

**TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH
LEIGH ANN HESTER
16 NOVEMBER 2012**

QUESTION: Why did you join the military?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: I joined the military because it was a childhood dream. I always looked up to seeing anybody in uniform, especially a woman in uniform, because it was rare. Police officer or a female Soldier, I always wanted to be that person.

QUESTION: When did you join and what was the attitude at that time?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: 2001. The attitude towards women when I joined, I believe it was just a few years before they integrated women into basic training with men. For me, I didn't know any different. I heard stories about how other military bases or boot camps where it was all male and I really didn't have any problems. As long as you can show you're tough and pull your own weight, you know, you won't have any problems, male or female.

QUESTION: Did you join before or after 9/11?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: Actually I signed the paperwork before 9/11. Then between the time that I signed the paperwork and went to boot camp, 9/11 happened. So, it was a sense of realism when I went to basic training. The drill sergeants and everybody were really trying to gear us up because they knew that there was going to be a mission coming out after that, and our training was tightened up, I guess.

QUESTION: How did that make you feel?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: The National Guard always responds to stateside deployments, and there have been missions too from my unit to Kosovo and Bosnia, and things like that, but nothing really wartime. So between the time that I raised my right hand and basically pledged my life to my country, and the time that I shipped off to basic training, things completely changed. I mean, like I said, there was a sense of realism and, you know, the reasons that I joined the Guard or the Army didn't change, and I was still happy to be there and happy that this is the completion of my childhood dream and a beginning of a great career.

QUESTION: Were you worried?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: Well, when I was at basic training, yeah, they heightened our awareness, we had to do a lot more training as far as we would be deployed and we were told that we were going to be deployed. When I got back to my home unit we were training up and getting ready, and it was just basically two years, two and a half years, after I signed up that I was shipped off to Iraq.

QUESTION: Tell me about that.

LEIGH ANN HESTER: Well, we'd been training really hard and we knew that we were going to get our warning order eventually. We had been training more and more, and as a National Guard unit, usually you show up once a month, it's pretty relaxed, but for the year and a half before that it was really getting serious and we'd have three and four day drills, and then, you know, two

weeks at a time here and two weeks at a time there and we would really focus on combat operations and training.

QUESTION: What is the reality of the National Guard today?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: The reality of the National Guard now is we can go and do go, and get deployed anywhere the Army does. The jobs in the National Guard are the same exact jobs in the Army, we're just not full time.

QUESTION: What was your job in Iraq?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: I am and always have been a military police officer. Our mission in Iraq was to clear the main supply routes and make sure that the convoys and supplies got through our area of operation safely. We would roll around in humvees at the time with a lot of firepower [LAUGHS] and a lot of ammunition and basically if there was bad guys out there we'd go out and find them.

QUESTION: How dangerous was that?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: It's very dangerous. A lot of people don't realize how much women actually participate, because this war is so different. There is no front line. So, you're out there doing the same thing, you know, fighting, and it can be very scary at some times, because, like I said, there is no front line, so the fire or enemy can come at you from anywhere.

QUESTION: We were talking to someone who said she would get shot at two or three times a week.

LEIGH ANN HESTER: Oh yeah, definitely. Definitely. Our squad would get hit with an IED almost every other day. I can't remember the exact numbers on it, but our company had over a hundred purple hearts for the deployment, some, multiples. Some guys had multiples and they had to be pulled off the road because if you get more than two then you get sent home.

QUESTION: You must have seen some very dramatic sights. How did that affect you as a human being?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: Well, first off, my experience was like no other I'll ever experience again. Secondly, the things that I saw when I was over there, whether it be the culture, their religion, their way of life, and also war, it puts a sense of realism on things and when you come back home things are so different. And it's hard to get re-adjusted to, you know, after a year or more of seeing the types of things that go on in a third world country, especially one at war. So, it can definitely change your outlook on everything. Life, family, love, everything.

QUESTION: How do you deal with the emotional affects of the things you saw?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: It was really hard to adjust to traffic when I got back, because they train you not to sit still. I mean, you always want to keep on moving and one of the things I had a hard time adjusting to was sitting in traffic or seeing a box on the side of the road and wondering whether that [LAUGHS] was an IED or not. Knowing that it's not, obviously, but still your mind would go to that, so I feel the hair stand up on the back of my neck. It's a hard adjustment.

QUESTION: What were some of the positive things that occurred over there?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: For me, I experienced something that I will never experience again, seeing how different people live their lives. I had one really cool experience with a little girl, we pulled up for a security halt one day and we were just sitting there for about five minutes and we're out in front of a house and these little kids, their heads popped up over this stone wall. And they were kind of scared to come over to us. We eventually got them to come over to us and actually one of the little girls, she had a work book, was learning English, and it had simple words like dog, cat, stuff like that in it, and we were pointing, and I would say them, and then she would repeat them, so it was like a learning experience for both. I was seeing the Arabic word and teaching her how to say the English word in the right way. And in the end of the day, she gave me a handmade doll that I still have at my house today. So that was just a really cool experience.

QUESTION: How often did a routine day turn into a fight in your experience?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: We were in several firefights, small ones, we'd hear gunshots every single day, whether they were close or off in the distance. Actually engaging the enemy, I believe we did five or six times, but a typical day, really, we'd be more worried about getting hit with an IED than anything else. I can take somebody shooting at me, I can see them and I know it's something I can shoot back at, but, a roadside bomb where you don't know where it's coming from, you don't know how much damage it's going to do, you don't know who it's going to kill, or if it's going to do nothing. It's the scariest feeling in the world. Not knowing.

QUESTION: Can you tell us about the events of March 20th?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: Yes, it was early morning; we'd went out and cleared the route. There was going to be several convoys coming through that day, we'd went out as a squad and cleared our AO of any roadside bombs, we didn't find any, and we didn't see any insurgents or anything like that. Then the convoys started coming through a few hours later, and we just happened to turn around on the right convoy, if you will, and then went through. They went down the road a little ways and we were following right behind them, and we just started hearing loud and close gunfire, and rapid gunfire, AK-47s and machine gun fire and explosions. So, from the sounds of it, it was pretty serious. Then you saw the smoke and then the trucks, the semi stopped and we saw that, you know, they were in trouble and they needed help. So we maneuvered our gun trucks in between the semi trucks and were rolling down through there and I looked over to the right where all of the insurgents were, where we'd heard all the insurgents, and I looked over there and I saw about ten shooting from a berm. We turned a corner, were going to go down a little side road to the right through previous reconnaissance we'd found taken security halts there before. And we were going to go down that road to fight them. My squad leader was in the truck in front of me, and he made that decision and as they turned the corner, their humvee took a direct hit with an RPG, knocking the gunner unconscious, down out of the turret. So, they turned down the road and they stopped about a hundred meters. Maybe a little less than a hundred meters down the road there was several cars parked on the side of that road with their trunks open and just thousands of rounds of ammo and extra weapons. By the time we got to that stopping point, I'd looked out, and you could see the field more clearly and there was at least 50 insurgents out there in the field, firing at the convoy, and they were just starting to shift their attention towards us. In a split second we decided that the best course of action would be to dismount, because it would provide more firepower, more than just three gunners, well, two at that point, because the first one had been knocked unconscious. So we got out of our trucks and

went to a berm where we could get a clear view of the field, and, like I said, there was several insurgents out there and we just immediately began returning fire. I remember getting out of my truck and hearing the bullets, hearing the bullets whiz by, and pinging off of the concrete and puffs of dust, you know, around my feet, and somehow, I came out unscathed. In the end, our gun trucks were riddled with bullets; three of our Soldiers were seriously wounded. But all in all, I mean, it was a successful firefight for us. I believe we killed something like 39 insurgents, and there was a handful that escaped, we don't know exact numbers, but we found other firing positions after it was all said and done with.

QUESTION: How long did it last?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: It seemed like it lasted about five minutes, in actuality it was about 45 minutes.

QUESTION: I'm sure the reality was a lot different than the movies.

LEIGH ANN HESTER: Right. From watching a movie and actually doing it in real life, it's completely different. [LAUGHS] It looks a lot cooler on TV. [LAUGHS].

QUESTION: It must have been hard to have your friends hurt. What are your feelings on that?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: Obviously, the events of March 20th will always be with me, I will always remember. The funny thing is I don't remember how anything smelled and I barely remember the gunshots. When you're involved in something like that, you don't hear your own weapon. And without earplugs, an AR-15 or an M-4's pretty loud. But you don't hear it. And, when the smoke cleared, and I walked up out of the trench, and there was one of my guys laying there, bleeding out, saying I can't feel my legs, you know, it's a pretty sobering moment.

QUESTION: How were you recognized for your service that day?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: I received the Silver Star for my actions in our firefight; my squad leader also received the Silver Star, which was later upgraded to Distinguished Service Cross. Our medic, who thank God, was riding in the truck with the three guys that got shot, he also received the Silver Star. I believe three received a Bronze Star with valor and the rest of my guys received an ARCOM with valor, and several Purple Hearts.

QUESTION: You were the first woman since World War II to receive that award. Did you have any concept of that?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: I knew what the medals stood for, what they meant. Did I ever go into any kind of battle or any deployment thinking that I was going to be a recipient of it? No. I didn't realize how big of a deal it was for me to receive the Silver Star until afterwards. I had no idea that no woman had ever received it for combat action before. And it still hasn't set in. You know, how much of a mark that women have made in the military, and we've come a long way, and we've got a long way to go, but we're getting there.

QUESTION: What does that say about your experiences there and women's ability to lead?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: You know, any person, given the right opportunity and having the right qualities can lead. In my opinion it doesn't matter, male, female, black, white, Asian, Hispanic, whatever, anybody can be a leader. Gender has nothing to do with it. If you can do it, do it, roll with it

QUESTION: What sort of things are women doing today that they may not have been doing many years ago?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: The first thing that stands out in my mind is being a military police. Twenty years ago, or 30 years ago, there weren't any women MPs, and now there's thousands [LAUGHS]. There are almost as many women MPs as there are men. I believe there are women in artillery now, just a handful, not very many. There's women, female pilots, female combat pilots, and eventually, I believe all the MOSs will be open to women, hopefully. If everything keeps going the way that it is there won't be any restrictions on what women can or cannot do, because, if you're capable, like I said, whether or not you're a man or a woman, if you're capable of doing the job, why shouldn't you be able to do that job.

QUESTION: What are some of the challenges that women in forward positions face that men don't?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: You learn to adapt doing everything. Where I was we were actually fortunate enough to have real showers and real bathrooms, or latrines as we call them. But when you're out in the field, if you've got to go [LAUGHS] you just got to figure out a way and you get real close and comfortable and cozy with your male counterparts out there. Especially, I mean, you're spending a year of your life with them, you get to know each other.

QUESTION: Why did you re-enlist?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: I love the Army. I love my country and I love being able to serve my country. And I feel that I, as a leader, have gained experience and knowledge that I can share and help train other Soldiers to take over my position when I move up, or move out eventually. But I'm going to be in the Army until they kick me out [LAUGHS]. So, but yeah, I love this country, and not everybody wants to go fight wars, not everybody wants to put on a uniform every day. There's certainly more money and other incentives to be made elsewhere, so, somebody's got to do it, and I just happen to be good at it.

QUESTION: Women have had to fight for the right to fight. What does that struggle say about their determination?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: Women are very determined people. For someone to want to fight to be able to die for their country says a lot. And obviously women, they're in combat situations now and there's several hundreds of women that have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, or elsewhere, so far. For someone to want the opportunity to serve their country, put their life on the line, and risk not coming home to their family is amazing.

QUESTION: What can we as a Nation do to better recognize the service of women?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: I think nowadays women are being recognized for their efforts and for their accomplishments in the military and I would say keep doing what we're doing, keep going forward with the recognition, I mean, things have changed so much that it's not always men that are doing great things in the military. I believe that things like the Women's Army Museum, you don't see a lot of gender specific memorials, but that's because women are Soldiers too, we're all Soldiers. I think our Nation has definitely started to realize the impact that women have had on our military and in our war efforts.

QUESTION: Is there anything I didn't ask you that I should have?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: I think there was a few things that I could have elaborated on, but I'm not very good with coming up with things off the top of my head.

QUESTION: Is it hard for you to talk about this stuff?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: It's definitely not something that I talk about every day and telling some of the stories gives me goose bumps. So, it's not hard, per se, but it definitely brings up a lot of memories.

QUESTION: When you go to the Women's Museum in Fort Lee, they have a display, how does it make you feel?

LEIGH ANN HESTER: It's actually really good, just like this; and their sculpting my face where, right beside me and, I'm like, this is weird, but I do have to say it looks a lot like me.

QUESTION: How does your display at the Women's Museum make you feel?

LEIGH ANN HESTER:

It makes me feel accomplished to have a museum display for me. It's pretty cool. Most of the time museum displays are of somebody either not living or just several years ago, and this being, you know, eight years after the fact, seven, eight years after the fact, it's pretty cool to go in and look at some of the things. It's so life-like and it's a really good depiction of what actually happened that day, and it gives our whole squad recognition as MPs and as having women in the military. It's an eye opener.

QUESTION: It's kind of the benefit of that whole facility that here is a place that gives recognition to this service that has gone unrecognized.

LEIGH ANN HESTER: Yeah, the Women's Army Museum is an eye opener because you're constantly learning the different jobs and different things that women have done in our military in the past that people just didn't talk about, you know. And now come to find out there's so many great women that put their lives on the line and lost them, and it's never been recognized and the fact that it's being recognized now with a film like this is just, it's incredible.