ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW OF DIANE OWSLEY

February 13, 2004
Diane Owsley - 2-13-2004

MR. OSTREGO: Good afternoon. My name is Carl Ostrego. I am with Mr. Gary Ford. Today is February 13th, 2004. We are interviewing Specialist Owsley. She served in Desert Storm and is currently serving in Operation in Afghanistan.

Could you state your full name, date, and place of birth please for the camera?

A. My name is Specialist Diane Marie Owsley. I was born in Rome, New York.

Q. What branch of armed forces did you serve?

A. I was on active duty during Desert Storm. And then I went into the -- what they call the IRR, which is Individual Running Reserve. Then I went through two -- a running reserves, which is active reservist.

Q. What is your current rank?

A. I'm a specialist which is an E-four.

Q. How long was basic training?

A. Basic training was eight weeks.

Q. Did you feel your training prepared you well for the Desert -- for Desert
Storm and in Afghanistan?

A. No. I don't think even our training that we had during basic prepares you for any -- much of anything to be honest with you.

Q. What -- what would you need that you didn't get?

A. We would -- when you -- when we do weapons qualifications especially, you're laying in a prone position. You have a prone supported and prone unsupported.

Reality is, if someone's firing at you, you are most likely not going to be laying on the ground, you're going to be running. You're going to be up on a wall. You're going to be hiding behind a building.

So, the training as far as the weapons qualification is not realistic to what you will actually face. And that I experience -- when we have had a -- we get bombed regularly. When the alarms go off, we go to fighting position which is on a wall. They don't -- there is no training for anything like that -- you are standing at a wall.

Also, most of the bombings occur
at night. There is very little training as far as how actually you fire your weapon at night. During basic training they use something called tracer rounds. Well, we don't have tracer rounds. We fire when you have to.

Two weapons I have is a nine millimeter and an M-16. We fire as many rounds at night that we fire during the day. There are no tracers.

MR. FORD: And why did you join the army instead of any other branch?

A. I always wanted to be in the military ever since I was in high school. It was something I always wanted to do, but I opted to get married and have children and felt it was important to us, to raise my children. And as they got older and got school aged, I became an age where I had to make a choice that I was getting too old and I decided to join the army.

Also, to be honest, in Rome there's not a lot of job opportunities. And for me, I felt like I would get good training -- get paid while I was being trained and do something
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that was important to me.

Q. What were your general duties at Desert Storm?

A. During Desert Storm I was the food inspector. And my main function in life was to make sure that the commissary which is -- is a grocery store for military personnel.

I inspected the slaughtering -- not the slaughtering but basically the cutting of the meat. I ensured that the temperatures were correct, the freezers -- there wasn't growing infestation in the building and none in the warehouses.

I inspected something called pit trap, which is a dry storage where they keep the boxes of the food before they come from the store where they sit in the warehouse for awhile. And we inspect those to make sure that there was not a lot of mold or infestation, mainly rats infestation.

Q. And what were your duties in Afghanistan?

A. In Afghanistan I worked in several different areas. My primary job there was
to work what was called the Jay-1. Normally that
is the S-1, which is basically your clerical
person. I became J-1 because I worked through the
joint staff as opposed to -- S-1 is just the
regular staff. I worked for the joint -- joint
operations that are over there. When I say joint
operations, there's several different countries,
and several different branches of the military
which are all involved in the campaign that we're
in.

And seek and -- which is what I'm
under is combined with special operations
taskforce. So I became J-1.

My primary duties were I
processed awards. I processed soldiers that were
coming in and I processed soldiers that are going
out.

At one point I was transferred
over to work with FAFF which is single -- single
operations command because my MOS was actually
Civil Affairs Officers.

Q. MOS means?

A. MOS is your job title when
your -- your principals -- principal of a school. Our MOS is -- is a three-digit number they give you which assigns you to a specific specialty. My specialty at this moment, what I am right now is called the Civil Affairs Specialist. I was very fortunate to have an opportunity to leave the J-1 and go out with the CAPOC which is -- their mission is to win the hearts and minds and that's literally -- you'll hear that on TV That's what their mission is. To win the hearts and minds of the people in Afghanistan.

Civil Affairs comes in behind them or with them to say now that we've gotten rid of the bad guys, how can we help you? What do you need?

Typically it would be, we need a school. We need our streets paved. There is no paved roads there. Just dirt roads.

MR. OSTREGO: How did you do that?

A. Our function is to go in and try to make it better -- a better life, a better quality of life.
Q. How do you win their trust?

Historically, outsiders have always been the bad guy.

A. Well what we usually -- we will entrust the Afghanistan people is we do not manage them. We can win -- we can say is let's rid of the bad guys, the bad guys are Taliban and Al-Quaid.

A. We can get rid of them or we can scare them away. But we can not stay as a presence -- a strong presence and let them know that we are not going to let anything happen to the Afghanistan people the minute we leave. We will be right back where we started.

And that's what -- Afghanistan people were first -- the Russians came in and took over and killed millions of people there. And then the United States decided to help the Taliban. We -- we helped them to get the Russians out of power. And now we're getting the Taliban and Al-Quaida out of power.

MR. FORD: When were you assigned to go to Afganistand?

A. The first -- well, I was
deployed, my unit was deployed several months before me. I went as it what they call individual R and D meaning they needed a person for a job and I had skill and won it so they pulled me from my unit and sent me away with another unit of people who I had no knowledge -- never met before. Met them at Fort Bragg.

Q. And your original unit was the J-1?

A. My original unit is the fourteenth civil affairs, which is -- Utica, New York.

MR. OSTREGO: What was daily life like there?

MS. OWSLEY: Daily life in country is nonetheless very dirty and the sand is not like when you think of sand like going to Florida to the beach. It is dust. It is like a Talcome powder and it covers everything. During the summer months you -- you can not keep anything clean. You -- you don't realize how dirty you are until you leave the country and go somewhere else and wash your clothes and realize how imbedded
the -- the dust gets into everything you have. And it -- actually I noticed, when I was in Germany, I kept smelling an odor, wondering what it was. Finally realized it was me. Opening my -- my wall locker, I said oh, that smell -- that smell the last few days it's me. It -- you get their smell just from the dust and the dirt that's there. I guess it imbeds in you.

MR. OSTREGO: What does it do to your weapon?

MS. OWSLEY: It makes your weapon very, very difficult to keep clean. We have to very regularly take everything apart and clean it because the dust gets into your firing pin. If your firing pin doesn't work, you're in trouble.

MS. FORD: You cleaned your weapons. So, how would you compare American weapons to that of the Iraqis or the Afghans?

MS. OWSLEY: Unfortunately, a lot of the weaponry they have, it was weapons that they obtained from the United States through other factions that black market purchasing.

The -- a lot of the Afghanistan
people carry very, very old weapons, Russian weapons that they -- that are left over from when the Russians occupied their country.

They have cache what they call cache that they've stockpiled in the caves and different areas, mainly in caves where they stockpile all these Russian weapons which we -- one of our goals is to confiscate any of those that we find.

MR. OSTREGO: We often read about these rocket propelled grenades that seem to be their number one choice against our vehicles, against our helicopters. Could you explain how they work?

MS. OWSLEY: They're called RPG's. And thank God they don't have the technology to accurately use them or you would be seeing maybe more deaths from Iraqi soldiers. They pretty much set them on a mountain, they point them in the general direction of the base or where they think people are and they send them off. They don't know how to accurately adjust them the way our soldiers know how to use them. So, we are
very fortunate that they have not perfected that technology. They're getting better -- they're getting much better at it.

MR. OSTREGO: In your transcript, it says you were assigned to the 304th. Could you explain exactly what the 304th is?

MS. OWSLEY: Psychological Operations and their function is as I said earlier, to win the hearts and minds. The way they do that is by pamphlets. They drop pamphlets out in the city. We literally drive in trucks and throw pamphlets out. They do air drops where they just load airplanes and they just fly over areas and just drop pamphlets.

They actually will have matches with pictures of the bad guys, offering rewards. We give those out. Pencils, they have a message, help the Americans.

MR. OSTREGO: Which seem to work best?

MS. OWSLEY: The pamphlets -- so much of the population can not read. The other thing that we also have are trucks with big
speakers on them. And we'll drive through the cities and we'll say, "We're here to rid the city Taliban and Al-Qaeda and if you know where they are, if you would come to us, we will offer you a reward. We will protect you and we will take the bad guys away." And people do come forward. There are large rewards offered.

MR. FORD: What were your Officers like?

MS. OWSLEY: The officer's that I worked with in psychological operations were a great people. They become -- they become a little numb. I think a lot of people over there can become a little bit numb and you get to a point where, I think jaded is a good word. You begin to forget that not everyone there is trying to kill you. At some points it's -- it's hard -- especially people who spend way -- way too much time there, they -- they become very jaded. And everyone was Taliban and everyone is Al-Qaeda, everyone is -- is intention threat. And -- and they are. You can't tell the difference. You can't walk down the street and say that's
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Taliban and that's -- that's a regular Afghanistan citizen. They blend in very well with the population.

MR. OSTREGO: Did you ever see any captured Taliban or Al-Quaida?

MS. OWSLEY: I saw three Taliban that were captured. I did not see them captured but I saw them after they were captured. And basically it's like you see on television when they put the bag over their head so they can't see where -- where they're at. We -- we don't want them to know where they're at. We don't want them to know how to get to where they're at. They are surviving, we have a special prison and I -- I also should mention that I'm on Special Forces Compound. Special forces are the ones that go out and they hunt them down. And raid people's home that they hear were that they're at, Taliban or Al-quaida hanging in the certain areas. Special Forces are the guys that go off and hunt them down.

MR. OSTREGO: Did you see of any decorations, medals or accommodations?

MS. OWSLEY: I saw many --
many -- because that's where I processed -- I must
have processed over five hundred awards for
soldiers who were there ranging from Army
accommodation medals to Purple Hearts. And the
Purple Hearts are the ones that you don't want to
see because that means that somebody was either
killed or wounded, very, very scarily injured.

MR. FORD: Did you actually
receive one?

MS. OWSLEY: I have three. I
have what they called Joint Service Achievement
medal which we go to the joint Special Forces I had
a joint like special service taskforce over there.
That translated to not war time, it'd be an army
accommodation medal. Or army achievement medal.

MR. FORD: Do you know exactly
what you received it for?

MS. OWSLEY: I -- I received
it -- when -- when I was transferred over to CAPOC
they had no S-1, they had no J-1. The first
sergeant was doing all their paperwork. So they --
they asked if I would be willing to go and
basically -- I said I'd go there. And the reason
he awarded it to me was because I created their office -- basically I took all the papers that they had sitting everywhere in the files and organized them and the medals, helped with promotion packets. Because some of the soldiers there are eligible to be promoted and worked on their promotions and awards.

And if they got hurt, if you get hurt over there it's called the line of duty and they were called off. So I'm thinking. I did a lot of those type of paperwork.

MR. OSTREGO: What would you say was the most interesting experience that you -- that -- I'm sorry. What would you say was the most interesting or inspiring thing that you experienced in the war?

MS. OWSLEY: The most inspiring thing and most interesting thing to me was when I was allowed to go to a city called Garnez. I went with the spy chasers and the CAPOC and the Civil Affairs. And I was actually able to meet with some village elders.

We went out to a very, very
remote area. And they invited us all to have a meal with them. They're very gracious people. They always want to give you tea, they want to meet you. And while we had one of these particular meetings, I asked if I could speak with the women, which women are not -- you don't see the women, they're kept hidden. And I was allowed to go into a room with over twenty women and sit down and speak to them. And that was -- that was the most awesome thing that we -- my whole time away from my family worthwhile to have that opportunity to sit and ask these woman how they felt about us being there.

Women were terrified to answer that question. They said we love you, we love the Americans, we love to serve you, we love to cook for you.

So, I realized that I wasn't going to get too far with asking them questions. So basically I told them very basic things about myself, that I was a mom. That I had children. They wanted to know about my daughters. And when I said I had a daughter whose in school, and she
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wants to go to college. She'll -- she'll go to
college, or she wants to get married and have a
family, she can do that. But she has a choice.
And they were amazed that women in this country
have -- have that opportunity.

They also wanted to know why I
was not covered. Why -- they're all veiled. Most
of them wear something called Burqa which
completely covers them. You can not see their eyes
or anything. And they wanted to know why I did not
have one. And I said because in the United States,
we don't have to cover ourselves. We're allowed to
dress how we want to dress and we're free to do
that. Which is why we want to come in here because
we want you to be free, if that's what you choose.

Some of the women have gone from
the Burqa to the veils. They still veil themselves
but it's not the way it was when the Taliban was
there. Everyone was in a Burqa.

A. You did not go out in the street
unless you were completely covered from head to
toe.

MR. FORD: What person or persons
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do you remember best from your service?

MS. OWSLEY: I think as far as
the people go, Afghanistan people, it would be the
people who would come and walk on our compound.
They are very gracious. They're -- they're very
happy just to shake your hand, just to have their
picture taken with you. They are very, very poor.
So, to give them a sweater or a jacket, it was
everything in the world to them. They are very
appreciative because they have so little.

One of the things that, it --
it's not fun but it's -- it would be funny to think
of your oldest pair of shoes that you have that you
would just throw away. They would fight for those
shoes because some of them had no shoes. Or they
have no soles. Their shoes are completely worn.

And it gets very cold there. So,
for them to have something besides a little plastic
sandal that they can afford, to have a tennis shoe
or a boot that actually covers their feet, it's a
huge thing for them.

As far as soldiers go, I don't
think I will ever forget the fear that I felt every
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time I watched a convoy get together to get out to
look for the bad guys. And seeing -- seeing some
of them come back wounded is -- and know that a few
days later I had signed them out in the book. And
now, some of them didn't -- did not come back
alive. That -- that probably -- I don't think that
I'll ever be the same.

MR. OSTREGO: What experience
would you say left the greatest impression?

A. Seeing the need of the people
there. Seeing how poor they are and how little
they really got compared to our standard of life
and compared to even what we consider poor
countries.

I've -- I've been to Guatemala,
and I thought they were very poor people. Their
poor is nothing like what I've seen in Afghanistan
people. I can not stress enough how incredibly
poor the majority of them are. That's a standout
memory for me.

Q. Did you perform any unusual
service duties?

A. I -- going out with the CAPOC and
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seeing was very unusual for someone -- for my being over there as an -- person, even though I was not in shooting. I was very fortunate that my first sergeant saw something within me and he knew that I wanted to be more proactive and he gave me the opportunity to do that. So that was -- a lot of people were jealous. They wanted to know how I got so lucky.

All my family will tell you, what do you mean lucky to go out to a fire base where you're risking your life, where you're being shot at? But it -- it made it mean something to me.

Q. You mentioned earlier that you followed some spy catchers.

A. I didn't follow them, I ran -- I was with them. I was --.

Q. What makes a spy catcher a spy catcher?

A. A spy chaser --

Q. Or spy chaser, I'm sorry.

A. -- basically, they're intelligence. That's the intelligence of the military. And what they do is they get reports
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from people in this area, there's a group of people who are doing this. For instance, they were collecting tolls on roads. They were not supposed to be doing. They were robbing people.

Our spy chasers go to the authorities and they say we know this is going on. And we believe that you know who they are. And we would like to give you a chance to -- to tell us who they are and where we can find them so that we can keep your cities safe. And it's pretty effective.

MR. FORD: In this forum did you work with people of other countries?

MS. OWSLEY: During desert storm I worked strictly at Fort Drum. I never left the country.

MR. FORD: What about in Afghanistan? Did you work with any people from other countries?

MS. OWSLEY: I have a -- I had a very unique opportunity to meet the United Emirates Colonel who for some reason took a brief liking to me and I went to their compound for meals, change
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of ceremony, their national holiday.

I met the people, been able to go over to their compound. We're not technically allowed to go over to other branches of the military's compounds but I was able to get permission from my command to go meet -- meet some of these people.

The Lithuanians regularly come out to our compound so we were able to interact with them.

MR. OSTREGO: Do you feel that the current foreign policy is working or would you have it changed?

MS. OWSLEY: I would have it changed. I think they need to step up. There -- there's a huge focus in Iraq right now, but we have not completed our job in Afghanistan and we need to step up, military action, which is in the works. I believe it's been on the news that they're currently going to be operating several more fire bases throughout the country. They are much more actively going to pursue the Taliban and Al-Quaida.

And I think it's very important
for us to call this a successful campaign, we must not give up. We have -- things have become too hot there. We need to show greater strength in my opinion.

MR. FORD: Could you explain some of the pictures that you brought here?

MR. OSTREGO: Well, I brought a picture of the current president who is Khalim Karsi. Who is I think it was approximately a month ago they actually met in the city of Kabu they had a big meeting to reestablish a government, or to establish a government.

One of the biggest problems that we have in Afghanistan right now is the Pakistan border. That is Pakistan are not our friends in my opinion. They have undermined many things that the United States has tried to do. They've let Al-Qaeda and Taliban fairly easily walk across the border. There's several sentiments out there that feels Pakistan is actually working with Osama Bin Laden somewhere.

I will tell you that I saw caves as you drive through Afghanistan there's caves
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everywhere. And it will probably take them a million years to go through every one of those caves, which is where they hide. The Taliban hides -- chaches being a large group of weapons.

And that's where we have lost some of our soldiers who found these caches and tried to detonate them and had no idea that the tunnels ran in several different directions and other tunnels were full of caches and you'll see that and every now and then things would go array. They think they're blowing up the cache and then the next thing you know there's explosions everywhere.

I think I can say that it was on the news that the city was pretty much ruffled because of --.

MR. FORD: What about your actual photographs?

MS. OWSLEY: These photographs, initially when I got to bombing this is what we lived in. There was no air conditioning, there was no heating. Don't be fooled by what you see there. There was no air conditioning or heating.
It was very, very hot during the day time until -- you could not go in there -- you had to be outside in a shaded area.

This is also -- this is what it looked like before contractors came in. The contractors came in and they built this which is called -- they're called Hut which is nothing more than plywood buildings, but they had heat. So we were very happy for them.

Haven't seen a lot of bugs or things like that of that nature, we did have a camel spider which I brought a picture of a camel spider, which I would say -- try to get a clear picture off the internet. They were very frightening looking. They looked sort of like a cross between a scorpion and a spider. And they were incredibly fast.

And my roommate and I had the opportunity to chase one down and kill it one day, it was trying to live in our house. So we -- we got rid of that one as quickly as we could. But they're fast.

Both of us were running around
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with objects chasing it from out from underneath
our makeshift little shelves we had.

MR. OSTREGO: You mentioned
earlier a bodyguard. Would you mind sharing that
with a troop story?

MS. OWSLEY: In Afghanistan, when
we go to a city, for instance, this is the city of
Kabul, which you will see on the news a lot, Kabul.
In order for us to be able to walk the streets
without being mobbed, there were young teenagers,
boys would come up and offer to be your body guard
for a very small fee.

And what they do is, they
virtually keep the local Afghanistan people away
from you because we draw so much attention they
would even follow us. It would be like the Pide
Piper. You will walk down the street and you'll
look and there'll be twenty people and you look
again and there's a hundred people.

And of course that posed a
problem for our safety because we don't know who's
in the crowd. It can be anybody. So we typically
what will happen is we will always have special
forces with us. They will always be constantly looking around for anyone that looks suspicious or anyone with a weapon. And the police -- the local police are very supportive of us. We can come in, they will keep -- keep from high traffic if they can.

This is a picture of a small crowd which -- which joined us when we were eating french fries. They're just so amazed to see Americans. And to see an American woman carrying weapons, carrying weapons, walking around with no covers on her head, is quite a thing to them. And they are just amazed to see us and look at us, So they follow us everywhere.

MR. OSTREGO: You had a story about someone that you lost?

MS. OWSLEY: We had a young -- a young fellow from our unit. And I'll try not to cry when I talk about him. Because this is very touching and his name was Adam Ginger he'd been in Afghanistan since July. He had two more weeks and he was about to go home to his wife -- to his wife who was expecting a baby in March. And he was one
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of the soldiers that unfortunately, there was a cache that was found. I'm not sure if they determined whether it was booby trapped which is one of the things that they'll do to try to -- to kill us.

But he was -- he was just recently killed. And as I said he was due to go home. It said here two weeks, I thought it was three weeks, but he had about two more weeks to go before he could go home.

MR. FORD: What was it like --?

MS. OWSLEY: No, I just -- the most important thing is that we don't forget about Afghanistan. That we don't forget that you can not go in and just scare the bad guys away. That in order to be effective with what we're trying to do there, there needs to be a lot more Civil Affairs people, which is the people I work with.

We need to make a better place for them or for what we've done is for naught.

If -- if we pull out another enforcement is going to take over. And that's what these people are used to. This has happened to them for thousands
and thousands of years. There has been somebody
coming in to occupying their country and we have an
opportunity to make a difference.

And as an American, I hope that
we don't let these people down.

(The interview concluded)
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This is a transcription of the audio provided to us. It is completed to the best of our skill and ability. The transcript consists of pages 1 through 30 inclusive.

Judith Spriggs
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