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Transcript of National Archives History Office
Oral History Interview
Subject: Deanna Belamy
Interviewer: Erik Moshe
Date: 09/13/17

MR. ERIK MOSHE: Where were you living when you enlisted?

MS. DEANNA BELAMY: I was living in New Orleans, Louisiana.

MR. MOSHE: Why did you decide to join?

MS. BELAMY: There was a horrible hurricane in the Honduras and I saw what the Louisiana National Guard was doing for not only their community but for other countries, so I wanted to be a part of that.

MR. MOSHE: Why did you pick the service branch that you joined?

MS. BELAMY: So my dad told me I wouldn't make in the Army 'cause I'm too girly. So I joined the Army National Guard [Laughing].

MR. MOSHE: [Laughing]. Do you remember your first days of service?

MS. BELAMY: Yes.

MR. MOSHE: What did it feel like?

MS. BELAMY: Actually, I was a little disappointed because I expected it to be like how it is on TV where people are doing push-ups in the mud and all that kind of stuff, and it really isn't that. I mean, they were mean to us, but it wasn't like on television. I met a lot of people. I saw people that I knew from college and different areas. And immediately they picked up on my New Orleans accent, and they made me a little target. [Laughing]. And I smile a lot, so smiling a lot and being from New Orleans kind of made me a little easy target. [chuckling]

MR. MOSHE: Do you remember your instructors?

MS. BELAMY: Yes. My drill sergeant's name was Drill Sergeant Assad.

MR. MOSHE: What was he like? If you remember.

MS. BELAMY: He was hardcore. He did not play. He had very large eyes and he used them. And one day we were doing a weapons check, and I was not good at weapons checks because I was actually afraid of weapons prior to joining the military. And when he would sit in front of me to do my weapons check, of course, I didn't do it right. And he looked at me in the eyes, and he poked me with his hat in my forehead, and he told me I'm going to step to the side and I'm going to let this person do weapons check. And he goes—and then I'm going to step back in front of you and you'd better have it right or I'm going to break you in half. So when he came back I had it right [Laughing]. And I had it right perfectly, you know, like I was born to do this.

MR. MOSHE: How did you get through boot camp?

MS. BELAMY: How I got through it was my parents threw this huge party when I was leaving to go to basic training, and the whole family, the neighborhood, everybody came out. So there was absolutely no way I could let them down [Laughing]. There were days I wanted to quit, but I was like, how am I going to—my mom, she has the whole neighborhood knowing that her daughter joined—as she'd say, Uncle Sam. Yeah, I'm Uncle Sam's daughter now. So I couldn't disappoint her.

MR. MOSHE: What wars did you serve in?

MS. BELAMY: I served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. I was a Supervisory Casualty Liaison at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait.

MR. MOSHE: Do you remember arriving and what it was like there?

MS. BELAMY: Yes. [Laughing]. When I arrived I was so happy to be there, kind of like Eddie Murphy in *Coming to America*, I was so happy to be there, right? And when I got off the plane, we had on our flak jackets and our weapons and our Kevlars and it was extremely hot, and it was the brightest thing I've ever seen in my life. It's very, very bright. Like the sun shines off the cement and the sand, and so it's very bright. And I looked up, and I saw snipers on the rooftop. And that's when I realized this is real. [Laughing]. And then I kind of calmed down.

MR. MOSHE: What was your job/assignment?

MS. BELAMY: My job in the military was a human resources specialist. I was like a personnel sergeant. But in my deployment, I was a supervisory casualty liaison. Basically, they gave me a regulation. I came up with an SOP, training materials, and I trained my team on how to do casualty reporting. Whenever someone wrote a report, anybody got hurt, it was my job to review the reports, before going on. And I also gave reports that needed to go out.

MR. MOSHE: Were there many casualties in your unit?

MS. BELAMY: No, not in my unit, but unfortunately I did see a lot of casualties working in the hospital.

MR. MOSHE: Was that hard to deal with?

MS. BELAMY: It was because I'm a feeler, you know? I always think about whoa, these people's family member, they have no idea what's coming, you know? I would take special care in writing the report. I would speak to the doctors, speak to the military police and even some of the coalition soldiers to make sure I got as much information as possible to not just explain the medical details of what had happened and the actual incident but also to highlight any heroic or positive things that that individual did.

MR. MOSHE: Can you tell me about a couple of your most memorable experiences out there?

MS. BELAMY: So what happened was we had some insurgents who came on the base. First they blew up our communications, and then some insurgents came on the base. And when that happened, we lost communications for over three weeks. Depending on the buildings people went in, they were able to get internet access or phone access, but I didn't have access for three weeks. One day I went to work and my phone rang. And I said, oh my God, the phone's ringing. And they were like, "oh yeah, Belamy, the phones

came back on this morning.’ And I was like, “oh my God, great.’ So I’m going to call my husband. My husband’s a Marine. And so I called him, now my ex-husband, but at the time my husband. I called him and I was like “hey,” and he’s like, “hey are you okay? I saw everything that happened on the news. And it looks pretty bad.” And I said, “no, I’m fine.” He’s like, “but they had insurgents.’ “Oh, I don’t know anything about any insurgents, I’m good, right?” ‘Cause I didn’t want him to worry. So he’s talking, and there was a whole bunch of commotion coming down the hallway, and when I looked to the left it was Rob Schneider, an actor and a comedian.

And when I looked, I said “oh my God.’ And I hung up the phone on my husband. And I’m 5’8”, okay, and Rob’s 5’5”. And so I jump up, and I start running down the hallway to catch up with him. And the MPs turn around and they’re like, “hey, hey, hey, hey,” and they’re like, “no, no, she works here.’ And I’m saying, “hey, you are my favorite actor” and he goes, “ah, no I’m not.’ And I said, “no, you are. I love you.” He goes — “yeah, right, what movie you seen?” I said, “all of them.” He goes, “what’s your favorite?” I said my favorite is *Deuce Bigalow*, and he goes, “really?” And I said yeah. He goes, “well, what’s your favorite scene?”

And I said “well, it’s not in *Deuce Bigalow*, it’s in another movie. I can’t think of the name of it, but it’s when you’re with this girl and the girl woke up one day and she was you.” And he’s like “okay.” I said “you’re talking to your friend, and you tell your friend, ‘you know I’m not pretty anymore, look at me,’ and she’s ‘oh, no, you’re fine.’ And she was, ‘are you sure?’ And she goes, ‘am I still pretty?’ And she goes, ‘yeah.’ And she goes, ‘on the inside.’” [Laughing]. So everybody, even patients bust out laughing. He’s like in tears. And so he goes, “oh my God, I’ve got to take a picture with her. He goes, “but only if you make that face.” I said “I’ll make the face if you quote it ‘on the inside with me.’” So I have a picture with him with him and I going, “on the inside,” you know? So that’s one of the most memorable times.

MR. MOSHE: Did you get any medals or citations?

MS. BELAMY: Yes. I got what they call ARCOMs, Army Commendation Medals. I received four of them. I got an Army Achievement Medal. I got the National Defense Service Medal.

MR. MOSHE: How did you stay in touch with your family?

MS. BELAMY: I was very fortunate because I worked at the hospital. I had a phone at my desk because of the nature of my job. So I would try to call my family at least once a week to let them know I was okay.

MR. MOSHE: Did you feel pressure or stress?

MS. BELAMY: Oh, most definitely. First, I was in a combat zone. Second, seeing the people come in the hospital made me realize how serious the situation was. Third, I’m a huge family-oriented person, so although I volunteered to go to Iraq, I still missed my family, and I worried about them because my dad was fighting cancer.

MR. MOSHE: Was there something special that you did for good luck?

MS. BELAMY: So I believe in God, and I had called my mom and I told her this is pretty heavy. She sent me three crosses, and one was just a wooden cross, one was a cross made out of palm leaves, and the other one she got it from a Catholic church, a rosary. I hung the rosary in my tent and prayed over my tent, and I carried the wooden one in my front pocket, and the palm was over my bed. And I just believed we’d be okay. And thank God we were. We had no casualties.

MR. MOSHE: How did people entertain themselves out there?

MS. BELAMY: We played cards and we played dominos. I didn't know how to play dominos until I got deployed [Laughing]. But I am an awesome Spades player based off of my deployment. [Laughing].

MR. MOSHE: Where did you travel while in the service?

MS. BELAMY: Most of it was stateside. I was at Fort Jackson in South Carolina. I went to Redstone Arsenal in Alabama. I was at Fort Polk in Louisiana. I was at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. I wasn't stationed but I always traveled to Aberdeen Proving Ground, which is why I live here now because that's how I was introduced to Maryland, and I just thought it was beautiful. I've been some other places, like Rock Island in Illinois. Mostly stateside.

MR. MOSHE: Do you recall any other humorous or unusual event that happened?

MS. BELAMY: Yes. [Laughing]. I'll tell you this one. So my first military duty day, they had me stuffing envelopes in a general's office, and they said the general was out that day, he wasn't there. "But Deanna, if you can go over and help them stuff envelopes because he just became a general, and we're going to have this huge party or whatever and we need to stuff envelopes." And I'm like okay. So I go and stuff envelopes, and this guy walks in with golf clubs. And so I'm like, "hey Sir, how you doing?" And he's like "hey, I've never seen you before." And I said, "I've never seen you before either." And everybody starts laughing [Laughing].

And it's like he goes, "well, I'm Ben." And I said, "nice to meet you, Mr. Ben," you know because I don't know this man to call him Ben. And I said "I'm Deanna." He goes, "oh, nice to meet you, Deanna." So we talked and we talked and we talked. And I mean he made me laugh, I made him laugh. So he goes, "well, Deanna if you ever need a job, you let me know. Here's my card, let me know and we'll try to get you—we'll try to see the type of training you need to get," you know, as a soldier or whatever and this, that, and the other. "And I'll do everything I can to help you." And I said, "well thank you very much, I really appreciate that." I said "but I'm in college right now, but I appreciate that."

So I looked at his card and he was the three-star general over the Louisiana Army National Guard. [Laughing] On my first day at work. I was like, oh my God, so I like busted my knee trying to jump up and stand at attention but I had on civvies, I had civilian clothes on because they didn't have my uniform yet. And he goes, "no, no, no, I'm not in uniform, you're not in uniform." And I was like "still you're like over everything, you know?" [Laughing] It's like—he laughed. And so I said, "well, thank you, you know thank you so much for talking to me." And ever since then he was always nice to me, even when he came to visit us when I was deployed in Kuwait, he saw me and he goes Deanna, and I said, "hey sir." He goes, "I want to hug you but, you know all these people are around." [Laughing]. The New Orleans culture and being in the National Guard, we're more laid back. It's really like a family unit.

MR. MOSHE: What are some pranks that you or others would pull?

MS. BELAMY: I had this E-8 who took vitamins all the time. And he was kind of, I don't know, he has to be taking Red Bull before we knew what Red Bull was 'cause he was really hyper. So we, well not me, but some people [Laughing] because I was too scared, they switched out his vitamins for something else. It was a different kind of vitamins and whatever. And so the whole weekend, 3 days, he was taking a different kind of vitamin which really was just like Vitamin C or something, it was something weird. It wasn't what he thought he was supposed to be taking. And so he kept saying, "I feel different. I feel like my vitamins ain't

working right,” [Laughing]. So the whole weekend we never told him. Because he would have killed us. But we all laughed the whole weekend, the whole PAC was in tears because he really felt the effect of us switching up those vitamins [Laughing]. He was too hyped, he used to run 10 miles and the sing cadence whole time way loud by himself. [Laughing].

MR. MOSHE: Do you remember the day when your service ended?

MS. BELAMY: Yes, I do. I had left a doctor’s appointment because unfortunately I had some injuries from being deployed. When I left I said, “well, let me go to this ID place and see if they can give me a new ID because this other one’s about to expire.” So when I went to go get my ID, the lady told me she couldn’t give me a new ID. And I was like, “well, I don’t understand. Why not?” And this is Randolph Air Force Base. I’m about to retire, but they’re still doing the paperwork. She goes, “actually your retirement was effective last, I think it was like Thursday” or something, and I was like what? And I say it like the Minion, “What?” You know? [Laughing]. And people started looking. I was like, “oh my bad, hold on, hold on.” I really was retired already? And she goes like “you are retired.” And I said “oh my God.” She said “do you want to get your ID?” I said “the blue one?” She goes, “the blue one.” They took my picture, and if you ever saw my retirement ID you’d fall out laughing ‘cause it’s real cheesy, like you could see all 32 of my teeth. You know because I was so excited. [Laughing].

MR. MOSHE: Did you work or go back to school after?

MS. BELAMY: Oh, most definitely. I became an intern, human resource civilian intern for the Department of Defense.

MR. MOSHE: Was your education supported by the GI Bill?

MS. BELAMY: Yes. And actually I didn’t use my GI Bill a lot, so I have some years left of it. So I’m going to go ahead and apply to go to Howard University now that I live here.

MR. MOSHE: Did you make any close friendships while you were in?

MS. BELAMY: Yes, most of my friends, I went to a class about networking, and I’m working on meeting people who are not military or government affiliated because all of my friends are military and government affiliated.

MR. MOSHE: Have you ever tried to access your military records at NARA?

MS. BELAMY: No, because I already have all my records. I was a personnel sergeant, so I already had my records. My records were on the wall in the office I worked in. So I always had a copy of my records.

MR. MOSHE: Did you join a veteran’s organization?

MS. BELAMY: I did not but I have had a few people reach out to me to join, and I have the application recently for the VFW, the DAVs, and the American Legion. I’m going to put in for all of those because now I actually like where I’m at, so I don’t plan on relocating.

MR. MOSHE: What did you go on to do as a career after the war? I know you stayed in HR, you said.

MS. BELAMY: Yes, I stayed in HR; really, it was more personal. I was able to nurture my personal

relationships with my friends, my family, my nieces, and my nephews. I met an awesome guy. I'm engaged. We're getting married next year. So things I didn't have time to do when I was in the military. I also do a lot of community service with my church.

MR. MOSHE: Did your military experience influence your thinking about war or about the military in general?

MS. BELAMY: Most definitely.

MR. MOSHE: How did your service and your experiences affect your life?

MS. BELAMY: I think I'm very happy-go-lucky now because I realize how short life is. I think my parents did a good job of raising me to be respectful and loyal and to be a hard worker, but the military just magnified that. I believe in cohesion, looking out for one another; when I see somebody's a backstabber, I don't like that, because it doesn't make anybody look good including the snitch, you know what I mean? Pull together and make one another stronger.

MR. MOSHE: Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered?

MS. BELAMY: I love my country. I love being able to serve it in a civilian capacity. And I think NARA is pretty awesome. I met a lot of great people.