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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT
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Fayetteville, North Carolina

Interviewed by Kate Scott on 9 February 2005
for the Women's Memorial Oral History Program

[Beginning of Transcript]

Micheala Hicks: Hi I'm Captain Mickala Hicks and I am an engineer officer in the 20th Engineer Brigade, 27th Engineer Battalion. Right now I'm the S1 Adjuvant [spelled phonetically] for the battalion and basically I'm looking over all the personnel and administrative stuff that goes on within the battalion.

Kate Scott: Tell me when and where you were born and a little bit about your childhood.

MH: Well I was born in Iowa City and then I lived in Texas for about 10 years after that. We lived in El Paso then we moved up to Ohio when I was about 10 and Ohio is kind of where I claim home now. That's where I went to high school, middle school and everything. My parents are still there and I've got six younger brothers and sisters. When I was about 13 we started having foster kids come live with us. The first five of us were all natural brothers and sisters and then we started having a bunch of different foster kids come live with our family and then my parents ended up adopting the youngest two. So my youngest brother and sister are quite a bit younger they're 7 and 10 and that makes it fun. You know I go for holidays and it's still Santa Claus is still real and [laughs] all those things.

Scott: Yes, a big family. Was there anybody in your family that had prior military experience?

MH: Not my immediate family. I'm actually the oldest so now I've got four younger brothers and sisters that are all in the military or doing ROTC, so by the time my littlest brother, natural brother anyway, we'll have a lot of Hick's in the military [laughs].

KS: Very good. What inspired you to join the army?

MH: What's funny I didn't really understand what West Point was when I first found out about it. It was -- to me it was just another college option. It was something that I looked into and I started to look more into the military aspect of it once I started the application process and it sounded like something I wanted to do. It offered something different than any other college to me and once I got there I started to understand what the military was all about. Yeah that's when for me it really hit home that this was the army and not just a different college and I think I just really bought into a lot of the values that they tried to instill and it kind of went right along with what my family had tried to raise us with any so it just seemed like I fit there and I liked it.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about your experience at West Point. You graduated in 2001. Did you have any sort of difficulty as a woman at West Point?

MH: It's funny I didn't really notice any difficulty as a woman at West Point. There are times when it's been more difficult as a woman in the military or in certain environments just because there are so few of us, but it never seemed like we were differentiated much while we were there and I think the biggest wake up call to me was I had mentioned to you before I went to Sapper School and that was the first time that they had women go through. And so it was that was a different experience. I think there were different situations we were put in that caused a little consternation between the genders, but everybody handled it pretty well. I was surprised [laughs].

Interviewer: That's pretty remarkable that the first time women through Sapper School you were there and --

MH: -- and you know what there may have been -- there may have been one or two people before that had come through and I don't that anybody had graduated before that or gone all the way through the course. I'm not really sure how that worked out.

Interviewer: Explain just for people that don't who don't know why that might be unusual for a woman to go through Sapper School and to complete successfully.

MH: Well I guess it was always --

Interviewer: Wasn't it physically--

MH: It was very physically demanding. It's generally as sort of a smaller Ranger School in a sense and Ranger School is just known for crazy hours, no sleep, little food, a lot of physical endurance requirements and there was a three month train-up that we did to be able to go and every morning we would get up and do physical training from like 5:30 to 6:30 and then I had basketball practice in the afternoon and then another run with another team I was on at that time. And so during that time I think I was probably more physically -- I don't know that I was more in shape than I am now, but I was definitely working out more than I ever have in my whole life.

Interviewer: Was there every a point when you questioned your -- not dedication but when you whether or not you wanted to do this, may be whether you even wanted to complete Sapper School or --

MH: I think for all of us who went through whether it was a guy or a girl there were moments every time we started another -- just another day even when we were -- just everyone was -- it just seemed too hard like you just don't want to do -- you don't want to get up that morning to go to school you don't want to get up to go to the work out, but I think the biggest thing that I've learned is the team kind of camaraderie that you have and just your own personal pride and drive. Like you don't want to let yourself down, but you don't want to let the people around you down either and you start to feel very almost dependent within your group and part of the group for me was actually knowing that there were other women who had wanted this opportunity and for whatever reason they were a couple of years older and just missed the boat or whatever it was like I was given the opportunity and there was no way I could let them down so it was like knowing that other people who probably were much more qualified than I was wanted to do it and didn't have that opportunity made it that much more important to me to finish it and do it well [laughs].

Interviewer: And so what happened after Sapper School? You went TDY at McGill [spelled phonetically] Air Force Base?

MH: No that was -- yeah actually after Sapper School I just went back to school as a regular cadet, finished my last two years as a cadet and nothing too much came of it. That did kind of shape I think which branch I choice just because I liked the engineer realm. That was really the only thing I knew about so much and it seemed to me kind of the toughest one for women; aviation is another one, MPs are another one. You know they're all pretty much the same now I can say as far as the tough factor, but to me at the time engineer seemed like it was it.

Interviewer: And you were already in uniform the days the towers and the Pentagon came down.

MH: Yeah we had just been commissioned in May of that -- or June of that year.

Interviewer: How did that day affect you as a service woman?

MH: It definitely --

Interviewer: As a soldier?

MH: It definitely changed my perspective on what my commitment to the army was going to be. I think all through West Point we were kind of brought up with this mentality of what army life is going to be like when we got out and it was portrayed oftentimes as you're going to go to a certain location for a few years and you're going to possibly deploy in some sort of humanitarian service realm or whatever it would be and

you're going to -- there was kind of a timeline that the upper ranking officers laid out for us and could kind of say this is what I did when I was a lieutenant. This is what I did when I was a captain. That's all changed. I mean a lot of my friends now have gone on three or four deployments by the time they're a captain. I've been to Korea and then been to Iraq. And so it's just that I think it changes your perspective and you know that you're looking at a different Army. You're constantly going to be deployed if you stay in and being at war does make a huge difference in really evaluating what it is your doing to serve your country I think. It makes you very proud I think of being in the service. Like when 2001 happened I felt like I had more of a connection somehow to the country just because we were in the service. I don't know if it's the same for everybody, but --

Interviewer: No I think that's a familiar statement anyway that I've heard when that question posed. Let's talk a little bit about your platoon leadership in Korea.

MH: Okay [laughs].

Interviewer: No I mean how many people were in your -- I guess how many people were in a platoon for -- and what kind of responsibilities did you have and what was that assignment like for you?

MH: Korea was honestly harder than being deployed to Iraq in a combat zone just because of the tempo that we were expected to keep. My experience is probably different than other peoples just because while we were there we -- I was in a company where we had a very distinct mission, which was to support the 2ID, which is 2nd Infantry Division. A platoon for me had about 35 people, but it also had about 35 pieces of large equipment and those were trucks, graders [spelled phonetically], Cs [spelled phonetically], dozers [spelled phonetically] and that equipment was constantly having to have maintenance repairs done to it just because it was used so much and we were on missions probably every other day if not everyday. When I say missions we were driving on convoys out to different sites to either load or download stuff or to actually do engineer missions which would be like temporary road work or compaction or anything of that nature and we went to the field probably about a month at a time the three different times I was there. There was -- it was -- it always seemed like we were working. It seemed like even on weekends because you were right there with your job it seemed like we were always doing something. Iraq was a little bit different for me because I had a different type of platoon a different a mission and we were able to kind of determine our hours a little bit more.

Interviewer: When exactly was the Iraq assignment?

MH: It was after the war had started in September of '03 and then went to March -- or we got back late March of '04.

Interviewer: Well tell me about your site. You mentioned that you were just starting to talk a little bit about your assignment in Iraq.

MH: I again had a platoon. I was lucky in that sense because a lot of times platoon leaders once they've had a year of platoon leader time like I had in Korea go straight to a staff job or an XO position or whatever it is and it's good to have platoon leader time because you're in a leadership position and it's a lot of fun but it's also a lot of work because you've got people that have needs every single day and needs in ways that you never imagined [laughs] or that I never imagined. I just never imagined that I would get involved in some criminal cases that I've gotten involved in, some of the family issues that I've had to see. People who can't support their children or their wives with the pay that they're on or some of the -- getting woken up in the middle of the night on the weekend to go pick up somebody from jail because they were drinking and driving. Just those type of issues are things that in the civilian world I don't think are really part of a job even if you're in a leadership position, but it comes to be expected --

Interviewer: -- in the military.

MH: You are in the military and you have to take of them and if you don't -- if you don't take of their families as well then you're not going to have the performance that you need to do life and death missions. It requires a lot growing up I think in a very fast sort of way [laughs].

Interviewer: Let's see if you were in Iraq September through March tell me about Jumpmaster School when did that happen? Was that after --

MH: I did that in October of this -- just this last year. And so I just finished the Jumpmaster School and I got my -- finished the graduation on December 31st. They had so many people backed up that we had to do our final test on the 31st of December, or on the 21st of December.

Interviewer: So on your uniform don't they give you wings?

MH: You know I haven't gotten to the point where I get a star yet. I have -- once make Jumpmaster you have to do 30 jumps, 15 of them have to be combat jumps -- or combat equipment jumps -- and then you have to do three separate duties. That's what you have to do to get the star. I still have one duty left and I have about six more jumps to go.

Interviewer: How does that work by the way? I mean the jumps, how do they -- I don't even know --

MH: What is it like to hook up?

Interviewer: Yeah explain maybe what you do when you get -- the details that you go through to make sure you're set to go and --

MH: You know this is funny because --

Interviewer: -- or how does it feel maybe or not [laughs].

MH: I've never really been afraid of heights but I think there's this sense of like once you see the door and you see everything rushing at you get adrenalized, I do anyway and it's kind of exciting. It's get your blood pumping for some people it's scary. There's other things that I'm scared of but heights isn't really one of them. So for me it seems kind of normal. When you get up you just walk up onto the back of the aircraft and you'll have your parachute already rigged up before you get on -- when I say rigged up it comes in a harness over your back and the parachute is actually on your back and there's a line that comes out of the parachute and it's hooked onto your reserve parachute right here. When they tell you to stand up you stand up and you unclip the static line that comes out of the parachute and you hook on to a big cable that runs along in the plane and once you do that there's a whole series of commands that they give and they do some inspections and checks and everything. That's the Jumpmasters suit -- when I say they. They do these commands that you have to do and everybody does the same thing at the time, does the inspection on each other and then you walk up with your static line that's attached to your parachute in hand and you give it to the Jumpmaster as you go out the door. He pulls the static line and as you jump out the door the static line pulls the parachute out of the pack and then it releases it. And so then your parachute is open and you're good to go.

Interviewer: But you in fact are trained now to be a Jumpmaster. You're trained for that position where you're the last one off the plane is that right?

MH: You're either the last off the plane or you pull a duty, which is called a safety. There's two different duties as a Jumpmaster and I've been a safety two times so far. I've actually had some kind of scary experiences with that. What happens when you're a safety is you check everybody's lines to make sure they're ready to go and that they're not kinked up in anyway that could cause harm or whatever and then you stand at the front, you take the static lines as they come in and watch the people go out the door. The Jumpmaster is the one who gives all the commands and who then stands by. He has to look for reference points to make sure that we're lined up on the drop zone correctly and he'll look out the plane to make sure it's lined up correctly and then he'll give the one minute mark, and then he'll give a thirty second warning and once he's given the thirty second warning he'll tell the jumpers to standby and then he steps out of the way and let's them all go through. As you know the green light -- there's a green light that comes on that tells you that it's okay to jump and the pilots put that on. The pilots may put a red light on and if the red light goes on then nobody jumps out because there's something wrong with either the drop zone or something the pilot can see that we can't. And so once we have green light we send everybody out. Then the Jumpmaster looks to make sure everybody is out safe, and jumps out. Then safety looks out and makes sure nobody is getting towed. Which you know would be if there --

Interviewer: Ohh!

MH: -- they got caught up some how on the plane. So you check to make sure nobody is getting towed. You pull all the static lines with the deployment bags back in, you're good to go [laughs].

Interviewer: That's incredible. You mentioned there were a couple of incidences that freaked you out as safety. Can you explain what happened?

MH: What was funny about it is that -- well the first time didn't really freak me out too much because I didn't realize that anything had really happened that was abnormal. We had a kid in the back whose reserve deployed that means that the parachute on front of him some how got caught, the handle got caught, and it started to deploy out. Nothing bad happened of that so it wasn't really a big deal. But as the load master, which is the, one of the guys from the Air Force opened up the door, he told us it was thirty seconds right then so that right there gave us you know about three minutes less time than we thought we had to get ready and get everybody positioned and so that was a little bit nerve racking. Not so much for me, but more for the Jumpmaster and then you know everything went fine. That jump was great. The second jump though that I was safety for, everything went as normal we thought, until we pulled back in the static lines and we noticed that one of the static lines had been cut about chest level from here and right away we like we looked at it. All the Jumpmasters that were still on the plane looked at each other we had to tell the plane to -- the pilots to land the plane and we had to do an investigation basically starting right then because the static line being cut meant that the parachute on the guy who jumped out probably didn't deploy and so that was -- that was really scary knowing that and wondering what had happened not having been able to see it. We didn't know if somebody was dead on the drop of zone or what and so there was about five hours time right there where everybody was trying to find what exactly had happened and also then there's the standpoint that even if the guy is fine and he's okay, which he turned out to be fine, thank god. He pulled his reserve parachute, his main parachute never deployed. But he pulled his reserve and he we good to go. But I mean there's these thoughts going through your head that did I do something or was there something I didn't do that could have caused this to happen and not knowing whether he was okay or not. It was just -- I mean it was so much -- it was a lot of stress and there's been a lot of situations like that since I've been in the army where you realize that as a leader you are in these situations -- whether its your fault or not -- where you're responsible for somebody's safety and welfare. I mean it was just another wake up call to me that -- they've pretty much closed the investigation saying that they don't think there's any fault on the part of the Jumpmaster team which is a great relief to us, but at the same time knowing that somebody could have been seriously hurt or killed it's just -- it's kind of scary. It's kind overwhelming at times to realize that you have that much responsibility on you and I guess that's why -- that's why they train us in the ways that they do to take responsibility for things that happen in our realm whether they're our fault or not.

Interviewer: You said that in your bio -- you said you had some practical work in the aircraft, do you remember what intention you had?

MH: That was -- that's PWAC [spelled phonetically], practical work is the last test that we do before we graduate Jumpmaster School.

Interviewer: Okay so that's what you have left to do?

MH: I just finished that in December. I'm good to go, yeah [laughs].

Interviewer: Let's see this you mentioned this is not your first deployment to Iraq and there's a possibility, Kelly mentioned that there's a possibility that you guys will be deploying again soon.

MH: Well that was my first deployment to Iraq and my only one so far. But there's always the possibility I could be deployed again soon in the future. I hoping that right now with the way the cycle is for my battalion that I'll be able to leave in April to go to the advanced course, which would be in Fort Leavenworth, Missouri. I may or may not come back to Fort Bragg after that. There's a lot of different deciding factors and pretty much the needs of the Army [laughs] if they want me to come back then they'll tell me I'll come back and that's the way it is, but --

Interviewer: So how many jumps did you have in Iraq?

MH: No we didn't jump at all in Iraq and to be perfectly honest there's very few jumps that they do anymore in actual combat zones unless it's just in a location where they need to get people to very quickly and they don't have access to by land or air -- or land or sea I should say. In our circumstances we were able to just drive in and it was fine so [laughs].

Interviewer: When I'm thinking about Sapper School and Jumpmaster School and it seems like there have been times in your career where've you really had to -- you've been kind of up against a wall, and you've probably had to draw on some sort of reservoir within to endure. I mean this is natural for anybody, civilian or soldier, whatever. Do you pray, do you run, do you journal, do you write letters? What is it that you do to --

MH: It's funny you kind of mentioned pretty much all the things that I do. I'm very -- I like to consider myself very spiritual. I mean I'm definitely religious. I grew up Catholic and my family is very -- has always kind of fostered that. God is really my only source of strength. There were a lot of times that have just seemed like they were overwhelming. Especially when we were in Iraq there were moments when we knew of people that had died or friends of ours that had lost arms or legs or whatever it was, and I really think that drawing on my faith life experiences and just the knowing that there's a higher purpose for all of us was the only thing that kept me going through a lot of it. I think -- or a lot of the people around me were stronger than me in different senses that were able to help me you know kind of see the light in some ways or see the light at the end of the tunnel. Any experience that I've had I haven't gotten through without the help of other people. You know it's -- I guess that's one of the other things too, that every since I've come into the army that I've really leaned on and learned and grown as a

person because there's a lot of things that you can't control by yourself. There's a lot of things that you can't control in life and it's part of growing up I guess to know what your weakness are and to know where other people are stronger than you, or what things you have to just offer up to God if you believe him or to fate or whatever it is.

Interviewer: You have your parents, they're supportive of you right?

MH: They're -- yeah they've been amazing yeah. I have an amazing family and I just, without them I wouldn't be where I am today by any means [laughs].

Interviewer: Are you married or --

MH: No.

Interviewer: No marriage, no children.

MH: No, no and it's been something I want and do want and have wanted and I hope it will come in the future. We'll see. I hate to blame it on the military but it does make it difficult [laughs]. You know being gone, not knowing what your life is going to be like for the next two or three months even it does make it a little bit more difficult.

Interviewer: Maybe it's nice that you're getting all of these experiences now and later in your career you can say you've done that. You know what I mean?

MH: Yeah and there's a part of me even when I do settle down I guess that is going to be drawn to some of the more exciting experiences that I've had in the military. And so it's going to be a challenge and I think it's a challenge for any woman whether she is in the regular civilian world work force or in the military whatever it is to -- because you're torn between wanting a family and home and all things that go with that, being the kind of mother that maybe your mother was or that you want to be and then also giving as much of yourself as you can to your profession or the things that you think are important in your job. So it's a --

Interviewer: That's right.

MH: Yeah it's a huge dichotomy I guess [laughs].

Interviewer: Women are still excluded from some of the more elite special forces, like the Navy Seals for example, or what not and as a competent, physically-fit leader how do you make sense of that?

MH: It's frustrating [laughs]. It is in certain senses. In certain senses I realize that there is -- there are reasons for it at this time, some of them are good, some of them are bad. One thing I was disappointed about was Para-Rescue in the Air Force was something that I was actually interested in looking at and I knew that there was a possibility that they were going to open it up to women. It may still be a possibility, but I

had recently looked into that option of transferring even branches just so that I could something that I thought was really fulfilling and exciting and would be what I wanted to do and it's not open and that's disappointing, but I just figured that maybe it will be open to women someday. Maybe it's just not meant for what I'm supposed to do with my life right now. So I'm okay with it.

Interviewer: I don't know if you heard recently there's been a little wave of publicity about George Bush's comments on the women in combat. As you know, having been there, the situation now is kind of there are no front lines. We are in a war with no front lines and then we have someone -- I'm trying to be objective with this question but it's not sounding like that, but I guess similarly what are you --

MH: I think I know what you're asking.

Interviewer: How can you -- how do you make sense of that? Here you are jumping out of planes and training people for combat and doing all kinds of things and your going to a war where there really is no combat zone. What --

MH: I just -- I think I know --

Interviewer: I don't know how to explain.

MH: I know what you're asking and I think it's something that we've talked about a lot, a lot of the women that I know. There aren't front lines and there's situations that women find themselves in right now today and have found themselves in. I've had a really good friend from my basketball team in college lose her arm in Iraq. You don't -- there is no front line and people use the excuse well American is not ready to see their women coming back in body bags or this and that, well they are. I'm sorry they are and I think for me as a woman I look at it as: I am soldier, I'm doing my job, if I get killed I am doing something that feel is serving my country. For some of us there's more fear of having lived in vain than having died in vain. I don't see my life as being anymore valuable or different than a man's life. And so to me it just seems like a very odd, you know like we can't have women in combat well why not if they're physically competent what really are we trying to protect. I mean we're volunteers just like the rest of the men and we don't have enough men volunteering right now to fulfill all the needs of the Army. So to draw these lines your sometimes then taking women out of situations where they would be possibly the better leader. I mean just because she's a woman doesn't mean that she is not going to be the better leader in that situation and I see it as -- I see it as sad in some ways that we might actually take away some of the opportunities that women have found themselves in in a combat zone. I'm not saying that anybody wants to be in a situation where they die or where they're going to be potentially killing someone, nobody wants that. But if you want to put the best people in those positions to make the right decisions and to take care of soldiers and to be there I think those lines are going to have to break down. I really do because there are a lot of women who've got what it takes to do that and I've seen it already [laughs]. So I don't know. I mean it's up for debate and I feel differently about it then I did even in high school. I thought it was --

I don't have the desire to do some of the things that I know friends of mine have had to do in different combat situations, but if I was put in that situation I know could.

Interviewer: Now let's see. We're at thirty minutes. You're doing really good.

MH: [laughs] Thanks.

Interviewer: Maybe in conclusion or your reflection if you can comment on what your experiences thus far have taught you about yourself and also end by saying what it means for you, Mikey Hicks [spelled phonetically], to serve in the military with this very distinguished group of people.

MH: Well it's a -- well I guess what the military has taught me about myself would have to be that it's okay to fail sometimes. It's okay to not be the best at something and it's okay to not be perfect, but it's not okay to give up. You have to keep trying -- trying to better yourself, trying to get there, trying to accomplish the mission, trying to do whatever it takes to become the better person and become -- to make yourself better, to make your team better, to make the mission happen in the best possible way. You're going to fail sometimes. You're going to drop the ball on things, but you can't let that define you and you have to pick yourself up and keep going. That's what the military has taught me about that. For me Mikey Hicks being military is just -- I'm very proud of the experience that I've had. I'm very proud to be serving along side people that are dedicated to something greater than themselves. There's a lot of really amazing people that I've met since I've been here and they've really inspired me to be the best that I can be.

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