

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT
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HOLLY HARRISON

INTERVIEW BY: KATE SCOTT

[Beginning of Transcript]

Kate Scott: ... program, for the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, in partnership with the Library of Congress Veteran's History project. My name is Kate Scott, and it's my privilege to have Lieutenant Commander Holly Harrison here from Charleston, South Carolina. She's a representative of the United States Coast Guard, and she's also the executive officer of the Coast Guard Maritime Law Enforcement Academy. So thanks for being here.

Holly Harrison: My name is Lieutenant Commander Holly Harrison. I'm currently the Executive Officer of the Coast Guard's Maritime Law Enforcement Academy in Charleston, South Carolina. As second in command of the unit, it's my duty to make sure that the daily execution of training for the students and qualifications for the staff are executed.

KS: So it's really a training facility for people that are in the coast guard that are going out to do law enforcement?

HH: Absolutely. It's a fairly new training facility; it was just formally established 1st of December 2004. The Coast Guard consolidated several Law enforcement schools that were scattered around the Coast Guard into one Law Enforcement Training Academy.

KS: What are some of the -- just give me a basic rendition of what the curriculums are like -- faculty [inaudible]

HH: We have three primary classes we teach. The main one we teach is our Boarding Officer course. It's 6 weeks, and that's the one for the personnel who lead the teams going out on the boats to do the law enforcement boardings. They're the ones who have to make the decisions, can they arrest someone, can they seize the cargo. And they don't have a judge or a magistrate right there who can issue them a warrant to do those things, so they have to understand those legal concepts, they have to be able to defend themselves and enforce regulations. So it takes a while, and it's a tremendous amount of responsibility for them. The other course, second course, would be our boarding team member course. It's 2 weeks long, and those personnel are trained so that they can support the boarding officer when the boarding officer is executing their duties. The third course we currently teach is the Marine Patrol Officer Course, and that's a course -- kind of a Train the Trainer course for state and local marine wildlife and fisheries personnel, the coast guard provides, and within the next year we'll be adding a few more

law enforcement courses to the curriculum.

KS: How do your students come to you? Do you choose them or select them, or is it something they decide they want to do [inaudible]?

HH: It's usually a decision. Usually, most of our students want to be there. They ask their commands, and the commands are required to keep a certain number of law enforcement personnel ready to go, based on the size of their command. Their commands submit their name, and everyone kind of jockeys for a slot, and they receive orders when their name comes up.

KS: How did you get into this? How did you get into law enforcement, period?

HH: I got into Law Enforcement because I've been stationed on cutters, three cutters so far. And when you're a junior officer on what we call a white hall cutter, that's a huge part of your mission. My first cutter, besides learning how to be an officer of the deck, I was a boarding officer. So I went through this training quite a few years ago, and I was doing law enforcement boardings myself. My second ship: still doing boardings, and then when I had command of my third ship, I was sending teams over to do the boarding. So because I had the experience doing law enforcement in the field, that's why I got submitted to be XO.

KS: What were the three cutters that you were on?

HH: First one was Coast Guard Cutter [unintelligible], she stationed out of Kodiak Alaska, and she was and still is what we refer to as the Queen of the Fleet. She's the oldest one still commissioned. Second one was Coast Guard Cutter Kiska [spelled phonetically], which is 110 foot patrol boat stationed out of Hilo, Hawaii, which is the big island of Hawaii. And the third one was Coast Guard Cutter [unintelligible], another 110 stationed out of Fort Macon, North Carolina, although about halfway through that tour, it was -- the home port was shifted to [unintelligible], Bahrain.

KS: And that was the ship that you commanded, and you went overseas and supported Iraqi Freedom, right?

HH: Yes.

KS: Okay. Well, before we get to that -- because I do want to talk in detail about that experience and that deployment, but -- what -- can you kind of take me through, first of all, when and where you were born, and what your parents were like as people? Siblings and religious background?

HH: Okay. I was born in Tucson, Arizona. My dad was in the Marine Corps at the time flying F-4 Phantoms over in Vietnam. My mom had been in stationed with him at [unintelligible], Hawaii, but when her unit deployed over to Vietnam, women weren't allowed to go in those days, so she couldn't go with her unit, and then, of course, she

finds herself pregnant, and in those days the Navy had no idea what to do with a pregnant officer. So basically, that ended her military career, which she occasionally likes to remind me that I'm the cause of that. And she went back to Arizona, which is where my grandparents are from, so she had me in Tucson, Arizona while my dad was overseas.

KS: When is your birthday?

HH: December 13th, 1972. And he got the little telegram overseas, that's how he knew, and then after the war, dad came back, and the Marine Corps was downsizing. They wanted him to manage the exchange, because he had a business degree. Well, to go from flying fighter jets to managing the exchange wasn't quite the career move that he was looking for, so he got out and joined the FBI. So when I was younger, we moved around while he was a special agent for the FBI going after the mafia, and some Russian spies in DC. That's how I ended up in the DC area eventually. My parents did divorce when I was in 2nd grade, but -- I guess one of the rare cases these days, they got along. They're still friends to this day. They never played games with my brother and I, throwing one against the other. So my dad had settled here in DC, and then got out of the FBI and became a Defense Contractor. Mom came here, got a job, and I grew up in the Washington, DC Area, in Vienna, Virginia.

KS: Tell me a little bit more about your mom. Did you live with her when you were a kid?

HH: Yeah, mom had custody of my brother and I. And she would drive down -- when my dad was here. She went to school to get her master's degree in New York, and she'd pile us into the car, drive us down here to see dad, pile us in the car to go back.

KS: And she was Navy, and -- well, I guess, when and where did you graduate from High School?

HH: I graduated in 1990, from Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Annandale, Virginia.

KS: And when you graduated, did you have any particular goals or dreams, did you know what you wanted to do?

HH: Oh, I knew I wanted to get into the Coast Guard.

KS: Really? First of all, why the coast guard, and secondly, why military service, more broadly?

HH: My mom's side of the family, particularly, is very heavy military. My grandfather was in the Navy, went to the Naval Academy, became a fighter pilot. Great Grandfather served with World War II, he was commander of Submarine Pacific Forces during World War II. Got an Air Force base named after Great, Great Uncle Oscar Monthan [spelled phonetically] in Arizona. My two aunts served, I've got a cousin at the Air Force

Academy. So I kind of had a military history, even though I don't remember my parents in the military, they'd refer to it, they'd talk about it. So it was kind of around. And then, one fateful day, I was at school, and they have after school programs at school, and you can go check them out in the career center, and they made an announcement that someone from the US Naval Sea Cadet Corps was going to be visiting that day. I had no clue what it was, never heard about it, but thought I'd check it out. And I signed up, and they threw a uniform on me, it's kind of like Junior ROTC, except they take it from the enlisted -- you work through the enlisted Navy ranks, and it's sponsored by the Navy League of the United States. And so part of that is the way you get advanced is you take the actual tests -- the basic military requirements tests, and you have to go get experience with military. So I spent some time on some Navy ships, spent some time out in [unintelligible] California, with the flight squadrons out there.

And then, one day, I was looking for some training, because I wanted to get advanced, and there was nothing available in the two-week period in the summer that I needed. So I ended up spending two weeks down at the Coast Guard recruiting office in Alexandria, Virginia. So for 2 weeks, I was surrounded by Coast Guard recruiting paraphernalia, making it look all cool and glamorous, and, okay, it's pretty interesting. So the next time I went looking for some training, I went down to the Coast Guard -- then it was reserve training center, Yorktown, Virginia, and spent 2 weeks at the Small Boat station down there. And then later went to Coast Guard Station, Miami, for another two weeks.

KS: You've been getting some choice assignments. [inaudible] I think it's really pretty there, and then Miami...

HH: Yeah, it was -- once I kind of got a --

KS: Kind of big for an 18-year-old, right?

HH: Oh, actually, I was probably 15, 16, 17.

KS: Oh my gosh! Still in High School.

HH: So I went down to do all that stuff. My parents were -- they thought it was great, of course, any parent who has a high school kid actually interested in something thinks it's great. But I had a great time with it. I think Mom was a little worried with some of the stuff I came across, but I guess she watched my reaction with some of the things that happened, and figured, "Okay, I guess this is what she wants to do."

KS: So what about college, what happened after your experiences with these coast guard recruiting and training centers?

HH: I applied for the Coast Guard Academy when I graduated, but they turned me down. I was blind as a bat, and they said, "Nope, you don't meet our eyesight requirements." But I had heard they were looking at adjusting the eyesight requirements. The enlisted could have 20/500 vision, as long as you could correct it, but officers, the standard was

20/200. So since I had heard that they were going to adjust it and make the officers 20/500 as well, I figured, okay, next year I'll apply. So I went to a small college called Pfiffer College at the time, it's now Pfiffer University, college where I knew I could get involved in some sports, get good grades. The college had a great reputation.

KS: Where is it?

HH: It's in a real tiny little town called Meisenheimer, North Carolina [spelled phonetically]. It's literally -- last time I was there, it was literally 2 roads crossing in the middle of nowhere, but it may be more built up now. But I went there to basically get a year of college in, keep some good grades, and reapply to the coast guard academy and made it my second attempt.

KS: Boy, you were bound and determined.

HH: [laughs] One way or another.

KS: That's great. Okay. And so what happened after your academy experience? You had been there in the -- what was the timeframe you were at the academy?

HH: While I was at Pfiffer College, that was when the Persian Gulf War hit. So that was -- we were all sitting around our dorm rooms, of course, watching all this stuff, so I got to the Coast Guard Academy right after the Persian Gulf War ended, went through the four years of basic standard military academy training.

KS: Were you -- how many -- what was the ratio of men to women at the Coast Guard academy? Did you notice? Did you have female friends?

HH: Oh, absolutely. My best friend to this day was one of my classmates from the Coast Guard academy.

KS: So you were kind of far enough along in that timeline that you didn't have much problem [inaudible]?

HH: Oh, no. No. When you first get there, and you're a fourth class cadet, and the upperclassmen are all over you, you just want to survive, and the person next to you just wants to survive, so there's no time for that kind of pettyness. And by the time you're an upperclassman, you all know each other.

KS: Did you have any trouble adjusting to the physical demand?

HH: It was tough, because when I was a fourth class cadet that summer, I had twisted my ankle on a set of stairs, so I had to watch it for most of my freshman year. And the hard part with that was it's a very physically demanding environment, and you always have people who want you to do more, and put out more, and if they don't think you're putting out more, they think you're just shirking, and not putting out. At the same time, I was

watching people around me who would have injuries, and as soon as it started feeling better, they'd go use that limb or that knee or whatever, to their fullest capability, and they'd re-injure it. So I'd kind of sit back, and I'm watching what's going on with my friend -- my best friend, in fact, had a lot of knee trouble. So I took it easier and just never abused it, and it's never been a problem since, so at least I figured that out, because otherwise I could be dealing with that for a long time. But otherwise, the other aspects of it weren't a problem.

KS: I think the Coast Guard just recently put a woman -- B.A. Campbell [spelled phonetically] -- as their, I don't know what you'd call it, [inaudible] like the President of the academy. She was faculty.

HH: Yeah, we have a military and civilian positions at the academy, so I'm not sure exactly where she's stationed.

KS: Okay, well let's move on. I didn't ask you if you -- of course, your family was probably extremely proud that you were at the academy.

HH: Oh, yes.

KS: Did they give you any grief about joining the Coast Guard, and not the Navy or the Marine Corps?

HH: I think there was maybe some friendly service rivalry type ribbing, because I'm the only Coasty in the family. Of course, the Navy, and the Coast Guard -- but it was always in good humor; it was never anything negative.

KS: Did it ever really -- do you think you came from a long [inaudible]?

HH: Not particularly.

KS: You're a kind of -- very determined young kid for somebody that wants to do coast guard.

HH: I've since figured this out, I think. If you'd asked me this a few years ago, I wouldn't have had a clue where to begin answering this. First of all, my Mom will sit there and refer to me, and use -- she'll mention "The B Word." And everyone thinks of a nasty, derogatory word towards women with that, but what my mom means is bored. I don't like to be bored. When I'm bored, that's not a good thing. So she's like, "Oh, no, Holly's bored." With the Coast Guard, from the time I'd spent with them, I had spent time on Navy ships, and while I enjoyed my time with the Navy, most of their job was training. What if something happens when we finally deploy, when we go to war? That's great, but it just really didn't capture me. When I was at the small boat stations, we were pulling in the lines, getting under way, pulling people out of the water. I mean, I was down in Miami and recovered a floater. A diver who died in a diving accident. And I'm sitting there as a teenager, pulling in this body, into the boat, and you know -- my mom

thought I was going to be completely psychologically damaged for life. She first heard that, and was going, "Oh god, I'm going to have to get shrinks and psychiatrists." 'Cause I'm telling her on the phone, "Mom! Guess what I did today!" But to me, it was, "Hey, I did something today." And it was exciting, and it was something new that I didn't do the day before. So that's what really drew me, I think, to the Coast Guard: something new, something exciting. I never knew what was around the next corner.

KS: Did you have any mentors early on in your career? Anybody that you've really kind of admired?

HH: I've had a number of people over the years. I can't really single it down to any one person, because I learned things from different people. My first commanding officers were night and day in their leadership styles and their approaches, and from each one you take, "Okay, that wouldn't work so well for me, but I like that." So yeah, I think that's a good style. My second commanding officer, who's Lieutenant Commander Phil Skuronik [spelled phonetically], he and I have served for 2 years together, when I was XO of Kiska. He reported only a month or two after me, so we were there the entire time. Very smart, very intelligent, very skilled guy, who just let -- he let me do the job. And he would guide me as a young Junior Officer, when he needed to, to keep me on the straight and narrow. But he really gave me a bit of a leash to run on. So later on, when I took over as Commanding Officer of [unintelligible], having had that experience as an Executive Officer, I knew what I was getting into as a Commanding Officer, and probably another person who I would throw in that mix would be Admiral Loy [spelled phonetically]. When I was at -- after I left -- Admiral Loy. When I left Kiska, I was assigned as the Protocol Officer for the Commandant in the Coast Guard, who was Admiral Loy at that time, and it was amazing watching him as Commandant. I'd never been to headquarters, didn't spend a lot of time around Senior Leadership, but he impressed the hell out of me. Very sharp, I would have loved to have served with him at sea, because I bet you he just had his act in gear in every respect, but he was a people person. He didn't care what your rank was, he'd engage whoever you were. He was out to do the best that he could for the Coast Guard, and if he had to take a stand that maybe wasn't popular or was tough, standing up to Congress can't be easy, he would do it. He did what was right, and it was really neat to watch a guy who could just sit back and go, "Ahh, it's the end of my career. I'm commandant, I could do what I want." I tell you, he was the hardest working man in the Coast Guard. I'd see him go home with a big suitcase full of papers every night to read, and he was going home late. Next morning he'd come in, drop that suitcase off to his Executive Assistant, and all the papers, he would have gone through them all.

KS: And how long did you work with him?

HH: Two years. And so watching a guy like that, with the senior leadership, who had kind of brought it all together to get it done, that was really kind of neat to see that perspective.

[laughter]

KS: Anyway. Okay. Let's see. Let's move on to -- let's talk about your Iraqi Deployment -- well, first of all, I was thinking maybe it would be better to talk about some of the experiences you had leading up to OIF, like some of the particularly most memorable assignments, most memorable experiences on those cutters.

HH: Wow, because I could go into a lot of different sea stories.

KS: All right, give us a nice composite of what day-to-day life might be like; maybe what you remember most about each experience on the first two cutters.

HH: Well, the first ship, [unintelligible], in Kodiak, Alaska, that ship was kind of a prototype, a one of a kind design of World War II, an icebreaker, but also designed to handle heavy weather. So every patrol was in the Gulf of Alaska, and every patrol was spent boarding fishing vessels, and not in the nicest of conditions up there. So that was actually a great ship to learn how to drive a ship. She had one screw, one rudder, and you couldn't just power your way out of a mistake, if you were trying to drive a ship. You couldn't just use a bow thruster to kick the bow over or to adjust at the last minute. So that probably taught me my ship driving skills. And that's where I just did a ton of boarding, just getting my feet wet as a law enforcement boarding officer, and just a junior officer in general.

KS: Explain, just for the record, what boarding is. I could -- [inaudible] right now, but --

HH: Well, the only way the coast guard can enforce the laws and regulations at sea is to go to the other vessel, get on board, see what's going on. So they'd have to launch a small boat, we'd crawl in a small boat, cruise over to the other vessel, somehow have to find a way to get on board, and then depending on the nature of what the vessel was doing, we'd have to inspect it, inspect their paperwork, inspect their safety equipment. If it was fisheries, we had to see what they were catching, what nets were they using, were they catching anything they weren't supposed to be catching, and just go through the vessel, find out what's going on to see if any laws had been violated, or regulations.

KS: I imagine that would tick some people off. Did you have any sort of hostile engagements?

HH: Wow. It's kind of -- actually, the closest I came to ever fighting someone, and it's really a risqué topic. It's very funny in hindsight. But I thought for a minute I was going to have to get into a fight with someone. A lot of the fishermen don't particularly care for women on the ships. There's an old custom of women at sea, on ships. I was going to get qualified as a boarding officer. So my operations officer came to watch me do a boarding. So I was nervous from the get go, because here was OPs watching me. I'm trying to get qualified, and I go up on the bridge, and there's this big barrel of an Alaskan Mountain Man, kind of looking, big burly guy, you know, beard and bushy, and I'm asking him for his Halibut log, of all things, to inspect the log where he has to write down all the Halibut he's catching. And he would not give it to me. So I'm sitting here, going,

"Ops is looking over my shoulder, I got to do this." He would not give it to me. In the Halibut logs, you can write them -- it's not a specific form. You just have to have the information. You can write it on a roll of toilet paper if you wanted to, as long as the correct information was there, at least at the time. When I finally convinced him to give me the log, I convinced him that this was -- we're running out of options, he gave me the log, and I realized the reason he didn't want to give it to me, because when I opened it, it was just a simple little notebook, he had his log in there, but on the other side, he had a graphic cutout from -- shall we say, one of your finer men's magazine. And at that point, the entire tone of the boarding changed. Because instead of him kind of being the aggressor, and not wanting to show it to me, he was just like "I'm under arrest. I'm dead. She's going to kill me." And Ops in the corner was doing everything he could not to laugh, and to keep a straight face, and I'm just kind of like, "Well, sir, let's look at your Halibut log."

So just all of these weird little things that happen to you, learning how to deal with people that you never would expect you'd find yourself dealing with. So [unintelligible] was all about doing fisheries boardings. And Kiska was a whole hodgepodge of miscellaneous things. We'd board some of the six packs, what we called them, it's the local boats that take out tourists. We'd call them six packs, simply because their license only allows them to take out six people at a time. A lot of the Hawaiian fisherman, but that could be everything from tuna boats to longliners to little tiny mom and pop kind of more native Hawaiian vessels. So that was a lot of different things. And it was also very interesting dealing with some of the native Hawaiians when we'd board them, because I'm obviously not a Native Hawaiian, and I even, at first, had a hard time understanding some of the slang speak and lingo they'd use. So that was another good lesson in how to learn to deal with different people and just get along with them, even when they weren't so happy you were there. So that's what [unintelligible] and Kiska were like.

KS: What about the boat itself?

HH: Kiska was 110 foot B-class -- what they call WPV patrol boat: very similar to my third ship, [unintelligible], except that [unintelligible] was the A-class version. I guess they went through the first few and stopped, and then made some tweaks and some design changes and then the next version that came out, the next group was called B-class, and they did that later on and came out with a C-class as well.

KS: How did you get selected to be the commander of the [unintelligible]?

HH: Put in for it. It was time for me to leave the Commandant staff, so I asked to screen for command to float. And you throw your name in a hat, you wait for the panel to meet, and in December they come out with a list of those people who make the screening. They always screen more than they need, so just because you make the screening doesn't mean you're going to get a ship. After that, it was kind of weird, because I put in my list, and [unintelligible] was my first choice. So I'm sitting there, and other people are hearing rumors from the detailers, and everyone's talking at headquarters, and rumors just fly, and I hadn't heard anything. So I'm thinking, great, he's talking to the people he's giving ships

to, and I'm down on the list, and not getting a ship. So I'm just sitting there, and I'm thinking, great, he's gonna offer me like one or two of the ships that nobody wants, and I'm trying to think of ways that I could sell it to him that he should still give me one of these ships. And he calls me up one day, finally, and said, "Yeah, you've got [unintelligible]. Have a good one." I was kind of like, "Say that again?" Because here I had this whole speech prepared for you, and I'm kind of like, it can't be that easy. He said, "Nope, you've got [unintelligible]." To this day, I don't know how I got picked for that, if the Admiral made a special phone call, if the detailer just assigned me there. But it worked out.

KS: Were you nervous about taking on that responsibility?

HH: Not really, because having served on another 110, I knew the platform. I knew how to handle it, and I knew what the missions were, so I wasn't too worried about it. I mean, obviously, you don't want to screw up, and you're apprehensive, because you want to do a good job, but it was -- I'd been at sea before, so it was just the next step.

KS: You'll have to pardon my ignorance, but when you [inaudible], does that mean you actually drive the boat, or does that mean you manage the people on the boat, or -- what exactly, how would you define the responsibility?

HH: Any and everything that happens, with the mission of the ship, to the ship itself, to the crew, I'm accountable for. Now I usually would use my role as more of command oversight. If I'm in the middle of driving the ship, it means I'm kind of focused in too narrow in that aspect, and I could lose track of other things. So usually I was overseeing whoever was driving the ship, whoever was doing operations. Now, with a small crew of only 16 people, I stood my fair share of covering the bridge, particularly when we were doing boardings. Because I'd send a group of people over to do a boarding, I have so many left on the boat, and I need another group resting, sleeping, because they have watches in the middle of the night. So usually when we were doing operations.

KS: The lingo -- what does doing the bridge mean?

HH: Unlike your larger cutters, where you have a huge number of people on the bridge, someone to be your helmsman, someone to be your lookout, the person on the plot, the person on the radios, really we only had two people on the bridge. So you had one person manning the plot, and the OD, or the Officer of the Deck did everything else. They drove the ship, they launched the boat, they did all the radio communications back with the group or with the small boat, so basically I take over the OD while they were doing boarding operations.

KS: When did you find out you were going overseas? [inaudible]

HH: Well, it was kind of weird how they did it. This was about a year after 9/11, and with 9/11, we'd been up and down the East Coast escorting any and everything in and out of port, and protecting facilities. So we had been told we were going to have to escort a

cruise ship. And this was a big deal. We were up in Philadelphia, in the Delaware river. And cruise ships just don't normally leave from Philadelphia, so Philadelphia was pretty excited about this, said, "Hey, we've got a cruise ship taking passengers, maybe this is a future industry." So it brings some media on this cruise ship. So we were kind of -- we knew that, okay, target wise, it was more of a potential target, because it was well publicized and it would have good media coverage. So we're getting ready to go do this escort, and I get a call on the radio, and I'm just told, "Cancel your escort, get back to home port." And I'm going, that never happens. They don't cancel the escort. They send you out to do things, they don't say, "Eh, you're too busy." Or you've had enough, come back home. So bells and whistles are going off in my head, something weird's going on here. So -- and Philadelphia, the group we were working for at Philadelphia, they didn't want us to go, "Wait, wait a minute, why are you trying to take our cutter from us?" So I got on the radio, and I talked to my chain of command, trying to figure out where this was coming from, and they had to be kind of very careful because they couldn't tell me too much at this point in the game. But basically, they told me, they said, "Well, you need to get back to home port, because we've got a new patrol for you. And it's going to be one you need to prepare for." And I said, "Okay, any clues so we can start planning and prepping?" Because I knew this was something unusual. And they said, well, let's just -- you know, I asked them what kind of charts do we need to pull out or whatever, and he goes, "Well, let's just put it this way -- you're probably not sailing there." And that's when we knew. I immediately knew when he told me that, because we can sail anywhere in the U.S., but I knew that they had looked at taking these 110's overseas for the Persian Gulf War. They come designed with these cradles from the manufacturer that you can actually pick these ships out of the water, put them on a bigger ship the way you do a cargo container to ship them overseas, and I knew that's what they had looked at doing in the Persian Gulf War. So when I heard that we wouldn't be sailing there -- and of course, we're all watching the news. We know that President Bush and Saddam Hussein are trading comments in the news about each other, and the weapons of mass destruction, so we weren't stupid. We knew what was happening.

KS: It seemed like it was such a ground -- and it still is so much of a ground war, what's it that you were able to do as on vessels outside -- let me back up, Holly, I'm sorry. First of all, how did you get there? Tell me what it was like when you arrived, and then we'll talk a little bit more about what your mission was.

HH: Basically, when we got to homeport, we spent the next few days, and by then our group knew -- everyone knew we were going overseas, so it was great. Everyone just, "Whatever you need." I mean, they're all standing there, "Whatever you need. I mean it was great. We got people in, the crews all did powers of attorneys, and took care of their families, and cancelled -- you know, I'm canceling the cable company, and the phone company, and battening down the hatches of my house, because I knew I wasn't coming back for forever. We threw all the cold weather stuff off the ship, because we knew we wouldn't need it in the Arabian Gulf. And then we met up with three other cutters in Portsmouth, Virginia. They had also been tagged to go overseas. Coast Guard Cutter Adack, Wrangle, and Baranoff [spelled phonetically]. Then, basically, they didn't know how soon we were going to be needed. Nobody knew if and when we were going to go

to war, so we didn't know how quickly this was going to happen. So it was kind of this - - you know, ready, get set, wait. They had to throw us physicals, get us the anthrax shots, smallpox shots, all kinds of training. We had maintenance teams crawl all over the ships and fix absolutely any and everything that was broken, because they wanted these ships in pristine condition when they went over, and as we'd find out, we'd have more time, we'd add more training, and get more things done. And so essentially, we ended up spending about 4 months there.

KS: 4 months in Portsmouth?

HH: 4 months in Portsmouth. By about the 3rd month, we knew it was going to happen because we were loading the ships out. But it took a while for the ships to actually sail overseas, so we had some time from the time the ships left port to wrap up some loose ends on our end. They gave us a few days to go spend time with family, then we all met back in Portsmouth, and we flew over to Bahrain. It was very interesting flight, it was a chartered US Air flight. I don't think those US Air flight crews were used to a charter flight, and they knew where we were going, so they let us play any movie we wanted to on the system, gave us all the food off the little snack tray. The guys had a great time.

KS: Were you nervous at all about going over there?

HH: Not really. I mean, nervous because you don't know what to expect, but I was going over with a crew -- we'd been together for a year. We'd been training for this. We'd been going over scenarios, what ifs, the big issue, the big uncertainty at the beginning of the war was chemical biological weapons, because Saddam had used them on his own people, so what if he does to us? Unfortunately a 110 has no capabilities to defend against a chemical biological attack, so we were coming up with all kinds of ways we could do it. What if this happened? What's the best we can do? And we'd run those drills in port with the guys, and before we even had the real gear, we simulated it. We used our rain suits, and rubber gloves, and I mean, we simulated it, we looked like morons, I think, freaks running around the decks in yellow rain gear and big blue latex medical gloves, but it was to simulate the gear we would get in theatre, so we'd been through that. We'd learned some of the difficulties. So -- and I think everyone had their focus in place. No one in the crew tried to get out of it. No one -- no one tried to, you know, find a reason not to go. Everyone knew we were going, and they just said, "Okay, let's do it."

KS: It seems like it was kind of a once in a lifetime opportunity, did you feel that way at all?

HH: Oh, absolutely. In fact, I knew other cutter Commanding Officers who were begging, can we go too, can we go too, can we go too? So we knew we were being handed a very special mission, and we took it very seriously. We trained for it.

KS: What was that mission?

HH: We didn't know for the longest time. We didn't know until we got in theatre. We didn't really even know who to ask for it, or why, exactly until we got into theatre. And they couldn't really tell us, of course, because all of this stuff was highly, highly classified, and plans were still being made. If we were going to invade, how were we going to do it? So when we got in Bahrain, we had a few days before the ships arrived. We kind of got our feet wet, figured out what's where, and we went to go meet with all the Commanding Officers, the four of us, we went to go meet with our new Commanding Officer over there, a man named Commodore Peterson. He was Commander of the Destroyer Squadron 50, which was -- we were assigned to work with Destroyer Squadron 50, as part of them. And it turns out Commodore Peterson had been the one that had asked for the 110's, and he had sent that up through the fifth fleet, and all the way over up to DoD with the Pentagon. And he had basically said, "Listen, if you want me to fight this war, I've got lots of big navy ships, but I need smaller cutters that can get up in those rivers and patrol those rivers, because the big ships can't, and I need these small ships to be self-sustained. I need them to go up there and stay up there, unlike rigid hull inflatable, they leave, and after a few hours, they got to come back."

The navy didn't have much of that capability. They had two of what they called 170's, PC170's, they're basically 170 foot patrol boats, just slightly larger than us, they brought over: Firebolt and Schnook. But they only had two of them, so they asked for the four of us as well. So then, basically, it's kind of a learning curve. They were -- his staff -- the commodore had had experience with 110's, he had worked with some Navy ships in the Caribbean in his younger days, so he knew kind of what a 110 could do, he knew what he was asking for, but his staff had no clue. So we sat around with their staff, telling them this is what we can do, this is what we can't do. If you want us to do this mission, we can do it for about this long, then we'll need fuel, then we'll need to rest, then we'll need food. So we kind of had to educate them as to what we can and can't do. And that was very interesting, because I don't think they knew quite how to handle us. We also have a little bit of a different culture, I think, than the navy, so while I think the Commodore understood us very well, we confused his staff sometimes. [laughs] Because we had a little bit of some culture differences, in how we conduct our operation. So we just had to get on the same page. So we spent a few days doing that, and figuring out what we would end up doing. The ships arrived; we basically unpacked them, loaded them with fuel, water, food, went out for sea trials, make sure nothing had broken, and as soon as we all passed sea trials, we headed out on patrol.

KS: Did you have any trouble adjusting to the different climates and the geography and - in the United States, you kind of know, whether it's Philadelphia, or North Carolina, you kind of know the way the water works on the coast, and I'm wondering if you had to prep yourself to figure out the depths of certain sea levels, especially with rivers. That's pretty tricky.

HH: Yeah, it actually wasn't so bad, because when you're used to navigating off charts, it really doesn't matter, you can do it. Now, as you would go in and take a look at it, new areas, you'd be picking off landmarks, and reference points, so when you saw them the next time, you'd be, "Okay, I recognize that, that, and that, so I knew where I am. Help

correlate what my chart says." So it's all becoming familiar with the area. But basic rules of navigation, so we had -- we got these charts, and we're combing all over them, and making sure the whole navigation team's familiar with it.

KS: What about -- so what was that mission? What exactly were you -- was your assignment up there?

HH: We were kind of just miscellaneous gophers. Whatever needed being done, we would get done. The big issue at the beginning was the oil embargo was still in place. So there were all these big dows at the mouth of the Karbala River loaded with oil. But they weren't allowed to export it. And what had been going on since the Persian Gulf War is the Navy had a presence off shore to keep these dows from leaving Iraq. Well, every once in a while, the dows would try and escape, and the navy would herd them back in. Well, they'd learn from the first Persian Gulf War kind of what to expect. And these dows, when the bullets started flying, the dows did not want to be there. So part of our issue was, great, we don't want the dows to be in there either. But we need to make sure that nobody's sneaking any Iraqi leadership out, nobody's strapped explosive underneath the hull of this thing, and it goes and blows up an amphibious assault ship, you know, 20 miles away. So we had to, when things were kind of getting down to the wire, the dows made a break out one morning, and I guess it was just decided that, fine, we're going to let them, but we're going to screen them, and we controlled it.

So we were boarding any and everything they had. We were going on board to clear the vessels, they had dive teams from the big ships underwater checking the hulls to make sure nothing was attached, and then just telling them to get out. Then, when the war actually hit, the big issue was the waterway, was it mined or not? There were -- they had Navy and British minesweepers, but they're not designed to defend themselves, and when they're in the middle of their minesweeping, they've got all their -- I don't know exactly what they have for minesweeping gear, but they have all their sensors and stuff out, so we were sent with them in the river to guard them. But -- which is funny, because we were absolutely the worst platform to be in an environment that could possibly have mines. We have a huge magnetic signature, and acoustically we're very loud.

KS: I would have never known that.

HH: So if anything, we figured, "Eh, we're the magnet. We'll take --"

KS: I was going to say, I would think traveling up the river, you'd be a particular target for a small [inaudible], did you ever draw any fire?

HH: No, which is interesting. We didn't draw any fire that -- and I'm still not aware of it happening to any of the other ships along the way. There was a big debate originally about whether or not to paint us gray. They decided to leave us with our Coast Guard colors, because -- the big Navy gray just screams warship. Being white and Coast Guard cutters, we have a little bit of a different reputation. And if that reputation being a humanitarian search and rescue type service, a little less threatening militarily, if that

happened to get us in there so we can do the same mission without getting shot at, wonderful. So no one ever took pot shots at us that we're aware of. The biggest issue for us, safety wise, was with those mines in the river.

KS: Did you have any incidents?

HH: That I know of, no ship got struck by any mines. Now, a lot of that was capturing the mines before they could be deployed. With the dows, out of the river, then the Iraqis saw the chance to lay mines. They didn't want to lay mines ahead of time, or the dows would be blowing up left and right. So we got in there, and part of it's just maintaining a presence. You know how when you're driving down the highway and you see a police officer? You take your foot off the gas, to behave.

KS: [inaudible] your rear view mirror.

HH: With us nearby, they didn't have an opportunity to pull out their mines and deploy them. One of the neat things I heard later on, after we got some of the -- we didn't actually, but some of the other forces with us got these, a tug and barges carrying mines. When they were debriefing the crew, they asked them, "You were there for several days, why didn't you deploy the mines?" And the Iraqi's response was that, "Because the white boats were there." Meaning the Coast Guard cutters. So we're sitting there going, "Woo, okay." Meaning we were that close to them, that we made them nervous, that they didn't want to get into the operation of laying mines because we'd see them.

KS: You've mentioned the Iraqis quite a few times, what was your interaction with the local population?

HH: Most of our interaction was with the crews on the dows, and there are generally two types of dows. There's big steel, heavy cargo dows, and a dow is just the type of ship they use over there. And then they have these smaller, wooden fishing dows. And if you ever see one of these middle eastern dows, it's a very unique style of ship. Kind of an old, traditional style of ship. But part of our mission would be, once we got in there, is to maintain control of the river. Who's moving on the river? We didn't want -- we wanted to get the Iraqi populace, allow them to fish and get food for their families and so forth, but we didn't want terrorists figuring out potential targets to attack. We also had humanitarian ships that were going to deliver supplies up to the Port of Macassar-- I've heard it pronounced to ways, "ma-CASS-er," or "ma-cass-AR." I don't know which one is correct. I keep getting two different pronunciations from people, and everyone says that's the right way, but -- so we'd have to escort these ships in and out, all the way up to the Iraqi port, and we'd constantly be boarding things, just to kind of keep a presence. We had to constantly change our operations, because you could see how even the fishing vessels would learn -- they'd adapt over time with what to expect with us. There were a ton of wrecks in this river. Some of them were big freighters that had been destroyed during the first war and just left there in the middle of the shipping channel. We were constantly boarding those and checking those, because they were great little observation outposts. First one, I think, we discovered, we went on board and we found a couple

prayer rugs, a couple of rifles, gas masks and a little notebook with drawings. Someone had started drawing the profiles of the different military ships. So people were sitting there watching what's going on, who's moving up and down this river, and taking notes as to how things were going. So we had to constantly go up and down and sweep these wrecks to make sure that people couldn't keep tabs on what we were doing.

KS: I talked to a lot of service women that [inaudible] the fact that Iraqi women are the lowest on the totem pole over there. Did you have any sense of -- I mean, any interaction with the local women, and did they look at you funny?

HH: Not with Iraqi women, because on the ship, there were no women we ever encountered on the Iraqi fishing vessels, the Iraqi dows. But two interesting reactions being a woman over there, I'd send my crews over to do these boardings. Well, I'd be the one on the bridge they'd be talking to on the radio, and my XO would come back, because he was the one usually I'd send to be my boarding officer, and he'd tell me, he'd sit there and laugh at me, going, "Hey Captain, they all want to know if you're the cook, and they want to know why the cook is on the radio. Because they all hear a woman's voice, and say, "Hey, why is your cook on the radio?" And he'd sit there and tell them, "No, that's not the cook, that's the captain." "No, no, no, the cook, the cook, why is the cook on the radio?" Try to get them to understand it, it kind of blew some of their minds that, no, that's not the cook. And then when we were in Bahrain, that's where I interacted with the local Muslim populace. I think we were -- I was a novelty. We always went out in groups.

KS: What were you wearing day to day over there? [inaudible]

HH: We did not wear any Islamic attire. We wore western attire, but it needed to be conservative in nature. None of this skin-tight, low-riding, skin exposing, you know, as is trendy with the young people. It needed to be loose fitting, full-length slacks and full-length sleeves. Because you just don't -- and I always, whenever I went out in public, I always tied my hair back in a knot, just because -- they don't have people running around who have such long hair. But I'd be in the local sook [spelled phonetically], which is kind of like their market where they sell and buy everything, and I think I stood out obviously because I'm a Western woman, but I'm also taller than a lot of them over there, and they'd just kind of look at me. And the little kids would be holding onto their moms, kind of looking and staring. No one ever said anything odd, but it was kind of like, who is this strange woman running around? But no problems.

KS: A couple of quick questions about that experience. First of all, living arrangements, what about -- how did you communicate with your family, and did you? We'll start there.

HH: Living arrangements -- the ship is designed for 16. It can hold 18, but we packed 22 onto it. Living arrangements were tight. Not for myself and the executive officer, so much; we had our own separate state rooms, but for the crew it was tight. Living in the [unintelligible] areas. We had to put four kind of temporary portable little cot type things in our aft birthing area, and it was just packed. Tons of clothes, because you had all of

your chemical biological gear, your flak jackets, your battle helmets on top of all your other uniforms. We don't have laundry machines on the 110, so we had to get creative to do laundry, otherwise things would get really nasty in those temperatures. I think sometimes we'd be sailing around and have the laundry drying off the back of the ship on lines, you know, people are probably looking at these big American warships, "Why are they hanging their laundry out to dry on the back of the ship?" Well, because if we didn't do laundry, it was going to get really nasty for the crew. But I mean, you're just living close, up close and personal with people. They had us on a very aggressive operation schedule, so when we did finally make it back to Bahrain, pretty much we'd all pile off the ship, get our mail, get sleep, maybe wander out into the sook one or two nights just to see other people.

Meanwhile we had a support detachment of all kinds of different rates and ranks, and they'd swarm on board the cutter, and anything that we had broken we'd have sent them a list ahead of time as we're coming in, saying, "Hey, all these things are broken, fix them for us." And they'd get on board and do all kinds of maintenance on the ships. It gave us a chance to relax. And because there were so many of us on the ship, we couldn't all stay on the ship at port, because at sea, you take turns standing watch. So some people were always on watch and didn't need to sleep at any given time. In port wasn't an option, so they had hooked us up with basically furnished apartments over there. Apparently they do a lot of this over in the Middle East. It's like going to the Holiday Inn, except much, much, much nicer.

KS: Well, it's nice you get to live on ground at least, for certain times.

HH: Yeah. When it was in port, it was nice just kind of -- if just for any reason just to decompress. The XO and I, not so much, because we'd usually be going to meet with the commanders at the Navy base, and figuring out what was going to happen next, and the paperwork never goes away. But the crew, at least, got a chance to relax just a little bit, but more than -- just a couple days later, we'd be right back out at it for a few weeks.

KS: What were the circumstances behind your bronze star?

HH: It's kind of a whole bunch of stuff that we did over there, from start to finish. I've got a whole citation written up on it, but --

KS: What a nice acknowledgement.

HH: Really, this is because of what the ship did and what the crew did. Because I was the commanding officer, you know, I'm the figurehead that represents the crew, so that's why I got it. But really, it's for what the ship, what the crew did over there.

KS: But there wasn't a kind of a defining incident --

HH: There wasn't any one particular incident. It was for what we did during that whole -
- from day 1 to -- [laughs]

KS: You should be really proud of that. Let me ask you a couple of questions. Well, first of all, when was the last time you got emotional thinking about what's going on over there, or maybe emotional thinking about losing our people, or our colleagues, or the cutters that are there now? You ever think about it?

HH: Oh, yeah, I mean, I'm sitting here writing my speech for Veteran's Day today. I'm sitting there in the office yesterday, putting my touches on it, and of course, every 5 minutes someone's knocking on my door. Meanwhile, I'm like, "Yes?" Because I'm getting teary eyed, trying of course to not let them know that. Part of it is tough, because if you really let yourself think about it, you will get teary eyed. So part of that is trying to think about it, but still keep that -- keep that armor, I guess, is the safe way to put it. Because it is hard. We have lost -- we've gotten personnel injured, and we got -- DC2 Nathan [unintelligible], Petty Officer, boarding off of one of the two gray ships, the PC170's, just like us, they were in a small boat just like I had sent my XO and my boarding teams, many times, to go inspect a dow that was approaching one of the oil terminals. I had done this hundreds of times, sent my guys to go shoo dows away from the oil terminal. But this one exploded, and killed several people. Could have been us, just luck of the draw that on that day they were there. But if it had been earlier on a different day, we would have been there, doing the exact same thing. So you kind of wonder -- you also don't want to wonder, at the same time, because you'll never get an answer to it.

But what amazes me now about the guys who are still over there, I think we had it -- in some ways, it was lucky that we got the first wave. It was probably trickier in many aspects, a some things we had to do -- at one point, they wanted us to go check out some bunkers inland, because they couldn't get to them, because they were mined on the land -- we don't exactly train for storming the beaches, and the thick Iraqi mud that was there was very difficult for my guys to traverse. And I'm sitting there going, "God, they're gonna get picked off by sniper fire." So some of the weird things we did, just going in and getting control of the rivers and just figuring out what's going on. Once you have control, that's done. You aren't going to do those jobs anymore; now you're just going to maintain control. So we had some of the neat stuff going in, whereas the guys there, they're just maintaining control, but they're doing it constantly. Day in, day out, and it's extremely repetitive in nature. And I mean, how do you maintain your edge, you know? You're over there for a year; it's 2 in the morning; you've looked at this thing for the past year; nothing's happened so far. You know, you're tired, you're beat down, you're worn out. How do you maintain that edge? How do you keep your sanity? I don't know how the guys over there are doing it, quite frankly. I think they have it much tougher than we had it, being the ones initially going in.

KS: What was it that you did do to keep your sanity? You couldn't run marathons when you were there.

HH: No.

KS: Did you write to your family, or did you write in a journal? Are you a spiritual person?

HH: What I did was -- and I'm not a journal writer. My mom says, "You should keep a journal, all these sea stories you have. You should write them down, you should write a book some day." And I keep telling her, "No one would be interested in that stuff, because it's just a bunch of -- a sailor telling sea stories." But I did. Every day, I'd sit there and write. And for me it was hard, because I couldn't get into the whole, you know, emotional aspect of it. Because I didn't -- had to -- time to do the mission, time to keep the game face on. But I would at least write down, you know, what happened, and you know, what we were encountering or what we were facing just to kind of keep it, because there was so much happening that I knew I'd lose the details with time. I still haven't gone back to look at that stuff yet. But I have it, so someday.

KS: Okay. Let me see whether -- just two more minutes here. Okay. Three final questions: what are you most proud of in what you've done personally and professionally in your career thus far, and then finally, what does that uniform mean to you, and what does it mean to you to wear it?

HH: Yikes. As far as what I'm most proud of, I can't tie it to any one particular event. It's kind of the culmination. Where I was, and where I've managed to get to, and there's a lot of things in between that got me to where I am today. I'm proud of everything I've done. I'm even proud of some of my not-so-sharp moments, because I learned a lot from them and didn't repeat them. And as far as the uniform, I love wearing this uniform. People always ask me, how long are you staying in the Coast Guard? Are you going to make it a career? And I always tell them, I'm going to stay in until they throw me out, or I stop having fun. And that's not the party line. I'm having fun. I got to different assignments; I do different things, work with different people. Believe me, there are days that are not so fun, but overall, it's challenging, and I like the challenge. So I'm going to stick with it until the very end, and they're going to have to drag me away kicking and screaming.

KS: Let me ask one more. What are three things that you've learned about yourself through your experience in Operation Iraqi Freedom?

HH: You can't do it by yourself; you have to rely on your team. Anyone who thinks that they've got something mastered, that they're the expert, you know, "I'm the Captain. I'm the expert." Wrong. I relied heavily on my XO and my chief to sanity check me, because I'd never done some of those things before. I'd say, "Hey, XO, think this is a smart move?" And sometimes, he'd go, "No." So that's another one. And three, regardless of the uniform, you're all people. I mean, my most junior seaman is just as important, just as valuable and deserves just as much respect for what he did over there as I did as the captain. So yeah, I got the bronze star, and if I could, I wish I could give it to every one of my guys. But they contributed just as much, and they got the job done and worked just as hard, so regardless of rate or rank, everyone put forth.

KS: Well, thank you, Holly, for your time.

HH: Sure.

[end of transcript]