

**TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH
LAURA BROWN
9 NOVEMBER 2012**

QUESTION: Why did you join the Marines?

LAURA BROWN: Well, it was April 1984, and we were going to graduate in May or June, I can't remember what month. I knew I was not going to go to college, just because there was no college money. I also knew that I wasn't going to get married, you know, in my culture that's what you do. You find a husband and you marry him, but I already knew my personality even then, it wasn't going to work for me. So I joined the Marine Corps because I was sitting in class in April and one of my friends walked in and I said, how come you haven't been here, and he said I went to go see my recruiter. I said what is that? Then he explained what the recruiter was and I asked him where he was. So I went to go see what the recruiter was about. That's why I joined because that was my out, I could leave home.

QUESTION: When you joined, what was the attitude with women serving in the Marine Corps in a male dominant profession?

LAURA BROWN: I thought about that question a lot. I get asked that question a lot over the years, and I really have to say that, you know, when you're 19 you don't think about those things. You're invincible, so you don't really realize that you're this girl going into the male dominated organization. You just know what you're good at and I also had the good fortune to go into an MOS, my military occupational specialty, that is financed, so, there's a high preponderance of women in that MOS. So it didn't dawn on me. I certainly knew that the Marine Corps was very male dominated but that didn't affect me the way I realize it now. Maturity makes you see things differently.

QUESTION: WWII slogan Free a Man to Fight, what affect did it have on the Marine Corps?

LAURA BROWN: Well, because I went to a WWII veteran's birthday last Friday at the nursing home, I think that back in those days the affect that it had was it afforded women an opportunity to serve for the very first time. So I think that if you are a young lady in that generation, it certainly opened an opportunity for you. I think the promotions back then were Rosey to the Riveter. So it afforded women an opportunity to do something other than be somebody's wife, or be a nurse, it allowed you to come into the military and serve your country.

QUESTION: What jobs did they do?

LAURA BROWN: Predominantly they were nurses. They were women that worked in the factories so that our male counterpart could go forward, because they weren't authorized to go forward back in the 40s. They worked on the aircrafts, they worked on sewing parachutes, again, part of that Rosey the Riveter concept. There was a lot of administrative typists, type clerks, those kind of job descriptions.

QUESTION: What acronym were women in Marines called?

MAJOR LAURA: We weren't called anything. I think it was President Truman that finally authorized women to come into the Marine Corps and he said, well, we're not calling them anything; we're just calling them Marines.

QUESTION: What are your thoughts on back in those days why men thought women didn't have what it took to be a Marine?

LAURA BROWN: Well, I laugh at your word, those days, because, you know, it's 2012 and I would suggest that it's still that way.

QUESTION: How does it make you feel?

LAURA BROWN: Well, it doesn't bother me because I knew when I was a PFC 26 years ago. The Marine Corps is really an outstanding organization in the regard that as long as you're physically fit and know how to put two words together. So, I would suggest that if you could do that, first and foremost, and stay within the weight standards, that that's half of its success, because we are a mobile unit. We do understand that we go in there to kill and destroy and then get out. You don't join the Marine Corps not thinking that you're not going to have to be physically fit. So, I would say to you that I am the top 1% of the Marine Corps and in that top 1%, there are about 500 male sergeants major and 18 women sergeants major and I'm one of those 18, so it doesn't bother me in the least, I've made it.

QUESTION: In 1945, the statue that was erected in New Orleans, what is it and what does it signify?

LAURA BROWN: That's Molly Marine and Molly Marine, as I understand it, was a forward observer in the air traffic control community, so that's really why they erected that statue.

QUESTION: She is symbolic of all the women who served in the Marine Corps, correct?

LAURA BROWN: That is correct. Yes, sir. And that is where the main statue is but there is currently one aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico in front of the library and there's one aboard Paris Islands, South Carolina. And every recruit training regiment, every time they graduate a platoon, they nominate one young recruit who is now a Marine that signifies and embodies all of those traits. So yeah, it's alive and well that program.

QUESTION: What are the traits it personifies?

LAURA BROWN: The same leadership traits that we, as the Marine Corps, condone and we recognize: leadership, character, discipline, Esprit de Corps, a Marine Corps ethos.

QUESTION: At the onset of the Persian Gulf War, how did it change for women serving in the Marines?

LAURA BROWN: It changed in the regard that when we deployed into Desert Storm, Desert Shield, women certainly went into country, but you didn't go forward of the battle area, you didn't do it. You stayed back in areas like Kuwait and made certain that you took care of the supply and the administrative pieces. Fast-forward to 2003 when we deployed into Iraq, women were able to stay with their units. I was a 1st Sergeant at the time and I was with the military police company, you got to go forward on the supply routes, you didn't leave your unit.

QUESTION: Persian Gulf War had many names, what sacrifice does it take leaving your children?

LAURA BROWN: It is tough. It is tough to leave your children. But I don't really understand why America wraps its mind around it's so hard when a woman deploys. It's just like a father

who deploys, he's leaving his family behind. So, I certainly understand that when I deploy it's different than when my husband deploys, but the sacrifice is the same, there's still emotional draws and ties, there still is the knowledge that you might not come back. But we don't serve everyday not to go forward into a battle area.

QUESTION: Today, more women are serving in the Marines than any time in our history, in layman's terms what things do women do today that they didn't do 20 years ago?

LAURA BROWN: I would say to you that in 2003, they created the lioness program and FET teams. Those are teams that required women to go forward because of the country we were in. We know that their rules and their statutes don't allow our male Marines that were in convoys or at the checkpoints to touch their women, so that afforded women the opportunity to stand up security detachments that would authorize us to go out there and do those jobs.

QUESTION: With more women suffering from military related disability, how does that affect women when they come home?

LAURA BROWN: Well, I think the Veterans Association is doing an outstanding job of recognizing that we do have female veterans. I don't think that we did good 30 years ago. We're doing a better job, we're actually recognizing that we do have combat veterans coming back with some real-live issues. They're standing up whole sectors or suites around the country that just service and support female related issues, and I think that's the way forward.

QUESTION: Do you know Jeannette Winters' story?

LAURA BROWN: I don't know her story. I know she came out of Miramar and I know she was a young sergeant. I know she was a mother, I know that her parents were able to keep some of her things, I know that some of her things were left in an abandoned warehouse, and to the generosity of General Mutters, we got that stuff back and took it to her family.

QUESTION: What does that say about the dangers Marines face today?

LAURA BROWN: Yeah. It's tough, but every generation is so different. I didn't realize that I'm the older generation. The reality is when you've been in the Marine Corps 28 years, and it's funny for me to even say it now, but I am the older generation. When I look at the young ladies who are deployed to Afghanistan or have done the FET Teams or the Lioness Programs, they are so aggressive and they're so young. I'll tell you, youth, we got to put that in a bottle because we don't think about the dangers. Certainly myself at the rank of Sergeant Major understands the dangers, but that's really why they keep us around, so that way we make certain that our young Marines understand their left and right lateral limits, that they contain themselves and take care of themselves. We're the good order and discipline, they're the ones who go out there and kick butt and take names.

QUESTION: You're young and don't think about your own mortality.

LAURA BROWN: Yeah, you're invincible. When I was out there I understood my role. I knew my role was at the end of the day to make certain that they saw me, you know, everyday that they saw me, that they understood that I was an ear, or a face, or a voice to talk to or listen to, because certainly the stressors are there and you're walking in them everyday and they just want to know that we're going to be okay and that we're going to make it back. And certainly, I don't know the answer to that, but boy, they hang on your every word and, of course, the response is

always, of course we're coming back. Of course then you go away and you pray to the good Man upstairs and say, oh God, please make sure we get back, make sure we get back so they can take care of their children.

QUESTION: Talk about your personal experience, what was your job?

LAURA BROWN: Well, I was there in 2003, in the initial invasion for the initial push and I was attached to a military police company. But that military police company became so huge they separated me from that military police company and made me the headquarters company 1st sergeant. Everyday I took care of the supply routes, took care of the stuff that was going out and made certain Marines were taken care of. It was the initial setup of the Fallen Angels. So that was really my role and responsibility, to make certain that whoever was coming into country was taken care of administratively or those that had to be evacuated medically, the rosters were all kept in place. That was my first deployment. The second deployment was as a service company 1st sergeant so I had four companies, or four sections, under the company. One was the dispersing office that took care of all the monies, the other one was LSSS, which is legal, the third one was again, the Fallen Angels, the mortuary affairs detachment, and I think that was it. The significance of that mortuary affairs detachment is it was a reserve unit that got attached to us, so it's not like you had unit cohesion back in the rear. That was really the success when you're out there as a 1st sergeant, your main objective is to make certain that you have mission accomplishment certainly, but equally as important is unit cohesion.

QUESTION: Describe what the Fallen Angels did and how difficult their job is.

LAURA BROWN: It is because, you know, things now in 2012 are certainly not what it was in 2003. You're in the middle of the desert, so, if you can picture, you're not in hardened structures, so you're taking care of the wounded personnel and, in a lot of cases, the ones that have passed away. So, you're preparing their bodies to be returned back to the United States and you got to do it in a dignified manner and the same time you're doing those things, you're making certain that the young people that have been put in charge of preparing the Fallen Angels, that they're taken care of as well.

QUESTION: Because of the emotional stress, I can't imagine.

LAURA BROWN: Absolutely. I couldn't imagine it either, but as I look back, truly God's grace was with us, and truly God knows who he sends into combat and gives those certain MOS's to and he certainly put the leadership that needs to be there. Leadership played an important role in a lot of those different MOS's. It's not just about the combat and kicking doors in, it really is about the emotional turmoil that you're walking through and we certainly don't wait to take care of it when we return back into the United States, it's an everyday process that you got to deal with emotions.

QUESTION: How do you process what you go through on an ongoing basis?

LAURA BROWN: Well, being in the military you handle things differently. You understand that they promote you to a level of leadership role, that there's a certain responsibility and accountability that if you don't take care of you first, you're not going to be able to take care of those around you. So you really do have outlets, you really do lean on your peer group. I was a 1st sergeant at the time so my outlet was another 1st sergeant. We talked a lot and that's really what it is. It's processing of emotions and feelings, it's when you let them bottle up that it

explodes, but right, I agree with you, it took me a while when I got back. You know, I didn't have a cell phone because I didn't think I needed a cell phone. When you've been out there in the desert without a cell phone you don't really understand why you need one. I don't like backfiring noises, I don't like when aircraft hovers over me and makes these loud noises, I'm still not over it and it's been a lot of years, but you process it, you have to talk yourself into, oh, okay, it's just a loud noise. You still have those daily interactions with your brain and you recognize the noise and then you just keep it moving.

QUESTION: The image of the Vietnam nurses what that signifies is they were looking for the helicopters that were coming and that's what they look for and their distinctive sound.

LAURA BROWN: They do. You are right. It is a very distinctive sound and you never forget it. A scud missile flying over your head, that noise, you never forget it.

QUESTION: Men and women have different needs, like going to the bathroom, how do you deal with it out from the barracks?

LAURA BROWN: Yeah. It was tough and you have to learn in a hurry to remove all those inhibitions. I was a 1st sergeant at the time, so my sergeant major, I remember when we were forward and he was packing his things. He had an orange crate, the kind that you put juices in, and a whole bunch of trash bags and a toilet seat that he had bought from the Home Depot, right, and I said, what are you doing? He said, you're going to need one of these when we go forward and it didn't dawn on me. But that's really how women learn to go forward because your male counterpart will share those things with you. So certainly, you're right. You could see a male Marine standing off in a distance, you knew not to walk that way. Female Marines, I won't get into the gory details, but you certainly lose your inhibitions. I laugh at our male counterparts. They talk about females and their monthly cycle, but I'll tell you, medical is pretty good about that. They'll give you some birth control pills that will cease you from having your monthly cycle. So it works out.

QUESTION: To date more than 143 women have lost their lives in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, what does that sacrifice say?

LAURA BROWN: I would say to you that since WWI, when women were allowed to go into combat, well, they weren't allowed to go into combat but they were allowed to serve, women are just as patriotic as our male counterpart. We love America just like my father does. I'll tell you, I was in Paris Island and Corporal [Jennifer M.] Parcell passed away, she was part of the FETs or the Lioness Teams. We got an opportunity to meet her mother and her mother was so proud of her daughter and she said, I hope you never forget her sacrifice, I want you to keep telling that story. So, everywhere I go I tell the story. She says, my daughter's death was not a sacrifice, she died doing what she wanted to do. So you know, when you say the 143, I consider that those women were doing what they wanted to do, and that's serve their country honorably.

QUESTION: What obstacles to you have to overcome?

LAURA BROWN: Physically, it was challenging, you just have to stay in top physical shape. In my community, when you go the route of sergeant major, you know that you're going to be the 1%, so you know that there are certain things that you've got to do to prepare to be part of this organization. Because when you become a sergeant major, you have to be an effective leader, you got to motivate them, you got to want them to see passed the fact that I'm a woman. They

need to see that this woman can lead them and motivate them and instill some leadership accountability into them. So, that's really what it was, it was a lot of physical fitness, it's a lot of emotional duress. But I'll tell you, I've grown and I've learned and I wouldn't give anything back for this journey.

QUESTION: Were you nervous about ordering men around?

LAURA BROWN: [LAUGHING] No, like I said, I think I came out of my mother's womb bossy. So this is the best organization for me. It's good. I will say to you an effective leader, it's not gender bias, it has to do with do you see my talent and do you see where I can take you. I've proven my worth. I think that's really when you make a name for yourself. And the longer you've been in, you know, your character it precedes, your persona precedes, everybody knows who you are so you can walk into a room and they said, oh, yeah, that's Brown, and you don't have to continually rebuild who you are or prove yourself.

QUESTION: What are your thoughts on the perception, when it comes to military, women are not necessarily the best leaders.

LAURA BROWN: I think that's part of society. I think that's part of men always wanting to take care of women, and don't get me wrong, you know, I'm a child of God, I truly believe that men are the head of the household. So I'm not a feminist by no stretch of the imagination but I also know that I'm a smart individual. A smart man will recognize talent. So, you know, I think women are emotional. I'm a woman and I am emotional. I'm often called passionate. So, it often amazes me that when men have a great idea it's, oh, that's a great idea John, but when you're a woman with a great idea it's, my gosh, why do you have to be so passionate. It's different terminology. So it doesn't affect me, I figured out the way you all think and I operate around you all.

QUESTION: Women have had to overcome the odds to fight for the right to fight, what does that say about their determination?

LAURA BROWN: You know, that's a positive twist on an age-old question, isn't it? It has to do with we're not going anywhere. This is the 21st century. So, I'm not suggesting that just because we want to do it, that you got to open those opportunities for us. I'm saying that if you are someone who has proven herself, than afford them the opportunity to submit the paperwork and then go test the theory. But if you don't meet the metric that's there for my male counterpart, than you don't get to just go play just because you want to, you got to meet the measure that's already been put in place.

QUESTION: As you look across the country and see the statues of men on horses, what can we as a Nation do to better recognize the service of America women in the military?

LAURA BROWN: I think we're doing it. I think we're finally doing it. But you see it in our presidential elections right now, don't you? I often listen to the news media and it's as if women have a separate voice. It's not like we're all Americans and we have one collective thought, you're segregating a woman's voting thoughts or her ideas. So, it's not just in the military, it's societal. I don't think I walk around and look at stuff and say, hmm, how can we change this. You just have to be responsible for your own character, whether you have women that work for you or you have men that work for you. I certainly see men and I don't look at a 20-year-old male and think, wow, he's smarter than I am. I know it's my responsibility to teach him and not

as a mother figure, I'm teaching him because he wants to be where I'm, he's the 20-year-old, he wants what I have and I'm certainly going to immerse him in the culture. It certainly has nothing to do with gender.

QUESTION: Why are memorials significant?

LAURA BROWN: Because it affords individuals who probably didn't serve their country, even myself, I was ignorant to the fact that women had served in WWI and WWII. Like I said, when you're young, you're invincible and you think that you created all that awesomeness, and then you realize, wow, there are people that came before me. And you start meeting these women that have wrinkles. I'm not always going to look this great, I'm going to get wrinkles one day and people are going to remember and they're going to say, wow, there was a woman Sergeant Major. I alluded earlier that I went to an old folks home to go see a WWII veteran and she's 91 and her name is Stella, and I'll tell you what, she gave me hope that I'm going to be a 91-year-old whippersnapper, I'm going to be just as intense when I'm 91 giving them some hell in that retirement community. So, it was good and she was intense.

QUESTION: Is there anything we haven't talked about that should be in this documentary?

LAURA BROWN: I think it's exciting that the title of this documentary is *Unsung Heroes*. That's why I stopped what I was doing, because for far too many years our service has not been documented. There's a couple of authors out there that wrote about three or four books and that's really when I started recognizing. You asked earlier, women Marines, are they called anything other than Marine? No, because that's not our culture, we're just Marines. But as I turned this age, I look back and I say, wow, if nobody tells my story as a Marine, than who else will? We have a responsibility in my mind that once you hit a certain level of maturity you have a responsibility to reach back to that 20-year-old and say, hey young person, you didn't get here all by yourself. I'm a wife and a mother. If the women that came before me had to get out because they chose to be married or mothers, hadn't sacrifice for me, I wouldn't be where we're sitting today. So, to them, I say thank you. And to you all, I say thank you because of this documentary.