



**TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH  
CYNTHIA PRITCHETT  
26 NOVEMBER 2012**

QUESTION: Why did you join the Army?

CYNTHIA: I joined the Army to spite my father, and that's a true story. My friends always ask me that question and I tell them, do you want the truth or do you want the mom and apple pie? But the fact is my father and I didn't get along. My father was an alcoholic, and when I decided that I wanted to go to college we differed on the college I should go to. I wanted to go to a local state university, my father wanted me to go someplace else in order to keep up with my cousin who was going to Notre Dame. We got into such a fight about it, I told my mom that I'm going to go down and talk to the recruiters. So I went down and I talked to all the recruiters except the Navy recruiter because my father was a Navy man. I figured the best way to piss off a 25-year Navy man was to join the Army. So I joined the Army and went off to basic training at Fort McClellan. After I arrived there I called my mom and let her know I was there. She goes, there's somebody here who wants to talk to you and it was my dad. He goes, look, you can go to whatever college you want to, but just come on home. I said you of all people should know I can't come home now, Pop. So, you know, it started off as spite and probably turned out to be the best career decision I ever made in my life.

QUESTION: You joined in '73?

CYNTHIA: 1973, July.

QUESTION: What was the attitude of the military towards women then?

CYNTHIA: Well, you know, it was the start of the all-volunteer Army. You still had the Women's Army Corps, so I actually joined as a WAC and we were still separate. It wasn't until about 1978 when we disestablished the Women's Army Corps and I actually went to Germany for my second assignment, where women and men were actually integrated into the same unit. Everyone was in the same barracks. So from the time I joined the Army until my second duty assignment in '78, to Europe, I was kind of in the Women's Army Corps. The women stayed in the WAC attachment. They went out and worked in their units and they came back to the WAC detachment. I ended up being in the WAC detachment to learn my supply craft and then I went back to Fort McClellan for my first assignment to the same company that I took basic training in to be the supply clerk. So all my drill sergeants were still there, my company commanders, all those folks were still there when I came back to McClellan. So I ended up in the same unit that I took basic. I did my 3.5-year tour there and became a drill sergeant while I was there.

QUESTION: Was there resistance to you taking on that kind of job?

CYNTHIA: No, because at that time we were all WAC drill sergeants so there were all female drills sergeants. It was actually bringing the men into the women's basic training because I think they were more apprehensive because you were bringing one or two male drill sergeants into this Women's Army Corps that we were trying to now integrate into the mainstream Army. They were more apprehensive, you know, how do I deal with women? I'm like do you have daughters? How do you deal with your daughters? It's really no different. But they were very apprehensive, and I remember drill sergeant Odin who was our senior drill sergeant who was a

male. I said look, I'll teach you everything about how to deal with women basic trainees as long as you teach me how to be a good infantryman, because we were just starting to let women fire weapons and do all that, so, if I was going to do that I wanted to be good at it. That was our tradeoff. I said, they're going to cry, it's all how you react to them. And, will women use their wily ways back in those days? Absolutely.

QUESTION: How did the Vietnam War affect women in the military?

CYNTHIA: I think it started to help open up doors, the all-volunteer force. While the people didn't actively go out and recruit women, you know, women came to see this as another option. No draft, so now you have to fill the ranks, and I think you have to fill it from the best qualified that you have out there. I think that's what the end of the Vietnam era did by opening up the all-volunteer service.

QUESTION: Tell me about the transition from the Women's Army Corps?

CYNTHIA: For me when I went to Germany, of course, I was used to being in a separate barracks. So I get there, we're on the same floor. I mean, we had a male latrine here and a female latrine here and women and men lived next door to each other. So it was making sure you had the right rules in place. I always tried to remind them that, look, we're just not going to be Animal House. You hear all these crazy things about what they do in college dorms. I said we're just not going to do that here, we're a professional organization. So it's just trying to set the rules to keep everybody professional but without saying it's so strict that we're bed checking everybody, because it's not. That's now their home. But you want to set the rules so everybody is in a safe environment. So I think that became the challenge, figuring out how everybody was safe and not putting too much restriction on both parties. But young people are young people.

QUESTION: Was there resistance to that?

CYNTHIA: I didn't really experience much of it as a young sergeant, you know, I mean, I was just another Soldier. I just happened to be the supply sergeant and we had a female company commander. But as I went on in my career I did notice there was more of a challenge of having to prove yourself. Not so much of the living arrangements, but in your duty performance. I remember going as a sergeant first class to my assignment at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. I'm a platoon sergeant, an E7, and I show up at the reception station and I'm supposed to go be assigned to a unit that needs an E7 position. They're like, well, the company commander wants to interview you for this platoon sergeant position at the warehouse. I'm like interview me? So I got in my Class A uniform, I show up, company commander comes out, introduces himself and the first sergeant, and they're like well, we just want to talk to you to make sure you can handle troops. I'm like excuse me, Sir? I want to make sure you can handle troops. Okay. I'm a former drill sergeant, I'm a former recruiter, I just came from Korea, and you want to know if I can handle troops? What kind of question is that? If I was a man would you be asking me that question? Well, he just hemmed and hawed around and I said if this is how you treat your senior NCOs, then Sir, you and I are going to have a problem. I got the job, but I don't recall any of my male counterparts having to go to be interviewed for their position. Normally you go to the reception station, you sign into reception, they look at your credentials, you know, your 201 file, your ERB or enlisted record, and they say, okay, E7 platoon sergeant MOS this is your job, this is your position. You go there. I didn't see many males go get interviewed for those positions.

QUESTION: How did that make you feel?

CYNTHIA: Oh, I was so pissed off it wasn't funny. I sat there on the bench stewing. I'm a little smart mouth sometimes and that's why I said, if this is how you treat your senior NCOs, you and I are going to have a hard time. Well, no, no, good sergeant. I'm like, no, it's not no good sergeant. I'm just a sergeant. I'm a sergeant first class of the United States Army, Sir. Long story short, he ended up moving, he was actually relieved a short time later. I was the warehouse platoon sergeant.

QUESTION: Persian Gulf War changed things for women in the military.

CYNTHIA: I think it's accurate in that it put a lot of publicity on what women were doing. I don't know that our jobs so much changed, but the fact that now we're in this 24/7 media world that a lot of it was publicized about what we were doing. I think that's what Desert Storm brought. At the time the war kicked off we weren't opened up to new positions, we were just doing the jobs we were given and doing them very well. And if you need the best mechanic, you need the best mechanic. If it happens to be a woman then that's the mechanic the commander wants. I think that's what that brought to light, we were now in that media age where the media was taking notice of this large group of women now being deployed.

QUESTION: They called it the "Mommy War."

CYNTHIA: Yes, because a lot of women in the military are married or single and with children and they had to leave their children. Fathers have had to leave their children all the time, but there's just this different dynamic when it comes to women. I'm not married and I don't have children, but I have a lot of friends who are and I know the struggles they went through to have to say, you know, this is my job and I've got to serve my country. But I have this child over here that doesn't understand why mommy is leaving because you're now trying to serve both those and they say you can't serve two masters. At some point one gives. I never envied any of them of having to make that choice of what they wanted to do.

QUESTION: Tell us about your role in Somalia.

CYNTHIA: When we went to Somalia, I was part of a logistical task force. We left from Fort Campbell. We had water, POL, petroleum, bulk fuel and line haul to deliver. We off loaded ships to transport goods and water purification and then we had an engineer company attached to us. So we were kind of like all classes of supply except VIII and IX to make sure that the coalition of forces, not just the U.S. forces, were taken care of. My troops were in eight different locations throughout Mogadishu. Everyday I would get in my Humvee with my three-vehicle convoy and ride around Mogadishu to go visit my troopers at their eight different locations. Some days it was a piece of cake driving down the old airport road and other days there was a little bit of excitement.

QUESTION: In your line of work what's a little excitement?

CYNTHIA: Whether it be a rocket go off or a grenade or there be some small-arms firing and you're trying to figure out where it came from; or like one day we were out visiting the petroleum folks at what we call the bag farm because it's bulk storage of petroleum that we'd pull off the ships. We're standing there and we're just watching these RPG launches falling into the ocean. They just weren't very good shots. But the fact is that you get these RPGs launching over and you're running for cover and you're just like please don't hit one of those bladders.

QUESTION: How has the role of women changed in Iraq and Afghanistan?

CYNTHIA: I think the only thing that's changed is demanding that we get the same training that our male counterparts do so that we are able to take care of ourselves. Everybody thinks the training is different. No, the training is the same. When a rocket attack happens, that rocket isn't flying in and say oh, there's a group of women, let me go over here. It's indiscriminate. It's going to hit where it's going to hit. And all women have ever wanted from my time in the service is to be given the opportunity to be provided the best training as our male counterparts. You know, if I'm expected to deploy, then I need to be able to take care of myself. I know this whole chivalry thing, and, you know, there's been always this argument that the men will be distracted because they're going to have to go take care of their female counterparts. Well, women don't want that. Women just want you to know if you give us the training we can do it, we can take care of ourselves. And who knows, we may be taking care of you in some instances as you've seen with young Sergeant Hester or young Monica Brown who say, and I think if you listen to their interviews, their training kicked in and they did what they trained to do. So I think that's all any woman or any service member wants is to be given the proper training in order to react, in order to take care of their fellow comrade, be it male or female.

QUESTION: This sort of chivalry thing is kind of gone now.

CYNTHIA: I think so. I mean, I think within units there's a bond. It's just like families. You know, you can't pick on my little brother, but I can pick on my little brother. Or you can't pick on my little sister, I can pick on my little sister. So I think in those types of units you have that bond where if somebody outside the organization wants to take on somebody within the unit, they'll all stand up for each other, male or female. Do I like a guy to open the door for me if we're walking in a building? Absolutely. I'm not going to turn around and say I can do it myself. There are some out there that would, but I think it just goes about how you were brought up, about your values, how people taught you to respect each other. And there's just certain things that are societal that I think it's okay.

QUESTION: Women now can do things they couldn't before.

CYNTHIA: I think commanders and leaders on the ground just say we have a mission to do and they go out and do it. The military police for me, where we have a lot of women, is kind of like the closest thing to infantry that women get to because they're out and about. They don't go out to seek and close and destroy the enemy, but if they run into the enemy, they don't turn around and go the other way. And there are a lot of women even in a truck convey. If our truck convey is going down the road and we get engaged, if you can blow through it you blow through it, but if you can't and you've got to dismount and fight, you dismount and fight. So I think this whole notion of women aren't capable has gone by the wayside. I think you'll find some of the consternation is the commanders on the ground are saying, look, we're employing our women in order to do what we've got to do, trying not to break whatever laws are out there. I get in this argument and everybody says, you know, women are not in combat. I say no. Women are in combat. Let's make that very clear. Iraq and Afghanistan made it quite clear that it's an asymmetrical warfare. The battlefield is all around. Women are in combat. What women are not in are in combat arms. They're not in infantry, armor or artillery. That's a whole debate for another day. But the fact is, when put up to go defend the perimeter, they pick up their weapon and do what they have to do. When they're challenged in the convoy, they do what they have to

do. So I think it's just where are we at in our society that we can't get past that? I mean, we didn't think West Point would ever be integrated. Okay, that fell. It didn't fall very acrimoniously because we didn't go about a good way of doing it. We had men trying to figure out how to integrate women into the system instead of having women help them figure out how to integrate women into the system.

QUESTION: The convoys seem very dangerous.

CYNTHIA: It is unexpected, and you got to think when we first went in there our vehicles weren't uparmored. Whoever thought of these things called IEDs? We were not prepared. In Afghanistan in 2004 to 2006 my vehicle was a civilian Lexus SUV type vehicle. Wasn't no up armor running around the streets of Kabul. You just had to be vigilant, what are the telltale signs. As the years went on I'm like, okay, somehow we got to get the star armor and we've got to start up armoring these vehicles because this is getting worse. You know, it wasn't too bad when I was first there. We were in this transition. But in the years since I've left, I'm guaranteeing they're not running around like I ran around in Somalia and in Afghanistan.

QUESTION: Now women are suffering the same injuries as men in combat.

CYNTHIA: Well, I think we have evolved as a Nation. I think when the first women came back that were killed you didn't hear an uproar that we had to get out of the war or that we had to bring the women home. So I think the Nation has resolved itself. I think the challenge is that the VA system, God bless all those people that work there, but it's still an old World War II system. It was never destined to take on the amount of people that we have now surviving the battlefield. I mean, these catastrophic amputations. I've run into women that have had their arm blown off. You go up to Walter Reed and their attitudes, you're just like wow. How do we take care of them? I think the VA realizes that there are things that affect women differently than men, and we have some other issues that we have to deal with. So they've made a conscious effort to adapt to that. The problem is we just can't adapt fast enough. And we've got a lot of groups that are standing up that are trying to help people but how do we get them all to work cohesively to provide that care? I think that becomes the challenge. Whoever heard of PTSD? It's been there, it's just it's been brought to the forefront with this war. Every war people have gone through these traumatic experiences, but again, these two wars we've been in a 24/7 media cycle. Everything is captured and then when things come back home and we find out it's a veteran then it gets exacerbated. I think veterans are also careful not wanting to be painted with this brush, they're afraid that if something goes wrong and somebody goes out and has a postal moment, not to criticize the postal community, but you know what I'm talking about, where somebody goes out and has a horrific act and they happen to be a veteran, then they want to say they were in Iraq or they were in Afghanistan and they get painted with that PTSD brush. It exacerbates how civil society hires veterans. What if I get a guy or a gal who was deployed? How do I know they're not going to go do what this guy just did? So it's a double-edged sword that society has to deal with. And veterans in particular, some of them are proud to say they're a veteran and then others are afraid because they're afraid there's some stigma that may be attached to it. We had it during Vietnam. Vietnam veterans got spit-on, nobody would give them the time of day.

QUESTION: I've heard it said that Soldiers don't fight for their country, they fight for their friends. How important is that to the whole equation?

CYNTHIA PRITCHETT: I think if they become a family like I kind of said earlier. I joined to serve my country, but I stayed for as long as I did because of the people. I love being around my Soldiers, I love being around people. It was always something new, it was never a dull moment, it was never the same thing twice. I may get up and go to PT and know that my day was kind of laid out a certain way, but there was always something that was going to happen that was going to be what I never expected. So you just build this bond, and I think you're right, it's about the guy to the left and the right of you and especially when you're challenged

QUESTION: What are the challenges that women face particularly in the field that we don't think about?

CYNTHIA PRITCHETT: Women camp, women do whatever. I do remember this one time in Afghanistan I had one of the young majors or lieutenant colonels actually came up to me and wanted to know when we were going to get the beauty shop into Camp Eggers, which almost threw me over the edge. I said, ma'am, have you ever been outside the walls of Camp Eggers? Well, no sergeant major, I've been downtown. I said, you know what, the next time I go downrange you're going with me. So I decided I'd take her to one of the provincial reconstruction teams that were out in Ghazni. So we get off the helicopter and you get out there and they're not in tents but they're in the wooden bee huts, and they have the wooden port-a-pots set up and then they have the urine tubes out there and of course she gets off and she's very naive, she's a young major, God bless her. So she goes, I need to go to the bathroom. I said, well, you see those brown rooms over there, yes, just go right over there, that's the toilets. She goes over there and she comes back out and she goes, they don't have any toilet paper. So I reached into my rucksack and I pulled out some toilet paper and she goes, you carry toilet paper with you? I'm like yes, [LAUGHS] you never know where you're going to be. And she goes, what are those things? I said those are called piss tubes, that's where the guys go. She was like, this is so primitive, I'm like, look around you. You're in Afghanistan. What do you think? I said, so think twice before you ask me again about whether the beauty shop is coming to Camp Eggers, because you too can be out in a luxurious spot like this. So, it's getting them to understand their survival skills. But, you know, we're not without our creature comforts. They just may be a little more rustic than what we're used to. But at the same time you've gone camping, you had to dig the hole or go behind the tree. You look for that place that'll give you some cover and you do what you have to do. I think women are pretty adaptable to that.

QUESTION: Tell us the highest rank you received in the military and what sort of responsibilities went along with that job.

CYNTHIA PRITCHETT: My highest rank was command sergeant major, which is E9, senior enlisted advisor to a commander. It starts usually at the battalion level, which is about 250, 300 people, and you work yourself up to brigade. My final assignment was the theater sergeant major for all U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan, about 27,000 at the time. I was the advisor to the combined forces command Afghanistan commander on all matters concerning enlisted people, force management, force development, and then had to deal with the training of the Afghan Army. So, as an advisor to the commander, you're his extra eyes and ears. General Barno and I never really traveled the same places, he would go one way I would come back and report to him, you know, challenges, making sure that his commander's intent was getting out, that people understood where the commander was trying to go with his plan. I served him until he left in May of 2005, then I served Lieutenant General Eikenberry when he came on.

QUESTION: What does that say about a woman's ability to lead?

CYNTHIA PRITCHETT: Well, you know, it's a funny story about how I got the position, because when General Barno approached me, I was the sergeant major at Fort Leavenworth responsible for all non-commissioned officer, officer and war officer education. He called me and asked me what I was doing and I said, well, General Wallace just came on board, he asked me to stay on to be the sergeant major, so I agreed to it. He goes, well, I was just wondering how adventurous you were feeling this summer? I said, I'm always up for adventure, why? He said, you know, I'm going to Afghanistan to be the CFC Commander, Combined Forces Command Afghanistan and I'd like you to come be my sergeant major, will you do it? I'm like, yeah, sure. I said, but you know I got to go talk to General Wallace. So I went and talked to General Wallace, and General Wallace initially wasn't very receptive when I approached him. One, because he'd asked me to stay on, so out of loyalty to him, I agreed to stay, and I sent General Barno a nice note saying, hey sir, General Wallace is not overly enthusiastic or receptive to the idea of my leaving, so out of loyalty to him, I'm going to stay on at Leavenworth, and here are the names of five sergeant majors I think would do a good job for you. Unbeknownst to me, he emails General Wallace, explains to General Wallace why he thought I was the right person to come to be the sergeant major in Afghanistan. General Wallace calls me in and we chat about it, and we have our private conversation. At the end he says, if Dave Barno wants you, I'll let you go. So, that's how I ended up in Afghanistan. Even when I got hired for Leavenworth, the same thing was about being a Soldier's Soldier, not necessarily being a woman. It brought something in fact that could show the Afghan women and the Afghan Army that it was about my ability, I happened to be a Soldier who happened to be a woman. It was the same thing when I got hired at Leavenworth, I was the first female at the Combined Arms Center. When I interviewed for that job I didn't know what the Combined Arms Center was. You know, infantry armor, artillery, all the combatants, support guys. When General Meeks interviewed me we had just gone through the whole Aberdeen thing and I just thought this was the token female being interviewed, because we were having this big hubbub about why don't we have senior female NCOs working for general officers? So I thought I'd go to Leavenworth, do my interview, come back to Fort Belvoir where I was a sergeant major and be very happy, figuring they ain't hiring me, I was interviewed against the infantry guy, an intelligence guy and a couple of other guys. When I got the phone call, I mean, I dropped the phone and everything, I was like, I got the job? So when General Meeks told me I got the job, he said I want you to know I didn't hire you because you're a woman. I said, well that's good sir, because I don't think I would take the job if you did. But he was about you're a Soldier's Soldier, you're a muddy boots Soldier, you've been in divisions, you've done this, you understand this, and this is why I'm hiring you to be my sergeant major. So both generals sought me for my ability and what I brought to the table.

QUESTION: How do the Afghan people react to that?

CYNTHIA PRITCHETT: The males are a little apprehensive, though I got to tell you the first time I went to visit a corps, they knew that the Combined Forces Command Afghanistan sergeant major was coming to visit so this was a big deal. And of course I had short hair, so in my battle regalia with the body armor, the helmet, you can't tell. So we drive back to the headquarters and I start taking all my stuff off and the look on the Afghan general's face was precious. I said, sir, I take it they didn't tell you that the sergeant major, Combined Forces Command Afghanistan was a woman. Ah, no sir. I said, well is that a problem? No sir. Okay, show me your operation.

And as we started dialoguing and he finally made the connection of who I worked for, that was the end of that. Even the Afghan soldiers, they treated you okay. I mean, were they curious? Absolutely. When I would go to training they would be very respectful. And the women I think are curious. They see these women with weapons and stuff and they kind of come around them and swarm, because they're just very curious. But even in the Afghan culture, behind closed doors the women kind of run things. But out in public it's kind of a different story.

QUESTION: They have these teams now, FET?

CYNTHIA PRITCHETT: They engage the women population, because part of their culture is men don't shake down women, they don't pat them down and question them without a male member of the family. By having these female engagement teams, it's a way to go out and connect with the women and open up a dialogue to find out what's going on, because the family is still the very central part of the Afghan culture, the women do have a say in the family organization. It's just when you're out in public, then the men are very protective, you know, the burqa whole thing. Even while I was there we would say, you know, we got to get women out of the burqa. The women would say if the burqa was our biggest problem, we'd be in good shape. So trying to break that whole cycle is part of what these Female Engagement Teams are, because now they're given, I guess, a sense of credibility that we're out there engaging with these women. It would give them a voice.

QUESTION: What's the best part of your job?

CYNTHIA PRITCHETT: People. Being around the young people and I think it's gone in cycles. I mean, I loved being a drill sergeant. I loved watching that young person that came in and then watch them eight, nine weeks later turn into a Soldier. Then it was out being in the units and watching people succeed. Nothing is more rewarding. In fact, not too long ago I was actually at a DAC, a Defensive Advisory Committee on women in the service. I was at a luncheon and this major walks up to me and she stands at parade rest at lunch by my table. And I'm like, yes ma'am? She goes, Sergeant First Class Pritchett, you don't remember me, but you were my drill sergeant in basic training. I said, yes ma'am, and you're now a major and you don't have to stand at parade rest for me. She goes, yes, but you will always be my drill sergeant. But to watch her succeed, she goes do you remember me, and I said that wasn't your name in basic training. She goes, no, I'm married now. Those troops really want to be recognized when they come up to you. I'm very good with faces, I'm horrible with names. The ones that stand out are either the ones that excel or the ones that will be your problem children. But to watch them succeed and be able to know that hopefully I had a role in that; or I have a day where things might not be going right and I'll open my email and out of the blue there's an email from some Soldier that you served with ten, twelve years ago that said, hey, I'm a platoon sergeant in Iraq and I just want you to know that when you were my first sergeant you taught me this, this, and that, and the other, and I'm doing that today and I just took care of a Soldier that had a similar problem. It's things like that. Now that even I'm retired people find you and say, hey sergeant major, can you help me with this, I'm like, yes, sure, I'll do my best. So, for me, it's always been the people connection. I was successful because of my Soldiers, of what they were able to do and the fact that I was privileged to get to lead them somewhere they could rise up and make me look good, it was always the best reward. So, it was all about the troopers.

QUESTION: One hundred and fifty plus women have lost their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan. What does that sacrifice say about the role of women in today's military?

CYNTHIA PRITCHETT: I think it says that we've been accepted in the fact that the Nation hasn't had this great uproar. That the lives of our sons are no more greater than the lives of our daughters, and the fact that women have made the ultimate sacrifice and people have respected that instead of using it as a political tool to bring up this whole issue about whether women should be in the military or not, it's kind of never happened. I think that's what that means, that they respect our service and that the country hasn't said, well, we value the lives of our daughters more than the lives of our sons. I think collectively we've come to say that our greatest treasures are our sons and daughters and that we value them both. I think that's what it's done.

QUESTION: Women have had to overcome long odds to get to this point. What does that struggle say about their determination?

CYNTHIA PRITCHETT: I think women have a lot of perseverance. There's always some ceiling somewhere that somebody has to break and it's how you go about breaking it. I think women in the military, while there have been some issues, have gone about breaking it by showing what they can do, not asking for a special privilege just because, but by saying okay, you want to give me an obstacle, okay, I'll overcome that obstacle. When I can overcome that obstacle, okay, there'll be another one. At some point you're going to run out of obstacles for us to overcome. At some point, I'm just saying.

QUESTION: What would you like people who are watching this show to know about the women that you served?

CYNTHIA PRITCHETT: That they're just ordinary citizens, that they're ordinary people that do extraordinary things. We've heard that said time and time again and all of us that serve today are allowed to serve because of those that came before us. If it wasn't for the women of World War I, Korea, World War II, even the women that served in Vietnam, the nurses, the women of Desert Shield, everybody along the way breaks down some little barrier. So even though I'm not a good student of our history, I know in the broad sense that this will allow us to truly understand our history and that we should be proud of our history. And that the next time we see a veteran, just thank the male or female for their service.