

Transcript—MCpl Bonnie Critchley, KOCR (7 July 2016)

Deployment(s): Afghanistan 2011

Interviewer/Transcriber: LCol M.C. Vernon

Note: Quotations are not 100% verbatim

Timecode	Comments
0:30	Volunteered because she'd just finished college. Had 9 years in Reserve. Had missed out on two Bosnia tours and Golan tour. Wanted to do my mob. Opportunity to deploy with TF 1-08 but in "typical redneck Alberta fashion" got on a bucking horse and shattered her arm. Just wasn't healing, so she got sent home.
1:50	Family? Father was very proud, and mother, "but she most certainly did a happy dance when I came off the horse and ended up in hospital". She makes no bones about that. Father was 28-year vet with LdSH. Retired in 2003. She is fifth or sixth generation military.
2:40	Dad's reaction to her joining armoured corps? She joined SALH. Choice was clerk or armoured crewman in Med Hat. Her father was proud. Taught her to shape her beret perfectly. They have same size boots. In 1991 they were in Gagetown when women were allowed to join Cbt Arms, she remembers her dad being upset. But now, not only is his daughter in the combat arms, but she's gay..."and he couldn't be prouder"
4:00	She is the only female crewman south of Edmonton. Interesting. Five other women on her course. One RTU for med reasons. She was only female on her course, in a curtained off section of H-Hut. No female showers. Shared with guys. She showered first, they lined up. She had her own bathroom stall. Pretty much a non-issue for her entire career. Describes getting dressed/undressed in presence of a male instructor. Other than accidental slip of the tongue when she came out... her regiment didn't care. They thought her girlfriend was quite cute. Inevitable bawdy jokes. Her common law wife has picked her up on Remembrance Day and driven some of the boys home. No comments. Always that way. "Not had any issues being gay or female. Only issues are recently due to the mental health injury"
7:00	Extremely upset at missing out on 1-08 tour. A week after she came home, Cpl Nathan Hornburg was killed and she was in brother's kitchen in a cast, planning funeral. Not a happy camper.
8:00	Hornburg's death—first major incident a Calgary unit had to figure out how to deal with. Go through the pams and figure out entitlements. Had to turn back Strathcona gun carriage. Frustrated at being told to pare things down. She was padre's driver, RQ's driver and Assisting Officer's driver.

9:15	The unit lost a couple members right away, friends of Nathan's who put in their 30 days and left. Several members still dealing with it. His name comes up when soldiers drink to the Fallen. Very hard. Nathan's family was adopted by the regiment, who attend functions.
10:25	His funeral was handled very well. Some misinformation. Media response was very good. During the press conference, she participated. Media very respectful. Public Affairs shut it down when he saw soldiers were getting upset.
11:20	Did not do initial notification of death, but she later drove various people to the family's home for funeral preparations. She had to go through Hornburg's military effects. It was extremely hard. "Through tears I was joking I certainly hope he washed his laundry".
12:30	A very hard time for her. She didn't get to march with Hornburg during the funeral. Seconded out to assist in other ways.
13:10	"He was one of my very few friends in the regiment at the time", but not very close friends.
13:30	Cpl Mark Fuchko lost both legs below the knee later and she worked as driver for padre. At Foothills Hospital... "I looked down and saw he'd lost his feet and no one had told me".
14:30	The padre had gone from death in theatre, to a suicide, to Fuchko... not expected to survive... so padre was exhausted and overwhelmed. She kept padre pointed in the right direction. Even to the point of making him eat. "He had hit the limit of what he could handle and I needed to keep him together to help the family"
15:50	"I'm an armoured crewman corporal and that's not in my job description"... and while others got counseling, she did not. She rolled from Hornburg, to Fuchko, to Starker's death. She assisted the 15 Fd Amb sergeant major in dealing with the administration.
17:15	When they sent her home from 1-08 they kept her on Class B, that's why she was so directly involved in these war-related taskings.
17:45	Nathan was killed Sep 24 2007 and Mike Starker was killed 16 May 2008 with Fuchko injured in between, March 2008. There were a couple of other funerals in this time frame—Strathconas, for example—she paraded with.
18:30	Did she seek help? It didn't occur to her. "I was just the driver. I didn't do anything. It was only a couple years later I realized it disturbed me more than I thought it had"
19:25	She volunteered for 1-10 with Strathconas but was on temporary category for her wrist, so she missed out. But she took the chance to do the close-out roto. Seven months inside the wire shipping home every piece of kit the Canadians had on the ground at the time. An interesting go.
20:30	The Taliban were targeting Canadians at the time, trying to send the battle group home with their tails between their legs. Most of the rockets aimed at Canadian sector. They tried to launch them towards

	<p>the Canadians. One building hit by rocket, a friend ended up in the Role 3 hospital with shrapnel wounds to her back. Rockets landed in their work areas too. One landed on a nearby road. Intelligence said they were targeting Canadians. The not-very-accurate rockets... a good proportion... landed in Canadian areas.</p>
22:25	<p>Some days, no rockets. Some days, multiple rockets. It was the kind of tour she expected, but frustrating. Her chain of command was more concerned with how things would be received in Canada. She did final count and sealed up triwalls for shipment. In 56-degree heat, some triwalls got scorched after being stored outside. She got in trouble for this. "An extraordinarily frustrating tour. I went to bed with a sore jaw from grinding my teeth because every week some new, silly procedure would be added in". Some sea containers were shipped with rocks in them after being shipped via Pakistan. High value materials were flown direct to Canada. She counted all the picks, shovels, nails... much of it sent via jingle truck. Pakistanis closed border for a month and the sea containers sat there for a month. "So when they finally got them in Canada, it turns out they'd been opened up, contents removed, and refilled with gravel". She's not sure how many. She and others expected ground shipments to be waylaid at some point. "So the Taliban got a lot of picks and shovels, not very important stuff".</p>
26:15	<p>She got there 1 May 2011. The Van Doos were gearing up for their fighting season to finish out Canada's war fighting campaign. First impressions were dusty and hot. Had time to acclimatize. Her boots were not impregnated with dust yet and she was pale. "KAF was very monochromatic because the dust coated everything"</p>
27:40	<p>Her preference? To fill a hole in a Strathcona tank outside the wire. She was given the opportunity, attached to an Intelligent unit as general labour. They wanted her to do a combat logistics patrol to a forward operating base, but the mission closure unit shut this down before she could go outside the wire.</p>
28:45	<p>It was very frustrating to be face down in dust due to Taliban rockets, with Romanians in charge of her security. Had to let someone else do it. Frustrating to be back with the "CSS personnel who were jabbering and bawling with fear while we're getting rocketed every day. It was extraordinarily frustrating. Because I had the skills to deal with it, but wasn't allowed to"</p>
29:45	<p>Memorable day? When her friend was wounded in Taliban rocket attack. "She was throwing up with shrapnel holes in her back. Resisted the urge to rub her back while she was throwing up". Another incident: Taliban breached Hesco with a jingle truck full of explosives. A sea container was launched and landed beside a massive propane tank. She was about a kilometer from the blast and could feel it.</p>
31:30	<p>Rocket attack SOP: Normally rockets detected before they hit the ground. Sometimes after wards. Supposed to hit the dirt, get geared up</p>

	in flack vest and helmet. Lay on the ground, wait for two minutes, then move to bunker area until all clear, in case they have to BIP... blow it in place. Basically they use air raid alarms and a "pleasant British lady telling you there is a rocket attack". Wait two minutes, then move to bunker until another alarm with the nice British lady's voice.
33:30	First time working with CSS? Not first time, but first time deployed with them. Worked in orderly room as clerk too. And been a trucker for taskings. It was her first time with "the politics". Chain of command was spectacular at company level. Otherwise, it was more concerned with how things will look in Montreal when we're done. Worked 8-10 hour days, 7.5 days straight. Could go to market during half day leave.
35:40	Integration? Had more skills than some of the logistics soldiers. Explains the process. Got out on HLTA two days early.
36:30	She came home for HLTA. She and her wife had acreage near DeWinton at that time. Pipes frozen. Spouse had to deal with everything going wrong on her own. Lists the various minor calamities. Lists her father's tours and says her mother helped Sarah, based on her experience.
37:50	Her wife is very independent. Didn't make much use of offered services. "She knew it was very, very important to me". Supportive at start. But now they are separated due to her operational stress injury. "She spent six years with me and my temper". Lengthy separation, home less than 2 of their first 4 years together. All brand new for her wife.
39:30	"I'm not very proud of myself in the least. My boots got dirty. Spent seven months being rocketed. But all I did was pack boxes and ship stuff home. Not very proud of it. Don't bring it up very often. Especially in a combat arms unit where guys fought and died. I packed boxes for seven months."
40:00	This tour or no tour? Would still do a tour, but probably not with CSS. Not what I trained to do but she did a job that needed to be done.
40:40	Decompression? Friend was there as the ops WO, so she got a little extra babysitting. (WO deGuzman-Tucker?) Got a stomach bug, visited some Roman ruins. Got a tattoo in Cyprus.
41:40	A lot of drinking the first night. Linked up with the previous chalk and "drank ourselves silly". But got the bug and was violently ill. Needed a shot to stop the vomiting. Didn't do any drinking after that.
42:30	How valuable? "It was two days before I would stop sitting bolt upright because my rifle was not attached to me. I full out stopped breathing. Heart attack. Where the hell is my rifle?... A really weird feeling." The lectures on what to expect were pretty good, but not too long. Two days, full blown panic attacks about rifle missing.
43:30	Being a history buff, Cyprus was really cool. Her dad deployed to Cyprus in 1979 when Turks invaded Nicosia [sic—it was 1974]. She's there 20-30 years later. Then she reconsiders the dates.
44:50	Homecoming? CO and RSM greeted her coming off the plane in

	Edmonton. Pretty nice. Landing in Calgary, there was no reception aside from her family and a few friends. No recognition. "I always giggle when I see the first gay kiss because I've got a picture kissing my wife in CADPAT... and nobody cared" Temperature adjustment. Very quiet, not jets' afterburners at her 100-year old farmhouse. "Which is where my temper started to surface. Dogs, cats, horses kept me calmer. But the quiet was definitely a transition."
46:50	Had had an extraordinarily frustrating tour. "Felt embarrassed to wear the same campaign star as the guys who did the fighting. Where my OSI reared its head. Rebroke arm punching the freezer. Called the medics" Landed in Calgary 26 November 2011. In Feb 2012 was this particular argument, call to medics. Edmonton didn't want to talk to her so she called local medics. "Too soon for symptoms to be manifesting themselves... wait another month for your post-tour medical". "That's what started my whole odyssey as Class A reservist in the medical system"
49:10	Irritability, lack of sleep, don't like crowds or fireworks. "Unless I can smell the cordite, gunpowder—it's outgoing—so it's OK" She's certain her experiences pre-tour plus "guilt and shame" came to a head and "I'm the laughing stock of the regiment because I did not do a combat tour". The ranks said things, but leadership did not. "The ranks, the guys who actually did the fighting, said shut up, go away, you've done nothing."
50:50	"That's the combat arms". Finally diagnosed in 2012 with major depressive disorder and anxiety and didn't get any medication until on a Class B in Wainwright. "Here's your diagnosis, good-bye". Paid out of pocket herself for medications. Finally got Veterans Affairs, but not covered as a Class A reservist.
52:10	Didn't do all her final out-clearances, "only half the signatures". Did her three half-days and off she went, no follow up. Eventually did a medical in Calgary. Counselling? She had to go in "kicking and screaming". Used a couple of different therapists. Had to demand access to OSI clinic in Calgary. A mess between serving, no coverage, VAC.
54:15	"One of the symptoms is avoidance, it will send me into a panic attack. Avoided dealing with this forever. Separated, but undergoing couples counseling" Just about had a traffic accident on Deerfoot. Never had these kind of violent spells before deploying. Retells "teeth grinding" .
55:45	"It's making things much better. Still gaps in the system. " She volunteers with charity organizations. [Her father runs such an organization, Can Praxis—equine therapy]. "Most guys are affected one way or another. The guys who don't deal with it, it can be bad. A lot of guys have a lot of issues, whether they admit it or not. I can see people headed to a dark place and there's nothing you can do until they realize it themselves."

57:40	Having seen rock-bottom, she can see where they are headed and recognize signs and symptoms of OSI, PTSD. Be ready to catch them when they fall. "I avoid transit, don't like crowds, stay away from fireworks. If I know I'm going to be triggered I put my back to a wall and breathe... very foggy, clouded thinking. Attention span of a squirrel and focus of a goldfish... try to get up and go to bed at the same time..." She's been told symptoms will eventually go away or she'll be able to minimize impact due to coping skills.
1:00:15	Dad's reaction? She hasn't really talked to him. "It's not something I bring up with my father very often. Can have an entire conversation with hand gestures... drives my mother nuts..." "It's a bit of a sore spot right now. Just leave it at that right now"
1:01:50	Future in uniform? On second temporary category. Has completed several courses, but barely passed due to hard time focusing, forgetfulness. Didn't pass patrol commander's course. Given some additional mentoring. Vulnerable to stress. Might be looking at a medical release [She was medically released several months later].
1:03:40	"Even now guys bring it up and there's a bunch of ridicule. 'How do you have an injury, you spent seven months inside the wire!' Even my injury is questioned by the troops, my peers, because I wasn't involved in combat." But she is open about the injury, not for pity or attention, but "it's not the end of the world". Has got phone calls from other soldiers struggling, seeking advice. "Fielded some calls, as well as flak".
1:04:50	She sends them to a professional, like psychologist she knows. Or if "guys just need to vent, I'll just listen to them rant and rave". She hopes it's because she stepped up, admitted her injury.
1:06:00	Her psychologist points out it's garbage, her task needed doing. Challenge is getting Critchley to believe that. "She's the lone voice in the crowd... and if you think differently, you'll feel better about it."
1:07:30	Doesn't use the term 'veteran' very often to describe herself. "Inevitably you have an injury, you hide in the basement". One charity has hauled her out of the basement a few times. Reminding her "I am not my injury"—Wounded Warriors Canada
1:08:40	WWC held bike trip to Gothic-Hitler Lines that she participated in. 600 km, ending at Monte Cassino. Paid respects at cemeteries along the way. On another trip to Dieppe, WWC gave her a wreath to lay. "One learns quite a bit, struggling up a mountain on a bicycle..."
1:10:00	Therapeutic? She's been converted to cycling. Helps her work her way through what's bugging her, riding up to 120 km in a day. Not just an event for veterans, but they are given preference and identified at the beginning of the ride. There are padres on the ground and other soldiers to help out. Other vets come together and help each other out. "The guys aren't really huggy types, however". Very supportive.
1:12:45	How important is such vet support? "Given that my unit leadership is

	supportive but the ranks have low opinion of me, that vet support has been important to me... Tomorrow is a new day. To have that section of vets behind me is good." Start getting cryptic Facebook messages and you send the local police and sure enough someone's tried to commit suicide... it's really important to have vets looking out for vets.
1:14:50	"I was not the most popular in the regiment. I did my job. Went up to the mess but wasn't necessarily invited out afterwards. It's gotten a little bit better, since no one's deployed. But now I'm a MCpl in a leadership position and my peers don't respect me. Wasn't the most popular, but it's worse now."
1:16:00	"Find it ironic I broke my arm on a horse and couldn't deploy, and now I'm using horses to help guys deal with PTSD. The irony really amuses me."
	Additional viz: --gay kiss at airport --footage of her working with horses, father, vets --pix from her WWC trips