divers, and then they had the drivers, and I got to do both. So it was really cool because we had a bunch of people that were Airborne jumping out of Chinooks with two propellers, and we were all basically driving out the boats, and they were letting people jump, and after the first stick of people went, they started calling through this big bullhorn, you know, "Bring in the boats, bring in the boats." And we saw the helicopter going in the wrong direction, and we're like, "Is he going to drop the people in the trees? Because the water is over here." We're like, "What's going on?" And they're like, "Bring in the boats. Bring in the boats." So we came in, and they were like, "Yeah, you know, something's going on. We're getting attacked." And I'm like, "Is this for real?" It didn't click until afterwards. After that, it was like 24/7 security guard. All -- we got all our weapons, we drew vests, we drew magazines, ammo, everything, and they had us guarding every single part of Fort Bragg. I mean the day after, I think it took people like six hours to get in the gates. And some people would just park their cars and would walk in, and we didn't see people coming in that lived off base until half of the day was over. So after that, it was pretty hectic.

KS: Were you able to see any of the footage that was [inaudible] on that day?

SS: Yeah, I was -- I just couldn't believe it. It didn't -- I was looking at it like, in this point of view where my hands were tied, and I just felt like, "Okay, what am I going to do?" It didn't hit me, or it didn't click to me that, "Okay, you're in the Army, you're the one that's going to go deal with this."

KS: And now it's your job.

SS: Yeah. But I'm watching it like, in shock, you know. Like I couldn't believe it. It just looked like a movie, especially when you see all the people coming out of the windows. I was like, "Why are they even showing this?" But yeah, a month later, they said, "We're getting ready to go."

KS: When did you find out first that you were going to be deployed that first time? Was it pretty quick?

SS: No, they just sort of started hinting. They started reading us "Rules of Engagement," which basically meant --

KS: Goodbye?

SS: "Yeah, you guys are allowed to shoot people as long as you feel threatened." And I'm like, "This is for real." It did not click until I got on that plane and we were ready to go out there. And then we had what's called PDSS, Pre Deployment Site Serving. People go out and it consisted of like, most of the high ranking people to go out and look at the area, and survey it pretty much, and come back and tell us, and see how many people we were going to need out there. And that's when I finally knew, he brought back like actual clips, and videotapes and pictures. And the Sergeant Majors here are telling us, "You're going to see little 5 and 7 year olds with AKs on their back. If they start shooting, you know what to do." And I'm like, "Oh my god. This is real." So yeah, shortly after that, we were on the plane, and we were going, and what was scary is that the chaplain traveled with me on my first way up there. And I knew that if he was nervous, I was definitely going to be nervous. And he's praying, and he's having us lock and load, and he's like, "Okay, we're all going to stay in a straight line when we get off." I couldn't believe it until we actually landed. It was horrifying.

KS: Tell me -- you actually left Fort Bragg then, for your deployment?

SS: We left from -- I think -- I can't remember the Air Force base was. It wasn't Pope Air Force Base, but it was like right out of North Carolina. I think it was in Charlotte somewhere. And we left from there, and I don't remember the flight, how long it was, but it was long. I know it was at least 16 hours.

KS: What did you tell your parents?

SS: I don't -- I think I just basically told them, "We're getting deployed." And my Mom was just like crying, "Why do you have to go?" And I just -- I sort of like, made up a lie and told her we're not going to the main area. And at the time, I didn't really know. I was like a PFC, so they weren't really going to tell me where we were going and what we were going to do. So I was just completely like out of it, too. I was like, "Okay, well, I think we're going here. We're in Germany now." I finally got to call her one last time when we were in Germany, and she was like, "Are you safe?" And I'm like, "Yes, we're safe." And after that, I didn't call her for like a week or so. So she was devastated, so was my Dad. My Dad just was like, "This cannot be. Why did they have to send her?" And I'm like -- actually, I think I did lie to them and say, "Yeah, we're going to stay in Germany. We're in Germany still." So.

KS: So how long was that stopover in Germany?

SS: It was probably a few hours, maybe like 5 hours, a couple more.

KS: So it was basically just changing planes, gassing up.

SS: Stop, and then we'd head out, yeah.

KS: Okay. And tell me what your initial reaction was to actually landing and getting off that plane. I assume you landed in Kuwait?

SS: No, we actually landed in Bagram [spelled phonetically], Bagram, Afghanistan.

KS: Oh, I'm sorry.

SS: It's okay. It was weird. I -- you know how they have the little tiny peep holes on the --

[end of transcript]

SS: Little tiny peepholes in the -- we came in on a C5, which is a huge airplane. And you know, everyone's saying, we landed, we're allowed to get up and whatnot. And we're looking out, and all you see is just flat land. And it was maybe -- it was like 4 in the morning or something, and it was still sort of dark, so we couldn't tell what was going on. And I didn't know what time it was, because we were completely off schedule. But I know my stomach was like completely full of butterflies, and they just wanted to throw up. I didn't know what was wrong. I was like, "Okay, either I'm sick from the food, or I'm just really nervous." And when I saw our Chaplain praying, I was like, "Okay, I think I should just pray now, too," because it was horrifying. It was just a mixture of feelings. I didn't think I was there. It was weird. It was like a dream.

KS: What about setting all those emotions aside, just doing your work? Tell me what the average day was like, or if you could characterize the average day in that first deployment.

SS: Well, I think from the day we landed, maybe for a week after that, I couldn't sleep. I was probably sleeping or running on like two hours of sleep a night, because we were in these really old, raggedy tents. They weren't even the new ones, they were these tan, old ones that weren't really plastic like, they were just like cloth, and they would always be flapping with the wind, and the poles would fall over, and not all of us had cots, so some of us were just sleeping on the ground with sleeping bags, and you can hear mortars and mines going off constantly, so it still felt like I was in a movie. I just had my eyes wide open all night, and I couldn't sleep, and people -- other people were like that, too. Walking around with flashlights, looking around like, "Is this for real?" But I think eventually it just -- seeing all the people and all the guys in my unit, and like the SF guys and stuff, I knew that I was in good hands. I think having deployed with them made me really strong, knowing, okay, I'm in really good hands. This is like top Army people. I shouldn't be afraid. I have to do my job. I'm already out here. I might as well make the best of it.

KS: How many other women were with you on that first deployment?

SS: The first deployment, it was probably only four of us until the main body came in, then we started getting more. In total, it was probably close to 30 throughout those 7 months.

KS: Okay. And did you feel singled out as a woman over there?

SS: Oh yeah.

KS: How so?

SS: Especially the fact that you're a girl, and you have your time of the month and what not, that was horrible. I mean, we had -- we didn't have toilets, we didn't have showers, we didn't have real water. We had bottled water, but that was like what we used, so we wanted to save it at the same time, we wanted to use that also for like hygiene purposes. But we couldn't, because you got to drink that water later, you might as well save it. So we just did the whole baby wipe/ washcloth thing. And guys can usually go for a pretty long time, but women it doesn't work. It's not very healthy at all. So you have to keep, you know, clean all the time. Especially your hair. I remember -- this is probably going to sound foul, but I remember not washing my hair for like a week or two, and just having it up, you know, completely tied in a knot or braided, and just carrying baby wipes with you everywhere, because you -- I mean, two minutes after you did try to clean up you were going to be all dirty again, because there was dust everywhere and sandstorms and stuff.

KS: Had the military ever suggested anything about like, the depo shot, depo prevera [spelled phonetically]?

SS: Oh yeah. Once we -- once the medics and the main body came out there, we started setting up, and a lot of tents started getting put up, and the med people were there, and everyone, like all the support people started getting stuff into place, and people that were on birth control, they gave us that. They made sure, basically, before you left, too, that if you had a certain medication that you stock up on it. You bring all this with you. And then our med guys, too, they're real cool. You usually become really close with them, because these units, like, it's a big family, and they know, "Okay, you're on this. You need to bring all of this." Or, "We'll get it for you. We'll make sure we have a big supply of this." Or you know, you're going to be out of luck when you're out there. Yeah, it was weird.

KS: Wow. And you -- why don't you just -- you were there 7 months, so I hardly know where to start, except that if you could just describe your job there. Well, first of all, after Bagram, where did you go? Did you set up camp?

SS: We did. We set up camp; we waited until the DoD guys, or you know, the bomb squad or what not, they cleared up more of the area, so that we can set up tents. And --

KS: Is that the one place you were stationed for those 7 months?

SS: Yes. It was Stationary. It became home, yes. And eventually, we started getting supplies in. We got our palettes in. We got all of our tools and what not, and we started doing our job, and my job basically consisted of a Network Administrator/ Cable Dog. Everything that dealt with communications. So we had to start from the ground up. We had to dig holes in the ground and bury the cables. If not, they were going to get ripped. And we were going to have to do that again, so you bury the cables, and as I was burying cables we got to find bones in the dirt, and here I am -- well, actually, myself and my coworkers were just throwing them, moving them out of the way, making space. And Captain, Captain [unintelligible] at the time, was like "Salas, why are you throwing those

bones? Those are people bones! How would you like somebody to go to your country and throw bones out of their grave?" And I'm like, I thought they were dog bones or something. No. Our J2 guys, which is like the intelligence guys, they found a full pelvic bone, intact, of a woman, which is horrifying, too, because at that point, I was like, "Okay. This is really disgusting. I can't -- " I had to like almost pretend that it was a dream at times, and then just like click out of it and be like, "Okay. Have to do my job. I have to do my job." And since I was new to it, and I was just a private -- a private first class, everyone's training me, and I just have to get used to it. Burying the cables, and then putting out the switches, setting up [inaudible] computers. Once we got all the computers set up, we had to move them quite a bit. So it was like -- our job was ongoing. It never stopped.

KS: The equipment came in after you did, obviously, and so you continued to receive supplies through Bagram and they'd be transported over to you. Was there a name for this area?

SS: It was CJ SOTF. Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force, I'm forgetting.

KS: But it wasn't like near a town, or anything.

SS: No, no. The nearest town was probably like 40 minutes away, if I'm not mistaken, which was Kabul, which was their city. But it wasn't a city. It was horrible, because I got to go down there, and I got to go on a trip to Kandahar also, on helicopter, which was quite an experience, too. A lot of those trips were because we had to get new hubs and routers, and we had to get -- we had to network with people and find out where we were going to get these from, because some of our re-supplies weren't coming in for another month, and we needed them, because we needed to communicate with the guys that were out, you know, down range and stuff. So it was --

KS: So you were communicating actually with Afghanistan nationals, or people locals, or what?

SS: No, with firebases. Our team guys, SF Guys. We had to keep them up to date with everything, and we had of course, the people who were working on the radios, which were right next door to us, and then we had all the satellite people. And then most of us, we would just help each other. It was like a big family. If they had this, and we needed it, then we would trade off, and we would just all work shifts. We were probably working like 18 hours a day when we first landed. It was constant, never stopped.

KS: What kind of interaction were you having with the local community, if any? It sounds like you were in kind of a remote area. But on the trips, for example, or when you went into town, how were you treated?

SS: Not very well. I mean, we -- our compound was set up right in front of a couple of villages, and there was a school nearby which wasn't really active. They didn't really allow small children, female, to go to school, and it was just mostly male students going. And the villages back there were constantly fighting and shooting at each other and just causing chaos, and we would always have to be alert and on guard. We all had to pull

our fair share of guard, too, so that was kind of overwhelming because there was only two people, and the only thing that separated us from this village was like one strand of Constantino [spelled phonetically] wire. And at times, you know, you'd see people out there, and yeah, you had your weapon, but you can be there by yourself at the time while your other partner or your guard partner is going around the compound, pulling roving guard where they have to go around and make sure that everything's fine. So that was kind of scary, because I got scared a couple of times, a dog jumped out at me, and I thought it was a person. But...

KS: When you got scared, what did you do kind of get by?

SS: I wrote a lot of letters, and I actually took a lot of pictures. I thought, you know, the places had a lot of potential. It was beautiful, like as far as the mountains go, they were snowcapped when we landed, and it was -- it was just nice. The mountains were really nice, we were right in a valley, and I thought, you know, this is sad. This place has so much potential, and just to be full of mines, and -- oh, another thing, with the white rocks, I was telling you earlier, the white rocks were mines that had been cleared, and red rocks, which the EoD had painted red, were mines that hadn't been cleared. So when we're driving to Kabul, to the city, we're driving fast as heck, because you don't want to get ambushed. And at the same time, you have to like go through this dirt road, and all of this dust is coming up, so you can't see all the rocks. And I'm like praying, in the back seat, like "Oh my gosh, please." And I kept telling him, "Can you please slow down?" And he was like, "We have to hurry up, because we can get ambushed." And I just felt like every time he would swerve, we were going to go over a red rock, and we were going to get blown up. But we didn't; we were lucky.

KS: At any point did you draw any sort of fire or encounter any sort of inherent physical danger besides -- I mean, I can't imagine driving down and being afraid to get --

SS: Blown up?

KS: Yeah, targeted, but did you -- did any sort of incident ever take place?

SS: There was a couple. Now, I got to shoot a lot for fun, which was at our own little man-made range, which was actually a lot of fun. We basically had some extra ammo, and we all got to go out there, which got a lot of our stress taken care of, and passed time, like, "Okay, let's go have some fun." And we got to shoot, and we made up our own little targets, and we threw grenades and stuff, which was fun. But actual physical encounter, I didn't shoot, but a lot of people told me I should have. I was on guard at the front gate, and MPs and a couple of locals were running towards us, and I wasn't sure what they were running for. And I see that one of the locals had a knife, like this really long knife, and I didn't know, you know, maybe something else is going on that's none of my business, the MPs got it, whatever. But they were coming straight towards me, and I'm like, "Oh, no." And my partner was sitting down behind me eating his lunch, or MRE or whatever, and I'm like, sitting in there, like, "They're coming. They're coming." So I had to -- I was like, "Okay, what do I do." As soon as I just picked up my weapon and like coked it back, the guy just stopped because he thought I was going to shoot him. So they tackled him, and they put zip ties on his wrist, and they got him. So that was cool, and I sort of felt like,

"Yay! I did something!" You know? But that was fun. That was actually a little scary, because I thought, you know, if I wouldn't have done that, he probably would have come straight for me and like stabbed me or something. But I think he was going to try to run into our compound to get away from the MP. But he ended up being some sort of insurgent, I don't know what he was, but we didn't find out, we just knew that he was somebody bad.

KS: Yeah. Anything else?

SS: We got shot at in the helicopter. I got to hear the ricocheting bullets. I went on a re-supply mission, and it was supposed to be a medevac, where we go help bring in soldiers who have been wounded, and my OIC at the time was in charge. He knew the pilots down at the compound --

KS: What was the network administrator doing on a re-supply medevac mission?

SS: Yeah, that was for fun. To get off the compound. Because it had already been three months, and we had done nothing but work, work, work, and he said, "Do you guys want to do something fun and different for a change?" "Sure, we'll go on a medevac." We ended up going on a re-supply mission, where you go supply ammo and food and weapons and stuff to the firebases. And we went out there, and we weren't even really allowed to land, because it was such a hostile environment, and we had to drop the palettes from like, I don't know how many feet high. But on the way there, I got to sit in the cockpit too, which was really cool. I was the only female on the helicopter, and I got to wear, you know, the little earphones and stuff, and I was listening, and I'm like, "Okay, they're talking about targets and stuff," and I'm like "Targets?" I'm seriously like oblivious, thinking about computers or what not, but -- you'd see the dirt flying up in front of you, like, "They're shooting!" And I'm like "I don't think I want to listen to this anymore." So I took it off, and I wasn't used to being on a helicopter, so I was getting really nauseous, and the fact that I was hearing all of this, I got even more sick to my stomach. They even gave me like, a little bag, because they thought I was going to vomit. But I didn't.

[end of transcript]

SS: But I didn't. I just sort of tried to fall asleep and not think about it, and then on the way back, I fell asleep completely because I was like, I have to go to sleep. Because if I hear more shooting, I'm going to get sick to my stomach and vomit all over these guys, you know, the pilots. But that was really scary. Now I laugh about it, but that was like, "I am never going on a re-supply mission again. Never. I'll stay right here, I'll fix computers, I'm not going on there again."

KS: You said that you were going to firebases. Can you explain to me what that is?

SS: SF consists of teams -- I can't really get too much into it, because we're not really allowed to talk about it. And the teams have specialties, and they basically go out downrange, or in the actual line of fire, and they come to us for support. And they're the main ones that are actually fighting. And so -- Yeah, they're front lines. And that's what we got to do, is just go re-supply them with ammo and whatnot.



KS: Did you know you were re-supplying the front lines?

SS: No, I didn't, which is funny. We should have known better, because we got on the helicopter that didn't have a big red cross on it. We got on a helicopter where we said, "Hey, you can't get on here unless you're in full battle rattle." Basically, you have to have your flak vest on, you have to have your weapon with all of your ammo, your LB, everything. And we're like, "We need this for a medevac?" So we got it, and here we go, and no, it wasn't a medevac, it was a re-supply mission.

KS: This is March to September. So what was the climate like over there?

SS: March was very cold. Up until maybe a month later. During the day, it was nice, it was sunny, but at night, it was freezing. I mean, it's desert climate -- it's either extremely cold or extremely hot, and there's nowhere in between unless it's like right in the morning, it'll be nice. But otherwise, it's very, very cold or very, very hot. And then when it finally did get hot, oh, it was like 115 degrees weather. But I loved it, because I like heat, I'd rather be in hot weather than cold weather, so I enjoyed that a lot.

KS: During those seven months, how were you able to communicate with your mom and dad? And also, I know you're married now, but at that time, did you have a significant other?

SS: Yes. Actually, my husband now was my boyfriend then, and it was hard. We actually broke up for a little bit, because there was no telling when I was going to get home. They, in our orders said anywhere from I think it was like 90 days to 365 days. So it was like, okay, we have no specific date, we don't know when we're gonna get home. So that was hard, especially with my significant other. But my parents, I almost dreaded calling them, because it just made me cry all the time, and I didn't want to cry because it showed them that it was dangerous, and I always was very full of pride, and I never wanted to, you know, put that wall down and say, yeah you know -- I was always a really, really tough girl. I never liked people to see my soft side, so I would try so hard not to cry, and my mom would always cry, and I'd be like, "It's okay, I'm fine, you're talking to me. Nothing has happened." And she'd hear stuff in the background, like mines going off, and she's like, "What was that?" And I'm like, "Oh, they're machines," or the tractors or what not. That was really, really hard, and I think she just couldn't believe it, and the fact that the media -- you can't always believe everything you hear on the news. Sometimes they would just blow out of proportion the stuff that's really going on, or sometimes it was not even true. Or it didn't really have to do anything with my unit, and so she would get worried. They'd say, "Oh, this convoy was ambushed." Or this helicopter went down or what not, and she automatically assumed, "Oh my gosh, Sayra's over there. It's got to be her, something's happening to her." But it was really hard speaking to them.

KS: How do you now make sense of the way the war has been depicted in the media, having been there three times?

SS: It's weird. I guess now that I'm out of the Army, it's kind of hard. Since I've been there, like you said, I don't really believe everything that the media says, because they're only allowed so much information, and they're all going to have different sources, and

they're all going to depend on these people allowed us to, so they're obviously not that -- I don't know. It's hard to explain, because there's a different importance in every unit and different precedents. So not everyone is doing the same thing, so maybe a unit out there doing just supply. Basically bringing in supplies that soldiers need. And of course, their story's going to be way different than a Special Forces Unit or even a Firebase, or anything like that. So now, I try to not be biased, and I try to just think, "Okay, this is the news, and I'll take in a little bit of it, but I know that there's so much more out there and so many more stories to hear from -- directly from the people that are out there.

KS: I know congress, not too long ago, was debating the combat -- women in combat resolution, and it didn't go anywhere, but what do you say to the critics who argue that women shouldn't be there, American women?

SS: I think I'm a little half and half for both. Because the fact that I got to see it, and that I wasn't at the front lines was different, but when you compare women as far as what they're able to do to men, there is a big difference. No matter what you say. You have to be in completely good shape, and super strong, lifting weights every day, to do what some of these guys can do. And I mean, even I couldn't pick up -- we have like the 50 cal, and we have like these big engines for the boats -- these guys were like, "Yeah, pick them up, put them over your shoulder." And I'm like, "I cannot pick that up." The thing was like 50 pounds or more, and just pick it up and throw it over my shoulder? No. Unless you really, really think that you physically can do everything that a man can do, then I'm all for it, go for it. Because some women are pretty strong. But mentally, I definitely think women could do it, because women have a lot of mental power, and I think mentally, a lot of women are a lot stronger than men. So I think it's more -- I'm for it. If they're able to do it, and if they're able to accomplish the training that they have to go through, then hey, more power to you all. If I could do it, or if I wanted to, and if they allowed women to be SF, I would probably be a candidate. I would love to do it, because it was just awesome, the things they do.

KS: You've touched on a lot of notable experiences while you were there, but if you were going to summarize your most memorable and your most difficult experience from your first deployment, what would it be?

SS: Wow. Well, there's probably two of them. They're actually both pretty funny. The first one is -- where we had to basically go to the restroom and use the restroom. It was just a big, wooden piece of plywood, basically, like four of them put together with one of those tin garbage cans cut in half, and just some dirt on the bottom. And that was it, and they had a couple of steps that were built, and there was a divider in between that was just a piece of plywood, and you could see the other person's foot next to you. You could hear everything. I mean, you can hear, smell, everything. And the most disgusting thing I have ever encountered in my life was how we got rid of that -- burning it. It was foul. Everyone knew, as soon as you saw this big cloud of black smoke coming -- we were eating, T rats, or MREs, they were already disgusting as it is, so just the fact that we had to deal with smoke coming from fecal matter -- it was horrible. Everyone was eating, you'd see this big cloud of black smoke coming, everyone would just start eating super fast so you can get away from it. "Here comes the --" you know, everyone's hurrying up, and it was nasty. You had to sit there with this big 5 gallon thing of diesel fluid, pour it in there, light it on

fire, and then mix it. This is all the people's stuff. Excretions, and everything.

KS: You had to do that?

SS: I got lucky. I didn't have to do it, but I had to pour the diesel fluid. I didn't get to mix it though, so I was lucky. And as soon as I poured the diesel fluid, I ran. I was like, "I'm done. That's my part." So yeah, I got lucky. And the only reason why I didn't have to mix it was because our job was extremely important according to our commander. He wanted his computer up; he wanted his cables run. He says, "We don't have time to have you guys out there burning or building tents, you guys have to have our computers up." So I got really lucky.

KS: You said there were two?

SS: Oh, yeah, the other one -- this is funny. I guess it's a little -- ignorance, and they don't know any better. One of the local workers, we contracted a couple of local workers to work with us and help build frames for tents. This was actually a few months after we had landed, so things were starting to get better, and living conditions were starting to get better. So our tents were going to be framed with wood so that they would be above the ground, because when it rains, it poured there. We'd flood, and the sand was like baby powder, so when you'd step in it, you'd sink to your knees. So finally, we got these local workers to work, and we got our first port-a-potty, and everyone was excited, and they'd starting getting the trips coming in and cleaning it. Well right after he cleaned it, I didn't think he knew that the port-a-potty was to go do your business. He went in there, and he came out, and his hands were completely blue. He thought it was like a water basin to clean his hands, and his hands were completely blue, and nobody could get over it. Like, "What is wrong with his hands?" He was washing his hands in the port-a-potty. Which was disgusting. I was like, "Why didn't anybody tell him that the port-a-potty is not a water basin?" That was, I think -- I mean, it was sad, but at the same time it was something I'd never forget. They'd never been -- they don't know what a port-a-potty is. They just go in, they see people come in and out; they didn't know what they were doing. Luckily they'd just cleaned it, or it would have been pretty nasty.

KS: I'm sorry to jump all over the place, but can you just, for the record explain -- you were setting up the computer systems, basically, it sounds like, and then doing everything that was required to get the place functioning. But what were the people that were using -- the soldiers that were using the base, what were they doing? What was the nature of their mission?

SS: Okay. So we had a timeframe. Basically, they gave us a month, and everyone had their certain jobs. And so, since we were computers, there was other people that were like engineers, and then we had other people that were the cooks, that provided the food for us. And then we had other people that were like admin, process all the paperwork, it just - - ton of stuff. Supply. They kept all our supplies. And then we had mechanics, which were very important, extremely important, because they had always had humvees and tractors and stuff going -- breaking down, and they were extremely important. And just all of them had a timeframe, and they all basically said, you know, we have to have this done by this time, and setup by this date, because this is when our teams get here, and this is

when they're going to be on the front lines and they're going to need our help, as soon as possible. So we knew that our job was really important as support. So everyone was sort of intertwined in some way. So like, admin always needed us for computers, because they couldn't do their work without the computers. The engineer needed us to order stuff, like supplies, like plywood, and screws, hammers, all the tools that you can possibly need to build stuff, and to renovate whatever was there. The mechanics needed us too, because they'd order stuff, and they had this system called ULLS, U-L-L-S, I believe. I can't remember what it stands for, but that's basically consisted of all the parts for the humvees, the vehicles, and all the equipment that we use. So our computers and communication over the web, was extremely important.

KS: At any point during that first deployment, did you find yourself being discriminated against as a woman in uniform?

SS: Not by my own comrades, like soldiers and stuff, but by the locals, definitely. They just always were telling us stuff that were degrading, like they always learn the derogatory terms first, call us a bunch of names, and I got offered 20 dollars to be your wife, he says, "20 dollar, you be my wife." Just stuff where it was just -- it was horrifying. Because a couple of them also would see us filling up sandbags, and we had to do that too, because sometimes we couldn't dig because the dirt was so hard, so we had to put sandbags over the cables. So I'd be filling up sandbags with a shovel, and you know, everyone gets their share of that as a soldier, everyone. I mean it's rare, the person that you'll meet, that's been in the military -- or at least in the Army -- that has not filled up their share of sandbags. It's not fun. But one of the locals was like, "No, no, move away." He didn't want to let me do it. And he kept, like, pushing me. And he started pushing me away. And I'm like, "Don't push me. I'm doing this." And he's like, "No, no, no." Basically telling me women aren't supposed to be doing this. Get in. Go away. And then, you know -- it's very controversial for them, especially when they have to take orders from females. They refuse to deal with that.

KS: At what point did you find out you were going home, and well first of all, have we covered kind of the first deployment successfully, or do you think there's anything I'm forgetting to ask?

SS: Well, I think just --

[end of transcript]

SS: Well, I think just one last memorable experience that I had was with this little girl, who I always gave hygiene stuff to. She always seemed to know when I had guard, at what time, and what post, and I always got either third or the first post, which first was the front gate or the third was right overlooking the village. So when I had third, she would always come up and ask for shampoo, or Kleenex, whatever she had her hands on, like, or what she could think of, as far as hygiene goes. She'd make signs like, wash my hair, or brush my teeth, signs like that, and I thought, wow. This is a first, because a lot of the times, we'd offer deodorant and hygiene's stuff to the local workers, and they didn't want it. And so I'm like, woah, she wants this stuff. So I'd get the care packages, stuff we didn't use and give it to her. And she was very grateful. She threw me, like, maybe five bracelets that were all really, really nice. I think they were silver. And she threw me a ring, too, and I

had to get it, crawl under the constantino wire and get it. And I was like, "I don't want this, you shouldn't feel like you have to repay me." I wanted to give it to her. But it was really sad. She was always out there with her mom, and her mom was like -- she looked like she was ready to burst. She was like 9 months pregnant or something, barefoot. Kids didn't have -- skinny, barefoot, and there's these nasty plants with prickly things. They would go through our boots, so I can't imagine how they were out there barefoot. It was horrible for the kids. That was really, really heartbreaking.

KS: Did you ever learn her name?

SS: No, I didn't. And I just remembered another thing, when we went to Kabul, speaking of children. This was actually the first time I started just basically crying. Just in front of everybody. Because I could not believe to what extent these people go to try to get money, or to try to just live a better life. This lady left me her daughter. Just next to my side, and took off. And I'm like, this little girl's holding on to my hand like her life depends on it. And I'm like, "Where's your mom?" You know? And we had a little boy as sort of like a little tour guide, interpreter guy. And he says, "Her mom's crazy. She left her daughter here." And I'm like, "Well, you need to go get her, because we're about to leave here." And he's like, "I don't know where she went." And I'm like, look. He wanted money, basically, to go find her. So I was like, "I'll give you two dollars if you go find the mom." He finally went. He couldn't find her. And I'm like, "There's no way, I can't let this little girl --" she must have barely been learning to walk, like 1 1/2, or 2. And here she is, holding on to my hand, she's this adorable little girl. And I'm like, "They're asking me to go." And there's this busy street, strangers everywhere, people, god knows, shooting at each other, whatever, and I don't want to leave this little girl by herself, so I was just in tears. I was like, "I cannot believe this lady just left her daughter here with me. How does somebody just leave their daughter with some stranger that they don't even know?" So finally, she came back, and she grabbed her, and she's like -- she couldn't speak English, but she told the little boy, she's like, "Tell her to take her. She'll live a better life with her." And I -- that just made me break down, because I could not believe to what extent they go to to try to live a better life. It was horrible.

KS: How did it change your attitude when you got back? How did it change your attitude about what you have, and what people here in America have?

SS: Wow. You learn to appreciate the air you breathe, because you wake up, and you'd have dirt in your nose. You couldn't breathe sometimes because it was so dusty. It was just -- it was like a dream when we got back, too, because you see green, and you're like, "Wow. Green trees. Green grass. Cars." You just look at everything, because it almost became like home. You seriously learn to appreciate just everything. Food, air, clean.

KS: Did you find yourself getting annoyed with like, the soccer mom that was impatient in line, or you know...?

SS: Oh yeah, I did, and I just basically try to be very patient with people. People don't realize how easy and how wealthy and blessed, and just everything you have here, it's like, you should be grateful for. And even -- I was grateful going in, but after that, it made me that much more grateful, thinking, you know, I thought I had it hard growing up. This

does not compare to what these people and women have to go through, especially the women that would get treated like dirt over there. It's horrible.

KS: So how did it feel to get home?

SS: It felt great. It was hard getting used to it again.

KS: Were you able to see your family?

SS: No, I didn't get to see them until Christmas, so it was a couple of months, maybe three months until I went home, and I saw them, and my mom was just -- broke down to tears, and could not believe that I was alive and home, and she kept telling me, she was always telling me, "Do you have to go back?" And I'm like, "Mother, it's the Army, I can't just be like sorry, I'm not going back today." You can't quit this job; I have to stay. And she'd always be like, "When are you coming home, when are you coming home?" "I'm almost done, it's only four years." Then she found out that I had to go a second time, and then the third time.

KS: So, when you came back, you went to Fort Bragg again?

SS: Yes.

KS: And then you stayed there until you got news of your second deployment.

SS: Yes. We stayed there; we were replaced by 19th group, I believe, and they're down south somewhere in like Florida, or New Orleans, somewhere around the Gulf Coast, and they replaced us, they were a National Guard Special Forces unit.

KS: Was it at all -- was there even a little tiny bit of you that felt a little bit bad about leaving? Did you have any sort of -- did you feel any sort of --

SS: Attachment, maybe?

KS: Yeah.

SS: I did. It was hard. I think it was weird because you feel like you've accomplished so much when you're out there. And you just feel like it's your prize, like this is your -- you know how people make model airplanes, and stuff, and that was like our model compound, you know? That was us. And it was hard when we left, everyone was proud, people got their awards. And we didn't get word about leaving again until probably a month later, a month or two, but we thought, oh, we're probably not going to go. Whatever, we've already gone once. So it became like a -- I guess they assign different units, and it's like permanent. You keep going there. Like rotating, with different units, and you keep going and going and going, and I don't know when it's going to end. We would joke and say that we were going to buy timeshares out there and just go live out there. But yeah, I mean, the second time you go back people, like the locals, knew you. They're like, "Ah, Salas!" And I'm like, wow, they remember us! I was looking for the little girl that I would always talk to. I couldn't find her, so I don't know.

KS: Could you lay out for me what was the main difference in the second deployment? What stands out as different from the first deployment?

SS: The living conditions, definitely. Because the other units that were there helped us out a lot, too. They basically took over and started bringing in, you know, what was left of what we couldn't finish because our tour was over. They brought in trailers that were showers, which was a lot nicer than a big tent. The shower conditions, the first time were disgusting. You were in flip-flops, but the water was like muddy, and it was up to half way to your shins, and this was the shower. And you have to pull this little chain to get water coming down, and the water that you're showering with -- I had no clue, I never bothered asking where the water came from, but it was in these big water blivets [spelled phonetically]. They were like pools, like little kid pools, but they were real big. They didn't have a cover on them, and so there was like roaches, and potato bugs and spiders and just you name it, it was all in there, and that's the water we were showering with. So you know, that second time, when we got the trailers, and we actually had like hard walls and real showers that we could turn on, that was a lot nicer. We could actually shut the door. Because with the wind in the tents -- the wind would open the tents all the way, and it was a show for everybody at that point. We always had a line of guys waiting for the females -- our time to go off, and we were like, oh no, if it's windy, that's it. You gave a show to everybody. But that was nice; the showers were a lot better.

KS: Now that you're -- had known what to expect, at least somewhat, was it -- was there any difference in the way you said goodbye to your family this time?

SS: Yeah. I was a little more confident, I guess. I wasn't as scared as I was the first time; I didn't have to lie to them. I just basically said, "We're going, and I should be fine, and I already know what it's like, and nothing happened the first time, so nothing should happen the second time."

KS: How was the work different the second time?

SS: It was more maintaining than actually working from dirt up. It was a lot easier, but we moved to make conditions better, because we were still running our operations out of a tent. So we moved that into the JOCC, which is -- Joint Operations Command Center, or something like that, I forget already. But basically moved it into the main area, and we had a lot better working conditions in there, we laid down cement, we put carpet over the cement, we built our own shelves. It was a lot nicer. It actually started looking like an office. When you go inside, we got air conditioners, which was a big plus. It was horrible without air conditioners the first time, that's another thing I forgot to tell you. I had to work night shift a couple of times, and there was no way you were going to sleep during the day. Maybe the first few hours, in the morning, but by like 9 or 10, you were already like pouring in sweat, and it was so hot, you could not sleep at all. But the air conditioners made a big difference the second time. So the air conditioner mechanic was actually my friend, and he was like big hook-up. It's like, as soon as the air conditioner would go bad, Chief [inaudible], one of the guys that worked with us, or he was in charge of us, he said, "Salas! Go get your friend! Our air conditioner's out!" Everyone, "Go get Dean! Go get Dean!" He was a lot of help. He was like maybe -- there were only two other guys

besides him for the entire compound. And all these ACs were going down, and everyone's like, "We need an air conditioner." That was like the biggest thing next to computers. Because computers needed the air conditioner so that they wouldn't heat up and crash.

KS: I can remember hearing, in the news, that somebody was sending air conditioners to the troops as a care package.

SS: Yeah, that's awesome. I got a fan in the mail. Like, this little baby fan, which was great, because I just hung it with this 550 cord across my tent, and I had it blowing right on top of me, so that was awesome.

KS: You said you took pictures and whatnot?

SS: Yes.

KS: Was it different this time, the way you interpreted the local community? Did you just - see things differently now, or appreciate things differently?

SS: Yes. Well, the locals changed. I think their point of view changed a lot. And they started being a little more lenient; they started being a little more understanding. They started getting a little more open with us, and they weren't as mean, and they didn't really hate us as much. Because I know they hated us a lot when we were first there. The females, I actually started seeing them uncovered. Because the first time, they were completely covered in the Burquas, they'd have them all the way to the ankles, and all you could see was their ankles. And the guys would make jokes and say, "Oh, look at the ankles on that girl." Whistle and stuff. But yeah, that was funny, but yeah, they changed a lot. The locals changed a lot. They started being a lot more laid back and talking to us and stuff.

KS: Were you working with the same guys that you were before, when [inaudible]?

SS: Most of them, yes. Except -- the guys that were in charge of me the first time, they got out of the Army. So it was sort of like I only had one other person out there with me, which was still cool, but it wasn't the same. It was -- there was a lot of memories left behind, and you thought, "Wow. It's gone, it's done and over with. It's history." You just got the memories to live by. And I really looked up to them a lot, though, because I learned so much from them. It was amazing.

KS: Those were the original guys that you came over there with.

SS: Sergeant [unintelligible], Specialist Anderson, and Captain Witt [spelled phonetically], which he was Special forces, and he was in charge of us only because he broke his back on a jump, on a combat jump in Columbia. So he was in charge of us because of that, or else he would be out with the teams in the front lines, so -- but he was awesome. I loved him.

KS: Did you ever hear stories about what people were doing out there, I mean, did word spread into the camp about what was going on, and what was it that you heard?



SS: It was very gory. It was -- I actually had nightmares of it a lot. And we had to take anti-malaria pills, methloquin [spelled phonetically], and a lot of people say that those give you basically really bad side effects, psychotic dreams, and I didn't believe it until I finally had a dream, and that was it for me. I stopped taking it, and I know you're not supposed to stop taking them, because of the malaria, but I had that dream, and I was like, I could not wake up. I could not get out of it. It was horrifying. I could not believe it. I was like, "Okay. I'm never saying that that's --

[end of transcript]

SS: ... that's a lie again. I believe it; I completely believe it. I guess some people just don't get the side effects as fast as others, but it took me a while. I took them for like four months, and then I finally had that dream, and I was like, that's it for me. I'm not taking them.

KS: Was this a recurring nightmare that you were having?

SS: Yeah, it was horrible.

KS: And was it based on something that you'd heard, or rumors that you'd heard?

SS: Yeah. It was -- there was one that was actually funny. The dream was just like gory, like people attacking us, and us having to -- we didn't have weapons, and us having to chop them up -- I mean, it was just nasty dreams. And as soon as I had those dreams, because I never really have nightmares, so when I had those dreams, I was like, okay, that's it. I'm not taking this anymore. But as far as like what they were actually doing out there, they were -- I never got to see first hand, but we fixed a lot of their computer systems. So they would save all their pictures on these computers. So you can imagine. I mean, we had guys with heads blown up. People's bodies were just completely, out of socket -- completely twisted, just -- you can imagine. Everything that you can possibly think of a war, it was on those. And the guys -- a lot of the times, that's what they're trained to do. That's what they're there for, and they're keeping us safe. So a lot of that was like their trophies. They kept it, and they put it on there. This was what they accomplished. They'd put it as their screensaver, and here we are, you know, updating their software or what not, we turn on the computer, and this big pictures of this guy's brain hanging out, hanging off the truck, and I'm like, wow.

KS: So it was kind of like their war booty, whereas they took cameras with them.

SS: Yeah.

KS: That kind of -- is that weird for you? Did that seem weird to you?

SS: It was really weird. And since I hadn't really seen such graphic stuff before, I remember my NCO --

[break in audio]

KS: -- the highs and lows of that second deployment.

SS: The second deployment was a lot faster than the first one, only because we knew hey, you know, it's a short tour, and you're only out here for this long, you know. And they gave us a specific date, or at least like a little time frame.

KS: And it was only four months, right?

SS: Yeah, it was only 4 months, so it wasn't quite as bad, but we had it a lot better. Food, the showers, the port-a-potties.

KS: What about hostilities?

SS: Yeah, there wasn't very many mines going off anymore. Every now and then, you'd hear a mortar attack. But it was like on the other side of the airfield, so it wasn't close to us, or we had indirect fire. Just a lot of the times when we would train, it was like just for training purposes. It wasn't like training for when it really happened. And it was a lot smoother than the first time. So it went by fairly fast, and you do come back again, and you have to go through that whole thing again where it's kind of weird to see green again and have clear air and eat a bunch of McDonalds and get sick to your stomach, because you haven't been eating it for so long.

KS: What was the best food you got over there?

SS: Oh wow, we got lucky. The SF compound, which is our compound, everyone wanted to come on it because we had some really good cooks, and they were awesome. I mean, if you want to talk about morale, they kept the morale up like crazy. They helped so much, I cannot imagine. They were almost like the most important on that compound, because everyone looked -- there was this high point of the day, it was dinner. Dinner, dinner, dinner, going to eat. Because they made it fun; they had music playing, they would always find different ways to cook the food. They started networking with these people from Jordan, and we had our meds go out there and inspect the food and do all that stuff, so we started getting like steak and crabs, and we were like, "Yeah, this is better than being back at the states." We're eating like surf and turf, and we had great food. I cannot -

KS: Was that through the Army Medical Specialist corps, or was that just sort of your own thing?

SS: It was through our own unit. SF was just great; I loved it. It's just like a great big family, and the fact that everyone was so close, and everyone looked out for each other, especially the cooks, everybody loved us. And since there was other compounds in other countries, coalition forces around us, they were always like, "Hey, how can we get on your compound so we can eat?" Because they were eating MREs and what not still, but we just -- we had it good. We, as far as eating goes, everyone wanted to be on our compound. So that was great. There was no more losing weight that deployment. It was more like, "Okay, we're going to eat this time." So it was great. And I always ate fruit. We got tons of fresh fruit delivered to us too, like in the supply missions, and that was like my favorite,

because it was so hot, I'd just live off of fruit. I'd go into the big freezers, and put my shirt - open it up and put mangos, and grapes, and oranges, and kiwis, and go on to the top of the roof. That was our mini tanning place, that was our R&R. And we'd roll up our shorts, and we'd have sports bras on, or sometimes we'd order bikinis online, so we could try to get them. And we'd lay out out there on our cots, and get nice tans so when we'd come back to the states we were all nice and tan. So that was a lot of fun when we finally got to kick back, and think, okay, our job is finally done. We just have to maintain.

KS: Did you have any sort of -- USO kind of events, or any sort of entertainment?

SS: Yeah, actually, we had like -- some of the buildings that were left, that were still up, intact, still have roofs and haven't been blown up, we used for MWR purposes. They put up a lot of phones, and they put up some computers. And we had one of those in our compound, where we set up computers, and we had special cables run there so that people could use the computers and surf the web and chat online and what not, use the phones. And then we built a volleyball court. We put up -- we had sand shipped to us, too, and we filled it all up. When we finally got done with the actual work in the mission as far as like building everything, we started thinking a lot more about the morale of the soldiers. That second time, we were like, "Oh no, not again." But it got a lot better as far as the morale went. Oh and we also had like a little Latin night, salsa things, where on Fridays, people would bring in their CDs and we'd have a little sound system that was delivered to the local people, and they'd use them and be like DJs, and people would go over there and just dance and have a good time, popcorn and water and whatnot. But it was good to get away from the normal, usual tent and work environment. It wasn't like a city or anything, you're still in dirt and trodding through rocks and a bunch of stuff, but it was nice to get away and listen to music.

KS: Was there a favorite song or something that you kept coming back to or something that maybe characterizes that?

SS: Oh yeah. I have a whole CD that we sort of put together and burned, and we called it Bagram Beats. It's funny. Since I was the computer geek of the group --

KS: You were making the CDs.

SS: Yeah. They'd bring up all these songs, and they were like, "Put these together, and we'll make a mix." I still have that CD, and I put it in, and I probably know it from front to back. I know all the songs, because we always listened to it, so that's definitely a good memory.

KS: Without naming any names, we kind of talked about this earlier, but could you describe what dating relations were like in your area, and what was the most screwed up about it, and what was the high -- the plus and the minus?

SS: Yeah. It was different. I know anywhere or any work environment there's always going to be here or there, people cheating or people dating this person, or people going behind backs when they're not supposed to be doing it. But there was good points of it too, where for example, one of my friends, her and her boyfriend were in the same unit,

and they got to deploy together, and they got caught doing stuff they weren't supposed to be doing, and our Sergeant Major was pretty cool about it. He just called the formation and basically said, you know, I know everyone has needs. You need to keep it to yourself, don't be doing it where you're not supposed to be. And of course there's fraternizing with officers and enlisted that wasn't supposed to happen, but I don't want to say that I don't blame them, because nobody really knows what it's like to be out there until you actually experience it, because I mean I'm not going to justify that it's okay that married couples do what they're not supposed to do, but it's hard once you're out there, and you don't have your significant other, and you don't have anybody, and you need comfort, and you need somebody to speak to. You're human beings. You need companionship of some sort, and it happens. It's just different, though.

KS: So were you glad to get home this time?

SS: Yes, I was definitely glad.

KS: Was it as hard this time to leave as it was the first time?

SS: It wasn't as hard to leave, just because I knew what to expect, and I knew, okay, this is the way we left it, and you expect to see it like that again. But there was a lot more improvements when we got there, but then there was also things that weren't very good, like the unit that took over was all male. And not going to name any names, but we found bottles full of urine all over the place. I mean, we didn't have problems of snakes or rats when we were there, because we were very clean, and we were very strict on hygiene, because we didn't want camel spiders. We didn't want scorpions. We didn't want rats, because rats meant snakes. These people got there, and they turned the place into trash. And we were -- that was just a disgrace to us. We were like, all this hard work we did. And then finally, you get back and you see that there's urine everywhere. There's rats, there's snakes. The DEFAC [spelled phonetically] where we ate, it became disgusting. We had to spend a whole week before we could actually eat out of it again. Had to scrub it down because there was flies, and flies meant malaria. There was just all sorts of hygiene problems that we had to get rid of before we can actually get back into the ball game, because it was gross.

KS: Well, let's talk about your third deployment. I imagine, just like before, you went back to Fort Bragg and then left again from Fort Bragg. Were you surprised you were being called up for a third time?

SS: Yes. It was more like -- I had a choice at this point. It was like, okay, I told them. They knew I was getting out of the army. They begged me to pretty much go and train the new soldiers, because they -- I wanted to stay in, but I didn't want to keep deploying, because I wanted to finish school and keep going to college, and I was still taking classes online while I was out there. So it was -- it was hard, trying to keep up with online classes, and then come home, and then try to go to college. It was only part time, one class or two classes here and there. But that was my main goal, finish college, because it's a hundred percent TA when you're in the army. And I was like, "This is great. This is awesome. I need to take advantage of it." But there was no way I was going to finish deploying as much as we were. And so when I finally -- they finally knew that I was getting out and that

I was serious, they were like, "We'd like you to deploy again." Pretty much, they didn't -- it wasn't a choice, it was more like, "Okay, you're going, but if you really think that you can't go, then we'll let you get off the hook," pretty much. Because they knew that I was going to school, and I was getting ready to get out, and I needed a transition. But I basically said, "Yeah. I don't mind going. I already know what it's like, I've been twice. I'd love to train them and show them everything." And it was a lot better.

The third time was definitely a lot better. It was super laid back. I was training, and I got to basically do -- it's called the SOR, a Statement Of Request, and it's basically like this great big list of supplies for our shop that I got to work on, and we had like a million dollars to spend. So I got to be in charge of that, and I was like, "Wow. If there's anybody that knows what we need for this office, it'd definitely be me." So I got to fill that out, and I was just going crazy. Fiber optic cable, router switches, the most up to date technology possible so that all of the new soldiers would be totally hooked up, you know, for the years to come so they didn't have to deal with switches blowing up and stuff and bad cables and what not.

KS: Did you find yourself taking the position of a mentor for anybody?

SS: Oh yeah, definitely. The second time, I did a little bit, I was in charge of -- there was two new soldiers at the time, and they sort of looked up to me, followed me around everywhere, because I was showing them around everything, and the third time, there was like four new soldiers, and I definitely had to teach them everything, and basically keep their morale up, because there were like, "Man, this sucks. How did you deal with this for almost seven months the first time; and then the second and third time?" And I'm like, "It really isn't that bad. The first couple of weeks, it's totally understandable, you're going to be homesick, and you're going to be not able to sleep. And it's just going to -- expect the worst, for the first couple of weeks. But afterwards, you'll get over it." They were very nice; they were quite understanding. As soon as I had to leave, they were actually pretty sad, I was actually really sad, too. It was hard.

KS: Because you knew you weren't coming back ever again?

SS: Yeah. I mean, it was like, okay, my time is done. No more Afghanistan. No more all the other places I got to go to. So there was no more traveling.

KS: You think you'll ever go back there?

SS: I don't know. I had -- I think now that I'm married and out of the Army, it's a little different.

[end of transcript]

SS: And out of the Army, it's a little different. Especially if I wanted to have a family. I don't think I could just take off and be like, "See you guys later." But if I wasn't married, I think I'd consider being a contractor and actually going out there as a contractor instead of a soldier. Because we used to think of that, too. We were like, we'd work with contractors, and be like, "How much do you get paid?" And they were like, "90 a year. 90 grand a year." And we're like, we're out here for 6, 7 months busting our butts, and we're

getting paid like 30, 40 --

KS: Sandbagging.

SS: Yeah, sandbagging. And they're getting paid like triple what we're getting paid, and we're like, "We're going to do that when we get out of the army." But it's definitely cool to see all the people.

KS: Well, let's touch on the good and bad of that third deployment. What are some of your more memorable memories?

SS: Of the third deployment? Working with other branches of the military, because we got Air Force and Navy guys, and we had like -- basically some augmentees from different units, and they -- it was different. It was a little weird, and it took us a little bit to get along, because things are so different --

KS: [inaudible]

SS: Yeah, language barriers, and the fact that their rank was different than ours, and they wanted -- demanded this respect in this form, and we did in this way, and we just thought, "Okay, we demand this respect only because we were in charge of this since the beginning, and we brought this place up from dirt." So that was a really big conflict at the beginning. But eventually we all got along, and it was quite fun. Especially seeing from other points of view, like Air Force, the way they went about business, and the way the Navy went about their business also. So it was different. That was definitely memorable, because the Air Force didn't have to do PT while they were out there, and we did, so that was really different. You'd see them, every now and then, the people who actually voluntarily did it. But here are the marines in full battle rattle, running with their weapons and stuff, and we're like -- the Army was like a little bit lower than them, they were like everything except the flak vest, and the weapon. So the Marines were like the hardcore, and then it was Army, and then it was Air Force, and whatnot.

KS: I've heard that before.

SS: It was funny. It was different.

KS: Anything else you want to address on the third deployment?

SS: It was just sad. Leaving, having to leave that second time -- I mean the third time. It all sort of just mixes in together now. Sometimes I'll talk about something and think that it happened the second time, when it really happened the first, or vice versa, and I get all mixed up, so it all seems like a great big mixture of just one long deployment. So it seems like I never went back. One good thing, though, was that when you're out there and you got down, or you were just depressed or what not, a lot of soldiers would go to their bank account and look up their bank account online, and be like, "Yeah, I'm getting paid." Even though it wasn't much, but it was a lot more than just being back in garrison, regular unit. So yeah, I think it was after the first time that I bought my car, and I was so excited, and so that was awesome. That was great.

KS: Tell me, kind of in conclusion or in retrospect, what it meant for you to be a part of Operation Enduring Freedom. What it meant for you to wear that uniform, and you haven't talked much about being patriotic or -- I don't know if that sounds corny, but what does the flag mean to you after having contributed what you have?

SS: Well, the fact that I'm Mexican American and that I came from a Mexican family, that really meant a lot to me, because it was to show that Mexican Americans also deploy, and also went to war, and I'm a female, and just looking at the flag now, it actually -- it's more meaningful to me than it was before I joined the Army. Before it was just okay, yeah, you know at school, you say the Pledge of Allegiance or what not, but now it's like -- sometimes it brings tears to my eyes, remembering it was all -- it feels like a dream. It's just a memory now, and sometimes I wish I could relive it. But I guess it's all for the better, but I'm definitely a lot more patriotic now than I was before. And now I take things a lot more serious, as far as wars go.

KS: Do you ever stop and think about what it must have been like for your parents to come here 40 years ago and have their citizenship questioned and what goes on today about all the kind of Americanization and English only and all of that stuff?

SS: Definitely.

KS: I would think that that it kind of brings it into sharp relief, when you think about your service.

SS: Yeah, it makes a big difference now, especially when people find out that their daughter went and served in the war and whatnot. They don't get it questioned as much anymore, but there was still times where you know, since they're Mexican and people say derogatory terms, or what not, they say "Go back to your country" or whatever. But when you're in the Army, and you realize that there's so many other nationalities besides your own, and everyone in the Army or in the service doesn't see a difference. It's like you're all in the same uniform, you better respect each other, because you're going to be next to this person for your next however many years you have in. If you don't respect each other, how are you going to make it out there when you are in combat or whatever? So it makes a big difference, and the uniform means a lot to me now. I had to return my desert uniforms, which made me a little upset, because they needed them to reissue them. But I got to keep my Boonie Cap, my backpack, I got my boots -- I don't think anyone would want my boots anyway. I got to keep quite a few things, which are still memorable, but I wish I could have kept one of my uniforms. I have my regular, the green BDs, but I don't have my desert ones. But I have the boots, and they have plenty of dust on them so that I can remember the nasty dust.

KS: You never cleaned them?

SS: No, I have them in a bag full of dust.

KS: Can you tell me, I guess, looking back on those three deployments what it is you learned about yourself as an individual?

SS: That I can do a lot more than I thought I could. You get to this point where you think that, you know, you can't do something, or you just don't feel that you can accomplish whatever goals you set. And then you go out there, and you're like, wow. You never could have passed my mind to think that I would be out here, in a combat zone with live fire in different places, doing your job and actually meaning something to the US Army, and having played such an important role. So it's a big relief, and sometimes I do sit back and think, "Wow. I can't believe that I did this." Then sometimes, it's just like, whatever. You know? It doesn't really faze me anymore. I just look back and talk about it, and it's like nothing to me, and people are like, "What? You did what?" And I'm like, you know, just sort of passes by.

KS: What -- let me see. There was a third question I had for you, but now I can't remember it. Oh, if you were going to tell a young woman in uniform the best advice you could give her before her deployment, what would it be?

SS: If she has long hair, take a lot of conditioner. [laughs] No, I mean, at that part, that's like more on the side, but I think overall, it's just if you find somebody that you can confide in or like a friend or even a coworker or just somebody who's in charge of you, just find that person that you can really talk to and spend time with and just hang out with, because it really is meaningful when you're out there. Because if you don't have that somebody, you're just going to go crazy. You're going to be -- nothing to do, no one to speak to. You're not with your family and your significant other. You're going to be with these people that you work with. Now they're -- they've become your family, and you better learn to live with them, or you're going to be out of luck.

KS: And this is my last one, I promise. What does the future have in store for you? What are your career goals or professional goals and personal goals?

SS: Yes. I have -- my personal goal is eventually have kids and have a great family, a big family, not as big as my mom and my dad's, not 12. But maybe 4, that's my max. Professional, I'm still working on my Bachelor's degree. So hopefully in two years I'll have it.

KS: Where are you doing it?

SS: I'm actually at Northern Virginia Community College now, but I'll be moving to California December 1st. That's my home. And then I'll be going to Sacramento State University over there. And I'm majoring in Business Administration, but I think I might change it, just because I have the background in Information Technology. So I might change it.

KS: I bet this experience is going to make you so competitive for job placement.

SS: It has, especially here, but since I -- I'm not really fond of this area. I'd rather go home to California.

KS: [inaudible] this area. Anyway, never mind. All right, well, thank you. You did a great



job.

SS: No problem.

[End of Transcript]