

Jamie Broady (JB) talks to Niall Munro (NM)

Niall Munro Thank you very much Jamie for talking about your experiences and it's great to have you here. Could you start by saying a little bit about your military background and your experience?

Jamie Broady Of course. Thank you and I'm glad to be here. So I joined the army national guard when I was about nineteen and at the time when people asked oh why did you join the military my response typically was I needed help for college. I thought that would be helpful. I didn't want to go into a lot of student loan debt and didn't have parents paying for college or anything so that was my sort of surface reason for joining. And because I joined the army national guard it turned out there wasn't a whole lot of... [laughs]. We didn't have the GI bill going on at the time for reserves and then we ended deploying to... our unit deployed to Germany in support of Operation Joint Endeavour which was a NATO led peacekeeping mission in Bosnia.

NM Did you think you were going to go out at any point before that?

JB Well, when I first signed on my recruiter of course said something typical like there's zero percent chance for deployment if you're attached to headquarters so come to headquarters and do this boring job and I just sort of believed him and went with it. I was pretty naive at the time. We didn't know until the last minute whether we were going to Germany or Bosnia and then it turned out most of our unit went to Germany to backfill for the active duty unit there going to Bosnia.

NM So what does backfill mean?

JB So sort of take their place in what they were doing on base in Hanau. Well actually our unit was split into fourteen different locations through Germany. So whichever base which parts of our unit were going to to sort of cover for the active duty members who were going "downrange" to Bosnia and then a few of our people from our unit attached to those and went to Bosnia as well. And that was a nine month tour of duty where deployed overseas. While I was there I started looking into changing my MOS, my military job, to language interpreter which I thought would be much more exciting and in line with my interests. And so I started doing the testing for that which was really interesting. It was listening to a series of clicks and patterns and identifying different patterns within those and supposedly it's really hard, you know, and the instructor warned me in advance "Most people fail this the first time. Don't feel bad if you don't do well on it the first time". Then I ended up scoring really well so... So that was my plan -- I was going to go to Monterrey after redeployment and learn Mandarin.

When I redeployed from Germany back to Oregon, I technically was a veteran at that point because we had been active duty a hundred and eighty days and in the US that's what defines a veteran as opposed to an ex-service member or former military member so often reserve unit servicemen and women aren't veteran status unless they were deployed onto an active duty for at least the hundred and eighty days, and then depending on what tour you were deployed for determines what level of access you have to VA healthcare. Of

course, we don't have universal healthcare in the States so we have Veteran Affairs health system for veterans. And some veterans even if they deployed can't access those services depending on, like I said, where they deployed and for what tour, whether that was considered a combat tour or not. They may be able to access some level of services but not all and then again if you have like a service connected disability rating then you have even more access to services.

I deployed in 96/97 and it was probably 2010 when I went into the VA with a friend of mine who asked me to come with her sort of as a moral support to talk to the MST counsellor, which stands for the Military Sexual Trauma counsellor. She had undergone quite a bit of sexual trauma on her deployment in Iraq. And so I went along with her and then that counsellor turned to me afterward and said "Well, what's your story?". You know, I was kind of taken aback by that and just at first responded with "What do you mean? I didn't go through anything like that. I mean basic training was hard. There were a couple of hard things, but nothing like that". And she just said "Well, I want to hear your story. What's your story? You have a story too". I think she knew then what I've learned since in working with many other women veterans through writing workshops and just talking with other women veterans over the years is that every woman has a story and that falls on a spectrum somewhere probably. But every woman I've talked to has a story of MST, of experiencing MST in the military, on some level. And so I told her my story and I really started writing about it and found that process to be cathartic. She really encouraged us both to file a claim with the VA for service connection based on our experiences. She felt that we both had experienced MST and also some lingering PTSD from that and so that trauma had been impacting our lives in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways since. And she sort of implored us to do that in such a way that she felt that we had a responsibility to do that as part of holding military accountable for change and recording our experience and advocating for ourselves in that way and for others who still hadn't shared their stories and just to sort of help create the change that's still needed in the military culture.

NM So did you do that?

JB Yeah. We both did that. And I felt conflicted about it. So did she. We both had to think about it for a little while actually. And then we decided to do that together and we went and saw our local VSO which is the Veteran Service Officer. And he helped us kind of transpose that, and that was the initial -- that was the start of me starting to write down my military experience.

NM In a kind of formal way?

JB Yeah, in a formal way. And that has expanded since to more of an essay and other bits of hybrid writing that I've been working on in the last ten years, not only about military experience but a lot of interconnected experiences. And so we both, my friend ended up with a 90% service connection rating. So she ended up with a large chunk of disability income basically coming in. And I was given, at first I think I was given a 50% disability rating, and then that's since been reduced to 30 I believe.

NM How do you feel about that?

JB About it being reduced or having received it?

NM Having it and it being reduced.

JB It's strange because there's a stigma that comes with that of course. And even I had to overcome that, the mindset and beliefs I had about people just relying on disability and using an experience as an excuse to access something, you know, and that wasn't our intention or impetus for filing a claim but it was kind of helpful because I was a single parent at the time and going through school and, you know, it was hard to balance everything and work a lot while I was doing all of that so it was really helpful in that way. But then there was also this sense of almost shame around it too, especially when we get the D vet plates, the disabled veteran licence plates. We don't ever have to renew our tags again and that's nice but everyone can see, if they know what that means, that's "disabled veteran" and people have an idea of what that means and it's not necessarily what we think it means, you know. But the truth is I still do have some chronic effects from my experience in the military and while I've done a lot of therapy and writing and, you know, healing from all of that it still impacts my life in various ways, and so I do feel like it's important for the VA and the military to be accountable for these -- you know -- this continued oppression that's happening with women in the military and to create change around that because it's still happening, it's still even getting worse sometimes.

NM Really? I was going to ask you whether you thought it had got better or not.

JB I think it's becoming more well known, especially, since post #metoo, there's been a documentary that was really well done and there's been some changes, but I don't know. Just yesterday I read a statistic that between 2016 and 18, MST reports have gone up 38%. And so I don't know if that was -- I didn't really do a whole lot of research around that to see how fact-based that was but I do believe it, because, even though... it just may be that people are making more reports now.

NM Presumably you feel that people who do report, there are lots who don't report as well, for exactly the reasons that you've just identified. So what does the writing help you to do? It helps you kind of think through some of those things without getting yourself back into the moments, I guess, which were particularly traumatic?

JB Yeah I think helps, I think I think I put in my statement for application, it helps transpose that trauma and to transcend it, and to find the complicated bits in it. It's not all black-and-white you know. I had a sense of complicity even in my own experiences, at least, part of them, and to sort of parse that out and examine that a little bit. It helps to yeah, just to process it and bring it out from just holding it in my body which can really exacerbate stress, and getting it onto the page, and that also allows and encourages other people to do the same I think. Whether you're sharing that work in a small setting or like in a larger, you know, if you're publishing that work. I think that it helps other people see their own experience and relate in some way and feel validated and then feel the freedom to do the same, to perhaps start writing about their own trauma, whether it be in the military or not, you know. So I've led various writing workshops for veterans, starting with women veterans, and then we did a mixed, a couple mixed groups, and then the most recent one was women again.

NM And you explicitly tied that, one of them at least I know to post #metoo or current #metoo thinking as well, so what was the effect of that?

JB When we were marketing it was interesting because I had a lot of veterans reach out, a lot of women veterans, and want to sign up for the course and then it dwindles down to a smaller amount of who can actually commit to it and show up and then an even smaller amount still on who does show up and it becomes a very small intimate group which has its pros and cons. But I think that I also had a couple, at least one actually that I can think of, veteran who reached out and said "Is this just for people who are writing about MST because I didn't experience that and I don't want to write about that?". That may or may not be true. I mean I believe her that she doesn't want to write about it. And maybe she's one of the lucky few who didn't experience that or she's not ready to acknowledge it in such a way. But I said, I clarified "This is for anyone and you can write about any topic you want. I'm not telling anyone what to write about. I'm just offering options and prompts. It's just a safe space to be able to talk about and write about our military experience and there's a whole range of topics that fall within that for everyone". So she didn't end up joining and I guess my answer didn't satisfy her. But I don't know why. It could have just been the timing. I think because after the #metoo movement happened, shortly after, there was a monument unveiling, which I spoke about yesterday, for women veterans in a town near mine and a lot of women showed up, and it was sort of --

NM So women who had been veterans?

JB Yeah a lot of women veterans showed up, or allies, and city officials, and mayors, and there were some government legislative reps and all of it, like Skyping in at least. They made this big deal, this big reveal, it was a secret what the monument was, what the sculpture was, and it turned out to be mountain lions, or lionesses, three cats that represent past, present, and future veterans. And while it was a beautiful sculpture, I felt and one other person standing beside me, we both just looked at each other like "cats?". And I felt it was a missed opportunity for representing women, because it was sort of another way to, while inclusive and not leaving any particular race or ethnicity or type of woman out, it was a missed opportunity because there are so few monuments for women veterans. And it's another way of keeping women veterans invisible because even if you knew that was a veteran memorial area, that part of the park, and you were driving by you wouldn't really see it. It's behind the men's monument, and it's behind a big lamppost, it's cats and you wouldn't know what it was unless you walked up to it and read the plaque which is like five feet over to the side which was added two years later. It just felt like a frustrating missed opportunity and while beautiful and really well done and I appreciate all the time and effort that the committee, which was women veterans, put into deciding on what that would be that would meet a whole bunch of different eligibility criteria that they had for this monument including being inclusive, we still do associate, at least in the US, a veteran with a man, a male combat vet. And combat vet really can mean a lot of things too but people tend to think of it as old fashioned sort of on the frontlines with your kevlon helmet and dodging bullets. And that's not what combat military looks like anymore most of the time.

NM So you think that's representative of the way that people think about women and the military and women veterans? They don't understand that there are necessarily so many women veterans in the US?

JB I think with the general public that's probably true. I know that when I started using the VA system which was right after I redeployed basically, I got plugged right into the VA system. And I was pretty young, I was twenty-one and I didn't look like a veteran to people, I had long hair and just looked like a girl. And I remember when I was waiting for an appointment at the VA and I was surrounded by these male veterans, a lot of them older too, and it was just like "Well who are you for here?" "Why are you here?", and "You're too young to be a veteran". And it was fine and now I don't get that as much because it's been a while and I see more women in the VA now which is good. And they do have a whole military sexual trauma area of the behavioural health centre and they do always ask when you're checking in "Have you experienced this?". And you know, that brings up a good point, I was going to the VA for ten, fifteen years before I answered that question differently. I had to be asked repeatedly for years and years before I was like well yeah, you know I did experience MST. And that was basically after I went with my friend to talk to the MST counsellor and she helped me see it that way and reframe it.

The thing that I shared with Sonia and it's not the only experience that I had but it felt the most traumatic at the time. Because another experience that I had in Germany I had shelved it and hadn't really examined it closely yet. So I told her about while in the military or while in basic training, there was a drill sergeant who was sexually harassing quite a few young women, most of us still teenagers, and he had been there almost twenty years and he was nearly forty, married with a family. And I didn't know he was sexually harassing multiple women, I just knew that it was happening with me. And I told one friend who I trusted what was happening and about halfway through the cycle of basic training which in the US is typically eight or nine weeks, and this was in South Carolina, Fort Jackson, a female drill sergeant showed up out of the blue and none of us knew why she was there all of a sudden because we'd all become pretty cohesive in our platoons at that time. There are four platoons in one company. She just showed up and attached to one of the platoons and she seemed really tough and everyone was like, well you know, why was she here, and you know, it was a little bit mysterious. She started pulling aside young women and asking questions, and each woman who had been experiencing some level of sexual harassment or sexual assault in some cases by this particular drill sergeant had told one friend, and that one friend had told this drill sergeant, this female drill sergeant. And so she eventually got us all in the room, and there were six of us, and she asked each of us to tell her straight from the source, what our experience was, with this particular drill sergeant. We all got to hear each others' stories and we all realised that we weren't the only ones this was happening to, and then there's probably more of a realisation he had been doing this for a long time, this wasn't his first cycle being a drill sergeant. And he was a little tough. She was a little hard. She kind of intimidated us to be honest, which maybe she needed to do. She just said you've all committed adultery too which is against military law and you have to file military police reports or you're going to get in trouble too, and you're going to get kicked out of the military. And so maybe some of us wouldn't have gone through with that if she hadn't threatened us in that way. But ultimately we all did follow her down to the MPs and filed our military police reports. That was the first bit of having someone write down I suppose. Then the next day, all hell broke loose. They pulled him immediately for investigation. He was

gone, never saw him again. And then all the other drill sergeants banded together in support of him and against us. And even the female drill sergeant -- they were threatening her, intimidating her, and I saw her break down in tears one day, and then she left. She was gone. I suspect now looking back she was actually a CID undercover investigator because this had been going on a long time and somebody decided she needed to go ask some questions and find out what was happening, so that's good to know. I think, I mean, I believe, because she just showed up and left shortly after the investigation.

NM You must have been worried though when she left?

JB Yeah because the pressure was getting more and more intense. They were at first getting us in groups of three and pleading to our compassion for the humanity of this drill sergeant who was about to lose all of his retirement and go to prison potentially and lose his rank and everything. And he was a really nice drill sergeant. He was everyone's favourite drill sergeant. He was funny and he was nicer than most of them which was part of his way, his grooming techniques. But nobody wanted to see him get in so much trouble. And they were just trying to talk us into retracting our statements, and basically say that we had been forced into making them and they weren't true, and they sort of kept at it until four out of the six did drop. They went and retracted their statements. And two of us just were like, 'Well we didn't want any of this to happen, but I'm not going to go lie and say that I lied, because that's not true either'.

NM So that was you? One of you?

JB That was me, and one other. The heat kept coming up and pressure kept intensifying and they'd get us alone, two or three of them with one of us at a time, and really the threats kept ramping up. And even the other platoon mates in his platoon because he wasn't actually my drill sergeant. He was just one of the drill sergeants in the company I was in. All of his platoon members were angry with us too and not threatening us but calling us names and pressuring us and it got pretty scary. And then at one point the first sergeant and the captain of that company walked us down to the lieutenant colonel of the base, his office, because he had been hearing about what was going on too of course and wanted to hear from us what was going on. On the way there we were threatened by the first sergeant not to make his drill sergeants look bad, and to be careful what we said, and, you know, or else. So once we got to the lieutenant colonel's office, he brought us in one at a time along with the chain of command who had walked us down, the captain and the first sergeant, who stood on one side of the room and sort of stared at us while we answered this lieutenant colonel's questions. And I still remember his name Lieutenant Colonial Tommy Wall and I looked at him at one point because I was just giving him yes no answers, "yes sir, "no sir", kind of keeping it vague. He looked at me and said "would you like me to have the chain of command leave the room?" and I looked at him and said "yes sir". And they were not happy but they left the room. As soon as they left he turned at me and said "OK I know that there's more that you're not telling me and I understand that you're probably afraid". And he showed me a picture of his teenage daughter and said she's coming through basic training next year and I don't want her to have to go through what you all are going through and this isn't the first time this has happened and it's not going to be the last if you all don't tell the truth". And so at that point I told him everything that had been happening including being threatened on the way to his office and he was really upset. Actually I remember him pounding his fists on

the desk and he was just irate that this was happening on his base under his command. He promised that it wasn't going to happen anymore, that we weren't going to be threatened or harassed anymore, and that he was going to move us to a new company for the rest of basic training, which he did. He followed through with all of that.

It was kind of awkward because you've bonded with your platoon and then the last two or three weeks of basic training you're with a new platoon and they're wondering who you are and why you're there and they don't really trust you at first. And that changed after a little while. I got kind of folded in with this new platoon. The problem was I'd see the old drill sergeants in the mess hall sometimes in passing. I wouldn't see them about our day-to-day exercises and field trainings and such but we'd see each other in the mess hall sometimes. And there were at least two drill sergeants in particular when they saw me in line, they'd stand next to me and corner me a little bit and ask me a bunch of questions and make me answer a bunch of stupid questions. And one particular girl from my new platoon was always standing behind me, and she was kind of the helper, because she was higher ranked than the rest of us, and she was sort of the helper, the assistant, to the drill sergeants and I think maybe she was meant to keep an eye on me. And she reported this continued harassment to my new drill sergeant. And he said you have to come down and talk to the first sergeant and tell them to leave you alone, and at this point I was just kind of exasperated and was like I just want to get through basic training, I can ignore them basically. And he was like no, you have to come and tell them what happened, give him a report, because they're violating orders. So I was walked down to the new first sergeant's office of that company, and he was like "What's happening? I hear people are giving you a hard time in the mess hall". And I told him "Yeah it was fine I can deal with it, I just want to get through basic training and be done." And he was like well they've been ordered to leave you alone and it's not going to happen again. At that point I was getting a little cynical about it. I said "Well what if it does? What am I supposed to do?". And he said "You have my permission to tell them to fuck off", which I was so surprised at. At that point, he seemed so certain that it wasn't going to happen again that I almost believed him. But it did, it happened again, another time in the line. This time I just ignored him rather than responding. Of course, we're told to fear and obey these drill sergeants, and you don't ignore them. But I just stepped out of the line and skipped the hot food and just went over to where there's fruit and stuff. Next thing I know there's a tray hurled at me and it hits the wall next to my head, and he's up in my face yelling at me that I have to answer when he speaks to me. And at that point ,the whole mess hall was dead quiet, everyone was watching us. And I just took a deep breath and I did tell him, I said "You've been ordered to leave me alone and I've been given permission to tell you to fuck off, so fuck off". Everyone was just like mouth agape. That was my cathartic moment. He didn't know what to say, he was just sputtering, he was really just red faced and he walked over to where there was another first sergeant who guards the exit of the mess hall from some other company and he told on me, and stood there with him until I left, and when I left that first drill sergeant stopped me and said to me "You still have to show respect to your drill sergeants, private Thorstad?". That was my name back then. And they used to call me Thermostat in basic training, that was my nickname, and I just said "yes sir" and walked out and that was it.

But then during graduation, when my new drill sergeant was pinning my label with whatever pin that we received for graduation from basic training, he warned me because I was staying on base for my advance training, my AIT, which the other young women that were involved

were all going to different bases for their AIT, I was the only one of that group staying. And he warned me that there were death threats against me and that I had to always always have a buddy with me wherever I went, on or off base, because in advanced training you can go off base at the weekends. So he just kind of quietly warned me about that. I never did encounter anything after that. I never encountered anybody trying to confront me in any way. I had read a little article about a drill sergeant ended up having to go to prison for a while and he did lose all his rank and his retirement and that company actually became, even though it was a mixed base, a mixed gender base, that company became an all male company after that cycle, because so much went down. There was another drill sergeant who ran away with a female platoon soldier after that cycle too, and you know, all of this was happening. I don't know how long they kept it all male but it switched over to all male because there was so much of that company in particular I guess that was particularly problematic, but I can imagine this kind of thing is happening all over, and it is still happening, because they're in such a position of power and authority and control and whilst some of them are really good at their jobs and they have a lot of integrity in what they're doing, others are drawn to those types of positions who are going to abuse that power and control.

NM Predatory?

JB Yes

NM And there are far far more male drill sergeants than female, presumably?

JB Yeah, I think the one that came in was the only one in that company and she was briefly there, right.

NM And particularly, when you left the mess hall, you must have thought time to leave the army completely? Just get out?

JB No because I had this challenge before I went in by my stepfather. He's like "You never finish anything you start. You're not going to finish basic training, stupid tart. You're not going to... you're going to quit". So I couldn't quit. I had to get through it.

NM But he didn't know how hard.

JB He didn't know it would be that hard. I didn't know it would be that hard. And I went in with this mentality, just blend in, because I had been given that advice by other people I had talked to who had been through basic training. Just blend in. Do what you have to do and don't stick out in any way. And that's what I tried to do but it didn't quite work out that way for me. No, I think once I got out of basic and advanced training, I was just... my transition into my unit, at home, or in Salem, which was the capital for Oregon, I was just like everyone is so nice. It's not like basic training. You're just part of the unit now, and even though you're lower ranking, sort of a newbie, they take you under their wings, and teach you more about your job, and it's one big family almost. When we deployed even though we got split up into all these different locations, we visited each other, and there were a few of us at each base at least and we had a reunion, you know, twenty years later, and we became all pretty close friends, like family and so it was very different than my basic training experience. I did have, with some of the active duty personnel on base, I had a couple other experiences that

weren't appropriate, you know, and that would definitely fall under the MST category which I didn't really process for a long time in that way. I'm just starting to write more about some of those experiences too. But there's a lot more to my military experience obviously than just, not just, but, than that part of it. But it does sort of impact all of it in some ways.

NM Well, I'm really grateful to you for talking in so much detail about it. Thank you so much.

JB Well, thank you. Thank you for listening.